



A Lot Like Perfect

Author: *Kat Cantrell*

Category: Romance, War

Description: She chose the man she wants. No, Destiny, not that one...

Aria Nixon doesn't need a man, but when her Aunt Serenity predicts Aria will find love via a makeover, it's game on to prove this understated wallflower can land a man as is. Superstition Springs newcomer Isaiah West is just the guy to help since she's set her sights on his SEAL brother.

This quirky small town is just a temporary stopping place for Isaiah. As soon as the former SEAL comes up with a plan for his life, he'll move on—but suddenly he can't deny a fierce attraction to blunt, feisty Aria. Sure he's only her practice man. But sometimes practice makes perfect.

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One

The guys on Isaiah West's SEAL team called him Elmer, like the glue, but it wasn't because his feet were extra sticky. Unfortunately. That would have come in handy if he hoped to win the bet he'd just taken to walk the entire length of the wooden railing that edged the loft in the old barn he'd signed up to help renovate.

Isaiah jumped up on the cracked, peeling rail and eyed the dusty expanse of the barn floor a good fifteen plus feet below the outer edge of his black Converse. No problem. It wasn't that far down. A bet was a bet, and compared to some other ones the guys on his SEAL team had thrown out, this one was pretty tame.

Isaiah refused to call any of them former SEALs. Or a former team. The five of them were no such thing, despite a discharge from the Navy that the brass might label honorable but still didn't change the involuntary part.

"You're not actually going to do it. Are you?" Tristan Marchande called up to him with faint amusement as if he couldn't believe Isaiah would entertain such a notion when Marchande had been the one to issue the dare in the first place. As he usually did.

What, like Isaiah was scared? Piece of cake after walking the roofline of a four story building to avoid an al-Qaeda welcoming party outside of Ghouta. He'd done that with two Colt M4A1's slung across his back while wearing combat boots with knives stuck in each one. But not because Marchande had bet him. Because taking out insurgents in the Middle East had been his job for almost a decade.

And now it wasn't.

Some days it was easier than others to accept. Today wasn't looking so good.

"You see me doing it, don't you?" Isaiah shot Marchande a look designed to shut him up but he had a feeling he'd only generated a good deal more amusement.

Which was fine. He didn't mind providing entertainment for the team if it kept them all motivated, though the other guys he'd served with in Syria were off on their own renovation projects.

The five of them had volunteered to help expand the tiny town of Superstition Springs in an effort to stave off developers from leveling the place to build a shopping center. Caleb Hardy, the best SEAL Isaiah knew, had recently been elected mayor in a surprise victory, and the man needed firepower in his corner to make good on his campaign promises—namely that he'd get the town up and running as a tourist destination. Before that could happen, the residents, which the SEAL team now counted themselves as, had to turn it into a functioning town.

Being a SEAL had been in their blood, given them a reason to exist. Taking that away with an honorable discharge changed nothing other than the fact that they could no longer collect a paycheck from the Navy. Or participate in the ops currently underway in the Syrian theatre. It was a fair sentence for the crime of accidentally destroying the wrong village. But no less disheartening.

With that crimp in their strides, they'd limped from California to Superstition Springs, a town near Austin, Texas to figure out how to breathe again. Or maybe that was just him. The rest of the guys were handling being cut loose from their platoon a lot better than he was.

For their part, Isaiah and Tristan had gotten schoolhouse duty, or rather Hardy had

assigned it to them without much discussion. This old barn needed to become an institution of learning inside of a month, but instead of working on installing the weather-proof exterior panels like he should be, Isaiah was busy testing out the quality of the loft railing. For a measly dollar.

He took a step and the rail teetered, nearly throwing him off balance. He flung up an arm to counter his weight. Shoved a shoulder down to lower his center of gravity. Perfect.

“If you fall, try to land on your head,” Marchande advised. “That’s the part with the most cushion.”

“Har, har,” Isaiah said without a drop of humor. If he fell, the pain would be no less than he deserved.

He took another step, compensating for the weaknesses in the railing’s construction. And the fact that it was probably a hundred years old. Two hundred if it had been an original part of the area back when Superstition Springs had been a mining town.

“Why are you letting Tristan egg you on?” Cassidy’s voice floated up to Isaiah from the vicinity of the barn’s double doorway, her dislike of his teammate coloring her question.

When had she gotten back from town?

He cut his eyes toward her without moving his head. Aria Nixon and Cassidy Calloway had both stepped inside the barn and stood watching him with arms crossed, clearly having heard more about the genesis of the bet than he’d like. The long-time residents he and Tristan had been paired with for this job had left for lunch a while back and obviously, Isaiah had lost track of time. Figured the better-looking half of their renovation crew would show up while he was mid-dare.

“For the money,” Isaiah deadpanned and took another step. A dollar was a dollar.

That was his standard answer but far from the truth.

The truth was, he couldn’t breathe sometimes. The crushing weight that had dropped on his chest after Syria never seemed to go away and the fresh air in Texas hadn’t helped as much as he’d hoped. How did he pick himself up from having unwittingly participated in a military strike against civilians, most, if not all, of whom had died? That had been the most horrific of the many, many things that had gone wrong in the little village of al-Sadidiq near the border of Lebanon.

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And afterward, his job should have been to help everyone pick up and move on. Motivate the guys, encourage them and above all, keep the team a cohesive unit. That's what he'd always done. Except for this last time. They'd been sent home before he could work his magic. Meanwhile, he'd developed these weird episodes that felt like an elephant sitting on his chest.

The only thing that ever helped Isaiah's lungs remember how to function was doing things that got his blood pumping, like edging along a two-by-four fifteen feet above a dusty barn floor. The riskier the better. If someone had offered sky diving in a fifty mile radius, he might have been off doing that but in a tiny town like Superstition Springs, he had to get his thrills where he could.

Aria's red hair flashed in his peripheral vision as she moved farther into the empty barn to stand near Tristan. She usually wore it up in a sassy ponytail that showed off her cheekbones but today she had it down for some reason. An odd choice if she intended to do any dirty work around this barn.

After a harrowing few minutes of tracking the length of the railing from one side to the other, Isaiah jumped to a wooden beam on the floor of the hayloft, then scrambled down the ladder to hit the ground. Safe. For all the good it did.

"Pay up." He shoved his palm in Marchande's direction.

"Bravo, mon frère," Tristan commented drily as he slapped a buck in Isaiah's outstretched hand. "Always a pleasure to see you wind up in one piece after taking a stupid bet."

“You’re the one who came up with it, Le Torch,” he reminded him with a smirk, purposefully using the other man’s nickname, which Marchande hated, but that’s what he got when he insisted on speaking French. Isaiah pocketed the dollar, which he instantly forgot about. “If you didn’t want to lose, you should have thought up something harder, like walking the ridge of the roof.”

Marchande eyed the soaring ceiling decorated for the occasion with cobwebs as if actually contemplating the idea. “How would you even get up there?”

“I saw a hatch leading out to the roof when I was in the loft. It’s way in the back,” Isaiah said, half hoping Tristan would take him up on the new stakes.

The roof wasn’t that high. And if he fell, he could possibly use any injuries as an excuse to get out of these renovations, which Hardy shouldn’t have given him responsibility for in the first place. Isaiah wasn’t planning to stick around Superstition Springs much longer. If creating a school out of this donated former horse-house was so critical, one of the other guys should be on it.

Of course, he’d have to tell Caleb he had one eye on the exit in order for the mayor to get the point. So far, there’d been too much going on for Isaiah to even contemplate that conversation. Soon, though. He’d lost his right to be a member of the team and that’s what he’d always done his whole life when things didn’t work out—leave.

“A secret passage?” Tristan perked up in a jiffy, always on the alert for escape routes, vantage points for recon, a place to plant a scope. Even thousands of miles from any credible threats, he was still a SEAL. Like they all were.

“Maybe we should get back to work,” Aria suggested lightly. “Havana asks about our progress every night and takes these copious notes when I tell her. She’s so anal about her spreadsheets it makes me shudder.”

Grinning to show there were no hard feelings about her segue, Isaiah offered, “Caleb said Havana adds nine things to his to do list once every hour.”

Aria rolled her eyes and happened to catch Isaiah’s gaze in hers on the way around. “At least nine. That woman can out-organize Martha Stewart.”

Havana was Hardy’s fiancée, but she was also Aria’s older sister. Havana was an urban planner by trade and she’d been hired by the new mayor to plan the town’s rebirth as a tourist destination with a new-age soul, or at least that was how she’d sold it to everyone. It was a huge project with lots of moving parts, and Hardy was counting on everyone—Isaiah included—to do their share.

“Hopefully she won’t go to prison while doing it though,” Isaiah offered with an eyebrow waggle, drawing a smile from Aria that did something amazing to her eyes.

Wow. How had he never noticed just how blue they were? She had fair skin to go with her red hair and she never wore makeup, so there was nothing to detract attention from the clear depths below her lashes. He got a little caught up in examining that until he realized she was watching him expectantly.

Because someone had said something. To him. And he’d missed it.

He cleared his throat, casting about wildly for a clue that did not materialize until Marchande elbowed him. “We’re getting back to work. You included. Put away the Elmer Show.”

“I’m always the Elmer Show,” Isaiah argued good-naturedly.

Or at least he had been. Keeping the guys entertained was one of many magic tricks in his arsenal designed to keep the team glued together. Sometimes he put on a spectacle so they forgot their troubles, sometimes he did nothing more than provide a

sounding board or a comforting hand to a teammate's shoulder.

He'd been doing a crap job since al-Sadidiq. The team had splintered then, mostly because he had, and that's why he needed to extract himself without a lot of fanfare. His challenge lay in getting right with the writing on the wall—he'd lost his place and nothing could change that.

That was the part he struggled with. He'd followed Hardy to Superstition Springs because that's what everyone else had done. The five of them had packed up and jumped into the SUV Hardy had bought to drive from California to Texas readily enough, so Isaiah had gone along too. They were a team. Had been for almost a decade. But he didn't really feel like he belonged with them anymore.

Because he was broken. It was his due penance to leave. He didn't deserve to stay with the community of brothers he desperately wanted but couldn't help.

"What's the Elmer show?" Cassidy asked with undisguised fascination, her gaze tracking Isaiah closely as if she didn't want to miss it if he did something else noteworthy.

He shrugged and started to respond when Marchande cut him off with a laugh.

"He's always goofing around," Tristan explained with a wink that Cassidy shrugged off with an icy glare.

A shadow drifted over Tristan's too-pretty face as he caught the malevolent vibe. Marchande had a way with the ladies that usually scored him a much better response than the cold shoulder being aimed in his direction by one Miss Calloway, but oddly, instead of backing off, he dug in. "We call him Elmer. Like Elmer Fudd. It's just a funny name."

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Isaiah kept from recoiling, but just barely. He was Elmer like the glue, not like the lame cartoon character who couldn't shoot rabbits. But if Marchande had deviated from the script, that could only mean one thing—he'd noticed Isaiah was broken.

That was bad. He and Isaiah went way back, had covered each other in some nasty cesspools of the world, and they were more than friends. They were brothers of the heart. All five of them were. How much worse was it to fail not just yourself, but your brothers too?

“Only because I am funny,” he reminded Tristan without letting on how deep the slight had dug into a tender place inside. Better to brush it off until he could figure out how to manage this new twist. If the others had figured out that Isaiah was useless, it sped up his get-out-of-dodge timetable. “And not funny-looking, like your hairdo.”

Marchande sneered at Isaiah's reference to his man-bun. He'd grown out his hair in the eight months since they'd been discharged and the guys liked to razz him about it, Isaiah included, because come on. The man's sleek blond hair was held together in a topknot with a ponytail thingy like the kind that chicks used.

“Really? Tell us a joke,” Cassidy said, her fascinated gaze still lingering on him as she rearranged her caramel colored hair behind her shoulders. She was a pretty woman but in a generic sort of way. Of course, it would be hard for her to stand out next to a bright streak of a woman like Aria Nixon.

“Jokes later,” Marchande insisted a little too sharply.

“Jokes are better in the moment,” Isaiah muttered but shut up only because Hardy had asked him and Marchande to do this job. He needed to take the suggestion and do it. At least for right now, until he figured out how to tell Caleb that not only was Isaiah not capable of keeping the team together, he was taking the first chink out of it by leaving.

Isaiah got to work and hammered some stuff while working side by side with Cassidy, who always seemed to gravitate toward him for some reason. Mostly he just tried not to pass out from lack of air. Sure his panic attacks were a defense mechanism, a gift from Syria. The Navy shrinks back in California had laid all that out for him nice and clear in case he’d been confused about why his chest got tight all the time even when he’d just been watching TV or walking on the beach near the base.

Texas was supposed to make it better. It hadn’t. Because Isaiah was the problem, not the locale. If Caleb hadn’t g

iven him this barn project, he’d already be working on his exit strategy, but he respected Hardy more than he needed to breathe.

The townspeople who’d voted for him clearly loved Caleb Hardy. Everyone did. He was as honest and forthright as they came, the kind of guy who was first in line to do the right thing. If you ever got confused about which choice to make, you could always ask What would Caleb do? And that was usually the best answer.

What Hardy would do in this moment, if he was here, was get on Isaiah’s case for not figuring out how to help him get the guys in order. As the mayor, Hardy had a lot of empty official town positions to fill and some SEALs at loose ends who need new marching orders—Marchande, for instance, who’d been tapped to shape the new fire department but couldn’t see his way clear to agree yet.

Instead of jumping into the role that Isaiah had always filled—either helping the team stay unified or gluing someone back together after a tough day—he was trying to figure out how to cut himself loose. To give up the team he loved but couldn't stay with.

He couldn't keep spinning these plates forever. He had a feeling they were all about to start crashing to the ground.

Two

That night, Isaiah went up to the rooftop patio of the old hotel where he and the other guys had taken rooms. On his second day in the old mining town, he'd accidentally found the stairs to the roof behind a multicolored door at the end of the hall. It stuck a little, but with a good dose of curiosity and elbow grease, it had sprung open to reveal a dark passage leading upward, full of spiders and other unknowns.

Once his pulse had started tripping with excitement over the find, of course he'd had to see where the staircase led—to the roof, naturally, where a patio of sorts spread out the entire perimeter of the hotel. Dead leaves and a stray branch or two littered the mostly barren expanse. It hadn't been used in a long time, if ever. Isaiah could easily imagine it becoming one of those places swanky hotels in big cities boasted, with lights strung across poles and a mahogany bar in the corner that served frou-frou concoctions to scantily clad women.

But he'd have to tell someone about it for that to happen. No one else seemed to know it existed, or at least he'd never encountered anyone else, and he wasn't in hurry to share it.

Isaiah spread out the old blanket he'd stashed in the corner under a weathered board with bent, rusted nails lining the edge, then stretched out to practice his breathing.

He'd spent more than a few nights up here, staring at the swirl of black and starlight when he couldn't sleep. Which was most of the time lately. His brain was constantly on blend mode, chopping through images of the kids that had died in al-Sadidiq. That was one of the hardest things about that op gone wrong. Innocent lives had been taken. Isaiah had helped make that happen. Accidentally, sure. It would be nice if that qualification mattered.

Creak. He snapped his head toward the door, just in time to see Serenity Force ease it closed on squeaky hinges, her long gray hair easily discernible in the weak moonlight as she joined him on the roof.

So much for solitude. He didn't mind though. Serenity was cool. She'd regularly penned letters to the team while they'd been overseas, somehow becoming more than a pen pal and morphing into a surrogate mom, first to Hardy and then eventually the rest of them. None of the five of them had family to speak of, so Serenity had filled a gap and then some. When Hardy had announced he was driving to Superstition Springs to help Serenity fight the imminent destruction of the town she loved, Isaiah had been the first one lined up at the door, ready to leave on a moment's notice.

Meeting Serenity in person had strengthened the bonds formed via letter. And she'd given the SEALs a place to land after Syria, which he appreciated more than he'd ever be able to say.

Which didn't mean he shouldn't try. He patted the blanket to indicate she was welcome. "Come to check out my tree fort? You're the only girl allowed."

Serenity laughed but he could tell his comment pleased her. "Aren't you a sweet boy. How did you find this place?"

He shrugged as she eased down onto the blanket, her knees popping at the joints in a reminder that she was nearly twice his age. Or so he'd surmised without asking

because that would be rude. But it wasn't a stretch to assume that she was at least old enough to be his birth mother, not that he'd know anything about her, age or otherwise, since he'd been thrust into the foster system as a baby. Looking for the exit had long been his way of coping with a bad situation, and he had a lot of practice at leaving. What kind of insanity was it to have hoped he'd eventually find a place he could stay when history had taught him that moving on was his lot in life?

"I opened a door," he said easily. "Hope it's okay to hang out up here."

As the owner of the hotel, it would be perfectly within her rights to tell him this area was off limits.

"Of course," she insisted immediately. "This is your home for as long as you choose to stay. I love that you've created a place for yourself."

Had he really though? What kind of place could he have where he wasn't providing the glue for his team as they battled bad people on a daily basis?

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“It’s more of an escape,” he admitted without really figuring out why he’d told her that much. But Serenity might be the closest thing to a mom that he’d ever have in his life. If he couldn’t be real with her, then who could he talk to?

“You need an escape?” she prodded gently, which turned to ice in his stomach as he scrambled to explain.

“Not from you! Or the hotel. It’s wonderful, very nice. I appreciate that you’ve taken us all in, which you didn’t have to do—”

“Isaiah West, you settle down now,” she interrupted but the smile in her voice was wide enough for him to easily hear despite not facing her. “I know you boys have had a time of it. That’s the only reason I didn’t send you on your way when you showed up here out of the blue, looking to get in the middle of my spat with Havana.”

Serenity was Aria and Havana’s aunt, having taken in the girls when they were young, after their parents died. They had a third sister, Ember, who had just recently dropped back into town after an extended absence, or at least that was how Isaiah had pieced it all together without prying. The little boy Ember had in tow might be a part of the puzzle, but the kid was quiet and kept his head down on the rare occasions when he crossed paths with Isaiah. It wasn’t a stretch to assume that the five male strangers in his great-aunt’s hotel weren’t the sort a seven-year-old knew how to speak to.

“I figure it must have been a pretty big surprise to have five SEALs dropped on you,” he said wryly. “We could have called first.”

Except, if they'd called Serenity, she might have told them not to come and Isaiah would have been last guy to risk that. He'd needed somewhere to go after being discharged, naturally. Leaving California had seemed like the obvious choice.

"Your hearts were in the right place, sweetie. It's my fault for pouring out my troubles about this town into my letters. But look what happened as a result. Caleb and Havana got the development company to give us six months to turn the town around," she said with a mix of awe and no small amount of gratitude.

Caleb and Havana had started out on opposite sides of the deal, but soon started making goofy eyes at each other until they were so tightly involved the only solution seemed to be combining forces. They were a formidable team, working tirelessly to get infrastructure in place so the town could become a tourist destination. If they didn't, the development company would start offering residents huge piles of cash to relocate and folks who loved the town, like Serenity, would be forced out.

"The schoolhouse is coming along. Cassidy is really excited about her plans to form a charter school once it's done," he commented. She never stopped talking about it, which he assumed equaled excitement.

"The first of many great additions to our town." Serenity's voice glowed with so much pride that he didn't have the heart to correct her. It was her town, sure. But not his. "I'm so thrilled you boys showed up. You were meant to come here. Didn't I predict that?"

Isaiah traced the little dipper with his eyes as a stall tactic before responding because he wasn't entirely sure he believed in all that jazz. So he'd kind of dismissed the concept when Serenity had doled out some hokey prophecy in a letter a few months back. But he knew she believed in her predictions. And her connection with the universe wasn't something he could easily reject while in her presence, not unless he wanted to be disrespectful.

“I don’t remember it that way,” he said instead. “I thought the prediction was about how I’m going to meet the future Mrs. West, not about coming to Superstition Springs.”

Future Mrs. West. It felt wrong on his tongue, too weighty and just...not something he could believe in. Now, he’d seen some pretty crazy stuff in Syria—idols and revered goats and such. But mysticism had never really resonated with him anyway and finding love was literally the last thing on his mind, then or now.

A guy with one foot constantly out the door didn’t lead a woman to believe that commitment was anywhere in his vocabulary.

She shook her head with a little tsk and repeated the words she’d penned to him. “You must slow down a bit to find love. Seek a romantic retreat to heal and nurture your soul while connecting spiritually with a like-minded soul that shares your need for depth. What is that but a perfect description of this town? Here you are, stargazing. Slowing down. Connecting. All of these things will help you heal.”

He didn’t bother to pretend she was wrong about his need to get better, though the fact that it was becoming common knowledge made him a little squicky. Clearly she’d sensed that on her own but it was a little easier to take from her rather than from Marchande earlier. Not that he believed either of them had done much more than witness for themselves that he was broken. Didn’t take a genius to sniff that one out when he’d failed to get anyone on board with Hardy’s quest to start filling official town positions.

It shouldn’t hav

e been that hard to talk Marchande into a role with the yet to be formed fire department. The guy’s middle name might as well be fire. Yet...here they were with no one on the roster.

But there was no reason to be dismissive toward her belief in the supernatural. He could still spell diplomacy. “Maybe the prediction is talking about connecting with my teammates. We’re tight, after all. That’s just as likely to be what you’re sensing as a female being involved.”

The look she gave him was priceless. “Well, if you’re saying you’re gay, I’ll love you just the same. That’s not what you’re saying, though. Is it?”

“Um, no.” Wow, that had been an unforeseen deviation. “What I meant was, the guys are my family. We depend on each other. They’re the ones who’ve had my back since day one and that’s not going to stop.”

The lump in his throat grew too big to swallow. The guys had depended on him and he’d failed them. They all had scars from Syria, mostly inside. Except for Caleb’s brother, Rowe, who’d had months of physical therapy after half a building fell on him and still had trouble hearing out of his left ear. Isaiah hadn’t helped any of them get back up after falling down.

The ticking clock got louder in his head. After the barn was finished, he should go.

“Sweetie...” Serenity took his hand, squeezing it gently. “It’s great to have friends. Especially the kind that you share such a bond with. But if they were the ones who were meant to help you heal, wouldn’t they be sitting out here in the dark watching the stars with you?”

Oh, man. His lungs froze as her insight hit him hard. He’d come up here on this roof to be alone and never once had he considered cluing in the guys about its existence. Because Isaiah was the one pulling away. On purpose.

“Maybe you’re my soul mate,” he said with a forced laugh and was only half kidding. If he spent a lot of time with Serenity, then he didn’t have to worry about any of that

mumbo-jumbo. Especially the slowing down part.

Slowing down wasn't on his radar. That was not how he'd get his breathing right, no matter what Serenity thought she saw beyond the veil. Only leaving worked. Or rather, he didn't have a lot of hope that he'd ever find a place that would fix what was broken, but the longer he stayed here, the more disappointed everyone would be that he couldn't be Elmer anymore.

He was glue that couldn't figure out how to stick. The irony was killing him.

"My predictions aren't that specific," she said in all seriousness. "But I do sense that you've met the one already. Though I'm pretty sure it's not me."

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The one. It sounded so mystical and wondrous. And not something Isaiah deserved. If it wasn't Serenity, who then? There weren't a whole lot of eligible women in town, so he needed to figure it out fast so he could stay far away from this woman. How could he jet if he was busy going gaga over a woman? The prediction had it wrong, all the way around. Not happening.

Though he couldn't deny that he ached down in his bones for the kind of soul-deep connection running rampant throughout that prediction. It was like Serenity had cracked him open and in one shot spied everything he longed for but couldn't have. His own mother hadn't wanted him. But the Navy had. And then Caleb Hardy, Tristan Marchande, Hudson Rafferty and Rowe Hardy had adopted him as one of their own. As a thank you, he'd failed them all.

"I'll take that under advisement," he said mildly. "But you'll forgive me if I don't run right out and propose to someone."

"Oh, no. You definitely shouldn't do that. This is a process. You need to do it slowly. Weren't you listening?"

Serenity was so serious about all of this that it gave him pause. "I'm sorry, I was. Slow. Got it."

Now he somehow had to navigate the next few weeks until he left without hurting Serenity's feelings. Preferably by completing a schoolhouse for Hardy's build-a-town project while not falling prey to the suggestive lure of glancing around just in case there really was someone the universe had selected to fix everything that hurt inside him. That was as likely as Isaiah taking a breath that didn't burn all the way down.

Three

Tristan Marchande was the most beautiful human Aria had ever laid eyes on. If she had a poster of him, she'd tack it up above her bed like a besotted teenager. The fact that she shared a room with Havana, who was engaged to Caleb, meant nothing at all. They could both stare at him. She'd share.

It was all make-believe anyway.

It wasn't like he'd give her a second glance or anything. Sure that stung a little but it was so much safer to dream about a stunning, out-of-reach angel of a man. If she set her sights on someone she had a chance with, then this hypothetical guy would eventually leave. Just like everyone else in her life had done. That was not a recipe for happiness.

No. Much better to have a harmless crush on a former SEAL with a physique that could bring a woman to tears. No one had to know she'd set her sights on him strictly because nothing ever could or would happen. That was the only way to avoid getting hurt.

"How did you know Caleb was the one?" she asked Havana, who stood behind her braiding Aria's hair in an intricate fish-bone pattern. It would be horrendously difficult to unbraid later, but Aria would never say a word.

Havana had been gone for eight of the longest years of Aria's life. Now her sister was back in Superstition Springs for good and there was literally nothing important enough to potentially squabble over. She'd much rather hear her sister talk about something fun like her fiancé. Just because love wasn't in the cards for Aria didn't mean she hated the concept. On the contrary. It was great to see her sister so happy.

"Because he thinks I'm bossy and loves me anyway," Havana announced

immediately with a happy sigh. “I can be myself twenty-four/seven without censure. What is that, but heaven on earth?”

The middle Nixon sister, Ember, spread her red-gold hair behind her as she settled into a pillow on the king sized bed that Aria and Havana shared. Ember had taken a tiny room on the second floor where all of Serenity’s ex-SEALs currently lived since there was no extra room on the third floor of the partially renovated hotel their aunt had bought a couple of years ago.

Her sister came upstairs enough that she might as well live there. She’d wandered into the bedroom a few minutes ago, seemingly content to watch Havana’s fingers fly through Aria’s stick straight hair, no mention of the whereabouts of her seven-year-old. Neither Aria nor Havana had asked after Judd since Ember got snippy the moment anyone said a word about her son.

“Really?” Ember’s voice dripped derision as she jumped into the exchange. “That’s what you find attractive in a man? A guy who calls you names, then tries to make up for it with declarations of his feelings. Please.”

Geez. That’s what Ember had taken from Havana’s comment? It had sounded pretty nice to Aria but since she’d never been in love, maybe there was a trick to it that other women learned on the fly.

“What do you think makes a guy attractive then?” Havana shot back over her shoulder. “A tractor?”

Ooh, interesting question almost assuredly designed to get some answers out of Ember about who the father of her son was. The young boy her long-lost sister had showed up with a few weeks ago looked exactly like Ember and their mother so there were no clues there, and her sister had been shockingly closed mouthed about his parentage. Just like she had been at seventeen. The only males of approximately the

right age and who were also rumored to have been Ember's lovers in high school were Farmer Moon's sons.

Aria glanced at Ember in the mirror, but their sister's face betrayed nothing. Too bad. Aria wouldn't ask. If Ember wanted them to know, she'd tell them. And it wasn't like she'd called a whole bunch over the last eight years that she'd been gone either. Havana had at least tried to maintain her relationship with Aria via phone, which was more than Ember had done.

"I like a guy who knows when to keep his mouth shut," Ember finally said cryptically. "Sil

ence is sexy."

No doubt a nod to whichever local boy had gotten her pregnant but hadn't spilled the secret in all these years. Of course it was possible that she'd never divulged the truth to the father, either. Maybe she didn't even know. Ember had been rather free with her affections back in high school, yet another source of conflict between Ember and Havana, especially after the positive pregnancy test. Aria had always avoided male attention on purpose, not that her lack of curves and dull red hair had inspired much of that in the first place.

"Figures." Havana smirked. "You've never met a wall you couldn't have an argument with. Why not pick a guy whose ear you can talk off? I feel kind of sorry for whoever you end up with."

"Who said I was in the market?" The hard cross of Ember's arms belied her mild tone.

"I like a guy I can have a conversation with," Aria threw in before the whole thing devolved into exactly the kind of argument Havana meant. Those two had always

clashed and nothing had apparently changed other than the fact that this time, no one had stormed off to another city and stayed for almost a decade. Not yet anyway. “Cheekbones are nice too. You could cut butter with Tristan’s.”

“Because that’s a useful quality in a man.” This from Ember who apparently had appointed herself the naysayer of all Nixon women’s opinions about the opposite gender.

“What do you think is a useful quality?” Havana asked point-blank, pointing the comb in her hand at Ember. “You know, if you were in the market?”

“Why all the interest in my love life?” Ember responded instead of answering, likely to avoid the question. Obviously she didn’t get the concept of conversation between sisters, a deficiency that Aria, for one, would like to change.

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“Because you’ve been gone for a long time,” Aria explained before Havana could say something else that would set Ember off. “We want to get to know you again. You’re the one who came back home. Why would you do that if it wasn’t to reforge the bonds with your family?”

Ember’s brows raised in an instant reaction, as if she had plenty to say about how wrong Aria’s guess was, but suddenly, she didn’t want to hear it. This was her life too and her sisters were home together for the first time since Aria had been a teenager. Why couldn’t they just all get along and stop sniping at each other?

“Tell us about how Caleb proposed,” she blurted out to Havana, desperate to change the subject.

“It was incredibly romantic,” Havana said sunnily. “He told me that Serenity had predicted we’d be together so that probably meant we had to get married.”

Aria blinked as Ember snorted out a laugh and said, “Boy, that guy’s a prize.”

Havana just laughed along with her instead of taking offense. “I appreciated the point. Serenity had given me a prediction too that almost ruined my chances with Caleb because I was so busy trying to circumvent it.”

“Why would you do that?” Ember asked with what appeared to be genuine curiosity. “Her predictions always come true.”

“They do not!” Both sisters turned to stare at Aria askance and she felt her cheeks heat under their scrutiny. Ugh, why had such an innocent question started up this old

debate again? “I mean... I know she believes in them but they don’t always come true.”

Of course, Aria didn’t have a lot of experience with Serenity’s predictions personally, since she’d never lobbed one in Aria’s direction before. Until yesterday. And the less she thought about that, the better.

“They do,” Ember insisted, but she’d long been in the believers of the supernatural camp with Serenity, despite not having any extra senses of her own. “Don’t tell me you’ve been living in Superstition Springs your whole life and haven’t gained an appreciation for the mysticism that practically drips from the rocks around here?”

“That’s not what I’m saying...exactly,” Aria mumbled. “How did we get on this subject anyway?”

Havana’s gaze cut to Aria’s face in the mirror. “She gave you a prediction, didn’t she? A good one?”

“Oooh, come on. Tell us,” Ember insisted, scootching forward on the bed until she was at the edge closest to where Aria sat at the dresser. The colors of the patchwork quilt under her sister’s legs swirled together in Aria’s head, creating a dizzying pattern.

She could hardly think around it. Finally, her sisters were paying attention to her, asking her things about her life and that stupid, ridiculous prediction was what they wanted to talk about.

Spice up your wardrobe or create a new style in order to attract the right partner. You’ll feel intimacy all around so no matter where you go, love will follow.

Could the real prediction please stand up? Because there was no way that was

happening. No way she'd breathe a word of it to anyone. Havana had been on her case from almost the moment she'd set her suitcase down in Serenity's foyer: Let me do something with your hair, Aria. A simple cut. Curlers. Something. Maybe we could try a little mascara, Aria. Please. What about lip gloss? Not a lot. Just enough to give you some color.

If Havana found out Serenity had sensed the need for a makeover, there'd be no stopping her. And the last thing Aria wanted to do was attract a man anyway. For what? Only to be abandoned one more time?

"It wasn't anything," Aria muttered. "Hardly worth mentioning."

"You're a terrible liar." Havana's mouth curved upward in the mirror, where of course they could both see the telltale blush staining Aria's cheeks like a neon sign. "Curse of the Irish. Sorry. I've long wished Mom had given us the luck of the Irish instead but no. We get red hair, no ability to play poker and a crappy hair-trigger temper."

"I don't have a temper." That was the only thing Aria could argue with though.

"Just wait," Ember advised with a sage nod. "The second you get a man sniffing around you like he means to stay, you'll develop one. They bring it out in you."

"Uh, huh." Havana's hum of agreement came practically before Ember had stopped talking. "That's no lie."

Aria almost did a double take. Had Havana just agreed with Ember like...she'd agreed?

Next, unicorns were going to bust out of the closet and invite them all to play ring toss with a few angel's halos they'd borrowed.

This was what camaraderie looked like. She was pretty sure anyway. Regardless, Havana and Ember were suddenly getting along and dang it if Aria didn't want to continue that trend. Why did it have to be the prediction that had done it though? It was like the best birthday present on a day when you had a toothache.

Aria weighed out how badly she did not want to talk about a makeover against how much she craved this sense of belonging inside her family. That was something she hadn't had in a very long time. Not since Havana had bailed for Austin and Ember had fled for wherever she'd gone, leaving Aria at home to take care of Serenity. Yes, it should have been the other way around, but Serenity had a childlike quality that wasn't well suited to responsibility. When Havana had left, things like paying bills and shopping for groceries had fallen to the lone Nixon sister still in Superstition Springs, which Aria didn't mind handling. Serenity had given her a place to live after all.

"The prediction is kind of dumb," she hedged, hoping that might give her room to wiggle. Or segue into something else if she could somehow convince them it wasn't worth their time to discuss. "Really nebulous."

"That's always the case," Ember said as if that should be common knowledge.

"Tell us," Havana repeated Ember's earlier plea as she twisted a hairband around the tip of Aria's braid to hold it. "You can't leave us hanging like this. It's a love prediction, isn't it? Is that why you've developed a sudden obsession with all things Tristan?"

"I do not have an obsession." Except she did talk about him a lot.

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Maybe she had oversold her crush on Tristan, but only because she knew she had no shot with him. It was supposed to be like having a crush on Zak Efron—no one really took that seriously. The prediction had even said she had to do something with her looks in order to get a man to notice her. Which was crap. Why was what she looked like the thing that would tip the scales? It shouldn't be. And honestly, she was kind of mad about it.

Instead of trying to dance around the whole thing, this was a chance to get her sisters on the same page, namely that the prediction was the worst sort of objectification.

“You know how you said you knew Caleb was the one because you could be yourself?” she asked but didn't wait for Havana's nod. “My prediction says I have to get a makeover to find love. How is that a recipe for being myself?”

“Wait.” Havana shook her head and plopped down on the bed next to Ember. “Serenity told you to get a makeover to meet your soul mate? That's too good. I've got some pictures I saved on my phone of hair styles that would—”

“No.” She could not cut off that thinking at the pass fast enough. “You're not listening. I don't want a makeover. How will that lead me to true love? It's false advertising.”

Ember and Havana glanced at each other. The pause got longer and Aria's gaze got narrower. What was that look for? Because she was silly and naïve about men? So? That was better than putting all your faith in someone who couldn't be bothered to stick around. She'd had enough of being left behind by her own family. How much worse would it be if she actually fell in love with someone who could rightly be

labeled her soul mate—only to be crushed when he took off?

She couldn't give a man that kind of power. It was unthinkable. And if she couldn't trust a man in the first place, there was no way a makeover would help that.

"It's not false advertising," Havana said, as Ember threw in, "Exactly. It's a way to give yourself confidence so that you can be the best Aria possible. Then you meet someone who likes your confidence."

Aria made a face. "Why? Because eyeshadow is the only way to land a man? That cannot be true. I don't even want a

man on those terms."

Ember cocked a brow at her. "What terms do you want a man on then?"

The spotlight that had just shifted onto Aria upped the temperature about a thousand degrees. Maybe she yearned to have someone who looked at her like Caleb looked at Havana. It wasn't a crime. He was really in love with her, you could tell. And he was solid, a keeper, as evidenced by the ring on her sister's third finger and Caleb's new job as the mayor of Superstition Springs.

A part of her figured his military buddies were cut from the same cloth, which might be why she'd formed the Tristan Fan Club. Didn't hurt that the man had a killer smile to match his silver tongue. Sure, he flirted with everyone but he did it so smoothly that you kind of wanted to believe he meant what he said to you. No man had ever flirted with her. It was a bit of a rush. No makeup required.

But that didn't mean she wanted Tristan, per se. Maybe more like the idea of him.

"I want a man who sees me," she blurted out. "Not the clothes I'm wearing. I don't

want to have to think about my hair and whether I picked the right color of lipstick to match my outfit. Lipstick fades anyway and then I'm left with just me anyway. Why not start out that way?"

That's what she wanted. But since that wasn't going to happen for her, she could moon over Tristan Marchande and never worry about having her heart crushed.

"I hear you." Havana shrugged. "Then prove the prediction wrong. Get Tristan to take you out on a date without a makeover."

Ember nodded eagerly. "I can respect a woman who has so much natural confidence that she doesn't even worry about how she looks. That's not me, not by a long shot. I'd kind of like to see how that's done."

Her sisters' words unfolded like a lovely little bouquet inside, warming her instantly. They believed in her. Had totally bought what she'd sold. They both thought she could land a man like Tristan, no questions asked.

And best of all, if she was successful, she not only got a beautiful man to pay attention to her as her reward, she'd have done something worthy of her sisters' belief in her. Then maybe they'd think twice about leaving her behind again.

"What, like a bet?" she ventured cautiously, still weighing out the craziness of the idea in her head versus the lovely thought of actually winning.

"Sure." Ember shrugged with a glance at Havana. "I'll take your shift at the diner for the night if you get him to ask you out and if you don't, you babysit on your off night sometime. Havana will...what'll you put up?"

They both glanced at their sister as she contemplated. "I'll get Caleb to loan him the SUV for the date so he can take you anyplace you like. No dice and you have to come

work for me for a day on town stuff.”

That was all easy stuff, but the bet part was incidental. It was the principle of the thing. There was no way she could refuse the challenge of proving she could garner a man’s attention without a makeover. But how in the world was she going to get Tristan to notice her like that? She needed help. Not from Mary Kay or Paul Mitchell but from someone who could stack the deck until it would be impossible for her to fail.

She knew exactly who to hit up.

Four

The barn renovation project team had almost finished nailing up the exterior siding. Isaiah stepped back from the area he’d been working on, pleased with his progress. No one could accuse him of slacking when Marchande’s side had nearly the same coverage.

He might have taken advantage of being alone for a few minutes while Marchande went for Powerade, or whatever passed for the least vile thirst quencher Mavis J had in stock at the grocery store in town. Normally he’d have used the down time to practice breathing or walking on his hands, but instead he’d gotten caught up with his appointed task.

Serenity’s rooftop chat had straightened him out pretty good. If he was head down at the barn, sweating through an honest day’s work to get this renovation done ASAP, he couldn’t be scouting around for the future Mrs. West. Which he wouldn’t have been anyway. Not really. Better safe than sorry.

Okay, he could admit a healthy curiosity about who might be the one Serenity thought he’d already met. Not because he planned to do anything about it if he did

figure out who the prediction had in mind to heal and nurture his soul. Still.

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Out of nowhere, Aria appeared, her red hair swinging in a rush of color as she practically skidded to a halt. She and Cassidy hadn't been by to help for a couple of days since the exterior work required more brawn than brains. Frankly, the ladies' absence had been a blessing. Marchande and Cassidy got crossways with each other twice an hour, mostly when she handed him his hat every time he tried to flirt with her. Isaiah had saved them all a lot of trouble by suggesting the ladies take a break from barn renovations.

Maybe his ability to guide people in the right direction wasn't entirely broken, not when it came to saving his own sanity.

"In a rush?" he asked Aria with a genuine smile. She was an upgrade over Marchande any day and as long as Cassidy wasn't with her, the fireworks would stay unlit. "This barn isn't going anywhere."

"I know," she said, her voice a tad breathy, which did something nice to it. "But I'm on a break from the diner and I saw Tristan head into Voodoo Grocery from the window and I knew that meant you were probably here alone, so I ran—"

"Okay, easy." She had his attention now. And she needed to stop talking so she could give her lungs a chance to catch up. He knew a thing or two about not being able to breathe. "You ran all the way from the diner? Impressive. That's gotta be half a mile."

She shrugged, matching his smile with one of her own that deepened the blue of her eyes. "Almost three quarters. Practically nothing. I don't mind the distance. You have to learn to get around in a place like this if you want to do anything besides stay shut

up inside.”

His estimation of her went up a notch. Yeah, he’d run his share of miles himself, usually at a ground eating pace with fifty pounds of gear strapped to his back. In the desert. Sometimes under a barrage of bullets. But he’d trained for brutal conditions and had the additional motivating factors of working with his team, plus trying not to die.

“You’re an outdoorsy type?”

“I guess.” She bit her lip, contemplating as if she wanted to be really sure she’d answered his question with as much honesty as she could muster. “I mean, I like to run, which has to be done outdoors around here. I never really thought much about it, but I do like being outside. Especially at the springs. It’s so peaceful.”

No one had mentioned anything about springs, which in retrospect might have just been a miss on his part given the name of the town. But he hadn’t had any reason to care about sorting that out. Until now. Aria’s face had taken on this glow as she’d spoken that might have been left over from running three quarters of a mile in the May heat. But he didn’t think so. And now he had to know more about what had lit her up.

“Springs? As in the Superstition ones?” he asked.

She tilted her head to the left to indicate the direction. “It’s not far from here. A little over a mile. Other end of town though, by the river.”

Springs and a river? He should get out more. His downtime consisted of rooftop stargazing. Alone. Which just sounded...lonely all at once. He had a very odd urge to invite Aria to join him in his makeshift tree fort sometime. They both lived at the hotel, albeit on different floors, so it would be convenient to jet up the stairs. Though

she often worked late at the diner. Maybe after her shift? Or was that presumptuous?

He shook his head. Hard. No women. Even unassuming ones who had never so much as tripped his radar that way. Which was a shame because he really liked Aria.

“I’m a fan of peace,” he said instead. “Sounds like a place I might enjoy. Though it seems like there would be a lot of quiet spots around here since there’s not much else?”

“There are a lot of places to be by yourself, that’s for sure,” she acknowledged wryly. “Especially when people don’t stick around long.”

“That’s the spiel I keep hearing from Caleb. There isn’t much to anchor folks here. I think the schoolhouse will help, don’t you?” Or at least that was the party line. They had to get some basic infrastructure in place before the town could really function as a tourist draw—police department, fire department, tax office. This barn renovation was step one of about a million designed to get people entrenched in Superstition Springs.

And that reminder sat in his stomach like a stone. Not only was he one of the people without an anchor, Hardy expected Isaiah to be the one handing them out. When he got his mayor face on, there wasn’t a lot you could say to argue with the man, and when he flat out told you he needed help gluing people’s feet to the ground here, things got dicey.

“Sure, that’s why I volunteered to help with the renovations. Well, one of the reasons.” She broke off and he had the distinct impression she’d said something she regretted. “Actually, that was a good segue into what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Talk to me about?” That’s why she’d hightailed it over here from the diner when

she'd realized he was alone? His intrigue meter shot into the red.

"Yeah. I need your help."

The long pause did not seem to fix her hesitation. Surely she wasn't uncomfortable around him. He'd always worked hard to make sure people felt at ease. Clearly he was falling down on that job too. "I'm a helpful guy. This is the part where you tell me what it is."

She huffed out a breathy laugh that seemed to release some of her tension. "It's just kind of silly now that I'm actually contemplating saying this out loud. But here it goes. I need you to promise what I'm about to tell you stays between us. It's a secret."

This just got better and better. "Like a pinky swear?"

She scowled, which only made her look cute instead of annoyed. Aria didn't have an ounce of meanness in her whole body, which kind of ruined the expression. "I'm being serious. I have a proposition for you."

Uh...if it had been anyone other than Aria, he might ask if it was of the illicit variety, but he couldn't imagine something of that nature coming out of her mouth. Intrigued didn't even begin to cover it at this point. "I'm listening."

"Here's the thing. You can't laugh. I made a bet with Havana and Ember that I could get Tristan to ask me out on a date. I'm pretty sure that's not going to happen unless I stack the deck."

She paused, eyeing him meaningfully and he caught a clue pretty fast. Decoy, fake boyfriend, make Marchande jealous. Take your pick. "You want me to help you."

Her relieved smile did something unexpected—it made him relax.

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That explained why she'd started wearing her hair down at the renovation site. She had a thing for Marchande, which was far from unusual. Women thronged around him on a regular basis and he'd always had his pick. If she had her sights set on his teammate, good. That meant Isaiah could be around her with no chance of anything mystical going on.

"I had a feeling you might appreciate the fact that it's a bet," she allowed. "They practically dared me."

That did hit all of his buttons. The fact that she'd clued in on it warmed him considerably. She didn't have to know that a wager upped the stakes enough to get his blood pumping or why he needed that so badly. "If there's a bet, I'm your guy. Tell me more."

She shrugged. "That's basically it."

"Not by half. Why would anyone take that bet unless they thought you'd lose?" He had to know what he was working with here and she'd left out a piece of this puzzle.

Aria's brows quirked in apparent disbelief. "Have you looked at me recently?"

What kind of question was that? He looked at her all the time. But in the interest of fairness, he swept her with a once-over that should have been a lot more casual than it was. "Looking at you. You have gorgeous hair. Pretty eyes."

As his gaze strayed to some of the areas that might be off-limits, he suddenly couldn't tear his gaze from her lithe form. Aria was fit in the way of a woman who could run

three-quarters of a mile without stopping. Sure she wasn't one of those lushly-formed types who made men stupid with nothing more than a come-hither smolder, but he'd never been attracted to that.

Actually, he'd never really spelled out the things that made up his ideal woman and he didn't want to start at that particular moment. Because he'd sound like an idiot if he said Aria had every last quality.

He cleared his throat. "Basically, you're pretty awesome. Seems like a sucker's bet to me. And like you don't need much help."

Aria blinked and a pleased blush stained her cheeks, which did nothing to decrease her attractiveness. "That might be the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me."

That summed up the issue in a nutshell. She didn't have a lot of experience with men paying attention to her, which must be what she hoped to gain with Isaiah's help. He was the practice run. That, he could do without worrying about Serenity's prediction or his imminent departure.

The whole shebang got his juices flowing in a way that nothing had, not in a long time. "You should have men singing sonnets to your beauty on a regular basis."

"Well they don't." She made a face that wrinkled up her nose a bit. "But I'm not expecting that. I just need Tristan to ask me out on a date. To anywhere. I've been in his orbit for a few weeks now and he's never given the slightest indication that he notices me above anyone else. I need insider info. Tell me what he likes, dislikes. Music, movies, books. That kind of thing."

"I'd counter that with the point the he's been in your orbit, not the other way around," he corrected and bit back some choice words about the kind of men Aria had been dating. There was a whole lot wrong with them if they hadn't been telling her on a

regular basis how great she was. “That’s all we’re going for here? He asks you out and you win?”

She nodded, seemingly pleased that he’d gotten on board so fast. “What can I do for you in return? Something similar? Maybe you’d like the inside track on Cassidy.”

He recoiled so fast it snapped his neck. How in the blazes had Cassidy Calloway entered this already bizarre conversation?

“What? Why? I don’t—” He swallowed before he said something he shouldn’t, like how plain and unappealing Cassidy was next to Aria. “Why would I want any kind of track with Cassidy?”

“You know. Because she’s into you. Maybe I can help—” Aria’s eyes widened as she contemplated what must have been an expression of extreme what the heck just happened? on his face. “This is news to you. I thought you were...well, this is awkward.”

Yeah, he was a regular Captain Oblivious here. Clearly he’d been too wrapped up in his own misery over coming home from Syria in pieces to notice all the goofy eyes being thrown around on this barn renovation project. “I feel like I’m back in high school.”

Aria just laughed. “I wouldn’t know. There were ten people in my school and two of them were my sisters. For a while anyway.”

Because they’d both left, according to what he’d gleaned from Hardy. “Well, don’t worry about reciprocation. You can have my help for free, but only because you deserve to have a man who appreciates you.”

All at once, he had the uneasy feeling Marchande wouldn’t be that guy. Isaiah would

lay down his life for the man, had been given many opportunities to prove that, but his own personal allegiance to his teammate didn't erase facts. Tristan Marchande was a smooth dog of the highest order, prone to love 'em and leave 'em before a blink of time had passed. He appreciated women all right—in mass quantities.

That would not be what Aria deserved. Neither was that any of his business.

“No, I insist,” Aria shot back stubbornly. “You and Cassidy would be cute together. She's so pretty and smart. There aren't a lot of women around here, in case you didn't notice. Why not snag one of the best for yourself?”

Because he was avoiding entanglements of that sort. And not just because of the prediction. Something that felt like panic beat a drum in his throat. But it couldn't be. Because that would be a stupid thing to panic over. All he had to do was lay down the law in that respect.

“No really, I insist right back. This is a freebie, strictly to win the bet. Your sisters are going down. We cannot lose. I'll be like Donkey, Shrek's trusted sidekick. Right by your side to help complete the quest with no thought to my own personal safety as we traverse a hostile countryside in search of the dragon's castle.”

The look Aria gave him brought him up short and he trailed off. Okay. Not on board with the Shrek metaphor. Maybe she'd never even seen the movie and plus, it was a cartoon. Probably he should have picked something more manly, like Lord of the Rings, another personal favorite. A quest was a quest.

“Before you get too far into this,” Aria said just as he opened his mouth to backtrack. “You should know there will be no makeovers like in the second movie. What you see is what you get. There will be no magic potions turning me into the non-ogre form of Fiona.”

Isaiah had to grin. “She never drank a potion. It was Shrek who got a makeover from the potion. Besides, I would never do that, mostly because I’m not into winning that way. But also because you don’t need any magic potions. You’re going to win because you’re you, and Tristan will be thrilled to have the Aria that you are right now.”

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Color climbed through her face again in the most interesting barometer of her feelings and he liked having that tell. His compliment had pleased her. He wanted to do it again.

“I’ve seen all four of the Shrek movies at least ten times,” she said and he had the distinct impression she’d veered away from the subject of Marchande on purpose. “So I know the fairy godmoth

er changed Fiona back into her human form. I’m just trying to go along with your point and also make it clear that there will be no new hairdo or anything.”

“Really? Ten times?”

He’d probably seen them all twenty times. But there was a lot of downtime when you were a SEAL waiting for deployment. The other guys preferred to read or watch depressing shows like Game of Thrones, but he’d had enough violence in his day job that he didn’t like it in his entertainment. Lord of the Rings notwithstanding since the violence was mostly toward the bad guys.

She shrugged. “The Shrek movies are great. The real question is why you picked that as the theme for our...association. Whatever you want to call it.”

What, like an almost thirty-year-old man couldn’t like cartoons? He bristled. “There’s nothing wrong with Shrek. It’s a quest movie. A twist on regular fairy tales.”

Defensive much? He hadn’t even touched on how it had this element of hope that had always resonated with him. If things could work out for an ogre, the same might be

true of an orphan who'd never known a solid home for more than a few months at a time. He hadn't seen the movies as a kid. It was only as an adult that he'd found the DVD in a pile of others at the base one day and the strange title plus the odd looking green monster on the cover had intrigued him enough to see what it was about.

"Oh, I know. That's one of the things I like about it. I just meant that you're more like Shrek, going on a quest to find the princess on behalf of the king. You said you were going to be like Donkey. I was just thinking that if you intend to be the annoying talking sidekick, maybe I should reevaluate this whole thing."

His shoulders relaxed as he laughed. "Point taken. I'll be more like Shrek, the delivery boy."

"You've seen those movies more than once." Her smile widened as she punched him companionably in the arm. "Don't try to deny it."

He spread his hands wide, palms up. "I would never. It's my favorite. The first is the best, followed by Shrek 3. Then 2, then 4. Sometimes I watch 2 and change my mind about the order though."

That marked the first time he'd ever said that out loud. You didn't talk about cartoons in a roomful of SEALs who could collectively dismantle an in-flight helicopter, then free jump fifty feet into the Persian Gulf before it crashed, taking its insurgent passengers to the depths of the sea.

There was something about Aria—and this conversation—that made him feel like he could be himself, no matter what. She didn't know he was broken, nor did she expect him to provide any glue.

"Four is always last though," she agreed with a definitive nod, apparently opting to skip the part where his taste had seven-year-old boy written all over it.

In a lot of ways, he hadn't ever grown up, though, as Hardy often laughingly accused him of when Isaiah took Marchande's stupid bets. So? What was so great about being a grown-up anyway? Adulthood sucked with all the responsibility and tension and bills. Besides, Isaiah hadn't gotten a real childhood, not the kind other kids did. There'd been no Santa Claus on Christmas morning or Easter baskets to anticipate. One year, he'd landed with foster parents who practiced some fringe religion and that had been pretty bleak since they didn't celebrate anything, least of all birthdays or other generally recognized festive occasions.

"I think we'll get along just fine," he told her as one very tall, very blond SEAL waltzed into view at the end of the cracked concrete road that lead toward town, not one hair bold enough to escape from his slick topknot. Marchande was always carefully groomed and never hurried anywhere, even when bringing back drinks for someone else who'd stayed behind working. "Looks like our target is back from his jaunt to Voodoo Grocery. Mum's the word, right?"

Aria shook her head, eyes wide. "Oh, for sure. You can't tell him there's a bet. Or that I've got the hots for him. I would be mortified if he found out."

"You told me, though."

"Well, yeah, I had to in order to get your help. And, you know." She shrugged and lowered her voice as Marchande ambled up the dirt path from the road, still taking his time but clearly intrigued by the party of two that had formed in his absence. "You're easy to talk to. More importantly, I trust you."

How about that? He kind of liked being her confidante, a go-to friend she could tell anything without fear of censure.

"What a great addition to the scenery," Marchande said by way of greeting and treated Aria to one of his megawatt smiles. "I like it when you come by to dress up

the place.”

She smiled at him in return, but otherwise kept her mouth shut. That wasn’t going to work. This was her chance to get started on winning the bet.

“Perfect timing, then,” Isaiah said cheerily. “I was just about to go...do something.”

He had nothing to do, but it was the only excuse he could conjure up on the fly to give them time alone together. Plus, jetting off had the added bonus of forcing Marchande to pick up his share of the renovations, which he’d shirked for the better part of an hour.

“Like what?” Marchande asked, because of course he had no clue Isaiah had been trying to finagle something on his behalf. “You can’t abandon ship, Elmer. It’s go-time on the rest of these exterior panels.”

“I have to get back to the diner anyway,” Aria said as Tristan handed over his PowerAde cargo to Isaiah.

But as she turned to go, she shot Isaiah a secret look that hit him square in the solar plexus with a long, liquid pull that shouldn’t feel so good. But it did. They shared something now. He was part of her inner circle, part of her community, and his greedy, parched soul lapped it up.

He’d had that in the Navy—the camaraderie, the sense of belonging—and it had been ripped away. If there was a small chance he could recreate some of that with Aria simply by giving her a few pointers about Marchande, but with none of the pressure, he’d take it.

In fact, he’d prefer it. Aria didn’t share the images in Isaiah’s head of the bloody, broken bodies he’d been responsible for murdering. The guys on his team did. They’d

all been there. They'd all participated in the strike that had leveled most of the village of al-Sadidiq. How did you move on from that, pick up and go on like nothing had happened? How did you make a single decision outside of what shoes to put on in the morning without questioning whether you had all the right information?

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Simple. You didn't. You also didn't let anyone give you the responsibility for any decisions. And you certainly didn't take on a role in a project that was critical to the survival of a dying town, even if the mayor was a guy you'd lay down your life for.

Isaiah's lungs got tight, right on cue. Good time for a sip of PowerAde to cover. Except the bottle in his hand that Marchande had brought back from Voodoo Grocery wasn't PowerAde, it was some knock-off brand called Quencher and it was purple, a color that probably signified grape. Normally Isaiah would gag. He drank half of it in one shot. Didn't help.

Clearly he needed to spend a lot of time in Aria's company talking about innocuous things like Shrek movies and less time with Marchande. He had a bet to win.

Five

Most weeks, Aria worked at Ruby's Diner every night except Sunday, but only because Ruby's was closed. The money wasn't fantastic, but jobs were hard to come by in Superstition Springs and it sure beat being broke. Farmer Moon's daughter-in-law did medical transcription on line—nice enough work if you had a computer and an internet connection—and some folks commuted to Bastrop or La Grange to work at the Home Depot or answer phones at an office. Also fine if you had a car.

Aria had none of those things and limited resources, which she mostly didn't mind. Serenity had a bit of money that she'd inherited, but she also had definite ideas about the evils of computers, and since her aunt had never learned to drive, it never occurred to her that Aria might like to learn too. Havana had sweet-talked one of Farmer Moon's sons into teaching her and then earned a scholarship to UT, which

was an amazing

accomplishment, but meant Havana wasn't around anymore.

After her sister had left, so much of the responsibility around the house had fallen to Aria that she'd started struggling in school, never her favorite thing anyway. Her grades hadn't recovered enough to contemplate a scholarship and besides, who wanted to sit in a classroom longer than you had to? She liked people well enough to work for Ruby and the company at the diner was definitely better than sitting home alone in a quirky hotel that had only had ghosts for guests for as long as Aria had lived there.

Once her aunt's five pen pals had stormed into town, the former military men had taken rooms on the second floor and things had gotten a lot livelier at the old hotel. Not only did she sometimes run into Tristan in the lobby, she got to dream about the delicious, six-foot-four blond god who slept just one tiny flight of stairs below her bedroom. It had all seemed so harmless—until this stupid bet.

How was she supposed to get Tristan to ask her out when she didn't really want to go out with him? Okay, she wouldn't mind it if something crazy happened and he fell helplessly in love with her, singing odes to her beauty beneath her window and stuff. But the odds of that were basically zero. Hence the whole reason she'd made such a big deal out of her crush. It was never supposed to go anywhere.

Worse, as she changed out of her waitress uniform after her shift that evening, her thoughts strayed to a different SEAL automatically. One who had dark hair and had agreed to help her land a date with Tristan. Imagine a wholly-masculine guy like Isaiah watching Shrek enough times to know the plot. Shrek, her favorite movie. Aria had watched it over and over growing up because it dulled some of the pain of losing her parents at the age of seven. Donkey made her laugh and Fiona had almost as funny of a name as Aria did, plus they both had red hair.

And then there was the whole thing about how Fiona turned into an ogre at night. But instead of hating herself for being ugly, she found the perfect life for herself alongside Shrek, who thought she was beautiful no matter what she looked like.

That was a real fairy tale in Aria's opinion.

What had drawn Isaiah to it? He wasn't hideous like Shrek. He was actually a really good-looking guy, clean-cut with a wiry build that hinted at both inner and outer strength. The real kicker was his eyes, though. He had one blue and one brown. Over time, she'd trained herself not to stare at them but it had been hard at first because they were so uncommon and interesting.

Someone knocked on her bedroom door and Serenity stuck her head inside without waiting for Aria to answer. "Hurry up, now. You have a caller!"

Aria paused midturn, her recently-shed uniform forgotten in her fingertips. "A what? It's not 1942, Aunt Serenity."

Serenity stuck her tongue out, but kept rearranging her long gray hair as if she couldn't decide what to do with her hands. "I was born in the sixties I'll have you know. Get dressed. Isaiah's here to see you and it's rude to keep a man waiting. Unless you'd rather receive him in that outfit, in which case I'll show him in."

With a glance down at her granny panties and serviceable bra, Aria arched a brow. "You wouldn't."

"Eh. Probably not," Serenity mused as if actually thinking about it. "Might give a fellow the wrong idea about the kinds of things I'm okay with going on under my roof."

Please. She and Isaiah were just friends and no amount of skin-showing—on the part

of either party—would change that, thank goodness. It wasn't like she had much to inspire a man in that department anyway since her share of womanly curves had gone to Ember. She slipped a sundress over her unsexy underwear and hustled her aunt out of the way so she could go see about her gentleman caller.

When she walked into the living area, Isaiah was cooling his heels by staring up at the very large watercolor that Serenity had hanging over her threadbare couch.

“Aria's mom painted that when we were kids. It's a longhorn,” Serenity explained helpfully since the painting did warrant some clarification—it resembled a giant uterus more than a cow. “Isn't it brilliant?”

Isaiah flashed Aria a smile that could more readily be described as brilliant and nodded. “It suits the place.”

Clever man. Not everyone could make such a statement sound both sincere and like a compliment without actually validating Serenity's opinion about the horrific artwork. Because it was frighteningly bad, not that Aria would disrespect her late mother by saying so.

“You didn't come by for an art appreciation lesson, did you?” Aria asked, strictly because she was dying to know what had caused Isaiah to darken her aunt's door.

Caleb came up to the third floor all the time to see Havana since they were engaged and also working sixteen hours a day together on the town revitalization plans. But this was the first time a former SEAL had made the trek upstairs specifically to see Aria and she might be a little giddy over it, never mind that he was the wrong SEAL. In this case, he was so very right and she wasn't about to apologize for it.

Of course, he was probably here to talk about Tristan. Why else would he have come by, to take her on a date? Silly. She didn't even want that. No one had to know about

the tiny little bit of disappointment that wormed through her stomach. She didn't even know what to do with that.

Serenity's talk of a caller had gotten her all twisted around. She didn't want to date anyone unless it was directly related to the bet. Except now she was thinking about dating someone just because they liked each other. And maybe she wasn't so against the idea after all. In theory, anyway. In reality, there was still a lot of room to get hurt.

"I came to whisk you away for a private chat," Isaiah informed her and gallantly took her hand in his as if they were an item and he had done it lots of times.

Everything promptly drained out of her head except for the fact that she was holding hands with a man.

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Isaiah's palm warmed hers and she made the mistake of glancing at his unusual eyes. She sort of fell in with no lifeboat in sight. The brown one was the color of old glass, like the kind they used to make bottles out of. Lennie had a few at his antique shop that he stored up on a top shelf behind the register. They'd been there so long that the bottles were coated with dust but that didn't keep the color from shining through when the light hit them right.

That layer of dust over Isaiah's gaze—she suddenly wanted to know more about the enigma behind it.

And she hadn't even started on the blue eye. That one held secrets better than a swirled marble, hinting at depths you really wanted to examine but couldn't because the surface obscured the center. Once she'd played marbles with some of the other kids from school, but she wasn't very good at letting go of the shiny piece of rounded glass in her hand. It was a treasure and she wanted to keep it.

"I'll give you two some privacy here, if you want," Serenity offered.

"That's kind of you, but I have something else in mind," Isaiah said and the sound of his voice broke the staring contest they'd somehow fallen into.

Aria blinked and tore her gaze from his without a clue why it was so difficult all at once. "Really? You have something planned?"

"Come with me," he instructed and led her toward the door.

She had absolutely no problem with that idea. He could have suggested a root canal

and she'd follow along obligingly because her brain had turned stupid the moment a man had paid attention to her. Plus he was still holding her hand, which would have made it hard to refuse. Sure she could have pulled loose, but why in the world would she want to do that?

In a tiny dot of a town like Superstition Springs, there weren't a lot of places to go unless you had access to a vehicle. Caleb owned an SUV but he and Havana had gone to La Grange to talk to Damian Scott and his investors, who were building a resort near the river, so Isaiah couldn't have much in mind in the way of destinations. But he still managed to shock her when he steered her downstairs to the second floor and then opened the stuck-in-place door at the end of the hall with a flourish.

A little befuddled, she stared at the dark staircase that led upward. "How did you get that door open? It's been stuck shut since we moved into this place. I actually thought there was a wall behind it."

She'd tried ten times or more to pry it open to no avail. When she'd asked where it led to, Serenity shrugged and told her maybe nothing, chalking it up to the very odd renovations the owners had done over the years. The entire third floor had been converted from individual rooms into a loft-style apartment, but the previous owner hadn't finished the job, leaving half painted walls and rooms that weren't enclosed. Since there were actually doors in the place that opened into spaces that went nowhere, Aria had forgotten all about it.

"Surprise." Isaiah flapped a hand toward the darkened opening. "Don't you want to see where it goes?"

More than she wanted to breathe. Without hesitation, she strode over the threshold and clambered up the stairs. Isaiah followed her and they stepped out onto the roof. A blanket of black unfurled above her, breathtaking and dotted with stars so beautiful it almost hurt to look at them. The quiet town slumbered beyond the edge of the roof,

making it easy to imagine they were the only two people in the world.

She didn't hate that idea.

Isaiah fetched a wad of fabric from behind an old board and spread it out, then helped her sit down on the ground cover. Utterly charmed, she folded her feet beneath her as she waited for him to settle next to her.

"You certainly know how to call on a girl," she told him wryly. "I wouldn't have guessed you could show me something new about the hotel I've been living in for two years. Gold star to you, sir."

He grinned, his face a bit shadowed since it was dark, but the stars provided just enough light to give the place atmosphere. Except she shouldn't be so enchanted by the magical vibe Isaiah had created. She needed to save that up for Tristan—he could enchant her more than enough when she won her bet. That's what she should be thinking about.

Maybe she'd ask him up here to the roof.

All at once, she didn't want to talk about Tristan. It felt...wrong to bring another person into this secret rooftop sanctuary. Plus, there was no guarantee she'd ever win the bet she'd made with Havana and Ember in the first place. And she certainly wouldn't if she refused to broach the subject with the man who'd agreed to help her get Tristan's attention.

It was just so peaceful up here on the roof. The interior of the hotel was too busy with all the people and history and the occasional creak or tap of the ghosts Serenity insisted shared the space with them.

"I have to admit," Isaiah said. "I'm pretty impressed that you charged right up those

stairs without knowing where they went. You're my kind of fearless."

His kudos put heat in her cheeks and she blessed the semi-darkness that hid it from him. There was nothing worse than having a billboard on your face that broadcast your emotions to God and everyone. "Not really. I mean, what kind of danger could there possibly be?"

"Spiders. Rats. Dead or alive, a lot of people wouldn't want to run across either. I thought it was brave."

"Oh. Well...okay. Thanks." Imagine that. Isaiah, who had spent a good number of years in some very nasty places according to the stories she'd heard from Havana, thought she was brave. "Spiders don't really bother you unless you bother them and rats run away pretty fast when they hear you coming. Dead things might be another story but it was dark and—"

"Hush now," he instructed with a laugh. "And let me admire you."

Oh, yeah that was so easy she could just flip a switch and stop being weird about it. But he didn't wait for her to mull that over.

"I have a confession to make," Isaiah murmured with so much weight she glanced at him. "I haven't brought anyone else up here. It's kind of a refuge. One that wouldn't benefit from a lot of traffic, if you get my drift. So I'd love for you to keep it quiet for a while."

He was saying she was special. That was such a doozy, she scarcely knew what to think. But she liked it. She nodded and mimed locking her lips closed. "I had that thought too. More people would spoil it."

"I figured you'd get it." Companionably, he leaned back on his hands to stare up at

the stars. “We seem to be on the same wavelength about a lot of things.”

Yes. Surprisingly. Which she’d have totally missed if she hadn’t asked him to help her. She basked in that for a minute. “Thanks for sharing your secret with me. Now we each have one about the other.”

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Clearly amused, he raised his brows. “What, like if you tell someone about my hideout, I could get you back by telling Tristan about the bet you made over his virtue?”

“You make it sound tawdry.”

But she laughed just the same and it felt nice to be so comfortable with a man, especially one she’d just held hands with. Her fingers still tingled, and coupled with the magic of this rooftop secret, this was the best date she’d ever been on.

Also known as the only date she’d ever been on. And it wasn’t really a date. She was just taking liberties with the term because Serenity had started it with all the talk of having a caller. Maybe that was one of the things she should be asking Isaiah to help her focus on—her complete lack of experience with men. Ember had hoarded what few eligible boys there’d been around town when they’d been teenagers, and as Aria had grown into her twenties, her looks hadn’t followed her. Men generally didn’t notice her, which worked in her favor as far as she was concerned.

And yet here she was on the roof with one man while poised to get all the information needed to win the attention of another one. Maybe. One step at a time. First she had to figure out how to get Tristan to ask her on a date and then she’d charm him so much, he’d...what? She literally had no idea what was supposed to happen after that. What did you even do on a date?

Oh, goodness. What if Tristan thought she wanted to start dating? Like actually dating, because he mistook her interest in winning the bet as interest in him long-term? The thought brought her up short. She hadn’t categorically dismissed dating

because she didn't want companionship. It was strictly a defensive mechanism.

People left. She didn't. But what if a miracle happened and she found a man who knew how to stick?

"Make no mistake," Isaiah said after a beat. "Tristan can turn something tawdry all on his own. He doesn't need your help."

That didn't sound like a compliment. She should ask more about that, but for the first time, it occurred to her that there might be some things about Tristan that she might not like once she got to know him. And that would ruin the lovely little fantasy she'd just spun, which was why she should stick to the plan.

"Tell me what kind of music he likes," she said instead.

Might as well get this show on the road. Why she'd been dragging her feet, she couldn't fathom. This was her chance to show Havana and Ember that she didn't need a stupid makeover to get a guy like Tristan. She aimed to earn her sisters' respect and maybe demonstrate that she'd done fine by herself after they'd gone. What was her problem?

"The very loud, very complicated electronic kind," Isaiah said, his tone indicating how highly he respected his friend's taste, which was not at all. "He likes to dance."

Aria made a noise that sounded a lot like blergh because really? "There are so many things wrong with those statements, I don't even know where to start."

"I know, right?" He shook his head. "If you're going to dance, that is not the way to do it. Slow and sensual is the ticket. But listening to dance music when you're not dancing is the height of annoyance in the first place. If you're just sitting around, jazz is the way to go."

It was on the tip of her tongue to admit that she'd never danced to either kind of music when she accidentally blurted out, "That's what I listen to too. The bluesier the better."

"Come on. Not really. You're a jazz fan?" Isaiah sat up. "What's on your playlist?"

"I don't know. Chet Baker's 'Almost Blue.' Some Amy Winehouse. Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Billie Holiday. 'Don't Explain' is the best song ever written." Warming to the subject, she ticked off some more of the music she'd grown up listening to. "'Lilac Wine,' 'Cry Me a River.' Oh, John Lee Hooker—'Boom Boom,' of course. And then you know, John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis."

She trailed off as Isaiah pulled out his phone and tapped on it, then handed it to her. One glance revealed exactly what she'd already guessed—his list of songs was nearly identical to hers. The main difference being that hers was on an ancient iPod that Havana had sent her several years ago for her birthday; Aria didn't and probably never would own a cell phone.

Nearly identical. But not quite. And that was a travesty of the highest order.

"Seriously?" She arched a brow at his John Lee Hooker choices. "'Free Beer and Chicken'? That's his worst album."

"You could not be more wrong."

Fighting words. Which of course devolved into a twenty minute argument about the merits of all things blues. It was the most fun Aria had ever had while disagreeing with someone.

Finally, she held up her hands in mock surrender. "Okay, you win. I will listen to the entire album again without prejudice or malice."

“Now you’re talking. We can start right now.” Isaiah flicked the screen of his phone and a saxophone wailed through the still night. “There is never a bad time for ‘Free Beer and Chicken.’”

The music wafted through her, kicking up a slow ache as the sensuous notes did their thing. She stared up at the stars, utterly content to never move again. “It’s not so bad when you have the right company.”

He glanced over at her and something in the long pause heated her skin as she felt him watching her. “Music is always different when you have the right company. That’s what makes it art.”

Geez, was that comment supposed to sound so ro

mantic? Definitely not. The stars and the magic of this rooftop not-a-date and the music had addled her brain, causing her to read into it. Actually, if anything, it was her fault for spitting out such a leading comment. This was not the kind of thing that normally happened to her, so she could be forgiven for a momentary lapse, right?

Problem was, she wished it wasn’t so out of the norm. And under these circumstances.

She was only here because Isaiah was helping her learn about Tristan. Oh, yeah. Tristan. Funny thing. She’d forgotten all about him. Easy to do when Isaiah had curled his body toward her, his half lounge both casual and intimate at the same time.

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“So I guess Tristan and I aren’t going to connect over music,” she croaked, hating to break the mood by mentioning another man but she kind of had to.

Isaiah flinched and jackknifed up to a sitting position as if he’d forgotten the real reason they were here, which shattered the vibe instantly. “Oh, yeah, probably not. We’ll find something though. What else do you like?”

You. She almost said it out loud. She and Tristan could share a friend, right? Surely that meant they’d have something in common since they both liked Isaiah. But she couldn’t seem to get that out around the big lump in her throat. Best thing would be to keep her thoughts to herself in case he misunderstood the comment and made it out to be something it wasn’t.

She had a huge crush on Tristan. Ask anyone. She’d practically turned it into an art form. It was absolutely imperative that she get him to notice her for a number of reasons, not the least of which was winning the bet. But also because it meant something if he did—that Aria was good enough, special enough, and important enough to for someone like him to believe it. Then maybe her sisters would see it too. And no one would ever leave again.

The real trick was how she’d convince herself of that when people who should have been in her corner never believed it either. It would be so much easier to forget the whole bet and hang out with Isaiah instead. He was funny and sweet and so unexpected, drawing her into his circle easily, almost as if they’d always known each other.

Except he’d never have invited her up to his rooftop refuge without the bet. She was

on borrowed time and not as brave as he'd claimed, which had the odd effect of making her want to prove him right.

She could do this. She had to.

Six

"Maybe it would be easier to tell me what Tristan likes," Aria said in response to his question after a long enough pause that Isaiah had started to wonder if she'd heard him. "Instead of trying to shoot in the dark by talking about what I like."

Sure. That made sense. But he already knew everything about Marchande. It was Aria who'd intrigued him so unexpectedly that he still hadn't quite figured out what had hit him. Which didn't make his sudden fascination with her okay, especially not when she'd come to him expressly with the goal of getting his friend to ask her out. She'd trusted him with this task, yet here he was veering off into la-la land like this was a date, and he had every right to dig into the personality of a woman who interested him.

He didn't. Not only did he have no plans to stick around, she was reserved for Marchande, who absolutely deserved to have a great woman like Aria. Besides, the heaviness in his chest served as a reminder that he had a lot of stuff going on inside that left no room for a woman. He wasn't aiming to fulfill Serenity's prediction. Quite the opposite.

Isaiah shut off the music. It was too sensual anyway, particularly in light of what they were supposed to be doing up here on this roof.

"Tristan likes..." Women. Isaiah bit it back. While that was true, it wasn't a flattering quality of his buddy's or at least he wasn't the right guy to spin it in a positive light. "Fire."

Also true. And safer. For everyone.

Aria's expression grew intrigued. Of course. Because Marchande not only had women falling at his feet, he was also a genius with fire as well as anything that created a spark. Not to mention explosives. When the man talked about his field of expertise, everyone listened, especially women.

"Tell me more about that," she said. "I can learn about fire. Does he do magic tricks with it?"

"Yeah, the best kind," Isaiah said flatly. "He has some sort of savant ability to control the flame, especially when it comes to the conditions, like how windy it is. I've seen him make a whole building disappear during a typhoon."

Isaiah, on the other hand, was lucky if he could gauge the wind enough to shoot straight at five hundred yards. Though he'd never been truly jealous of Marchande. Until now. It made him feel petty and small.

"A whole—building?" Her voice veered between fascination and disbelief. "That's better than any magician I've ever seen, including David Copperfield on TV."

"Oh, yeah. He's way better than that guy. The main difference being that it's an illusion on TV. Tristan is the real deal. We're talking major destruction of property. It's his specialty. That's why we call him Le Torch. Nod to his French ancestry and all."

He left out the part where Marchande's nickname had actually come about because of his reputation with the ladies. It was a nice bonus that it fit his skill set too.

"Wait. You mean the building doesn't come back?"

“No.” Not even when the intel about which building to destroy was wrong. “That’s what we did in Syria. Took out al-Qaeda strongholds. The goal was to ensure everyone inside died and that the place couldn’t be reused. We were good at it. Quick and efficient.”

Too efficient.

While the village he’d had a hand in destroying in Syria haunted him, Marchande had been the one to bring a chunk of a building down on top of Rowe. Isaiah knew both men had been severely affected in ways the rest of them couldn’t begin to fathom. Though he’d tried to reach out to them both. And failed.

His mood soured considerably, which was a shame because he’d been enjoying this interlude with someone who hadn’t been a part of the worst experience of Isaiah’s life. But the universe had a way of bringing things around full circle and definitely he’d needed the reminder that he didn’t deserve to relax.

“What’s your specialty?” she asked and the question snapped over him like a net, pinning him in place.

“Isn’t that the million dollar question?” he muttered, struggling to drag air into his lungs. “When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.”

She didn’t press him on it, thankfully, or he’d have to decide whether to admit that his role usually came afterward, when everyone needed to reconcile the circumstances of the op. He’d been good at providing a sounding board, encouragement, hope. Isaiah was the one who glued everyone back together so they could do it all again the next time.

Or at least that had always been the case in the past. After al-Sadidiq? Nothing. He’d curled up in a ball and let his grieving brothers be crucified on the altar of politics and

diplomacy.

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And there was no one to glue him back together.

“Let’s move on,” he suggested and she nodded without commenting on how tight his voice had gotten. A blessing.

“So far, I know that Tristan likes dance music and fire. What else? Does he read? What TV shows does he watch?”

That hadn’t exactly been the subject he’d hoped to move on to, but really, what else could they conceivably talk about if he insisted on staying away from conversation about his past life as a SEAL? Besides, he had one job here and Marchande was it. “I’ve never seen him pick up a book. He’s always said the best stories are already in his head and that reading just puts him to sleep.”

Aria made a noise of disgust. “I’d like to know what books he’s tried to read. I’ve read my share of books that kept me up until way later than I should have been awake but I’ve never had a book put me to sleep. He’s obviously doing it wrong.”

“Funny, that’s what I told him.” Isaiah had to grin at her choice of words. “Even as a kid, I loved the idea that so many worlds lived inside the covers of every single book on the shelf at the library.”

“Library day was the best.”

Aria’s happy sigh reverberated in his own chest as if she’d breathed on his behalf, forcing his own lungs to react. The sensation was so foreign, yet so cleansing that he immediately wanted her to do it again. “You used to like going to the library?”

“Still do,” she corrected freely. “There’s one in La Grange and the librarian is about a hundred years old, but she’s always been there. She orders books she thinks I’ll like and puts them on hold until I can get into town to check them out. I’ve racked up hundreds of dollars in fines over the years because it’s so hard for me to get a ride all the way out there to return the books, but she clears my account on the sly.”

Yeah, he knew all about lack of transportation. The foster parents he’d collected over the years could almost never be bothered to drive him to the library, so he’d had to find inventive ways to get there, which didn’t always correlate with a due date. A couple of times, he’d ended up returning the books to the library in a new city entirely, hoping they would have the resources to mail the books back to where they belonged. He sure hadn’t had the money to do so.

“My library card was my most prized possession,” he admitted, thrown back suddenly to the days when breathing in the smell of the library was enough to center him. “I saved every penny I could scrape together so I could buy a wallet to carry it in, and it went right behind the clear plastic where your driver’s license is supposed to go. I wanted to see it.”

“A library card is like a ticket to anywhere you want to go in the world.”

Maybe he should be more shocked that once again, they were on exactly the same wavelength. But honestly, the real shock lay in how long it had taken to circle around to the conversation he’d really rather be having.

He glanced over at her as she lounged on the blanket staring up at the sky. The moon had risen enough to cast a river of silver over her hair that was so beautiful, he couldn’t look away. Beautiful in a purely aesthetic way of course. He got the

same lump in his throat when he saw the ocean crashing on the shore or a horse galloping through a meadow.

The last thing he should do was engage her on a personal level again. But he couldn't stop himself from stepping up to the glass and trying to peer inside Aria. "You like to travel?"

"Only in books," she said with a hint of mirth. "I can't say if I'd like it in real life since I've never been more than seventy miles from home. And in case you're wondering, that's the distance to Austin."

Yeah, he figured that out pretty quickly, and while Austin wasn't bad as cities went, it sure wasn't the be all, end all. "If you like to travel, you should have that chance. I got to do that a lot during my stint in the Navy. In some ways, that's one the hardest things about not being a sailor anymore."

"What, being stuck in one place?" She wrinkled her nose as she half rolled to face him. "I could totally see that. I would hate to finally break out of here, only to wind up back where I started."

Well, that wasn't exactly what he'd meant. Moving from place to place had been a way of life since birth. He'd never felt "stuck" anywhere. Most of the time, circumstances had forced him to go before he was ready.

What the Navy had afforded him was a team to go places with. That's what he'd always enjoyed about books as a kid. Each of the thousands of worlds between the pages had come readily inhabited with people, communities, culture—something to belong to. Then he'd found that in real life. Only to lose it.

Well, he hadn't lost it. He knew exactly where the rest of his team was. What he'd lost was the right to be a part of it. The real killer would come when he finally moved on this time without his unit. Because that day was coming. He should do more to prepare for cutting himself out. Get himself excited about the idea of adventure and new horizons. He did like that part too, so he wouldn't exactly be faking it.

“Yeah, being stuck in one place would be pretty tough,” he said, well aware that it was a bit of a generic response that didn’t begin to cover what was going through his heart.

“Tell me what it’s like to have the freedom to go wherever you want,” she instructed him lightly. “I can’t imagine what that’s like.”

“You can go wherever you want right now. Can’t you?”

She shrugged. “Not unless I want to walk. I’ve never even gotten my driver’s license. No need, right? And you can walk a long way in Texas and never get anyplace much different than where you are now. So it never seemed like a good use of my time.”

“I’ll take you somewhere,” he offered impulsively. It might do them both good. “Where do you want to go?”

“Hawaii.” No hesitation, as if she’d been waiting a million years for someone to ask that question. “Then Italy. Maybe Spain after that but it’s a tossup between that and Greece, so either would be fine.”

Biting back a laugh, he held up his hands. “Whoa. I was thinking more like Dallas. Houston. Or New Orleans even. Something within driving distance.”

“Oh. Well any of those would be fine,” she said cheerfully enough that he believed it. “I thought we were talking bucket list stuff. I didn’t think you were actually serious. Does Tristan like any of those places?”

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As if she'd stuck a pin in his lungs, they deflated. Of course he should have had Tristan in mind all along. In fact, it wouldn't be out of line to tip off his friend that he'd have a sure yes if he invited Aria on a road trip. "New Orleans. He always appreciates the chance to show off his French."

Marchande's language skills had gotten them into a fight more than once at train stations in France, so odds were good New Orleans wouldn't be any better. Surely he'd be on his best behavior with a lady present though.

"Where do you think you'll go next?" she asked, completely veering off topic again instead of following the breadcrumbs he'd laid for her toward Tristan.

Worse, that simple question had a lot of layers and he wished the answer could be both honest and easy. It was neither, but conversation went both ways, so he could at least give her a partial answer. "Wherever the next great adventure takes me."

That was what should be on his mind. If he planned to unstick himself from his teammates, he had to embrace the positives in moving on.

Plus, there was Serenity's prediction to consider and how she'd advised him on this very roof to slow down a bit. If he did that, her vision had promised he'd find love, not his mojo. A soul mate would only remind him of all the reasons he didn't deserve something good and pure. Not yet anyway. Maybe one day. No reason to tempt fate by holing up in a town that wasn't in the long-term cards for him.

"That sounds so lovely." Aria sighed with a little lilt that hurt his chest.

Before he left, he'd do his best to help her get the attention of the man she wanted and then go behind the scenes to make sure Marchande knew how to make Aria happy, which Isaiah had just spent a very enjoyable evening learning about. It was the least he could do.

Seven

The next evening, Isaiah, Tristan and the rest of the guys trooped into Ruby's for dinner like they always did, but this time, Aria had a heightened awareness that she'd spent the previous evening on a secret date-that-wasn't-a-date with Isaiah. They'd connected in a way she'd never experienced. He'd made her feel important, special. Like they both belonged to something that no one else did.

When he smiled at her like he was recalling the nice things about it too, her skin prickled.

It shouldn't feel so delicious and kind of naughty, should it?

"You gonna head over and see what the boys are in the mood for tonight?"

Aria blinked and focused on Ruby. Also known as her boss. Ruby cocked a brow and jerked her head toward the tableful of SEALs in the corner booth, her expression mildly inquisitive. In reality, that was the perpetually thirty-nine-year-old's way of saying stop dilly-dallying and get back to work.

"Yes, ma'am. I am. Going to."

Ruby cackled and leaned on the worn counter, forgotten coffee pot dangling from her hand. "You've got it way bad, don't you honey."

She didn't bother to tack the question mark onto the end of that sentence since Aria's

crush on Tristan had made the gossip rounds several weeks ago. Mostly she didn't mind the jokes and pretty well owned up to the truth because there was little point in lying about it when everyone could clearly see that she had no shame when it came to her favorite SEAL.

Except this was the one time she hadn't been mooning over Tristan Marchande. And the one time she'd have to play it off as if Ruby had guessed one hundred percent correctly about her absentmindedness. "Sure thing. He's a hottie, no doubt."

No one could know that she'd enlisted Isaiah's help. If nothing else, it didn't feel sporting toward the bet to stack the deck, but that excuse didn't begin to cover the other, very confusing thoughts that crowded into her brain about the man helping her. Thoughts that she couldn't explain away. Dreams about seeing the world that she'd put aside, but he'd surfaced so easily. She'd rather not open that up for inspection to anyone just yet.

Good time to hightail it over to the corner booth.

She wound through the half-full restaurant, checking on Farmer Moon on the way and nodding at Lennie Ford, the antique store owner who took up an entire booth bench seat all by himself.

When she got there, Tristan winked and treated her to his megawatt smile, the one that usually made her weak in the knees. Today seemed to be an exception.

"Hey, there's my best girl," he said. "You're looking extra lovely today. Did you do something different with your hair?"

"Not a thing." Aria couldn't help but return his smile despite the lack of knee-weakening behind it. Probably something was wrong with her, not him. Maybe she was coming down with a cold. "But aren't you sweet?"

The first time they'd had this exchange, she'd nearly come out of her skin right there in the middle of Ruby's Diner. A man like Tristan had called her lovely. Sometimes she was still surprised that her bones hadn't melted. But then he'd said nearly the same thing with a minor variation the next day, so she got the drift. He flirted by default.

She didn't mind. When he complimented her in that whiskey smooth voice, anything sounded nice, even on repeat. She just didn't quite swoon over it anymore. Probably when he asked her out on a date, he'd surely find a different script. Or ditch the lines that sounded practiced and have a real conversation. Like the kind she'd had with Isaiah.

A shiver rocked her shoulders out of nowhere.

That conversation...it had been everything. Isaiah was so different than anyone she'd ever met. He'd not only had some of the same yearning she'd had as a child to get out and experience the world, he'd done it. She shouldn't find that so fascinating. Or so blindingly attractive. She'd wanted to ask him more about the things he'd seen. Poke at his adventurous spirit and examine how he'd gotten the courage to be the one who left instead of waiting around for someone else to do it to him.

But they weren't supposed to be learning about each other. He was helping her with Tristan. Only. She should focus on that. Studiously, she avoided Isaiah's gaze and trained hers on Caleb instead.

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“Hey, Aria,” Caleb said with a nod. “You see Havana around, you tell her I’m coming by at eight to take her out.”

“Sister’s keeper in my job description today?” she teased. “Did you lose your fiancée somewhere?”

“She’s not answering her cell phone,” he grumbled good-naturedly, scrubbing at his overgrown whiskers that her sister had told her on the sly was her favorite thing about her soon-to-be husband. “Not sure why she has the thing if she’s not going to use it.”

“Maybe she lost it,” Isaiah suggested with a light shrug, drawing her gaze automatically.

He did that kind of thing a lot—jumping in to guide the conversation toward a more positive note. Normally Aria was so focused on Tristan, she didn’t pay as much attention to anyone else, but Isaiah’s voice had been stuck in her head all day. Hearing it again took her right back to last night. Also known as the thing she’d been trying to avoid thinking about. She glanced away.

“Or refuses to be tied to her phone,” Hudson, the taciturn one of the group, said. He’d dragged a chair from another table and flipped it around to sit in it astride, a habit he’d formed the first day in Superstition Springs and had yet to change. “If so, that makes me like her even more.”

“Everyone’s well aware of your allergy to cell phones.” Caleb rolled his eyes and elbowed his brother, Rowe, who always sat so eerily still that you might wonder if he’d passed into another life right before your eyes. “Remember the time he threw

mine in the Persian Gulf because I'd been arguing with the lady at the base for thirty minutes?"

"She wasn't listening to you," Rowe reminded him loyally. "It wasn't your fault she couldn't do her job. Stillwater just doesn't like conflict."

"That's not true," Hudson corrected in his lethally calm voice that gave credence to his nickname. "I don't like conflict I can't resolve with a Bowie knife and a locked room. That piece of garbage got chucked because it's proven that cell phones degrade white matter in the brain and your brother has so little to spare."

"You're such a comedian," Caleb said and glanced at Aria apologetically. "Sorry, they get off track too easily these days. Going soft in their old age. I'll have the usual."

She nodded and went around the table for the rest of the orders, skipped over Tristan's crystalline blue eyes easily, but then somehow got tangled up in Isaiah's unusual gaze when she got to him.

"I can't decide," he said with a laugh that turned his brown eye a fascinating shade. And then all at once, he slid from the booth, crowding into her space. "Let me walk with you back to the counter while I think about it. That way I won't hold up everyone else's food."

She had no choice but to do exactly as he'd outlined, particularly since the other four men promptly forgot her existence in favor of the deck of cards Caleb had just pulled out. They played Hearts almost every night. Why, when Caleb always won, she hadn't yet figured out.

"You never have trouble deciding," she said out of the corner of her mouth and nearly yelped when Isaiah's arm brushed hers, sensitizing it almost beyond bearing.

Automatically, she covered the area with her palm, but that only captured the heat that had gathered there.

“I’m not really having trouble,” he admitted without shame, his voice skimming through her to fill all the emptiness inside, the same way it had last night. “You can get me a hamburger and fries.”

Isaiah slid into one of the swivel chairs at the lunch counter as Aria skirted it to take her customary place behind the expanse of Formica, praying it seemed normal and not like an escape. With half of her attention on the weird prickly thing going on with her skin, she went to work writing up the corner table’s order on the pad of paper, then handed the slip to Ruby through the window to the kitchen.

“I wanted to talk to you about Tristan,” he said as soon as she turned back to face him. Which she’d dragged out an extra five seconds in hopes of settling her suddenly jumpy nerves. “I have a plan that isn’t fit for prying ears.”

Sounded like a really good subject change that she could latch on to. The sooner she got Tristan to ask her out, the sooner she could forget how much she wanted to hang out with Isaiah on the roof again instead. That was safe. A known.

She needed to be bold if she hoped to change the way her sisters thought about her. Bold like the heroines of her favorite books. It had been a long time since she’d thought about how inspiring those girls had always been, doing their own thing and setting off on adventures. Isaiah had awoken that too.

“Do tell.”

“You and Cassidy come by the barn tomorrow to work on the interior stuff. I’m going to suggest we cut out early and go to the movies in Bastrop. It’ll be the perfect opportunity to hang out with Tristan, no strings. You can talk to him and I’ll be there

to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

It sounded perfect. She and Isaiah could wrangle Tristan into a double date that he wouldn't even label as such and move forward with this bet at the same time. Isaiah and Cassidy would have an opportunity to get closer too, a bonus he'd no doubt considered now that he was all clued in that she had a thing for him.

A little too perfect. Aria hated the whole idea.

What was wrong with Isaiah and Cassidy together? Nothing. And everything.

“The point was to get him to ask me out,” she reminded him and tried to make the squicky feeling in her stomach go away.

“I know. How is he going to do that without a chance to see you in a casual setting? Here and at the barn, you're always working. This way, we'll all be relaxed, and I'll be there to ask leading questions so he can get to know you a little. If nothing else, it's a chance to get out of town.” He eyed her suspiciously. “Why don't you sound thrilled with this?”

Because...she didn't know why. It sounded great, like an adventure. He'd been listening to her last night, well enough to have devised a plan he thought she'd like. It couldn't have been an accident that he'd come up with this idea after hearing that she felt kind of stuck here.

That was part of the problem. She might want to get out of this place and see things, but she had responsibilities. Serenity needed her, for one, and so did Ruby. Aria didn't get to jet off the moment things got rough, like her sisters had done. “I have to be here early tomorrow.”

“So we'll go the next day. Unless you flat don't want to. This is totally your call.”

Ugh, she was being silly. Which made no sense when she'd asked Isaiah for help. Here he was, delivering on his promise in a huge way. And in return, she could finagle a way for Cassidy and Isaiah to have some alone time, even though he'd brushed off her help, probably because he was nice enough to not care about reciprocation. She cared though. It was only fair that he get something for his trouble. There was no reason to feel weird about helping Cassidy get on the radar of a great guy, same as it wasn't weird for Isaiah to help her with Tristan.

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Instead of taking inspiration from the characters in books, this was her chance to be like Isaiah, to move forward instead waiting around for things to happen, like the inevitable round of people who mattered to her leaving again. “Okay. Thanks. It’s a good plan.”

“Great. Don’t forget to wear your prettiest dress,” Isaiah said, which got stuck in her craw sideways, probably because she was already out of sorts and a comment like that didn’t help.

“Why, because he can’t like me as is?” she shot back. “I’m not the dress up type.”

Isaiah held up his hands, as if to say I surrender. “Then wear an ugly dress. Or don’t wear a dress at all. You’re going to slay him no matter what you put on because you’re an amazing woman.”

“You’re just saying that,” she mumbled strictly because her brain had turned into oatmeal. That was the first time a man had called her amazing with so much sincerity. Tristan had said something like that once after she’d brought him a plate of fried chicken, but it had a lot more oomph coming from a man who didn’t treat flirting like an Olympic sport.

“I’m not,” he insisted. “You’re fearless, you have impeccable taste in music and your hair reminds me of a sunrise. What’s not to like?”

Geez. Heat climbed through her cheeks and she ducked her head, busying herself with wiping away invisible crumbs on the counter. What was she supposed to say to that? Thank you. She should say thank you.

The words got stuck in her throat. No one had ever said anything nice about her hair color, which was a washed out shade of red. Havana had gotten their mother's bright red and Ember's had come out this gorgeous strawberry gold that was a perfect mix of their mother's and father's colors.

Her hair reminded Isaiah of sunrise, when the sky was full of more subtle colors. That was a perfect, wonderful way to say it wasn't splashy like her sisters', but still nice.

"Sorry," she croaked. "I don't handle compliments well."

?

"You don't say. Don't worry," he told her with a smile. "I'm here for you. I'll keep saying things like that so you can get used to it. Helps that it's nothing but truth."

Isaiah pushed away from the counter and strolled back to his friends with his hands stuck in his back pockets as if nothing monumental had happened. Which from his perspective, was true. She was the one still standing there like she'd been turned to stone.

While her body felt frozen in place, her brain seethed with stuff she couldn't sort fast enough. She was such a dork around Isaiah, arguing with him about going to the movies and whether he'd inadvertently tried to push a makeover on her. That's why he'd taken off so quickly. Why would he stick around? Why would anyone? She certainly hadn't been enough to keep her sisters home and nothing had changed.

That's why it was so important to prove she could accomplish something noteworthy like a date with Tristan. It was a message to herself about her own self-worth. And she couldn't even do a simple thing like take a compliment from a man. She had a lot of work to do to earn this.

Eight

It took three days to actually organize the pseudo-date and by the time Isaiah got everyone on the right page, he was exhausted. Putting together a simple movie excursion had required battlefield precision.

Cassidy had oddly held out, refusing to accompany Aria to the barn where they were supposed to be helping Tristan and Isaiah do the renovations. Finally, Aria somehow figured out how to drag her there and after some awkward exchanges that ensured Isaiah had no future as a double agent, a spy or anyone who had to lie for a living, he'd gotten her to agree to go to the movies.

Only to get grief from Le Torch about it—the guy who had turned dating into an art form. After a lot of pleading, Isaiah wore down Marchande enough to wheedle a yes out of him with the stipulation that Isaiah had to pay.

He wished he'd saved his breath. The silence in the SUV as he drove toward Bastrop had icicles hanging from it.

Isaiah glanced at Marchande, who had taken the front passenger seat. His friend watched the passing terrain as if fascinated by the scrub oak and miles of rocky dirt. Usually Tristan was the chatty one, charming everyone with his natural affinity for people. Not so much today. Something was stuck in his craw, but Isaiah hadn't been able to get whatever it was out of him.

Not a new problem. Marchande had become somewhat of a clam lately.

“It's nice to take a break from the barn and get away, isn't it?” Isaiah remarked and winced at what passed for cheer in his voice. It was a little false. Maybe no one would notice.

Tristan's facial muscles barely twitched as he said, "Bien sûr, Elmer. Whatever you say."

More silence from the backseat where he could see Cassidy in the rearview mirror, also staring out the opposite window, similarly mute. Aria perked up, bless her, and snatched Isaiah's cue, probably because she'd gotten tired of the weird tension too.

"I was just telling Cassidy that we've been slacking on our duties toward the schoolhouse," she said brightly in a voice that matched his in the fabricated spirit department. "Monday, we'll be there bright and early to get some work done."

"Maybe I'll find another assignment then," Tristan muttered under his breath.

"Why, because it's actual work?" Cassidy piped up from nowhere. "Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Tristan stiffened, his fingers digging into the center console near Isaiah's arm. "Because the barn's only big enough for me or your attitude. Not both."

What was Marchande's problem with Cassidy? A year ago, Isaiah would have known every nuance of what was going through his friend's mind. Of course, that had been a necessary part of being a cohesive strike unit. Without synchronization, they'd fail. And Isaiah had taken his role as the mediator, sounding board, and general gluer back together of the men he considered his family very seriously.

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Right now, he had no clue how to dig into Tristan's psyche and the lack of communication between them stretched out until Isaiah could almost taste the abject failure that laced everything he'd tried to do lately.

But he had a different job to do here. One that shouldn't be as much of a challenge. And part of the reason he'd agreed to help Aria had to do with this feeling like the team had been divided, with Isaiah on one side of the yawning expanse and everyone else on the other. This was his chance to connect with Marchande outside of the team, one on one. Get things back on an even keel.

He'd sucked at it so far.

Granted, he'd only briefly tried once as they'd been working side by side at the barn. The backbreaking work hadn't left a lot of room for chatter, not to mention that reaching out took energy that Isaiah didn't have to spare. That, if anything, probably had more to do with his cluelessness when it came to the dynamics of the personalities in the car. Which meant he'd stepped into a minefield by organizing this outing and now he had to figure out how to dance.

"Did Tristan suddenly develop an allergy to hard work?" he asked lightly in the direction of the back seat. "I need to know if he's going to start sneezing and reaching for the tissues in the middle of helping me secure the classroom dividers."

"Ha, ha." Tristan's eye roll came through loud and clear without visual confirmation. "The only allergy I have is to women who make snap judgments without bothering to get facts. I'm good with everything else."

“Snap judgments?” Cassidy’s voice bristled with sarcasm so thick that you could practically wrap it around you like a coat. “That implies that I might be wrong, and I really don’t think—”

Cassidy bit off the rest of her words so suddenly that Isaiah glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure she hadn’t leaped from the Yukon via the window or something. He watched in the mirror as Aria glared at her friend and jerked her head toward the front seat, mouthing something that was too hard to catch and drive at the same time, so Isaiah let her handle that half of the battle.

His half would have to wait until a more opportune time, like when the subject of Tristan’s animosity wasn’t four feet away. The second the coast was clear, he’d pull Marchande aside and get some answers about out what had crawled up his friend’s backside.

Because sorting out where to step in this minefield that he’d unwittingly thrown together sounded exactly like what he’d hoped to do on this group date. Wearily, he focused on driving. That was the extent of what he could handle right now.

Once he’d found the movie place with Aria’s excellent directions, he parked and they spilled from Hardy’s SUV. Marchande ate up the concrete with his long legged stride as he outpaced Isaiah and the women easily. About half way across the parking lot, he seemed to realize this wasn’t a one hundred meter dash and slowed down to wait for them. Then he carefully kept to Isaiah’s left side, presumably since Aria and Cassidy were on the right.

Isaiah sighed. There were women present and Marchande wasn’t even flirting with either of them, which was about as unlikely an event as the sun not rising in the morning. What was he supposed to do with that?

What he’d promised he would, of course. A bit desperate, he scrolled through his

mental Aria file in search of something he could use to break the forty-foot wall of ice that had formed. “Hey Marchande, tell Aria about that last trip to Hawaii. That’s the place she most wants to visit.”

Tristan shot him the side-eye. “We spent fourteen hours in the water wearing seventy pounds of gear.”

Aria lifted a brow, clearly trying to figure out the punchline, which Marchande did not deliver.

Cretin. He wasn’t even trying to be charming and before today, Isaiah has assumed that was one part of Marchande’s DNA that would never fade. There was a running joke that he’d be chasing the nurses at the assisted living facility even after he hit ninety.

“But we went to the beach that one time,” Isaiah reminded him. “That was nice.”

“You were there. You tell he

r,” Marchande muttered with an eye roll.

“You’ve been to Hawaii?” Aria elbowed Isaiah good-naturedly. “You didn’t bother to mention that during the original conversation. What was it like?”

“It was a lot of work.” Now he sounded like as much of an idiot as Marchande, but she’d thrown him for a second with the light accusation, as if she’d really gotten twisted up over the fact that he’d held out on her. “We went for a training exercise at the base in Pearl Harbor a while back. It wasn’t a vacation.”

“Oh.”

She seemed disappointed, but that last thing he'd wanted to do was make it sound like he'd led some kind of glamorous life while trying to play up the sour puss on his left. "Tristan's been a lot of places on vacation though. He likes to travel."

"That sounds interesting," Aria commented brightly, clearly recognizing her cue again, which gave Isaiah a brief spurt of warmth inside despite all the ice. "Where have you been?"

Tristan shrugged with a tiny glance in Aria's direction. "Je ne sais pas. Lots of places. South of France. Brief stopover in Prague. It's easy to get around Europe when Stuttgart is one of the main pass-throughs for SEALs."

"That's in Germany?" Aria asked.

"Ouais."

And just as Isaiah started breathing a little easier, the conversation ground to a halt, as it generally did when Tristan switched to French—which he had done on purpose. Of course. Because leading four adults through the rigors of a normal conversation had suddenly turned into a feat of epic proportions. He gave up and slunk to the counter to get tickets for everyone. Thank goodness he'd picked the movies for this excursion, where they could sit in silence on purpose. Imagine if he'd planned something monstrously difficult for this ill-fated outing, like eating a meal.

After he'd handed off tickets to the women, he let them go ahead so they could pick out whatever seats made the most sense to them given the climate. The last thing he wanted to do was get in the middle of a knock-down-drag-out over who refused to sit next to who.

Since Tristan had likewise hung back, it smelled like Isaiah's one chance to dig. He grabbed Tristan's arm and pulled him to the side, out of the flow of traffic.

“What gives, man?” he demanded.

Marchande scowled and crossed his arms. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play it like that. Why are you being such a jerk? Normally I can’t get a word in edgewise when there are females around.” And this was the one time he’d hoped for that.

“Laisse tomber,” he shot back and rushed on, scarcely giving Isaiah enough time to rifle through his French vocabulary to recall the phrase meant drop it. “It’s not like I’m dating either of them.”

Point taken. This was where it got tricky. Isaiah couldn’t come right out and say that he’d organized this thing as a way to put Aria in Marchande’s path, but neither could he let the opportunity pass to test the waters. “It’s not like either of them are off limits though. They’re both nice women.”

“One of them is,” he countered darkly. “The other one is a pain in my rear. She should watch her mouth.”

Cassidy, Isaiah assumed. At least the subject was now opened for questions. “Did you have some kind of argument?”

Marchande’s expression got blacker. “That would imply there was a back and forth of some type. So I’m going with no. She slings blanket statements around like what she says is carved on stone tablets given to us mere mortals from the Almighty.”

This was the angriest he'd seen Marchande in some time. It was a little impressive to watch how his friend bristled as he made chopping motions with his hands.

"So forget her," Isaiah suggested mildly. "Spend some time talking to Aria. She's a great woman. You'll like her."

"Yeah." Marchande mused that over for a minute, sliding a hand along his ridiculous man bun as if even one strand of hair had dared escape from the sleek knot at his crown. "That's a great idea. The more obvious I can make it that I'm freezing out that woman, the better."

That woman? This outing was swiftly turning into a disaster.

"Uh...that's not exactly what I had in mind," Isaiah called out after his friend who had already started moving toward the theatre, rubbing his hands together as if he had just devised a very diabolical plan that involved using one woman to teach the other a lesson.

Aria did not deserve to be put in the middle of this grudge match that had sprung up between their friends. Beleaguered, he loped after Marchande, nearly knocking the popcorn bucket from the hand of a middle-aged woman who had unwittingly stepped in his path.

"Sorry," he threw over his shoulder as he skirted her to draw up even with Marchande, who had paused in the doorway of the theatre. "Why don't you hold up a sec and listen to me?"

"You're done," Tristan said, his attention already on the seated movie-goers, presumably scanning them in search of their companions. He must have spotted them since he took off up the carpeted steps.

Shades of Syria, or rather the aftermath. What Marchande had really meant was that he didn't want to listen to Isaiah, not anymore, and this was his way of softening the blow. Isaiah had tried to reach out, multiple times, and had gotten shot down. Tristan had a lot of guilt over what had happened in al-Sadidiq. They all did. But Isaiah wanted to help everyone get better and that's where they parted ways—no one else cared about that. They all acted like it had never happened, burying the destruction of the wrong village under a mound of government paperwork, like that would change facts.

Seventy-five people would never draw breath into their lungs again and it wasn't fair that he still could. He didn't deserve to have functional respiration, and it didn't take a fancy psychology degree to figure out that might have something to do with his panic attacks.

Or why he couldn't fix any of his teammates. If he couldn't glue himself back together, why should anyone else trust him with their healing process?

Somehow he managed to sit through the movie, but once the lights in the theatre came up, he couldn't have named one plot point, an actor in the movie or even the title. The icing on the cake came as the four of them spread out for the long walk back to the car and he found himself walking next to Aria, who would have been on Tristan's radar by now if Isaiah had done his job right.

"That was fun," she said, her voice laced with so much sarcasm that he almost laughed.

At least he didn't have to pretend with her. "I'm sorry. I didn't know that Tristan and Cassidy hated each other so much or I wouldn't have suggested this."

"It's okay. News to me too." She shrugged. "And I'm sorry it ended up not working out for you to spend time with Cassidy."

He lifted a brow. “That wasn’t a goal for today.”

It wasn’t a goal for any day. Had he not already nipped that idea in the bud with her? He could hardly focus on his prediction when everything else was such a mess. Healing and nurturing his soul wasn’t on the agenda, especially not since he’d failed at doing that for everyone else.

“Well, it should have been.” Aria flipped a hand in the direction of her friend, who was standing near the SUV, arms crossed as she stared at the sky in an obvious attempt to avoid a conversation with Tristan, who had already climbed into the passenger seat, then slammed the door with more force than a hurricane. “Tristan tried to talk to me a couple of times during the movie and Cassidy shushed him with uncomplimentary comments about his manners. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was jealous that he sat next to me.”

Yeah, that seemed unlikely. “We’ll try again another time. With another plan. And no Cassidy.”

“Well that defeats the whole purpose of our deal. You get nothing out of this if she’s going to keep acting like a third grader. I’ll talk to her,” Aria promised with a secret smile as they approached the SUV. “Pinky swear.”

Isaiah got in the car. There was nothing else to say at this point.

Nine

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Aria let it ride until the next morning, dutifully rolling out of the king-sized bed she shared with her sister to get ready for church. Havana groaned and flopped onto her stomach, flinging the patchwork comforter over her shocking red curls. Aria kicked at her sister a few times because obviously she still hadn't gotten into the swing of attending services with Serenity on a regular basis. Today was not a good day to be late since Aria had a come to Jesus lined up for Cassidy.

They had much to discuss about A) what in the world was going on with Tristan and B) why in the world Cassidy had thrown away an opportunity to get closer to Isaiah. The woman had been spouting off about him for at least as long as Aria had been doing the same with Tristan.

Cassidy had been Ember's buddy more than Aria's back in high school, but once Ember had hightailed it out of town, leaving the two of them behind, it had turned into a natural bonding experience. Plus, once they'd hit their twenties, a couple of years age difference hadn't affected things much, not in a place like Superstition Springs where friends were hard to come by.

As a result, Aria usually knew what was going on in her friend's headspace. Not so much after that horrible movie experience. Cassidy owed her some answers.

Twenty minutes later, Aria strolled into the pre-fab building that served as the non-denominational Superstition Springs church. Farmer Moon had donated both the land and the structure, but drew the line at preaching. That honor fell to his eldest son, Matthew, who had married a woman from Bastrop named Augusta. She liked to sing, which worked out well. Together, they pretty much did the whole service. The messages were always uplifting and since the five former SEALs had started sitting

in the second row, attendance had gone way up.

Havana beelined over

to squeeze in next to Caleb, who in turn, bumped his buddies down a bit on the hard wooden bench. They grumbled good-naturedly and Aria bit back a smile as Isaiah shushed them all.

“Sharing is caring,” he said with a warm glance at Aria, which should not have released so many winged things in her stomach.

Mavis J and Lennie Ford sat on the third row as per custom, taking up almost the entire bench by themselves—or rather Lennie did. Mavis was a tiny woman in the first place but next to Lennie, who could be easily described as a mountain of a man, she looked more like a doll that he might break in half. They were an odd couple who had been together for more years than anyone could count but had never married.

“Morning, Aria,” Mavis said cheerfully as Aria squeezed into the fourth row where Cassidy had already claimed her usual, dead-middle spot. “Tell Serenity I got in a new batch of fabric she might like.”

“Sure thing.”

Serenity sewed all her own clothes, a skill Aria admired and definitely didn’t possess the patience for. But the last thing she wanted to do was chat about anything other than the disaster of yesterday.

“What is the deal with you?” Aria muttered to Cassidy and wedged in close to her friend in case she had a mind to flee. “After the movies, I thought for sure you’d want to dissect every last thing that happened, but you didn’t come by the diner last night.”

That had kind of stung too. She'd waited and waited, hoping to commiserate with Cassidy about their respective love lives or lack thereof. Instead, she'd only had Ember and Judd for company. Her sister had definitely been in the mood to gripe about things, particular how Judd had developed a tendency to talk back to her. The sullen little boy had refused to eat anything but French fries with mustard, and Aria got the distinct impression he didn't even like the combo but enjoyed irritating his mother enough to choke it down.

"I don't want to talk about it," Cassidy whispered, staring straight ahead as she studiously avoided glancing at Tristan, who was sitting just two rows ahead. Tristan wasn't affording her the same courtesy, openly eyeing her with a very hard to read expression on his face.

He never looked at Aria like that. Right at that moment, she was glad. "Well, you spent so much time arguing with Tristan that you forgot about Isaiah. I thought you liked him."

"I should apologize to him," she mumbled as guilt crept over her expression. "He's nice and sweet. Unlike some other people I could mention who are arrogant, thick headed and obviously think they are the universe's gift to women. I mean, really. He's not even that good looking—"

"Now you're being silly," Aria broke in and lowered her voice as Tristan glanced at her instead of Cassidy. "Tristan is gorgeous and you know he is. Also, that's the man whose attention I'm trying to get. So lay off. Focus on Isaiah for a minute."

"Okay."

Cassidy didn't brighten the way she normally did when talking about Isaiah. In fact, she hadn't mentioned him at all lately, though there'd been a time when they could both go on for fifteen minutes straight about the qualities of the guys they had the

hots for. They'd turned it into a regular hen-fest at times, especially as Havana's relationship with Caleb heated up. Both she and Cassidy had pumped Havana for details about Tristan and Isaiah, and they'd both—more than once—made silly comments about clawing other women's faces off if they so much as looked at the men they'd targeted.

That was one of many reasons she hadn't told anyone that Isaiah was helping her land Tristan. Land. It was such a funny word to use in relation to a man, like she'd cast her bait in the water and all she had to do was wait until he bit. Then she could reel him in, same as a fish hooked onto her line.

It left a bad taste in her mouth all at once. Why couldn't Tristan just notice her on his own? She wasn't beautiful like Cassidy, but she had a good personality. Or at least she thought she did. Isaiah seemed to enjoy hanging out with her. But that came so natural, she barely had to think about what to say or how to act around him. Maybe that was the piece she was missing here—she should have asked him to help her work on being more fun on a date. Then she wouldn't need an inside edge.

“Isaiah is nice and sweet,” Aria repeated because it was true. It was also impossible to think of anything else to say about him that wouldn't betray the secret meetings they'd had in the name of the bet. “He likes jazz music. Maybe you could ask him over to listen to an album or something.”

“Jazz music.” Cassidy wrinkled her nose. “I don't think I could even pick out a jazz song from a playlist.”

“Really? We've known each other since we could walk and you don't know a single jazz song? I have all the best stuff on my iPod.”

Cassidy glanced at her askance. “You listen to jazz? Since when?”

Since forever. She started to give her friend a blistering what-for since she clearly wasn't paying attention to anything other than her own problems, when it occurred to her that she'd never talked to anyone about her love of jazz. Except for Isaiah.

She'd started listening to it after Ember left and she'd been forced to sleep in her bedroom by herself for the first time since their parents had died. Nightmares weren't uncommon and who was there to soothe her through it? No one. Serenity hadn't ever gotten the hang of mothering, often falling back on Havana to handle day-to-day things like permission slips and homework.

But Havana had left for Austin, supposedly to go to school but mostly to get away from Superstition Springs...and Aria. Who could blame her? It must have been rough on an eighteen-year-old to have responsibility for both a mouthy, temperamental seventeen-year-old sister and a fifteen-year-old.

Except no one had thought about how Havana being gone meant Aria had to fill that void with Serenity, basically growing up overnight as she learned how to mother herself and her aunt. Aria had worked hard to forgive and had. Mostly.

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In the meantime, she'd glommed on to jazz. It was one of the few kinds of music that had been free, probably because most of what she'd listened to then—Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Billie Holliday—was old school music that struggled to find an audience in an increasingly digital world.

Jazz was a private thing, linked to a difficult period of her life when abandonment had been her emotional reality. Yet she'd shared her love of it with Isaiah readily, not even pausing to think about how intimate of a thing it really was. How would that come across to Cassidy, who had expressed an interest in Isaiah? Not well, surely.

"Yeah, I listen to it," she mumbled casually. "I guess Isaiah mentioned he liked it and it happens that I do too, so we talked about it. Briefly. You should brush up on it."

"Maybe I will. Thanks for the tip." Cassidy sang the opening bars of the first worship song as the service started, her expression decidedly blank.

Great. So Cassidy would start listening to jazz and then she and Isaiah would have something to connect over. That's exactly what should happen. If nothing else, Aria had helped move the dial for her friend and that was the important thing.

But the thought of Cassidy and Isaiah together on the rooftop of the hotel made her stomach hurt. He'd probably take her up there and spread out that blanket like he'd done for Aria, then stretch out his long, lean body to cover the length of it. Cassidy would definitely not be able to avoid appreciating how good-looking Isaiah was, not when he put himself on display like that. Isaiah would play some of his sultrier blues, horns wailing through the still night air, and it would be so romantic that Cassidy would fall for him instantly. If she hadn't already.

Aria slouched down in her seat, crossing her arms over the squiggle in her stomach that had turned into more of an ache behind her ribs. How stupid was she for opening her big, fat mouth about jazz? And how selfish was she for regretting it? Cassidy deserved someone good and kind like Isaiah in her life, assuming he stuck around.

Actually, she didn't know that he would. After they'd talked about his love of travel, she'd made an assumption that he'd be taking off again soon. Why wouldn't he? There was nothing holding him to this town.

The thought of him leaving knifed through her much harder than the mental image of Cassidy in her spot on the roof. One or the other was inevitable. Maybe both would happen, but either way, Aria would have to give up her secret friendship with the man. Soon. Cassidy was her friend and there were rules. You didn't hang out with a guy that your friend was dating. That was totally not cool. Aria couldn't get in the way of that budding relationship or she'd never forgive herself.

Except a part of her had dreamed of tagging along with him when he took off to see more of the world that she'd only heard about. It was a silly thought, born of desperation to avoid being hurt. If she left with Isaiah, then it wouldn't matter if Havana and Ember stayed in Superstition Springs or if they'd both planned to abandon her again. Aria wouldn't be around to care.

If Isaiah headed out into the big, bright world, he might take Cassidy with him instead. That's what Aria should be guiding them both toward. She vowed to bring that up after church, because if nothing else, this was her chance to be a good friend. Besides, the sooner Cassidy and Isaiah became an item, the less it would ache inside for no good reason.

She hoped.

She had no business thinking about what it might be like to take her friend's place and she definitely had no call to be suddenly imagining how she'd react if Isaiah had tried to get a whole lot closer to her up in his rooftop sanctuary. Because she wasn't picturing herself pushing him away. That alone meant she had to swiftly backpedal before she did something irreversible and ruined her friendship with Cassidy.

Aria knew what it felt like to be hurt and betrayed by people who should love her. She refused to do the same to Cassidy by letting her thoughts stray even a little toward unseemliness with Isaiah. It was time to up her game. Once she had Tristan in the bag, she could—and surely would—forget all about secret rooftop alliances with Isaiah.

The Moons led the congregation through the last prayer, but Cassidy slipped out, pleading a headache. Aria let her go. There would be plenty of time to push her friend toward Isaiah a little harder, assuming she could figure out a way to stomach it.

The noise level inside the pre-fab building rose as folks chatted or headed for the exit, depending on what else they had going on today. As if she'd conjured Isaiah simply by thinking his name, the man himself materialized in front of her, his different color eyes sparking with something she couldn't fathom. But it was intriguing, beautiful and compelling all at the same time.

A liquid warmth gushed through her insides and it didn't matter how hard she tried to squelch it, she couldn't. Fantastic. Now she had involuntary female reactions to contend with when Isaiah looked at her. Tristan had never turned her on with simply a look. What was wrong with her?

"Hey," he said and the sound of his voice did not help things in her southern regions. "You up for another session tonight? I know you don't usually work at the diner on Sunday so I figured the timing was good. I thought of a few more things that might get Tristan's head out of his rear end."

A little sigh slipped out before she could catch it. What did it mean that he'd remembered her work schedule? No one paid attention to stuff like that, just automatically assuming she'd be at Ruby's no matter what.

"That would be great." No. No, it wouldn't. It would be magical and fun and she'd get hit with another wave of enormous guilt about Cassidy again. "I mean... Maybe another time."

"Because why?" Concern evident, his expression lost a little of its sparkle. "You're not upset about how he ignored you at the movies are you? Because I'll talk to him—"

"No! It's not that." Goodness, she'd actually forgotten about the movies. "It's that I was thinking we should try something else."

"Like what?"

Like not being alone together. Caught in the trap of her own making, she cast about wildly for something that might plausibly work to explain why she could not spend time with him. Her gaze lit on Tristan, who stood at the south entrance to the building talking to Ruby about something that had made her boss laugh.

"Act like you're interested in me," she spat out as Tristan turned his pale blond head in their direction. Ugh, that was the worst idea ever and judging by the look Isaiah was giving her, he wasn't so keen on it either. But it was already out there. Too late to do anything else but roll with it. "You know, to make him jealous. Right now. Put your arm around me or something."

"Uh, no." Isaiah actually stepped back a few inches, which didn't do a lot for her ego. "That is not a good plan. At all. Moving in on another SEAL's woman is not kosher and he'd immediately back off."

“What, you mean he’d deliberately give me up for you, even if he was really interested? That’s ridiculous.” It wasn’t. She’d literally just had the same thoughts about how she couldn’t betray Cassidy, and yet here she was arguing with Isaiah that his friend shouldn’t worry about that. How had this gotten so complicated? Frustration grabbed her vocal cords and it was testament to her befuddled state that she blurted out, “Why can’t we all be honest about how we feel?”

Isaiah’s otherworldly eyes fastened on her with far more intensity than she’d have liked in that moment. “You want honesty? Try this on for size. I think you’re scared of Tristan.”

“What?”

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She lowered her voice as Serenity glanced in their direction. The last thing she needed was her aunt wandering over to get in the middle of this conversation, especially when it looked like Farmer Moon had gotten up the gumption to speak to her. Aria hoped he'd capture her aunt's attention for a few minutes. The sweet old widower had been crushing on Serenity since forever but she mostly just blushed and changed the subject whenever anyone pressed her on it.

In fact, Aria and Isaiah shouldn't be standing in a church where half the town could wander within earshot at any moment. But she'd already flipped out about another rooftop venture where they could talk privately, so what could she do but see this off-the-rails conversation through?

"I'm not scared," she insisted. "What are you talking about?"

"You've spent more time coming up with strategies to get him to ask you out than you have actually talking to him. Try that, maybe. You're a great woman."

Her heart melted a little. That wasn't good. She scrambled to hold on to the slippery edges but the stupid organ tumbled through her chest anyway. "You're a small minority of one who thinks so."

He scowled. "That's because you don't give anyone else a chance to find out."

"That's not true." Dumbfounded, she stared at him as she filtered through his point and arrived at the conclusion that she was the one who didn't have a clear picture of reality. Because he wasn't wrong.

She hadn't come right out and expressed an interest in Tristan. Not to his face. To everyone else, sure. But she'd carefully shied away from anything that smacked of getting to know him on a deeper level. If she really wanted to succeed with him, she could just barge right into his space and demand that he notice her.

She wouldn't. But not because she was scared.

Having a crush on an unattainable man was safe solely because it would never amount to anything. This bet had screwed up all of that, forcing her into a position that would expose how desperately she didn't want to be abandoned again. How had Isaiah figured out she'd been avoiding anything that resembled forward progress with his SEAL buddy? No one else had.

No, Tristan didn't scare her because he didn't matter. Isaiah did though, in a huge, impactful way. And that was something he could never be allowed to figure out.

"Maybe I will go talk to him," she announced, crossing her arms over her midsection. It felt like a million angry bees had buzzed down her throat, stinging everything in their path.

"You should. Just be yourself. Tristan's an idiot for not noticing you thus far. Every man you've ever met is."

Geez. He had to stop saying stuff like that, especially not with that velvety smooth voice that she heard in her dreams. She'd never be able to get that out of her head now.

"You notice me," she whispered, goodness knew why. She should be backing out of the church at full speed, distancing herself from this craziness.

"Case in point. I'm not an idiot."

His smile did something simultaneously soothing and enlivening to her whole body. She never wanted it to end. She could stand here listening to Isaiah West talk for the rest of her life and never get tired of hearing what he had to say.

Except that wasn't in the cards. Of course she'd latched on to the one person who was guaranteed to leave her behind. It was like she couldn't help but be attracted to someone who was bound to hurt her.

It didn't matter. She had no business still standing here when Isaiah had merely spouted pretty words that didn't mean anything. He wasn't offering to replace Tristan in her heart and she wasn't accepting even if he was. Cassidy came first.

Besides, Tristan didn't have a place in her heart. Nor could he. Isaiah had already climbed inside while she wasn't looking and basically taken up all the room. She had to figure out a way to reverse that. Pronto. By asking Tristan out herself.

Ten

Isaiah spent most of the rest of Sunday in a horrible enough mood that the guys all stayed away from him. Which was both good and bad. The little room he'd taken at Serenity's hotel was just quirky enough to fit him and it provided much needed sanctuary from both the heat of the day and his own revelations.

He hated the thought of Aria being with Marchande. Where had that come from?

He'd like to say it had been born out of seeing how his friend had acted at the movies yesterday and thinking that Aria deserved better. But Isaiah was afraid he'd started enjoying her company a little too much. When she'd hemmed and ha

wed about another rooftop session, basically rejecting an activity that had ranked high on his list of favorite experiences, it had cut deep.

So she wasn't feeling anything special between them. Good. It was better that way.

She wanted Marchande. That much was clear, especially with the make-him-jealous routine. As if Marchande had ever been threatened by another man in the whole of his life. It was nearly laughable in a not so funny way that Aria had assumed Tristan would somehow register Isaiah as competition. Fortunately, she'd bought the deflection he'd cooked up on the fly.

It was true that his friend would definitely step aside if he thought Isaiah had his sights set on a woman. But that wasn't the reason he'd killed that plan.

There was no way he could touch Aria like she'd suggested without something coming unhinged inside him. No way he'd have done it in a church in front of witnesses either. Because if he got Aria into his arms like she seemed to be suggesting, he would have a very difficult time stopping himself from kissing her and he had no interest in testing his will.

Instead he'd fallen into a whole other battle of wills, the kind where he had to push her toward his friend, but he'd done it. She'd take his suggestion to show Tristan her multifaceted personality and that would be that. And Marchande was a good guy. Mostly. Deep down inside, where it counted. He was loyal and had charm to spare. Everyone loved him.

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The problem lay in how Isaiah wished this one time, a woman might overlook Marchande and settle her sights on someone a little less obvious and flashy. Like Isaiah. Thank goodness she hadn't. Imagine that mess, when he was already halfway down the road. Except, it had been a while since he'd thought about leaving. He should do something about that.

He sprawled on the bed and tried to watch something inane on his iPad but he'd had to route the internet connection through the hotspot on his phone and the buffering speed was so lousy there was literally no point in even trying to decipher the broken dialog.

A knock at his door saved him from the game of Solitaire he'd just started. Bad mood aside, he welcomed the interruption.

Caleb Hardy stood outside, hands in his back pockets in a misguided attempt to appear casual, but his former team leader had forgotten to remove the all-business glint from his eye. "Got a sec?"

"Depends. How serious is it?" He was only half-kidding. Whatever Hardy needed, Isaiah would try to do, no question.

"I need you to take over managing the PR campaign for Superstition Springs."

Except that. He laughed at what was surely meant to be a joke. "Is that how you lead up to the real thing you need? So the real thing doesn't seem so bad?"

Hardy waved that away, clearly not joking. "You're the only one I would trust with

this. You have a knack for figuring out what people need to hear. It's awe-inspiring sometimes how you get the guys motivated."

The praise should have hit a couple of warm-fuzzy buttons inside but instead it just made his stomach turn. "Yeah, maybe in the Navy. Not so much anymore."

Hardy eyed him curiously. "Still. Even just recently. At the diner, you always smooth over the rough spots with ease. Marchande has a big mouth and you keep him in check before Rafferty takes him apart. You always have kind words for Rowe and I appreciate how you make sure he hears everything being said."

Only because Marchande didn't always understand how he came across and Rafferty needed no encouragement to take care of something that irritated him, usually with very permanent results. Hardy's brother, Rowe, couldn't help that he'd lost most of the hearing in his left ear. It was no trouble to watch for pitfalls. Rowe would do the same for him.

Isaiah would shuffle his feet in an aw-shucks kind of way if any of the above would have made an ounce of difference. It didn't. He was the wrong guy for this. "Managing Marchande is already a full time job. I don't have time for anything else."

"I'm not asking you." Hardy hadn't moved from his stance outside the door but it sure felt like the mayor was standing on his chest as his gaze drilled through Isaiah. "I can't handle the PR piece right now, and it's critical to start drawing people to the town. Superstition Springs needs people. New businesses. A doctor, like yesterday. The development company gave us six months to do three years' worth of work. Figure out how to motivate people to relocate here. Come on daytrips. Something. Just get them into the town."

The enormity of what Caleb was asking him to do just about broke him. He could scarcely handle the responsibility of the barn renovations. Had spent a lot of time

working out how to get the four people doing it to ditch work and go the movies yesterday. Most of his remaining energy went toward keeping his lungs from seizing up and even that wasn't going so well.

Like now. "I can't."

Hardy pushed into Isaiah's room and shut the door, turning immediately to put a concerned hand on his shoulder. "What's going on with you? Stop feeding me BS lines about Marchande and be real with me. You've been a little off-kilter since we hit town. Do you hate it here?"

"No!" That had burst out of its own free will and had the benefit of being the truth. "This place is great."

"Okay. I know I have a tendency to push people into things they aren't ready for. But I think you're tailor made for the PR job, and I need someone who will do it well. Plus, being honest here. You're floundering." Caleb's warmth bled through his arm straight to his heart. "Tell me I'm wrong. I thought out of anyone, you'd be first in line to take a permanent role. Show the other guys how it's done. When you didn't—"

"You're not wrong." No point in denying it. The jig was up. Caleb had figured out he was broken same as Tristan had. "You know you're not. That's why you shouldn't be here asking me to do something you just labeled critical. I can't do it."

"You can. Or I wouldn't be here. Sit down."

Isaiah dropped to the bed instantly without question. He'd followed Hardy through some pretty rough circumstances, and it came automatically to do as ordered in the heat of the moment. If only he could conjure up some of that same will when stepping up to the plate Hardy had thrown down in front of him.

Looked like Isaiah should have hit the road sooner. Before the mayor came looking for someone to fill a spot on his roster that felt too huge for someone who was indeed floundering.

Hardy sat on the floor, back against the wall, a deliberate move that put him physically lower than Isaiah so it was obvious this was a chat and not his former team lead trying to pull rank. That's why Hardy was a great mayor—he knew how to handle every situation, no fear, no hesitation. It was near poetic to watch sometimes.

Not right now though. Because Isaiah had a feeling he knew what was coming.

“Syria messed us all up,” Hardy threw out gravely. Yep. Exactly the script Isaiah had expected. “You included.”

“Not a news flash. Naming it and claiming it doesn't change facts. I led everyone into that crapstorm. Me,” he stressed but only because Hardy had to be crystal clear on this point. “You say I'm good at motivating. Well I did my job pretty well that day, didn't I? Rafferty questioned the intel. He knew it seemed fishy. What did I do? I brushed it off because when had Rowe ever been wrong before?”

That was a pretty bland recitation of the things that haunted his nightmares and sometimes his awake hours. They'd called Rowe The Ghost well before he'd turned into a shadow of himself. The man could become darn near invisible when the situation called for it, which made his intel-gathering skills legendary. Why would anyone question the coordinates?

But Rafferty had. And Isaiah had told him to shut it because he didn't want anyone balking right before a critical op.

“It's not your fault,” Hardy chided gently. “Did you have the authority to call off the raid?”

“No, but that’s—”

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“It is the point. You did your job. I did mine. I could have called it off. Trust me, I spent mont

hs replaying those last few hours with a different ending, where I figured out in time that we had the wrong village. But that’s not how it went down. We have to move on, embrace this town that took us in when the Navy kicked us out. Find a new future.”

“I’m doing everything I can,” he cut in fiercely.

“Are you?” Caleb’s brows arched in counterpoint. “I see someone pulling away. Totally get it. But that’s what you’re doing.”

“I’m not...” He was. Hardy knew him better than anyone, had easily sniffed out Isaiah’s defense mechanisms. “This is not going to last, Hardy. Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

Nothing ever lasted. That’s why leaving was what he did best. And he’d failed at that too because Syria had turned him into a waffler of the highest order on top of breaking him into little pieces. Decisions were not his forte right now.

Frustrated, Isaiah shut his eyes and massaged his temples for as long as he could, mostly so he didn’t have to see the disappointment in Hardy’s expression. Isaiah wasn’t stepping up to the plate like he should. Like he’d have sworn he would, given the opportunity. But this was the one time Isaiah couldn’t keep the team together. Didn’t deserve to. Didn’t have the will to, not anymore.

“The thing is,” Caleb said quietly. “I’m putting one hundred percent of my energy

into making sure it lasts. I was hoping you'd do the same. Thought maybe giving you something that would bind you to this town might help. Because if you want it to last, the best way to do that is to stop pulling so hard in the other direction, slow down and work for it. The better you are at this PR job, the more successful the town will be and then there's no danger of it evaporating before our eyes. Make it happen for all of us, Elmer. I'm counting on you."

He let Hardy have the last word and nodded as the man climbed to his feet to leave.

Slow down. It was Serenity's prediction all over again, but with much broader implications than solely on his love life. Had he missed a critical piece of what she'd seen in his future?

It didn't matter. He couldn't do what Hardy was asking. This was the line in the sand. The mayor needed to hear that Isaiah wasn't the person he thought and that sticking around this place wasn't on the agenda. Except he'd promised Aria something that he hadn't done yet. And he'd promised to get the barn done. He couldn't leave yet. But neither could he pretend that everything was going to work like Caleb hoped.

At the door, Hardy turned for a final parting gift. "Start with one small thing. Build on that."

One small thing. Like what? Design a new town logo? Pick a theme song?

Instantly, ideas unrolled in his head. While he'd kind of meant that last part sarcastically, he couldn't deny he knew music well enough to figure something out that might be a catchy way to build an advertising campaign that would convince folks they wanted to visit.

Maybe he could handle that. The barn project was moving along. It might be nice to have something else to occupy his time. He could use it as the stake in the ground. As

soon as he had that done, he'd make sure Aria had gotten her chance with Marchande and then he could go with a clear conscience once he'd told Hardy his plans. No matter how difficult all of the above would be.

Oddly, as soon as Hardy left, Isaiah's mood improved. He pulled out the slip of paper where Serenity had written his prediction.

You must slow down a bit to find love. Seek a romantic retreat to heal and nurture your soul while connecting spiritually with a like-minded soul that shares your need for depth.

What if he was supposed to love this new job as the PR guru of Superstition Springs? Maybe that's what the prediction meant. It was an opportunity to find a new way to function within the team, only the team would be a much bigger pool of people. Who would be counting on him to keep the town together.

That was the rub. He didn't trust himself to stick. To breathe. To motivate others.

The worst part was how much he longed to do it. How great it sounded to be a part of something, filling a spot that had his name on it. If he did it right, he might not have to leave this time and that was the thing that was tripping him up. Because he didn't want to. But neither did he deserve to stay.

If nothing else, this new assignment was a great excuse to ask a long-time resident for some advice.

Eleven

Isaiah hustled out of his room to take the stairs to the third floor before he could change his mind. Aria answered the door at the private apartment she shared with her sisters and Serenity, her red hair hanging down her back in a long liquid fall of

gorgeous. He didn't bother to pretend he wasn't drinking in her pretty face.

He'd missed her. Which was ridiculous. He'd just seen her at church a few hours ago. But that didn't change the big ball of happy in his chest that expanded the longer he looked at her.

"Isaiah." She stared at him as if she couldn't quite look away either. "Didn't we decide we'd reconvene after I tried talking to Tristan on my own?"

He shrugged. "I guess that's where we left it. I'm here about something else. Something roof-worthy. You can't say no."

This would be a great time for his rusty persuasion skills to make a reappearance. Good practice too. He had a burning need to get Aria Nixon onto that roof and an even greater need to prove to himself that he could still figure out how to motivate people into doing things they didn't necessarily want to.

If he could find remnants of his old self, maybe—maybe—he might have a shot at doing what Hardy had asked. Not that he was going to. It was just that he would feel a little better about his chances.

"I can't say no?" Crossing her arms over her midsection, she tried—and failed—to keep the amusement off her face. "What happens if I do?"

"I'll cry," he said deadpan. "And you don't want to see that."

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She actually laughed, leaving him wondering why he'd been in a bad mood all day. Maybe he'd misread her caginess earlier. Or he'd really hit on something when he'd told her she was scared of Marchande, which she hadn't liked. Either way, he didn't intend to leave without her.

"Tell me what it is then," she insisted.

"Can't." He mimed zipping his lips, which was hard with the grin stretching his face, and that's when it struck him that he'd been in a bad mood solely because he hadn't been in Aria's orbit. Being around her did nice things to his insides, things that lightened his spirit, and he was glad all at once that Hardy's visit had caused him to seek her out. "Come with me to the roof and I'll spill everything."

She didn't move. "But this is not about Tristan?"

"No, something else," he promised, glad all at once that he had an excuse to spend time with her that had nothing to do with other people. "Come along."

Shock of all shocks, she nodded and stepped across the threshold, shutting the door behind her. That had been far too easy. His skills might be in much less dire shape than he'd thought.

But now he had a bigger problem. Aria spilled into the hall, surrounding him in ways that his greedy, contact-starved soul lapped up like a dog. Why did it always feel as if the sun had just broken through the clouds of his heart whenever she looked up at him through those clear blue eyes?

“So... yeah. This way,” he said brusquely and turned, hoping whatever warmth had just bloomed inside would die a cold death the second he cut off the source. Didn’t happen. But it was too late to back out now.

When he pushed open the door to the roof, sunset had just started staining the sky to the west, throwing purples and oranges deep into the blue. He couldn’t have timed this better if he’d tried and the serendipity of it actually made it much better than if it had been planned. The only thing he could do at this point was roll with it.

“That’s a nice picture,” Aria commented, her gaze fastened on the horizon.

His gaze was on her and he couldn’t seem to stop watching the small smile playing at her lips as she gorged on the sunset. “It’s more than nice. It’s closer to perfect.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot for a second how much of a romantic you are,” she said wryly. “I stand corrected. It’s a lot like perfect.”

“I’m not romantic.” A genuine scoff barked from his throat. “Furthest thing from it.”

At that, she sifted her gaze from the sunset to his face, zeroing in on him with uncomfortably canny focus. “You do realize that Shrek is a love story. Right?”

Rolling his eyes, he gave up. She could think whatever she wanted about his nature and assign his preferences all kinds of fluffy qualities. Didn’t make it fact. “Let’s circle back to that later. I have something that I need your help with. Strictly in exchange for helping you with Tristan.”

Yes. Good. Focus on the task.

But Aria was already shaking her head. “I’m setting you up with Cassidy in exchange. It’s already decided.”

“The same Cassidy who completely ignored me at the movies yesterday? I don’t think that’s something you can promise.” Nor was that what he wanted, and not just because of the prediction—though that was a huge factor. First and foremost, he didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings since he had less than zero interest in Cassidy. But he didn’t want to examine why he had no interest, let alone explain it to Aria. “This is a much better favor. Hear me out and then you can decide what’s fair compensation.”

“I’m listening.”

“Caleb asked for help in putting together some ideas to draw people to town.” It didn’t sound so overwhelming phrased like that, more like a group effort. Hardy could benefit from some tips on persuasion, which didn’t include tossing around the concept that Isaiah would be in charge of anything. “As a longtime resident, you’re well suited to coming up with angles that might appeal to people.”

“Ideas about how to draw people?” She pursed her lips. “Permanently or you mean like, to shop at Voodoo Grocery?”

“Either. Both. To do things that don’t exist yet. Like may

be we create a festival.” Now he was just making this up as he went along, because that had been nowhere on his radar. But he warmed to the idea almost against his will. “What local traditions could we capitalize on? That’s the kind of insight you’ll have. I’m thinking we could come up with some great stuff together.”

Suspicion marred her pretty features as she did some mental calculations in her head that apparently didn’t add up in his favor. “Why didn’t Caleb come ask me to help out on this himself?”

“Because it’s...”

Wow, there was not a good way to weasel out of answering that honestly, not after he'd wordsmithed it to sound like something different than it was, namely Caleb trying to force Isaiah into an ill-fitting mold. Sure Caleb had good intentions and there was the possibility that taking on this assignment could help tether Isaiah to Superstition Springs in way nothing else had. But at the end of the day, framing it as a team think tank type project had been disingenuous and he owed Aria a better explanation.

"It's really supposed to be mine," he told her, straightforward, no hem hawing. "Tapping you for help was my idea, not Caleb's. I think we'd be a formidable team. Don't you?"

"Why don't you think you can do it by yourself?"

The simple question washed over him with surprising force. She hadn't even bothered to be complimented by his pretty words and instead had honed in on the root of his issues, despite additional deflection. This was the inherent problem with Aria: she saw him a little too clearly and he liked that a little too much.

He was so tired of pretending. Why couldn't he just be honest with her about how itchy it made him to think about her and Marchande together?

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Well, what if he did tell her? Then what? It wouldn't change anything. He was still on his way out the door and Aria wasn't. All Isaiah could do at this particular point in time was spend a few hours in the company of a woman he liked and work out some ideas to help the town. One step at a time, like Hardy had said.

"I can totally do it by myself." Which was totally a lie. Not only that, he couldn't be honest about Marchande, and he couldn't flat out tell her how broken he was. "I just don't want to. We like the same music and of course, you have a vested interest in new blood since you work at the diner, right?"

She shrugged nonchalantly. "Sure. Ruby could use some patrons with deeper pockets. I always feel bad taking tips from people I've known my whole life, who don't make much money in the first place."

"Does that mean you're willing to help?" he asked her hopefully.

After a brief moment of hesitation, she nodded. "We're going to be here a while then. Where's the blanket?"

A little thrown by her sudden decisiveness, Isaiah jumped to do as she bid and pulled the blanket from the watertight container he'd invested in after figuring out that a wet blanket wasn't the slightest bit fun and spares were hard to come by. He fanned it out, stomped out the air bubbles and extended a hand to Aria to help her get settled before taking his own seat.

The silence stretched as the sun finished up for the day, sinking toward the horizon, which ran in a line as far as you could see.

“I appreciate you. For doing this with me, I mean,” he corrected hastily.

“Of course.” She flashed him a smile that took on a mysterious edge in the fading sunlight. “It sounds like fun and besides, watching a sunset with you is not a chore.”

“Well, it was a tossup whether I’d actually get you up here tonight. You weren’t so keen on the idea earlier,” he reminded her lightly, praying that she couldn’t read how much her rejection had actually bothered him.

“I’d planned on hunting up Tristan tonight,” she said, her gaze trained on the stain of colors beyond the lip of the roof. “To prove I’m not scared of him. Yet here I am. Avoiding him again.”

“I didn’t mean anything by that.”

Other than to point out the obvious—that she wasn’t getting Marchande on board the Aria train fast enough. Isaiah needed them together and the whole thing done with. Then he didn’t have any room to imagine a different ending to his association with Aria or have to worry about his prediction.

“You did so.” But her tone was gentle enough to tip him off that she wasn’t mad. “And it’s a valid point. I’m comfortable with you. It’s easy. I like not worrying about whether I’m saying something witty or if you’re giving me a compliment that you’ve repeated to a hundred other women. I know you’re completely sincere. Why wouldn’t I prefer that to a sweaty-palmed encounter with a man I have nothing in common with?”

Ridiculously pleased, he absorbed all of the nuances of what she’d said and then did it again because hello. She’d just admitted that she preferred Isaiah’s company to Marchande’s. Not a typical occurrence in his world. Or anyone’s.

“Thanks,” he said, though how he got the word out around the lump in his throat was a mystery. “I like hanging out with you too. That might have been at least half my motivation for dragging you up here.”

Oh, look. He could be honest after all.

“I came willingly,” she returned with enough texture in her voice that he did a double take.

She wasn’t...flirting with him, was she? If so, he’d gone about this whole thing wrong. He should have brought candles. Invested in chairs. With cushions.

And then reason returned in a huge, uncomfortable rush. Aria wasn’t interested in him. She liked Marchande or they wouldn’t even be here. Likely she was rehearsing her moves, hoping to rinse and repeat with his friend. Isaiah had volunteered to help. Why not with that aspect as well? Certainly made it a lot easier to ignore the little rush in his stomach when she smiled at him if he kept the idea front and center that this was all practice. Not real.

Eventually she’d get it right with Marchande. And then Isaiah would have to sit back and watch his efforts bear fruit while Aria cozied up to someone else. He had to get to the point where he was okay with that.

“Yes, you did and a good thing too. I don’t invite just anyone up to my roof.”

“I do feel special, then,” she murmured and her gaze wandered away from the horizon to light on his face. “Where should we start?”

About a million responses sprang to mind but he bit them all back. Every last one was too provocative, too intimate. But that didn’t stop him from wishing he had the liberty to say exactly what was on his mind and it was not a dying town, the bet she’d made

or anything other than how much he'd like to kiss her.

"Theme song," he choked out and she blinked. As well she should. He needed to get his thoughts in order before he blurted out stuff. "I think Superstition Springs should have a theme song. Maybe 'If the Stars Were Mine.'"

"Melody Gardot?" Aria pursed her lips, which did nothing to stop kissing type thoughts from multiplying in his head like rabbits. "That's a fascinating choice."

"I mean, you can't dance to it or anything..." Duh. What a lame thing to say, as if dance-ability factor had anything to do with anything. She'd fried his brain or something. "Maybe slow dance but it would be tricky."

"I wouldn't know," Aria said wryly. "I've never slow danced to anything, so I wouldn't exactly call myself an authority."

"That's terrible. And easily rectifiable." Instantly, he jumped up and fished his phone out of his pocket to key up the song in question, pushing everything Superstition Springs related out of his head. "Let's see how it would work."

The notes wailed out of the speaker, low and sultry. He held out a hand to help her up, but she hesitated long enough that his lungs seized up.

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“You don’t have to dance with me,” she said with a half-laugh that was anything but amused.

Those candles would come in handy right about now. He’d love to have some extra light to read the things in her eyes that she hadn’t said. But if his persuasion skills hadn’t completely deserted him, he could still feel his way through this wi

thout benefit of additional clues. “Come on. You don’t want Tristan to ask you to dance and then stumble all over his feet, do you? This is just practice.”

Labeling it as such seemed to do the trick, just like it had for him a minute ago. This was no big thing. It meant nothing. She placed her hand in his and climbed to her feet, crowding into his space and then there was nothing left to do but pull her into his arms.

Yeah, he was really wrong. This was a big thing. Huge. She smelled like cinnamon and something fruity which he would have never expected to go well together but on her, it swirled into a magical blend which crossed his eyes.

“What do I do now?” she murmured throatily and the catch in her voice told him that she was similarly affected by the moment.

How, was the question, but he didn’t dare chalk it up to anything other than nerves, likely because she worried she might be doing it wrong. The least he could do was set her at ease.

“You’re doing great. Put your other hand at my waist,” he instructed her without

giving away just how affected he was.

His performance deserved an Oscar to boot, especially once her warm fingers nipped into his flesh. The T-shirt between them hardly mattered since he could still feel her heat through it, and he wasn't at all ashamed to admit he'd much prefer it if the shirt could go.

"Let me lead," he said and guided her in a clumsy circle that probably told her all she needed to know about his skill on the dance floor, which was somewhere in the low fives on a scale of one to ten. But it wasn't zero.

They found a sweet spot where they moved pretty much in sync, and when he caught her gaze, deep and rich and full of unfathomable things, his soul turned over.

"This is kind of fun." The surprise in her voice made him smile. "And not as hard as I was thinking. It probably won't be easy when I'm trying to do it with another man, though."

Not for either of them, he thought sourly, but pushed that out of his mind. He had a lot of nerve even thinking about Aria as anything other than a friend, her scent and the way she felt in his arms notwithstanding. "We'll practice a lot. How about that?"

Yeah, he was a saint, wasn't he?

He spun her slowly, giving her time to acclimate to the new direction. She did so flawlessly, catching on to the rhythm much faster than he'd have expected. The waning light provided just enough illumination to see each other but not much more than that. It was kind of a blessing, taking some of the tension out of their nearness for some reason, like a twilight filter that muted any weirdness.

The song swelled around them as he caught her back up in his arms, holding her a

little closer than was expressly necessary, but in his defense, she'd never danced before. She might trip and fall. That wouldn't do.

"Her voice is so beautiful," she said wistfully. "I wish I could sing. I'm tone deaf."

"Ironical much?" he teased. "With a name like Aria, you should be belting it out."

"Yeah, well. The fact that I can't is one of Ember's favorite jokes." She seemed to be a good sport about it though. "Besides, that would be like me questioning why you can't spout prophecy."

"Point taken." He was definitely not in the same category as his biblical namesake, and prophecy wasn't his favorite subject right now. "We'll pretend our names have nothing to do with who we are and move on."

She went quiet for a moment and he imagined she was concentrating on the moves, but then she said, "Why 'If the Stars Were Mine'? For the theme song, I mean. Why not 'I Put A Spell On You'? That might play to the quirkiness of the community that Caleb hopes to capitalize on."

"Perfect." Why hadn't he thought of that? Easy answer—because he was still not on his game yet. But she'd filled in his gaps and he didn't mind that at all. "Where do you stand on the otherworldly aspects of this place?"

"What, you mean in relation to Havana and Caleb's plan to tease out the supernatural part of the town?" She shrugged, and he felt the movement under his fingers. "I think it's brilliant. The residents love their oddities and that'll motivate them to make it work."

As she was one of the longtime residents, he couldn't help but ask. "What's your oddity?"

“The fact that I don’t do feminine things isn’t enough of a clue?” she said with a wry laugh. “Havana’s always after me to do something with my hair or clothes, but that’s just not me.”

“What? You do feminine as well as anyone.” Case in point, the moon had peeked over the horizon in the opposite direction of the sun, lighting up her hair with an ethereal fire that caught in his throat.

She smiled. “How do you always know what to say?”

Because it was easy when it was the truth. Mostly. The truth he’d like to be speaking he shied away from, though.

“I almost never know what to say,” he mumbled and even that was a lie. A lot of times he knew what he should say, but didn’t. For example, he should be talking about the plan to draw tourists to Superstition Springs. He should not, under any circumstances, tell Aria how beautiful she was.

“Is that why you wanted help on working through ideas for Caleb?”

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No, that had been because he suffered from a lack of confidence, a severe case of the waffles, plus myriad other issues. But this was one of the times when he didn't want to think about the consequences of his brokenness. "I told you. I thought we'd be a good team. Why do something by yourself when you can do it with someone else?"

She nodded. "That's true. I've never thought about it like that."

"That's because you've never been a part of a cohesive unit like I have," he said automatically. Except he wasn't anymore and that was a hook through the gut he could have avoided if he hadn't been distracted by Aria.

"Yeah." Her voice grew wistful again and her thumb moved against his shirt in a little circle that heated instantly. "It's hard to come by here. But it sounds wonderful. What was the best part about it?"

"Having a niche," he said. "A place that was mine."

Which wasn't what he'd meant to say at all, not to her. It was too personal. Revealed too much.

But it was pure truth. The camaraderie, the guys having his back, working as a highly trained team—that was all great. But he'd liked knowing there was a unique spot that only he could fill. His job had been to keep the team unified and he'd lost his way.

"I can see why you'd like that."

He swallowed. "It was hard to lose. Really hard. I'm still not sure where my place is

now.”

A part of him felt as if the announcement should have come out with a little more fanfare. A drumroll. Something to mark the occasion of owning the damage that Syria had done to him way down deep inside, where he couldn't touch it. There was nowhere to hide and no way to paint that picture with any less bleak colors.

Aria just nodded solemnly. “I'm sorry. But that's what's great about the fact that you've come here. You can find a new niche.”

Which sounded remarkably like what he suspected Hardy had been trying to help him realize. The problem was that Isaiah could see that very clearly. What he couldn't see was how to reverse the fact that leaving was what he knew best. What he deserved. There were too many dominoes stacked up, ready to usher him across the town lines as he left for the last time.

“Maybe,” he said noncommittally.

The song ended and they both stopped moving at the same time. He should step away. She should step away. There was entirely too much unsaid swirling beneath the surface of what should have been a simple dance lesson. But neither of them moved and the longer they didn't, the tighter the tension bound them together.

“This was nice, thank you,” she said, her voice low as she peered up at him through her lashes.

“You say that like it was some horrible favor I had to endure,” he countered gruffly, and tightened his arms at her waist, completely determined not to let her go. “I like dancing with you.”

“Then that's the best kind of favor, when you don't mind it.” She leaned in without

warning and brushed his cheek with her lips in what she might have considered a thank-you kiss or some nonsense.

Before she could draw back, he caught her jaw with his thumb, threading his fingers through her hair to hold her in place mere inches away. She stared at him. His flesh burned where she'd brushed it. It would take no effort at all to lean into the gap and connect in a real kiss.

He shouldn't. But in that moment, he couldn't remember why. This was every bit the spiritual connection Serenity had predicted, the one he'd tried to avoid, tried to ignore. Tried to pretend it was someone else he'd had to watch out for, when it had been Aria all along. Now that he had it, he didn't want to deny himself a single second.

But before he could instruct his muscles to move, she broke away, stumbling backward to put a huge gap between them. She stuttered out some words and then fled, leaving Isaiah on the roof alone.

Twelve

In the morning, Aria blearily rolled from bed. Guess this would be one of those days where she tested how well a person could function on three hours of fitful sleep.

When she'd summoned up the will to walk away from what would have been her second kiss ever—and the first one didn't count because she'd been nine and had finally caught the slowest of the Moon boys—she'd thought that would be the hardest thing she'd do in her life. Turned out that lying awake wondering what it would have been like to kiss Isaiah had been much more difficult.

Especially when her thoughts drifted past kissing to some other activities that might happen on a secluded rooftop that no one knew existed. Things she'd never done

before but could certainly picture. Sort of. Which meant she'd had to spend a lot of time thinking about how it would all work between them. All that imagining had made her hot and sensitive in places that had no business being sensitive over that particular man. Tristan? Fine. Zak Efron? Sure.

Not Isaiah. There were so many reasons she had to nip this craziness in the bud that she couldn't even see over the pile,

not the least of which was the fact that Cassidy was her friend. Who had called first dibs on Isaiah a long time ago. She had been ignoring him at the movies like he'd thought, which meant Aria needed to have a really long talk with Cassidy about how you let a man know you were interested in him.

And then she would have that talk with herself. Twice. She needed to move the dial with Tristan if for no other reason than to give her a good excuse to never be alone with Isaiah again. The huge black sadness that crowded into her heart at the thought would fade. In time. And hey, it hurt a lot less than putting all your faith in someone who had one foot out of the door.

Everyone did. That was the whole reason Caleb and Havana were working sixteen hours a day to get the town renovated into a new-age mecca for people who were looking for the next quirky destination after Austin. If the town had good things that people wanted to stay for, they would. Aria wasn't one of them. History didn't lie.

That was why she'd become so determined to chase Tristan. It might sting a little if he rejected her but she'd go on like always. No harm, no foul. The fact that she didn't want Tristan didn't matter overly much. It was what he represented that she needed, not the least of which was a shield against Isaiah, but also to prove something to herself.

As she pulled a brush through her hair, she frowned at her reflection. If that was true,

then there was no time like the present. She had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Imagine how her sisters would admire her for landing a man like that. Maybe they'd rethink their opinions about their little sister then, huh?

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Resolute all at once and very determined not to think about how desperately she needed to be unavailable like yesterday, she threw on a sundress that wasn't her prettiest because she still had principles, and tore out of her apartment to clatter downstairs to the second floor where Tristan stayed.

And Isaiah. But she carefully kept her eyes from straying toward the door at the end of the hall. At Tristan's door, she knocked softly. Her pulse was pounding in her throat loud enough that he'd hear that before the door. Be bold. The heroines in her books didn't balk in the face of challenges.

A gap appeared and then the man did, tall and beautiful and...she blinked. "Your hair is down."

Tristan grinned and winked, running his long, slender fingers through the blond mass that fell to his shoulders. "Now you see why I keep it up. Unruly mess, this is. My hair band broke and I was just looking for another one, but I'm afraid I might be out. You don't have a spare, do you?"

"I, um...do." Dear heaven. Was she having a conversation with a man about borrowing and lending ponytail holders? "Can I get it for you in a minute?"

"Sure?" Confusion wrinkled his brows as he eyed her and it made his face look even weirder than his long hair did. "Is there something wrong with now?"

"I came to talk to you. I was hoping to, you know. Do that."

"Here's an idea." He winked and smiled, his signature move. Which he'd already

done once. “Why don’t we walk upstairs and you talk while we’re walking.”

Oh, well sure. That made too much sense. He’d thrown her off by mentioning ponytail holders and coupled with him being less perfectly groomed than normal, she was just...not thinking. Tristan wasn’t ugly with his hair out of its typical topknot by any stretch, but his usual look gave him a debonair flair with a hint of the exotic. All that hair around his face made him seem less angelic somehow, as if he’d gained mortality strictly by virtue of a broken rubber band. What kind of shallow was she?

Squaring her shoulders, she stepped back. “We can walk and talk. No problem.”

And then she turned herself into a liar by stumbling over an invisible imperfection in the plank flooring that caught her toe somehow. Instantly, Tristan’s hands shot out to catch her before she hit the ground, holding her steady with his unmatched grace.

His palms covered her bare shoulders. She glanced up to see genuine concern etched into his fine features.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Fine.” Her voice should be squeakier or something, shouldn’t it? Tristan Marchande was practically holding her in his arms, his lithe body a mere inches from hers. And all she could think about was how his touch did nothing to her insides.

Not like what had happened while dancing with Isaiah last night. Not like the slick, needy heat that had arced through her when he’d cupped her jaw. She’d died a dozen deaths in those scant precious moments between realizing he was going to kiss her and realizing she had to prevent that from happening.

It had taken a really cold shower to get her functional again after that. And then she’d put herself right back in that floaty netherworld about half a second after climbing

into bed.

“Really? You don’t seem okay.”

Talking. Someone was talking. Who wasn’t Isaiah. With a fierce headshake, she focused on Tristan, the man she should currently be swooning over.

“I was just...thinking about something else,” she muttered and glanced away, but the telltale burn in her cheeks had probably tipped him off that there was more to it than that.

He didn’t press her on it though and let his hands drop from her arms. “Okay, then. Let’s try again, shall we?”

She ducked past him, successfully this time, and led him to the stairs leading to the third floor. Half way to the landing, she groaned. Havana and Ember had been arguing about something in the kitchen when she’d breezed past a few minutes ago on her way to Tristan’s and she’d have to parade him past her sisters while flirting him up. Or whatever it was she planned to do. Which was basically the problem—she had no plan.

Skidding to a halt, she wheeled on one foot to face the man following her up the stairs, barely avoiding being clocked with his forehead when he didn’t stop in time.

“Whoa,” he said with a laugh. “Didn’t know we were switching directions on a dime.”

Since she stood two steps up, they were almost the same height for once. Weird. He wasn’t so attractive as a short man.

What was wrong with her? The man was gorgeous, all the best parts of Chris

Hemsworth and Thor mixed together and brought to life in her little corner of the world.

“I just remembered that I wanted to say something before we do the hair thing,” she told him with a decisive nod. Yes, that was how she needed to play this. Take charge and let him see who she really was. “I like you.”

To his credit, his expression didn’t change as he registered that. “I like you too. Glad to have that established.”

“No.” Flustered, she waved a hand in the air for emphasis. But she’d have to say the words instead of drawing air pictures that didn’t tell him anything. “I mean that in the broader sense. The dating kind.”

Oh, man. It was out there now. Kind of. Hopefully he’d pick up the reins and she’d be saved from having to elaborate any further.

“Okay. Wow.” Tristan ran a hand over his head, a habit she’d noted he did frequently when he was trying to think of what to say. Which didn’t bode well for the next sentence out of his mouth. “I did not see that coming.”

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Really? There was a part of her that had become convinced he already knew about her crush on him and upon her confession, he'd smile gently and say something witty or wonderful. But then again, he specialized in stock lines that he pulled up at random intervals from his storehouse. Probably he didn't realize she'd noticed that he repeated himself a lot when he was being charming, which she'd never considered a detraction to his attractiveness. Until now.

But she had to see this through. There was a bet to consider here. Plus she had some things to prove to herself and to her sisters. Most of all, she had to get a barrier in place between her and heartbreak and Tristan Marchande was it. "So, yeah. I was thinking it was time to lay it out and see if—well, you know. What you thought about that. Is there any chance you might want to get coffee sometime? That kind of thing."

"Are you asking me on a date?" Tri

stan's clear blue eyes bored into hers as he laid it out in kind.

"Yes." There was the squeaky voice she'd expected from the beginning, which might not have been so bad if she hadn't also tacked on a lift at the end that made it sound like a question.

Dust motes spun through the suddenly still air as she waited for him to drop the hammer. Which was a ridiculous metaphor but she'd likened him to Thor already in her head, and it was too late to avoid picturing him with a raised fist, giant mallet-style hammer clutched in his hand.

"Aria." No affirmative sentences started with that tone. It was the precursor to being

told something she didn't want to hear. "I don't think that's a good idea. We're not really right for each other."

Definitely not what she wanted to hear. And shortsighted on top of that. She bristled, totally unconcerned if it was visible or not. "Why, because you're beautiful and I'm not?"

Boy, talk about laying it all out there. But she wasn't backing down now. He'd offended her principles in the same breath as rejecting her and she wasn't standing for it.

Tristan had the audacity to chuckle, but tempered it with a quick shake of his head.

"That's not it and you know it's not." Both of his hands flew up, palms out, as if to ward her off. He must have guessed—correctly—that she was about to flay him alive for daring to tell her what her own mind was. "Relax, Aria. We're all friends here. Give me a second to sort this out before you go warrior queen on me again."

Slightly mollified, strictly because he'd never called her warrior queen before, she crossed her arms and waited for him to dazzle her.

"First of all, you're spirited which is better than being beautiful all day long." He ticked off that point on his index finger. "But you're also pretty in an unconventional way, which has absolutely nothing to do with whether or not we can get coffee."

"What does then?" she demanded. A part of her should be mortified over this show of temper but all bets were off at this point. Probably literally too. There was no way he was asking her out on a date unless he did a complete 360 in about four seconds.

"The fact that I don't think of you that way," he explained gently with nothing but sincerity radiating from his face. "You're a great person and I like seeing you at the

diner. But that's all there is. When I catch sight of you, I don't recoil in horror or anything, I just don't get anything inside that means I could think of you as something more than a friend. Does that make sense?"

She sighed and tried to work up some more anger, but since she'd as recently as five minutes ago had a similar revelation about the lack of pinging, she didn't exactly have a leg to stand on. "You mean, just for example's sake, when you put your hands on my shoulders earlier, you didn't get a zingy sensation where it counts?"

"Something like that." Earnestly, he searched her expression. "I'm not trying to hurt you. But I have to be honest up front. This is a small town. I would hate to hurt you worse later on if I led you on. I hope you can forgive me."

Geez. Tristan was a gentleman and a really nice guy underneath it all. How many women got that kind of speech before making fools of themselves over a guy who flirted as a default? Or worse, before jumping all in with their heart, only to have it blow up in their faces later when they figured out he wasn't serious about all the compliments and stuff?

"There's nothing to forgive," she mumbled, still struck by the irony of it all.

Was there any worse time to realize there was no future with a guy than at the exact same moment you figured out he had unknown depths of character?

She wasn't even upset. How could she be? She'd done exactly what she'd set out to do, or at least the trying part. She'd failed to get him to ask her out, sure, but in the process, he'd said some pretty complimentary things about her that weren't his typical rehearsed lines. They weren't right for each other, bottom line, and he'd managed to convey that eloquently.

"Still friends?" he asked and stuck out his hand.

She nodded and slipped her hand into his for what she thought would be a perfunctory shake, but it was Tristan. He raised her knuckles to his lips to kiss them and winked.

“Besides, we’d never work out anyway,” he told her and released her hand. “Not with Isaiah still in the picture.”

“Um, what?” Or at least that’s what she’d meant to say but it came out garbled with zero resemblance to English.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know he thinks you hung the moon,” he teased and then caught a clue that maybe she wasn’t pretending. “I mean...you don’t see how he looks at you?”

“You didn’t see the way I looked at you,” she muttered as her brains completely fried like a dropped egg on concrete in August. “So that’s not a valid test.”

Tristan just laughed. “Because there was nothing to see, as we just discovered. We don’t float each other’s boat. You might have admired my cut abs on occasion but you know, everyone does.”

Instead of his ego annoying her like it probably should, she had to laugh too. “I’ve never seen you without a shirt, so whatever. Get over yourself maybe.”

“Can’t.” He shrugged. “Born this way. Now about that hair band...”

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She rolled her eyes good-naturedly which hopefully covered the mild panic that had started to set in as she mentally examined all the possible meanings of hung the moon. “Sure, sure. Anything for a friend.”

At this point, she was so beleaguered, she couldn’t even care that Havana and Ember might still be in the kitchen. It turned out they weren’t, so she let Tristan cool his heels in the living area and fetched a spare ponytail holder from her room as fast as humanly possible. Then she shooed him on his way so she could have a minor breakdown.

Isaiah did not think she hung the moon, not the way Tristan made it sound, as if he had a thing for her. They were friends, nothing more. Kind of like the way she’d landed with Tristan. Nothing between them and no one got internal butterflies over innocent touches. The almost kiss? Probably complete conjecture on her part. He hadn’t been about to kiss her. She’d made that up because she’d never danced with a man before. Maybe that charged moment at the end was part of dancing.

And if she repeated that to herself a hundred more times, that would make it fact. Right?

But as the day wore on, it got harder and harder to convince herself that she did not want to march right downstairs to Isaiah’s door and demand to know what way he was looking at her that had evoked metaphors like hung the moon. It was ludicrous. The Almighty himself had hung the moon in Genesis, no humans need apply.

The problem was that she couldn’t confront him. If she did, she might blurt out that she had a thing for him too and then she couldn’t take it back. Cassidy would find out

that Isaiah had almost kissed Aria last night, and then she'd have to face the horrible reality that she had utterly betrayed her friend.

No. It was better to ignore the butterflies, pretend she wasn't falling for Isaiah, and let Cassidy have the happiness she deserved. Aria would never forgive herself if she did anything less. Besides, she could never be happy with a man knowing that it was her fault a woman sat alone in the dark, feeling abandoned and betrayed by someone who claimed to love her. That was not pain she'd wish on anyone.

Good thing the bet over Tristan was off. She had a legitimate reason to halt the roof hang outs with Isaiah. She'd send him a note or something to explain—oh, no. She'd just volunteered to help him out with the tourist draw project.

That was an even bigger disaster than the almost-kiss of last night.

Aria bit her lip. She'd have to decline after all, as much as that felt like weaseling out of a promise. Gah, this web had grown too tangled. No matter what she did, someone was going to be hurt or disappointed. She had a bad feeling she'd end up being the one who was both.

Thirteen

With the six-month timetable looming over the town, the barn restoration project could really benefit from some focused attention, but Isaiah slapped a paint brush over the wood without really seeing either one. His mind's eye was too busy replaying the way Tristan had lifted Aria's hand to his mouth as if he had every right to kiss the woman.

Isaiah really shouldn't have stood there watching them this morning. But honestly, he hadn't expected to stumble over such an intimate scene. He'd tromped up the stairs intending to go to his room, when bam! Voices. Aria's first in a low murmur he

couldn't catch, then Marchande's. The stairwell from the first floor lay on the opposite end of the one to the third floor where they were standing, so he'd ducked back into the shadows, easily staying out of sight.

With the entire length of the second floor hallway between them, he couldn't hear what they were saying to each other but there was nothing wrong with his vision. The image of them together had been burned across his retinas. It hadn't been so easy to stop himself from bursting out of his hiding place with every intention of taking Marchande apart for breathing the same air as Aria. And his knees still hurt from how long he'd stood with them locked after they'd vanished up the stairwell to the third floor.

Looked like things had worked out between them after all. Great. That was what should have happened when Aria approached a man and laid out her interest. She was amazing and she'd make Marchande really happy, if he bothered to take the time to get to know her. Tristan was his friend, but that didn't mean Isaiah was blind to his faults, and Marchande went through women pretty fast. Aria was definitely worth changing your stripes for.

The man himself strolled up the dirt path from the road a solid hour after Isaiah had arrived at the barn to start on the task of painting, which had been on their to-do list for a couple of days.

"You're here early, mon ami," Tristan commented and held up an apple. "Want one? I stopped by Voodoo on the way. Mavis J says bonjour."

"No thanks."

Isaiah kept his eyes trained on the side of the barn, where even the most casual observer might note that the quality of his painting job left a lot to be desired. He'd ha

ve to redo it, which might not be a bad thing. If he was painting, he couldn't work on ideas for Hardy or dwell on how he'd just talked Aria into helping him with that, which would force him into her orbit again. At the time, it had seemed like a good idea to work with her, but that was before he'd realized that she'd move so fast with Le Torch, who'd certainly lived up to his reputation. Who would have thought she'd blaze ahead after hanging back so long?

"What's with you, Elmer?" Tristan asked as he bit into his apple.

"Nothing is with me," he growled and tried to line up his brush strokes so that it didn't look like a three year old with questionable abilities to stay inside the lines had taken over his body. "What's with you?"

"I meant with you getting here so early, quoi." Marchande wandered over to examine the side of the barn where Isaiah had been working, though some air quotes surrounding the term "work" might be appropriate, since he'd spent a lot of time seething instead of painting. "But now that we're on the subject, why are you trying to take my head off? Are you mad that you've been here so long without help?"

"I'm not mad," he ground out. "I'm painting. See?"

Isaiah swirled the brush around, but he'd forgotten to dip it in the paint can at his feet so the bristles didn't do much other than streak what he'd already halfheartedly covered.

"I'm sorry anyway," Tristan said with a laugh that demonstrated he had no clue how close Isaiah was to seeing how his friend looked with a broken nose. "I had to stop by Aria's to borrow a hair band and we got to talking."

Was that what the kids were calling it these days? "Lucky you."

Marchande clapped him on the back with a little more force than was necessary. “Don’t be jealous. I’ll ask her to let you borrow a hair band too.”

“I’m not—” He swallowed the rest because yeah. He was jealous.

Far more than he should be. More than was fair. More than was right. He’d pushed Aria directly into Marchande’s arms on purpose, because he said he’d help her. But knowing that he’d had a hand in it didn’t help ease the sharp thing in his stomach that dug deeper with each passing second as he reimagined Marchande’s mouth molding to the shape of Aria’s hand.

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And there'd be more where that came from. Tristan had women falling all over him for a reason, and it wasn't solely because of his pretty face—he knew how to talk to them, how to treat them. Had some wicked words at his disposal that made women swoon and he'd regaled the team with tales of his exploits enough times that it was pretty clear he knew his way around a woman's body too. They tended to like it when a man had talents in the area of making them feel good.

That line of thought did nothing to cool the temper that simmered just under Isaiah's skin.

How was he supposed to stand around and watch Marchande put his mouth on Aria some more?

Answer: he couldn't. Wouldn't. It was obvious that his time in Superstition Springs had come to an abrupt halt. Except he was right in the middle of not one, but two really important projects that he'd committed to doing for Hardy. If a man couldn't honor his word even when the going got tough, he had little character. At least that had always been Isaiah's philosophy and it had carried him through BUD/s training where he'd learned what true pain and difficulty meant. And then he'd become a SEAL, fighting for justice in some of the darkest corners of the world. Never once had he faltered in his mission. Until Syria.

The cherry on his craptastic sundae arrived at that moment as Aria and Cassidy came into view at the head of the dusty road leading from town to the barn. He stifled a groan. Both ladies were still on the barn restoration project, which he'd conveniently forgotten. Apparently today was the day they'd opted to come by for a long morning of torture.

To make it even more fun, Havana and Hardy were with them.

Marchande stiffened the second he caught sight of Cassidy and said something under his breath that would get him bleeped on any sort of broadcast. Apparently, Isaiah wasn't the only one blindsided by the company. Though he did wonder why Marchande was surprised to see the woman he'd just been cozying up to in the stairwell—had they not gotten around to discussing Aria's plans for the day?

"Hi, guys," Havana called cheerily, her bright red hair a garish contrast to Aria's muted shade.

Aria's sister held hands with Hardy and neither of them seemed at all concerned about public displays of affection that might make other people suddenly long to have that kind of easy warmth with another human.

Apparently it was a day for jealousy. Isaiah swallowed against the burn in his throat. "Wasn't expecting a crowd."

Hardy's gaze shifted past Isaiah and Marchande to examine the side of the barn, his expression decidedly underwhelmed. "Came by to see the progress. We've got to move on this schoolhouse. When do you think you'll have it ready for Cassidy and Tallhorse to start setting up for classes?"

Tallhorse had long been the only teacher in Superstition Springs until he'd taken on Cassidy as his apprentice of sorts. They planned to run a charter school together that the renovated barn would house. The Native American resident was real character, the kind that could be thirty-five or ninety, and had a Ph.D. in Russian Literature from Yale, an oddity Isaiah still didn't get.

Isaiah glanced at Marchande, who was making a great show of ignoring Cassidy and didn't give the slightest hint that he'd heard the question. So Isaiah answered on

behalf of both of them. “Once we have the paint dry, we only have a few more weatherproofing things to do on the inside and about a day’s worth of work on the bathroom. We got that guy from Bastrop to do the majority of the plumbing, so it’s minor stuff. Easy.”

Clearly relieved, Hardy nodded. “That’s great. I knew I could count on you. The sooner we get this checked off, the better. Then you can double down on how to attract folks. We’re thinking of doing something big and splashy to generate interest in the town. Like a welcome to Superstition Springs party or some such. I’d like to put you in charge of that. A dose of Elmer would be stellar.”

An iron claw raked through Isaiah’s stomach. Obviously Hardy had gotten the wrong impression when Isaiah hadn’t categorically rejected his plea to handle the PR stuff. He should have just said no. There was no way he could handle responsibility for an entire kickoff party. It was too much pressure, too much opportunity to get it wrong.

But before he could utter a word, Aria piped up.

“Let us finish the barn first,” she said with a laugh that clawed at him in a much more disturbing way. “You don’t have to tell us that there’s more work to do. We get it. But we’ll do better working on one thing at a time.”

“That makes sense.” Hardy glanced at Havana and they exchanged a look that seemed to signal agreement. “I’m fine with reconvening on the welcome party, maybe later this week. Elmer, you come find me when you’re ready to talk.”

And with that, Hardy and Havana strolled off. In one fell swoop, Aria had read his mind and offered an alternative that allowed him ample breathing room. She’d rescued him.

That couldn’t have been an accident. Clearly he’d communicated more to her last

night about his reasons for not wanting to handle the job alone than he'd realized. He'd have rather kept all of his angst hidden, but clearly he didn't get that choice. Aria saw through him to his most visceral level. What was he supposed to do with that?

"What would you like for me to work on?" Cassidy asked in the sudden silence. "I'm not really dressed for painting."

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you walked out of the door this morning," Tristan said with a good bit of sarcasm. "We're renovating a barn, not going shopping. Then again, it wouldn't surprise me to find out you didn't own any clothes that you'd consider painting in."

"You don't have to be obnoxious," she retorted, hands on her hips as she faced Marchande down. "Oh, I forgot. You can't help it."

You open your mouth and the obnoxiousness just pours out."

Isaiah rolled his eyes and went back to painting as they continued hurling insults and criticism at each other, too unsettled over the way Aria had jumped in to save him from the mayor's agenda to deal with someone else's conflict. Which was as much a testament to his befuddled state of mind as anything. Usually he was the one who smoothed things over.

The back of his neck prickled as Aria leaned in to murmur, "Are they like, related or something? If I didn't know better, I'd think they'd grown up sharing a bathroom. I mean, Ember and Havana fight like that too, but they love each other underneath. I don't know what to do with this."

That was only fair. Isaiah didn't know what to do with the way his pulse had started jackhammering in his throat the moment he'd scented her hair, either. "I think the key

is to keep them apart at this point. Maybe you should both work on something on the inside of the barn.”

That would benefit everyone, especially him. The less Aria had opportunity to lean into his space, the better.

“That’s a fantastic idea, thanks. I can’t take any more of the bickering.”

Isaiah nodded his agreement, willing her to disappear as quickly as possible. Apparently, that plan suited Cassidy to the ground, because the woman flounced through the door well ahead of Aria less than a minute later.

Good, now he could breathe.

Except his lungs wouldn't quite expand like he'd have expected. Actually, he hadn't thought much about his breathing lately, at least not when he'd been around Aria. She kept him so occupied with everything else that his lungs were the last thing on his mind.

"That woman is going to be the death of me." Marchande's expression was nothing short of black as the man picked up a paint brush from the pan in front of him.

"Which one?"

"Cassidy, of course." He said her name as if spitting out poison. "Why would I have a problem with Aria?"

"I would hope that you wouldn't," Isaiah muttered. "Given that she's been interested in you for so long."

"Yeah, she told me. She's a nice lady. Too bad it's not going to work out for us." Marchande shrugged, oblivious to the way Isaiah's pulse had just shot back into the stratosphere. "But that leaves the field open for you, right? I'd get on that if I were you. She's not going wait around forever for you to pull your head out of your rear end."

Isaiah tried to talk and swallow at the same time and choked on it. The subsequent coughing fit brought tears to his eyes. But that didn't stop his brain from picking up the information that Marchande had oh so casually dropped and running with it.

Aria and Marchande aren't an item. How? Why? What was with all the hand kissing in the stairwell then?

"You okay?" Marchande whacked him on the back a couple of times and then went back to painting nonchalantly. "You thought your feelings for her were a big secret or something?"

"Not a secret," Isaiah wheezed, desperately trying to wrap his thoughts around something that resembled cohesive. "Because it's not a thing."

"Please. Anyone can see that you have it bad for her. I told her that too."

The paint brush fell from Isaiah's suddenly nerveless fingers. "You did what?"

"Don't worry, I didn't make it sound like you were a blubbering idiot or anything."

Tristan stroked his brush over the side of the barn with maddening care, falling silent as he worked on fixing the mess Isaiah had made with the paint. As metaphors went, that one was a doozy.

"What did you say?" he demanded. "What did she say?"

"What, are we in third grade? Faut que tu te bouges. Point barre."

"Stop being a jerk," Isaiah ground out. "This is not the time or place for your cryptic French crap."

Marchande just laughed. "Step it up, mon ami. Talk to her. If it's meant to be, it'll all fall into place."

Easy for him to say. He'd never failed with a woman in his life. Isaiah, on the other

hand, had few relationships in his rearview mirror, and those had all been surface level type things that he'd invested zero emotional energy into since his sole focus over the last decade had been keeping his team both alive and motivated to waltz into dangerous situations.

But it didn't matter what his experience with women was, because there was nothing with Aria to fall into place. Could not be. The talk Isaiah needed to have with her looked a lot more like damage control than anything. She could not continue to have the impression that there was the remotest possibility that something of a romantic nature could work between them.

No matter how badly he wanted to tell her the exact opposite.

But the stark truth that Tristan had just unwittingly uncovered couldn't be denied. There was nothing left to hide behind—Isaiah had been falling for Aria this whole time.

So far, it had been easy to ignore since he'd been under the mistaken assumption that it couldn't go anywhere. She'd been destined for someone else, after all. Yet he had Tristan to thank for surfacing the real reason he couldn't lay it on the line and admit to his growing feelings—she deserved so much more than a broken SEAL who had no place in this little town she called home.

“I will talk to her,” Isaiah mumbled, mostly to put an end to this conversation that never should have happened.

Marchande needed to learn how to keep his big fat mouth shut, especially when it came to other people's love lives. But whatever. If nothing else, all of Isaiah's problems could be put to rest in one shot. All he had to do was leave, which he'd known was coming the moment Hardy had dropped the idea of Isaiah organizing a shindig for the town. This new revelation pushed the timeframe up to immediately,

which meant Hardy needed to hear how Isaiah was fresh out of glue. And then he owed it to Aria to tell her personally that he'd be taking off.

His imminent departure spurred him to get as much done on the barn-turned-schoolhouse as possible. Plus it gave him the added benefit of avoiding that scene with Aria for as long as possible. By the end of the day, the entire exterior of the barn had been painted and he and Marchande knocked out the rest of the exterior weatherproofing. Funny how he'd managed to motivate himself well enough to complete a task that had been lingering for some time.

Aria and Cassidy had made good progress too, and the ladies called it quits nearly at the same time as Isaiah and Marchande finished up. The four of them met up in the clearing near the new schoolhouse door but apparently Cassidy and Tristan hadn't figured out how to play nice with each other. Both of them quickly took their leave, Cassidy heading toward her house and Tristan heading toward town, presumably to go to Ruby's or the hotel.

In the awkward silence, Isaiah and Aria stared at each other. The sun had crept toward the horizon, but it wasn't late enough for sunset, so her hair remained its typical muted red.

"I need to tell you something," he said before he lost his nerve. He'd have rather hashed this out with Hardy first but Aria was here now. Better to rip off the Band-Aid as soon as possible. "You asked me a while back when I might move on to my next adventure and I think it's time."

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“What, now?” she gasped. “We’re still working on the barn.”

“No. We’re pretty much finished,” he countered casually. “I think Tristan can handle the rest. I’ve been pretty itchy for a while. It was only a matter of time, right?”

Her bemused expression tore through him unexpectedly, which felt oddly appropriate. Of course this should hurt—and probably a lot more. He’d never have enough pain piled on top of his chest to atone for his crimes.

“I was always kind of braced for it. I just didn’t think it would happen so soon,” she said.

“What can I say? It’s time and there’s not really any reason to stay.”

The lie nearly lodged in his throat but he managed to spit it out without tripping over it. The real test lay in whether he’d sold it—she’d picked up on his angst earlier, so there was no guarantee she wouldn’t sense something amiss now.

But she seemed to absorb his statements readily, nodding fast and blinking a lot. “Okay. I’ll miss our conversations. But I understand.”

“Okay, good.” There didn’t seem to be anything else to say, though why he was so reluctant to walk away remained a mystery. “I’ll miss you too.”

Not their conversations. But her. She didn’t seem to notice the slip, just backed away quickly. “I have to get to the diner. Please don’t leave without saying goodbye. Promise me.”

“I won’t.” Though that might be a lie too. He didn’t think he could do this again.

How was he supposed to leave when he’d just realized he’d found the place where he could breathe? It was wherever Aria Nixon was. And he had to go.

Fourteen

Aria doubled back around as soon as she was out of sight of the barn, her heart pounding in her chest as she ran full tilt toward Cassidy’s house. Isaiah was leaving. She had to let Cassidy know this was her last chance with the man. If she wanted to make a move, she had to do it soon.

Then Aria’s conscience would be clear. She didn’t have to feel guilty about how every time she got near Isaiah after Tristan’s revelations, she’d searched his face for some indication that he was looking at her a certain way. And saw nothing more than the way he always looked at her, with his blend of complete focus, a slight smile as if he found everything she said fascinating and his dual-chromatic eyes melting with unfathomable things she wished she could explore.

In short, she was in a lot of trouble.

Cassidy answered the door as if she’d been standing there waiting for her. But then her friend’s face registered mild surprise and she glanced over Aria’s shoulder. “What are you doing here?”

r /> “You were expecting someone else?” she joked and then realized that Cassidy actually was craning her neck in expectation of seeing someone besides Aria on her doorstep. “Oh, like who?”

“I thought maybe Tristan had followed me in order to get the last word in. That man is the worst combination of player, flirt and egomaniac. It’s like he loves the sound of

his voice so much that he thinks the rest of us do as well.”

“Um... I think he’s mostly nice,” she ventured, a little thrown off by the venom in Cassidy’s voice. “And that’s not what I came to talk about. You have to hurry up with Isaiah. He’s leaving town. Probably permanently.”

A puzzled frown drifted over Cassidy’s expression. “Isaiah. What am I hurrying up with him for?”

“You know.” Exasperated with the cluelessness of basically everyone on the planet, she rolled her hand in a get on with it motion. “Because you like him. You haven’t made a move yet and now he’s leaving. Maybe if you tell him how you feel, he’ll reconsider leaving and stay. That would so romantic, if he—”

Cassidy cut her off with a bemused laugh. “Aria, I’m not interested in Isaiah. I think he’s cute and all, but I gave up on him a long time ago. Right about the same moment when I figured out that you two were perfect for each other.”

“You, um...figured out—you...I mean, what?” Her eyelids fluttered closed as about forty-seven different emotional reactions swamped her at once, none of which she could sort fast enough to pick the strongest.

“I thought you guys were spending time together. Alone.” Cassidy smiled gently. “Getting to know each other. You forget how small this town is, clearly, if you thought that was a secret. Besides, I’m not blind. I see your face when he talks to you.”

“What does it do?” she whispered, fairly certain she was going to hear that she looked at him like he hung the moon, or some variation thereof, because of course she did.

All of this felt strangely inevitable. She’d started falling for him and her stupid face

had broadcast that. Probably that's why the almost kiss had happened, because she'd given away what was going on inside without realizing it. He'd responded in the way that made sense to him—and thank goodness she'd fled.

Imagine if she'd given in. They would have shared an amazing kiss, maybe more. Probably more. She'd certainly been primed for it. And then she'd have floated away in a cloud of bliss, only to wake up the next morning to learn that once again, she hadn't been enough to keep someone she cared about in town.

Because he'd still be leaving. Of that she had no doubt.

“You look like a woman who has found everything she's looking for. Which begs the question. Why do you look like you're about to cry?” Cassidy asked, her concern bleeding through the palm she reached out and placed on Aria's forearm. “Am I wrong about all of this?”

“No.” She sniffled as she realized Cassidy had called it in one. She was about to cry. “He's on his way out of town. What am I supposed to do about that?”

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“Go with him,” her friend said as if it was obvious.

And maybe it was. The possibility flooded her instantly, filling all of the empty places that had hollowed out when she accepted that she’d been unsuccessful at shutting down what was happening between her and Isaiah.

“I couldn’t do that,” she breathed but it was a token protest.

She could absolutely do that. Why couldn’t she? It was a lot better of a plan than being left behind and this time, she wasn’t a teenager. And she had every reason to be bold—Isaiah had even said he liked that about her.

“Sure you can. What’s holding you here?” Cassidy waved at the dusty road behind Aria that stretched toward town, but otherwise had nothing much to recommend it. “You still live with Serenity, just like I live with my parents because what else can you do here? This is your chance to find something more. Take it.”

“He might not even want that,” she mumbled.

How could she take such a huge risk? Five minutes ago, she’d been battling guilt and a host of other things that had prevented her from even thinking like this. She couldn’t realign the absolutes in her head that fast. She could barely process that there was the remotest possibility that Isaiah could be hers.

And now she was actually contemplating the possibility of seizing her dream and leaving Superstition Springs—something that had never seemed plausible but with Havana back and living with Serenity again, she could watch out for their aunt in

Aria's stead. It was perfect.

Cassidy raised a brow. "He might not. But what if he's waiting for you to make a move? Can you really not take this opportunity to find out? And if it doesn't work out, fine. He's leaving. You don't ever have to face him again."

The wisdom settled inside her. That was true. The risk wasn't as great as she'd pretended but the reward—that might be worth it. All she had to do was pick up everything she'd intended to apply to her quest for Tristan and aim it back in Isaiah's direction. Right? What was the worst that could happen?

And if it went well, she'd finally be the star in her own story.

"I have to go."

Cassidy laughed. "Send me a postcard."

Aria gave her friend a quick hug. "You don't deserve a postcard. It didn't occur to you to mention that you'd lost your interest in Isaiah like, I don't know, two weeks ago? Or at church when I told you that you'd missed your chance with him at the movies? I mean, come on, Cassidy. I've been wracked with guilt."

"Because you're a good person," Cassidy told her gently. "That's why I love you and why everything is going to work out. I can feel it."

That made one of them. Aria's pulse was doing this weird thing where it missed beats and then made up for it by doing the next three triple time. "Do me a favor and let Ruby know I'll be late."

Cassidy cackled. "I'll do you one better and tell her you're sick."

And that was that. She had no excuses not to forge ahead and find out exactly where she stood with Isaiah West, the man she'd accidentally started falling for while she was busy pretending she'd been interested in someone else.

As she wandered away from Cassidy's, everything came to a head instantly when she spied Isaiah's lean form walking toward her in the distance. Her throat went creek-bed-in-a-drought dry as the conversation with Cassidy swirled through her chest to mix with the one she'd had with Tristan. If he could be believed, Isaiah had been making googly eyes at her this whole time and she'd missed it. No. She'd noticed but refused to acknowledge it—that was the real kicker. What might have happened on the roof that night if she'd been given these revelations prior to?

She couldn't breathe. Think. Swallow. But neither could she flee. Not this time.

Isaiah's pace slowed when he saw her but by that time, she'd started moving again and they met up halfway between the barn and Cassidy's.

"I thought you were on your way to work," he said when she halted in front of him.

"I was. But there was something I had to do first."

How was she supposed to navigate this, just blurt it all out? This wasn't like one of their rooftop sessions when the expectations had been low and she had all kinds of excuses not to admit what she was feeling. This was totally different, fraught with the possibility of being rejected and she had no safety net.

But this was also her one chance to be bold, to choose her own destiny. He was already on his way out the door and for some reason, knowing that in advance helped.

If she did it right, she might be buckled in next to him as he moved on. The idea appealed to her enormously. Adventure, romance, connection—all of it was right here

in her grasp. Without a stupid makeover.

Inspired, she smiled. “I was thinking. You haven’t seen the springs yet. You can’t leave before you get to experience them.”

Equal parts intrigue and caution warred through his face. “You’re right, I’ve neglected that part

of Superstition Springs. I might breeze by there tomorrow on my way out of town. Can you give me directions?”

Directions? Like he intended to go by himself? Not hardly.

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“Um, no. I can’t. I have to take you there personally. Right now. Come on.” Emboldened, she grinned. “Race you. I bet you can’t beat me.”

And with that, she took off, praying he’d follow her, that the dare was enough to pique his interest when he’d clearly been thinking the trip would be a solo venture. Gratified to hear his footsteps echoing behind her, she slowed her pace just a touch in case he had trouble keeping up. She should have realized that his body had been honed by the military and thus he had absolutely no problem sprinting a mile to the springs that lay to the north of town.

Aria, on the other hand, was breathing pretty hard by the time the outcropping of rocks appeared on the horizon, but she kept going until she hit the base of the springs.

“That was...invigorating,” Isaiah said, his mouth quirking as he leaned on one of the giant boulders to catch his breath. “Was there a reason we had to come today? At full speed, no less?”

“Yeah, this is more private than the roof.” Obviously more than just one person had seen them up there and she had little interest in an audience. Leaving him to puzzle through that comment on his own, she started climbing the rocks until she stood at the top. Glancing down, she lifted her brows. “You can’t see the springs from down there.”

Isaiah didn’t hesitate to start climbing and the moment he drew up next to her, his eyes widened. His gaze panned the gorgeous and thoroughly hidden area that she’d always loved. They were standing on the natural basin that contained the crystal blue water of the springs that were an odd, atypical section of the normally mud-colored

Colorado River.

“Welcome to Superstition Springs,” she said.

“You should really lead with this,” he murmured. “It’s beautiful. It kind of spears you, right here.”

He brushed his chest with his fingertips and then let his hand dangle down between their thighs, which happened to be where hers was. Their fingers somehow intertwined, maybe because she helped matters along, and suddenly, his gaze shifted from the springs to land on her.

“That’s funny,” she whispered as she got likewise tangled up in his eyes. “I was just thinking that’s exactly what you do to me. Spear me. Right here.”

She lifted his hand along with hers and placed them both on her chest. There was a moment when she thought he wasn’t going to bite, that he intended to jerk away, but he didn’t. His fingers rested on her flesh, warming it, and oh yes, there were butterflies. A whole flock took flight in her stomach, wings beating in time with her pulse as Isaiah’s different-colored irises did beautiful things.

“Aria—” His voice cut off as if he’d choked on the word. “We can’t.”

“Can’t what? Finish what I stupidly ended too soon the other night? We can.” Where she’d gotten the courage to talk like this to him, she’d never know. But she had no intention of stopping until all the barriers between them fell away, once and for all. “I’m not scared anymore. I want to know what you were about to do. When we were dancing. Right before I left.”

“You were scared?” His fingertips nipped into her skin and then without warning, he released her fingers and his hand skated up to her jaw, cupping it exactly as he had

then. “I thought...well, it doesn’t exactly matter now. But you don’t have to be scared.”

“I know.” She nodded once, pushing her chin deeper into his palm deliberately until it became a caress that thrilled through her. “I know you’re leaving. I know I acted like an idiot putting Tristan between us. But he’s not in the picture. Neither is Cassidy. It’s just us and I want to know what it feels like when you kiss me. Before it’s too late.”

And then time unraveled as he complied, lifting her jaw just so and then laying his lips on hers. Fire tore down her throat and exploded in her midsection as Isaiah kissed her. It was everything she’d imagined and nothing she’d expected. He tasted of heat and passion and it made her ache for things she couldn’t articulate.

All at once, the kiss ended and Isaiah had backed off, his expression equal parts chagrined and gobsmacked as his hands fell away. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Don’t, Isaiah.” Disappointment seeped into the lovely floaty feeling, staining the experience with darkness that shouldn’t be there. “I wanted you to kiss me. Why shouldn’t you?”

“Because. I’m—” He bit off whatever he’d been about to say and shook his head.

“What? Not interested?” Her temper didn’t get riled too easily but when it did, she said stuff she couldn’t take back. A deep breath didn’t help. “Didn’t enjoy it? Not a fan of my lack of experience?”

“No! None of that. I’ve wanted to do that for a long time.” The admission didn’t ease the misery pulling at his expression or settle hers much either. “It’s the timing. It’s all wrong.”

She crossed her arms to keep herself from reaching for him again. Which was harder than she'd have expected, but she'd had such a small taste of him. She wanted more. Much more. Why did this have to be so complicated?

"Maybe the timing is exactly right," she countered. "Maybe I need this. Maybe we both do. I don't know what the next steps are after tonight, but why do we care? Can't we just spend time together like we've done in the past without stressing about what tomorrow might bring?"

His eyelids slammed shut as he absorbed that. "I don't think you know what you're asking of me."

"Then explain it," she countered. "I'm not going anywhere. I took a sick day from work. So you have no excuses. I think we have something special that's worth taking a little deeper. Or a lot deeper. If you don't feel the same, then just tell me."

"You are special." His whisper floated along her skin, raising goosebumps. "I just don't want you to be disappointed. You know, when I leave."

A fierceness rose up inside that she didn't recognize, a burning to lay it all out and beg him to take her when he went. But it was too soon to talk like that, too overwhelming to contemplate giving up the home she'd known since the age of seven in pursuit of a man. This was all too new. Right now, she just wanted to skip all the emotional tripwires and enjoy Isaiah's unique brand of amazing.

Once she felt a little less precarious, like everything that had suddenly come to matter to her might slip away, then she could think about whether she could follow him to parts unknown.

"Let me worry about that. The only thing you have to understand is that I'm not the slightest bit interested in keeping you tied here. I get that Superstition Springs isn't in

your long-term plan. I wasn't either. So think of tonight like a gift, freely given, with no expectations."

Without warning, he closed the gap and caught her up in a brutal kiss that swept away everything between them. Except the heat. Except the dizzying sense of rightness. Completion.

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His mouth claimed pieces of her that shouldn't have been available, or at the very least, shouldn't have been so easily transferred. How would she get them back? And then her brain ceased to function as the kiss deepened, dragging her into a maelstrom of sensation.

Instinctively, she pressed closer, yearning for...something. She met solid warmth in the form of Isaiah's lean body, and she shivered as his hands skimmed down her back, slicking across her hair. He groaned and murmured her name in a wholly encompassing way that clamped down on her with teeth and wouldn't let go.

"Your hair," he murmured as he nuzzled at her mouth with his. "It's so beautiful. It might be my favorite thing about you."

"Your eyes are my favorite thing about you," she admitted, tilting her head to let him access her throat with his magic mouth. "I could look at them for hours but I'm always worried you'll take it the wrong way."

He laughed softly against her skin. "I'm used to people staring at me. It's a bonus if it's you."

"I'll do it a lot more then."

The implications of that weighed down the space around them. She could only do it a lot if something changed. Otherwise, they weren't going to be in the same place long enough for her even begin looking her fill.

They stared at each other as the moment dragged out and she wanted to ask at least

one of the million questions running through her head, but she couldn't bring herself to break the little bubble they'd fallen into. It felt like her entire life had been headed toward this exact moment, when she had to stop being afraid that she'd be abandoned. It might still happen. She might get her heart torn out. Or she might figure out how to prevent both.

If she knew anything, it was that people left when things got difficult. So she'd strive to ensure she never gave Isaiah an excuse to start looking for the exit.

Fifteen

Mysticism and otherworldly predictions had been nowhere on Isaiah's radar when he'd hopped into the SUV with Hardy and team on a jaunt to Texas. He didn't really believe in anything he couldn't touch. But clearly there was something to the concept. How else could Aria have ended up in Isaiah's arms except through some inexplicable magic?

In case the magic had something to do with the springs, he was fine hanging out here with Aria for the next few hours. Or forever. Right now, he couldn't fathom breaking the spell they'd somehow fallen under, where the rest of the world didn't exist. He didn't have to pretend anymore and here, he wasn't broken because Aria didn't expect anything out of him but his presence.

He could do with a good dose of living in the here and now.

Just like he could kiss Aria whenever he felt like and oh, look—she was conveniently located millimeters away because he didn't have to let her go. So he hadn't.

Her warm lips tasted sweet, opening under his as he explored the depths of her passion, which seemed to be limitless so far. She met him more than halfway, bold and eager, just as she did everything else.

“Aria,” he murmured again, her name leaving his mouth like a song. And why shouldn’t it? She was as beautiful as a melody and as sultry as a saxophone.

“Are you going to do that a lot?” she asked,

shifting deeper into his arms, which worked for him.

“Um... I don’t know. Which part?” If whatever it was resulted in her snuggling that much closer, he’d definitely be repeating it.

“Saying my name like that.” She sighed and the rise and fall of her chest hit him in places she shouldn’t have been able to touch from the outside. “It makes me shivery.”

“In a good way, I hope.” He didn’t have the expertise of someone like Marchande, but he’d never had any complaints either. Plus, she’d chosen him. That realization alone had him riding pretty high. “If so, then I’ll do it a lot.”

She gave him one of her wistful smiles that made him want to gather up the whole world and gift it to her so she never had to want for anything again. “That would be nice. Except if you’re busy saying my name a lot and I’m busy staring at you a lot, we’re never going to get to the thing I’d really hoped to do tonight. And I had some big plans.”

“Oh?” She had his complete and utter attention as he honed in on the undercurrents that had sped up instantly. “What might that be?”

“Well, you know.” She blinked up at him through her lashes and it was every bit as alluring as when she smiled. “We’re alone. We’re really far from town. No one is looking for us.”

Her voice had dropped a few degrees but the temperature hadn’t and the images that

sprang to mind as his imagination started filling in the blanks of her provocative statements didn't help. "All of that is true. What do those circumstances put you in the mood for?"

This would not be a good time to misinterpret her meaning.

Somehow she'd moved even closer, her kiss-reddened lips begging for him to taste again, and things below the belt noticed all of the above in a big way.

"Something daring," she said. "Something guaranteed to make tonight memorable, especially since I've never done it with a man before."

"Never?" Well, duh. It only made sense that Aria didn't have a lot of experience with men. She lived in a small town that was decidedly short on eligible males. But to toss it out there so he knew exactly where he stood—raw energy and no small amount of humility coursed through him as he considered the implications. "I'm honestly flattered that you'd choose me for your first time. Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Oh, completely sure. There's just one small problem." She bit her lip and it was so enticing that he nearly groaned.

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“You’re killing me,” he ground out hoarsely. “No problems. Whatever it is, I’ll fix it. Just tell me.”

Lack of sheets, pillows, candles, music? He’d crawl on his hands and knees all the way to La Grange to get double of every last thing.

“I didn’t bring my bathing suit.”

“You didn’t...what?” His brain collapsed as he tried to make sense of the statement in the context of what he’d thought—assumed—they’d been talking about, which apparently wasn’t the same thing she’d been talking about. “What do you need a swimsuit for?”

“Well, I mean, I guess I don’t. I’ve never skinny dipped before either.” Aria’s cheeks pinked up, matching her hair in way he might find cute as soon as all the blood returned to his brain where it clearly needed to be. “But what is tonight about if it’s not being bold?”

“I’m sure I have no idea,” he muttered and shook his head in hopes of clearing out the impure thoughts he’d been having, which wasn’t greatly helped by the replacement images of skinny dipping with Aria. “Are you saying your big plans for tonight involve swimming, possibly without clothing, neither of which you’ve ever done with a man?”

He honestly didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at this point. If she hadn’t done either of those things, odds were good she had the same lack of experience with other types of things women did with men, just as he’d earlier surmised. Which meant he

needed to back way off, since she probably had no idea how seductive this innocent conversation had turned.

But she just nodded as if the question had been a perfectly reasonable clarification. “The water stays cold year round, even in August. It’s part of the magic of this area that we can’t explain. Jump in with me. You can’t come this far without going all the way.”

Which seemed to be a fitting metaphor for the evening—why not roll with it? “What, we just jump from here into the water?”

“Sure. Nothing like going all in. We’re talking major commitment here because you can’t back out once you’re in the air.”

Also a metaphor? The undercurrents weren’t merely of the sensual variety, though plenty of those were still in the mix. She might have framed this evening as something to be savored with no expectations over what might happen tomorrow, but he was extremely aware that women of Aria’s caliber didn’t mess around with a man and kiss them goodbye in the morning, totally okay with nothing but fond memories for their time together.

Nor did he want her to be okay with that. He wasn’t okay with that. No matter what happened, Aria wasn’t going to be easy to walk away from in the first place, and adding intimacy to their relationship would make it nearly impossible.

That reality should scare him more than it actually did.

But still. His will was only so strong and swimming with a naked woman who had no clue how alluring he found her would break him, no doubt. “I’ll jump. But let’s keep our clothes on.”

“Oh, that would be a shame.” Disappointment crowded into her expression and she shifted, creating a space between them that he didn’t like. “Are you sure we can’t do the skinny dipping part? Ember has lots of times and she always made it sound so great.”

Isaiah bit his tongue before blurting out what had been on the tip of it, which was something along the lines of, the same Ember who has a seven-year-old son? But surely Aria was aware that Ember had likely gotten pregnant as an indirect result of her swimming preferences—or a direct result. That was not a fate Isaiah was prepared to contemplate right now, not when they had so much else seething below the surface of what should have been a simple kiss and so was not.

“Sweetheart, I would love to get naked with you, but not today,” he told her firmly and the blinding smile that earned him nearly knocked him from his already precarious perch on the rock.

“I changed my mind. I like it when you call me sweetheart more than Aria. Especially when you say things like that.” She hummed happily, pushing her chest against his with far too much heat, and he’d had about enough of tempting fate.

“What things?” he growled instead of pushing her away. Apparently he hadn’t quite had enough of making her happy simply by speaking what was on his mind, though. “That I want to see you naked? Pure truth. You’re beautiful and kissing you lights me up inside. I’d love to spend a very long time finding out how much better that could get if we took it to the next level. But we’re not there yet. As much as I’d like to hurry that along, we’re going to take it slow.”

Slow. Everything had come down to that. He didn’t bother to pretend Serenity had gotten it wrong when obviously she’d gotten every single word of his prediction right. Just in telling Aria that they were taking it slow meant he was on a downward slide toward fulfilling that prediction to the letter.

Slow down to find love.

He might already be there. That put a lick of panic in his stomach. But even that wasn't enough to get him to step back from her.

And there was no way to avoid wondering if this was also the romantic retreat his prediction had called out. Since he hadn't run screaming from the springs yet, perhaps he could open his heart to that part too. Just here. Just for now. There was no harm in believing in magic for one night, was there?

Tomorrow he could get back to the reality of his life where redemption wasn't a thing.

"Okay," she agreed, her eyes a little bit too shiny for a woman who had just been told she wasn't going to have her world rocked. "Slow is good. But I have to ask how slow. You know, given that you're leaving tomorrow."

Yeah, that didn't sound so great at this point. Soon, he'd have to pick up stakes. But it didn't have to be tomorrow. "I'm suddenly not in such a hurry."

She blinked. "Because of me?"

He had to laugh. "What do you think is happening here? That I was going to take advantage of all your sexy talk about being daring and then still jet off in the morning?"

The way she winced told him she had thought that. Wow. A little of the Aria miasma he'd fallen into wore off as he contemplated the quicksand he'd just stepped in. That jumpstarted his brain enough for him to realize that she might have been more aware of how flirtatious her earlier comments had been than he'd given her credit for.

“Isaiah.” She frowned and the vibe between them went colder than he’d have thought possible given all of the heat that had been burning him up a moment ago. “I would never hold you here. No matter what. Even if we...you know. I want to be with you for whatever length of time I can get. I’m totally prepared for you to leave tomorrow. I don’t want you to feel forced to stay.”

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This marked the absolute first—and hopefully last—time in his life that a woman had told him she was fine with scraps of his attention and then given him permission to treat her like garbage after sharing something intimate and amazing. “That’s not anywhere on my radar. I’ve been dreaming of being with you like this for far too long to rush it.”

Which pretty much sealed his fate. If he planned on taking her up on the offer that was very clearly being communicated via her melting blue eyes, he had to stick around and do this right. Or leave before it went that far. Indecision—the bane of his existence. How did he get enough information to make the right decision in this case? It was impossible.

“That might be the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard,” she murmured, which just about broke his heart. And solidified that he’d be making even more concessions, at least until he figured out to navigate this unexpected detour. Aria was worth it.

“Something else that needs to be fixed, immediately,” he said with a scowl. “You deserve romance and to have someone pay a lot of attention to you. Bring you flowers and give you presents for no reason.”

Her expression was nothing short of dazed. “I would like that.”

He would like to be the man who did those things for her. If he had to postpone taking off to give them to her, that wasn’t so bad.

The bad part was how his greedy, contact-starved soul had latched on to hope that the rest of the prediction was going to come true. That Aria was every bit the healing

power he'd been searching for and hadn't found yet because he'd resisted slowing down long enough to let it happen.

"You know what else I would like?" she asked him sweetly.

"If we could just go swimming and forget all of this heavy stuff?" he suggested, only half joking. If he'd known he'd have his head spun around this many times in the course of an hour, he'd have packed better.

She hesitated long enough that it became apparent she'd rather have kept hashing out the parameters of this fledgling relationship that had somehow sprung up in a matter of minutes. He started to tell her that was fine, hash away, when she nodded. "That was first on my list, after all. Well, no. Getting to that kiss was the whole list. But after that...definitely taking the plunge."

"I'm all in."

And he meant that in as many ways as she wanted to take it. How he'd honor that promise remained to be seen, but his will wasn't strong enough to deny what was happening between them. And neither did he intend to miss a minute of being with a woman who'd orchestrated this entire outing because she'd hoped he'd finally kiss her. Since he'd ached for that too, they were both winners.

After they ditched their shoes, he took her hand and led her to the edge of the rock where the crystal blue water quietly waited for them to jump. It was clear enough to see straight to the bottom and deep enough to take a body from ten feet up.

They leaped in tandem, hitting the water with a giant splash. The cold engulfed him, refreshing, shocking. He held his breath as it closed over his head and then kicked to the surface, easily compensating for his sodden clothes that weighed a lot less than the scuba gear he'd spent more than his share of time wearing while under water. Her

fingers slipped from his as they broke above the water line at the same time.

“That was awesome,” he told her.

She treaded water next to him, rivulets streaming from her hair. Wet, she was even more devastating than she’d been up on the rock, post-kiss. Why she didn’t have a thousand men beating down her door, he’d never know. He just thanked his lucky stars that all those idiots had cleared the way for him.

“That’s why I suggested it,” she said, her smile becoming infectious enough to tease one out of him. “You only get one first time. I figured we should make it count.”

Oh, every bit of this had counted.

She kicked away with a splash and he followed her. They explored the basin together, laughing, kissing, touching—though the wet clothes provided both the much-needed barrier he’d intended them to be, as well as an incentive for him to figure out how to extend the magic past tonight. Which was the worst sort of selfish. Better to just enjoy the spell of the springs and forget about it tomorrow.

Eventually the sun went down and the water grew too cold to stay in it. Reluctantly, Isaiah rolled to the shore and dragged Aria into his arms to warm up her shivering body. They hadn’t eaten since lunch but he couldn’t find the energy to care about anything other than her.

“This was everything you promised it to be,” he murmured into her hair. “I don’t want it to end.”

“Then don’t end it,” she suggested softly, her tone contradicting the sudden stiffness of her body. “I get that you’re not a roots kind of guy. It’s part of what I find breathlessly attractive about you. You make me think about how big and wide the

world is. I want to see it. What if—”

His heart went into a free fall as she ground to a halt, right when she’d opened up a conversation that had completely piqued his interest. What if was his favorite phrase all at once.

“Don’t stop now, sweetheart.” He tightened his arms around her for fortification. This wasn’t easy to navigate for him either, but she gave him courage. Maybe he could do the same for her. “Be bold. You talk all you want about how attractive you find me.”

She laughed, as he’d intended, but more importantly, she relaxed against him, her body losing all of its sudden tension. “I like a lot of things about you. But what I was going to say is that you make me feel bold. As if I can do things I never thought I could. Like leave Superstition Springs.”

The whisper of a suggestion floated through him as he internalized what she’d left unsaid. “You mean with me.”

“Maybe you don’t want that,” she gushed out in a rush, as if he’d been about to protest the idea. “I didn’t intend to bring it up so soon. I mean, just think about it. I’m not asking for anything to be set in stone—”

“Aria.” He laid his lips on her temple. “I’m thinking about it.”

He wasn’t. Not really. Even if she was serious, which he highly doubted, he couldn’t be responsible for tearing her away from her home, the only place she’d ever known. And for what? A broken man who was good at shirking commitment and bad at doing the only job he’d ever loved? No. She’d gotten all caught up in the magic, as had he, but that didn’t change reality. Come tomorrow, the best he could hope for was a precious, minor extension to the bliss he’d gotten lucky enough to experience for this brief flash in time.

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“Are you going to hum like that all day?”

Aria glanced up from the sink to see Ember stalk into the kitchen, her expression nothing short of annoyed. Her sister plunked down at the ancient wooden table and pulled a bowl from the center where Serenity kept them due to sheer lack of cabinet space, then poured out a bunch of cornflakes.

“Probably,” Aria responded cheerfully and went back scrubbing the carrots she’d picked up from Voodoo Grocery a few minutes ago with the intent of making Isaiah carrot salad for lunch.

When they’d parted last night—reluctantly—it had been contingent on the premise that he’d come by so they could see each other alone before he had to get back to the barn for some final touches. She’d stayed away from him all morning, allegedly so he could focus on finishing the project without distraction, but that was just a lie she’d told herself.

Really, she didn’t want to rock the boat. If she crowded him, he might become a flight risk and she couldn’t stand to think she might be the one who pushed him away.

He hadn’t left town, as she’d discovered from Cassidy. She’d been afraid to ask, afraid to hope. But he was still here, still working on the barn. Still taking up an enormous amount of real estate inside her.

His continued presence might not mean anything significant. Or it might. She tried not to assign too much importance to it, or the brief conversation they’d had

regarding the possibility of them hitting the county line together. It was hard enough to reconcile that they were now a couple. Or something. That had yet to be established, but she didn't think it would help to slap a bunch of labels all over everything when she didn't quite know what she wanted to call their relationship yet.

It felt fragile and precarious and like if she put any sort of stock in the things he'd said last night, she'd only wind up heartbroken.

All she knew was that the humming seemed to be involuntary, an expression of the huge thing inside her that she couldn't contain. Ember could find another place to eat breakfast at—Aria glanced at the clock—eleven-twenty if she didn't like the music.

“Judd doing okay?” Aria asked her sister, strictly to be polite. Serenity had ingrained that kind of thing into her. If you were in the kitchen with another human, you chatted about everything and nothing companionably. All women in Superstition Springs held the same phil

osophy.

Except Ember apparently. “Why are you asking? Afraid I've lost my kid somewhere? Or do you just want to jump on the bandwagon with everyone else to criticize my mothering skills?”

“Um...” Geez. Aria rolled her eyes at her carrots and started scraping off the skins into the scratched porcelain basin. “Maybe I was just curious. Who's criticizing your mom-ness?”

Ember sighed. “Who isn't? I'm doing it all wrong according to Serenity. Mavis J is suddenly an authority on proper discipline of a seven-year-old. Augusta Moon makes snarky comments pretty much every time she sees me. I'm chalking that one up to the fact that she's convinced I used to...date her husband, though.”

Yeah, it wasn't hard to fill in the pause with another word that better described what she'd actually done with Matthew Moon, but as per usual, Ember hadn't confirmed or denied the rumors Aria had heard for years. "What do you think about the job you're doing?"

Surprise flew across Ember's pretty face, but she squelched it fast. Also typical. Ember didn't like anyone getting the drop on her. She fiddled with a long curl of strawberry-gold hair as she chewed her cereal deliberately before swallowing and answering.

"He seems okay, doesn't he?" She didn't wait for an answer, clearly deeming the question rhetorical. "Grows like a weed, so obviously I'm not starving him."

Her sister's tone said she wasn't so keen on the concept of chatting. Not a new revelation. Some days, Aria wondered why she'd been so upset about the fact that both Havana and Ember had taken off when in reality, they hadn't been all that close in the first place. Ember and Havana always fought and as the youngest sister, Aria had often been forgotten. She and Havana were building their relationship back up again, but Ember...totally different story.

Which begged the other question her sister had never confirmed—why she'd come back home when she so clearly didn't want to be here. It was only a matter of time before she got fed up and left again. Would it be something to beat her to the punch and leave first?

Havana bustled into the kitchen to form a party of three that should have been a party of one who was expecting the man she'd just started seeing. Dating. Falling in love with. Take your pick.

How was she going to get them out of here before Isaiah showed up? The last thing she wanted to do was admit that she'd veered hard to the right in her quest for Tristan

and landed in Isaiah's lap, almost literally. A blush heated her cheeks as she recalled exactly what he'd felt like under her backside as he'd held her on the banks of the spring.

"Just in time," Ember muttered as she glared at Havana. "Maybe Aria can start cross-examining you now instead."

Please. That was not what she'd been doing, but obviously Ember had her own interpretation of what kinds of things sisters were supposed to discuss.

Lifting her hands in a what's-up gesture, Havana peeked in the sink to presumably see what Aria was working on. "Nice carrots. I've got nothing to hide. Examine away."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ember jumped in before Aria could clarify that she'd only been asking simple questions. "That I'm trying to hide something?"

"Sounds like a Freudian thing to me," Havana said with a laugh, which made Ember's face crinkle up in a scowl. "Overly defensive much? Only someone trying to hide something would jump all over my comment."

"I lost the bet," Aria offered abruptly, determined to get her sisters to stop arguing at any cost, even if she had to hedge a little on why she'd lost. Both of them turned in her direction instantly, the words on their lips dying as she gave them a pained smile. "You both win. Tristan didn't ask me out. Totally not interested. It was fine though. He was really sweet about it."

"Honey, you lost that bet a long time ago," Ember advised her with a sly wink. "How's Isaiah, by the way? Oh, don't look so shocked. At least four people saw you head to the springs with him last night."

Havana clapped her hands in glee. “Story time. Everyone knows what happens at the springs when you go with a man you like.”

“Not me,” Aria muttered, ducking her head. She should have just grated the carrots and closed her mouth. “It wasn’t like that. It was...”

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Spiritual. That was the only way to describe how truly soul-deep she'd felt the connection to Isaiah. That's the only reason she'd gotten the courage to blurt out the idea she'd been kicking around about leaving with him—and he'd said he was thinking about it. That made it real and she'd been running that scenario through her head today too. But all of that would sound stupid out loud.

“That good, huh?” Ember cackled. “Guess that means you're babysitting, and none too soon. I've been wanting to check out this bar in Bastrop, so it's perfect timing.”

“A bar?” Havana wrinkled her nose. “That's a dumb place to troll for a man.”

“I'm not trolling for anything,” she shot back. “It's field research. I'm thinking of opening my own place. What makes you think I'm hot for a man anyway? They're all losers.”

“Isaiah's not,” Aria protested at the same moment Havana said, “Speak for yourself. My fiancé is brilliant. A liquor license is frightfully expensive, so word to the wise if you're serious.”

That was the first Aria had heard about Ember having permanent plans that involved Superstition Springs. It put a squiggle in her stomach to think that her sister might be here to stay on the eve of Aria deciding it might be time to find her own adventure. Jury was still out on whether she could actually do it, and this new twist threw the concept into an even more uncertain light.

Oh, goodness. Why would she let anything Ember did sway her? She'd never had one lick of consideration for Aria's feelings on the matter when she'd hightailed it out of

town. Havana either. Aria was an adult who could jolly well make her own choices about a future that may or may not include living here.

And she felt daring enough in that moment to do it.

“I am serious,” Ember said as she crossed to the sink to deposit her empty cereal bowl. As she rinsed it out, she called over her shoulder to Havana. “You and Caleb have been recruiting all of us like mad, spouting on about pitching in to make the town viable. This is my contribution, a sure-fire hit. People always like to drink, don’t they?”

“What do you know about running a bar?” Havana asked.

“What do you know about running a town?” Ember countered with raised eyebrows in what Aria did think was a fair point. “I can learn something new, same as you. Thanks for the vote of confidence, by the way.”

Havana sighed. “It wasn’t a vote of no-confidence. Why do you always think I’m not on your side? I’m glad you’re here. This town needs locals far more than new blood, especially those of us who grew up here. We’re the ones who are going to sell the town to newcomers. Right, Aria? I’m counting on you to take the reins on some stuff.”

Just as Havana’s pointed comment sank into Aria’s stomach, coating it with greasy guilt, her sister shifted her gaze to connect with hers. Well, of course she’d think Aria was on board with digging in to make the town a success. Why wouldn’t she? Aria had never breathed a word of her dream to be the one who did the leaving this time.

Wouldn’t they all be in for a shock when she picked up and sailed out of town without a backward glance?

“That’s kind of rich coming from you,” Aria muttered before she could help herself.

Havana did a double take. No shock. Aria never spoke that way to her sister, but maybe it was time for a change around here.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Havana asked, one hand on her hip, and it was nearly comical how much she looked like Ember, who had just said the exact same thing to something Havana had lobbed at her.

“That you never think about how I’m the only one who never left,” she said and apparently it wasn’t only a man who could rile her temper. “You and Ember took off without even a backward

glance. You left me here. And now you’re expecting me to help figure out how to get people to stay?”

“Oh, honey.” Her sister’s mouth crinkled as she absorbed Aria’s ire. “Are you still upset about that?”

“What was your first clue?” she spit out and took a deep breath. Long the peacemaker, she couldn’t keep ruffling feathers. It just wasn’t her style. “I mean, I’m not still upset. It was a long time ago. It’s just...”

How was she supposed to explain that while she’d worked on forgiving Havana and Ember for abandoning her, it didn’t mean she was okay? That it didn’t still affect her. It did. It was one hundred percent the reason she couldn’t figure out whether she was coming or going with Isaiah.

That’s when a knock sounded at the door. Isaiah. Happy to cut off Havana’s laser-eyed focus, Aria’s gaze flew to the still-closed door as she weighed how badly she needed to see him against how quickly she could get her sisters to vacate the premises

before she let him in.

Isaiah won, solely because there was little a solid dose of him couldn't fix. She darted across the living area and let in her caller, who was here to see her.

The moment she flung open the door, Isaiah blew across the threshold and gathered her up in his arms to drop her into a blistering kiss. Every nerve in her body ignited, draining her of all sense of time and place. The man had a wicked way with his mouth that rendered her mute and stupid, but then what did speaking and thinking matter when he was kissing her? She had no interest in either, not when he held her like he'd found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

"That was worth the price of admission."

Dully, she registered Ember's sarcastic voice through the haze of Isaiah that had stolen her wits. She broke off the kiss with extreme reluctance and nuzzled his face with hers. "I think our audience needs to go before you do that again."

"I scarcely noticed them," he murmured, his eyes warm and inviting and most importantly, trained on her and not even bothering to check out the women in the kitchen. "How fast can they leave?"

"Fast enough," Havana called with a forced laugh. "We know when we're not wanted. Come on, Em. Let's go hang out at Ruby's so you can tell me more about your ideas for a bar."

"Really? Because I have a lot of ideas." The sarcasm hadn't quite drained from Ember's voice but she followed Havana from the kitchen all the same, skirting Isaiah and Aria who gladly moved a few feet closer to the longhorn-uterus painting to give them room to exit Serenity's apartment.

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“Where were we?” Isaiah slammed the door shut with one foot, all without losing his hold on her. That was talent she could appreciate.

“You were kissing me. And I was swooning,” she reminded him with a grin, more than happy to forget all about that scene with Havana. “You’re a really good kisser.”

“You’re a really fun woman to kiss.” He demonstrated by giving her a perfunctory peck on the lips, then pulling back in a tease that had her growling in frustration, which only made him laugh.

The rumble of it against her torso settled inside her warmly and if he hadn’t been holding her so tightly, she’d definitely float away in a bubble of bliss. “I missed you.”

“Yeah? You could have come by the barn. There was some stuff you could have done, like hand me tools and bat your eyes at me.”

“Then everyone would have known we were an item.” A silly excuse. Everyone knew, obviously, if Ember could be believed. “I wanted to keep you all to myself. A secret for us only.”

His gaze heated, turning his blue eye molten and his brown eye the color of melted chocolate. “Like the roof? I’m a fan of secrets that involve me and you and no prying eyes.”

She shuddered as she contemplated all the delicious things that could happen in such circumstances, some of which she’d only recently gained half a clue about and the remainder of which she desperately wished to be given more than just a clue. “We’re

alone now. Serenity is with Caleb at the bank in La Grange and won't be back for another hour or so."

Isaiah groaned, tilting his head to hers until their foreheads touched in a gesture that felt far more intimate than it should. "I did not need to know that. You really enjoy testing my will, don't you?"

"Not a test." She shook her head. "Am I not being clear enough that you light me up inside too? That I'm more than willing, eager in fact, to get to the next level. Show me what it's all about."

But he did the exact opposite of what she'd expected and backed off, taking all his warmth and solid muscles with him as he pulled away. When he'd put a firm five feet between them, he stood there running a hand through his short dark hair, staring at the floor. Her heart twisted painfully as she watched him struggle to speak.

Which loosened her own tongue faster than his. "What, Isaiah? You're fine with kissing but I'm not pretty enough to undress all of a sudden?"

"Don't drag that up again," he said with frown. "I've already told you plenty of times how beautiful I think you are. That's not going to change overnight."

Those were just words, though, and his actions spoke far louder. She'd never said anything so bold to a man before, so it was possible she had pictured the wrong outcome when she'd thrown herself at him, but she was pretty sure that no one with a Y chromosome had ever rejected an offer like that from Ember twice in a row. Or even once.

"Then please. Do tell which part has changed overnight."

"The part where I can't seem to stop myself from getting caught up in you, only to be

reminded that there are more factors involved here than doing whatever I want without considering the consequences.” His eyelids slammed shut for a brief moment, as if in a quandary. “The barn is nearly finished. Tristan can do the rest without me. It’s a good time to cut ties, and I just...”

“Want to tell me this is over?” she guessed quietly, even as the phrase tore through her. She would’ve sworn she’d been prepared for this. She wasn’t.

Obviously that was why he wasn’t taking her up on her blatant offer. Once again, she’d discovered a man’s depth of character just as he was showing her the door.

“No! Aria. Geez.” Isaiah shook his head and plunked down on the couch behind him unexpectedly, then braced his hands on his knees as he stared up at her. “I was having a hard time thinking about leaving in the first place and now that I’m falling in love with you, it feels impossible.”

Her heart tumbled from its perch and fell right at his feet. Which seemed like as good a place as any to lay her own revelations on the line. She dropped to her knees between his and gathered up his beautiful face with both of her palms, praying everything she was feeling inside could somehow be communicated through her eyes because her throat wasn’t working so well.

They stared at each other for a long moment. I’m in love with you too. She couldn’t be sure if she said it out loud or not. Surely he could hear it weeping from her skin as there was no way something so big and huge could be contained by banal flesh.

“Isaiah,” she murmured and leaned into a kiss that wasn’t anything like the first one. This was more of a transfer of souls, a connection that bound them together in ways she had yet to figure out. While she’d rather be done with all the talking, she had more to say. “About the thing I brought up last night. About going with you. Isn’t that the answer?”

More to the point, she wanted it to be.

A shadow stole over his expression. “It’s all I’ve thought about today, though I told myself I wasn’t going to. It’s madness, Aria. I can’t take you away from your home, nor should you ask me to. Just like you don’t want to hold me here, I don’t want to be responsible for forcing you to leave.”

“But that’s the thing,” she croaked, emotion coloring her voice as the decision clarified for her in an instant. “You’re not making me do anything. You’re opening doors for me. We belong together, can’t you see that? I want to be wherever you are.”

That’s what her prediction had meant. You’ll feel intimacy all around so no matter where you go, love will follow. She wasn’t supposed to stay here at all.

Isaiah was already shaking his head. “Aria. The reasons I’m leaving are the same reasons why you can’t go. You deserve better than to be tied to someone like me.”

She flinched. “Someone like you? Someone good and kind, who makes me feel floaty and bonds me to the ground at the same time? A man who refuses to take advantage of me and then leave is who I see in front of me. You’re someone I can talk to. I feel comfortable with you, more so than anyone else I’ve ever met. What more could I possibly ask for, let alone deserve?”

“I’m not...” He sighed, a great heaving of his chest that she felt in hers. “There’s more to me than meets the eye. We barely know each other. You’re putting all your hope in something you know nothing about.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Suddenly furious and not at all sure where the surge of heat had come from, she shot to her feet, almost taking his nose off in the process. “You just told me you were falling in love with me. Why would you even say that if you already knew you were going to throw up all these roadblocks?”

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“I don’t know. Because I’m selfish,” he ground out. “Far more selfish than I would have guessed. I shouldn’t have told you.”

“But you did.” Because he’d been speaking from the heart. That much, she believed beyond a shadow of a doubt. “And it’s too late to take it back.”

“I’m not trying to!” Cursing, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry, this is not how I expected lunch to go.”

“Hint, when you kiss a girl and talk about falling in love with her, your next move is almost never going to be explaining all the reasons why that doesn’t matter because it’s not going to work out anyway.”

Like she knew. Maybe this was how all relationships went. Ember had to have gotten her all men are losers spiel from personal experience. The longhorn-uterus picture over his head blurred as she stared at it, trying not to cry in frustration.

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He just nodded, mute all of a sudden. Which tripped her temper again. “What did you expect anyway? Why even come over if you were just going to say sayonara?”

“Because I’m weak,” he said wearily with a small smile. “And making good decisions is my Achilles heel lately. I couldn’t stay away from you, which is a running theme here, by the way. If I’d been able to stop myself from seeking you out over the last few weeks, we never would have made it past that first time on the roof.”

But they had. Because they'd connected. But he seemed fine with just throwing all of that away. She crossed her arms and glared at him, giving him the full brunt of her Irish. It was just like Ember and Havana had said. The second a man came into her life, voila. Her previously unriled temper made an appearance.

“Well, guess what. I get a say in this too and I'm not sorry that's how it happened.” She almost stamped her foot and resisted at the last minute. “I'm in love with you and you can't make me stop. Also? If you leave, I'll just follow you. What are you going to do about it?”

His gaze locked onto hers, spearing her through as he assessed her face, presumably to gauge how serious she was. Which she was happy to clarify.

“Deadly serious,” she informed him. “So now that we have that established, stop acting like Shrek and start trying to figure out how to make this work instead of pushing me away. Because that's what I'm worth, buster. And so are you.”

For whatever reason, that made him laugh and the sound of it lightened her heart—and her mood. They had a shot, she could feel it. If she could just get him to agree to leave together, this could work between them.

“So that's it then? You call me Shrek and I'm supposed to fall at your feet?”

“Pretty much.” And then she squealed as he bulletted off the couch to catch her in his embrace. She melted into it, gratified at least to have gotten him over whatever hump had caused him to stop touching her, and let herself drown in his warmth. “Are you through making me dizzy with all your back and forth then?”

“Probably not,” he admitted easily. “But it seems as if you're largely unimpressed with my attempts to be noble, so let's try this. I'll stop pushing you away if you agree to give me time to do the figuring out you're asking for. I don't know what that looks

like. But if you're willing to stay on the boat for the discovery process, welcome aboard."

Seventeen

The devil's bargain Aria had talked Isaiah into could not end well. But he'd gotten so tired of being alone. Aria hadn't been listening to him anyway. What he should have done was sneak away in the middle of the night without telling her. But that had felt cowardly.

Instead, he'd blubbered his feelings all over her—which had been totally unfair, somewhat of a running theme with him lately—only to have her refuse to accept the out he'd been trying to give her.

What was he supposed to do with that?

Heal. Immediately. Yesterday would have been better. Of course, if it was that simple, he'd have just done that already. Fixed himself and gone on his merry way.

Now he had the best reason of all to figure it out. Aria. The problem was if he left, he couldn't do what he'd promised her he would. And sticking around meant he couldn't easily avoid helping Caleb with his PR job. The thought put him in such a panic that he had to lie on his bed just to get enough air circulating through his brain to avoid blacking out.

Obviously falling in love was not the magic solution to his problems. Not that he'd ever held out hope in that respect. But still. It would have been a nice gesture on the part of the universe to get the prediction at least partially right.

So instead, it looked like he'd be doing hard work of the emotional variety in order to get to a place where he didn't feel like he was ruining Aria's life no matter what

decisions he made.

She seemed pretty determined to love him regardless, which felt miraculous. This morning, he'd woken up like always, but in that split second of coming to full consciousness, he heard her voice in his head saying I love you. One day, he might get lucky enough to hear it every morning in person. But he had a lot to do before that was even a remote possibility.

All of the above was a huge motivating factor for why he'd taken over the corner booth at Ruby's as his Welcome to Superstition Springs party command center. The morning breakfast crowd had eyed him curiously as he sat there furiously scribbling out ideas on a sheet of paper and looking up things on his phone. The screen was too small to flip back and forth between Pinterest, party planning sites and the calculator, which added to his mounting frustration.

By ten o'clock, he'd come to the realization that he needed a laptop, which had been nowhere on his radar when he'd left California. After reading a few reviews on an electronics website, he ordered one. That turned out to be the easy part.

"Hey, Ruby," he called to her as she stood behind the counter pouring coffee for Lennie Ford. They both turned. "What's the mailing address at the hotel?"

Ruby hooted and exchanged an amused glance with Lennie, then finally let Isaiah in on the joke. "We don't have a postal code out here. Folks have their mail held at the post office in La Grange. We're off the grid for the most part and like it that way."

Lennie, a gentle old soul who ran an antiques shop that shared a wall with Voodoo Grocery, shifted in his seat to contemplate him. "What're you having mailed?"

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One factor of living in a place like Superstition Springs—privacy was not a thing. Of course, Isaiah had set up shop in the middle of Ruby's where the entire town came through on a daily basis, strictly because he hoped to get some eyes on this project. He couldn't do it without everyone's help, so he welcomed curiosity. "A laptop. I'm planning something for the mayor. A party."

That piqued Lennie's interest. He shoved off his seat and lumbered over, full coffee cup in hand. "What kind of party?"

Isaiah jerked his head at the bench seat that normally held the other four SEALs but might accommodate one very large antiques dealer. "Take a load off and let me talk to you about it."

Without hesitating, Lennie plopped down, resting his heavily tattooed arms on the table as he leaned forward as well as his enormous girth would allow, given that he'd barely cleared the opening. "Haven't been to a good party in a decade. Not sure you'll change that."

Well, neither was he. But it was enough of a challenge to have him gearing up to prove differently.

Ruby lifted the coffee carafe in his direction in a silent question as to whether he wanted a refill. He didn't, but he nodded all the same. She bustled over to pour, her eavesdropping ears wide open, which was exactly the reason he'd asked for more coffee. The more, the merrier.

"What makes a good party?" he asked them both.

“Lots of food,” Lennie answered decisively. “Barbecue. Smoked chicken. Mudbugs.”

Isaiah looked up from his paper where he’d been noting the points. “Mudbugs?”

“Crawfish, honey,” Ruby answered and leaned one hip on the table. “Word to the wise, when Texans talk about barbecue, its beef, not pork. Though we like both.”

This stuff was gold. “I thought crawfish was a Louisiana thing. No?”

And that was enough to get both of the residents off and running. Ruby and Lennie set him straight: sweet tea was a must, Blue Bell ice cream non-negotiable, Tabasco sauce could be traded out for Texas Pete’s but it was safer to have both. Isaiah’s hand hurt from taking notes by the time the lunch crowd started shuffling in, forcing Ruby to abandon ship since she had to go cook.

“Thanks, Lennie,” he said to the man once Ruby had sailed off. “I appreciate a local perspective.”

Lennie shrugged, a grin splitting his grizzled beard. “Don’t you mention it. You’re good people, and that Caleb is doing fine by us as our first mayor. You boys are all a welcome addition to the fold.”

The fold. It had a nice ring to it without adding a l

ot of expectation, as if all Isaiah had to do was let himself be wrapped in the town’s embrace in order to be a part of things here. “Caleb and Havana have a vision. I think this party will help give people a reason to visit. But more importantly, residents can meet some new people in a fun setting who might become paying customers of businesses in town.”

“I never thought about that.” Lennie’s expression grew thoughtful as he mused it

over. “I was more on the track of having a good time. But I see the point. You set up a snow cone booth in front of my store and maybe some kids come inside to see what kind of old toys I got.”

“Exactly.”

“I haven’t had any new kids to bake cookies for since Ember brung her Judd to town.” The prospect of making cookies seemed to seal the deal with Lennie, judging by the pleased glint in his eye. “I got a couple of old friends in Austin who do some catering on the side. Lemme make a call, see what I can do on getting you a good price. Least I can do to help since you got me thinking differently.”

Wow. Okay. That was shades of his old self at work there. He’d forgotten how good it felt to leave someone more positive about the outcome of something than they’d been a few minutes ago. “That would be great.”

“They’re good guys who’ll do quality work for you. Served with ’em in the Persian Gulf during the ’80s.”

Dumbstruck, Isaiah stared at the man as he rifled through the data in his head about US military operations during the time and could only come up with one conclusion. “You were in the Navy?”

The Persian Gulf had been the site of one of the largest naval offensives post World War II and had given rise to the conflict that had extended into Operation Desert Storm. Isaiah had long understood that the sacrifices of great men like this one had allowed him to carry on the fight against terrorism two decades later in the Middle East. Until he couldn’t anymore.

“Sure, for a few years,” Lennie said. “Saw some bad stuff. Got out before I lost my way.”

For some inexplicable reason, that pricked at the back of his eyelids. He blinked away the very non-masculine moisture and swallowed. “Yeah, I could see the wisdom in that.”

“Guessing that things didn’t get much better.”

Isaiah glanced up to meet Lennie’s shrewd gaze. Obviously the man’s comments hadn’t been random. How much did he actually know about the reasons the five of them had rolled into town? “Same evil, different country. Let’s just say our separation from the Navy wasn’t entirely voluntary.”

“Figured something wasn’t right. All of you had that shell-shocked look about you when you first came to town, as if you weren’t quite done with the job and weren’t quite sure how you ended up in Texas.”

“You read a guy pretty well,” Isaiah acknowledged with a bemused nod. Of all people to play unlikely therapist... “We still have some fight in us.”

Lennie unlaced his beefy forearms and tapped the table twice for emphasis. “Good. We need that kind of fierce. Saw dedication in Caleb a mile away or we wouldn’t have voted him into a position where he could do damage to what we’ve built here.”

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“What have you built here?” he asked with genuine curiosity.

It was the first time he’d thought to ask the question. The first time he’d thought about the town as a whole entity already. Caleb had drummed into everyone’s heads about how critical it was to get the town profitable as a tourist draw, but Superstition Springs had existed for a long time before the SEALs had plunked down in the middle of Serenity’s resort crisis.

“A community.” Lennie let him absorb that for a minute and then heaved from the bench seat, nearly toppling Isaiah in the process. “You come on by my shop later and you can have my laptop for as long as you need. That infernal thing makes me nuts with all the updates and whatnots. Can’t never get a good signal even though I pay for fancy satellite internet service.”

Isaiah hid a grin. Given what he’d just learned, Lennie couldn’t be more than about sixty but he acted like he was ninety. “Appreciate it. And the call to your catering friends. I’d be proud to do business with any vets you send my way.”

Vets. Veterans. Vets were former military. Just like me. Isaiah forced himself to run those concepts through his head despite the pain, because pretending he was still a SEAL didn’t change anything. This was just the first time he’d allowed himself to grieve while thinking about the future in the same breath. Yeah. He was still breathing.

He’d jumped into the SUV with Hardy to come to Texas because what else did he have to do? Nothing. And he’d spent weeks in Superstition Springs waiting around for the signal to leave. Perhaps that signal hadn’t come because he was already more

a part of this community than he'd credited. This is where I'm supposed to be. Where he'd met Aria. Where his life had begun to make sense when he wasn't looking.

Here he was in the fold. If he left, he'd only be doing it to keep moving, which accomplished nothing. To heal, he had to stay. That was how he'd stick his pieces back together, once and for all. He saw that now. Aria was worth it, sure. But so was he.

He still had some fight left in him.

“What’cha working on?”

Aria’s voice slid over him, soothing the ragged places in his soul that the conversation with Lennie had roughed up. He hadn’t seen her since yesterday and it had been far too long. Greedily, he drank in her pretty face, which was highlighted by the fact that her hair had been pulled back in a long braid. He held out his hand and when she grasped it, he pulled her into the seat recently vacated by Lennie and kissed her soundly.

“Hey, you,” he murmured when the kiss finally broke after he remembered they were in public.

“Guess we’re going full bore on the PDA then,” she commented wryly, her eyes sparkling enough that he guessed she didn’t see that as a problem. “I’m sure the crowd enjoyed the show.”

“Forget them.” He waved away the onlookers. “They can find their own if they’re jealous. I’m working on plans for the party. You know, the one Caleb asked me to work on?”

After having such a productive conversation with Ruby and Lennie, he couldn’t wait

to see what Aria might have to offer on the subject. Plus, he'd been hoping to make a rooftop trip out of it. That thought got him good and primed for something a lot more private than this corner booth in the middle of a diner.

"Oh." Her face registered mild surprise. "I wasn't thinking you'd sign on for that after...well, you know. What we talked about."

He raised a brow. After they'd talked about how he needed to get his crap together? What, was she thinking he couldn't handle it or something? Because she might be right. But he had to try. The more he thought about settling in here, the easier his heart beat. That had to count for something. "We talked about taking it slow. About how I'm not going to push you away any longer but I need time to figure it out. If I'm taking that time, why not dig into something that will help the town?"

"Because we weren't talking about digging in, Isaiah." Little frown lines appeared around her mouth and he got the first clue that this conversation was distressing her in some way. "We were talking about leaving. Together. I guess—well, I envisioned taking that time on the road. As an adventure."

Shades of their last conversation replayed in his head and he definitely didn't recall agreeing to anything of the sort. And after what had just slowly dawned on him, he definitely wasn't planning an escape routine. Not now. "I told you I didn't want to tear you away from here. I meant that. I'm working on ways to stay. Because I want to do that for you."

But instead of taking a minute to consider what a big concession he was making, she shook her head. "You said welcome aboard. That's a metaphor for sailing. As in sailing away from here. That's what I want to do. I've spent the morning working out a plan, where to go. Putting up pictures of beaches and mountains on my dream board. Figuring out how to pay for it. Funny thing, I actually thought for a moment that's what you were doing too."

“Well it’s not.” Nor would it be. He had a lot of healing to do, none of which would happen under the circumstances she was describing. Instead, it sounded a lot like running away, which he frankly excelled at. It was past time to stop. “Besides, you said you’d follow me if I left. I took that seriously. So no leaving.”

That was the opposite of love in his mind—letting a woman pin her hopes on a broken man who’d lured her away from everything that made sense in her world on the premise that some mystical prediction would keep them together. How about no.

She fiddled with the salt shaker in the center of the table, one she’d probably refilled a thousand times if he didn’t miss his guess, so her fascination with the thing seemed off. “That wasn’t supposed to make you change your mind. It was supposed to show you that I wasn’t afraid of going.”

“I’m afraid of leaving,” he admitted, a little shocked at how easily it had come after so many weeks of torturing himself, and he wasn’t all that proud of how long it had taken him to get to this point in the first place. “No, not afraid of leaving itself, but what it represents. I have some things I’m trying to work through.”

“I know!” She glanced around and lowered her voice. “But those are things that being together someplace else can only help. I get that you’re conflicted about taking things deeper. We can figure that out together, away from here, where there’s so much pressure.”

“Aria.” He bit back his frustration. How could they still not be communicating after all the conversations they’d had? “I’m not talking about working through us. I have...scars from Syria that aren’t healed yet. That’s why I can’t take things to the next level. Not yet.”

But he wanted to. Badly. He wanted a lot of things, some he didn’t dare hope for but couldn’t help picturing perfectly, like his ring on her third finger.

“What are you talking about? You mean your time in the military is the reason everything is backward

d all at once?” Confusion wormed into her expression. “Is that what you meant when you said there was more to you than meets the eye?”

“Yeah. Basically.” He blew out a breath and went for broke. “So I’m here. Digging in. Working through it. I want to do that with you by my side—in Superstition Springs. Don’t you see what I’m telling you? I don’t want to leave. For the first time. I’ve finally figured out what I need to do and it’s stay.”

Surely she could see how huge of a thing this was for him. Surely she could support that, especially if she loved him like she claimed to. They needed to have a really long talk about what was going on with him. The panic attacks that he pretended were something else. His inability to make a decision. To accept responsibility for anything. None of this was her fault, but finally, he could see a light at the end. Aria held that light.

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If he reached for it, he could find his glue.

“That’s not true,” she whispered, obviously stricken. “That can’t be true. I’m finally figuring out some things too. And the way that I need to heal from the scars that I carry around is to leave. With you. That’s what this is all about.”

“That’s not what this is about. I have to stay.”

“I have to leave.”

They stared at each other, neither flinching. Until they both did. He shook his head, his own confusion marring the moment. “What scars? Where is this coming from?”

“From feeling like I’ve been left behind for the last eight years. Isaiah.” Her warm hand covered his and he clung to it desperately, lacing their fingers together tight. It didn’t fix the sensation that everything was sliding away, nor did it halt the momentum. “I need to stop feeling like I don’t have any control over my own fate. Like I’m just waiting around for the next person to leave. I can’t do it anymore. I have to be the one to leave. I thought—well, obviously I thought wrong. But it doesn’t change that you loving me gives me the courage to do what I should have done a long time ago.”

The sincerity and genuine pain radiating from her gaze sliced through him as he finally internalized what she was telling him. She was leaving. And he couldn’t follow her.

Oh, sure, he could. He could do lots of things. Except tear himself away from this

community that he'd somehow become a part of, one where he had people—more than one—who understood what it felt like to fight for freedom in a world that didn't want you to succeed. Who knew what it felt like to come home not quite whole.

That's why he'd resisted leaving for so long. Why he couldn't lay it on the line with Hardy and tell him he was on his way out the door.

He had a new purpose in Superstition Springs, a place to heal, a place to thrive. Be productive as he fought for something different but no less important—himself. The springs had worked their magic after all. And he didn't think he'd find that anywhere else. Not right now. Maybe later, after he'd sorted through everything enough that breathing became natural and easy again.

“So somehow we've gotten to the point where we can be in love but to become better people, we have to do it apart. How does that make any sense?” he asked.

“I don't know.” Misery flooded her expression. “But I don't see a way around it.”

It was a paradox of the worst kind. The gift of the Magi gone horribly wrong. “Can I ask you to stay? Would that make a difference?”

Her lips lifted in a brief, completely unamused smile. “You don't want to be the one who holds me here when the reasons I have to go are the same reasons you have to stay. Right?”

“Someone really stupid must have said that,” he muttered. Trust her to use his own words against him. “I don't want to lose you.”

“I don't know that you are.” Her thumb caressed his knuckle and her warmth breeched his skin to spread. “I'm not going to stop being in love with you.”

Fat lot of good that did him. “Yeah, but I want you here. Where I can...do things.”

So many things. The sheer number of things he hadn't done yet with her and wanted to paraded through his head. Only a few of them involved closed doors. That hurt maybe the most, not being able to treat her to the romantic encounter she deserved for her first time.

He had the sudden, compelling urge to tell her that. To spill out all the things in his heart in an effort to sway her. They were all right there on the tip of his tongue. Stuff he should have said already, arguments to the contrary. Bargains. Maybe he could go with her for just a week and then come back.

But he didn't say any of that. For the first time, despite knowing influence and motivation were his best skills, he bit it back. He couldn't use words to convince her to stay. That wouldn't be fair. To either of them. She'd made up her mind to go, same as he'd put his own stake in the ground.

He let go. “I'll be here.”

And then he watched her walk away for what he expected would be the last time.

Eighteen

Havana took Aria to the tiny bus station in La Grange. In a rare feat, her sister drove Caleb's SUV the entire way without saying a word, and of course it was the one time Aria would have preferred some chatter. How was she supposed to forget the devastation on Isaiah's face during that last conversation if she didn't have something to distract her?

It was only at the curb that Havana finally exhibited an ounce of mercy and broke her silence. “I hope you find what you're looking for.”

Aria nodded. That was the hope. Of course, the huge hole in her chest felt more like she'd lost everything. But that would fade in time. Time she fully planned to give herself. This wasn't a lark or something designed to prove a point. The pain just made it all the more critical to figure out why she couldn't accept that Isaiah meant it when he said he would stay in Superstition Springs.

Because that was the bottom line. She couldn't stand around and wait for him to leave her. It didn't matter how many pretty promises he made—everyone abandoned her eventually.

And it was on her to become someone that people didn't leave. That could only be accomplished by taking action. By being brave. This journey was the scariest thing she'd ever done. Sure she'd have liked nothing more than to have someone right next to her, holding her hand. Isaiah specifically. But he'd refused to come with her, which honestly was for the best.

She just didn't like it.

“Do you have enough money?” Havana asked as Aria stuck her hand out to open the door.

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“I don’t know,” Aria mumbled and shifted her gaze out the window to watch the people milling about on the sidewalk in front of the gray building housing the bus station. “How much is enough?”

Shouldn’t the bus station be grander or have more buses waiting to whisk people away to a new life? The building was small and kind of depressing. Three long silver vehicles idled by numbered chutes that reminded her of cattle runs leading into a barn, but otherwise, there was little to indicate the purpose of this place.

“Depends on what you’re trying to do. Stay in a hotel for a few weeks? Rent an apartment? Go to Disneyland?”

Aria glanced over at her sister. All good questions that she didn’t have an answer to. “I have enough to buy a one-way bus ticket to Los Angeles and that’s the important part. I’ll figure out something when I get there.”

That’s what all the heroines did in her favorite books. They were smart, resourceful. They took on the world with no apologies and viewed each step as an opportunity. They did not abort the quest before taking step one.

Havana’s lips pursed and she could tell her sister wanted to say a whole bunch of things in response, but she didn’t. It must have taken an act of sheer will for her to keep her opinions to herself. They’d never picked up that discussion from the other day, the one that Isaiah had cut short. And Aria had no intention of hashing that out again anyway. What would be the use? To get an apology from Havana? That wouldn’t change anything.

“You can call me anytime if you need me to come get you,” Ha

vana finally said. “No matter where you are.”

“Really? What if I’m in Alaska?” she couldn’t help but retort. That was nowhere in her plans, but still.

Havana just turned up her hands. “Even then. You think distance makes a difference when my baby sister needs me?”

Yeah. She did think that because it made a huge difference, but Aria was the only one who seemed to understand that. “Distance is the whole point of this excursion.”

“Because you’re trying to escape me.” Havana’s mouth flattened. “I’m bossy and difficult. You can say it.”

“This is not about you.”

Except it was. It was one hundred percent about how everyone else in her life had gotten to go places and do things and hadn’t had one thought for how Aria would feel about being abandoned. How hard it was to be the one left behind. How that would become the defining phenomena that drove her decisions. Even after spelling that out, still Havana had said nothing.

And now Aria was the one doing the leaving. Finally. Was it supposed to hurt her this much though?

“Well, I’m not going to tell you what to do this time,” Havana said firmly though Aria would swear there was a glint in her sister’s eyes that meant she was trying not to cry. “You’re an adult and you can make your own decisions.”

“That wasn’t ever in question. And for the record, I’ve never minded you telling me what to do. What I minded was when you left.”

“Would it help if I said I was sorry?”

One tear finally worked its way down her sister’s face and that was nearly Aria’s undoing. Havana wasn’t a crier. She was a get things done kind of woman, the likes of which Aria had always admired.

“It helps.” But it didn’t change anything.

Aria was fixing herself once and for all. She opened the SUV door and forced herself to step onto the curb, then collect her bags. Because she was a masochist apparently, she turned for one final tremulous smile for her sister. “Tell Ember I said bye and that I’m grateful to her for taking over my job at Ruby’s.”

Havana nodded and the moment Aria shut the SUV’s door, her sister drove off, leaving her there with two pieces of luggage and the sinking sensation that she’d somehow messed up an opportunity to leave all of her old baggage full of the past behind.

But her sister wasn’t getting it, insisting on missing the point by laying blame for Aria’s troubles on something so meaningless as Havana’s tendency to be dictatorial. Who didn’t know that about the eldest Nixon sister? Havana had even said that Caleb loved her in spite of that flaw.

All at once, that conversation she’d had with Havana and Ember filtered into her mind, the one where Havana had said that Caleb let her be herself. And called it heaven on earth. Exactly how Aria had felt every moment she’d ever been with Isaiah—except for the ones where they argued about the future of their relationship with no compromise in sight.

But even then, he'd never once made her feel unloved. Or like he had no interest in working it out. He'd just asked for time to sort through the stuff in his head.

Well, guess what? She was giving him that time while she got out before being hurt again.

She bought a ticket for Los Angeles at the window and stoically climbed on board the bus at the appointed time. It was easily the lushest vehicle she'd ever been in with soft, posh seats, a rest for her feet and a cushion for her head that would come in handy since she'd have to sleep on the bus after transferring in Austin.

The trip to Austin took over an hour but it passed pretty quickly, probably because Aria had gone numb by the time the bus hit the freeway. For a grand adventure, it wasn't turning out to be anything other than a lesson in misery. Mostly because she couldn't stop thinking about Isaiah and how she'd put lines on his face that hadn't been there before she'd told him she was leaving anyway.

She'd hurt him. And still he'd asked her to stay. Had told her in no uncertain terms that he wanted to be with her. Why couldn't she just take that at face value? Wouldn't staying be a better test of whether she'd become someone people didn't leave? With each rotation of the tires, she grew less and less convinced that she'd made the right decision.

But this was the way it had to be. Wasn't it?

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In Austin, she debarked the bus and found the queue for the one that would take her to Dallas, where she'd have to transfer yet again to make the long trek to California. Somehow she'd envisioned this journey would be fun but it was June in Texas, which equaled hot. And sticky. After a long fifteen minutes, the new bus rumbled into place.

And then she couldn't make herself get on it. Once the bus rolled away from Austin, she'd officially be the farthest from home she'd ever been. Why that was tripping her up, she had no idea. Maybe because she'd come this far and nothing had changed. She was still really mad at Havana and Ember for leaving and really mad at herself for being so adamant with Isaiah that this was the only answer. But how did she go back home when she'd been so convinced that the only way things could ever work with Isaiah would be if he left with her?

Staying would have never gotten her to the point where she could relax in the knowledge that she'd never be abandoned again. He obviously didn't get that.

She sighed. Maybe he didn't get that because she'd never quite come out and said it, not that plainly. But then again, he hadn't divulged all of his junk either, just dropped a lot of cryptic comments on her about how messed up he was.

The bus heading for Dallas left without her. She found a bench near the ticket window and heaved herself onto it, tucking both pieces of luggage underneath. The way this day was going thus far, she'd be using one suitcase for a pillow. Odds were good she'd be sleeping in the bus station unless she could figure out what she was supposed to do when she couldn't stop being stuck between the past and the future.

That's where Isaiah found her some hours later.

“Is this seat taken?”

She glanced up into Isaiah’s beautiful, precious face, both of his irises luminous in different ways, and everything inside melted. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you. Duh.”

He smiled, then yelped as she launched herself at him. He caught her, easily shifting to compensate for her weight while simultaneously avoiding an unnecessary trip to the bus station floor. Of course, because he was brilliant and solid and amazing and when his arms wrapped around her, her world rebalanced.

Isaiah was here. In Austin. Holding her. It was so lovely that she floated away in a haze of bliss, not at all concerned about how surreal this whole thing was. Though after a good five minutes of being consumed by all the things he’d broken open inside her, she had to know.

“Why were you looking for me?”

“To tell you how stupid I am,” he murmured into her hair. “I let you leave. The best thing that ever happened to me and I let you go for all the wrong reasons.”

“You let me go for all the right reasons,” she corrected gruffly, scared to reiterate the point, scared to talk, scared to keep silent. Scared this wasn’t the second chance she so suddenly craved. “I told you to let me go. And you did, without question. What’s that, but a demonstration of how much you love me?”

That cracked what little of her had remained whole. It was exactly that. And she’d walked away from him. She was the stupid one here.

“A better demonstration would have been to tell you why I made you dizzy all of

those times.” He laughed as she narrowed her gaze, too befuddled to follow his train of thought. “With the back and forth. Never putting my stake in the ground when it came to us. I’d like to blame it on my heterochromia iridium, but that’s just a convenient excuse.”

“Your um...what?”

“Different colored eyes. I veer between extremes so often that I forget it’s not how I used to be. Syria changed me in ways I have yet to compensate for. Let me tell you about it.”

She nodded. Yes. Talking was exactly what needed to happen here, but she needed to be doing it, not him. “In a minute. I have to tell you about why I was so bent on leaving.”

“I’m sensing a very long conversation in our future, then.” He glanced around at the crowded bus station, looking none too pleased with the lack of privacy. “Maybe this isn’t the place to do it.”

“It is. Location isn’t magic,” she advised him because she didn’t care who heard. It was all so clear, especially what Havana had been trying to tell her in the car about distance. “Only you matter, not where we are. I was afraid of you leaving me, so I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to beat you at your own game.”

“But I was trying to stay.” His confusion was entirely warranted. He wasn’t the only one who’d been veering from extreme to extreme without fully understanding how dizzying it was.

“I know. I didn’t believe you would, though.”

He winced. “I deserved that. I deserve a lot of things, but you’re not one of them. Not

yet.”

“But you’re here, darling. You came after me.” He’d followed her. It meant the world to her, even though she didn’t quite understand it yet. But that’s where conversation came in. Real conversation that pulled no punches, the kind they’d always excelled at. “Why did you if you didn’t think it was the right thing to do? You were so sure you had to stay, even if I left.”

“Oh, it was absolutely the right thing to do.” He hesitated for only a moment and then asked, “Do you know why the guys call me Elmer?”

She shook her head, sensing there was more to the story than what Tristan had mentioned about the relation to Elmer Fudd.

“My job was to pick up everyone’s pieces and glue them back together. That’s how we did the hard work in Syria. It wasn’t pretty. People died at our hands. Sometimes it’s hard to wake up the next morning and do it again, but that’s what I helped them do. Over and over.”

He paused for a moment, but she couldn’t be sure if it was to give her time to absorb or him. She feathered a thumb across his cheek to show she was l

istening, which had the odd effect of making him smile. She’d take it, though it didn’t do much to ease the tremors in her stomach.

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This was difficult for him to articulate. But he was doing it—because it mattered to him. And she'd listen as long as he needed her to. "Elmer like the glue, then."

He nodded. "I was good at it. I liked being the guy the team needed because nobody ever had before. The rest of my team all had specialties that made them good at warfare but what I did was one hundred percent mental and one hundred percent necessary. And then I couldn't do it anymore. I lost my stickiness. How do you fix that? It's not like I suddenly couldn't shoot straight anymore so maybe I practice and get better."

A lot of things suddenly made sense. "You were trying to fix your stick-factor. That's why you couldn't leave."

And she'd blatantly told him she hadn't believed him when he'd said he would stay. The tremors turned into more of a sick wave. Why hadn't he shared any of this with her? Because she'd been too busy trying to punish her sisters for abandoning her that she hadn't paid attention to him?

"Among other things," he admitted. "Leaving was what I always had to do as a kid when things changed and I figured I didn't deserve a place in Superstition Springs if I couldn't do what I'd always done for the team. So I had to go. But then I realized staying was the key. Because it meant owning up to my healing process and trying to forgive myself for leading my team back into the battlefield where ugly stuff happened."

Tears pricked at her eyelids as she processed the pain laced through his voice and she could do nothing else but lay her lips on his in a tender kiss that hopefully

communicated the swirl in her chest that had his name written all over it.

“But you came after me,” she choked out in a whisper. “Why?”

His lips curved up against hers. “Funny thing. I thought I had to stay to fix the stuff that had me screwed up after Syria, but you’d already started healing me. One rooftop encounter at a time. I was looking for a bigger splash, a sign. Something. I got that the moment Havana came home without you in the SUV.”

“Really?” When he nodded against her forehead, she murmured, “What was it?”

“Tristan smacked me across the back of the head and told me to get on a bus,” he admitted sheepishly. “See, he’s kind of mouthy, but that comes in handy when I need to hear something, like how staying wasn’t going to fix anything if I lost you.”

Dazed, she pulled back and stared at him as her heart squeezed. “What would you have done if I wasn’t sitting here in the bus station?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’d like to think that it doesn’t matter. We were destined to be together, so I found you.” His arms tightened around her and she hoped he never let go. “Why were you sitting here in the bus station?”

“Funny thing...” She smiled through sudden tears. “I didn’t want to go to Dulac after all. I’d rather live in a swamp with you.”

He laughed at her Shrek reference, as she’d intended. “You know this is how the whole thing was always going to end, right? Except for the part where the dragon eats the bad guy at the wedding scene. I’m pretty sure that’s not going to happen in our story.”

Wedding scene? Surely he didn’t mean that literally. But what if he did? The thought

winged through her heart and she could think of nothing she'd like more than to put on a white dress and pledge to love Isaiah West for the rest of her days.

A grin split her face. "I'd be okay with the happily ever after part."

"That's reserved for after a whole lot more conversation about what's going on in our hearts until we know we can overcome all of the things pulling us apart. But the deal is that we're going to be in the same place at the same time from now on. No more running away from the problems. You leave, I go with you. I leave, same deal."

One of his arms slipped from her waist and he held out his hand for her to shake. Solemnly, she took it and pumped once. "I like those terms."

Everything wasn't magically fixed just because he'd come after her. She got that. Neither was he saying it was going to be easy to navigate whatever came out of the impending conversation and she had no illusions about the fact that she had some issues to iron out too. But he was saying he was committed to working it out as long as they were together, and she could totally get on board with that.

"Where to?" he asked and glanced around the bus station, then pointed to the backpack slung over his shoulder. "I'm traveling light, so you tell me where we're going."

"Home," she said decisively. "Helps that I realized that's wherever you are."

"Well, sweetheart, I told myself I'd try to be really understanding of whatever was driving you to leave Superstition Springs and that I'd be accommodating if you ended up in Timbuktu, but I draw the line at living in a bus station."

She laughed even as her heart squished over the term sweetheart, pretty sure that would happen a lot from now on. "Let's find the bus back to La Grange and then

spend the night on the roof. Together.”

His eyes went wide and then softened into melty pools of blue and brown. “Now you’re talking.”

“We’re talking,” she corrected him. “That’s what the roof is all about after all. Though we might get to some other stuff too. If you talk fast.”

The thought nearly made her swoon. Yes to talking, yes to touching, yes to Isaiah. She didn’t need her sisters to admire her or for either of them to stay in Superstition Springs. She’d needed the fulfillment of charting her own destiny, of seizing happiness, and he’d given her the courage to do so.

“I’m liking the sound of this more and more.” But before she could pull away to go stand in line at the ticket window, he cupped her jaw and brought her lips up to his in a sweet kiss that busted every wall around her heart, then knit everything all back together again.

Isaiah West was the most beautiful human Aria had ever laid eyes on and somehow the stars had aligned to give them as many shots at getting this right as needed. No makeover required—except for the one in her heart, which had allowed her story to finally start.

Page one: Isaiah.

Epilogue

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After a very long bus ride back to where they'd come from, during which Isaiah did not let go of Aria's hand once, Havana picked them up in La Grange without a lot of fanfare. He appreciated both the ride and the lack of questions about what had happened since she'd dropped Aria off earlier that day.

All anyone needed to know was that he and Aria were a couple.

Havana did pull Aria into a hug that had Big Sister written all over it, mouthing something into Aria's ear that made them both smile. He had the distinct impression he'd been the subject of the comment. As long as no Nixon Family Lynch Mob had been formed once Aria had called her sister for a ride, he figured he must be in the clear.

Most importantly, he was home.

Nightly rooftop chats became a necessary recipe to the success of Isaiah's relationship with Aria. Not just because they had a lot to say to each other, but also because that was the one place they were guaranteed to be alone.

He liked being alone with her. What he did not like was the end of the night, when he had to kiss her goodnight that final time, then let her go off to the third floor where she lived. Every night, he had to figure out how to sleep with the fruity scent of her hair keeping him company. He'd rather have the woman.

All of his energy currently went toward solidifying things between them so that she didn't ever think about leaving town again—unless he was with her. And he definitely had some ideas about that.

As had become their custom over the last few nights, Isaiah waited for her on the roof until she finished her shift at Ruby's. The guys ate there every night, so of course, he'd seen her not too long ago. It was never enough.

Besides, Ruby's had become really awkward since Cassidy and Tristan both refused to be in the same place at the sam

e time. One or both of them left the second they spied the other. It was getting old. Rafferty liked to joke that if they didn't cut it out, he'd lock them up together in a room and refuse to let them out until they worked through their animosity. Hopefully he was joking.

Isaiah could see the top half of the diner as he sat in the wicker loveseat he'd bought in La Grange and as soon as the interior lights dimmed, he knew Aria was on her way.

When she burst through the rooftop door and bulletted over to him, he had to grin. But then he had an armful of woman and he didn't have a lot of room left over for anything else but her. She was his glue and he couldn't imagine a better way to be put back together than because Aria Nixon loved him.

"Hey," he said and stroked her hair as she nestled deeper into his embrace. "Let's do something different tonight."

"I like the way you think, sailor," she murmured against his neck, then worked her lips up to his mouth for a scorching kiss.

Okay, that had not been what he'd meant, but he was having a hard time arguing when everything about her crawled underneath his skin until he could hardly think for wanting to be with her so badly.

Except they needed to talk about something important. He pulled back with what went down as a herculean effort. Blinking, she eyed him.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said with a laugh that sounded a lot less pained than it should have. “I really did mean something different. Like party planning.”

“Keep talking,” she advised. “Because I’m going to need more than that in order to be okay with not kissing you.”

Yeah, that made two of them. “Superstition Springs needs a bang up party. You expertly shuttled Caleb’s attention off of it the other day, which I appreciated. I was having a hard time seeing myself in the role of PR guru. I realize why. It’s because we’re supposed to be doing it together.”

“That’s literally how you sold me on a rooftop session, the one where we ended up dancing,” she reminded him with a saucily arched brow. “Is this yet another ploy to romance me while not planning a party?”

“Shush. That is not what happened.” It was exactly what had happened because he’d been too caught up in her to keep his head on straight. “Okay, maybe a little. The thing is, we’re done with the barn renovations and I want to start shouting to the world how great of a place this town is.”

Cassidy and Tallhorse had vanished inside the schoolhouse, working feverishly to get the place ready for students in the fall, the number of which they hoped would grow as new people heard about the revitalization going on. That’s where Isaiah—and Aria—needed to come in. The six-month deadline was already a third over. They had to make more progress or the town would be in trouble.

And he wasn’t giving up his happily ever after.

“Because you’re sticking around this time,” she said softly, her smile reflected in her eyes. “We’re both sticking around. Who better to sell people on the concept of making this a permanent destination than us?”

Yes. Exactly. Though she hadn’t been so thrilled the last time he’d brought this up. She’d seen it as yet another wedge between them that meant he couldn’t go with her, so he hadn’t brought it up until he was sure they’d worked through everything keeping them from forever.

“You read my mind.” His throat got a little tight as he thought about how easily he could have let her slip away. “What else am I thinking?”

“That the party should happen right here on this roof.”

“Not even cl—” Then what she’d said sank in. “Yes. That’s brilliant. Why didn’t I think of that?”

He could picture it perfectly, with throngs of people and music. After dark, of course, so the stars would provide a backdrop of epic, celestial proportions. The whole town could come, plus all of the guests he and Aria would drum up. Together.

“Because we’re a team,” she told him succinctly and nestled next to him on the loveseat with another kiss that was way too short.

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But it created a pause that swelled with things his heart couldn't contain. Surely the poor organ would burst if he didn't spill out some of the love in there.

"I have something for you," he told her.

"You do?" She sat up, taking her warmth and delicious scent with her. He'd looped several strands of outdoor lighting through the loveseat's legs and along the perimeter of the patio and some of them reflected in her shiny eyes.

"Yeah. But you weren't supposed to move," he chastised her lightly and pulled her back into place against his chest. "I bought this thing with room for two on purpose."

Immediately, her weight settled against his torso easily and the best part was how much easier it was to breathe when she was with him like this. He draped one arm along her shoulders and fished out his surprise from the recesses of the cushion on his end of the loveseat.

"Fine. What is it?" she mumbled into his chest and he laughed as he handed her the long flat box. "I can't open that when I'm busy listening to your heart. You open it."

Because he liked the metaphor of flipping open the lid himself with her ear pressed up to the place where all of his vital organs functioned, he did it, revealing the plane tickets inside. "First class to Hawaii. I hope you can fit that into your busy schedule."

"Oh, Isaiah," she breathed and her hand came up to rest on his chest as she stared at the contents of the box. "I...that's—well, it's I don't know what. My brain just fizzled."

“It’s perfect,” he told her. “Or rather what’s going to make it perfect is if you’d do me the honor of marrying me on the beach while we’re there.”

That was enough to tangle up the air in his lungs. His first proposal. And definitely the last. He’d found everything he wasn’t looking for and then some. The future Mrs. West. How about that?

Her palm dug into his chest as she levered off to meet his gaze, with wonder and about a thousand other things flooding her face. “That is a lot of perfect. I would love to marry you on the beach or anywhere else you pick. Tomorrow. Next week. Tell me where to be.”

The impatience in her voice matched the urgency he’d been feeling to get to the next level. Nice to know they were on the same page. “After the party, we’ll go. It’ll be tough to wait. In the meantime, I got you this too as a reminder that soon, we won’t have to say goodnight on the roof any longer.”

He took her hand and held up the ring that he’d moved heaven and earth to find, then slid it onto her third finger. She admired it for the longest while, tears running down her cheeks. “Even more perfect. I don’t know how I got so lucky.”

“It’s not luck. Providence,” he reminded her. “The universe had this in mind all along and it’s only because we had the wisdom to listen to Serenity that we were able to come together.”

They’d shared their predictions with each on this very roof, laughing over the irony. Of course, that had begged the question of who else Aria’s aunt had tagged with a love prediction. Marchande, maybe. That would explain his bad attitude lately, especially if Serenity had told him he was fated to be with only one woman.

“Really?” She shot him a look that was half-smirk, half-disbelief. “That’s what you’re going with? It’s only by the grace of God that we figured out how to stop

being stupid long enough to fall in love.”

“Well. There’s that too,” he said with a laugh and then told her the final bit of his three-pronged approach to getting his life in order. “I’m looking into buying some property from Farmer Moon so I can build us a house. I hope that’s okay. If you don’t want to stay here, now would be the time to say so.”

“I want to stay,” she said firmly, her smile wide. “This is where I belong. Where we both belong.”

Isaiah couldn’t argue with that. The magic of Superstition Springs had created the perfect place for them to stick to each other.

How long will it take for Tristan and Cassidy to realize they’re meant for each other?

Find out in *A Lot Like Fate*.