



Born a Billionaire

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Description: She didn't want a bodyguard. Now he's all she wants.

In the wake of scandalous tabloid headlines about her movie star mother, Adelia Allen needs a hasty escape from California, and who better to help her hide out from the paparazzi than her second family, the Schultzes. But when she becomes the target of a blackmailer, it's time to call for backup. Officer Oliver Wood has never worked as a bodyguard before, but when the head of the famous Schultz family requests his help for their high-profile guest, he can't say no. Especially when the woman he's protecting is none other than Hollywood's favorite daughter. Forced together amidst all the drama, Adelia and Oliver's attraction grows, as does the list of differences between them. Can a normal guy and a celebrity find love? Or are the obstacles keeping them apart too great to overcome?

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ONE

As the wheels of the airplane touched the pavement at LAX, an abnormal sense of dread came over Adelia Allen. No matter where she traveled, whether for work or play, coming home usually gave her a sense of calm. But after the call she'd received from her manager, Iris, letting her know there was a tabloid story circulating about her parents, she was on edge.

At first, she'd blown it off. It wasn't like the tabloids hadn't concocted stories about her parents before. But there was something in Iris's tone that made Adelia nervous, wondering if this time was different.

She pulled a baseball cap from her bag and put it on, tucking her long blonde tresses underneath. Maybe she should've canceled her first-class commercial ticket, chartered a private jet, and flown into the celebrity terminal to avoid the public, but that seemed like overkill. How much attention could another phony story actually bring? If only she'd been able to reach her parents, but neither was answering their phone.

Hugh Allen and Cora Roberts were Hollywood's most famous and beloved couple, and their thirty-year marriage was something many aspired to. Thankfully, their fans were loyal and steadfast and not easily swayed by the tabloids' fabrications.

Adelia exited the plane and headed through the airport with her head down and sunglasses on, anxious to get to the car that was waiting for her. The moment the doors slid open, a group of paparazzi rushed at her from the curb, blinding her with camera flashes, and bombarding her with questions.

“Adelia, is it true your parents are divorcing?”

“How do you feel about their split?”

“Is the divorce because of your mother’s affair with her costar, Bryce Griffiths?”

Her stomach dropped as what they were saying hit her, and she rushed around the car to the door her driver, Andre, held open and practically dove inside, bags and all. She took a deep breath in and let it out, relieved when the vehicle pulled away from the curb.

“Where to, Miss Allen?”

“Can you just drive around for a while, Andre?”

“Sure can.”

She pulled out her phone, about to call her parents’ household manager, Marta, and paused. They had a family rule—don’t read tabloid magazines or websites. Her parents had taught her from a young age that this was all part of the very public life they lead and to avoid what was printed about them at all costs. But this was one rule she was about to break.

Adelia opened one of the popular celebrity websites, and there, at the top of the page, were pictures of her mother with Bryce Griffiths on a beach somewhere, and they were all over each other. Adelia’s stomach churned. Mom’s latest film was set in winter, so she knew that probably wasn’t a scene they were filming for the movie. Could it really be true?

She dialed Marta, tapping her foot against the floor as she waited.

“Hello, Miss Allen.”

“Put one of my parents on,” she demanded.

“They aren’t here at the moment.”

“Where are they?”

The other end of the line was silent.

“Marta?”

“I’m sorry, miss. Your father said he’d be in touch with you tomorrow.”

Adelia groaned and hung up on her, and the phone rang seconds later with a call from her mother’s business manager.

“Violet, what is happening?”

“How are you holding up, sweetie?”

“I’m confused, and I can’t get ahold of either of my parents.”

“They’ve gone away to be out of the eye of the paparazzi for now.”

“Gone away where?”

“Your dad went to the country home in England, and your mom—”

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“They aren’t together?” Reality began to set in.

There was a pause. “No.”

“So, it’s true then.”

“Adelia.”

“Is she with ... him?” She couldn’t say his name.

“I’m sorry, Adelia. She is.”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

“I would advise you to get away from Los Angeles for a while too. At least until the initial shock blows over.”

“It’s never going to blow over. People adore my parents and their love story. Their fans are going to be crushed.”

Shewas crushed. Her world as she knew it was shattered. Having famous parents who were still together was rare in Hollywood, and Adelia had always been proud that hers were so solid. They were her role models, proving to her that love can last a lifetime. At least that’s what she believed until about ten minutes ago.

Sadness overcame her, and she shoved it down before she did something weak and pathetic, like cry.

“Do you have someplace you can go?” Violet asked.

She immediately thought of the Schultzes, the family behind the world-famous Schultz Chocolate company. Their families owned Malibu homes just down the road from each other, and Adelia had been best friends with their daughter Skylar since they were little girls. They’d always been like a second family to her. If she needed a place to hide out, she knew they wouldn’t hesitate to help her.

“Yes, I do,” Adelia replied.

“Good.”

“Did you know this was happening?”

Violet was silent.

“Right. That’s what I thought.” Adelia shook her head. “Somebody could’ve warned me.”

“I work for your mother. I’m not at liberty to give out information about her, even if it is to her daughter.”

“We’re done here.” Adelia hung up. Violet had always been more like a fun aunt to her than her mom’s assistant, and the betrayal stung.

Adelia let out a frustrated groan.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Miss Allen?” Andre asked.

“I need to go back to the airport. The celebrity terminal this time.”

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TWO

When Adelia arrived at the airport in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the sight of Skylar's smiling face caused her throat to tighten up. Even more so when Skylar opened her arms and greeted her with a hug, squeezing her harder and longer than usual.

"I like the look." Skylar motioned to the short brunette wig and sunglasses Adelia donned in the hope of not being recognized.

Adelia's eyes shifted around the small airport. "Yeah, but we should probably go soon before someone figures out it's me."

"I brought the sedan instead of my convertible so we'd be less conspicuous."

"Good thinking."

When they were safely inside the car, Adelia removed her sunglasses and leaned back against the headrest. "I appreciate this more than I can say."

"Hey, I know you'd do the same for me in a heartbeat."

"Are you sure I won't be in your way?" Adelia asked.

"Of course not. But I thought you might like to stay at the cottage anyway. It's empty right now so you'd have the place to yourself, and it's out of the way so nobody would bother you."

“That sounds perfect.”

“Great. I already had it all stocked up for you this morning.”

“You’re always so organized.”

“I can’t do much to help with what you’re going through, but I can do this.”

Adelia smiled, unsure of what she’d ever done to deserve such a kind and loyal friend.

“Are you sure this whole thing isn’t just some kind of publicity stunt for your mom’s movie?” Skylar asked.

“That’s not really her style. Besides, Violet pretty much confirmed it.”

“I’m so sorry, Adelia.”

“Thanks.”

“Is this going to affect any of your projects?” Skylar asked.

“I’m not filming anything right now, but there is some press for the rom-com I shot earlier this year. Not sure what I’ll do about that.”

“Can you back out?”

“I couldn’t do that. They’re counting on me to help promote the film.”

Skylar nodded in understanding. “Maybe this will all blow over quickly.”

“This is my parents we’re talking about. They have fans all over the world.”

Skylar turned the car onto the road that led to the Schultz’s cottage on Lake Michigan. Adelia smiled as it came into view. The cedar siding had always reminded her of her family’s beach house in Nantucket. She loved it there, and she had a feeling she was going to enjoy her time here in Michigan. Maybe it would even get her mind off of everything going on with her parents.

“Are you sure you want me to leave you alone?” Skylar asked once they brought Adelia’s things inside. “I can take the day off.”

“I’ll be fine. Go to work.” She gave her a nudge toward the door. “Then go kiss that handsome fiancé of yours.”

“If you’re sure,” Skylar said with a wink.

“I’m sure.”

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“You call us if you need anything at all.”

“You know I will.”

“Love you,” Skylar called over her shoulder as she walked to her car.

“Love you too.”

Adelia went inside and activated the security system like Skylar had told her to, then she walked over to the wall of windows overlooking the lake. There was an ache in her chest, but she shoved her emotions down. Everything felt surreal, and the thought of her parents not being together was inconceivable.

The multitude of colors in the sky were so vibrant—peaches, pinks, blues, purples. With each minute that passed, the hues shifted from pastel to neon.

Adelia let out a contented sigh. It wasn’t the Pacific Ocean, but it was equally beautiful. “This will do.”

Later that evening, Adelia opened the refrigerator, staring blankly at its contents. She was in the mood for something sweet after dinner, but nothing looked appetizing. She closed the fridge firmly, causing bottles in the door to rattle, then went to the pantry. She wasn’t even sure what she was looking for. Maybe some wine? She looked at the rack of Schultz Winery bottles, but nothing jumped out at her.

Skylar had done an amazing thing, stocking the place for Adelia’s stay, but Adelia had a sudden craving for something that wasn’t on those shelves—Nestlé Sno-Caps.

She didn't like the idea of bothering Skylar to come all the way back to Holland for a candy run, though. Plus, Skylar would've given her serious grief for buying a chocolate product that wasn't Schultz Chocolate. But Sno-Caps reminded her of her dad—it was their go-to movie snack—and he was in the forefront of her mind.

Her eyes stung as she fought back tears. If she cried for anyone in this situation, it would definitely be for Dad.

She took a deep breath in and let it out as she shook her arms and body and twisted her head from side to side, like that would rid her of the sadness.

A sudden thought came to her, and she walked through the house and peeked into the garage.

“Yes! They're still here.”

Adelia took off for her guest room and put on her wig, a Detroit Tigers baseball cap, and a pair of black-framed glasses to complete the look. She grinned as she made her way to the two Vespa scooters parked in the garage and climbed onto Skylar's pastel pink one. Not exactly an inconspicuous color, but it was dark outside anyway. Better than calling an Uber and risking some random driver recognizing her.

This probably wasn't a very good idea, but she took off down the road anyway. Adelia shivered from the brisk fall air. She missed the warmth of California already. Now, if she could just remember how to get to The Snack Shop.

As she passed by familiar landmarks and street signs, she thought back to her summer visits to Skylar's when they were teenagers, driving all around on the scooters. That seemed like a lifetime ago.

Ten minutes later, she arrived at the little convenience store and parked. She took a

deep breath and assessed the situation. Only one car outside. She knew exactly what she wanted, so it would be a quick stop. In and out.

She'd been to The Snack Shop many times with Skylar when they were younger, and she was pleased to find that the layout of the store remained the same. On her way to the candy aisle, she noticed the rack of magazines and paused. The tabloids already had pictures of her mom and Bryce on the cover. It sickened her the way they profited off of other people's pain.

She lifted her chin and headed for her target, but her steps slowed at the sight of a tall raven-haired man standing right in front of the candy display. She hesitated, willing him to leave, but then he glanced over at her and her eyes connected with his—icy blue and intense—and her stomach fluttered.

Her hand lifted without much thought, sweeping a piece of her dark brown wig away from her face, and his gaze followed her movements.

She approached slowly, remaining at a distance as she scanned the rack, but there were no Sno-Caps.

"You look confused or angry," the man remarked. "I can't tell which."

"Disappointed, actually. They don't have what I want."

"Maybe I can help you."

Her eyebrow raised as she looked up at him and noticed the tilt of his mouth to one side as she got a better look at him up close. Besides those hypnotizing eyes of his, he had perfect full lips and a jawline to die for, and she wondered if that thick, shiny hair of his was as soft as it looked.

“Maybe they have some extra stock in the back.”

“Maybe.” Her hopes lifted.

“Doesn’t hurt to ask, right?”

“I guess not.”

“What are you looking for?”

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“Nestlé Sno-Caps.”

He held up a finger and took off toward the checkout.

Adelia shook her head. As attractive as this guy was, now was not the time to get involved with someone new. Even if it had been a while since she’d been on a date.

He returned soon after with a box of Sno-Caps in hand.

“No way!”

He nodded his head toward the front of the store. “They moved all the movie theater snacks to a special display near the checkout.”

“Oh my gosh, you are a lifesaver.”

“They have those too.” He reached over to the rack and picked up a roll of Life Savers, which made her laugh. “Sno-Caps were that important to you?”

“So important. Thank you.”

A smile spread across his face, and she wished she could stay and chat like a normal person.

She smiled back and was about to ask his name when he said, “You look so familiar. I feel like we’ve met before.”

Her stomach dropped. Crap! “I don’t think so.” There it was. Real life reminding her why she couldn’t have what she wanted. “Thanks for the candy.” She scurried up to the checkout, grabbing a few more boxes of Sno-Caps on the way, and paid before her mystery man came after her.

“Have a good night,” the hippie-looking dude behind the counter said.

“Thanks. You too.” She could see the guy she’d been talking to moving in her peripheral and dashed out the door.

She walked quickly to the scooter, put her snacks in her bag, and climbed on.

“I like your scooter,” the man said as he came outside.

“Oh, thanks. And thanks again.” She gave him a smile and a wave and drove away.

That was close. Her stomach churned. What if he figured out who she really was? Why had she thought she could go to the store undiscovered?

Back at the lake house, Adelia settled into a chair with a few movie scripts, a glass of wine, and a box of Sno-Caps. Outside the window, everything was pitch black. It was only eight o’clock, but it felt much later with it getting dark so early this time of year.

She opened the first script but found herself quickly bored, so she set that one aside and started on the next. The number of scripts she’d been reading and passing on lately was ridiculous. It wasn’t that they were bad stories, but her heart was set on a project she’d been trying to get made for two years, and so far, she’d been unable to get the green light.

The next script she opened was entertaining, but not what she was interested in. She set that one aside too. With each average script she perused, she felt more and more

disappointed. She needed another project to work on. Something to get her mind off the movie she really wanted to make, and something to distract from her current family situation.

Her phone rang, startling her from her thoughts, and she frowned at the screen.

“Hello, Mother,” she answered.

“Darling, are you okay? Where are you? Violet said you left California.”

“No thanks to you.”

“I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

“But it did, didn’t it?” Her jaw was tight, and her nostrils flared. She’d never felt such anger.

“Adelia, dearest.”

“Don’t ‘Adelia, dearest’ me. How could you do this to Daddy? How could you do this to our family?”

“Your father and I have been having problems for a while now.”

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“What? What are you talking about?”

“We fell out of love, and—”

“I’m sorry, you fell out of love? You told me marrying Dad was the best choice you ever made.”

“I don’t remember saying that.”

Adelia rolled her eyes. “Well, you did. We were sitting in the kitchen, talking about my breakup with Layton, and you told me dumping him was the best choice I could’ve made and marrying Dad was the best one you ever made.”

“Well, I—”

“You also said relationships have their ups and downs, and I’d find someone like Dad who was worth going through them with.”

“We’ve had more downs than ups lately. Our issues became too much.”

“What issues?”

“I won’t go into the details with you, but let’s just say ... I have needs.”

“Oh my word. You are the biggest cliché right now, do you know that, Mom?”

“Maybe so, but I’ve found someone who fulfills me and loves me for who I am. Your

father was always trying to change me.”

“Are we talking about the same man? The one who always supported you in everything you did, who took time away from acting when I was little so you could work? That’s the man you say tried to change you?”

“I didn’t say he didn’t support me in my career. But career is not all I am.”

Adelia laughed loudly.

“Is that funny?”

“It’s laughable. Because if you couldn’t act anymore, I think you’d be singing a very different tune.”

“Actually, I’m going on an extended hiatus from acting.”

“Excuse me?” Adelia wasn’t sure she’d heard her right.

“Bryce and I are moving in together.”

Her stomach bottomed out. “Are you serious?”

“I’m moving to London.”

“You know Dad’s in Cornwall, right?”

“I’m aware.”

“So, why would you go there and rub that in his face, practically in his back yard?”

“London is hours away, and I’m not going to put my life on hold because of him anymore.”

Adelia chest tightened, and her hand clenched.

“I hope you’ll find it in your heart to forgive me. I’d love for you to come to London for Christmas.”

“Goodbye, Mother.”

“Adelia, don’t—”

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She hung up and tossed her phone at the sofa, where it bounced and landed on the floor. A scream was building inside her, and she was about to let it out when she thought she saw movement outside the window.

She slowly reached over and turned off the lamp beside her then headed into the kitchen, turned off the light there, and moved into the shadows. She remained still and watched out the window. Maybe her eyes were playing tricks on her.

A figure moved outside the window at the far end of the living room, and Adelia's heart leapt into her throat. She reached for her phone in her back pocket but remembered it was on the floor. As stealthily as she could, she crouched down, moved around the sofa, and grabbed her phone. Very carefully, she covered the screen and turned it on, quickly lowering the brightness all the way down. She slowly made her way to the back door, where the light switches for the outside deck were located, then opened the video on her phone and aimed it at the windows where she'd last seen motion. Then she took a deep breath in, let it out, and flipped the switch for the outdoor lights.

A shiver ran through her as the person on the deck was revealed, obviously startled, and ran toward the steps that led down to the beach. She didn't get a glimpse of a face. Just someone dressed in all black.

She was about to dial 911 but paused. It might bring unnecessary attention to the cottage, which she definitely did not want, so she dialed Gus instead. Of the three Schultz siblings, Gus was the middle child and one of her closest friends. He and Skylar were like the brother and sister she'd never had.

His cheerful voice answered seconds later. “Hey, Deals! What’s up?”

“Someone’s outside the cottage,” she whispered.

“Say again,” he replied.

“I’m at your family’s cottage, and someone was stalking around outside. I didn’t want to call the police because I don’t want to draw attention to the fact that I’m staying here. What should I do?”

“Sit tight. I’ll be right there.”

THREE

With a beer in one hand and a plate of freshly grilled steak in the other, Oliver Wood settled into his favorite recliner, ready to enjoy a little television and relaxation on his first night off in over a week. His police patrols around Grand Rapids lately had been filled with especially colorful characters and strange happenings. All he wanted was a quiet night to himself.

His mouth watered as he sliced off a chunk of meat. He could almost taste the seasonings before they hit his tongue. The fork hovered an inch from his mouth ... and his cell phone rang. His gaze flitted to where the phone lay on the side table. Gus Schultz's name appeared on the screen.

Oliver groaned. "Really?"

He wanted to ignore it so badly, but that's not who he was. The Schultzes were good people, and he hoped Gus wasn't in any more trouble after cleaning up his act over the past year.

He set his plate on his lap and answered the call. "Hey, Gus. How are you, man?"

"Hey, Oliver. I need a favor."

He eyed the juicy piece of steak with longing. "What can I do for ya?"

"Someone's creeping around the lake house tonight, and I wondered if you could come out and take a look."

“You could’ve called the local police for that.”

“Uh ... we have a guest staying there, who wants to keep her visit low profile, and she was afraid to call 911 and bring attention.”

“I see.”

“It would make her feel better if someone came out and made sure everything was secure.”

“Are you there now?”

“I’m heading over as soon as we hang up.”

“All right. I’ll meet you there.”

“Thank you, man. We appreciate this so much.”

“You bet. See you soon.”

Oliver hung up and let out a sigh. So much for a night off.

He wrapped up his plate and put it in the fridge, but not before enjoying that one bite of steak that had been calling his name. Then he grabbed his keys, wallet, and gun belt—just in case—and headed out to Holland.

When he arrived, Gus was just getting out of his car and came over to greet him with a handshake.

“Thanks for coming,” Gus said.

“No problem.”

Oliver looked over at the house. All the lights were on as well as the outdoor lighting. Somebody’s scared of the dark.

Just then, the front door opened, and the most beautiful topaz blue eyes met his, the owner of which was none other than Adelia Allen, actress and daughter of some pretty famous folks. Oliver knew she was a friend of the Schultz family, but it still surprised him to see her there.

“Hello.” Her voice was soft, almost a whisper, and her eyes shifted to the left and right, searching the wooded areas around the house.

“Hello,” Oliver replied.

Gus walked up and hugged her, and she wrapped her arms around him and buried her head in his neck. Oliver wondered what being in Gus’s shoes at that moment would be like.

They went inside, and Gus motioned for him to follow.

Oliver had never been inside their lake house before, and he took in the wide-open space with the large kitchen that gave way to the dining area and living room, with windows spanning the entire back wall that faced the lake. It was probably a killer view in the daytime, but all that could be seen now was their own reflections in the glass and the inky darkness beyond.

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“So, Gus said someone was sneaking around the property tonight,” Oliver said.

Adelia chewed on her perfect bottom lip as she nodded. “Yeah. I was sitting there,”—she pointed to the chair by the window—“and I saw a figure moving outside. I turned off the light and the one in the kitchen and moved over here.” She walked over to the light switches near the back door. “I turned on the light to scare them, and they ran off down the steps toward the beach.”

“Did you get a look at the person?”

She shook her head. “Not their face. Wait—” She interrupted herself to pull out her phone and hold it out toward him. “I got a video.”

Oliver was impressed that she’d had the presence of mind to turn her phone camera on. He moved to her side, and the scent of coconut overcame him. She smelled exactly like he imagined a California beach babe would. She pressed “play” and leaned closer to him so he could watch.

The screen was dark then the light flipped on and illuminated a figure, dressed all in black, darting across the deck and disappearing down the stairs.

He reached for the phone. “May I?”

“Of course.” She met his eyes and handed it over.

He watched the video again, pausing the second the lights came on. It wasn’t a clear shot of the person’s face, but based on size and stature and the sliver of light skin that

did show, they were probably looking at a Caucasian male. “This is helpful.”

“It doesn’t really show much,” she noted.

“Every little bit helps.”

“Good.” She looked pleased.

“I’m going to get a flashlight and take a look around,” Oliver told them.

“I’ll help,” Gus offered.

Adelia stepped aside as he moved past her on the way to his vehicle. Oliver retrieved two flashlights from the back of his Jeep for himself and Gus, and they moved around the perimeter of the house, checking windows and doors. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. They went up onto the back deck, and there was some dirt that came from the back stairs, which led him to believe the man had snuck up from the beach, and as it showed in the video, he had escaped the way he’d come. He and Gus walked down the steps to the beach, shining their flashlights at the sand. It was hard to see clearly, but there appeared to be footprints moving off to the south. They split up and searched the woods on either side of the house and found nothing.

When they returned, Adelia was waiting, watching them through the window, biting her fingernails.

“So?” she asked as soon as they stepped foot inside.

“Everything looks secure,” Oliver replied. “Looks like whoever it was is long gone by now.”

“Okay,” she said with a hint of nervousness.

“Do you want me to stay here tonight?” Gus asked.

“No, that’s okay. I’ll be fine. I’ll just set the alarm. I’m sure they won’t come back since they know someone’s staying here right now.”

Oliver sensed that she was trying to sound confident about the situation, but there was just enough worry in her voice to let him know she was hiding her true feelings.

He approached her again. “Can I see your phone?”

Her eyes met his, and she took her bottom lip between her teeth as she handed her phone to him.

He added himself as a contact. “There. Now you have my number. If you need anything, call me. I’ll be here in ten minutes.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“You’re welcome. I’m Oliver Wood, by the way.”

“Adelia Allen.”

He smiled. “I know who you are.” He couldn’t keep his eyes from hers. They drew him in and made him feel things he hadn’t felt in a very long time.

“I’ll call you tomorrow, Deals,” Gus said, pulling Oliver from the trance he was in.

“You better,” she replied with a smile. She looked over at Oliver again. “Thanks for coming all the way out here, Oliver.”

“Not a problem.”

As they headed out, Oliver couldn't help feeling a pull to stay and make sure she was really okay. Something told him she was more scared than she was letting on.

FOUR

Sleep had not come easily for Adelia, and when it did, it was fitful. The thought of someone creeping around outside the house while she slept was enough to keep her awake into the wee hours. It felt like she'd only just drifted off when the dim morning light shone through the bedroom window.

She sat up and stretched then threw on some running clothes and cautiously headed down the steps to the beach. A morning run would help clear her head, and things always seemed better in the light of a new day.

The brisk morning air filled her lungs as she jogged at a steady pace along the flat sand that had been packed down by the waves. She weaved back and forth with each splash of the water along the shore, avoiding getting her shoes wet.

Her mind drifted to the project she'd been longing to work on. Her passion project. Just thinking about it filled her with excitement and anticipation, but she feared it would once again be put on the back burner because of this gigantic scandal of her mother's making.

She still couldn't believe Mom had done this. It made her furious that after all their years together, she would just walk away. Her throat felt tight when she pictured her dad, secluded at their country home in England, while Mom was off doing God knows what with Bryce Griffiths. Ugh! She didn't want to think of Mom with anyone but Dad. And Bryce Griffiths?

Okay, he was handsome and charming, with that British accent to die for. He was

also closer to Adelia's age than her mother's. Was this some kind of mid-life crisis Mom was going through?

She swallowed hard and fought back the tears. Real emotions felt strange to her sometimes. She was so used to conjuring up tears when needed in her acting, that when real tears hit her, she felt like they should be stopped and stored away for her next role. She was sure it had something to do with the fact that she'd rarely seen her mother cry, apart from the silver screen. Maybe not ever, now that she thought about it.

Adelia's parents were her heroes, and she'd always been their first priority, alternating their movie shooting schedules so one of them could be home with her. The few times they had filmed a movie together, they brought her to the set and left her with a nanny in their trailer so she'd be close. And to keep her out of the limelight, they had hired tutors to homeschool her. Amidst their massive fame, they had found a way to make it work, and the three of them had been everything to each other.

Until Adelia grew up and decided to follow in her parents' footsteps, that is. From then on, she and her mother had butted heads about every movie project she wanted to work on.

Dad, on the other hand, supported her in whatever films she chose. He understood that she needed the freedom to express herself and figure things out on her own after being so sheltered her entire childhood. If only her mom would realize that.

Her heart ached as she ran and ran. More than anything, she needed to hear her dad's voice and make sure he was okay.

After a couple of miles, she turned around to head north to the house and noticed she wasn't alone on the beach anymore. A man was walking his dog, heading in her

direction. As they got closer, a nervous feeling hit her in the gut because he looked like the guy she'd met at the convenience store. Apprehension and worry hit her at the same time because she wasn't wearing her wig from the other night. What if he recognized her?

"Good morning," he said as she jogged past.

"Morning." She kept her head down and continued on.

"Hey, Snow-caps, right?" he called back at her.

She slowed her pace and turned hesitantly. "Yeah."

He motioned toward her head. "I almost didn't recognize you."

"Oh, I sometimes wear wigs. Just for fun."

"Well, I liked the brown, but natural looks good on you."

She smiled at his compliment as he approached and held out his hand.

"I'm Anthony."

She shook it. "Nice to meet you."

"I live a couple miles up the beach." He nodded to the north. "It's so funny to run into you again so soon."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"Serendipitous," he said.

She liked his use of that word. It felt very much like that to her too. She crouched down next to his border collie and rubbed her hand over his head and around his neck, fluffing his black and white fur.

“His name’s Lucky,” Anthony said.

“Well, hello, Lucky. It’s nice to meet you too.”

Lucky licked at her face, and she laughed as the dog attacked her with his tongue.

“He likes you.”

“I couldn’t tell.” She laughed as Anthony tugged on the leash to get Lucky off of her.

“Sorry about that.”

She gave Lucky a few more strokes as she stood, noticing the heart-shaped white spot on his head. “He’s great.”

“We should probably get going. Maybe we’ll see each other again.”

“Maybe.”

Anthony gave a wave as he started down the beach and tugged on the leash, but Lucky kept trying to get back to Adelia. They laughed, and then Anthony stopped.

“Hey, what’s your name?” he asked.

She thought about giving him her real name but gave her grandmother’s first name instead. “Coraline.”

He smiled at her. “Nice to meet you, Coraline.”

“Cora is fine,” she told him.

“Okay, Cora. You can call me Tony.”

She continued on her run back to the Schultz's lake house, thinking about Tony and his blue eyes and hair as dark as night. She wondered what it would be like to date a regular guy like him. She'd had bad luck dating fellow actors in recent years, and she was over those kinds of guys. There were good guys in California, but she hadn't encountered them. She always ended up with the ones who seemed great at first, but were ultimately full of themselves, obsessed with their careers and status, and didn't treat her very well. Maybe it was time to find a guy who was in no way associated with Hollywood.

Back at the house, Adelia got cleaned up for the day and was about to call her dad when Skylar and Merritt—Gus's wife and one of Adelia's best friends—arrived with take-out bags from Sunset Grill, the lakeside restaurant owned by the Schultz family, which was only a hop, skip, and a jump from the cottage.

Merritt set her bags down, walked straight to Adelia, and wrapped her up in a hug. "How ya holding up?"

Adelia shrugged. "I could be better."

One thing she knew without a doubt was that her friends would help her get through this.

"You guys didn't have to do this," Adelia said as they moved the food to the table. Her stomach growled loudly, and the girls laughed. She hadn't realized she was so hungry, but she'd barely eaten anything since last night.

"We could've walked over to the restaurant, but we figured it was better this way since you're hiding out and all," Skylar replied.

Adelia wished she could just go freely wherever she wanted. "I hate having to deal with the paparazzi. They were all over at the airport."

“That’s what we were hoping to avoid.”

“I’m done talking about all this drama,” Adelia said as Skylar removed the contents of the bags. “I want to talk weddings.”

The mention of weddings perked them up. Both Skylar and Merritt were on their way to the altar with the men of their dreams, and Adelia was ecstatic for them.

Merritt and Gus were technically already married from a fake marriage arrangement that became real. And Skylar had been engaged for all of two days, but Adelia was sure she already had plenty of ideas about her wedding to Franky. She’d only been dreaming of marrying him since she was thirteen years old.

“I think Franky and I are going to get married next fall,” Skylar said. “That gives us a year. I would get married tomorrow, actually, but I don’t want to rush the planning. I think we’re having the wedding at the winery.”

“Of course, you are. It’s your place,” Adelia said. “And you guys are having a Christmas wedding, right?”

Merritt nodded with a huge smile on her face. “The week before. Invitations are going out at the end of next week.”

“Are you excited?” Adelia asked.

“I know we’re already married, but I’m really excited to say those vows for real and mean them with all of our hearts. When I signed up for this, I never thought I would fall so hard or love him so deeply, but I did and I do. He’s everything, you guys.” She got a dreamy look in her eyes. “And he’s so sexy and so good at all the ... well, you know.”

“No, Merritt,” Adelia teased. “All the what?”

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“Hugging.” She winked.

Skylar’s mouth fell open. “Ewww, Merritt! That’s my brother!” She eyed her sister-in-law. “Also, I thought you said you wanted to wait until you said your real vows.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I did. And I tried. I really did. But I failed.”

Adelia burst out laughing, and Skylar’s face screwed up.

“Honestly, it’s been really difficult. We’ve been apart a lot with him traveling here to Michigan so often for work and me traveling to London for my company. At one point, we didn’t see each other for almost a month, and let’s just say, when we saw each other again, we made up for lost time.” Merritt’s mouth tilted to one side in a sweet smile. “What can I say? He’s my husband, and I love him.”

“Well, I’m happy for you,” Adelia said. “Nothing wrong with showing your husband some loving.”

Skylar visibly shuddered. “Next subject.”

They passed out the food and dug in.

“Guess who Franky and I ran into at the Downtown Market this morning,” Skylar said.

Adelia and Merritt both shrugged their shoulders as they enjoyed their fish tacos.

“Milton.”

The girls groaned. Milton Hanley was Skylar’s ex-boyfriend and had caused all sorts of problems for the Schultz family since their breakup, including suing Gus after an altercation in a bar.

“He saw my ring and wished us good luck in the most sarcastic tone ever.”

Adelia rolled her eyes. “If I ever come face to face with that guy, I’ll knock him out cold for all the crap he’s put your family through.”

Skylar chuckled. “I would love to see that. But he’d probably sue you for it.”

The girls laughed.

“It’s probably best you never met.”

“I’m glad I never had the misfortune.” Adelia screwed up her face in disgust.

“I would actually like to thank him,” Merritt said, which got her a couple of blank stares. “Gus being sued by Milton led to him coming to California. If he hadn’t, I never would’ve met him.”

“Aw, you’re so sweet, Merritt,” Adelia said. “I love that you see the good in the situation.”

“When you put it that way ...” Skylar dabbed at her eye with the corner of her napkin. “I guess it was all worth it.”

The girls chatted through lunch, and Adelia was thankful for the distraction.

Once they had gone, her mind returned to her father, and she rang the landline at the house in England.

“Hello?”

She was so relieved to hear his voice. “Daddy, it’s me.”

“How are you, my darling girl?”

“I’m okay, but I want to know how you are.”

“Been better,” he replied. “Trying to distract myself with work, but that’s all so tied up with your mother too that it’s hard to concentrate.”

Her parents had signed on to star in a movie together next year. It was the first time they would work together on a film in nearly ten years. Their fans were excited and already talking about it all over the internet. It was highly anticipated. But would it even happen now? Would Mom go through with it? They were both professionals and had never backed out of a project before, but this was another situation entirely. Who could have anticipated when they’d been sitting at the dinner table, excitedly discussing the script, that it would all fall apart less than a year later?

“I’m so sorry, Dad.”

“I’ll be okay, sweetheart.”

Adelia groaned. “I’m so angry at Mom. I can’t believe she would do this.”

Dad was quiet on the other end of the line.

“You don’t deserve this, Dad. You’ve sacrificed so much over the years for her, and this is how she repays you.”

“I did those things because I wanted to, because I loved her and you. I would make the same decisions again. But within our marriage, there was a lot you didn’t see. Things we didn’t allow you to see. There were many times when we almost didn’t make it.”

Her stomach sank. “Really?”

“Marriage is hard. Anyone who tells you differently is a liar.”

“Mom always said that too, but she also said working hard at it was worth it.”

“That’s how I thought we both felt.”

“She’s such a liar.”

“No, I don’t think she lied. I’m sure she meant it at the time.”

“And then she just went off and cheated?”

“I don’t know what was going on in your mother’s mind, except she was tired. We both were. Tired of fighting about the same things over and over. Tired of trying to make ourselves feel something that might have faded away a long time ago.”

“What are you saying? You and Mom don’t love each other anymore?”

“We’ll always love each other. But the passion we once had for each other ... we’ve been trying to find it again for many years. Maybe she gave up.”

Adelia’s head was spinning. Everything she had believed about her parents was quickly falling apart in her mind. “I’m so confused. All these years, I thought you were head over heels for each other. Now I find out it was all a farce?”

“It wasn’t all a farce, but there were times when we struggled that we didn’t want you to see. So we put on a happy face.”

“Well, bravo to both of you. You deserve Oscars for your decades-long performances. Maybe they’d give you a Lifetime Achievement Award for that.”

“Adelia.” His voice was stern, like the scoldings he’d given her as a child.

“I’m sorry, Daddy, but you’ve just basically told me that my whole life has been a lie. I looked up to you. I wanted to find someone to spend my life with and model my marriage after yours.” She shook her head in disgust. “What a joke.”

“We tried hard for many years to keep this together. I believed we could. I wanted to. I still do.”

“Still? After what she’s done to you? Why?”

“Because I love her. She’s an extraordinary woman, and until now, a great wife, and

a wonderful mother.”

Adelia snorted. “Not lately.”

“Everyone makes mistakes. We’re human. We’re not infallible.”

“If she came back today and told you she was sorry and wanted to come home, would you let her?”

“Yes.”

She was surprised his answer came without an ounce of hesitation. “How could you do that? Aren’t you hurt beyond repair?”

“I made vows to her before God. One of them was to love her in good times and bad. We’re just in the middle of the bad.”

“So, you think she’ll come back?”

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“I don’t know.”

Adelia sighed. “I’m sorry you’re going through all this right now, Dad.”

“Thanks, sweetie. I’m so sorry you’re in the middle of this. Iris let me know that you’re staying with the Schultz’s right now. That’s good. Good to stay out of California for a while. That’s what I’m doing.”

“I’m planning to stay at least a couple weeks. Hopefully, that’s enough time for things to die down with the paparazzi a little.”

“Good idea. You could always come here if you want.”

“Maybe I’ll fly over on a weekend soon and see you.”

“I would love that.”

“I’ll text you with my plans.”

“Sounds good.”

“I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, baby girl.”

The moment they hung up, tears sprung to her eyes. She could almost feel her father’s pain through his words, and it broke her heart. Her thoughts whirled,

picturing different times in the past when her parents had been fighting but clammed up when she came into the room, acting as if it was just a little squabble. What if it hadn't been? She could remember those "squabbles" happening when she was as young as ten. Had they really been fighting to stay together for twenty years?

She stood by the window, staring out across Lake Michigan, wondering what it was that had attracted her parents to each other to begin with. And why hadn't it lasted? Was it just physical attraction? Because she knew that was something that could fade away. There had to be more to their relationship. What were the things he had mentioned that they kept fighting about over and over? Was it career-related? Was it about ... her? Could she be a reason for their problems?

She'd never felt anything but loved, but now she was second-guessing it all. And she was questioning her feelings about marriage. Was it really worth it? So many people got together and married only to divorce when they realized they weren't as compatible as they thought. Why put yourself through that? Did anybody stay together for a lifetime anymore? And those old couples she'd seen on the streets, strolling hand in hand, were they truly happy together, or were they only together out of convenience and comfort?

The questions didn't stop all day long, and neither did the tears. The more she thought about it, the more she didn't think she wanted to marry and risk that kind of pain.

FIVE

After a long shift at work, Oliver was beat, and the steak and potatoes he'd never had a chance to eat last night were calling his name. He went straight from his front door to the leftovers he'd put in the fridge and popped them in the microwave while he changed into comfy clothes. When he was finally settled into his chair with a fork full and on the way to his mouth, his phone rang, and he was struck with a sense of déjà vu.

"You've got to be kidding me." He glanced over at the screen.

Val.

He almost didn't answer, but his ex-wife rarely called unless it was something important. So he reluctantly set the food down once again and answered.

"Hello."

"Hey, it's Val."

"I know."

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'm fine. You?"

"Not the greatest, which is why I'm calling."

“Are you okay?”

“I am. But we just found out my dad has prostate cancer.”

His heart wrenched at this news. “Val, I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. I thought you should know. I know how close you and Dad always were.”

“What’s the treatment plan?”

She blew out a breath into the phone. “It’s not good, Oliver. It’s extremely aggressive and has spread. They’re giving him maybe six months at the most.”

Oliver’s throat tightened with impending tears.

“Surgery isn’t really an option, and he’s decided to forego chemotherapy, so we’ll get him medication for the symptoms. And then we wait.”

Oliver didn’t know what to say. Donny was a great man, and he’d been there for Oliver, even through the divorce. He felt bad for having not reached out to him much this year.

“I know he’d love to see you before ...” Val’s voice cracked and trailed off, and he could tell she was crying on the other end, which was always his weakness.

“Val.”

She sniffled. “I’m fine.”

“I know you’re not fine. You can still talk to me if you want. You know that.”

“Why are you such a good guy ... after everything?”

He didn't respond to that. “How are you really?” he asked instead.

“I think I'm still in shock, and I'm worried. I'm afraid ...” She paused for several beats. “I guess I should just come out and say it ... I'm having another baby.”

“Oh.”

“I'm due in a few months, and I'm so afraid Dad won't be around to meet him.”

Hearing Val was having a second baby with her new husband, Mike, filled him with a mix of emotions. A small part of him was still angry that she'd left him for that man after a year-long affair. But the other part was glad Mike was able to give her what Oliver didn't have the desire to. Val had wanted kids practically from the day Oliver married her, but after a tragedy in his family and all the violence he saw on the job, he had no desire to bring a child into the world.

“You’re having a boy?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she answered quietly. “I’m sorry. I don’t tell you this to hurt you.”

“I know.” Despite all they’d been through and how awful things were for a while during the divorce, they had found a way to communicate with each other again. And he was thankful for that. After all, they’d been in each other’s lives for the better part of twenty years and married for fifteen of those.

“I just can’t believe this is happening,” she said.

“I’d like to go see him.”

“Good. Sooner rather than later, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Thanks, Oliver.”

“You’re welcome. And Val?”

“Yeah?”

“Congratulations.”

She was silent for a beat and sniffled.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“Darn these hormones,” she said with a laugh.

He chuckled. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

Oliver sat in silence after they’d hung up. It was a lot to take in. Donny had been like a father to him. His relationship with his parents had never been great and had only worsened after the loss they had suffered. Donny was there for him in a way his parents never were. Even when Oliver didn’t see him for long periods of time, he always knew he could count on Donny to be a listening ear and to give good counsel. His heart ached at the thought of losing him, and then anger welled up within him.

Why did bad things happen to good people?

SIX

Skylar's face was a welcome sight after two days alone with nothing but her endless thoughts about marriage and a pile of less than stellar scripts. Adelia wasn't used to being confined like this, and all this isolation was getting to her.

"Good morning." Skylar greeted her with a smile and a hug.

"Morning. I'm so glad you're here."

Skylar held a manila envelope.

"What's that?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. It was in the mailbox. It's addressed to you."

Adelia's brow furrowed. "That's weird."

Skylar slid her finger under the enclosure to open it for her and removed the contents, and Adelia caught sight of a glossy black-and-white photograph of herself, running on the beach.

"What the?" Adelia snatched it from Skylar's hands along with two others. Goosebumps raced across the surface of her skin as she flipped through them. One was of her crouched down beside Tony, petting his dog. She took the envelope that Skylar still held and opened it to see if there was anything else inside, but it was

empty.

Skylar's eyes were wide. "Someone knows you're here."

Adelia flipped the photographs over. One of them had a piece of paper taped to the back with typed lettering.

One million for my silence.

"You've got to be kidding me." A sinking feeling hit her in the gut.

"What?"

Adelia showed Skylar the note and pulled out her phone.

"Who are you calling?" Skylar asked.

Adelia held up her finger as it started to ring.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Adelia Allen. We met the other night."

"I remember. Is everything okay?"

"Actually, it's not."

Twenty minutes later, a forest green Jeep Wrangler pulled up in front of the house, and Oliver Wood climbed out. He was wearing his police uniform, and something about that stirred Adelia's interest. She'd always been a sucker for a man in uniform, and Oliver's fit him just right.

“Good morning, ladies,” he said as Adelia opened the door.

“Morning,” Adelia replied and motioned him inside.

“Morning, Oliver,” Skylar said.

Adelia went to the kitchen counter and retrieved the envelope of photographs for him.

He gave her a closed-mouth smile as he put on rubber gloves, took the envelope, and viewed the contents within. The ladies watched as he pulled out an ink pad, paper, powder, and a brush to dust for prints.

“Do you think you’ll find the person’s prints that way?” Adelia asked.

“If anything, we’ll find yours and Skylar’s. But it’s worth a try.”

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He took their fingerprints for comparison then proceeded to dust the photographs for prints while they cleaned the ink from their hands.

Adelia watched Oliver's long slender fingers work meticulously to collect the prints he found. He had strong hands, the kind that could easily open a stuck lid on a jar for you. Her eyes traveled from his hands—noticeably absent of a wedding ring—along the sleeves that covered his forearms and up to his biceps and shoulders. She hadn't noticed when he'd been there the other night just how physically fit this man was. Her eyes took a journey up his thick neck, along his freshly-shaven face, to his perfect lips. She wondered what those lips would feel like against hers, and her cheeks warmed, surprised by her sudden attraction to him. The hints of grey peeking through his dark brown sideburns caught her attention, making her wonder how old he was.

Her gaze lifted to his, and her stomach flipped when she discovered him looking at her. He'd obviously been watching long enough to know she was checking him out.

Their gazes held for what felt like forever, and Skylar let out a giggle as she moved into the kitchen and offered Oliver something to drink.

"I'm all right," he answered, his eyes still fixed on Adelia's. "I'm going to take these back to the station with me." He held up the envelope.

Adelia nodded.

"In the meantime," he said as he removed the rubber gloves, "I'm going to talk to Gus about installing some more cameras around the property, and hopefully we can

catch this person in the act.”

“You think they’ll come back again?” Adelia asked.

“They’ll surely reach out in some way to give you instructions for payment.”

“Oh, right. What should I do?”

“Don’t do anything. I’ll get you through this.”

She held out her hand to him. “Thank you.”

He reached out and placed his palm against hers. Those long fingers curled around her hand as he gave her a firm shake. “My pleasure.”

Her stomach flipped. Did he have to use the word pleasure? Their hands were still connected, and his eyes traveled over her face for the briefest instant, causing her to swallow hard.

“Thanks for your help, Oliver,” Skylar said.

He gave her a nod and finally let Adelia’s hand slip from his. “I’ll be in touch.”

The moment he was out the door, Adelia felt like she could breathe again.

“What was that?” Skylar asked with a laugh. “You two were in some kind of trance.”

Adelia, who was now out of said trance, snorted. “We were not.”

“There were some serious sparks there. I could practically see them bouncing between you two.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Well, Oliver is great. I would definitely approve if you were into him.”

“How old is he?”

Skylar shrugged. “Older than Sebastian, I think. Maybe late thirties. I’m awful at guessing people’s ages.”

“I saw grey in his hair. He could be forty.”

“So. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, if you’re into older guys.”

She thought about Sebastian, the eldest Schultz sibling. When they were teenagers, she’d considered what it might be like to date him. They were always flirting with each other, and she didn’t have the kind of sibling-like relationship with him that she had with Gus and Skylar. But life never brought them together in that way, which was for the best. He belonged with Genevieve.

Sebastian was only five years older, though. She wasn’t sure about dating someone ten years or more older than her.

“It might be better to marry someone older,” Skylar said, “considering all the losers you’ve dated have been younger than you.”

“Not all were younger. Layton was a year older.”

“In number, but not maturity level.”

Adelia laughed. “That’s the truth. And you’re right. An older guy would be more mature and over all the partying and screwing around.”

“Definitely.”

“And I need a normal guy. No more actors.”

“Oliver’s a normal guy.”

Adelia pursed her lips. “He seems nice, but I can’t handle anything serious right now. In fact, I’ve decided I’m not getting married.”

Skylar’s eyebrows lifted. “You’re not?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for days. After all my parents are going through, I feel like marriage isn’t worth it. You spend your whole life working so hard to stay together. All those years wasted when one of you realizes it was all for naught.”

“Just because your parents have problems, doesn’t mean you will, Adelia. Don’t give up on love.”

“I’m not. I think love is a worthy and achievable goal in a relationship. But I don’t think marriage is necessary.”

Skylar held up her left hand and waved the engagement ring in front of Adelia's face.
"I disagree."

"Marriage isn't for everyone."

"Give it time, Adelia. Don't give up on that option because your parents have."

She raised her chin and stood resolute. "My mind is made up."

SEVEN

Seeing Adelia again had been a pleasant start to Oliver's day. Not that he was happy for the reason she'd called. The thought of somebody spying on her and taking photographs sent chills up his spine. He could only imagine how she felt, and a protective instinct had kicked in. After work, he planned to stop by the house to check on her, hoping his presence would make her feel safe.

There seemed to be a connection between them. He'd noticed the way she was looking him over, and when their eyes met, it was as if they were lost in the moment. There was no way he'd imagined that. But it seemed far-fetched that someone like her would give someone like him a second glance. He'd never get involved with her anyway. She'd dated a lot of guys in Hollywood—according to the entertainment shows—and he wasn't interested in being another fling.

At the end of the day, Oliver was called into the boss's office.

"Hey, chief," Oliver said as he entered the room.

"Close the door and have a seat."

Oliver did as he was asked while the chief flipped through a few papers on his desk, rubbing a hand over his forehead before setting them to the side.

His eyes lifted to Oliver's. "I've got a special assignment for you."

"I'm all ears."

“Ephraim Schultz contacted me this afternoon. He said you’ve been helping out with the special high-profile guest staying at their lake cottage, and they’ve asked for you specifically to serve as personal protection for her.”

“I see.” Oliver immediately wondered what that would entail. “So, guard her when she goes out, that sort of thing?”

“Actually, they would like you to be there full time. With the suspicious activity on the premises earlier this week, they’re concerned for her safety.”

His brow lifted. “Stay in the house with her?”

“Yes, is that a problem?”

“No, not at all. Just clarifying.” His heart was beating a little faster at the thought of staying with her. “How long will she be in town?”

“At least a couple weeks. Possibly longer.”

He swallowed hard and nodded. “Alright.”

“I’ll need you to report there for duty immediately.”

“Yes, sir.” Oliver stood to leave.

“Look, I know this isn’t exactly what you signed up for when you joined the force, but the Schultzes trust you.”

“It’s fine. I won’t let you or them down.”

“Good man.”

“I try, sir.”

The chief nodded. “And you always succeed.”

Oliver packed a bag and headed for the lake house. His stomach somersaulted as he got closer. He really needed to rein in his attraction to Adelia. He was there to do a job, and he needed to remain professional to avoid risking her safety.

When he arrived, the door opened, and Adelia’s smiling face greeted him.

“Back so soon?” Her brow furrowed when she saw the bag over his shoulder.
“What’s going on?”

His steps slowed as he reached her. “They didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

Great. He figured they’d given her a heads up. Part of him thought maybe she’d requested that he stay with her because she was frightened, and he liked thinking she needed him. Obviously, that was a fantasy he’d conjured up in his mind.

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“The Schultz family hired me to be your personal protection while you’re here.”

Her mouth fell open, and then she laughed. “You’re joking, right? This is just a follow-up to the fingerprints on the pictures or something. Tell me that’s what this is.”

“I’m afraid not.”

Her expression turned serious. “Oh my gosh. I had no idea they would take it this far. I love them, but this is too much. I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“Well, this isn’t exactly how I was expecting to end my day either, but it is what it is.”

She stood still in the doorway.

“Can I come in?”

“I don’t know,” Adelia replied.

“You don’t know?”

“I mean, I feel like I should have words with Gus about this. I’m sure it was all him.”

“The request came from Ephraim himself.”

Her eyes widened. “It did?”

“They’re all concerned for your safety.”

She got a sweet smile on her face. “Man, I love them so much.”

“So, do I need to plan to sleep in my vehicle then, or are you going to let me in?”

She tilted her head to the side and pressed her lips together as if she was considering her options. When she stepped aside and pushed the door open wider, he knew she’d made her choice.

“Thank you.” He walked past her, accidentally brushing his arm against hers, and the feeling of that light contact with her skin against his stayed with him long after he’d entered the house and made his way into an empty bedroom across the hall from Adelia’s.

He dropped his things on the bed then joined her in the kitchen, standing on the opposite side of the counter from where she sat on a stool.

“I’m going to talk to the Schultzes. You don’t need to have your whole life taken over by babysitting me right now. I feel awful.”

“It’s my job. Don’t feel bad. I just want to make sure you’re safe out here.”

“I still think it’s unnecessary.”

“You feel free to take it up with them then, but Gus is pretty stubborn.”

Adelia laughed. “I’m familiar with that side of Gus.”

They exchanged smiles.

“We weren’t able to get any prints other than yours and Skylar’s off the photos, by the way. I didn’t have high hopes that we would, but like I said, worth a try.”

“Darn. I hoped that would solve all of this so I wouldn’t have to worry about some creeper.”

“I’m sorry. But the good news is I’ll be here if they show up again.”

“I can’t believe this. In all the years my family has had paparazzi following us around, this has never happened to me. I mean, I remember my mom once had a stalker when I was younger. He tried getting into the house, but he didn’t make it that far. The cops came, and he went to jail, but I think he’s out now.” She shivered. “Gosh, I forgot all about that guy until just now.”

“We’re going to get this person, Adelia.” He reached over and rested his hand atop hers without thinking. “Trust me.”

Her eyes locked with his. “If the Schultzes trust you, then I do too.”

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He removed his hand and walked over to the fridge, and Adelia stood.

She circled the counter and came up beside him. “Help yourself to anything. Skylar stocked it up for me.” She tugged the freezer drawer open to show him the contents just as he stepped forward, and it slammed into his kneecap. He leaned over and grabbed his knee, stumbling to the side.

“Oh my gosh!” She shoved the drawer closed and covered her mouth with her hands.

He rubbed at the pain, praying it would pass, as he moved across the room and leaned against the nearest wall.

Adelia looked adorably flustered as she darted about the kitchen. “I don’t know where the first aid kit is.” She opened drawer after drawer.

“Adelia,” he said.

“It’s got to be here. What do we need? Peas!” she cried.

“Peas?”

“Frozen peas!”

“Adelia.” He laughed as she pulled open the freezer drawer again and riffled through.

“Aha!” She lifted a package of frozen peas above her head. “Yes! I found them!”

Oliver's knee still throbbed, but he was highly amused by her antics.

She jogged across the room and pressed the peas against his knee a little harder than she should've.

"Ah!" he cried out in pain.

"I've broken you! I'm sorry. I don't know what to do." Her face was covered in worry.

He laid his hand on her shoulder. "I'm fine. Not broken. And it's okay. It was an accident."

"What a way to welcome you." She pointed to herself. "Worst hostess ever."

"Don't beat yourself up over it. I'll heal."

"Well, when you're done with those, I can cook up some peas with dinner."

Oliver's chuckle turned into full-blown laughter that filled the room, which caused Adelia to laugh too.

When their laughter died down, they smiled at each other, and Oliver hobbled over and put the peas back into the freezer. He took a look at what was in the refrigerator and spotted a package of ground turkey.

"Are you hungry? I can whip up some turkey burgers," he offered.

"I could eat," she replied. "But I want to help." She cautiously stepped around him to look at the contents of the fridge. "I'll make us a salad."

“Sounds good.” He liked that she said us, which he realized was a ridiculous thought. There was no us.

She moved to the pantry and looked inside. “I think I saw some chips in here.” Her voice was muffled from the wall between them. She emerged with bags of Ruffles and Cool Ranch Doritos and set them on the countertop.

Adelia took the lettuce from the fridge. “So, if you weren’t here tonight, what would you be doing?”

“A few buddies and I go bowling most Thursday nights.” He rolled up his shirt sleeves and noticed her watching his motions, her gaze locked on his forearms until she caught his eye and quickly looked away.

“For ... for fun or are you on a league or something?” Her slight stutter and failed attempt to hide her perusal of his arms secretly pleased him.

“Just for fun.”

“You should go. I don’t want to keep you away from your life.”

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He squirted soap into his palm and rubbed his hands together. “You’re not. Like I said, I want to make sure you’re safe out here. I can miss bowling for a couple weeks.”

“I’m not sure I’ll even be here that long,” she said as he rinsed his hands.

“Oh, I was told it would be at least two weeks.”

“I have to return to California for work next week.” She moved beside him to rinse the lettuce. “I’m not exactly looking forward to the circus that awaits me, but I’ll get through it.”

“Working on a new movie?” he asked as he dried his hands and moved to the counter with the package of ground turkey.

“Press junket for the last one.”

He nodded. “What’s that like?”

“Boring.” She laughed. “It’s a series of interviews, answering questions about the movie, about how it was to work with the other actors and the director.”

He formed the turkey into a patty and placed it on a plate. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Not if you’re the reporter.”

“I think I would’ve made an excellent reporter. I’m great in the interrogation room,” he bragged.

Adelia laughed. “Is that right?”

“Want to practice?”

“You know nothing about the film.”

He shrugged. “I already know the only question that needs asking.”

The look she was giving him let him know she was intrigued.

“If someone made your life into a movie, who would play you?”

She snorted. “Do you know how many times I’ve been asked that question?”

He laughed. “If you couldn’t act anymore, what would you do?”

“And that one.”

“They seemed like the most cliché questions people would ask,” he said with a smile.

“Definitely.” She went to the refrigerator. “What kind of dressing? Looks like we’ve got ranch and Italian.”

“I’m a ranch guy.”

“Do you want cherry tomatoes?”

He screwed up his face. “Not a tomato guy.”

“Oooh, and I thought we might just be friends, but not now. Not after this.”

He smiled. “I’ll live.”

“That’s debatable. I’m a really good friend to have, Olly.”

He rolled his eyes at the nickname. “Nobody calls me that.”

“It’s a common nickname for Oliver, right?”

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“When I was growing up, my mom made sure to stress to everyone that my name is Oliver. Anytime anyone called me Olly, she corrected them.”

“Well, I like it.”

He smirked.

She quirked her brow and let out a laugh. “I just realized, your last name is Wood.”

He stared at her blankly. “And?”

“Your name is Olly Wood. Like Hollywood.” She cracked herself up at her silly joke and sing-songed “Hooray for Olly Wood” and burst into laughter.

He watched her with amusement. “Okay. It’s not that funny.”

“I know it’s not, but I can’t stop laughing.” Her eyes watered.

He shook his head, but was soon infected by her contagious laughter.

“You should move to California. You’d fit right in with a name like that.” She snorted.

His eyebrows shot up. “I’m not sure this is really snort-worthy.”

“Apparently, it is.” Their laughter died down, and she let out a happy sigh.

“It’s nice to know you’re so easily amused at my expense, Addy.”

He caught sight of a little smile on her lips at the nickname he’d just given her, but she didn’t comment on it. Instead, she went back to salad prep in silence, and he finished up the burgers and went to fire up the grill.

A strong wind whipped across the surface of Lake Michigan, howling and whistling around the lake house. Oliver lay wide awake in bed, unable to sleep, thinking about the amazing woman in the room across the hall. They had shared casual conversation and plenty of laughter throughout dinner and after. She was easy to get along with and was nothing like he expected the daughter of famous Hollywood billionaires to be.

The creak of floorboards had him bolting upright. He listened intently, wondering if it was just the wind and his mind playing tricks, but then he heard it again. He quietly climbed out of bed, grabbed his gun belt, and slowly turned the handle on his door until it gave and opened. Trying to step lightly, he made his way down the hallway toward the kitchen and was surprised to see Adelia moving toward the window, dragging a blanket behind her.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asked softly as he set the gun belt on a side table and moved toward her.

She didn’t reply, only stopped by the window, eyes fixed on the blackness beyond the glass, and he couldn’t make out whatever unrecognizable words she was mumbling.

He moved closer. “Adelia?”

She continued to stare, then suddenly turned and walked right past him with a blank stare on her face. He watched in fascination as her footsteps took her to the dining room table, where she tossed the blanket on its surface before plopping down in the

closest chair and laying her head on top of the blanket.

“That can’t be comfortable,” he whispered, realizing she wasn’t actually hearing him. One thing he knew for sure: Never wake a sleepwalker. He didn’t want her to get hurt or lash out and punch him in the face or something.

He took a seat across the table and waited until her breathing evened out to be sure she was asleep. Then he moved around the table, carefully lifted one of her arms around his neck, slid one arm around behind her and the other under her legs, and picked her up.

As he turned to grab her blanket, she shifted in his arms, curling herself against him, burrowing her face into his neck. His pulse spiked at the heat of her breath there, and he took his time walking to her room, soaking in this feeling of holding her, warm and soft, against him.

He carefully laid her on her bed, moved her legs under the sheets, and spread the blanket she’d dragged along with her back over the bed. He leaned down to tuck it around her, and she reached up in her slumberous state and gently caressed his face. Her thumb brushed across his bottom lip, and her eyes cracked open for an instant before she rolled over and snuggled into her pillow. He stood by her bedside, completely drawn to this woman, wanting nothing more than to be close to her and keep her safe.

Her breathing was steady as she slept deeply, and he quietly snuck from her room. There was no way he was sleeping after that.

EIGHT

The aroma of eggs and bacon wafted into Adelia's room, permeating the most delicious dream. At first, she was being carried down the beach by Tony with his dog running along beside them. The sun was shining, and a warm breeze blew in from the lake. But as they walked, the sun rapidly dropped below the horizon, and she was suddenly being carried up the stairs, through the house, and down the hallway. When she nuzzled into Tony's neck, his smooth-shaven face had turned scruffy, and she lifted her head to discover Oliver was the one carrying her. He lay her on the bed and hovered over her, caressing her face with his fingertips before pressing a kiss to her forehead then her nose, then just as his lips were millimeters away from contact, her eyes opened.

She fully expected to be back home in her bed, but quickly remembered she was in the Schultz's guest room. Her mind returned to the dream before all the details faded away. Why was she dreaming about her bodyguard?

She shook her head as she flipped back the covers and rolled out of bed. They'd had a nice conversation last night. She wasn't sure she'd ever felt so comfortable with a guy she'd just met before. And he wasn't hard to look at either. But she couldn't think about him that way. He'd been hired to protect her. He'd only showed up in her dream because of how well they got along. And maybe because she'd been staring at his sexy five o'clock shadow for a little too long. But that was all it was.

Throwing on a robe, she shuffled out to the kitchen to see what Oliver was getting himself into.

“Breakfast is served,” he announced at the sight of her.

She took a seat at the table, and he walked over and set a plate before her, which caused her to instantly drool over the fluffy scrambled eggs, golden pancakes, and crispy bacon. She inhaled the aroma as she poured a small puddle of syrup onto her plate then took her fork, cut a little bit of egg, a square of pancake, and a chunk of bacon, assembled them on her fork in that order, and dipped them into the syrup. She closed her eyes at the first bite, savoring the taste.

“Mmm. So good.” She opened her eyes and discovered Oliver’s gaze was fixed on her. “What?”

“Nothing.”

She quirked her brow and tilted her head. “I don’t believe you.” Again, she put the combination of eggs, pancake, and bacon on her fork and found him watching her again. “Seriously. What? Do I have food on my face or something?”

“I’m just fascinated by the way you eat.”

“I eat like any normal person does.”

“Not everyone cuts their food into bite-sized pieces and puts them on the fork like that.”

She held the fork in front of his face. “A little bit of egg, a piece of pancake, and a little bacon. The perfect bite!”

“Perfect, huh?”

“Yes.” She gobbled it up.

“I’ll take that as a compliment, since I’m the one who made all this.”

Adelia nodded. “It’s really good. But I could do without being watched while I eat.”

He chuckled. “Sorry.”

She watched as he took his fork, copied what she’d done, and took a bite.

“Pretty good. But would I call it perfect?” He stabbed and devoured a full slice of bacon. “Now that was perfect.”

She shook her head and went back to eating the way she wanted to. She didn’t actually care if he was watching her. And after the dream she’d had, she kind of liked it.

In the middle of their breakfast, the door suddenly opened, and Gus and Merritt entered the house.

“Morning, Deals.” Gus walked over and kissed the top of her head.

“Morning. Want some breakfast? Olly made it.” She gave Oliver a sly smile.

He rolled his eyes. “There are leftovers if you want some.”

“We already ate,” Merritt replied as she took the seat next to Adelia.

“What are you two up to this morning?” Adelia asked.

“We’re leaving for California today, and we wanted to check on you before we go,” Gus replied.

“That’s sweet, but isn’t that what you hired a bodyguard for?” She stared at Gus.
“Without talking to me first, I might add.”

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Gus sat down across from her, glanced over at Oliver, who gave him a shrug, then looked at Adelia. “We just want you to be safe while you’re here.”

Adelia set her fork down and took a drink of orange juice. “I have to admit, it is a little creepy, hidden away out here. Back home, it’s not unusual for someone to photograph you when you don’t know it because paparazzi are everywhere. Here, it just feels stalker-ish.”

“We’ve had photographers follow us around Grand Rapids plenty of times, but none have ever come here before, which is why we wanted to take extra precautions.”

“I just don’t think a bodyguard is necessary, Gus.” She looked at Oliver. “No offense.”

His gaze met hers. “None taken.”

“We all agreed, we’d feel better about you staying here if Oliver was with you. What if the person comes back?”

“If things escalate, we’ll need to move you,” Oliver added.

“Escalate?” Her heart skipped a beat. “Like get violent? It was just some photographs.” Her mind reeled.

“That’s often where it starts. And maybe they’re harmless and just out for your money, but we can’t be careless about this.”

Adelia groaned. “I can’t deal with this right now. I’ve got enough to worry about.”

Oliver reached over and squeezed her hand. “It’ll be okay.” He smiled, and the corners of his eyes crinkled, which she found incredibly handsome. There was a kindness in him that made her believe he could be trusted.

It was then that they both seemed to realize Gus and Merritt were staring at Oliver’s hand on hers, and he pulled it away.

Adelia saw them exchange a look and knew what they were probably thinking, but thankfully, they didn’t put a voice to their thoughts.

“Okay, Olly can stay,” Adelia declared as she stood and took her plate to the kitchen sink.

Oliver followed her into the kitchen and started loading the dishwasher.

“I can do that,” Adelia offered. “You made breakfast.”

“It’s fine.”

She shrugged and returned to the table, and Merritt gave her a look.

“What?” Adelia mouthed.

Merritt’s eyes traveled across the room to Oliver and back.

Adelia shook her head and waved her off. “Can I stay with you guys next week? I have a press junket, and I don’t want to stay at home. Once people know I’m back in town, they’ll be staking out my house, and I don’t want to deal.”

“Do you think it’s safe to travel alone right now?” Merritt asked.

“I’ll be fine. Besides, the creep is here in Michigan.”

“Creeps can board planes too,” Gus said.

Adelia rolled her eyes. “I’ll be fine.” She glanced over and noticed Oliver watching her and listening intently.

“You know the interviewers will ask about your parents,” Gus remarked.

“Iris is on top of it. They’ll all be told ahead of time that I will not be answering those questions.” She turned her attention to Merritt, anxious to change the subject. “So, how’s the fall product launch going?”

“Really good. People are loving the new line. They want to look just like you look in all the new colors.”

“The pictures turned out amazing.” As the face of the Merritt Cosmetics ad campaigns, Adelia was thrilled to be a part of helping her friend’s wildly popular organic cosmetics company grow. “Are you working on the spring launch now?”

“Of course. And we’ve got some great ideas for the ad campaign too.”

“I’m ready.” She smiled. “So, can I stay with you guys?”

“You know you don’t even have to ask,” Merritt replied.

They talked a while longer before Gus and Merritt said their goodbyes and headed to the airport. And then she and Oliver were alone again.

“Are you sure about going back to California right now?” Oliver asked.

“I’ll be fine.” Maybe if she kept saying that, she’d actually convince herself.

NINE

On Monday morning, Oliver sat up and stretched his arms above his head. The sun wasn't up yet, but there was a faint glow through his window. He'd always been an early riser, but after the past few days, he'd never wanted to sleep in more. He didn't feel rested at all because he'd been on high alert since he arrived.

He had also discovered that Adelia's sleepwalking wasn't confined to that first night, so he'd taken to leaving his door ajar to hear any movement throughout the house. Thankfully, all she ever did was walk to the window or sit on the couch or chair in the living room. No grabbing dangerous objects, like knives from the kitchen, or walking out the door, or falling down the stairs. But he followed her wanderings every night to make sure she was safe and sound and didn't accidentally hurt herself. And it always ended with him carrying her back to her room.

Oliver climbed out of bed and took a shower then went to the kitchen to make breakfast as he'd done every morning since he arrived. Usually, the smell of the food and the coffee brewing was enough to get Adelia to emerge from her room, but she still wasn't up when everything was ready, so he went to wake her.

"Good morning, sleepy—" His heart leapt in his chest at the sight of an empty bed. "Adelia?"

He crossed the room and checked her bathroom. Empty.

He went from room to room. Nothing.

He returned to the main living area, calling out her name.

“Where is she?” he grumbled as he raced down the stairs to the game room. “Adelia!”

He climbed to the main floor again and went out front to see if his vehicle was still there. Not that he really thought she’d take his Jeep without asking, but he had to check. It sat in the exact place he’d parked it days ago.

Back inside, panic overcame him. He took a deep breath and went for his phone. He brought up her name and was about to dial when he heard footsteps on the back deck. He whipped open the door just as Adelia’s blonde head came into view at the top of the stairs.

“Are you crazy?” he cried.

She startled and nearly dropped her water bottle, grabbing hold of the railing. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“Where have you been?”

“I went for a run. Lighten up, Olly.”

“You can’t just go for a run without telling me. I thought something happened to you.”

Her eyes widened. “I’m sorry. You were in the shower when I got up. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, you weren’t,” he snapped.

“Hey! It’s not easy being cooped up in this house. I needed to get out of my head for

a while and let off some steam. Running helps me do that. If I didn't, you wouldn't want to be around me right now. Trust me."

"Well, I don't want you going anywhere without telling me."

"Okay, Dad."

His eyes narrowed at her. "It's for your own good."

"That's a total dad thing to say."

He ignored her. "Next time, tell me, and I'll go with you."

"Fine!" She pushed past him on her way into the house, and the smell of her sweat pervaded his senses. Even that did something to him.

"Fine!" He walked over to the edge of the deck and stared out at the lake, taking deep breaths, trying to calm his heart rate down. They didn't need to be snapping at each other. But thinking something had happened to her definitely had his adrenaline pumping.

He didn't move from that place for a while, and the sound of the door opening again caught his attention.

Adelia came out of the house, looking and smelling freshly showered, which had his pulse quickening again for other reasons.

She came to stand beside him. "I'm really sorry, Olly. I didn't mean to freak you out." She bumped his arm with her elbow.

He glanced over at the expectant look on her face. "It's alright." He gave her arm an

elbow bump, and the smile he received in return instantly made everything better.

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“Can we go somewhere today?” she asked. “I just need to get out and do something ... anything. I have a serious case of cabin fever.”

Oliver understood. He was starting to feel the same. “I get it. Want to take a drive and see some fall colors?”

Her face lit up. “I’d love that.”

An hour later, they were in his Jeep, heading north along the Lake Michigan shoreline.

“So, tell me, Olly, did you always want to be a cop?”

His heart skipped a beat. He hated when people asked him that question because he really didn’t want to get into his reason for becoming a police officer. It was personal to him and not something he shared when he didn’t know someone well.

“Pretty much.” That was the pat answer he usually gave.

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Since I was twenty-three.”

“A really long time then.”

He looked over at her and found her smirking. “Are you calling me old?”

“I don’t know. How old are you?”

“Can’t you guess?”

She reached over and brushed her fingers against his sideburns, which sent a jolt straight through his body. “You’ve got a little grey going on here, so I’m guessing you’ve left your thirties.”

He did his best to recover from his sudden reaction to her touch. “Almost.”

“Thirty-nine then?”

He nodded. He knew from doing a little research on her when he’d been hired that she was thirty. Ten years was a pretty big difference. She probably thought he was ancient.

“You must like your job to be doing it for so long.”

He glanced over at her. “I do. I never imagined when I became a police officer that I’d end up a bodyguard for Hollywood’s princess, though.”

Adelia groaned. “I hate it when people call me that.”

“You do?”

“I know my parents are Hollywood royalty”—she made air quotes as she said royalty—“but I’m just a girl, and I have my own life, my own career, my own dreams. I hate being the little princess, born into this life I didn’t choose, everyone assuming I have everything handed to me.”

“Don’t you?”

She twisted her lips to the side. “Sometimes.”

When she looked over at him, he quirked his eyebrow in disbelief.

“Okay, yes, I’ve been given parts in movies because of who my parents are. I won’t deny that. But I’ve also auditioned just like everyone else and, believe it or not, have been rejected for roles I really wanted to play. I don’t always get everything I want like everyone seems to think.”

“What do you want most right now?”

Her eyes widened a smidge and her perfect lips parted as she looked at him. And then it was like her face lit up with excitement as she started talking nonstop. “There’s this story I really want to make into a movie. Margaret Bourke-White was this amazing woman, who was the first female photographer at Fortune Magazine and then Life Magazine. She was the first foreign photographer allowed in the Soviet Union. She photographed the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. She was the first female war correspondent during World War II. She was there for the German invasion of Moscow. She went on air bombing missions. She even traveled with Patton’s army through Germany while they liberated concentration camps. She had this amazing life and never seemed to take no for an answer.”

“Sounds awesome.”

“She was. She passed away from Parkinson’s in the early 70s. But what a life. The moment I heard about her, I knew her story was one I wanted to pursue. I have a friend, a scriptwriter, who’s written the screenplay. But I’ve been trying to get this thing made for two years. We’ve had hiccups along the way, but I feel like it’s closer to becoming a reality. It feels almost within my grasp now. I’m trying not to hold my breath, though. Every time I get excited about it, something falls through.”

“Like what?”

“Funding mostly.”

“Can’t you fund it yourself?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Do you know how much it costs to make a movie?”

Oliver shook his head. “Not really. A lot, I assume.”

“It can be hundreds of millions, depending on what kind of movie it is. And that’s just to get the movie made. That doesn’t even cover all the marketing and distribution. There’s an old Hollywood adage that says ‘Never make a film with your own money.’ It’s too risky when you don’t know if you’ll make your money back.”

“That makes sense. I hope it all works out. I can see how much this means to you.”

“It really does. I believe in this story. And I want to make something that’s all mine. Apart from my parents.”

“Well, I have a feeling it’ll happen for you.”

She smiled over at him. “Oh, you do?”

“I do.”

“Prepare to see your name in the credits if this thing gets made.”

“As what? Consultant to the Princess?” he teased.

She punched his arm, which felt more like a tap than anything, and she winced.

“Gah!” She gripped his bicep with both hands, and once again, her touch sent tingles of electricity through him. She was very casual with all the touching, and he wasn’t sure what to think about that. “I was going to say ‘Miss Allen’s Bodyguard’ but I think I’ll just have them put Captain America in the credits.”

He laughed loudly at that. “Never been called that one before.”

“Are you complaining about being compared to a superhero?”

“I’ll take it. Although, I’d prefer to be called Thor.”

That had Adelia laughing, and the sound brought a smile to his face.

“You have a really nice smile,” she said.

He looked over and found her smiling at him.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had butterflies in his stomach, but they were happening now. She was so beautiful, and he had one of those surreal moments, realizing that the Adelia Allen was sitting in his passenger seat, smiling at him, giving him nicknames, and laughing at his jokes.

“So do you.”

When they returned to the house, Oliver unlocked the door, let them in, then reactivated the security code for the night. He was heading into the kitchen when he heard Adelia gasp.

“Did you get me flowers? They’re so pretty.” She stood next to the kitchen counter, reaching for the card tucked in the display.

“Don’t touch those!” he cried.

She jumped. “Why not?”

Oliver walked over to the vase of red roses, and Adelia stepped back.

“Maybe they’re from the Schultz family. Or maybe my dad,” she said.

Oliver carefully took the small card from among the leaves and opened it. The card contained an address and instructions for where and when to leave a duffle bag of cash and ended with a message.

I’ll be waiting.

TEN

Oliver lived in a quiet suburban area fifteen minutes from Schultz Cottage. The neighborhood was looking festive for the upcoming Halloween weekend—orange lanterns and sheets as ghosts hanging in trees, purple and orange lights strung up on houses, skeletons and cardboard gravestones in yards. One house even had a gigantic spider that appeared to be crawling up the side of it.

The first thing that struck Adelia as they pulled into Oliver’s driveway at the end of a cul-de-sac were the lights lining the sidewalk that led to two large potted plants on either side of the steps of a wide front porch. It was very inviting. Even in the dark, she could tell the yard was nicely landscaped.

She climbed out of the car, and Oliver was already out, grabbing her bags from the trunk. He led her along the sidewalk and up the steps of his two-story Cape Cod home. There were two rocking chairs to one side of the porch and a swing at the opposite end. She could picture Oliver sitting out there, sipping lemonade on a hot summer day, shirtless after working on the lawn, beads of sweat dripping down his neck and trailing along his solid chest.

“Adelia?” Oliver pulled her from her unexpected daydream.

“Sorry, what?”

“We should get inside before someone sees you.”

“I’ve never had a porch swing,” she remarked as she followed him inside, sweeping

her inappropriate thoughts away, willing the blush in her cheeks to disappear, even as her eyes traveled to his backside.

“Really?” He moved through the entryway and into the open living area.

“I’ve never even had a front porch to put a swing on.”

“Well, I’m sure you didn’t miss it with the ocean out your back door.”

Why did she suddenly miss a porch swing she’d never had?

“Come on in,” he motioned for her to enter, and she took in the space, which surprised her with its quaint and tidy appearance. Not the manly bachelor pad she expected. Olly was all man, not like the guys she’d been involved with throughout her twenties, but he clearly had a nice sense of style.

“You have a lovely home.”

“Thank you.” He set her things down and moved to the windows, quickly closing all the drapes. “Make yourself at home while I put your stuff in the guest room. Help yourself to whatever’s in the fridge. I’ll be right back.” At that, he disappeared up the stairs with her bags.

She ambled around the room, taking everything in. The more she looked things over, the more she felt like this space had a woman’s touch, and that made her wonder if there was a woman in his life. She’d never thought to ask. She was fairly certain he was single, based on Skylar’s comments, but had he always been? Probably not if he was nearing forty.

Heavy footsteps moved across the ceiling above her as she went to the kitchen and looked inside the fridge—water, pop, beer. She grabbed an amber-colored bottle and

tried screwing off the top, but it didn't budge. She riffled through a couple of drawers, looking for a bottle opener.

Oliver's footfalls sounded on the stairs, and he joined her in the kitchen.

"Where's your bottle opener?" she asked.

He gently took the bottle from her hand, rested the lid against the counter's edge, and smacked the top with his hand, causing the lid to pop off and clink on the tile below.

She grinned up at him as he offered the bottle back to her. She almost told him how hot that was but caught herself just in time. "Thanks. Do you want one?"

"Maybe later. Are you hungry? I could fix something, or we could order out."

Her nose wrinkled. "Maybe later." She walked into the living room and plopped down onto his big comfy sofa and took a swig of beer. "How long have you lived here?"

"Eighteen years." He sat down in the recliner across the room.

Her eyes widened. "And have you always lived alone?"

"No."

"Roommate?"

"No."

Adelia's eyebrow raised. "Was there a Mrs. Ollywood?" She asked the question teasingly, but his eyebrows squeezed together, and his lips pressed into a thin line.

“I’m sorry. That was absolutely none of my business.”

“It’s okay. I was married, but I’m not anymore.”

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“I’m sorry.” Her heart went out to him at the sad look on his face, and she had the strongest urge to walk across the room and hug him.

“I’m fine talking about it. It ended a few years ago.”

“Were you married a long time?”

“Fifteen years.”

Her heart sank. “I’m really sorry, Oliver.”

“Don’t be. It was for the best.”

Yet another marriage gone wrong. Everything seemed to be pointing to what she had concluded—marriage wasn’t worth it.

Oliver abruptly stood. “I think I’ll have that beer after all.”

She watched him walk into the kitchen, trying not to check him out on the way, but she failed. He was definitely a handsome man. Her mind wandered, wondering what it was that split up Oliver’s marriage. With all that was happening with her parents, she was curious how people could call it quits after so many years together. Did they really love each other? Was there infidelity, like with her mom? Did they drift apart? She knew she couldn’t ask him, but it didn’t stop her mind from coming up with a variety of scenarios.

The sound of him hitting the beer bottle against the counter stole her attention. Why

did she find that so very attractive?

“Thank you for letting me stay here,” she said as he returned to the room.

“There was no way we were staying at the lake house. Not safe.”

Adelia got chills, thinking about the vase of flowers on the table. How had the person gotten inside the house? They obviously knew how to hack a security system. Maybe the person has the security code.

“I thought of that,” he replied.

She hadn’t realized she’d said that aloud.

“I already texted Gus and asked for a list of people who have access to the house and asked that he have the code changed as soon as possible. But even then, I don’t think it’s wise for you to go back there right now. Whoever did this knows you’re staying there. If they were crazy enough to come inside the house, they might try something else, especially since they’re out for your money.”

“I’d give up the money if it made this go away,” she said. “I don’t care. I just want it over.”

“I strongly advise against that. There’s no way to guarantee the person won’t take the money and then spill your location anyway.”

“Maybe it’s better if people know where I am. I can’t hide forever.” She frowned. “I sometimes wonder what my life would’ve been like if I’d been born into different circumstances.”

“Such as what?” He looked at her curiously.

“A simple life. Like yours.”

“You think my life is simple?”

“You don’t have people hiding out in the bushes just to get a peek at you on your way home from the gym or pumping gas. Your every move isn’t scrutinized. You don’t get mocked for your hairstyle or the clothes you wear. People don’t use you to get ahead because you have money and a famous name. Your life is private. It’s your own. I’ve never known that.”

He gave her a sympathetic smile. “Everyone has problems and challenges that go along with their circumstances in life. Just because I’m not rich and famous, doesn’t mean I have an easy life. My job can be challenging. I see a lot of things I wish I didn’t. The underbelly of society, if you will. I often work long hours. I get called out at inconvenient times. I miss holidays and special occasions. And when I am home, I’m exhausted and checked out. It does a number on one’s social life.” He smirked. “Heck, guarding you is the most social I’ve been in months.”

“I know life isn’t easy,” she replied. “I’m just saying, you’re lucky. My entire life has been documented by strangers. My parents did what they could to keep me out of the tabloids when I was little, but people still found a way. We couldn’t go on normal family vacations without causing a stir. I could never tell if kids were inviting me to their birthday parties because we were actually friends or because of my parents’ fame. My parents worked hard to get where they are today, but I had no choice in this life. I didn’t choose to be famous. It’s what I was born into. You don’t know how much I wish I could walk down the sidewalk without being recognized for once.” She gave him a pout. “Can we switch places for a while?”

He chuckled. “I can’t really picture you as a police officer.”

“What, you don’t want to sit in a room and answer a bunch of questions about the

romantic comedy you're starring in?"

He twisted his mouth to the side. "Tempting."

"I did play a police officer in a movie once."

A loud laugh escaped him, which made Adelia smile.

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“What movie?” he asked.

“It was an indie film that never saw the light of day about a trio of female officers. I think they were going for the Charlie’s Angels vibe, but it wasn’t big budget and it sort of fell flat.”

“So, everything you touch doesn’t automatically turn to gold?”

“Of course not. Every actor stars in a few flops.” Her brow furrowed at what he’d said. “Is that what you think about me? That everything I do is gold?”

He shrugged. “That’s how it seems. Your movies are box office hits. And I’ve seen your commercials for beauty products and clothing. I even saw a billboard with you on it once. You and some guy, looking all hot for each other. I don’t remember what that was for, though.”

She frowned. “A men’s cologne.” She had met Layton on that photoshoot, and they’d started seeing each other frequently after. They’d even starred in her most recent movie together. If only he hadn’t been sleeping with every woman on the west coast.

“You’re practically a supermodel.”

“Far from it.” Her eyebrow lifted. “Wait, are you saying you follow my career?”

He coughed as the swig of beer he’d just taken went down rough.

She giggled.

“I’m saying I’ve seen some of the things you’ve done, and it seems like you’re doing well.”

She let it go at that, allowing the things she’d learned about him to simmer, which left her wondering if it was his job that had caused the rift between him and his wife. Long hours, too much overtime, missed holidays and special occasions, called out at random hours. That had to be hard on a marriage.

A growl of her stomach pulled her out of her thoughts. “What was that you said earlier about dinner?”

ELEVEN

Frozen pizza and chips weren't exactly a gourmet meal, but Adelia didn't seem to mind. After dinner, Oliver showed her to the guest room. He'd tidied up when he brought her bags upstairs, but it really could've used a vacuum and a dusting. He tried not to worry too much about it as she walked into the room and looked around.

"This is super cute." She plopped down on the bed and smiled. "Cozy."

The charm was in the angled ceiling and little window seat nook Val had insisted he build. She thought it would be cute for their kids' room one day so she could sit in the window and read to them. So he had built it. Even though he had never really been on board with having kids.

Adelia stood and walked over to the closet and opened the door. "Oh." Her eyes searched the room then met his. "No bathroom?"

"The bathroom is just down the hall." He pointed over his shoulder in the direction of the hallway.

"Okay." She turned her face away and went to her bags. Was that a blush on her cheeks?

"Towels and washcloths are in the bathroom closet to the left of the door. Feel free to use anything you want—shampoo, conditioner, body wash." He clamped his mouth closed at that and tamped down the sudden thought of her washing up in his shower. "Let me know if you need anything else."

“I will. Thanks.”

He abruptly turned to leave and slammed his elbow into the door jamb. “Ahh!” he cried out.

Adelia gasped. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. Good. Great. I’ll leave you to it. Goodnight.” A soft giggle followed him out of the guest room and down the hallway, and he rubbed his sore elbow all the way down the stairs.

Sleep wouldn’t come. Probably because Adelia was in his house, asleep in the bed across the hall from his room. He liked having her in his space. He liked talking to her. He didn’t know what he’d expected when he met her, but it wasn’t the woman who had spent the evening talking about her longing for a simpler life. He could only imagine what things had been like for her, growing up the way she had. And he had a strong urge to take her far away from the spotlight. But he was just letting his thoughts run away with him again.

The sound of the door across the hall squeaked, and he listened intently as the floorboards creaked under Adelia’s weight. At first, he thought she was going to the bathroom or to get a glass of water, and he silently admonished himself for not leaving a glass on her nightstand. But then he heard the loose third step make that sound it always did, and he knew she was heading downstairs.

He climbed out of bed, throwing a T-shirt on over his flannel pajama pants, and quietly followed. When he reached the first floor, she was nowhere to be found.

“Adelia?” He looked in the kitchen, the downstairs bath, the laundry room, and glanced into the entryway, only to realize the front door was open a crack.

His feet took him out the door in seconds, and he was about to call for her when he spotted movement out of the corner of his eye.

And there she was, lying on his porch swing, blanket half draped over her and half on the ground.

A smile spread across his face at the sight, and he walked over and crouched down before her. She looked so peaceful. Her smooth blonde tresses were mussed up in the back, and before he could stop himself, he reached up and ran his hand over her head, trying to tame them.

She stirred slightly and let out a contented hum.

He looked out into the darkness of his yard, lit softly by the street lights. He really needed to get her inside, but who would see them at two o'clock in the morning? Instead, he carefully lifted her upper body and settled onto the swing with her head on his knee and began to move them gently, forward and back, while he tugged the blanket up and tucked it around her.

It suddenly occurred to him that the last time he'd sat on this swing was with Val, the day she told him she was leaving. His heart squeezed just thinking about it. They'd been going through a rough patch. At least that's what he thought. Their fighting had ramped up more with every year they were married. She accused him of being married to his job. He accused her of being distant when he was there. It was the same fights over and over. Then they would work on it for a while, only to fall back into the same patterns. Toward the end, he knew things were bad. They hadn't been intimate in a long time. She'd make excuses when he tried to get close. He had no idea she had given up on their marriage altogether and sought comfort in the arms of another. Not until that day on the swing when she told him they needed to talk.

Oliver continued to rock the swing until he got too cold in just his T-shirt and pajama

pants. He slowed the movement and carefully shifted as he stood, then slid his arms under her upper body and legs, lifting her and the blanket from the swing. And like at the lake house, she curled her body into him, burying her face in his neck. Only this time, her hand traveled up his chest and her fingers slid into the hair at the base of his neck, and he swallowed hard at the sensations it created.

He carried her inside, closing and locking the door behind them, and slowly made his way up the narrow staircase to the guest room. As he was laying her down on the bed, she giggled in her sleep.

“Ollywood,” she mumbled.

He held back his laughter until he was back in his bedroom, drifting off with a smile on his face.

TWELVE

It was the oddest thing, waking up in Oliver's home. Adelia had never stayed in such a small space before, but she didn't mind. It felt cozy and safe, and after the creepy flower incident, she was grateful to be there.

The glow of daybreak cast a warm light across the area rug, and as much as Adelia wanted to burrow deeper under the colorful quilt to keep the slight draft from the windows out a little longer, her bladder was screaming for relief. So she counted to three, threw back the covers, and rushed out of the room and down the hallway, doing a little potty dance along the way. She whipped the door open to a blast of heat and steam and yelped at the sight of Oliver, standing at the sink, combing his wet hair, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist.

She covered her face with her hands, but not before she got an eyeful of his broad chest, muscles upon muscles, abs upon abs, leading down to his narrow waist.

"Sorry! I should've naked ... er, knocked."

She peeked from behind her fingers and saw the corner of Oliver's mouth lift in a smile, which warmed her all over.

"I mean, who doesn't knock when they're a guest in someone's home? You don't just bust into the bathroom like that."

"Adelia."

Her eyes locked with his in the mirror.

“There’s another bathroom downstairs.” Obviously, he’d noticed that she was bouncing and squeezing her legs together.

“Okay. Right. Sorry. Again.” She shook her head, mumbling what an idiot she was all the way down the stairs.

She used the bathroom, and when she went to the sink to wash her hands, her reflection stopped her in her tracks. Her hair looked like a wild rat’s nest, and her mascara from the day before was smudged under her eyes.

“Lovely.” She took the hand towel from the bar on the wall and wetted the corner, wiping at her eyes as she talked to herself. “Good morning, Olly. Didn’t know you’d wake up to Medusa in your house, did you? I know, I’m just so hard to resist. Try to control yourself.”

She hung the towel again and left the bathroom on her way upstairs to get her brush. As she walked past the entryway, the door suddenly opened, and she froze.

A petite young woman with dark hair smoothed back from her face in a stylish bun came through the door. She was dressed in a curve-hugging black dress, and the three-inch heels she was wearing accentuated her shapely legs. The woman closed the door and turned, letting out a gasp as she made eye contact with Adelia.

“Oh, hello,” she said as her hand came to rest on her chest. “You must be Adelia.” She laughed a little as she came closer. “What am I saying? Of course, you are. You’re Adelia Allen.”

Adelia couldn’t help the sudden jolt of jealousy that shot through her at this beautiful woman ... who had a key to Oliver’s home. “And you are?”

“I’m Carmen.” She held out her hand, and Adelia shook it hesitantly. “I’m such a fan of your parents. I think I’ve seen all of their movies. I especially love the ones they’ve done together.” She paused with a sympathetic look on her face. “I’m so sorry they’re going through a rough patch right now.”

Adelia’s eyes narrowed. “It’s really none of your business what’s going on with my family.”

Carmen's expression immediately shifted to one of regret. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Well, I am, and I’d appreciate it if you kept your pity to yourself.”

Oliver’s heavy footfalls sounded on the stairs. “Hey, Carmen. I see you’ve met Adelia.” He looked between the ladies as he came closer. “Adelia, this is my partner, Carmen.”

“Your partner?” A lightbulb went off. “Oh, your police officer partner?”

“Yes.” He walked past her, fixing his narrowed eyes on hers as if in warning. “And my friend.”

Adelia chewed on her bottom lip. He must’ve heard the way she’d spoken to Carmen before he came downstairs. “Nice to meet you. I’m sorry for snapping. It’s a tense time right now.”

Carmen waved her off. “Don’t worry about it.”

Adelia reached up and attempted to smooth down her wild hair. “I love your shoes.” A compliment couldn’t hurt after how sassy she’d been.

“Thank you. They were a gift. No way could I afford them myself, and I only wear them once in a while when I have to get dressed up.”

“Why are you so dressed up, Car?” Oliver asked.

“I have a funeral to attend this morning.”

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“That’s right.” He stepped back and stood to Adelia’s side, his arm brushing hers, causing all the hairs on her arm to stand on end.

“Would you excuse me for a minute?” Adelia said. “I need to take care of this.” She pointed at her head as she walked away, hearing Oliver and Carmen chuckle as she headed up the stairs.

It wasn’t like her to be so snippy with someone she’d just met, but she couldn’t help it. A strange instinct had taken over, and the words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

She was curious about this woman, Carmen—this friend of his. How close were they? She wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. Was there more than friendship there? He had been single for a few years now. He’d probably dated women since his divorce. She frowned. Why did the thought of Oliver dating anyone else make her heart ache?

Adelia grabbed her brush and went into the bathroom. She really needed a shower, but that could wait. The room smelled of man soap and toothpaste, and she closed her eyes and remembered Oliver standing exactly where she now stood, wearing nothing but a towel and that incredibly sexy smile of his.

She shook her head. It would do her no good to fixate on Oliver’s manliness. It wasn’t like he was interested in her anyway. She was a job and nothing more. He probably saw her as a spoiled rich child. Especially after the way she’d treated his partner.

But even if he was interested, she couldn’t handle commitment right now, and Oliver

didn't seem like the kind of guy who would be okay with a casual relationship.

When she'd brushed her hair out until it was fairly smooth, she went to the bedroom to dress.

In Oliver's little house, voices carried up the stairs quite clearly, and she could hear the conversation going on downstairs. No wonder he'd come down so soon after Carmen arrived.

"Did you get the message I forwarded you from Gus?" Oliver asked.

"Yeah, I'm going to look into the service that cleans the Schultz's lake house today."

"Yeah, from what Gus says, all of the people on that list are given the code, so any of them would've had access to the house."

"Or anyone they gave the code to," she replied.

"True. We'll definitely need to question every one of them."

"I'll handle it. You just keep her safe like you were hired to do."

"I'm doing my best. This isn't exactly something I've done before."

"Are you worried this person will take things further?"

"I hope not. But I've been involved in enough stalker cases to know this person is probably not right in the mind."

That sent a chill through Adelia. Was she really in danger?

By the time she had dressed and come downstairs, Carmen was gone. “Oh, did I miss saying goodbye?”

Oliver arched an eyebrow at her and twisted his lips in disapproval. “You could’ve been a little nicer.”

Adelia took a step closer and crossed her arms over her chest. “I was surprised when a strange woman you never mentioned walked in the door. And then she proceeded to talk to me about what my family’s going through. Not a good first impression.”

“She’s a kind and genuine person and only meant it in the nicest way.”

Adelia dropped her arms and shook it off. “Whatever. It’s fine.”

“Why do I not believe you?”

She shrugged as he went into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot. The whole situation annoyed her, and she wanted to be done with it.

“Coffee?” He held his mug up to her. “It’s not the fancy lattes and cappuccinos you’re probably used to, but—”

“I’ll have you know, I am perfectly fine drinking black coffee. Don’t presume to tell me how I take my coffee.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He released the coffee mug into her outstretched hand with a playful smirk.

She let a little smile cross her face, even though she was still grumpy.

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Oliver proceeded to make bacon and eggs while Adelia sat at the kitchen table, looking on.

“Do you think I’m in danger, Olly?”

He looked over at her with concern in his eyes. “You’re going to be fine. I’ve got you.”

“But I heard you talking to Carmen earlier. What you said about other stalker cases.”

He left the pan and crossed the room to stand beside her chair. Crouching down so they were at eye level, he took her hands in his. “I’m here, and nothing’s going to happen to you on my watch. Okay?” His eyes were locked with hers, and she could’ve easily gotten lost in the deep chocolate brown of them.

“Okay.”

He gave her hands a squeeze and returned to breakfast preparation.

Still, she felt uneasy. His words said one thing, but was that worry she saw behind his eyes?

Television programs kept them company throughout the day. The rest of the time was spent on their computers or phones. Adelia answered urgent emails and dumped all the junk mail. She read a couple more scripts Iris had sent her. The first was a period drama, but it didn’t draw her in, so she set that aside. The next was a comedy in which she would play the best friend. That one got tossed out quickly. Heck no! She

wasn't the best friend. She was the leading lady.

Frustrated, she went back to her computer, browsing social media, but that turned out to be a big mistake. She'd been tagged in a series of photos of her mother with Bryce out and about in London. Definitely not what she wanted to see, but she couldn't pull her eyes away from the smile on her mom's face. She sat there, staring at it for far too long, praying her father was staying off of his computer. Adelia knew her mother's smiles, and the one in the photographs was her genuinely happy smile.

She stared at Bryce next. He was shorter than Mom by a couple inches and looked thin and scrawny, which was the opposite of Adelia's tall, physically fit father. What was it about this guy that had drawn Mom away? He was handsome enough, with black hair and a beard streaked with a little grey, making him look distinguished. Maybe it was the British accent. All she knew was that Mom was making a huge mistake letting Dad go, and one day, she would regret it. Too bad she had to rip their family apart to figure that out.

Tears burned her eyes, and she glanced across the room to see if Oliver noticed, but he was too engrossed in whatever he was doing.

Aside from her family drama, she was beginning to worry about going to California alone next week for the press junket. Yes, she would be staying with Gus and Merritt, but they had their own things to do while there. She couldn't expect them to babysit her the entire time. Maybe she was overreacting. Whoever knew she was here in Michigan probably didn't know she would be heading back to California for the weekend. She would be fine. Wouldn't she?

After mulling it over all afternoon, she finally got up the nerve to say what was on her mind while they were in the kitchen, fixing tacos for dinner.

"I have an idea," she said.

Oliver looked over from where he was browning the ground beef.

She took a deep breath and let it out. “Come to Los Angeles with me.”

His brow furrowed. “Why would I do that?”

“Extra protection, peace of mind, and you said yourself you don’t have much of a social life.”

He frowned at her.

“Come on, Olly. Get out of your bubble for a while.”

“Would you need me to go to the press thing with you?”

“My driver will get me there and back safely, and I’ll be with my manager at the event, so you can go see the sights during the day.” She bumped his hip with hers.

“Maybe you’ll even”—gasp—“talk to other people.”

He bumped her hip with his in reply.

“Is that a yes?” she asked hopefully. “It’s only a couple days—Thursday to Saturday.”

He continued stirring. “I’ll consider it.”

She smiled triumphantly, and he bumped her hip with his again. Was he flirting with her? The thought made her stomach flip-flop, but she had to remember that he was only being nice to her because he was hired to be. Once this was over, he would go back to his day job.

THIRTEEN

An hour had passed since Oliver had gone up to bed, but he hadn't drifted off yet, waiting for Adelia's latest sleepwalking adventure. He feared that, like last night, she would unlock the front door in her sleep and wander outside, and he couldn't have that.

He glanced over at the clock. She had retired to her room before he had, so if she was going to sleepwalk, it probably would've already happened. He breathed a heavy sigh and rolled over, letting himself relax.

Just as he was close to drifting off, he heard the familiar squeak of his doorknob and looked over to see Adelia's silhouette in his doorway. The faint glow from the nightlight at the end of the hall made her look almost angelic.

The loose cotton sleep shirt she wore hung about mid-thigh and gave him a view of her long smooth legs as she floated across the floor toward him.

She stopped beside his bed, and he propped himself up on his elbows and looked up at her.

"Adelia?" he whispered.

No response came, but she turned and sat down on the bed, causing him to scoot over to make room. She twisted until she was facing him, pulled the covers over herself, and lay down with her head resting on his pillow.

He smiled to himself, knowing she would be shocked to learn the things she'd been doing in her sleep lately. After tonight, he really needed to tell her. But in the meantime, he made room and let her settle in. He needed to make sure she was asleep before he moved to the guest room.

He lay his head on the other pillow and watched her, looking so peaceful despite everything going on in her life right now. He reached over and smoothed a hair back from her face. That was all he meant to do, but his fingertips traced along the contour from her temple to her jaw. Her skin was so soft and smooth, and she was radiant, even in her sleep.

She let out a soft hum, and he pulled his hand back, but it was too late. She breathed in deep through her nose and reached out for him, arching her body toward his. Her hand landed on his bare chest, sending goosebumps over the surface of his skin. He closed his eyes as her hand traveled in a path to his hip, sliding around his back, until she had managed to snuggle up against him, burrowing her face into his neck, like she had when he carried her all those nights. Only this was not like him carrying her. They were body to body, close and intimate, her breath warm against his neck, her fingertips gently trailing up and down his back, every nerve in his body on high alert.

As much as he needed to get out of there, he knew he had to wait until he could carefully extricate himself from the situation without waking her. Because if he moved now and she woke up, she would surely be embarrassed and humiliated. And what if she asked for a different bodyguard? He didn't want someone else looking out for her now. He was invested in this situation, in her, and he wanted to see it through to the end.

So he stayed still, struggling against his body's traitorous reactions, praying she would drift into a deeper sleep soon.

For a moment, he imagined what it would be like to touch her the way she was

touching him, to feel her smooth skin beneath his palm. He wondered what it would feel like to kiss those full, petal pink lips of hers, and to have her return the kiss. He shook away those thoughts before he got carried away and gave in, which he could not do.

As much as he enjoyed Adelia's company, they came from very different worlds. She was ten years younger than he was. And he was her bodyguard. Crossing that line would be unprofessional. Besides, Adelia didn't see him in a romantic light. She was seeking some kind of comfort in her sleep right now, that's all it was. He couldn't fault her for something beyond her control.

Several minutes later, Adelia's breathing steadied out again, and her hand slowed until it was no longer moving against his back, which he was relieved about. He slowly put some distance between them, an inch at a time, until he could see her face. Her lips were parted, and her body had relaxed. Now was his chance.

He reached up with one arm and carefully moved her arm to the bed between them as he rolled back a little to make even more space. Carefully, he sat up and turned, climbing out on the opposite side.

Before he left the room, he rounded the bed and tucked Adelia in. Then he slowly leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of her head before crossing the hall to the guest room for the night.

The bed smelled like her, and as hard as he tried, he couldn't get thoughts of her out of his head. He groaned as he flopped his arm across his face. He really needed to get a girlfriend. It had been far too long since he'd dated, and he'd done very little of that since his divorce. Dating would require him to actually go out and meet new people.

He rolled over and drifted off with the scent of Adelia on the pillowcase and the lingering feeling of her in his arms.

In the morning, Oliver was abruptly awakened by a pillow slammed against his head.

“Hey!” he cried as the pillow moved away.

Adelia swung the pillow at his head again, and he raised his arm just in time to block his face.

“What are you doing?” He scrambled to get out of the bed.

“Why was I in your bed?” Her eyes were wide, searching for answers.

He held his arms up. “Put the pillow down, and I’ll explain.”

She eyed him over the pillow but kept it in her grip.

His eyes met hers and held. “You sleepwalked into my room.”

The pillow lowered. “No, I did not.”

“Uh, yeah, you did.”

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She shook her head in confusion. “That’s ... no, I haven’t sleepwalked since I was a kid.”

“Well, I’ve witnessed it every night. You are most definitely sleepwalking.”

“Every night? Since when?”

“Since the first night I stayed with you.”

“What? Are you serious?”

He nodded.

Adelia dropped the pillow and walked over to the window seat, curling up on it with her legs tucked under her. Her eyes drifted to look outside. She appeared deep in thought, and he waited for her to speak when she was ready.

“I used to sleepwalk, but it’s been a lifetime ago. I saw a therapist, and it went away. I thought it was just a childhood thing.” She finally looked over at him with apology in her eyes. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t do anything embarrassing, did I?”

“Not really.” How could he tell her about last night?

She quirked her brow. “Okay, you have to tell me now.”

“The first night, you came out of your room with a blanket, stood by the window in a blank stare, then you put the blanket on the table and used it as your pillow.”

She laughed. “Not too crazy.” Her forehead scrunched up. “Did I walk back to my room then?”

“I carried you.”

Her mouth fell open. “You carried me?” Her hands covered her face, her words muffled. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m here to take care of you. Even if it means carrying you to your room.”

“Please tell me that’s all I’ve done.”

“The first night we were here, you went downstairs and outside and laid down on the porch swing.”

Her eyes widened like saucers. “No.”

“I found you before anyone else did.” He gave her a reassuring smile. “It’s all good.”

She glanced toward the doorway. “So, I kicked you out of your bed last night then?”

He couldn’t control the heat that colored his cheeks. “Uh, yeah.”

Her eyes narrowed as she met his. “What? Just tell me.”

“Let’s just say, you were in the mood to cuddle.”

Her cheeks turned beet red, and she covered her face again. “Nooo.” She pulled her legs tighter against herself and looked at him. “Oliver, I am so sorry if I made you uncomfortable, throwing myself at you like that. Especially after walking in on you

yesterday in the bathroom. I feel too embarrassed to know what to say right now.”

“It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t know you were doing it.” He shrugged to let her know it was no big deal. “And it wasn’t uncomfortable at all.” He shouldn’t have said that but it slipped before he thought about his words, and so did the wink he gave her.

A hint of a smile crossed her face.

“I’ll get out of here so you can get ready,” he told her.

She nodded, and he stopped to make the bed first.

He glanced over and noticed her gaze had slid down and was fixed on his backside, and he turned back to the bed before he gave away that he’d seen her. He didn’t want her to feel any more embarrassed than she already did, but he smiled to himself, knowing she was checking him out.

“Do you want pancakes?” he asked when he finished the bed.

“Sure.”

He moved toward the door.

“Oliver.”

He stopped and looked over at her.

“Can I get chocolate chips in those?”

“I’ll see if I have any.”

Her lips curled up in a cute smile that melted his insides. “Thanks.”

He shook his head as he walked down the stairs. If he wasn’t careful, this girl was going to sleepwalk her way into his heart.

FOURTEEN

Adelia sat in the window seat for far longer than she probably should have. She couldn't believe what Oliver had told her. It had been years since she'd walked in her sleep. She wondered if maybe it was caused by the stress over her parents' separation. Separation? She hated even thinking that word because most times the next word in that situation was the d-word and she really didn't want it to come to that. But the way things were going, she was pretty sure it eventually would.

She chewed on her bottom lip as she wondered what exactly she'd done last night. He said she'd cuddled with him. But how exactly? Her mind wandered through the possibilities. Did she kiss him? Did she touch him inappropriately? Her stomach churned at the thought.

He was extremely gracious about the whole thing, but she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to get past it. How could this have happened?

When the scent of pancakes wafted its way up the stairs, she finally headed to the bathroom to get cleaned up for the day. After a nice hot shower to try and wash away her embarrassment—which didn't work, by the way—she headed downstairs.

She shuffled into the kitchen, head down and disgraced, and took a seat.

Oliver chuckled. "You look like someone ate all your chocolate chip pancakes."

She frowned at him with a hint of playfulness.

“Lighten up, Addy. No harm done.” He removed a pan from the oven, which contained a few stacks of chocolate chip pancakes, and put them on a serving plate. “I kept them warm for you.”

That made her heart feel all gooey like the melted chocolate chips. “Aww, Olly, you’re so sweet. Especially after I groped you in your sleep.”

Oliver burst out laughing. “There was no groping. Don’t worry.”

That was a relief.

He set the plate on the table along with some syrup, orange juice, and milk.

“Dig in,” he said as he poured himself a glass of milk.

Oliver’s pancakes were golden brown with loads of chocolate chips, and they tasted heavenly. “Mmm. So good.”

The two of them ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes before Adelia chose to shift the subject away from her utter embarrassment.

“So, have you thought about what I asked you? About coming to Los Angeles?”

He nodded. “If you’ll feel safer having me there, then I can’t refuse.”

“I really will. And with the weird sleepwalking thing ... we’ll be staying with Gus and Merritt, and it would make me feel better if you’re there, and you can keep me from doing anything ... humiliating.”

He smirked. “You don’t have to convince me, Addy. I’m here to help.”

“You look nervous,” Oliver said when their plane touched down at LAX.

“Last time I was here, I was bombarded by paparazzi. Not really looking forward to that.”

“Well, so far, they don’t know where you’ve been so how would they know this is your flight?”

“They always seem to know.” Adelia pulled the wig from her bag and placed it on her head.

Oliver pointed at the wig and tilted his head to the right.

She shifted it to the left. “Better?”

He reached up and put his hands over hers and adjusted it. His palms lingered against the backs of her hands, and his eyes moved from the wig to her eyes before dipping to her lips. “Perfect.”

She gave him a little smile, and he lowered his hands, leaving a chill the moment the contact was gone.

They thanked the pilot and crew and headed out of the airport, where Andre was waiting with the town car.

“Welcome home, Miss Allen,” he said as he rounded the car and took their bags.

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“Thanks, Andre. This is my friend, Oliver.”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Andre said.

“You too.”

They climbed in, and Adelia sank against the seat cushion.

“See, nothing to worry about,” Oliver told her.

“You have no idea how relieved I am.”

The driver got in and closed his door. “To the Schultz’s house, correct?”

“That’s right,” she replied. “But if the coast is clear, let’s stop by my house first.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Oliver looked at her and mouthed, “Yes, ma’am,” and she gave him a playful glare.

The time in California may have been three hours earlier, but Adelia’s stomach was still on Michigan time and growled as loud as a bear.

“I feel ya,” Oliver said. “It’s past my dinnertime too.”

She chuckled. “I’m so hungry, I could eat my own arm.”

Oliver laughed.

Adelia liked the sound of his laughter. She also liked the way his eyes crinkled and his face lit up when he laughed. She tamped down that line of thinking and changed the subject.

“So, what will you do tomorrow while I’m at the junket?”

“I’m not sure. What do you recommend?”

“Do you want the typical tourist experience? If so, you could go to Hollywood Boulevard and see the Walk of Fame.”

“Oh, right, all the stars on the sidewalk.” He nodded. “And the Chinese Theater.”

“And Santa Monica Pier is a favorite among tourists.”

“Maybe.”

“You could go to Venice Beach. The boardwalk there is full of lots of interesting things and great for people-watching.” She tried to get a read on his level of interest, but he gave nothing away. “Or Griffith Park. The observatory’s there, and you’ll get a great view of the Hollywood sign.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“You could go to Disneyland.”

He let out a laugh.

“Help me out here, Olly. I just want you to have fun while you’re here.”

“Not sure any of that would be much fun by myself.”

“I wish I could go with you. I’d much rather play tourist than what I have to do.”

He looked over at her. “If you could be completely anonymous for a day, what would you do?”

“I wouldn’t mind doing any of those things. This might be hard to believe, but I’ve led a pretty sheltered life. My parents kept me out of the public when I was younger. We didn’t go many places around here because their fame made it impossible for us to have any privacy.” She tilted her head. “I have actually been to the Hollywood Walk of Fame ... when my parents got their stars. And my parents took me to the observatory when I was little, but they rented the place after hours so it was just us there.”

“That’s cool.”

She shrugged. “I guess. But I think in some ways, it was really unhealthy for me. I was afraid to go out when I was younger, afraid I’d be recognized. I think it’s what triggered my sleepwalking back then. There was a level of fear instilled in me that I worked hard to get over. Years of therapy helped, and eventually, I accepted it as my normal.” She rolled her eyes. “As normal as it is for people to stop me for a photo or ask about my parents.” She shook her head, realizing she’d been rambling. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I told you all of that when we were talking about sightseeing.”

He laid his hand atop hers. “You can tell me anything.”

She leaned over and placed a kiss on his cheek. “Thanks, Olly.”

His eyes locked with hers before drifting down to her lips. “Anytime.”

She smiled as she sat back and looked ahead out the windshield, trying to calm her racing heart. What was she doing?

“The coast is clear, miss,” Andre suddenly said as they approached her home.

“Okay.”

He stopped the vehicle next to the gate, entered the code, and the gate swung open.

“I’m just going to pick up a few things. Want to come in?” she asked Oliver.

“Sure.”

They approached the house, and she opened the door and stood to the side, making a sweeping motion with her arm to usher him inside.

“Welcome to my humble abode.”

FIFTEEN

Humble abode? There was nothing humble about it. The foyer alone was nearly the same footprint as his entire house. And they hadn't even moved into the main living area yet. He swallowed hard as he walked through. This was where she grew up? He couldn't imagine. Just like he couldn't imagine hopping on a private jet whenever he felt like it.

Still, there was a warmth about it that felt friendly and inviting. While the space was open and bright with off-white walls, the Oriental rugs in shades of red, pink, and blue, covering the light hardwood floors, made the space feel homey.

"I'm going to get my things. Feel free to explore," Adelia said as she headed up a set of stairs.

Oliver took her up on that, wandering through the kitchen, the living area, and out the sliding doors to the large backyard space that gave way to an infinity pool. To one side of the pool was a small guest house. And beyond was the breathtaking beauty of the Pacific Ocean in all its glory with the sun sitting just above the horizon. The sky was colored in streaks of orange and gold, fading up into violets and blues. It was one of the prettiest sunsets he'd ever seen.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there looking at it. He could've stayed there for hours, watching the colors deepen after the sun disappeared for the day.

This was his first time seeing the Pacific Ocean. The largest body of water he'd seen before now was the Atlantic Ocean once when he was a kid on a trip to Myrtle Beach.

That was the last vacation his family took before their world was torn apart. And he hadn't traveled much since.

He felt Adelia's presence before she made herself known. It was funny how that happened with her.

"What do you think?" she asked.

He glanced over at her then back at the ocean. "It's awe-inspiring."

"I meant my house," she said with a cute laugh.

He smiled over at her. "That too."

She smacked his arm playfully. "Whatever."

"It's a great house, Adelia. I can't imagine growing up here, though."

"We split our time between here and the house in Beverly Hills."

Two houses? He could barely afford one.

"I wish we could stay here, but I have a feeling we would wake up with paparazzi outside the gate. I don't want to put you through that."

"I can handle it if this is where you want to be."

"You're the sweetest, Olly, but we'll be better off at Gus's."

Oliver turned back toward the house and noticed a bag inside the sliding door. "Can I help you with this?" He walked over and took the bag before she had a chance to

reply.

“It looks like you can.”

He smiled and bumped her with his elbow as she walked past him.

They made their way to the car and went to Gus’s, where the gate was already open for them.

Merritt came running out of the house to greet them. “You’re here! I’m so happy!”

Gus came out then to help with their bags while the girls hugged and chattered.

The Schultz’s Malibu home was one-story and looked to have at least four or five bedrooms by the area it took up. It was an open concept, like Adelia’s, with a large kitchen, dining area, living area, and a patio outside with a pool and another amazing view of the ocean.

“Great place,” Oliver commented as he followed Gus down the hallway.

“Thanks. We like it.” He chuckled. “You’ll be in here, and Adelia will be in there.” He pointed to rooms across the hall from each other. “We’re across the house in the master.”

“Cool. This is great. Thanks for letting us stay,” he said as he put his bags just inside the door of his room and Adelia’s in hers.

“Hey, no problem,” Gus replied. “I’m just glad you came. Not that I really think this creep is after more than her money, but you never know these days, and I’d rather she has you around, just in case.” Gus grabbed his shoulder and squeezed. “You’re a good friend to our family, Oliver. I don’t know if I can ever thank you for all you’ve

done over the past couple years.”

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“I like your family, and I feel honored that you all trust me so much.” They walked down the hallway to the living area. “And I’m glad you got all your stuff worked out.”

Gus nodded. “Me too.” He stepped up beside Merritt and put his arm around her back, bringing her into his side. “This one had a lot to do with that.”

“What did I do?” she asked.

He pressed a kiss to her temple. “You fell in love with me.”

She smiled up at him with a twinkle in her eyes. “Guilty.”

They shared a kiss, and Oliver looked at Adelia, who was watching them with a half-smile on her face. He wasn’t sure how to interpret it, and he didn’t know much about her friendship with Merritt or all the circumstances that had brought Gus and Merritt together. Maybe Adelia wished it had been her and Gus. He knew they had been friends since they were kids. Maybe there had been something more between them along the way but it hadn’t worked out.

Oliver was surprised by how curious he was about it, and he found himself saying, “I’d love to hear your story.”

The three of them exchanged glances and started to laugh.

“That good, huh?” Oliver asked.

“Let’s get a drink first,” Gus said.

Adelia lay her hand on his bicep. “You’re in for an interesting tale of enemies to lovers.”

He smiled, trying to ignore the spark that danced up his arm at her touch. “I’m intrigued.”

Gus poured them drinks, and they settled in the living room. Merritt snuggled up next to him on the couch as they told their story—from Merritt almost hitting him with her car, meeting at Adelia’s Christmas party, their strong dislike for each other, and Gus’s sudden fake marriage proposal. They shared how their friendship had blossomed and their fake displays of affection had turned real until they actually fell in love.

Oliver shook his head. He could not have guessed that’s how their relationship began.

“We almost ended the marriage,” Gus said. “I even had the paperwork drawn up, and we both signed. But it was before I knew how she really felt about me. I was trying to do the right thing and give her back her freedom.”

“But I didn’t want it,” Merritt said. “I only wanted him.”

Gus drew her close. “So we tore them up.”

“But I thought you guys were getting married in December,” Oliver said.

“We are. More of a renewing of the vows,” Gus explained.

“We didn’t mean them the first time,” Merritt said, “and I really want an actual wedding, not at the courthouse, with my parents there, so we can say the vows again

in front of everyone we love.”

“That’s great,” Oliver said.

“What a story for the grandkids someday, right?” Adelia said.

They all laughed.

“Not sure we’re ready for that yet,” Gus said.

Merritt smiled over at him.

After all that Gus had been through the past couple years—changing his bad-boy ways, trying to prove to his family he was capable of running the company alongside his siblings, and dealing with legal trouble from his sister’s ex—Oliver was pleased to see him so happy and in such a good place.

Oliver noticed Adelia yawning and stood as he said, “It’s getting kind of late for us. I think this one needs some rest.”

“Darn jet lag,” Adelia mumbled as she got up.

Gus and Merritt stood.

“We’ll let you get to bed then.” Merritt hugged Adelia. “Goodnight. I’m so glad you’re here.”

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“Me too,” she replied. “We can talk wedding plans tomorrow.”

The girls squeezed each other tight, then Merritt gave Oliver a hug. “Goodnight, Oliver.”

“Goodnight,” he said.

Oliver and Adelia walked side by side down the hall to their rooms.

“Maybe I’ll be too tired to sleepwalk tonight.” Her cheeks colored a pretty shade of pink. Maybe she was thinking about what had happened last night because she avoided looking Oliver in the eye.

“I’ll be sure to lock my door.”

Her mouth fell open as her eyes met his, and she playfully smacked his arm. “Hey there.”

He laughed. “I deserved that.”

She stopped by her door and nodded toward his. “You’ll leave the door open, though, right? Just in case.”

“Of course, I will.” He gave her an understanding smile.

And then she hugged him. Her arms wrapped around his back, her chin came to rest against his shoulder, and her soft body molded into his in a full-on embrace. All the

wires in his brain went haywire. The connections that should've been in fine working order were sparking and snapping as if overloaded, and his brain was no longer in control of what he was doing. His arms slid around her back as he held her body tightly against his. The beats of his heart were loud in his ears, and he could've sworn he felt hers pounding against his chest too. He knew he needed to let her go, but he didn't move to do it, and neither did she. This felt good. Too good. It had been a long time since he'd had a woman in his arms like this. And she wasn't there because she had sleepwalked, but because she chose to be this close to him.

"Olly?" she whispered.

"Yeah?" he replied, an unexpected hope brewing within.

"I feel so safe with you."

The wires in his brain reconnected and righted themselves. The sudden attraction and physical response fizzled as he realized what this was really about. She was grateful to him for keeping her safe. That's all this was to her.

He gave her a squeeze and let go.

"Goodnight, Olly."

"Night, Addy."

She gave him a shy glance over her shoulder and closed the door behind her.

He threw himself onto the bed in his room.

What was I thinking?

SIXTEEN

As the town car traveled along the highway toward the Hollywood hotel where the press junket was set to take place, Adelia's thoughts lingered on the moment in the hallway last night. The surge of gratitude for how Oliver had taken care of her the past couple of weeks had suddenly come out in the form of a hug. At first, she was worried she'd crossed a line, but then his arms came around her, holding her tightly against him, and he didn't let go. That was when her heart rate sped up and the butterflies went crazy in her stomach. Being in his arms felt so right, and she never wanted it to end.

Something was happening between them, and she didn't want to fight it anymore. She was sure he felt the same, and it filled her with an excitement and anticipation she hadn't felt in a long time. What she wanted more than anything was to tell Andre to turn the car around and head back to the house so she could spend the day sightseeing with Oliver. And that longing was suddenly exacerbated by the mob of photographers waiting outside the hotel when the car pulled up to the entrance.

Adelia groaned loudly, and Andre gave her an understanding look in the rearview mirror before getting out of the vehicle.

She took several deep breaths to prepare herself for the onslaught.

The door opened, and before she was even out of the vehicle, she was bombarded with photographs and question after question about her parents.

Andre shielded her as they walked. He was tall and brawny and had no trouble

getting her through the crowd to the concierge who was waiting for her at the door.

Once inside, she smoothed her hair and her blouse and noticed her manager, Iris, standing across the lobby with a smile on her face.

“Good morning, Adelia.”

“Is it?” Adelia raised an eyebrow as she passed her by. She walked to the elevators, the sound of Iris’s clicking heels following her.

Iris caught up. “It is a good morning, and you’re going to put on your happy face and promote the heck out of this movie today.” She continued talking as they rode the elevator. “The buzz for this one is already big, and people want to hear about it and how much you enjoyed working with everyone.”

Adelia snorted. “You think they’re going to believe I liked working with Layton?” He may have been one of the most in-demand leading men at the moment, but he was still a selfish, conceited playboy, and his fans knew it.

“You may hate him off-screen, but you didn’t always. And there’s no denying your chemistry.”

Adelia smirked. “That’s called acting.”

Iris rolled her eyes as they came off of the elevator.

They made their way into a suite that was set up for the interviews with a large printed movie poster behind two chairs. There were wires and lights and microphones everywhere as well as a seat for the interviewer.

Adelia’s gaze fixed on the two chairs. “Isn’t this a solo interview?”

Iris chewed on her bottom lip and tucked her smooth chin-length auburn hair behind her ear.

Adelia's breath caught in her throat. "Iris, no."

"I'm sorry, Adelia."

"I told you I didn't want to interview with him. It was bad enough being locked into that movie contract after I dumped him."

"It was the studio's choice. They want their favorite couple together, showing that despite your past, you are still ... friendly."

"But we aren't."

"Well, act like you are. It gives the public hope that maybe you'll get back together someday."

Adelia laughed at the absurdity.

On a normal day, she loved Iris. She was the best manager Adelia had ever had. She was young, only a few years older than Adelia, and had proved herself capable and savvy, always working hard behind the scenes, trying to find her the best scripts and projects. Lately, Iris was working alongside her family's agent, Barney, to try to make Adelia's dream project a reality. So she couldn't be too angry with Iris about this interview. She was just doing her job.

The first of the interviewers soon arrived, and everyone took their places. Everyone except Layton, that is. His manager kept glancing at the door, looking mad enough to spit nails.

“Typical,” Adelia mumbled under her breath to Iris, who pointed at the microphone above her head that had picked it up. She chuckled. “Oops.”

“I guess it doesn’t pay to be the first interviewer of the day,” the young guy seated across from her said.

“If you want to ask me some questions without Layton, that’s cool with me.”

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“One obvious question comes to mind.”

“Should I be nervous?”

He smiled. “Was Layton always late to set?”

She laughed and was about to answer when the door swung open.

“I’m here! Let the interviews begin!” Layton strolled in like he owned the place, latte in hand, and leaned down to place a kiss on Adelia’s cheek as he passed by. “Miss me, beautiful?”

She tried her best not to cringe and gave him her best fake smile. “We all did.” She motioned around the room.

“Traffic. What can ya do?” He plopped down in the chair next to her and flipped his head to one side to move his beach blond hair out of his eye.

Adelia fought against the urge to roll her eyes. She was one hundred percent sure he’d rolled out of bed late due to whatever partying he’d done the night before, left some woman behind in his bed, and stopped for that latte on the way, not thinking twice about whether he’d be on time.

Nevertheless, the interview commenced, and fifteen minutes later, the nice young man bid them farewell and was on his way before another was ushered into the room and the process repeated.

They took turns talking about how much fun they had working together—lies, all lies—and how much they loved the director—that part was true. A couple of people asked about their personal relationship and what it was like working together, and Layton made sure to lay it on thick that Adelia was the greatest girl he'd ever dated and that they were still great friends and always would be. Adelia simply plastered on a smile and agreed.

Not once did an interviewer ask about her parents' situation, and she knew she had Iris to thank for that. She hadn't realized the undercurrent of worry that had been running through her with each new person that entered the room, so when the final interviewer left, her entire body relaxed from extreme relief.

Adelia pulled out her phone and noticed a few messages and a text from Oliver. He'd sent her a picture of himself in front of the Hollywood sign with the caption "Ollywood." She smiled so big, she thought her face might crack.

"Who's that? Your latest conquest?" Layton stood behind her shoulder, leaning over to look at her screen.

She tilted her phone away and glared up at him. "You're the one with the endless list of conquests. And I regret being one of them."

He touched her chin. "You were more than that, and you know it."

"Touch me again, and see what happens."

Layton took his hand away, and she gathered her things and stood facing him.

"Hey, I heard about your parents," he said. "That sucks."

"Yeah."

“I always thought if anyone would cheat, it would be your dad.”

His words made her stomach churn. “Excuse me?”

“He’s a good-looking man for his age. Always buff for those action movies he’s done. If I starred opposite all the sexy leading ladies he has, there’s no way I wouldn’t partake.”

Her eyes narrowed as the fury built up inside.

“Isn’t that how your mom and dad got together? On a movie set?”

“Stop talking,” she gritted out.

“Must be old habits die hard for your mom. But I don’t blame Bryce. Your mom’s hot. I’d hit that.”

She couldn’t help it. Her fist flew before she could stop herself and connected with the center of his face.

“Ah!” he cried out as he grabbed his nose. His eyes were wild with shock. “You ... you punched me.”

“You are a disgusting excuse for a man.” She rubbed her knuckles, realizing what she’d done.

When he moved his hand away, blood was trickling down his lips onto his chin. “I could sue you for this.”

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She narrowed her eyes at him. “You won’t do that. I have too much dirt on you.”

One of the studio’s assistants came over with a wet washcloth and some ice. Layton grabbed it from her and wiped at his face as he took off out of the room with her and his manager on his heels.

Adelia looked over at Iris, whose lips were pressed together.

“Adelia,” she said on a laugh.

“I know, I know. I shouldn’t have done that.”

They headed out and made their way to the elevators. On the ride down to the first floor, Iris’s phone rang, and she groaned. “It’s the studio.”

“That was quick.” Adelia worried she might have caused a problem for herself, but she wasn’t sorry she’d done it.

“You go home,” Iris said. “I’ll clean up this mess.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shook her head and waved Adelia off. “He deserved what he got.”

Adelia smiled and pulled out her phone to let Andre know she was ready. Then she texted Oliver a reply to his picture.

See, I told you. You fit right in with a name like that.

She waited in the hotel lobby until she spotted Andre. The paparazzi were still waiting outside, and at the sight of Andre, they backed off enough for her to get to her car. She did hear one of them ask about Layton leaving the building with a bloody nose, and she wanted so badly to answer that, but she didn't. He would no doubt come up with some story about how it happened for the interviews tomorrow. If he bothered to show. The producers would not be happy with her if he didn't. But she didn't care. All she cared about at the moment was getting to Gus's to see Oliver.

SEVENTEEN

Oliver's day of sightseeing had been very enjoyable with Gus as his tour guide. They'd gone to Griffith Park as Adelia had suggested and had a nice morning hike to the top. He couldn't resist having Gus take his picture by the Hollywood sign.

It was surprising how many sights Gus packed into one day. They got some food at Venice Beach and watched the street performers for a while and still had time to check out Santa Monica Pier and see a bunch of the stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

They were seated on the patio at Gus's, enjoying the late afternoon with a couple of ice-cold beers, when Adelia strolled outside and took a seat on the end of Oliver's chaise lounge.

"You two look relaxed," she commented as she swiped Gus's bottle and took a swig.

"Hey! Get your own!"

She chuckled as she handed it back then looked at Oliver. "How was your day?"

Oliver's eyes fixed on her hand, puffed and swollen, and he sat up swiftly and took it between his. "What happened?"

She smirked. "I punched Layton in the nose."

Gus's laughter echoed around the yard.

Anger flared through Oliver. “Did he do something to you?”

“Just opened his big, stupid mouth.”

He looked down at her hand, softly moving his thumb over the swollen skin. “Does it hurt?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll get you some ice,” Gus said.

“Thanks, Gus,” she said as he stood and headed into the house. “Olly, you look so worried.”

He looked into her eyes. “I don’t like that you were hurt, and I wasn’t there.”

“You should’ve seen the other guy,” she teased.

Gus returned with the ice, and Oliver let go of her hand. It was clear Adelia was able to take care of herself just fine, and he admired that, but he worried about her more than he’d realized.

“Other than Layton, how did the interviews go?” Gus asked.

“Fine.” She looked at Oliver again. “I want to hear about your day.”

“We hit all the tourist spots in town,” Gus replied for Oliver.

“Oh, you went too?”

“Yeah, Merritt was working today.”

“So, you went to Griffith Park. Did you hit Venice Beach?”

“We did,” Oliver replied. “And you were right. Lots of good people-watching.”

A smile lit up her face. “I knew you’d like it there.”

“So many street performers.”

“What was your favorite?”

“I don’t know if I can pick just one.”

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Adelia got a wistful look. “I wish I could’ve gone with you guys. It would’ve been much better than this.” She held up her hand.

“What exactly happened?” Oliver asked. “I’d like to know.”

“I knew Layton would be there for the interviews, but I didn’t realize we were doing them together. He just pushed my buttons all day, and then he made some rude comments about my parents that sent me over the edge.” She laughed as she remembered the look on Layton’s face. “I might’ve broken his nose.”

Gus held his hand up in the air, and Adelia gave him a high five with her good hand.

“Did anyone ask about your parents, besides Lame-ton?” Gus asked.

Adelia chuckled. “Actually, no. They stuck to questions about the movie. I was relieved. Hopefully, tomorrow will be more of the same.” She let out a sigh. “I’ll just be glad when it’s over, and we can head back to Michigan.”

Gus got a call then and excused himself.

“So, this Layton guy. He’s your ex, right?” Oliver asked.

“Yeah. He’s the one you saw me on the billboard with.”

“Ah,” he replied with a nod.

“We dated for a while, and I thought things were going well. He seemed happy, and

we both signed on to this romantic comedy together as the love interests, then I found out he'd been sleeping around, so I kicked him to the curb. But we still had this movie to film, and my agent advised me not to break the contract, not only for the money, but for my career. I shouldn't have done it. I should have bowed out, no matter what it cost me. But my mom also told me to honor my commitments." She shook her head and let out a breath in a huff. "How hypocritical is that?"

Oliver didn't know what to say. It seemed like a bad situation all around. So, he simply took hold of her good hand and gave it a squeeze.

She smiled over at him. "I can't go back and change it now. I just wish I'd known he would be there today. My manager neglected that little detail. Probably because she knew how I'd react. And she was right. But I tried to be professional, Olly. I really did."

"What did he say to you?"

Adelia filled him in on the things Layton had said, and he shook his head in disgust. "You absolutely did the right thing."

That brought a laugh out of her, and he adored that sound.

"Hey, I have to take off," Gus said as he returned to the patio. "I told Merritt I'd meet her for dinner after work. You guys are welcome to come along."

Adelia looked at Oliver then back at Gus. "No, thanks." Her eyes met Oliver's again. "I have a better idea."

Whoever said you can't go to California without taking a drive up the Pacific Coast Highway was right. Gus had dropped them off at Adelia's so they could get her little black convertible, and she let Oliver drive them north, passing beaches, rocks, homes,

and shops. The scenery was incredible and definitely worth the trip.

He glanced over at Adelia, whose head was back and eyes closed with a smile on her face.

“This was a great idea,” Oliver told her.

Her eyes opened and found his. “It’s beautiful, right?”

He nodded, thinking that word applied to more than just the view.

“We’re going to turn off at a beach about five miles up ahead.”

When they arrived, she directed him where to go, and they parked and got out. There were still quite a few people out for a late October evening, enjoying the above-average temperatures.

Adelia hovered around the car for a few minutes, fiddling with her bag or her phone.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

She looked off down the road.

“No, I’m waiting for someone. I thought she’d be here by now.”

She? Why did he think this was going to be an evening with just the two of them? He really needed to stop letting his mind get carried away with him and making more of their situation than it was.

“There she is!” Adelia’s face lit up.

A short, stocky woman with dark brown hair stepped out of a car and rounded to her trunk before heading in their direction. She was carrying a blanket and a basket.

“Marta, thank you for doing this,” Adelia said as she took the items from Marta’s arms.

“You’re welcome, Miss Allen,” Marta said. “Will there be anything else?”

“That’s all.”

“Have a nice evening then,” she said.

Oliver held his hand out to her before she walked away. “Hello, I’m Oliver.”

The woman gave a little smile as she shook his hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m Marta.”

Adelia had a blush on her cheeks. “I’m so sorry. Marta is my parents’ household manager. She takes care of their home, coordinates the staff and the schedules and everything. The whole place would fall apart without you, Marta.”

“Thank you for saying that.” She smiled at Oliver. “Enjoy yourselves.”

As soon as she was out of earshot, Adelia said, “I feel so bad for not introducing you. She never really talks to me much, aside from household tasks. She doesn’t mingle with us or our guests. I think I sometimes forget she’s even there.”

“Until you need something.”

Her eyebrows raised at him.

“Sorry, that was rude. It wasn’t my place.”

“No, you’re right. She’s a person with feelings, not just an employee, and I should remember that.” She lifted the basket in her hand. “And she came all the way from Beverly Hills to bring us these.”

“What do we have here?” He tried to open the top of the picnic basket, but she snapped it down before he had a chance to see.

“Not yet, mister.”

He reached for the basket. “Here, let me. Before you hurt your hand.”

“You just want to peek inside.”

“I promise, I won’t.”

She handed it over and narrowed her eyes. “I’m watching you.”

He smiled as they headed out onto the beach.

For the most part, people were doing their own thing, not really looking their way, and for Adelia’s sake, he hoped that would continue. They moved down the beach to a more secluded spot, and she shook out the blanket. He helped her smooth it out, then pushed the corners down into the sand and scooped small piles of sand over them to keep the blanket in place.

“Nice trick,” Adelia observed.

“Is it? I’ve always done it. Maybe it’s a Michigan thing.”

Adelia shrugged her shoulders and went about emptying the basket of its contents, which included place settings for two, complete with linen napkins and silverware, and In-and-Out burgers and fries for the main course.

Oliver laughed as she unwrapped the fast food and placed it on the fancy plates.

“Only the best California cuisine for you, Ollywood.”

With the sun dipping low in the sky, they were basked in a golden light that made Adelia look even more angelic than she usually did. Her blonde hair was glowing, and her eyes sparkled. He couldn’t help but stare, entranced by her beauty.

“I lost you there for a minute.” Adelia held the plate up in front of his face.

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He tilted his head down shyly, hoping he hadn't looked like too much of a fool. He couldn't seem to help himself when it came to her. He didn't think he'd ever been in the presence of such a stunning woman before. Sometimes she didn't seem real.

But it wasn't only her appearance that drew him to her. She was strong and intelligent and funny, and talking to her was easy and comfortable, which wasn't usually the case for him with women.

They ate in silence, enjoying another breathtaking sunset, then Adelia moved the basket aside and scooted closer, stretching her legs out in front of her. She leaned back on her hands like he was already doing, and her arm rested against his.

He swallowed at the feel of her warm, silky skin against his and tried to keep his eyes off of those long, smooth legs before him.

"I like you, Oliver Wood."

He wasn't sure he'd heard her correctly.

"You're such a good guy. You've been such a loyal friend to the Schultz family and now to me."

Right. Friends. That's all they were.

"I'm seeing so many situations differently because you let me see them through your eyes rather than my privileged view of things."

She looked over at him, and their gazes locked.

“I like who I am when I’m with you. I like being around you, talking to you. I feel like I can be myself and not worry about the whole fame thing.” Her voice turned soft as she spoke. “And even before I arrived at the junket today, I was anxious all day, thinking about the moment I would get back to the house so I could see you and hear all about your day.”

What? She was thinking about me?

He shifted and leaned closer, and she did the same. Was this really happening?

Her eyes fell to his mouth, and he thought he might spontaneously combust when she wetted her lips. That was the signal girls made when they wanted to be kissed. She was waiting for him to kiss her, but his brain was still trying to catch up with all this new information she’d thrown at him. And as much as he longed to make this happen, there was still a voice in his head that told him not to go there.

When he didn’t move for several long torturous beats, her eyes lifted to his.

“Did I just make a complete fool of myself?” She sounded insecure, which seemed so out of character for her. “Was I wrong to think there’s something between us?”

He lifted his hand, holding her cheek in his palm. “You weren’t wrong.” His thumb was dangerously close to touching that full bottom lip of hers.

“But?”

“I don’t think we should get swept up in something because we’re stuck together for a few weeks.”

“That’s not what this is. Not for me anyway.”

“We barely know each other.”

“I know. I want to get to know you.”

“We come from very different worlds.”

“Why should that make a difference?”

Oliver lowered his hand. “Because it does. You come from a life of fame and fortune. You’re used to people dropping everything to do things for you. I come from humble beginnings. People don’t just hand me things. I’ve worked every minute of my adult life for what I have.”

Adelia sat up straighter and pulled her knees into her chest, curling into herself like she was hiding from the truth she didn’t want to hear.

“I’m not saying these things to hurt you, Adelia. It is what it is.”

She looked over at him with tears in her eyes. “I didn’t choose this life, Olly. I told you that before. I was born into this. And I would give it all up right now if you’d just give me a chance.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think you really know what you’re saying. And this world you’re from wouldn’t let you walk away so easily.”

“This isn’t fair.” Her lips pressed together in a firm line.

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“Life’s not fair sometimes.”

“So, what you’re saying is that you feel something for me, but I’m not worth it.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“I would. You won’t explore whatever this is because I was born into money and you weren’t.”

She started to get up, and he laid a hand on her knee to stop her.

“It’s more than the money. There’s an entire country between us.”

“There are airplanes for that.”

“I was hired to guard you, Adelia. Ephraim might think I took advantage of the situation.”

“Ephraim Schultz respects you more than pretty much any man in Michigan, Olly. I’m sure he would heartily give us his blessing.”

“You live a very public life, and I’m the complete opposite. I just don’t see how it could work.” His voice cracked from the pain he saw on her face.

She got on her knees in front of him. “How do you know if you won’t try?”

Adelia leaned closer, her soft blonde waves tickling his cheek. She was so close,

hovering there with her lips nearly touching his, waiting for him to make the move.

When he didn't, she sighed and rested her forehead on his shoulder.

"Olly," she whispered.

His hands suddenly took on a life of their own, making a slow journey over her knees, along her hips, and around her waist, tugging her to sit sideways on his lap.

She gazed up at him, every ounce of hope visible in her eyes.

He felt it, the pull between them. There was no denying it. And he wanted nothing more than to kiss her. But the obstacles in their way seemed insurmountable.

He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead and pulled her close against him. And somehow, he summoned the strength to say the words.

"I'm sorry. I can't."

EIGHTEEN

Day two of the press junket dragged on and on. Adelia was still feeling the sting of Oliver's rejection, and it had put her in a foul mood. She tried to understand where he was coming from, but it felt like he was finding every possible excuse not to be with her. They weren't the first people from different backgrounds to date. Both Sebastian and Gus's wives had come from humble beginnings as Oliver had. Gus and Merritt worked across the country from each other, and they made it work. She kept thinking about all of these arguments to support her case that she wished she'd thought of last night.

It was difficult to stay focused on the reporter's questions. Thankfully, Layton couldn't make it that day because he'd injured himself in a freak home improvement accident. That was the story he was going with anyway. He'd probably paid the studio assistant a hefty sum to keep quiet. But Adelia didn't care if he lied about what happened. She knew the truth, and that was satisfaction enough.

Between interviews, her mind wandered. She really thought Oliver was going to kiss her. The way he'd held her face, touched her with his strong hands, and pulled her into his lap had felt like he was claiming her as his own. But it hadn't turned out how she hoped.

"Adelia?" Iris broke through her thoughts. "The last interviewer is here."

Adelia shook herself out of the fog to see a smarmy-looking man seated across from her. His name tag said he was with Behind the Celebs Magazine, and she groaned inwardly. That particular magazine always seemed to know everything about

celebrities' lives and had long been the bane of many an actors' existence. She was annoyed that he had gotten a press badge to this event.

"Nice to be here, Miss Allen," he said. "I'm Preston Wright."

She immediately pictured the name Wright as write and wondered if it was his real name. "Is that a pen name?"

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"Nothing. Ask away."

He started with the typical questions about the movie, how it was working with Layton, despite their rocky relationship. She answered as honestly as she could without giving away her true feelings.

"I was disappointed to learn he wasn't going to be here for the interview with you today. My sources say he left here yesterday with a bloody nose. Care to comment on that?"

She pressed her lips together to keep from laughing and shrugged her shoulders. "No comment."

"Very well. Maybe you'd prefer to comment on this." He retrieved a photograph from his bag and held it up so she could see, and her stomach bottomed out. "You were spotted last night at Point Mugu Beach with a mystery man. Is he your new boyfriend?" The photograph was of her and Oliver on the beach, she on her knees, leaning close to him.

Crap!She didn't think anyone was paying attention to them, but obviously, someone was. Someone always was. And it only served to prove what Oliver had said. Her life

was very public, and his privacy would be sacrificed if they were together.

“He’s ... a friend.”

The man raised an eyebrow as he showed her another picture of her sitting on Oliver’s lap. “Just a friend?”

“Yes. A friend.”

Iris suddenly stepped over to the man. “Please restrict your questions to the movie or this interview will be over.”

“Of course.” He said with a nod as he put the photographs away.

The rest of the interview went as it should, which was a relief. But Adelia was beyond flustered over the pictures of Oliver.

When Preston finished his questions, he thanked her and gathered his things.

“You’re going to post those pictures, aren’t you?” Adelia asked as he walked toward the door.

He stopped and looked back at her over his shoulder. “That’s my job.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Unless you can give me a good reason not to, they’re posting in an hour.”

“A good reason ... as in money.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You could tell me who he is and save us from trying to figure

it out on our own.”

“Please don’t go digging. There’s no story there. He’s just a friend. A regular, everyday guy, who doesn’t deserve to have his picture plastered all over the internet.”

“I’ll tell you what.” Preston turned back to face her. “Give me an exclusive interview about your parents and we’ll lose the pictures of you and your friend.”

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Her heart was suddenly in her throat. She couldn't do that. She couldn't put her family's business out there any more than it already was. This was a private struggle they were going through, and as much as she wanted to keep Olly out of the tabloids, she knew her parents would be disappointed in her if she went through with it.

Thoughts and ideas raced through her mind as she tried to come up with a way to stop this from happening. Then something occurred to her, and a smile spread across her face.

"Preston Wright, I have another story for you."

Adelia felt like a superhero as she walked into Gus's house that afternoon. She had singlehandedly solved her problem and maybe their bigger problem as well.

"What's that smile about?" Merritt asked.

"The junket is over." She raised her arms in the air and did a happy dance, which caused her friends to laugh. Her arms fell as she looked around the room. "Where's Oliver?"

Gus motioned toward the back of the house, and she spotted him in the hot tub, staring out toward the ocean.

"What did you guys do today?" she asked.

"This is it."

Her brow furrowed. “Oh. I thought he’d want to see some more sights before we fly back tomorrow morning.”

“He’s been pretty quiet all day.”

Adelia made her way out onto the patio, and Oliver watched her as she took a seat on the edge of the hot tub and dropped her legs in.

“Hi,” she said with a smile.

“Hi.”

“You look relaxed.”

The corners of his lips turned up in a little closed-mouth smile. “You didn’t punch anyone else today, did you?”

“I almost punched one of the reporters, but we came to an understanding.”

Oliver’s eyebrows scrunched up. “What happened?”

She looked out over the bluff to the view beyond. “He asked some questions he had no business asking, but I handled it.”

“I’m sorry you have to deal with jerks at these events.” Oliver’s hand skimmed up her calf and settled there, and goosebumps traveled over the rest of her body.

She reached over and ran her fingers through his hair, pushing it away from his forehead, and his eyes drifted closed.

They stayed like that for a while. The breeze was soft, the late day sun warm on her

face. She could have stayed there forever with her fingers in his soft, dark hair, helping him relax, while his strong hand gripped her leg and his thumb moved against her skin.

He was so still, she thought he might've fallen asleep. But then he gave her calf a soft squeeze before letting it go and moved to stand.

"Getting out so soon?" she asked.

"I've been in here too long already." He showed her his prune hands.

Her laughter died in her throat as he came out of the water, dripping wet and perfect. Her gaze traveled over his chest and down to the elastic of his swim trunks. She hadn't gotten this close a view of him that day in the bathroom, and it was obvious he took excellent care of his body.

One side of his mouth curved up as he caught her checking him out.

She smiled unashamedly. She didn't care if he knew she found him attractive. She wanted him to know. If only it would make a difference for them.

Oliver grabbed his towel and dried off, and Adelia's gaze followed him into the house. He grinned at her over his shoulder in a way that seemed flirtatious, and it gave her a little spark of hope.

Adelia stayed by the hot tub for a while longer. She was relieved this weekend was over.

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Merritt came out and joined her, taking a seat on the edge. “So, we’ll be back in Michigan in a week, and then I think it’s time to kick this wedding planning into high gear.”

“That sounds great. I need something to get my mind off everything.”

“I have plenty to keep you busy.” She glanced over her shoulder toward the house. “Do you know what’s up with Oliver today?”

“I told him I have feelings for him.”

Merritt’s face lit up. “You did?”

“Shhh.” Adelia waved her hands to get Merritt to lower her volume and level of excitement. “He turned me down.”

“What? He did?”

Adelia did her best to keep her voice low. “He made some good points. We’re from different worlds. He’s a private person and wants to keep it that way. And he doesn’t want to cross the line because he was hired to watch over me.”

Merritt shook her head sadly. “No wonder he looked so tortured today.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. He was so quiet, and we couldn’t get him to really participate in any

conversations.” She looked toward the house again. “I can understand his point of view. I’ve been where he is. When I married Gus, I was suddenly in every tabloid around. That was a bit of a shock.”

“I remember.”

“It was annoying at first, but you get used to it.”

“He loves his job and his life in Michigan. I’m sure he won’t want to fly back and forth all the time like you guys do, and I need to be here often.”

“Gus and I make it work.”

“I just think it’s too much of a hassle for him. I’m not worth it.”

Merritt tilted her head in disapproval. “Don’t get that in your head, Adelia. You’re an amazing woman, and Oliver would be lucky to have you in his life.”

“Thank you. I just don’t—”

“What did you do?” Oliver came marching out of the house.

Her eyes widened at his tone and the look of anger in his eyes. “What is it?”

“Carmen just called and said some reporter called the station for a comment on an article about Adelia Allen’s blackmailing case.”

Her heart leapt into her throat.

“She sent me the link, Adelia.” He held his phone screen in her direction. “I repeat, what did you do?”

“It was that reporter today. He was asking me some questions I didn’t want to answer, so I gave him a different story to print.”

“Adelia.” He looked up at the sky, exasperated.

“Is it really that big a deal? I thought maybe it would scare the creep away, talking about it and not hiding where I’ve been. Now, there’s no reason for me to pay to keep that fact a secret.”

Oliver rubbed his hands over his face. “You may have hindered our investigation and angered the person. We don’t know what they’re capable of.”

“I’m sorry, Olly.”

His eyes shot to hers. “Really, Adelia, what were you thinking, doing this without talking to me first?”

She turned her face away. “I had my reasons.”

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“Let’s just hope you haven’t made the situation worse.” He spun around and disappeared inside the house.

Adelia felt her throat tightening, but she pushed the emotion down and marched after him.

He went into his room and slammed the door shut.

She didn’t knock before whipping the door open and entering.

“I apologize, Oliver. Truly. If I did anything to jeopardize us finding out who was doing this to me, that was not my intention.”

His fierce gaze met hers. Why did she find angry-eyed Oliver so hot?

“And you’re right, I should have talked to you first. But the situation called for me to make a quick decision, so I made it.” She stepped toward him, afraid he’d back away, but he didn’t. So she took another step until she was within a foot and laid her hand on his chest, right above his heart. “Please don’t be angry with me.”

He gripped her hand and lowered it from his chest. “You have to stop touching me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you want to be with me.”

She touched his arm with her free hand. "I do want to be with you."

He groaned and stepped away, turning toward the window.

She gathered her strength and walked over to stand behind him, sliding her hands around his waist and up his chest, bringing her body against his back, and resting her cheek against his shoulder.

He didn't move at first, but then his hands slid up and covered hers. She thought he was going to pull them away again, but he didn't.

"You're supposed to let me handle this," he whispered. "I'm supposed to take care of you."

"I know. And you are. But I had to take care of you too."

He turned his head to look at her over his shoulder. "What does that mean?"

She rested her forehead against his back until he turned to face her and gripped her arms, his expression demanding an answer.

"Talk to me."

"That reporter had pictures of us on the beach last night. He was going to dig around and find out who you were and post the pictures all over social media. I knew you would hate that. So I gave him a better story, and he agreed to lose our pictures. I did it to protect you, Olly."

He looked taken aback. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. It just proved that what you said was true. Being

with me means sacrificing your privacy. I meant everything I said last night, and as much as I think we could have something really great, I will try harder to respect your decision to keep things professional.”

He lowered his head and closed his eyes for a breath. “Thank you.”

“But I hope we can still be friends.” She looked at him hopefully.

He lifted his eyes to hers. “Of course, we can.”

NINETEEN

It was difficult for Oliver to look Adelia in the eye last night and agree to be just friends. Because deep down, it's not what he really wanted. And hearing what she'd done for him, even if she shouldn't have, had only made him fall harder than he already was. What he had wanted to do was turn around and take her in his arms and show her how much he felt for her. But it was indulgent and immature to think that way. He had a feeling she wasn't looking for the kind of serious commitment he was, so he needed to keep his head on straight and not let his judgment be clouded or they could both end up hurt in the end.

The flight back to Grand Rapids was quiet, mostly spent sleeping. He'd barely slept last night when he heard Adelia get up and walk out of her room. He had followed her to the kitchen, where she stood at the refrigerator, not opening it, just standing there. This time, she had walked herself back to her room without needing assistance, but he'd sat in the chair by her bed for a long time to make sure she stayed asleep, drifting in and out of sleep a few times before returning to his room around dawn.

"Your neighbors go all out for Halloween," Adelia commented as they drove into Oliver's subdivision. "Why don't you decorate?"

"I only decorate for Christmas."

They pulled into the driveway then, and Oliver ushered her quickly into the house.

"Do you have candy?" she asked when they were safely inside.

He glanced over at her as he set their bags down by the stairs. “Candy?”

“For the kids.”

Kids?He hadn’t thought about the fact that a bunch of trick-or-treaters would be coming to his door later that night.

“I’ll turn the porch light off so they don’t come here.”

Her mouth fell open. “You don’t have to do that. We can wear costumes.”

“They’ll get plenty of candy from the other houses.”

“Please, Olly. I’ve never passed candy out to kids before. We don’t get a lot of trick-or-treaters up on the bluff.”

She stuck out that full bottom lip of hers, and he forced himself to look away before he acted on the sudden desire to take it between his own.

“Okay,” he mumbled as he took the bags upstairs just to give himself a moment of escape.

Adelia clapped her hands. “Yay!”

When he returned, she was on her phone.

“Skylar and Franky are coming over and bringing candy and costumes. What do you want to dress as?”

“I’ll just put on my uniform.”

She smirked. “That’s not very original.”

“It’s as dressed up as I’m gonna get.”

“What should I dress as? A prisoner? You could put me in handcuffs.”

He cleared his throat. “That’s not an image I need in my head right now.”

Her cheeks blushed. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know, but talk about something else. Skeletons or zombies or something.”

A coy smile spread across her face. “I could dress as a skeleton and put white makeup on my face. That would keep me from being recognized.” She raised a finger in the air. “Or a clown.”

“Not a clown. Those things creep me out.”

She laughed as she typed on her phone. “I told her to find me a skeleton costume. Are you sure you don’t want something else to wear?”

“I’m sure.”

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She happily typed on her phone, and she looked so young at that moment, so excited about something as simple as passing out candy to a bunch of kids. He wanted her to experience the simple things, and he loved that he was there to see this one. But as much as he wished he could whisk her away to a normal life, he knew deep down she would never really want that. She clearly enjoyed acting and the many perks that went along with her lifestyle. And every time he entertained the possibility of them being together, it became more obvious that a life like his would never be enough for her. There was very little he could offer her. And as sad as that realization was, it simply reaffirmed that it was best if they maintained the status quo.

When Skylar and Franky arrived, Oliver sent Skylar upstairs with her bag of costumes to the guest room, where Adelia was napping. Franky came in, carrying a couple pizza boxes, and Oliver's mouth watered at the sight.

"Come and get it," Franky said with a laugh.

Oliver ushered him into the kitchen and grabbed some plates from the cupboard. "Thanks for the pizza, man."

"Dig in. There's plenty."

They ate and made small talk. Oliver didn't know Franky very well, but he always came across as a friendly, funny kind of guy.

The girls' laughter carried from upstairs then, and the guys chuckled at the sound.

"Women are so loud when they get together, am I right?" Franky tilted his head

toward the stairs.

“You would be correct.” He took a bite of pizza and sighed with satisfaction. “It was really nice of you to make this happen for Adelia at the last minute.”

“She’s like an honorary member of the Schultz family. They would do anything for her.” Franky pointed at him. “That’s why they hired you. Only the best for their Adelia.”

Oliver’s heart warmed. “I appreciate you saying that.”

Franky nodded as he chewed on a piece of pizza.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Oliver’s heart stuttered in his chest at the sight of Adelia’s costume.

“I thought you were dressing as a skeleton,” he said.

“They didn’t have any skeleton costumes left,” Skylar responded for Adelia, “unless we went with a slutty skeleton, and I didn’t think that was what she had in mind.” The girls giggled.

Adelia looked adorable, from her black beanie-hat-topped head to the black Converse low tops on her feet and everything in between. A thin black mask was tied around her face with her eyes peeking through the holes, and the black-and-white-striped shirt over black jeans completed the look.

She turned from side to side. “You like?”

Oliver responded with a smile and a nod, but his mind was also on their earlier conversation.

Franky stood and put his plate on the kitchen counter, then went upstairs with Skylar to change into their costumes, which left the two of them alone.

“You make a cute burglar,” he mumbled as she stepped closer.

“Are you going to arrest me?” she asked with a coy smile.

He took a deep breath in and let it out in a huff. “Not if you behave yourself.”

She stepped even closer and hooked her finger through the handcuffs on his belt. “I’ll do whatever you say, officer.”

He swallowed hard as his hand lifted of its own accord and slid the mask down to her neck to reveal her face. “Whatever I say?”

She nodded.

He took hold of her shoulders to hinder her from getting any closer and looked into her eyes. “Stop flirting with me.”

Their gazes stayed locked for several long beats.

“I can’t seem to help myself,” she said with a grin.

“We’re friends, so maybe try a little harder to resist me.” He said the last part as a joke, but she didn’t laugh.

“Okay.” He hated that he’d put a frown on her face, but it had to be this way.

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The evening was actually more fun than Oliver thought it would be. The girls fawned over every kid's costume, and the kids especially loved Skylar and Franky dressed as The Incredibles. Most of the kids were from the neighborhood, so they walked from house to house in the cul-de-sac while their parents stood in the street visiting.

One mom approached with her child, who was dressed as Link from The Legend of Zelda game. "I'm sorry," she said. "I saw you take your mask off and readjust it before we walked up, and I have to ask ... are you Adelia Allen?"

Adelia's mouth fell open a little before she replied, "I am. And you have the cutest little Link I've ever seen." She crouched down in front of him. "Are you going to rescue Princess Zelda?"

The little boy nodded and held out his candy bag.

"What do you say?" his mom asked him.

"Trick-oh-treat."

Adelia held her hand to her heart. "You get extra candy for all that cuteness," she whispered to the little boy, "but don't tell the other kids."

The smile on his face was priceless as he showed his mom. Just seeing Adelia with the kids made Oliver's heart ache. He could tell she was enjoying herself and that she was wonderful with children.

"Thank you," the woman said. "And I hope this isn't out of line to ask, but would you

mind signing this for me?” She pulled a piece of paper and a pen from her purse. “I am a huge fan of yours, and I would really appreciate it.”

“Of course.” She looked around the neighborhood. “But only if you don’t mention that you saw me here.”

“I won’t,” the woman replied.

“Thank you.” Adelia took the paper and used the porch railing as a surface to sign it. “Here ya go.”

“Thank you so much. And I’m praying for you and your parents. I hope they can work things out.”

Oliver noticed Adelia tense up at that.

“Happy Halloween,” the woman said.

“You too.”

Adelia stood still for a moment, then handed the plastic pumpkin-shaped bucket filled with candy to Skylar and walked into the house.

Oliver followed, and she stopped between the living room and kitchen and took her mask off.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

She didn’t look fine.

“I think that woman was actually being sincere when she said she was praying for my family. Most people just want all the dirt.”

“There are good people in the world, Addy.”

“I guess I haven’t encountered many lately. And I don’t think prayer is going to help my parents. I don’t know how they could work things out after what my mother did.” Tears formed in her eyes. “It was really nice of her to say that, though.” Her lower lip quivered a little as she spoke.

He knew he shouldn’t, but he gave in to the overwhelming urge to comfort her and wrapped her up in a hug. She melted into him and buried her face in his neck, gripping the back of his shirt tightly in her hands. He held her like that for a few minutes, until the mood slowly shifted, and he knew he was in trouble.

“You smell good,” she breathed against his neck.

“So do you,” he whispered in reply.

“I love your hugs.”

“Me too.”

She lifted her head to look at him. “I know I said I’d behave, and I know I agreed to just be friends, but it’s not what I want.”

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He tightened his arms around her, quickly losing the battle. “What do you want?”

“I want you to kiss me.”

He lowered his forehead to hers, resting it there for a moment before softly rubbing his nose against hers. Her breath against his lips drew him closer, and he lowered his head, about to play out what he’d imagined. He was millimeters from taking her bottom lip between his. All he had to do was close the distance. Soft, sweet contact, and then—

Adelia jerked back and looked down. At their feet stood a border collie, nuzzling its nose against her legs. She crouched down and petted its black and white fur while it licked her face.

Oliver glanced over and noticed they’d left the front door wide open.

“Hey, I know you,” she said as she stood and took the dog’s leash, which was dragging behind him, and led him out the door to the porch.

Oliver followed with curiosity.

“Tony? Is that you?” Adelia asked a man standing across the yard, dressed as a skeleton, of all things.

“It’s me,” he chuckled through his mask. “Funny seeing you here. My nephew is a few houses down, but Lucky here got away from me.”

Adelia was all smiles as she turned to look at Oliver. “This is Tony. He lives up the beach from the lake house.”

Tony gave a nod and a wave.

Oliver nodded, realizing Tony and his dog were the ones in the blackmailer’s photographs, and he was instantly suspicious.

“Not staying at the lake anymore?” Tony asked Adelia.

“Not right now. Staying with a friend.”

“Well, I need to get back to my nephew. Good to see you again.”

“You too.” She crouched down and petted the dog once more. “Bye, Lucky. Be a good boy.”

She waved as they walked away, then gazed over at Oliver with a smile and a tilt of her head. Obviously, she wanted to go back inside and pick up where they left off.

Oliver shook his head, and Adelia frowned. He hated to disappoint her, but he’d already confused things enough by nearly kissing her. Thank God they’d been interrupted by that dog.

TWENTY

You guys were so cute with the kids,” Adelia told Skylar and Franky when the last of the trick-or-treaters had gone for the night.

Franky stood behind Skylar with his arms wrapped around her waist and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “We need at least three of our own for our Incredibles family to be complete.”

She smiled over her shoulder at him. “Maybe we’ll start with one and see how that goes.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Or we could do that.”

“The kids loved you too, Adelia,” Skylar said.

“They were so adorable in their little costumes,” she gushed. “I can’t wait to have kids of my own someday.”

“How about you, Oliver?” Skylar asked.

Adelia gave her a look, knowing her friend was putting Oliver on the spot.

“I’m fine with them stopping by my door once a year for candy, but that’s where I draw the line.”

Adelia looked at him in surprise, thinking he must be joking, but there wasn’t a hint

of jest on his face, and the disappointment of that hit her harder than she expected.

She tuned out of the conversation after that. Having kids was non-negotiable for her. She might not want a traditional marriage, but she still wanted a family. Always had. And now she was wondering if she needed to add that to the list of things keeping her and Oliver apart.

Skylar's mention of the song Franky had written for her brought Adelia out of her thoughts.

"Speaking of music." Adelia looked at Franky. "Once I get the okay for my next movie, I'll be needing a composer to work on the musical score, and I wondered if you'd like to do it."

Franky's mouth fell open, and his eyes bulged out of his head. "Are you serious?"

"Of course, I'm serious. You are amazingly talented, Franky. I'd love to hear what you can come up with for it."

"That's ... I don't even know how to respond to this." He looked at Skylar. "Am I dreaming?"

"I think it's real, babe," she replied with a smile.

"It's very real," Adelia replied.

"I love that you want to tell Margaret's story, Adelia," Skylar said. "I've admired her work for a long time."

"I know you have. I just hope I can do the story justice."

“You will.”

Skylar had been into photography for as long as Adelia could remember, and she had an amazing eye. Adelia always thought she should pursue it professionally, but Skylar was happy working for the family business and having photography as a hobby.

“What do you say, Franky?” Adelia asked.

“Yes!” He walked over and wrapped Adelia up in a hug. “Yes! Thank you.”

Adelia laughed and squeezed him tight. “You’re welcome, Franky.” She let go and eyed him. “Don’t let me down.”

“I won’t!” He went back to his fiancée, who opened her arms to him, and he hugged her and bounced them up and down.

Adelia looked over at Oliver, who was observing Franky’s little dance.

“I think someone’s a little excited about this project,” she said.

“I couldn’t tell,” he replied with a chuckle.

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Adelia was awake half the night, longing for sleep after their long day, but unable to stop her whirling thoughts. By the time the sun came up, she'd thought about every detail since the moment she met Oliver and all the reasons he said they couldn't be together.

Her mind got stuck for a while on their almost kiss last night. If not for that dog, she would know what it felt like to have his lips on hers, to be in his arms, to be the focus of his desire. Her stomach had somersaulted so many times thinking about it, that she had to sit up and take a drink of water to calm herself.

She opened her door to head downstairs and was startled to find Oliver standing there as if he was about to knock.

“Oh! Good morning, Olly.”

“Good morning. I wasn't sure if you were awake yet or not, but I have some good news I wanted to share with you.”

“What news?” she asked as she turned back to the room and took a seat on the bed.

Oliver sat down beside her. “Carmen received a call from a young woman who works at a local photo lab. She saw the article about you being blackmailed and said a couple weeks ago, a sketchy-looking guy came in to have some black-and-white prints made. She thought the woman in the pictures looked like you, but she dismissed it until she read the article. They picked the guy up this morning, and he confessed.”

“Are you serious?”

“Very serious. We caught him.”

She threw herself at him. “Oh my gosh. What a relief.”

He laughed as he wrapped his arms around her. “I’m really happy for you.”

She pulled back, trying to keep some distance between them. “So, what you’re saying is I didn’t ruin the investigation after all.”

He smirked.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You might even say it helped the situation.”

“Okay, okay.”

She laughed. “Does this mean I can stay at the lake house again?”

“If you want to. Sure.”

“And I guess that means I won’t need a babysitter anymore.”

His eyes locked with hers.

“So, you won’t be paid to take care of me.”

He slowly shook his head from side to side.

That was it! She couldn’t take this anymore. She took Oliver’s face in her hands, leaned forward, and pressed her lips against his.

He gripped her arms as if fighting it at first, but then his hands slid up her arms, over her shoulders, and into her hair as he angled his head and pressed into the kiss, tugging her as close as he could get her. She was drowning in the pure ecstasy of the moment. It was better than she imagined it would be with him.

His kisses intensified then slowed, and he pressed one firm kiss to her lips before pulling back to look at her. His eyes traveled over her face and back to her lips, and he leaned in again, pressing soft kisses to one cheek and then the other, before turning all his attention on her lips again. She thought he was slowing things down, but the way he kissed her this time kicked everything up a notch.

“Olly,” she whispered between kisses.

He groaned into her mouth and hauled her closer until she was in his lap like she had been that night on the beach. Only this time, they were doing exactly what she had wanted to then. Losing themselves in each other.

When they’d made out for longer than she’d ever made out with a guy before, he finally ended with a few soft, tender presses of his lips to hers and leaned his forehead against hers.

“Why did I ever fight this?” he asked as his fingers caressed the soft skin of her neck.

She shrugged her shoulders and tilted her head to give him all the access he wanted.

His lips replaced his fingers then, and her eyes drifted closed at the heat of his open mouth against her neck. “Not only do you smell good,” he muttered, “but you taste heavenly.”

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“That feels heavenly,” she replied as she focused on every sensation.

Oliver’s phone buzzed in his pocket, and he groaned as he pulled away to see who it was.

Adelia pouted, and he leaned forward and nipped her lip. She had never been as happy as she was in the presence of this playfully sexy version of Oliver. And it was all for her.

“It’s Carmen,” he said as he looked at the screen. “Probably related to the case. I have to call her.”

“Okay.” She pressed a soft kiss to his lips and leaned her body into his as she trailed kisses across his cheek and nipped his earlobe. She could be playful too.

“Adelia,” he groaned.

“Hmm?”

“I have to make a call.”

She brushed her lips feather-light along his neck. “I’m just returning the favor.”

Oliver snapped, grabbing hold of her waist and flipping her onto her back as he hovered over her.

Her hands slid up his chest and around his neck, and his eyes slid closed.

“We have to slow down, Adelia.”

She tugged on the hair at the nape of his neck, and he opened his eyes to her. “You’re the one who put us in this position.” She gave him a teasing smile.

He leaned down and pressed one soft kiss to her lips then stood and helped her up to sitting. “I’m going to make this call now. And then we’ll talk.”

She stood and stepped closer, and he held his hand out to still her.

“I said talk.”

She grinned and raised an eyebrow. “Talk. Of course.”

He rubbed his hands over his face and walked out of the room, and Adelia fell back on the bed. She’d never known what it felt like to swoon until now. Oliver was the best kisser. She couldn’t believe it had actually happened, and she would do whatever it took to make sure it happened again. Now that she’d been in his arms, there was nowhere else she wanted to be.

TWENTY-ONE

As much as Oliver wanted to stay right where he was, there was no time for talking after his call with Carmen. The guy they'd brought in was in the interrogation room, waiting to be questioned, and he had to go.

He hated to leave Adelia home alone, but he felt better about it now that they had the guy in custody. Still, he made sure she locked the door when he left and told her not to answer the door for anyone.

Oliver's hands were shaking as he entered the station and headed down the hallway. Carmen was waiting there and handed him a folder, which he perused as they walked into the interrogation room.

A young man with a dark curly ponytail sat at the table. He was dressed in an oversized grey plaid flannel, layered over a black T-shirt.

They introduced themselves and turned on the voice recorder.

"Are you a professional photographer?" Oliver asked as he sat in the chair across the table from the man.

"Nah. I dabble."

"And you decided to dabble the day you took pictures of Adelia Allen without her knowledge?" Carmen asked.

“That’s right.”

Oliver flipped through the file to get the man’s information. Cyrus Mason. “How did you know Miss Allen was staying at the lake house, Mr. Mason?”

Cyrus was slouched back in the chair, looking very uninterested in Oliver’s questions and more interested in checking out Carmen.

“Mr. Mason,” Oliver snapped.

“I heard she left California to hide out from the reporters because her mom cheated on her pops.”

“You heard? From who?”

“I saw it. Online.”

“But it wasn’t public knowledge where she was staying. How did you know?”

“Oh, she came into the convenience store where I work. I saw her leave on a scooter, so I followed her.”

“You left work and followed her in the middle of the day?”

“No, it was at night. I locked up early and went.”

“What were your intentions that night?”

He shrugged. “To see where she was going.”

“Did you plan to harm her?”

“No.”

“But you got close to the house that night, didn’t you?”

“So, I looked in the window. So what.”

“That’s trespassing.”

“I didn’t hurt her. I just wanted to see if she was there.”

“And was she?”

“Yeah.”

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“So you watched her?”

“Yeah.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know. Ten minutes.”

“Then what?”

“Then I took off when the lights came on outside.”

So, he was the man she’d caught on video that night.

“And then you came back and took pictures of her?”

“Yeah. She was running on the beach and talking to some guy and his dog.”

“What did you do with the pictures?”

“I sent them to her and told her I wanted a million dollars.”

“That’s a lot of money for a couple of pictures.”

“I didn’t figure she wanted people knowing she was here. I figured it was a small price to pay for my silence.”

Oliver almost laughed aloud. Small price, indeed. He wanted to grab this guy and shake him. But something felt off.

“What then?” Carmen asked.

“What do you mean?”

“How did you plan to get the money?” she asked.

“I guess I didn’t have a plan for that yet. I just wanted to send a message.”

“Did you send any other messages?” Oliver asked.

“No.”

“None?”

“Oh, yeah. I sent her flowers.”

“Did you order them locally?”

“Yeah, I got them from that place downtown. I can’t remember the name right now.”

“Any special instructions for that delivery?”

“I told them the address.”

“Any specific time?”

He opened his mouth as if to speak then closed it again as if he was thinking about his answer. “I just wanted them delivered that day.”

Carmen had learned from the flower shop that they had been given instructions to stop at the gate, wait for the cleaning service employees who were set to arrive at the house, and ask them to bring the flowers inside. This guy didn't seem to know anything about that.

“Was there a card in the flowers?”

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“Yeah, there was a card.” The guy bounced his knee nervously.

“What did the card say?”

“I told her where to put the money.”

“That’s all it said?”

“Yeah.”

Oliver could tell the guy was getting flustered. “One more question. Who was the man on the beach?”

“Who?” Cyrus avoided eye contact.

“There was a guy in the picture with the dog, but his face wasn’t showing. Who was he?”

“Some random dude walking his dog, I guess.” He shifted in his chair.

“Did you see him around the house while you were there?”

“Just on the beach.”

“That day only?”

“I think so.”

“So, you were there often then.”

“No, not often. Just that night by the house and in the woods taking her picture.”

Oliver stood as if to leave and then paused and bent to look at the guy, resting his hands on the table. “Did you have an accomplice?” he asked point-blank.

“No,” the guy answered a little too quickly. “It was just me.”

Oliver eyed him. “If there’s anything or anyone else you need to tell me about, now would be the time before you go to jail for this.”

He smirked. “We’ll see about that.”

Carmen stepped closer and stared the guy in the eye. “You don’t think you’ll get jail time for stalking, trespassing, and extortion, just to name a few?”

Cyrus’s lips pressed together defiantly, but his eyes gave away his worry.

Frustrated, Oliver marched out.

Carmen followed him into the room next door with a one-way mirror that overlooked the interrogation room.

He shook his head as he entered. “He’s hiding something.”

Carmen nodded. “I agree. There’s something not right about his story.”

“He didn’t seem to know about the plans for the flowers to be delivered to the cleaning crew.”

“And his answers were definitely rehearsed. Someone put him up to this.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking. It was like he was trying to keep the details of a story straight that he’d been told but didn’t actually take part in.” He let out a sigh and shook his head. “Adelia was so happy when I told her we caught the guy. Like maybe she could put all this behind her.”

“I’m sorry. We’ll keep working on him, see what we can dig up, and if we can get him to crack.”

“Thanks, Car.”

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“You bet.” She patted him on the shoulder as she walked out, and he stared at the guy through the glass.

“Who are you working with?”

The entire drive back to his house, Oliver worried about Adelia being there alone. His hands trembled against the steering wheel, and his heart raced, knowing another person involved with the blackmail was on the loose. The lack of control over her safety wound him into a giant ball of anxiety.

He jumped out of his car the second he turned off the engine and raced into the house.

“Adelia!” he cried as he noticed her packed bag on the floor at the bottom of the stairs. He didn’t give her two seconds to reply before he called out to her again. “Adelia!”

“I’m up here.” Her footfalls sounded on the steps.

He let out a breath, and his shoulders sank with relief.

“I packed up my stuff,” she said with a smile. “I thought maybe you’d want to stay with me at the lake house for a few days.” Her expression turned from one that could melt him to the core to a look of concern. “What is it?”

“I spoke a little too soon this morning,” he told her.

Her eyebrows crinkled. “What do you mean?”

“It’s very clear to us that the guy we brought in is working with someone else. He’s not exactly the brains behind the operation.”

Her shoulders sank. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. We’re working on it.”

She plopped down on the couch. “I’m so sick of all this.”

Oliver walked over and rested his hip against the back of the couch. “I know you are.”

“Maybe I should go to England and stay with my dad for a while.”

Oliver’s heart clenched in his chest. “If that’s what you want.”

She let her head fall back against the couch cushion. “I don’t know. At least before all this, I knew the paparazzi would be hanging around. They were overt about it. This creepy stalker crap is disconcerting.”

“Well, maybe you should leave Michigan. You revealed you were here in the article anyway, so it’s not like you can hide out anymore.”

She rolled her head to the side and looked up at him. “I like hiding out here.”

He rounded the couch and sat down next to her, and she immediately snuggled into his side with her head resting on his chest. “And I like having you here. But you might be right. And maybe while you’re away, we can get the guy to give up his partner.”

“And I can come back here without that hanging over me.”

“Exactly.”

She shifted to look up at him. “But what about us?”

“I just want you to be safe, Adelia. That’s the most important thing right now.”

“I don’t want to leave just when I discovered what a good kisser you are.”

He laughed. “I’ll still be here when you get back.”

She sighed. “I’m sure my dad would like it if I spent Thanksgiving with him so he doesn’t have to be alone.”

Oliver nodded, though he knew her being gone for weeks would leave a hole that no one else could fill.

She gazed up at him with hopefulness in her eyes. “You could come with me.”

“That’s really tempting, but I should stay here and work. It’ll make me feel like I’m taking care of you, even when you’re so far away.”

“This isn’t exactly how I thought things would go when you got home,” she said, “but absence makes the heart grow fonder, right?”

“Absolutely.”

TWENTY-TWO

Things had been refreshingly quiet and drama-free for the past few weeks with Dad at their stone cottage by the sea in St. Ives in Cornwall. Adelia enjoyed the time alone with her father. They hadn't dealt with many photographers there, and those they encountered weren't pushy. It was as if they felt bad for her dad. He was the one who had been wronged, after all.

On Thanksgiving, they made a turkey and all the fixings. Dad's older brother, Corben, and his wife, Dottie, were arriving for a visit along with their son, Collin, and his family. It had been a long time since she'd seen them, and she was looking forward to a house filled with family. It would be good for Dad to be with his brother too.

But it was going to be strange not having mom there. And as Adelia peeled the yams, a sadness settled over her, knowing this was how it was going to be from now on. They would never be together as a family like they used to, and her heart broke all over again. The perfect ideal she'd always had about marriage and family had been shattered.

When all the food was in the oven, Adelia went about preparing a salad, which made her think of the day Oliver came to stay with her at the lake house. She'd thought of him often since she left Michigan, and they'd talked on the phone a few times, but it wasn't the same. She was beginning to understand how difficult a long-distance relationship would be.

Oliver kept her up-to-date on what was happening with the case, which was a whole

lot of nothing. She really hoped when she returned to Michigan for Gus and Merritt's wedding, she wouldn't have to worry about that anymore, but it didn't look like that was going to happen, and she was torn about what to do next.

Part of her thought it was best if she just went back to Malibu. Her parents' scandal was old news by now, and while the paparazzi weren't going away, she was sure she wouldn't be bombarded like she had in the beginning. And this would put her far away from whoever tried to blackmail her.

But she had to be back in Michigan the second week of December anyway for Gus and Merritt's wedding. Merritt had said she needed her to be there for a few days leading up to the wedding to help with all the last-minute details, and she couldn't let her friend down. Adelia was excited for them to say real and honest vows this time and have the wedding they should've had the first time around.

Thinking about that made her sad, though. She would never have a wedding. When she was young, she often imagined what it would be like, hanging white shirts or towels from her head, pretending it was a veil, while she walked slowly across the length of her room and imagined meeting her groom at the end of the aisle. But those were just silly childhood fantasies. She was under no more false assumptions when it came to marriage. It was not for her.

The doorbell rang an hour before the turkey timer was set to go off, and Dad welcomed the family in with great joy and commotion.

"Hey there, Hugh," Dottie said as they hugged. "Long time no see, stranger."

"Good to see you, Dot," Dad said. "Hey, big brother."

Uncle Corben gave him a hug and patted him hard on the back. "Hey, how ya holding up?"

Hugh let go and shrugged. “Just moving forward, day by day.” He motioned the rest of the family into the house as he closed the door. “Come on in.”

Collin and Susie came in, followed by their kids, Samuel and Grace. Adelia couldn't believe how much they'd grown up since she'd last seen them.

“Oh my goodness,” Adelia said as she came across the house to greet everyone. “Sammy, I think you're taller than I am now. What are you, six feet?”

Samuel shook his head and rolled his eyes. Oh, preteens were so much fun to be around.

“I wouldn't doubt it. How old are you now anyway? Twenty?”

Grace giggled. “He's almost eleven.”

Adelia pulled her into a hug. “Really? Well, then I guess you aren't quite eighteen yet, are you, Gracie?”

“I wish,” she said with another giggle. “I can't wait to grow up like you and not be eight anymore.”

“Don't rush it. Eight is great.”

“Adelia.” Aunt Dottie approached with arms open wide. “You look well, sweetie.”

“Thanks. So do you.”

“How's everything?” she asked. “Any new projects coming up?”

“Nothing at the moment, but there's one I'm really excited about. Just waiting for

funding and other not-so-fun details to come through.”

“Tell me more.”

They moved into the living room, and the ladies sat down to chat while the men went off to chat elsewhere, and the kids ran off to the entertainment room to play video games.

“Up until now, I’ve done some indie films and a few lighter movies, like my latest rom-com. But this one is special. It’s a true story, a drama, and I think it could be the one that showcases my talent. I want to make a name for myself, not just because of who my parents are, but in my own right, ya know?”

They nodded in agreement.

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“You’re very talented, Adelia,” Susie said. “I hope it all works out for you.”

“Me too. The waiting is killing me.”

Dottie looked toward the hallway, where the men had disappeared into Dad’s den. “How’s your dad really holding up?”

“We haven’t talked about it much since I’ve been here. We did talk on the phone shortly after it all went down, and he said if Mom wanted to come home, he’d take her back.”

“Really?” Susie asked.

“Do you think he still means it?” Dottie asked. “Now that some time has passed and it doesn’t look like she’s going to leave this other man?”

“I don’t know. I hate my mom for what she’s doing to this family.”

“Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry y’all are going through this.”

“Thanks, Dottie.”

The doorbell rang then, and Adelia was about to get up when her father came down the hallway to answer it.

He opened the door, spoke to someone, then closed it. He opened a manila envelope he held in his hands, and his chin dropped to his chest as if in defeat.

“Who was it?” Adelia asked.

He walked over and dropped the envelope on the side table. “From your mother.” And then he headed back down the hallway again.

Adelia was filled with dread as she took the envelope and peeked inside. Tears burned her eyes. She’d been so good at keeping her emotions inside about all of this, but she couldn’t right now.

“Divorce papers,” she whispered, and the ladies surrounded her with hugs and held her while she cried.

Dad’s eyes were rimmed red when he and the guys came out for dinner. Nobody mentioned it, and the meal went on as if nothing had happened. They talked and caught up and had a nice time together.

After dinner, Dottie and Susie took care of the dishes while the guys smoked cigars on the back deck, the kids disappeared to the game room again, and Adelia went to her room for some quiet.

She lay on the bed for a while, thinking about what had happened, and then she grabbed her phone and dialed.

“Hey, you,” Oliver answered on the first ring.

“Hey.”

“Happy Thanksgiving.”

“You too,” she replied. “What did you do today?”

“I worked.”

“No Thanksgiving turkey?”

“Not this year.”

“That’s so depressing. There was plenty of extra here, even with my dad’s family in town.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It would’ve been more fun if a guy hadn’t shown up at the front door with divorce papers for my dad.”

“Oh, you’re kidding? On Thanksgiving?”

“It’s not Thanksgiving here.”

“I guess that’s true,” Oliver said. “I’m really sorry, Addy.”

“I know.” She was quiet for a few breaths. “I feel awful for my dad and furious at my mom. I just don’t know why she did this. Were her and my dad that miserable and I never noticed? I feel like it came out of nowhere, but Dad says they’ve had their problems.”

“People can be good at hiding the truth and putting on a happy face.”

“Yeah, it’s called acting, and my parents have built their life on it. But I never thought they’d put on a show of happiness for me. I never thought they’d lie to me about what was really going on.”

“I’m sure they were trying to protect you.”

“I would much rather have known the truth than to have all this sprung on me so suddenly. You know, I can remember one time when I was maybe twelve, my parents were arguing when I got home from a dance class, I think. They didn’t know I was there yet, and my mom told him she was tired of having to say no to projects because it didn’t fit with his shooting schedule. He said something about this being the plan when they decided to have a kid, that they would take turns so they could raise me and not put me with nannies, but I guess she was sick of doing that.” She shook her head in surprise. “I forgot about that conversation until right now. I feel like that little child again, walking in on my parents in the middle of a fight I wasn’t meant to hear. Only this time, Mom isn’t hiding it. She’s out in the open for the whole world to see.”

“Maybe she resented your dad for keeping her from doing what she wanted all those

years.”

“Or she resents me.” Adelia’s heart sank. “Maybe she regrets even having me.”

“I’m sure that’s not the case, Adelia.”

Adelia’s throat tightened, and she pushed the emotions down. They were quiet for long moments.

“Are you okay?”

“I miss you, Olly.”

“Do you now?”

“You didn’t think I would?”

“I figured some guy with a sexy British accent swept you away over there.”

Adelia laughed a little. “I think one too many British accents has infiltrated this family.”

The end of the line was quiet for a few seconds before Oliver spoke again.

“I miss you too.”

TWENTY-THREE

Oliver had only been to the Schultz's home a few times over the years, but never as a dinner guest. His palms were sweaty as he climbed out of his Jeep and walked up the cobblestone driveway to the entrance. He rang the doorbell as he straightened his navy sport coat.

The door opened, and their butler Gerard greeted him warmly, ushered him inside, and took his coat.

"He's here!" a familiar voice echoed through the house.

And then Adelia came into view, and his heart skipped a beat at the sight. Her long blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders in thick waves, and the long topaz dress she wore made the blue of her eyes pop.

"Olly!" She raced across the foyer and attacked him with a hug.

He laughed as he returned the embrace. It felt so good to have her in his arms again.

"I'm so happy to see you," she spoke close to his ear.

"Me too." He let go and gave her a smile. "When did you get in?"

"A few hours ago." She gave him a once-over. "You look nice."

His eyes traveled down the length of her dress and back. "You look more than nice."

You look ... like a movie star.”

She laughed as she took his arm. “Come in, come in.” She led him through to the family room where everyone was seated.

Simultaneous greetings went up from around the room.

Ephraim stood and shook his hand. “Welcome, Oliver.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Adelia led him to an empty seat beside her on one of the couches. Sebastian and his wife Genevieve were cuddled up on a love seat. Gus was sitting on the end of the couch with Skylar and Franky. Merritt was in the chair next to him, and Harriet, the matriarch of the family, was seated in a chair near the fireplace.

Ephraim went to stand next to the fireplace then, and Gus angled toward Oliver and spoke with a low voice. “It’s about to get all formal in here.”

Oliver raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t worry.” Merritt leaned forward and talked around Gus. “This is just what he does.”

“Now that everyone’s here,” Ephraim began, “I want to welcome our special guest, Officer Wood.”

Oliver smiled and nodded at the family, uncomfortable being the center of attention.

“This family owes you a great debt of gratitude for the many ways you’ve helped us these past years. You’ve gone above and beyond your regular duty more times than I

can count.” His eyes drifted to Gus.

“Hey!” Gus’s eyes narrowed. “Direct your gaze elsewhere, Dad.”

Everyone laughed, and Gus screwed up his face at them as Merritt patted him supportively on the knee. He pretended to push her hand away then laughed and leaned in to kiss her.

Ephraim cleared his throat and continued. “We can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done, for defending our family, for watching over our sweet Adelia. You have forever earned an honorary place in this family, Oliver, and you are welcome here any time.” He took a glass of wine from the side table and raised it in the air. “To Oliver.”

The others took glasses and did the same.

“To Oliver!”

Oliver didn’t know what to say. This wasn’t the first time he’d been recognized for his service on the force, but there was something about being acknowledged like this, in such an intimate setting, that meant more than any formal ceremony ever could.

Adelia reached over and squeezed his hand. “To Oliver.”

He smiled at her, warmed by the look of adoration in her eyes.

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Gerard entered the room then. “Dinner is ready.”

“Thank you, Gerard,” Harriet replied.

Sebastian suddenly stood and held his hands out to stop everyone from getting up. “Before we go to dinner, there’s something I’d like to say.” He took Genevieve’s hand, and they went to stand beside the fireplace together. “We have some news.”

“Are you moving back?” Gus immediately asked. “Because I’m not giving the president job back to you.”

“Co-president,” Skylar corrected him.

“That’s what I meant.”

The two of them gave each other dirty looks like typical siblings.

“This isn’t about the company, you loons.” Sebastian shook his head. “You’re about to get new titles altogether.”

“Uncle Gus and Aunt Skylar,” Genevieve said with a smile.

“What?” Gus’s eyes widened.

“Are you serious?” Skylar cried.

“We’re having a baby,” Sebastian announced.

Everyone jumped up with elated cries and hugs all around.

Harriet embraced her son. “My sweet baby boy is having a baby.”

Ephraim patted him on the back and hugged him tightly.

There was so much love in the room, Oliver felt a little choked up. Not only because of the excitement over the addition of a new member to their family, but because he knew he would never have such a moment. Seeing their joy didn’t change his mind about having children, though. He’d seen too much. He’d experienced a terrible loss. He never wanted to go through that again.

Oliver shook Sebastian’s hand and hugged Genevieve. He wished he could be as happy and carefree as they were about bringing a child into this world.

As they ate dinner and he listened to the ladies chatting happily about the due date and baby nursery and cute baby clothes, Adelia’s comment on Halloween drifted from deep in his memory and stuck there in the forefront of his mind.

I can’t wait to have kids of my own someday.

He thought about all the fights he and Val had about having children. It was the thing that tore them apart. And he could suddenly understand what might’ve happened between Adelia’s parents. Having the same fights over and over, going round and round, never solving anything. Once that wedge is driven in so far, there are only so many choices. Pull it out and do everything you can to fix things so the wound can heal, leave it where it is and simply survive—unhappy and miserable—with a chasm between you, or drive the wedge all the way through, like Val had done in their marriage, severing any chance of healing. She had turned away when he wouldn’t give her what she wanted and found what she needed from another man. Maybe Adelia’s mom had done the same.

He never wanted that to happen with him and Adelia. There were already so many differences between them, and he knew this was the one that stood to ruin them before they even started.

When the evening came to a close, Oliver thanked Ephraim and Harriet for inviting him and headed for the door where Gerard was waiting with his coat.

“Not going to say good night?” Adelia joined him in the foyer.

“Aren’t you coming back to my place?” he asked.

Adelia stepped closer and grabbed hold of his coat collar. “As much as I would love to, I’m staying here for a girls’ night.”

Oliver felt a wave of disappointment, but he was glad she’d be with people who loved her and would keep her safe. “That sounds fun.” He nodded toward the door. “Will you walk me out?”

A little smile crossed her face. “Okay. Or maybe we could go for a drive and catch up.”

“A drive sounds good,” he replied.

Her face lit up. “I’ll be right back.” She raced off and returned in her coat. “Ready.”

They walked out together, and Adelia slid her arm through the crook of his. He walked her to the passenger side and opened the door for her, which earned him another smile. He’d never felt more accomplished than when he put a smile on her face.

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Once they were on the road, Adelia reached over and laid her hand on his knee, which made him jump.

She laughed. "Sorry. I feel like it's been so long since I saw you. I wanted to make sure you were real."

He chuckled and placed his hand atop hers. "Are you real?"

She turned her hand over and wound her fingers through his. "This feels real to me."

As good as it felt to hold her hand, he still had strong doubts about taking things to the next level with Adelia, but he hated to disappoint her, so he kept his hand where it was.

"So, how are you?" Adelia asked.

"Fine."

"Anything new on my blackmailer?"

He shook his head. "Things have been quiet there. No new leads, and the ones we had went cold."

"I figured."

"I'm really sorry. We're still working on it."

She let out a breath. “I was hoping to come back and not have to look over my shoulder this time.”

“I know.”

Her phone went off, and she let go of his hand to answer it. “Hey, Skylar,” she answered then listened. “Yeah, that’s fine. Text me what everyone wants.” She tossed her phone into her purse and looked at Oliver. “The girls want snacks. It’s okay to stop somewhere, right?”

“Of course. But isn’t the Schultz house stocked with Schultz Chocolate?”

Adelia laughed. “Probably. But Merritt wants salty, Skylar wants crunchy, and Genevieve wants celery and peanut butter.”

Oliver screwed up his nose.

“Pregnancy cravings.” Adelia shrugged her shoulders.

The last thing Oliver wanted was to talk about babies, so he changed the subject. “How’s your dad doing?”

“He put on a happy face for me while I was there, but he couldn’t really hide his sadness. I know him too well.”

“I can relate. It’s hard to feel so helpless to fix things when the other person doesn’t want to anymore.”

A look of concern crossed her face. “I’ve been so wrapped up in my family drama, I didn’t think about the fact that you’ve been through this. I hope this isn’t bringing back painful memories for you.”

“I let it go a long time ago. And it was hard. But it will get better for your dad. It did for me.”

She was quiet for a few beats. “Do you still miss her?”

“I do. We were high school sweethearts. She was my best friend. But for us, it came to the point where we wanted different things, and we fought about those differences over and over until it broke us. We weren’t in love anymore. We weren’t even friends, really. All I wanted was to go back to the way things used to be, but we couldn’t. We were too far gone from that time in our lives. I didn’t see it, but she did. I was stubborn, but so was she. And she made a choice for her own life. It just didn’t include me.”

Adelia didn’t reply, and the space grew quiet.

“I don’t know what your parents’ issues are. Maybe they can figure out a way back to each other. But that wasn’t possible for us. We went into marriage with a different future in mind, and we should’ve been more honest about that from the start.”

“What were the differences?” she asked softly. “The things you couldn’t get past?”

“I’d rather not talk about it right now,” he said, feeling a twinge of guilt for not being upfront with her.

There was a mental battle raging within him. He knew he should say it—I don’t want children—but he couldn’t force the words out. Saying them would surely push her away, and he didn’t want that, even knowing there was no future for them.

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He glanced over and noticed her looking out the window, deep in thought. Things were too serious, so he turned on the radio, hoping to lighten the mood. They were met with Carrie Underwood's smooth country voice, singing a sassy little tale about slashing the tires of her cheating boyfriend's truck and smashing the headlights with a bat.

He turned the volume up and tapped the steering wheel with his palm, and Adelia looked over at him curiously.

"Nothing like Carrie Underwood getting revenge on a cheater, am I right?"

Adelia raised an eyebrow. "But did she break the guy's nose?"

Oliver laughed loudly. "Good thing you didn't have a bat with you that day."

"It would've hurt me less."

They laughed together, and he was relieved to move past the heaviness.

They chatted about this and that—Oliver's work, her Thanksgiving, and the visit with her dad's family. He could've kept driving all night just to listen to her voice. But before it got too late, they stopped to pick up snacks for the girls and headed back to the Schultz's.

When he pulled into the driveway, he turned off the Jeep and got out to open the door for her. His stomach was tied in knots, knowing he needed to have an honest conversation with her.

She climbed out and immediately stepped up close to him.

He wound his arms around her upper back and pulled her in.

“I really did miss you, Olly,” Adelia spoke softly, her breath tickling his ear, sending pleasant shivers up his spine.

He leaned back enough to look at her. “I missed you too.”

Before he had a chance to say what he needed to, Adelia tightened her arms around his waist and brought herself closer, gazing up at him in anticipation. He leaned in with the intention of planting one soft kiss on her lips, but it didn’t happen that way. She gripped the back of his coat and kept him close as she kissed him again, more intense this time, and he was lost. His hands drifted to her neck, fingertips tangling in her silky tresses, and his heart picked up pace with their perfect give-and-take. It was like they were back in his guest room again, kissing like their lives depended on it.

A loud truck passed by on the street, and it was enough to draw them out of the fog.

“I could kiss you all night,” he whispered.

She grinned up at him. “Maybe someday.”

A pleasurable warmth settled over him at her innuendo, and he had to fight to keep his mind from going there.

“So, I probably should’ve asked you this sooner,” she said, “but I need a date for the wedding. And I’m thinking since you just kissed me, you’ll probably say yes if I ask you.”

“I guess you’ll have to ask and find out.”

She tilted her head and angled into him flirtatiously. “Oliver, will you be my date to Gus and Merritt’s wedding on Saturday?”

He gave her a sly smile. “I’ll have to check my calendar.”

She smacked his chest and stepped away, but his arms swooped around her and pulled her close again, and she sighed as she smiled up at him.

“I would love to be your date.” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“I knew it.” She leaned in and touched her lips to his for one soft sweet kiss before they parted ways for the night.

Oliver watched her walk to the house, and she glanced over her shoulder and smiled at him before disappearing inside.

The entire drive home, he had a nagging in the pit of his stomach. It had started when they talked about his marriage and ramped up after their kisses. He was so weak when it came to Adelia, and he was being selfish with her. Being close to her felt amazing, but every time he surrendered to his longing for her, he confused the situation and gave her false hope.

He didn’t want to hurt her, but at this point, that couldn’t be avoided. The roadblocks between them were impossible to get past, especially knowing she wanted kids. He had to end things before they got in deeper and the damage was too great.

His heart ached at the thought of not having her in his life, but he’d already let this go too far. And the only way to get rid of this feeling in his gut was to tell her the truth.

He decided to wait until after the wedding to talk to her so he wouldn’t ruin the festivities. He’d never dreaded a conversation more.

Oh, how he wished things could be different. But they weren't meant to be.

TWENTY-FOUR

The moment Merritt stepped into her dress, Adelia and Skylar stared at her in awe. Her long, lace gown with cap sleeves was perfect for a winter wedding. It was straight and fitted just enough through her waist and hips to show off all of her curves. Her dark hair was down in waves, hanging just below her shoulders—the way Gus liked it, she'd said.

Merritt tugged at the sides of the dress, smoothing them down. "It feels a little snug."

"Well, it looks amazing," Adelia told her.

Merritt's face lit up. "Can you zip me up?"

"Of course." Adelia moved to stand behind her, and Skylar got her camera out to capture some candids of Merritt getting ready.

Adelia looked over Merritt's shoulder at their reflection in the mirror before them. Seeing her friend in that dress, her own longings to be a bride surfaced, but she shoved them down and focused on Merritt.

"You're stunning."

Merritt smiled. "Thank you."

Adelia took hold of the zipper and slid it upward halfway before it stopped.

“Is it all the way up?” Merritt glanced back over her shoulder.

Adelia tugged. “It won’t go up.”

“What?”

Skylar joined Adelia and took hold of the fabric on either side of the zipper. “Try it now.”

Adelia tried again, but it would not budge.

“Is it stuck or something?” The pitch of Merritt’s voice raised with her obvious worry.

“Didn’t you have a final dress fitting?” Adelia asked.

“I did. I’ve just been feeling so bloated this week.”

Tears threatened to ruin Merritt’s perfectly applied wedding day makeup, but Skylar rushed to grab a tissue and gently dabbed under Merritt’s eyes to keep that from happening.

“My time of the month is any day now,” Merritt said. “But I hope it waits until after our trip. I totally skipped the last two from all the stress.”

Adelia and Skylar exchanged looks.

“What?” Merritt took the tissue from Skylar and dabbed away a rogue tear before it fell.

“Merritt, you skipped two periods?” Adelia asked.

“Yeah. It’s no big deal. It’s happened before. Especially when I did my first Merritt Cosmetics launch. All the stress and everything. I skipped like three that time.”

“And your wedding dress is too tight,” Skylar noted.

“So?” Merritt stared at them until her eyes suddenly widened, and she shook her head, finally seeming to realize what they were hinting at. “Nooo!”

“Were you and Gus careful?” Adelia asked.

She turned her face away as her cheeks colored. “Not the first time. But we were every other time.”

“It only takes once,” Adelia told her.

“Oh my gosh. I can’t be.” Merritt started pacing. “Can I?” Her hands were shaking. “I can’t walk down that aisle, not knowing for sure.”

“Do you want me to go get you a pregnancy test?” Skylar asked.

“Would you?”

“Of course.” Skylar took off faster than a lightning bolt.

“What am I going to do about my dress?” Merritt’s chin quivered.

“One crisis at a time.” Adelia handed her another tissue and took the one she’d been gripping, which was now crushed in a tight ball.

“I wouldn’t call being pregnant a crisis,” Merritt said. “We want a family. Maybe it’s a little sooner than we expected, but if this is happening, I’m not upset about it. I’m just surprised.”

Adelia’s mouth spread into a smile. “You and Gus are going to have such cute babies.”

Merritt’s eyes sparkled with happy tears. “I know.” She dabbed her eyes again.

“Can you believe last year at this time, you were on your way to my Christmas party when you first met Gus?”

“I almost killed him with my car. That’s a little hard to forget.”

They laughed as the door to the bridal room opened, and in walked Genevieve and her mom, Ida.

“Skylar says you need a seamstress,” Genevieve said.

Adelia noticed Ida was carrying a travel-size sewing kit as she approached the bride.

“What can I help you with, sweetie?” Ida asked.

“I think it needs to be taken out a little,” Merritt replied.

Ida gripped the back and tugged the sides together. “It sure does.” She looked at Genevieve. “I need cream-colored ribbon.”

“I’m on it.” Genevieve took off on a mission.

Merritt definitely looked more worried about her dress than the possible pregnancy, and Adelia lay a hand on her arm. “It’s going to be fine.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Several minutes later, Genevieve returned with a white ribbon instead.

“It’s all I could find,” she said. “I stole it from a couple of the flower arrangements.”

“Okay, we’re going to fix you right up,” Ida said, “but first I need your dress.”

Merritt slipped the dress off and handed it over to Ida.

“It won’t be perfect, but I’ll do my best.”

“I don’t care as long as it stays on.”

They watched as Ida worked some kind of crazy magic, making loops with ribbon,

and sewing them into the dress as quickly as her hands would allow.

The door opened soon after, and Skylar entered with a small paper bag in her hand.

Merritt looked from Skylar to Adelia and back. “I think I need to use the bathroom. Sky, can I talk to you for a minute?”

Skylar followed Merritt into the attached bathroom, and they closed the door.

Adelia felt a wave of excitement. Merritt and Gus’s life might be about to change forever with the results of that test. She let herself imagine what it would be like to take a test of her own someday, and if it would be with Oliver.

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Skylar reappeared less than a minute later, and they watched for the next few minutes as Ida put the finishing touches on her fix for the dress.

“Okay, we need our bride,” Ida announced.

The door to the bathroom opened slowly, and Merritt appeared with tears in her eyes.

“Oh, sweetie,” Ida said, “I promise I didn’t ruin your dress. It will fit just right. I guarantee it.”

A slow smile spread across Merritt’s face as she held up the pregnancy test. “It’s positive.”

Adelia and Skylar screeched with excitement and attacked her with hugs and kisses.

“You’re pregnant?” Genevieve asked.

Merritt nodded her head enthusiastically, causing the tears to slide down her cheek.

“That explains the dress,” Ida said with a chuckle.

“Our babies will get to play together,” Genevieve said as her hand fell to her own belly.

Merritt held an arm out for Genevieve to join their group hug, and they all embraced and laughed and cried together. Adelia’s heart overflowed with joy for her friends.

A knock on the door interrupted their celebration.

“Just a minute,” all the girls cried.

“Are you ready?” Merritt’s father’s voice was muffled through the door.

“Just a few more minutes,” Merritt replied.

“It’s almost time,” he said.

“They can’t start without me.”

Adelia and Skylar helped Merritt into her dress, and Ida took a length of ribbon and wove it criss-cross through the loops she’d created and tied her into her wedding dress, tucking the end of the ribbon down into the dress and out of sight. Then Ida helped to put on Merritt’s thin beaded headband veil and smoothed it down to cover the fix.

“There you have it,” Ida said.

Merritt turned to look at the back of her dress in the full-length mirror and tugged her veil out of the way to see. “You did it.” She turned and pulled Ida into a hug. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

Ida smiled and cupped her cheek. “You’re welcome.” She glanced down at Merritt’s belly. “And congratulations.”

Merritt’s eyes were bright and threatened to unleash more tears. “Thank you.”

Once her makeup was touched up, Ida opened the door and let Merritt’s dad into the room.

Merritt had always said her dad wasn't one for emotion, but Adelia could see he was fighting back a few tears at the sight of his daughter.

"You take my breath away, Merritt."

"Thanks, Dad."

He raised an arm to her. "Are you ready?"

Merritt was practically glowing as she wound her hand through the crook of her dad's arm. "I am."

Adelia walked down the stairs behind them, thinking how she would never have this moment. Her dad would never walk her down the aisle. She shook it off, quickly reminding herself of the pain she would avoid by not getting married, and focused on Gus and Merritt's wedding.

Adelia knew the exact moment when Merritt told Gus about the baby. They stood at the back of the church, having walked down the aisle after their ceremony. Adelia, who was the Maid of Honor, was walking out with Sebastian, the Best Man, and she saw Gus's mouth fall open just before he swept his wife up in a hug and lifted her off the ground.

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“Are you serious?” Adelia heard Gus say just as they came into the foyer.

He set Merritt down, and she nodded up at him with a big smile on her face.

Gus’s hands went to her waist, his thumbs rubbing her belly. “A baby?”

“A baby.” Merritt was beaming.

“Mer ...” Gus choked up, and his chin began to quiver as tears sprung to his eyes and spilled down his cheeks.

Merritt took him in her arms, and they stood there, holding onto each other.

Adelia’s heart ached in the best way as she witnessed this moment. Gus had struggled for so long to change the bad boy ways of his twenties, and finding Merritt was the best thing that had ever happened to him. To see him so happy and soon to become a father filled Adelia with pride. He was going to be such a great dad.

When Gus and Merritt finally let go, he rubbed the tears from his face and glanced around the room, his gaze meeting Adelia’s.

“Deals! Did you hear our news?” She’d never seen a bigger smile on his face.

“I did. Congratulations!” She opened her arms to him, and he hugged her tight.

“Auntie Adelia has a nice ring to it.”

Adelia laughed. "I like the sound of that."

Word traveled fast, and soon the whole family was showering them with hugs and congratulations.

As the guests funneled through the foyer on their way to the reception, Adelia caught sight of Oliver coming through the double doors in her direction.

"Hi," she said as he leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to her cheek.

"Hi. You look beautiful."

She turned around in her floor-length emerald green chiffon dress. "This old thing." She gave him a wink but didn't get so much as a smile in return.

She looked him over, checking out his nice suit and tie, his hair smoothed back.

"You're not so bad yourself," she said.

"Nice ceremony," he remarked, not reacting in any way to her flirty comments.

"It was. Almost makes me want a wedding of my own someday."

"Almost?" he asked.

She waved it off. That was a conversation for another time. "I have to go have pictures taken with the bridal party. Do you want to come with us?"

"I think I'll just meet you at the reception."

"Okay." She was a little disappointed that he didn't want to stay, especially after how

standoffish he was acting. “I’ll see you there.”

When she leaned in to kiss his lips, he tilted to the side and kissed her cheek again instead. “See you there.”

There was definitely something going on with Oliver. She could’ve dismissed it as him not liking to show public affection, but deep down, she knew it was something more.

Once they arrived at the reception, it only got worse. The bridal party was seated together with their dates, and Oliver seemed withdrawn and quiet, like he was having no fun at all. Maybe it was because of the conversation about marriage they’d had the other night. She wasn’t sure, but she didn’t like the sudden distance she felt between them.

Adelia tried not to worry over Oliver’s strange demeanor and focused on the happy occasion instead.

“You know what I just realized?” Merritt said. “All the crazy things I’ve been eating lately have probably been pregnancy cravings.”

“Like what?” Adelia asked.

“I don’t want to say.”

“Okay. You have to tell us now.”

“I actually ate pickles and ice cream the other day,” Merritt admitted. “How cliché is that?”

“How could you not think you were pregnant after that?” Skylar asked.

Merritt shrugged. “At least I’m not craving celery like Genevieve.”

“Hey, celery with peanut butter is delicious,” Genevieve said. “Don’t knock it until you try it.”

The girls laughed, and Adelia envied the pure joy on Merritt’s face.

“You two are making me so excited to have a baby someday,” Adelia said. “I can’t wait to have pregnancy cravings of my own.”

Skylar leaned in and whispered, “With Oliver.”

Adelia shushed her. She glanced over at Oliver, who hadn’t said more than three words in the past hour. He was loosening his tie, looking extremely uncomfortable. “Are you okay, Olly?”

“Yeah, this thing is feeling a little tight.”

“Let me help you.” She lifted her hands to take over, but he leaned away.

“I got it.” He stood then. “I think I’m going to step outside for some air.”

“It’s thirty degrees.”

“Ten minutes won’t cause death by exposure.”

She rolled her eyes and smiled. “Wear your coat.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Her eyes widened. “Don’t ever call me that again.”

He smiled for the first time all night and walked toward the exit.

“Did we scare him away with all the baby talk?” Skylar asked.

“I’m not sure. He’s acting really weird. I think I’ll go talk to him.”

Adelia retrieved her coat and walked outside, where she found Oliver, looking up at the thick, heavy snowflakes, falling from the dark sky.

“Hey.”

He looked over his shoulder at her. “Hey.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” She reached up and brushed at the coating of snow on his hair.

He chuckled and shook his head like a dog shaking water from its coat.

“You seemed quiet in there.”

He let out a heavy breath, and his shoulders sank a little. “There’s something I have to tell you. I wasn’t planning to do it tonight, but I guess it needs to be said.”

Her body hummed with nervous anticipation.

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“I like you, Adelia. You know I do. But I’ve been wrong to let things go as far as they have between us.”

“Olly.”

He held up his hand as he continued. “I know we’ve already talked about the many differences between us that might stand in our way. But there’s more. And as much as I enjoy spending time with you and can’t deny my strong attraction to you, in the long run, it’s best if I tell you now before this goes any further.”

Adelia could already feel the tears burning in her eyes, even not knowing what he was about to say.

“I don’t want children.” He let it hang there in the air, heavy and important.

Adelia’s heart ached at his admission. She didn’t know what to say.

“I heard you talking about babies in there. I know you want a family. And I can’t let you consider what a future like that would be with me, because I can’t give it to you.”

Her brow furrowed. “Can’t? Or won’t?”

“Won’t.”

“I see.” She chewed on her bottom lip as the silence spread between them. “That’s the reason your marriage fell apart, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” There was such sadness on his face. “I wish things were different, Adelia, but it would be selfish of me to get serious with you, knowing how you feel about this.”

“Why don’t you want kids?” she asked.

“I think when I married Val, I thought kids might be something we talked about someday, but it was a long way off. Like some distant future that might or might not happen that didn’t affect us or how much we loved each other in the moment. She would mention it every once in a while, and I’d say we’d talk about it in another year or so, after I got a promotion or after we bought a bigger house that would fit kids. But I was really just making excuses. She got angrier and angrier about it as the years went by. Her clock was ticking, and she wanted to start trying. She was ready, and I knew I never would be.”

“Why?” Adelia asked.

“I ...” He paused for several long moments, and his eyebrows scrunched up as if he was struggling to answer. “I’ve seen some bad stuff in my job. The world can be a horrible place. And I don’t want to bring a child into this.”

Adelia shook her head. “The world can be a horrible place. There are terrible people out there. But there are also good people, people who want to create something beautiful from their immense love for each other. And being afraid something bad is going to happen to a child isn’t reason enough not to have one. Of course, bad things happen to children sometimes. Bad things happen all the time. It’s just a fact. But you can’t live in fear of that or you’ll end up alone. Is that what you plan to do?”

“Of course not. But I can’t help how I feel.”

“I’m not trying to downplay how you feel, Oliver. But is there more to this?”

His lips pressed firmly together, and his silence told her there was. She wished she knew what was going through his mind.

“If we were to get married someday,” he said, “I would still feel the same way, and I don’t want to go through another divorce.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have to worry about that with me because I’m never getting married.”

Oliver’s eyes met hers. “You’re not?”

“Why spend years with someone, legally bound to them, and then have to go through the huge hassle of getting a divorce, splitting your assets and everything, if it all falls apart? After seeing what went down with my parents, who were married for decades, who I thought would be together for life, I’m not putting myself through that.”

“So, you don’t want a committed relationship then,” he replied.

“I do want that. Just not the marriage.”

“What if the man you love wants to get married?” Oliver asked.

She stared down to where snowflakes had started to accumulate on the fabric of her coat. “I guess I’ll hope it isn’t a dealbreaker for him, and if it is, then we weren’t meant to be.” She turned her eyes on him again. “You can’t possibly want marriage again after what happened with your wife.”

His gaze turned to the parking lot. “Actually, I do.”

Her mouth fell open at his admission.

“I still believe in committing my life to another person. I think marriage is important and special, and I want to find the right person to spend the rest of my life with. And when I do, I want to marry her.” He looked over at her. “You say my fear of losing a child shouldn’t keep me from having one, but you’re doing the same thing by not getting married. You’re afraid someone will hurt you like your mom hurt your dad.”

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His words struck a chord, and she couldn't seem to reply. They were more alike in their thinking than either of them knew.

Silence stretched around them as the snow fell.

"What a pair we are," Adelia finally said. "The one who doesn't want marriage but wants a family. And the one who wants marriage but doesn't want children."

"I tried to tell you from the beginning, there are just too many differences between us, Addy."

Her heart ached to hear him call her that. "I know." She moved closer to him, and he turned and brought her into his arms, where she snuggled in close.

He rested his cheek against her head and rubbed his hands up and down her back to keep her warm. "I want you to have the family you want someday, Adelia. I want every happiness for you. But it can't be with me."

She was seconds from breaking down crying, but fought to hold it together. "Why do I feel like walking away would be a monumental mistake?"

"We have a connection. There's no denying that." He lifted his head and pressed a firm kiss to her forehead. "But it's not enough."

TWENTY-FIVE

It's not enough.

Adelia hadn't been able to get Oliver's words out of her mind since last night. After that horrible moment, he'd taken her hands in his and stared into her eyes before he said he should probably go. She had stood there, feeling numb, and not just from the cold, as she watched him walk away. Then she'd snuck into the bathroom and had a good long cry until Skylar happened to come into the bathroom and heard her. And when it came time for the bridal party to dance with their dates, she stood on the sidelines, dateless and alone, until Ephraim stepped in and lifted her spirits with a spin around the dance floor.

Now, she was curled up in Skylar's childhood bedroom, staring out the window at the winter wonderland from the freshly fallen snow. She thought she was all cried out last night, but her throat tightened, and her eyes burned with the threat of more tears.

Deep breaths, Adelia.

She rolled over and looked at Skylar, sleeping peacefully beside her, and wished her life was as settled as her friend's.

Skylar's phone rang, and she grumbled and rolled to grab it. "Hullo," she answered groggily. "Good morning." Her voice turned all soft and dreamy, and Adelia knew it was Franky calling.

"Good morning, Franky!" Adelia called out, and Skylar yelped and nearly fell off the

bed in surprise.

“Adelia! You scared me to death. I thought you were sleeping.”

Adelia laughed. And laughed some more. She couldn't stop laughing. If she didn't laugh, she'd cry.

Skylar eyed her. “Are you okay?”

Adelia giggled and pulled herself up to sit against the headboard.

“I'll see you soon, Franky,” Skylar said all lovey-dovey. “I love you too.” She hung up and rolled over to look at Adelia with a goofy smile.

“You guys are sickeningly cute.”

“I didn't mean to rub our love in your face.”

Adelia waved her off. “Don't worry about it. I'll get over it.”

“Are you sure there's no way you and Oliver can find a compromise?”

“I told you, he's never going to want a baby, and I don't want to get married. Why even start something if we know we'll never get what we want out of the relationship.”

“I guess that's mature of both of you.”

“It is.” She pushed down the sadness that threatened to swallow her up. “We both know what we want.”

“But if you don’t get married, I can’t be in your wedding.” Skylar pouted.

“I’m sorry, Sky. Not going to happen.”

“Maybe he’ll change his mind someday and want kids after all.”

“He seemed pretty adamant.”

Skylar snuggled up and laid her head on Adelia’s shoulder. “I’m really sorry it didn’t work out with Oliver.”

“Me too.” Adelia’s phone rang, and she saw her agent’s name and groaned. “Ugh. Barney.” She took a deep breath and answered with fake cheerfulness. “Barney, so good to hear from you so early in the morning. How are you?”

Skylar made a face as she pretended to stick her finger down her throat.

“Good morning, Adelia. I have news about your project.”

Adelia sat up straighter in the bed. “What news?”

“The producers are in, and they’ve approved a budget. You’ve got the green light.”

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Her heart stuttered in her chest. “What? Are you serious?”

“Production meeting on Tuesday morning.”

“That soon?”

“Yes, are you ready for this?”

The excitement coursed through her veins. “I was born ready. Thank you, Barney. For everything.”

“You’re welcome. See you soon.”

Adelia squealed so loud that Skylar slapped a hand over her mouth.

“You’ll wake everyone up.”

She pushed Skylar’s hand away. “My project, the one I’ve been trying to get made for the past two years, is finally green-lit. We’re moving forward on pre-production this week!”

Skylar hugged her. “Oh, Adelia. I’m so happy for you.”

Adelia smiled. “This is exactly what I needed right now.”

Leaving without talking to Oliver felt wrong somehow, but Adelia knew where he stood, and as much as it broke her heart, she boarded the plane for California without

so much as a text to let him know. As happy as she was about the project, she felt like she'd left a part of herself back in Michigan.

She moved through the airport in a fog. Nothing seemed to phase her. Not the traffic on the way home. Not the paparazzi camped out at the gate. All she wanted was to take a nice relaxing bubble bath, have a glass of wine, and get enough sleep that she was ready for the meeting with the producers tomorrow.

Andre helped bring her bags inside, then she locked up and headed toward the kitchen to see if there was anything edible. As she passed the living room, a movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention.

Her pulse quickened, and she nearly jumped sky-high at the sight of her mother, sitting on the couch with a wine glass in her hand.

"Mom!" Her hand flew to her heart. "What are you doing here?"

"Am I not allowed in my own home?"

Adelia came closer and took a good look at her mother's face. Smudges of makeup rounded her puffy eyes and mascara streaked down her blotchy cheeks. A few tissues were strewn across the sofa and a pile of them had collected on the floor.

"Mom? What's wrong?"

Mom's shoulders shook, and she began to cry.

Adelia wasn't sure how to react, having never witnessed such a thing before. She slowly walked across the room and sat down beside her, and Mom leaned over and rested her head against Adelia's shoulder.

“Did something happen with Bryce?”

“Something happened alright. I’ve ruined my life.”

Mom’s crying became full-blown blubbering, and Adelia handed her a fresh tissue and waited for her to calm down again.

“Talk to me, Mom.”

“I’ve made a mistake of epic proportions.”

“Everyone makes mistakes. What happened?”

“Bryce isn’t the man I thought he was. It was all new and exciting at first. He seemed so interesting and attentive to me and my needs. But the real Bryce has been revealed to me. The man is selfish and stubborn and a user. He doesn’t want to settle down with me. He doesn’t want to settle down with anyone. He was only looking for someone to prop up his ego and give his career a boost.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

Mom looked over at her with a raised eyebrow. “No, you aren’t. You’re glad this happened. I got what was coming to me, right?”

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Adelia's brow furrowed. Her mother wasn't wrong. "You broke up our family for this man. You broke your husband's heart and my heart, and you ruined marriage for me. So, no, I'm not sorry that it didn't work out with him, but I am sorry that he hurt you."

"What do you mean I ruined marriage for you?"

"You and Dad have been together for over thirty years. How can I trust happily ever after when yours fell apart in a matter of months?"

"It didn't fall apart in months. It took years of struggles and fights to get to this point. Throw careers and raising a child in the mix and working on a marriage sometimes gets pushed aside, until you've lived side by side for years, just surviving while the marriage crumbles around you."

"So if you didn't have me then maybe things wouldn't have been so stressful, right?"

"Don't put words in my mouth."

"You regret having me, don't you?"

"What?"

"I heard you tell Dad once that you were tired of giving up projects to have to stay home with me."

"That was not because I didn't want you, it was because sometimes a great script

came along, and I had to pass on it because it was your dad's turn to work. It was our agreement before we had you, and I went along with it. Sometimes it was frustrating." She turned and took Adelia's face in her hands. "But I was never ... never ... sorry we had you. You are our greatest accomplishment."

Adelia's heart clenched. "Even greater than your Oscar?"

Mom smiled. "Far greater than that."

Adelia and her mother hadn't been close in years. Mom pushed for her to do her best—which usually came across as cold and bossy. She never showed a lot of emotion or was very affectionate, and she never told Adelia how much she meant to her. To hear her say those words touched someplace deep in Adelia's heart. She hadn't known she'd needed to hear them until now.

"Thank you for saying that, Mom."

"It's the truth." She smiled, but then her eyebrows scrunched in concern. "But you not getting married, that's ridiculous. Don't think I didn't notice you playing with my wedding dress when you were younger. I know you want that."

"I wanted the wedding. But that's just a ceremony. If you don't get married, then if it doesn't work out, you can go your separate ways. No messy divorce to worry about."

"You make it sound like walking away from a relationship is easy? Even without marriage, it's difficult, and it hurts. And it sounds like you're giving yourself an escape route before the relationship even starts."

"That's not what I'm saying."

"I know you, Adelia. You don't just dip your toe in, you jump. You don't do things

halfway. You're an all-in kind of woman. And maybe what I did has tarnished your view of marriage. We were your example of life-long commitment, and I screwed that up. But I still love your father. I always have. And I want to be with him."

Adelia's eyebrows lifted. "But you just served him divorce papers a month ago."

"I know. That was a mistake." She shook her head. "We were stuck in this cycle for so long. We couldn't seem to break out of it. As messed up as this is, I think I was hoping it would get his attention and get us out of the rut."

"That is messed up, Mom. You cheated on your husband to get his attention?"

"There were other reasons, but I think that was part of it. And now I've realized that I do want our marriage to work." She looked at Adelia with all seriousness. "And that's what a marriage takes. A lot of work. And you, my girl, have never been afraid of hard work."

TWENTY-SIX

Monday morning was definitely not welcome. Oliver hadn't been able to stop thinking about his conversation with Adelia. The shocked look on her face and those tears in her eyes had stuck with him. So much so that he'd picked up his phone numerous times intending to call and apologize, to tell her how much he wanted things to be different, to tell her he missed her already. But he never dialed.

The coffee cup he was blank staring into at the moment wasn't enough to tempt him. It was most likely cold anyway. He sat at his desk at work, doing a whole lot of nothing, when he should've been filing reports.

Carmen strolled up and placed a fresh to-go cup of coffee before him. "The good stuff."

He broke from his stare and gave her a little smile. "Thanks."

"Our blackmailer got off with a fine and probation. No jail time."

Oliver's eyes widened. "How?"

"First offense, and he had a very good, very expensive attorney."

Oliver groaned. "Super." He shook his head. "There's no way he could afford that on his convenience store wages."

"Which lines up with what we've been saying all along. Someone put him up to this."

The frustration took over, and Oliver grabbed the closest thing to him—his computer mouse—and tossed it across the room, which turned some heads.

“Hey, get control.” Carmen retrieved the mouse and placed it back on his desk.

“I’m sorry.” Oliver ran his fingers through his hair. “There has to be a trail back to this guy.”

“So far, Cyrus has paid for everything in cash or with a cashier’s check. There is no bank trail. Whoever did this planned ahead.” She patted him on the shoulder. “We’ll keep on it.”

Oliver nodded, finding it difficult to concentrate after that. Whoever planned this was still out there, and there was a chance they might try something again.

Later that morning, Oliver drove his police cruiser to the Schultz’s home, a nervous flutter settling in his stomach. He could’ve easily texted Adelia to let her know about the photographer getting out, but it was an excuse to see her and make sure she was okay.

Gerard greeted him at the door, as always, and ushered him into the house. “The family is having brunch. I’ll announce you.”

“Thank you.” Oliver immediately second-guessed not calling ahead.

Gus came into the foyer less than a minute later and shook his hand. “Hey, Oliver. Come on in. Have you eaten?”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt.” His stomach growled at the mention of food. He hadn’t felt like eating anything all morning.

“No worries. Mer and I are having brunch with my parents before we head off on our honeymoon.”

“I just came to talk to Adelia.”

“Oh, she left this morning.”

“Left for where?”

“Her project got the green light, and she flew back to California for meetings.”

A smile crossed Oliver’s face at that news. “She got her movie? That’s wonderful.”

“Yeah, she was really excited about it. I’m sorry you missed her.”

“It’s all right. I can call her later.”

Merritt came into the room then and greeted Oliver with a hug. “Come and join us.”

He waved her off. “I don’t want to impose.”

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She raised an eyebrow at him. “You wouldn’t be.”

Oliver decided to sit with them for a while before heading back to the office. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Nice to see you again so soon, Oliver,” Ephraim said as he entered the dining room.

“Nice to see you too.”

A plate was retrieved for Oliver and placed next to Merritt.

“Help yourself,” Harriet said. “There’s plenty.”

“Thank you. It looks delicious.” He took a helping of eggs, sausage, and home fries.

They chatted about work and the weather, and Gus and his father got to talking about Schultz Chocolate business.

Merritt turned to Oliver while the others talked. “Did you hear, Adelia’s movie is happening?”

“Gus told me. That’s amazing. I’m so happy for her.”

“Did you talk to her before she left?”

He shook his head.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s for the best.”

“Why’s that?”

“A lot of reasons.” He didn’t think the Schultz family dinner table was the place to get into all of that.

Merritt seemed to let it go and went back to eating.

“Your wedding was really nice,” he said, trying to keep up the conversation.

“Thank you. I’m so glad you could come. I know Adelia was too.”

He gave her a closed-mouth smile. “And congratulations on the baby.”

Merritt’s face lit up. “Thanks. It was a bit of a surprise, but we’re happy about it.”

“Yeah, we are!” Gus interjected.

When Oliver finished eating, he thanked the Schultzes for inviting him to join and wished them well before he headed back to work.

“Oliver!” Merritt called when he was about to open his car door.

He looked over to see her shrugging on her winter coat as she walked toward him.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“Adelia told me some of the issues the two of you are having, and I know one of them is your very different backgrounds.”

“Yes,” he replied.

“I don’t know if this will make any difference to you, but I’m the adopted daughter of a homemaker and a blue-collar factory worker. I came from very little, worked hard, and built my cosmetics business all on my own. Gus and I told you how we got together, remember? We couldn’t have been more different. But you can’t help who you fall in love with, right? And when you love someone, sometimes you have to step out of your comfort zone and navigate situations you normally wouldn’t have to. And that can be hard and uncomfortable, but when it’s the right person, it’s worth it. You may have paparazzi taking your picture and posting your private life all over the internet, but at the end of the day, you get to have a life with the one you love, and that’s what really matters.

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“And I can tell you that being part of the Schultz family is worth it. They are wonderful people. And Adelia is one of them. She might not have the Schultz name, but they love her like a daughter. And they love you for all you’ve done for the family.”

“I appreciate what you’re saying, Merritt, but there is so much more to it than just our different lifestyles.”

“Is it the age difference thing?”

He shook his head.

“So it’s the no kids thing.”

“I know she wants a family someday, and I can’t give her that.”

“Because the world is so messed up?”

He was quiet.

“I’m sorry. If I’m overstepping here, just tell me to shut up.”

“No, it’s fine. I know you’re asking because you love Adelia.”

“I do. And I know you do too.”

His heart stuttered in his chest. He hadn’t even entertained the idea that he could be in

love with her, but there was a good chance that Merritt was right.

“So, this isn’t something you’re ever going to change your mind about?”

“I don’t think so.”

“When Gus and I first talked about having a family someday, I was a little skittish at the thought.”

“Really? You seem so excited about it.”

“I am. But my biological mom actually left me at a hospital when I was born, so I have some issues surrounding all of that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I feel like she was probably alone and scared and wanted better for me, and I understand that now, and I’m thankful for the family I have. I’m really excited about having kids with Gus, and they will always know how much they are loved and wanted.”

“You’re going to be great parents.”

“I think you would be a great dad, Oliver. And I know you’d keep a child safe from all the madness in this world.”

And there it was. His biggest struggle was having no control over what could happen to his potential child. Just like he’d had no control over what happened to his younger brother when they were kids. His throat felt tight, and he fought to keep from crying in front of her. “There’s so much more to it, Merritt.” He swallowed hard. “Something I don’t really talk about. Something I haven’t told Adelia.”

“Is it something you could work through?”

“I don’t know.”

She reached out and gripped his hand. “If it is, and if you care about Adelia like I think you do, isn’t it worth a try?”

He didn’t know what to say to that.

Merritt shivered then. “I should get back inside. I’m sorry if I came off as pushy. I just care about both of you, and I want you to be happy.”

“Thanks, Merritt.”

“And don’t be upset with Adelia for telling me things about your relationship. She just needed someone to confide in.”

“I understand.”

“Thanks for letting me talk. And think about what I said, Oliver.”

“I will.”

He climbed into his car and sat there for a moment while it warmed up. Dredging up the pain from his childhood wasn’t something he ever wanted to do. But the thought of not having Adelia in his life felt so much worse.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The warmer temperatures of early March had melted the last of the snow along the route to Schultz Cottage. Tiny green buds were sprouting from the tree branches, flowers were bursting through the soil, and the excitement of a fresh new season was in the air.

Three busy months had passed during pre-production on Adelia's movie. Principal photography would begin soon, but for the few weeks in between, she was back in Michigan for Genevieve's baby shower and wedding dress shopping with Skylar.

A nervous excitement had been running through her from the moment she stepped off of the airplane, and she couldn't deny it was because she might see Oliver while she was in town.

They had texted once just after she returned to California. He congratulated her on the movie and wished her well. Then he let her know about the photographer in her blackmailing case being released with only a fine and probation, which was disappointing and infuriating. He said they would continue to check any and all leads. And that was the extent of it.

After their disappointing exchange, she decided not to reach out to him. It was too painful to keep up a friendship, knowing they could never be more. But it didn't stop her from picking up her phone every once in a while with the intent to call.

Focusing on her movie and doing what she loved most helped the time fly by. She loved everything about the production process and was learning so much. There

wasn't a day gone by when she wasn't thankful to be telling this story.

Skylar's red Porsche was already in the driveway when she arrived at the cottage. Adelia was relieved that Skylar would be staying there with her while she was in town.

The door opened, and Skylar and Merritt came rushing outside and greeted her with a group hug then helped her with her things.

Once inside, Adelia went to the living room and flopped down on the couch.

"It's good to be back," she said. "I feel like I've been in constant work mode for months."

"You have," Merritt said, "but how exciting. Did you start filming yet?"

"Next month." She couldn't help but smile. "I can't wait."

"Is Layton your costar?" Skylar teased.

"Oh my gosh, don't even joke about that. I will never work with him again if I can help it."

The girls laughed, and it filled Adelia's soul. She hadn't realized how much she needed time with her friends. Despite how busy she'd been, it had been a lonely time for her.

One good thing to come out of it was spending time with her mom, who had stayed at the Malibu house with her for a few weeks until Dad returned to their home in Beverly Hills. Dad was open to talking, and Mom soon moved back home with him.

Adelia still wasn't sure what to think of all that. If she had been in that situation, she didn't know if she would be so quick to forgive her husband's infidelity. But she wasn't married and didn't understand the inner workings of a thirty-year relationship.

After pouring some wine—fruit juice for Merritt—they settled in for some girl talk before dinner.

“Look at you with your cute baby belly,” Adelia said. “How are you feeling?”

“Overall, pretty good. I'm in the second trimester now, so any nausea I had early on is gone. Honestly, I think I got lucky. I didn't get very sick. But don't mention that around Genevieve. She was sick as a dog for weeks.”

“Poor thing,” Adelia said.

“You should see her, though. She's one of those beautiful pregnant women who have this glow and look exactly the same, except for the baby belly.”

“Aww, Merritt, you're a beautiful pregnant woman too,” Skylar told her.

“You're gorgeous,” Adelia agreed. “And you are totally glowing.”

“That's from being sweaty and bloated. I tried to brighten up my face with my cosmetics. If I wasn't wearing any, you'd see these dark blotches on my face from this hormone-induced melasma I've got going on.” She pointed to her forehead.

“Thanks, pregnancy!”

“I've heard about that, and it usually fades,” Skylar said.

“I know. I'm not worried about it. But I definitely have to work to get the ‘pregnant glow.’”

“I’m sure Gus doesn’t care,” Adelia said.

Merritt got a silly grin on her face. “He’s all over me lately, so ...”

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The girls cracked up laughing.

“You two better be careful after this baby is born or you’re going to have another one right away,” Skylar warned.

“What about you and Franky?” Merritt asked. “Are you going to have kids right away or wait a while?”

“Maybe in a few years.” Skylar had a twinkle in her eyes. “Sometimes, I still can’t believe that he’s finally mine, that I’m going to be his wife.” She danced in her seat. “I can’t wait!”

Adelia’s heart was full for her friends. Everything was falling into place for them. They’d found their matches and were moving on with life and plans.

She must’ve been quiet longer than she thought because Merritt leaned over and squeezed her arm.

“Are you okay?”

Adelia nodded. “I’m just happy for you guys.”

“Have you spoken to Oliver since you left?”

“We texted once about my movie, and he said he was happy for me. But that was it.” She couldn’t hide her sadness.

Merritt shook her head. “I really hoped our talk would make a difference.”

Adelia’s brow furrowed. “What talk?”

“The day you went back to California, Oliver stopped by the house to talk to you.”

Adelia’s breath caught in her throat. “He did?”

“Yeah, and he and I talked.”

Her curiosity was piqued. “What about?”

“He told me there was a bigger issue with him not wanting kids, something he hadn’t told you about. I thought it might be something he could work on that might change his mind. He said he didn’t know. I hoped he’d talk to you about it.”

“I wonder what it was.” Adelia looked out the windows toward the lake, emotions rushing to the surface.

“He didn’t tell me, but it seemed pretty serious.”

Her shoulders sank. “I guess if it was something that could be fixed, he would’ve told me.”

“Maybe.”

Sadness poured over her, and her chin quivered as her eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, Adelia,” Skylar said.

“I’m sorry.” She waved her hands in front of her face. “I thought I was over him by

now.”

“Ohhh.” Merritt scooted closer and wrapped her arms around Adelia, and Skylar moved to her other side and did the same.

They held her as tears dripped down her cheeks. She had cried more over Oliver than she ever had about anything in her life.

“I guess I missed him more than I realized.”

“Maybe you should go talk to him while you’re here,” Skylar said. “You could say you’re checking up on the blackmail case. Isn’t that still open?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know if I should. I told myself I’d let him come to me.”

“But Oliver’s a quiet man,” Merritt said. “Maybe a little set in his ways. He might not be the kind to make the first move.”

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She thought about how she had been the one to initiate their first kiss. It probably wouldn't have happened if she hadn't done it.

"Merritt has a point," Skylar said. "Oliver might need a nudge."

Adelia nodded. "Maybe you're right."

After a few busy days with the girls, Adelia was looking forward to relaxing, beginning with sleeping in as late as she wanted. But around eight o'clock, she was awakened by the sound of hushed voices floating through the house. She reluctantly crawled out of bed and emerged from the guest room to see what it was all about.

Skylar and Merritt were seated across from each other at the table, and they didn't look happy.

"Morning." Adelia walked toward them. "I didn't know you were coming over this early, Merritt."

"I thought I'd bring coffee." Why did Merritt's voice sound shaky?

"That was sweet of—" Adelia's eyes landed on a series of black-and-white photographs on the table between them. "What are these?"

"I found them in an envelope on the front door."

Adelia looked closer at the photographs. There were a couple of her, Skylar, Genevieve, and Merritt taken at Sunset Grill, where they'd eaten after wedding dress

shopping. But the next three pictures made her heart skip a beat. They were of her, Skylar, and Merritt, sitting at this very table yesterday after shopping for baby gifts for Genevieve's shower.

"I'm really creeped out," Merritt said.

"Me too." Skylar looked through the window. "They were standing right out there on the deck when they took these."

"This goes above and beyond the usual paparazzi," Merritt added.

Adelia flipped the photographs over. No message this time. She grabbed the envelope and looked inside, then flipped it over and a slip of paper floated out onto the table.

I'll get the money. One way or another.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Browsing celebrity news websites wasn't something Oliver normally did with his time, but when Carmen mentioned she'd seen pictures of Adelia online with the Schultz ladies, he couldn't help himself. The headline mentioned Genevieve and Merritt's baby bellies as well as the fact that they were seen at a bridal boutique in Grand Rapids, shopping for Skylar's wedding dress.

So, Adelia was back in Michigan.

As he browsed the photos, a wave of envy came over him that they got to spend time with Adelia and he didn't. He hadn't even known she was coming to Michigan again, and that hurt, but she was under no obligation to tell him when she was in town. Things between them were over. By his own choice. He couldn't fault her for moving on and living her life, even if he still longed to be a part of it. Every day since she left, he wished he could take it back. But it was too late.

He closed his laptop and headed to the kitchen to heat up some leftovers. Just as he was dishing some fettuccini Alfredo onto a plate, the doorbell chimed. He quickly threw it into the microwave, set it for a couple minutes, and went to see who it was.

His heart skipped a beat when he opened the door.

"Hey, Olly."

Adelia stood before him, looking as beautifully angelic as ever, and he couldn't seem to find his words.

“Are you going to invite me in?” She twisted a blonde curl around her finger.

“Yes. Sorry.” He held the door back for her, and she breezed past him, leaving him in her coconut-scented wake. “I’m just surprised to see you.”

“I probably should’ve called first. Is it okay that I’m here?” She faced him, wringing her hands and biting the corner of her bottom lip, which only made him want to kiss that very spot.

“Uh ... of course. Come in and sit.” The microwave beeped in the kitchen. “I’ll be right back. Do you want something to drink?”

“I’m okay. Something smells good.”

“Leftovers,” he called from the kitchen as he covered the plate for later and returned to the living room.

Seeing Adelia sitting on his couch felt unreal. He was happy, almost giddy, that she was in his house again. And her presence filled the hole in his heart that had been there for the past three months.

He took a seat on the opposite end of the couch and turned to face her with his arm resting on the back. “How are you?”

Her forehead was creased and there wasn’t a hint of a smile on her face. “I have a bit of a problem.”

“What’s up?”

She reached into her bag, and Oliver’s stomach sank at the sight of a large envelope. He took it from her grasp and perused the contents.

“We’re all pretty freaked out.”

“Thank you for bringing these to me. We’ll get right on it.”

“What do you think they mean? One way or another? I’m scared, Olly.”

He lay his hand on her shoulder. “Hey, if this person tries anything again, we’ll get ‘em. The littlest slip-up will lead us right to them. Trust me.”

“I hate this.” Her nose wrinkled up in the cutest way.

“I know.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze and removed his hand before he gave into the urge to pull her into his arms.

“You should stay at the Schultz’s main house.” He looked into her eyes. “Or you could stay here again.”

“You’re under no obligation to be my babysitter anymore, Olly.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I’ll be okay.” She shifted to face him, mirroring the way he was sitting, with her arm on the back of the couch. “Let’s talk about something else. How are you?”

“Okay. How’s life in California? Did you start filming the movie yet?”

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“Next month. Everything is really coming together, and I couldn’t be happier about it. It feels surreal that it’s finally happening.”

“I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, Olly.” Her smile lit up the room. “So, get this, I think my parents are going to reconcile.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Really? How did that happen?”

She explained how she’d arrived home to find her mom there, having second thoughts about her relationship with Bryce Griffiths and wanting to work things out with her dad.

“I’m still pretty upset with my mom for all she put us through, but Dad seems to be way more forgiving. I went to their house in Beverly Hills a couple weeks ago and found them making out like teenagers on the couch, which was definitely not something I wanted to see, and now it’s burned into my memory.”

Oliver laughed at the way Adelia’s face screwed up.

“They actually ripped up the divorce papers and are going to marriage counseling together instead. Can you believe that?”

“I think that’s great. They obviously believe what they have is worth the fight.”

Adelia’s eyes met his and her hand drifted across the space between them and rested

atop his. “Totally worth it.”

They stared for long moments, not saying anything, just looking at each other with their hands touching. Adelia moved first, her fingers intertwining with his.

“I hated not talking to you,” Oliver finally admitted.

“Really?” Her expression turned soft.

“I thought it was best to just let you go.”

“I wish you hadn’t.”

“Well, I didn’t. Not really. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.”

Her lips parted at his admission.

“I sit on my porch swing and remember holding you there when you sleepwalked. I close my eyes and you’re in my arms again, and I can’t shake the memory of how that feels, to hold you, to kiss your perfect lips”—he reached over and brushed her bottom lip with his thumb—“and it drives me insane thinking I’ll never get to do that again.”

Their breaths hitched at the same time, and they came together in one swift motion, mouths connecting, lips moving, limbs entangling, kissing, touching, breathing each other in like their lives depended on it.

“I missed you,” she said between kisses.

“I missed you too.” He pulled her close against him and deepened the kiss.

Suddenly, it was them who were like teenagers, making out on the couch, and there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

Their kisses soon slowed, and Adelia's lips traveled across Oliver's cheek and pressed a soft kiss next to his ear. "There has to be a way to make this work," she whispered.

All the reasons that stood between them came flooding back, and he leaned away to look at her. "I want to, but we want different things."

"We can figure it out. Together. Don't you think we're worth it?"

He took her face in his hands and pressed a firm, yet gentle kiss to her lips, hoping she'd feel every ounce of love he had for her. "Totally worth it."

After Adelia reluctantly said goodnight and headed to the Schultz's home, Oliver was in a state of bliss. There were still big issues to deal with, though, and as he lay in bed that night, he thought about what it would take to have Adelia there beside him every night. He needed advice, and a visit to the man who had always given him the best of it was long overdue.

In the morning, he made a call then drove north to Muskegon to the home of his ex-in-laws.

"Oliver!" Fay Barnes came out of the house as he stepped out of his car and greeted him with a hug.

"Fay, it's good to see you."

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“It’s been too long.” She stepped back and looked up at him. “I’m so glad you came to see him.”

“I should’ve come sooner.”

She patted his arm. “You’re here now. That’s all that matters.”

“How’s he doing today?”

“Like I told you on the phone, he’s weak. It’s taken a toll on his body, and he’s very thin. We don’t think he has much more time.” Her chin began to quiver, and Oliver pulled her into another hug.

“I’m so sorry, Fay.”

She gave him a tight squeeze before letting go. “We know God is with him, and we believe he’ll be going to a better place with no more pain. That gives us comfort.”

Oliver had always admired their family’s faith. He shared their belief in God and Heaven but had never been much of a churchgoer. It wasn’t done in his family. Especially after the tragedy they had endured.

Fay led him into the house to where a hospital bed was set up in their living room. Donny looked to be sleeping but as soon as they neared, his eyes opened.

“Oliver.” His eyes were sunken with dark circles, his face thin and pale. Fay was right. The cancer had taken a toll on his body. “Come talk to me.”

Oliver's heart ached as he sat in the chair by Donny's bed. "How ya doin', old man?"

Donny gave a weak chuckle. "Never better. Did you bring your fishing gear? We can go see what's biting."

Oliver laughed at that. "Maybe next time."

Fay patted him on the shoulder and left the two of them alone to talk.

"I hear you're a grandfather again."

"I sure am. Austin Donald. Named after me."

"That's sweet. I'm happy for you."

Donny managed a smile. "How are you, my boy? Anyone special in your life?"

"Actually, I did meet someone. A really special someone. And I could use some advice."

"Hit me with it."

"We come from very different worlds, and there's a lot to overcome."

"Tell me more."

"She's very wealthy, an actress with famous parents. Her life is very public. She's followed around by reporters all the time. She's ten years younger than me. And she wants to have a family." Saying it all out loud overwhelmed him. "There are just too many differences. So I broke it off."

Donny coughed. “You broke up with a young, rich woman who wanted a family with you? If I could, I would smack you right now.”

Oliver couldn’t help but smile. “I think I can get past the paparazzi and the age difference. But I don’t know how we can get past me not wanting kids.”

“Not this again.” Donny was nothing if not blunt. “Did you ever go talk to a therapist like I told you to?”

Oliver shook his head, the guilt rushing in.

“This aversion you have to bringing a child into this world is not something you can deal with on your own, Oliver. What happened to your brother shaped your life in so many ways, in your career choice, in the way you think about children, and you’ve never been able to move past that. And I know you don’t think you can, or maybe you think you don’t want to, but I know deep down you do. If you love this woman, you’ll do it for her. Because you can’t get through it if you don’t find someone to help you.”

Oliver was quiet. The thought of dredging up the past did not sound appealing to him. Especially since he’d worked so hard to push it down and avoid dealing with it.

“God brought someone special into your life. Don’t push her away because of this.”

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“I’m afraid,” he finally managed.

“I know you are. I know it’s not going to be easy, but you can do it.”

“The idea of sitting down and talking about what happened to Orin makes me feel like a scared little kid again.”

“You are braver and stronger than you think you are. Look at your job, how you help people every day. I think it’s time you help yourself.”

“Thanks for having faith in me.”

“I’ve known you since you were a teenager, Oliver. You didn’t stop being my son because you and Val split up. And I know you. You are a good man and worthy of the faith I have in you.”

Emotions welled up inside Oliver. “You’ve been a good father-in-law to me, Donny.”

“Children are a blessing, a gift from God. There’s nothing like holding a child you made with the woman you love, seeing yourself in them, watching them grow and change and make a difference in the world. Maybe you weren’t ready to go through this when you were with Val, but I can tell you are now. Don’t miss out on happiness because of a past you had no control over. We’ll never fully understand why bad things happen to good people in this life. But don’t let it stop you from living. Get the healing you need, be with the woman you love. You won’t regret it.”

Oliver nodded.

“You can consider it my last dying wish,” Donny said it with a wink, but Oliver knew there was more than a hint of truth there. “Don’t let me down.”

“I won’t.”

“Good man.”

The entire drive home, Oliver thought about the things Donny had told him, and he wept for the man who had been more of a father to him than his own had been. He wished he had gone for a visit sooner, that he had more time.

Going to therapy was a scary thought. Donny had tried to get him to do it years before when he and Val were falling apart over the same issue, but he couldn’t. Now he realized it was his stubbornness and fear that had held him back before. But Donny was right. More time had passed and maybe he was ready to finally deal with his ghosts now.

Late that night, he got a call from Val. Donny had passed away peacefully.

TWENTY-NINE

It meant the world to Adelia that Oliver wanted her by his side at his ex-father-in-law's funeral. She worried that she might bring unnecessary attention to the event, but he had talked it over with the family, and they were fine with it. They understood that Adelia was a special person in Oliver's life, and he needed her there. Just knowing that made her heart swell with love.

After a lovely graveside service, Oliver took Adelia's hand, and rather than walking toward the car, he led her across the cemetery. They stopped in front of a gravestone that read "Orin Wood." Adelia did the math in her head between the date of birth and the date of death. Five years old.

"I was standing three feet from my little brother Orin when he was gunned down on our street. The shooters in the car were aiming at some guys at the house next door, and a stray bullet hit him." Oliver's grip on Adelia's hand tightened. "I held my brother and watched the life go out of his eyes."

She could feel him shaking, and she just held on and let him talk.

"It tore my parents' marriage apart, losing their son like that, and something inside me snapped. I thought not having a baby with Val would keep us from ever going through that kind of loss. I saw what happened to my parents, and I couldn't risk us falling apart like that. I didn't realize that denying her a child would tear us apart anyway. I still lost her because the fear of losing a child crippled me."

He was quiet after that, and Adelia hugged his arm against her side.

“I’m so sorry about your brother, Olly,” she said softly.

He turned into her and held her close, and she felt his shoulders shake as he let his emotions out.

When he calmed, he took her face in his hands. “I want to get past this. I do.” He nodded in the direction of Donny’s grave. “He told me to get some help, to work through it, and be with the woman I love.”

Adelia’s heart skipped a beat as he leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers.

“I’m so in love with you, Adelia. I want to make this work.”

She took his face in her hands this time and brushed his tears with her thumbs. “I love you too.”

He closed the distance between them and sealed their love with a tender kiss.

“I still can’t promise anything. I don’t know how this is going to go, but I want to work on breaking free from the past, and I’ve never wanted to do that before, so this is pretty huge for me.”

She kissed him again. “I’ll be here for you every step of the way. No matter what.”

After a brief appearance at the wake, they headed back to Oliver’s house. All Adelia wanted was to be with Oliver, to catch up, to make plans, and to have a little alone time now that they were officially a couple. That didn’t seem real to her yet, but she was happier than she ever thought she could be.

Oliver stopped at The Snack Shop on their way to the house to stock up on snacks.

Adelia needed her Sno-Caps, of course.

“Do you want me to go in so you’re not seen?” he asked.

“It’s fine. There’s only one other car in the parking lot. I don’t care.”

They went inside and got their snacks, and on the way out, a poster on the bulletin board by the door caught her eye.

“Oh no!” She moved closer and pointed to the picture of a black and white border collie and “LOST DOG” at the top in big bold letters.

Oliver stopped beside her. “What’s wrong?”

“I know this dog. It belongs to that guy, Tony. It’s the dog that came running into your house on Halloween, remember?”

“How could I forget?” he said with a smirk.

She smiled up at him, knowing he was remembering their interrupted kiss, then looked back at the poster.

“He’s such a sweet dog. I feel so bad for him.” She noticed a phone number and entered it into her phone with Tony’s name. “I wonder how old this poster is. Maybe he found the dog since then. Do you think I should call him?”

Oliver shrugged as they walked to the car.

“I think I will.” She dialed the number when they were on the road again.

“Hello?” a woman answered.

“Hello, is Tony there?”

“Who?”

“Tony.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman replied, “you must have the wrong number. There’s no Tony here.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I saw a poster for his dog that was lost, but maybe I got the number wrong.”

“Wait, did you see our dog?” she asked.

“No, but I know the owner, and I was just calling to see if he found him yet.”

“We’re the owners of the lost dog. You say he was with a guy named Tony?”

“I’m so sorry. The dog looked so much like his dog, Lucky. I just assumed it was. But I think I’ve got the wrong dog. Sorry for getting your hopes up.”

“Our dog’s name is Max. If you see him, please call again.”

“I will. So sorry again.”

They hung up, and Adelia played the conversation over in her mind. “That was weird.”

“Wrong dog?” he asked with a curious look on his face.

“I know it was Tony’s dog on that poster. How many dogs have a heart-shaped spot on their head?”

“Tell me again how you know this Tony guy?”

“He lives up the beach.”

“Right, you said that. But how did you meet him?”

“The first night I was here, I went to get snacks at The Snack Shop, actually. Tony was there, and he helped me find the Sno-Caps.”

“How did you know he lived up the beach from the Schultz’s cottage?”

“I went out for a run one morning and passed him and his dog on the beach. We talked briefly, and he told me.”

“You didn’t happen to get a last name on this guy, did you?”

Adelia’s eyebrow lifted. “No. Why?”

“Just curious.”

“Your police skills are showing, Officer Wood,” she said flirtatiously.

He reached over and brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers, and she ran her hand up his arm and held it in place as she turned to kiss his hand. His eyes were on her, and she let go and nodded ahead.

“Eyes on the road, Olly.”

He let his hand fall to her knee and gave it a squeeze before softly running his fingertips up and down her thigh. Delightful shivers traveled up her leg and made the butterflies go crazy in her stomach.

“Are we there yet?” she said on a sigh.

THIRTY

Despite the euphoria of having Adelia in his arms, Oliver felt unsettled after their conversation in the car earlier. Who was this Tony guy? Was it a coincidence that he lived near the lake house and had been in Oliver's neighborhood on Halloween? He thought not. Adelia seemed to trust him, but how much did she really know about him?

Adelia pulled away from their kisses and searched his eyes. "Where are you right now?"

"I'm here." He leaned in again, but she moved back.

"I know you're worried about going to therapy, but it will be okay. Therapists are trained to help you. They're a safe place for you to share your feelings. I've gone at different times in my life, and I'll probably go talk to mine again soon about all my feelings about my parents."

"I was actually thinking about the blackmailer."

"While you're kissing me, you're thinking about that?" She leaned closer and pressed a slow trail of soft kisses along his jaw. "Is this going to be a problem?"

"Is what going to be a problem?" He'd practically forgotten his name.

She chuckled as she continued the trail down his neck. "I didn't think so."

Oliver's phone signaled a text at that moment, and Adelia lifted up to look at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Sorry." He planted a quick kiss on the tip of her nose. "I have to check that."

"I see how it is," she teased as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

He had sent Carmen a text earlier asking her to find out if there were any houses on the road where the Schultz Cottage was located that belonged to a Tony or Anthony.

Carmen: There's one a couple miles away, owned by an Anthony Miller.

Oliver: Okay. Can you find out if there is any way he might be connected to Cyrus Mason?

Carmen: Will do. Could this be our guy?

Oliver: That's what I'm trying to find out.

Oliver held his phone up and showed Adelia as he turned the ringer off and tossed it across the room onto a chair.

She raised an eyebrow as he leaned toward her, snaking his arms around behind her to bring her close again. She gently caressed his cheek and gave him the most beautiful smile, and he lowered his mouth to her ear.

"Now, where were we?"

Oliver felt as if he was walking on air the next day as he arrived at work. He couldn't believe Adelia had chosen him. Out of all the guys she'd ever met, he was the one she wanted. It made him happier than anything ever had.

“Are you whistling?” Carmen asked as Oliver sat down at his desk.

“Was I?” His smile could not be concealed.

“I take it you saw Adelia.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Uh, yeah.” Carmen laughed. “And speaking of your little Hollywood princess ... I couldn’t find any connection between Anthony Miller and Cyrus Mason. Anthony is a sixty-five-year-old man, recently retired. He lives in Grand Rapids with his wife, and they visit their house on the lake a couple times a month. More in the summer and fall.”

“That can’t be the same guy Adelia’s talking about. The guy was at my house at Halloween, and he was much younger.”

“So you’ve seen him.”

“He was wearing a costume and a mask, but it was clear he wasn’t sixty-five.” Oliver’s brain cycled through the other details Adelia had told him until something occurred to him. “Adelia said she met this Tony guy at The Snack Shop in Holland on the night she came into town. If by chance they have security cameras in the store, maybe they caught this guy on video.”

Carmen nodded. “It’s worth a try. I’ll call over there.”

“Thanks. It just seems strange that he was at the beach and then he showed up at my house on Halloween. I’ll feel much better if we can rule him out.”

THIRTY-ONE

The Schultz's home was decorated in the loveliest yellow and grey tones for Genevieve's baby shower. The wall behind the gift table had a large cluster of pale yellow, grey, and white balloons, and the table centerpieces were yellow daffodils in small white vases. She and Sebastian had decided not to find out the gender of their baby, so they were sticking with neutral tones.

Adelia had arrived a couple hours early, thinking she might help set up, but everything was already in order. She should've expected nothing less since Genevieve had a background in event coordinating and had put on one of the most successful fundraisers the Schultz Foundation had ever held.

Her mind wandered, and she imagined a party someday to celebrate a baby with Oliver. She didn't know if it would happen, but just knowing he was willing to work through his issues felt like a good sign that it could.

"You're looking especially happy this morning," Skylar said when she walked into the room and saw Adelia. "Anything you'd like to share?"

"Oliver and I ..." A smile spread across her face. "We're together."

"Are you serious?"

Adelia nodded enthusiastically.

Skylar attacked her with a bear hug. "I'm so happy for you guys."

“Me too.” She squeezed her friend and let go. “We had some good talks ... and a little kissing.” She smirked. “Okay, a lot of kissing. And we’re going to give it a try.”

“That’s amazing.” Skylar looked almost as happy as Adelia felt.

“What’s amazing?” Merritt asked as she joined them.

“Oliver and Adelia are together now.”

Merritt’s eyes widened, and she threw her arms around Adelia. “That is amazing.”

“There’s a lot to figure out and some big things to work through, but we just want to be together.”

Merritt gave her a big smile. “I couldn’t be happier for you.”

“Thank you. Both of you. For being there for me.” She looked at Merritt. “And for him.”

They went and got drinks and found their seats to wait for the party to begin.

“Hey, I saw an article online about your parents getting back together,” Merritt said. “Is that true?”

Adelia nodded. “It’s true. Can you believe it?”

“Wow!” Skylar said.

“How do you feel about it?” Merritt asked.

“At first, I was shocked and still angry at my mom. But they seem serious about

going to counseling and figuring out their problems. I would love for my parents to stay together. So, I guess I would say I'm cautiously optimistic."

The afternoon went by in a blur of conversation, games, and gifts. It was the perfect celebration of the first Schultz grandchild.

After the baby shower, Adelia drove back to the lake house to pick up a few things to take with her to Oliver's. All she could think about was seeing him again so they could talk about how to make their relationship work logistically. She would be willing to move to Michigan if he wanted, just to be close to him. There would be times when she'd have to be in Los Angeles for chunks of time, but he could come to visit. Their love was real, and she knew they would find a way.

Adelia pulled up to the house and went inside, setting her purse on the table near the door. She was about to set the security code when there was a ring of the doorbell. She looked over at the video screen and smiled. When she opened the door, a very enthusiastic border collie jumped up on her legs, and she laughed and crouched down to his level.

"Hey, Lucky." She rubbed his head, looking at the unique spot on his head, then up at his owner. "Hey, Tony. How are you?"

"I'm fine. We were walking down the road and saw you turn in the driveway. It's been a while, so I thought we'd stop and say hello."

"I'm glad you did." She got to standing again.

"Do you mind if we come in for a minute? Lucky could use a drink of water."

"Sure."

THIRTY-TWO

The fact that The Snack Shop owner had kept security camera footage for longer than three months was a miracle. Oliver had always trusted his instincts when it came to unsavory characters, and this Tony guy gave him a bad feeling he could not ignore.

“Come on back,” the owner said as he led them down a hallway to his office. “We’ve had a few break-ins these past couple of years, so I had the cameras installed. I don’t know if that’s the reason we haven’t had any more problems with that, but it doesn’t hurt, right?”

“Very smart,” Carmen said.

“You said you have footage stored on a hard drive,” Oliver said.

“Yes. The files are date and time-stamped, so you should be able to find the dates you want”—he opened a folder on his computer’s desktop—“right here.” He stood up and gave Oliver access.

“Thank you. This is very helpful.”

The man stood to the side while Oliver brought up the footage from the night back in October when Adelia had first come into town. The same night he had been called by Gus because someone was outside the cottage.

“There are two feeds, one for each of the cameras, and you can scroll through the footage here.” The man showed him what to click to speed up the playback.

The first camera angle was from behind the checkout, a tight shot without much view of the store, facing down at the customers' faces and the back of the cashier's head.

"Who was working that night?" Carmen asked.

The man stepped closer to look at the screen. "That looks like Cyrus. Cyrus Mason."

Oliver and Carmen exchanged looks.

He scrolled ahead and found the video of Adelia checking out with her snacks. But she was alone. So, he switched to the second camera footage, which was from a corner of the store with a wide-angle view of the entrance, the checkout, and down the length of the far aisle. Customer after customer came in the door, but it didn't give a good shot of their face unless they turned toward the camera.

Several men entered over the course of the hour before Adelia arrived at the store. One had a straight shot of his face, and Carmen took a shot of the screen with her phone. But he looked a little old to be their guy.

Then Adelia entered the store. She turned and faced the camera then made her way down an aisle that wasn't visible on camera. Oliver slowly moved forward in the video until she made her way to the checkout and left the store.

Oliver groaned. "I thought maybe we'd see her talking to the guy."

"Wait." Carmen pointed to the screen. From the right of the checkout, a man inched into the shot, then came to stand in front of the cashier. He set something on the counter, held up a finger, then headed out the door after Adelia, never giving a clear shot of his face. "Maybe he followed her."

Less than a minute later, he came back into the store and returned to the checkout. He

stayed there for quite a while, his back to them, talking to Cyrus until both nodded, they fist-bumped, and then as the man went to leave, he turned his head toward the camera.

Oliver's heart skipped a beat, and he leaned closer, squinting to see better, unsure if his eyes were playing tricks on him. He shook his head.

"What is it?" Carmen asked.

He switched back to the other camera footage and scrolled ahead to after Adelia had left the store. The man stepped into clear view, and Oliver's stomach dropped like a lead weight.

Carmen gasped. "No way."

Oliver yanked his phone from his pocket and dialed Adelia. "Come on, Addy. Answer your phone." It rang and rang then went to voicemail, and Oliver felt panicked and immediately dialed again. "Please answer. Please answer."

Voicemail again.

"Dang it! I need to get to her."

"Let's go," Carmen declared. "Thanks for all your help," she told the owner.

"You're welcome."

They darted out of the building to their police cruiser.

Oliver was shaking, and Carmen laid her hand on his arm. "Take a breath. I'm sure she's fine."

“If anything happens to her, I swear, I will kill him with my bare hands.”

THIRTY-THREE

I'm so relieved to see you with Lucky," Adelia told Tony as she walked into the kitchen and went to the fridge. "I saw this 'Lost Dog' sign with a picture of a dog that looked just like yours, and I thought Lucky was lost. I tried calling you at the number, but some woman answered."

"Oh, yeah? Must have been a different dog."

Adelia handed him a water bottle and a bowl for water for Lucky. "That's what I thought too, but now that I'm seeing Lucky again, I know it was the same dog because it had the exact same shape on its head. That's weird, right?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. Weird."

Now that she was saying it out loud, it did seem like more than a coincidence, and she got a very bad feeling about it.

"Can I tell you a secret?" he asked.

"I guess so," she answered hesitantly.

"I've never been much of a dog person."

Her eyebrows scrunched in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I thought walking a dog on the beach rather than just running into you out there

alone would make me owning a house up the beach from you more believable, so I borrowed him.”

“Lucky isn’t yours?” That was the least of her concerns based on what he’d just said, but it was the first thing that she thought to say.

“No, but it worked, didn’t it?”

Her heart rate picked up until it was galloping like a racehorse in her chest. “Okay, I don’t know what creepy games you’re playing here, but you need to go.” Adelia pointed toward the door, her eyes darting toward her purse, desperate for her phone.

“When I saw you at The Snack Shop that night, I knew it was you right away. And I thought you would’ve recognized me too, but you didn’t.”

“Why would I recognize you?”

“I thought you might’ve seen pictures of me and Skylar together.”

“Skylar? You know Skylar?”

“Not as well as I wanted to.”

Adelia’s thoughts raced, piecing together everything as quickly as her mind would allow. Tall, handsome, black hair, blue eyes ... her stomach roiled in disgust. “No. You’re not ...” It couldn’t be him, could it?

“Figure it out, did you?”

“Are you Milton Hanley?”

“Ding, ding, ding. Give the girl a prize.”

Her fist shot out as if on autopilot, but he shifted just as quickly and grabbed both of her arms, twisting them behind her back, and she cried out in pain.

The dog barked loudly and came closer.

“Shut up, mutt!” Milton yelled.

“I’m going to kill you,” Adelia said through gritted teeth.

“No, you won’t. But you’re going to help me.”

“Why would I do that?”

Adelia’s phone rang in her purse, and Milton tightened his grip.

“You owe me,” he said.

“I owe you nothing,” she grunted.

“I had those pretty pictures taken of you and gave you those beautiful flowers and everything.”

“You? You’re the one blackmailing me?”

“You’re smarter than you look, gorgeous.”

She fought against him. “Don’t call me that, you disgusting excuse for a man.”

The dog started barking again, and Milton tossed a coffee mug at him, missing him by a foot.

“Stay back, Lucky!” Adelia cried, worried he might cut himself on the broken pieces.

Milton twisted her arms tighter causing a stab of pain. “If you want me out of all of your lives for good, you’ll do what I say.”

“Why do I think you’ll never be gone from our lives?” she managed.

“Oh, I will.” He moved her to the living room and pushed her down to sit on one of the chairs. “I’m going to disappear.” Adelia’s phone started ringing again, and Milton groaned. “All you have to do is deposit two million dollars into this account.” He handed her a card with a bank account number on it. “After that, I’m out of here.”

“I thought you wanted a million.” She rubbed her sore wrists.

“My price went up after you ruined my plan with that article of yours.”

“Didn’t you already get enough money from the Schultzes when you sued Gus?”

Milton let out a wicked laugh. “That was a hefty sum, but unfortunately, I got into a bad business deal, and I owe some dangerous people an even bigger amount.”

“How do I know you won’t try to do this again in the future to someone else?”

“You’ll just have to trust me.”

“That I will never do.”

“It’s either that, or I take you with me and demand money from your parents.”

“Are you insane? Do you actually think you’ll get away with any of this?”

“Sure, I will. I always do.” He pulled a laptop from the backpack he’d brought in with him and opened it before her. “Now, make the transfer. And no funny business. I’m watching you.” His eyes were locked on the screen.

“Skylar was so right about you,” Adelia said as she opened her bank’s online website.

“What did she say?”

“That you have this way about you that charms the ladies and draws them in. I know I was drawn in when I first met you.”

“I miss Skylar. If she hadn’t been such a prude, we might’ve lasted.”

Adelia snorted. “You really are insane if you think you and Skylar ever would’ve worked. She’s way too classy for the likes of you.”

“That’s enough talking,” he snapped.

Her mind reeled, trying to come up with a way to get to her phone. She opened the login screen, knowing he was watching her. “I need my purse.”

“Stop stalling.”

“I’m not. I don’t have my password memorized. It’s in my purse, on my phone.”

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“Do you think I was born yesterday?”

“If you want your money, you’ll let me get my phone.”

Milton started walking backward toward the door. “Don’t move.”

Adelia waited until the moment he turned his back, and she was off of that chair in a heartbeat, racing toward the back door as fast as her legs would take her.

“Hey!” he cried as she whipped open the door and took off down the steps toward the beach.

She could hear his heavy footsteps behind her, and she took the stairs as fast as she could and ran toward the trees beside the house. The branches snapped beneath her feet and did the same with each of Milton’s steps as he grew closer. Adrenaline pumped through her veins as she reached the top of the hill beside the house. She would run down the road to the neighbor’s house if she had to.

But she didn’t get that far because just as they came up beside the house, Milton caught up and grabbed hold of her from behind.

“Let go!” she cried as he lifted her off the ground.

“It didn’t have to go this way!”

Her mind traveled back to the self-defense classes her dad had made her take when she was younger. What had they taught her to do when a man grabs you from behind

with his arms around the waist? All her training came racing back, and she threw her head back against his face, connecting with his nose, and he cried out in pain and loosened his grip. She spun around and kneed him between the legs, and he toppled to the ground in agony.

The squeal of tires caught her attention, and her heart soared at the sight of Oliver jumping over the gate and running toward her, followed by his partner. Her chin quivered as she ran toward him, and they came together in a tight embrace, while Carmen went to cuff Milton.

“It was Milton Hanley,” she whimpered.

“I know, baby.” He held her head against his chest as she let out the emotion. “We’ve got him now. You’re safe.”

THIRTY-FOUR

The Schultz family gathered at the cottage that night, surrounding Adelia with their love and comfort. Skylar, Franky, Gus, and Merritt were the first to arrive and were instantly by her side. One of them always had an arm around her or was getting her whatever she needed. Sebastian and Genevieve came next, followed by Ephraim and Harriet.

Oliver watched with so much gratitude in his heart for the way they took care of and supported her. And he was thankful that he and Carmen had figured it out in time before something even worse happened. Now that he had her, he didn't want to imagine a life without her.

Adelia gave her statement to another officer while Carmen was on the phone, confirming that Milton had made it to the jail.

"This is all my fault," Skylar said as she sat down beside Adelia. "If I hadn't brought Milton into our lives, none of this would've happened." Her head dropped into her hands.

Franky crouched down in front of her and rested his hands on her knees. "Don't blame yourself, Sky. Nobody else does."

Adelia put an arm around her and leaned her head on Skylar's shoulder. "There's no way you could've known what kind of guy Milton really was. Don't beat yourself up over it."

“I should’ve recognized him at Oliver’s house on Halloween,” Skylar said.

“You couldn’t have with the mask he was wearing,” Adelia said. “I wouldn’t have known it was him if not for the dog.”

“Don’t worry,” Oliver said. “He’ll get what’s coming to him. Extortion, stalking, trespassing, assault ... just to name a few. He’ll have the book thrown at him.”

“I hope so.” Skylar looked like she was about to burst into tears.

Adelia reached down and petted Lucky’s head. “Not to mention dognapping.” He’d been curled up next to Adelia’s feet the whole time.

Oliver took a few steps closer to the group. “He’ll for sure get jail time. And we believe he spent all his money paying off Cyrus, hiring him a lawyer, and paying his fine, so there won’t be any fancy lawyer for him this time around.”

“He definitely seemed desperate for cash,” Adelia said. “He was going on about owing some bad people some money and saying he was going to disappear.”

Oliver came to sit beside Adelia, and she turned into his side, resting her head on his chest and her hand over his heart.

Carmen walked over to the group. “The detectives just questioned Cyrus Mason, and he admitted Milton was behind it all. Milton paid him to take the rap for everything, promising him a big payday when all was said and done.”

“The only payday he’ll be getting is the candy bar,” Franky said with a chuckle, and everyone groaned at his attempt at a joke.

Ephraim had been quiet up until now, but he stood as he always did when he had

something important to say. “This man has caused nothing but problems for our family, and we will do whatever we can to make sure he gets the maximum sentence he deserves, Adelia.”

“I know you will. Thank you.”

The doorbell sounded then, and Ephraim went to answer it.

A woman’s voice traveled across the room. “Hello, we got a call earlier that our dog was here.”

The dog perked up and suddenly left Adelia’s side.

Adelia stood and walked across the house. Oliver followed her, and they watched as the woman’s eyes filled with tears.

“Max!” She got down on her knees as the dog went into her arms, nuzzling her neck and licking her face. “Oh, I can’t thank you enough. We thought we’d never see him again.”

Oliver looked over at Adelia, who had tears spilling down her cheeks. She walked over and crouched down, petting Max.

“I’m so happy we could reunite you. I’m sorry this happened to you.”

The woman stood and reached into her purse, pulling out her wallet. “Let me give you something for your trouble.”

Adelia touched her arm. “Just knowing Max is back with his family is all the payment we need.” She bent down and petted his head and gave him a kiss on the heart-shaped fur on his head. “Bye, Max.”

The woman walked away with Max at her heels, and Adelia walked into Oliver's waiting arms.

“You did a good thing,” Oliver spoke softly.

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“I know. He’s such a good dog. I feel so bad, thinking Milton might’ve hurt him.”

“Hey, he seemed healthy and strong. There was no sign of abuse. We can be thankful for that.”

“I am.”

Oliver hugged her tight. His heart rate still hadn’t returned to normal yet.

“Can you take me home with you?” she whispered.

“Whatever you want.”

“I just want to be with you.”

The sight of Adelia curled up on his couch gave Oliver a huge sense of relief. The thought of losing her was more than he could bear. All of these worst-case scenarios had gone through his mind while driving to the lake house. Once they knew it was Milton, he had to get to her, to let her know. He never thought Milton would take it as far as he did. But after the steps he took to blackmail her, it was clear his desperation for the money, maybe even his strange obsession with the Schultz family and those they loved, had taken things to the next level.

“How’s your head?” Oliver asked.

“Throbbing, but worth it.” She smirked and rubbed the back of her head. “I’ve never head-butted anyone before.”

“Here.” Oliver handed her a glass of water and two Tylenol.

“Thanks.”

He sat down beside her, lifted her legs across his lap, and went to work rubbing one of her feet.

Adelia set the glass on the side table and laid back, her eyes sliding closed. “Mmm. That feels really good. I could get used to this.”

He chuckled and worked the arch, determined to help her relax. When he was sure he’d sufficiently massaged that one, he moved to the other. She looked so still, he thought she might’ve fallen asleep. But when he started on her other foot, she let out a contented sigh, and he smiled.

Long minutes later, she sat up and crawled onto his lap with her legs to the side, and he wrapped an arm around her back, pulling her closer. His fingertips traced down the side of her face as hers did the same to his. And then they were kissing, slow and deep, breathing each other in.

“I was afraid I was going to lose you,” he admitted.

“I was afraid of never being right here ever again.”

He leaned his forehead against hers, and their next words came out at the same time.

“I love you,” he said.

“I want to get married,” she said.

He lifted his head and looked at her with wide eyes. “You want to get married?”

“Not right now.” She chuckled. “But someday.”

“You’re serious?”

She nodded and grinned at him.

“What changed your mind?”

“My mom, actually.”

Oliver raised an eyebrow.

“She reminded me that marriage was something I’ve always wanted. I was just confused about my parents. And what you said at Gus and Merritt’s wedding really stuck with me. I was afraid of getting hurt if I risked everything for love. The thought of getting married made me feel too vulnerable. But I won’t let fear keep me from happiness anymore.” She leaned in and touched her lips to his. “So yeah, marriage is something I want.”

A slow smile spread across his face. “Good to know.”

THIRTY-FIVE

Three years later

The red carpet at the Academy Awards was teeming with celebrities dressed to the nines. Adelia gripped Oliver's hand and held in a laugh when she looked over at him.

"That's Tom Hanks," he whispered as his eyes darted around. He kept looking over his shoulder as actor after actor arrived, some stopping to talk to the entertainment news reporters, others pausing for photos. And then he stopped in his tracks. "Oh my gosh. It's Iron Man."

"Play it cool, Ollywood." She giggled. "Do you want to meet him?"

"Robert Downey Jr.? No, that's ... no."

"I never thought you'd be so starstruck, Olly. You've been to events with me before."

"Nothing this big."

A sudden commotion captured their attention, and they turned to see Adelia's parents step out of their limousine. The cameras clicked and flashed like crazy to capture Hollywood's beloved couple. Hugh and Cora made their way, hand in hand, along the red carpet, until they met up with Adelia and Oliver.

"There's my daughter and favorite son-in-law," Cora said with open arms.

Oliver hugged her and kissed her on the cheek then shook Hugh's hand.

"Hi, Mom." Adelia hugged her, and then Mom stepped back and looked her up and down. "You look fabulous, darling. This dress looks perfect on you."

Adelia glanced down at her flowing topaz blue maternity gown. "They practically had to sew me into it. I feel like I grow bigger every hour."

"Pregnancy suits you."

"Only two more weeks. Then this little guy will stop pushing on my bladder all the time."

Dad gave her a hug then. "How's my girl?"

"Excited. Nervous. Nauseous."

He kissed her cheek. "Enjoy this night. No matter what happens, you earned that nomination. We'll be rooting for you."

"Thanks, Dad."

When they got inside, Skylar and Franky were already seated in the row reserved for the nominees. They exchanged hugs and took their seats, anxious for the awards ceremony to begin.

"How are you feeling?" Skylar asked.

"Big as a house."

"Well, you look amazing."

“I feel like people are just telling me that to be nice.”

Skylar laughed. “It’s the truth.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Whatever you say.”

“Hey, did you guys see Thor over there?” Franky asked.

“No way,” Oliver said. “Where?”

The girls laughed at their husbands’ superhero worship.

“Would you rather sit with him?” Skylar asked.

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Franky leaned in and kissed his wife's cheek. "Of course not, honey."

"Don't honey me."

"Is the honeymoon over already?" Adelia asked.

"We're an old married couple now," Franky said.

"Who are you calling old?" Skylar eyed him.

Skylar and Franky had married three autumns ago as planned, and Adelia and Oliver had tied the knot five months later on a beautiful spring day in an intimate lakeside ceremony at Schultz Cottage. After all of her doubts about marriage, Adelia never once questioned whether marrying Oliver was the right decision. It was impossible to know what the future would hold, but she believed in him and their love, and committing to him was the best decision she ever made.

The awards soon got underway, and before they knew it, the category for Best Original Score was up. Adelia was thrilled that Franky had been nominated for the amazing music he had put together for her movie. An orchestra played a medley of all the nominated scores while clips from each movie showed on a screen, and Adelia reached over and gripped her friends' hands. She could feel Franky's hand shaking, and she gave it a squeeze.

"And the Oscar goes to ... Francis Middlebury for Beyond Her Lens."

Franky looked stunned. Skylar hugged him while the audience applauded. He kissed

Skylar then leaned over and hugged Adelia, saying “Thank you” over and over in her ear.

“Congratulations!” she said.

Franky stood and headed to the stage, wearing the biggest smile on his face.

Skylar’s eyes were sparkling with tears, and Adelia felt tears of her own welling up.

“Whew! What a rush!” Franky said when he took to the microphone. “It really is heavier than it looks.” He jokingly pretended to drop the little statue, which got him gasps and laughter from the audience.

Adelia had been there when her mother received her Academy Award, but there was nothing like seeing Franky standing up there, holding that Oscar, knowing she had a hand in putting it there.

“Four years ago, I was working in a law firm, writing music in my free time, not even daring to dream that I would get to do something I love for a living,” Franky said. “But life is funny sometimes. And I would not be standing up here right now without the love and support of the people in my life. First and foremost, my best friend, the love of my life, my beautiful wife, Skylar. Thank you for putting up with my late-night writing sessions and humming the music all hours of the day.”

The audience laughed, and he proceeded to list the people he’d worked with on this project that needed to be thanked. And then he paused and nodded toward where they were sitting.

“To the incomparable Adelia Allen. You believed in my ability to write this music before I did. You let me be creative and find what worked for this amazing story you were telling. And I would not be holding this little guy tonight if not for you.”

Adelia brushed a tear from her cheek and gave him the biggest smile she could. This film was a labor of love for her. And it had exceeded all of her expectations. It had already won critical acclaim, a few Golden Globes, and it was also nominated for Academy Awards for Best Director, Best Picture, and Adelia's nomination for Best Actress.

When the Best Director category came and went without an award, Adelia's stomach filled with butterflies. Or maybe that was just the baby kicking. No matter what happened, she would be fine. If she didn't win, she would always be an Academy Award Nominated Actress, and that felt like a huge accomplishment to her.

The names of the Best Actress nominations were read next, and Oliver squeezed her hand when her name was mentioned.

"And the Oscar goes to ... Adelia Allen."

Adelia sat there, frozen in place, and Oliver kissed her cheek.

"Babe, you did it!"

Her mouth fell open. She couldn't believe it, and as she stood a little too quickly, the blood rushed from her head and made her dizzy. And then ... whoosh!

"Oh, no!" Her heart raced in her chest at the sudden warm liquid running down her legs.

Oliver stood and hugged her. "You have to go give your speech, Addy." He nudged her toward the end of the aisle.

"I can't."

“Why not?”

She leaned close to his ear, trying not to panic. “My water just broke.”

“What?” he squeaked.

“What’s wrong?” Skylar asked.

“Her water broke.”

Skylar’s face lit up. “Oh my gosh! Adelia!”

Adelia motioned toward the stage. “I can’t go up there.”

Franky jumped up. “I’ve got this!”

He raced to the front, disappeared offstage, and returned, carrying a handheld microphone.

“Miss Allen would love to stand center stage and accept her award,” he said as he walked back the aisle, “but her baby has decided she should go to the hospital now.” The audience gasped, and the room filled with cheers and applause. “But before you go, would you like to say a few words?”

Adelia nodded at Franky and took the microphone.

“Thank you to the Academy for this award. I have a list of people I need to thank, but maybe I’ll let Franky say those for me when I’m done and skip to the most important ones.” She took Oliver’s hand in hers and looked up into his eyes. “My husband, Oliver, is my biggest fan, my cheerleader, my support, my sounding board. My life has been so much better since the day we met.” She turned toward Skylar. “Thanks to my dear Schultz family. I couldn’t have asked for more wonderful people to have in my life. And to my parents, who have taught me all they know and raised me to fight

for what I want. I've wanted to tell Margaret's story for years, and the doors kept closing on this one. But I stuck it out and found the right producers, the right person to write this screenplay, and the pieces fell into place.

"Margaret once said, 'Nothing attracts me like a closed door. I cannot let my camera rest until I have pried it open.' That's how I felt about this film and telling the story of this amazing woman, who lived such an interesting and incredible life. She saw so much. She not only told the big picture story, but she got close and saw beyond the photograph to the people. She sought to understand humanity and show that through her photographs. And that's a beautiful thing. Thank you."

The audience applauded, and Adelia's heart was bursting with joy at this amazing moment. And then she felt the twinges of her first contraction.

"And now, I have to go have a baby."

The room filled with laughter, and Adelia was rushed out of the building, where their car was waiting for her. Oliver pulled her into his side and kissed her forehead, and she smiled up at him.

"This kid definitely has a mind of his own," Adelia said through another not-too-bad contraction.

"He's been surprising us since we found out you were pregnant, so this seems about right."

"But he's not due for two weeks. What if it's too early?"

"Everything will be okay." He leaned in and pressed his lips to hers.

She loved Oliver's kisses. She'd been addicted to them since the very first one in his

little guest room in the house on the cul-de-sac. Her hand slid up into his hair, and she kept him there a little longer. When she had kissed him thoroughly, he leaned away with a goofy grin on his face.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“Because I love you, and I need you to know that before we get to the hospital, since I may say some things to you and about you that I have no control over.”

Oliver laughed and rested his forehead against hers. “I love you so much. You have no idea.”

The car pulled up to the hospital not long after, and Oliver ran inside, returning with a wheelchair.

“A wheelchair? Really?” she asked as she climbed out of the limo.

“Yep! Let’s go have a baby!”

The next evening, Adelia awoke from a nap after eighteen hours of labor and delivery and visits from family and friends. She felt a little more herself after a few hours of rest. Through sleepy eyes, she noticed several colorful bouquets on the window ledge as well as two Oscar statues—one for Best Actress, the other for Best Picture—and she smiled. What a strange and wonderful night it had been.

Her gaze turned to Oliver, sitting in the chair by the window, holding their son, just staring at his sleeping form. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

“Olly?” she said softly.

“Hey, you’re awake,” he whispered. “Do you need anything?”

“Just you and Orin.”

Oliver carefully stood and walked to her side, transferring their son into her waiting arms. He sat down on the edge of the bed beside her and brushed her matted hair back from her face.

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“He’s so perfect,” she said. “I can’t stop looking at his little nose and his fingers and toes. He’s so tiny.”

“I know. I’ve been sitting over there, staring at him for who knows how long.” He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to Orin’s head then softly pressed his lips to Adelia’s.

Tears filled her eyes and spilled over.

“Oh, don’t cry.” He wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb.

“This is one of those perfect moments in life, and I don’t ever want to forget it.”

The click of a camera shutter sounded in the doorway, and they both looked over to see Skylar standing there, holding her camera, smiling through tears of her own.

“Now, you won’t ever have to.”