



Crossing Into Brooklyn

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Description: Carter Riordan believes in Once Upon a Time. She spends her days creating fantastical realms full of magic, elves, and other mythical creatures. It's not unusual for her characters to find true love. But Carter has lost faith in finding her Happily Ever After. Aside from her doubts about finding real-life love, Carter's greatest nemesis is the chaos on her desk and in her computer files. Her best friend, Ali, thinks she has the solution: hire Brooklyn Brady to "organize" Carter's life. Carter is skeptical. Brooklyn's picture and her online profile pique Carter's curiosity, and she agrees to meet Brooklyn in New York. A coffee meeting followed by a marathon dinner pave the way for a working relationship between Carter and Brooklyn. Brooklyn Brady quickly captures more than Carter's interest. Leaving old wounds in the past and taking a chance with someone new isn't in Carter's plans. Brooklyn's unassuming nature, her intelligence, humility, and her honesty test the limits of Carter's resolve. The question for Carter is whether she can allow Brooklyn to clear more than the chaos from her desk. Can Brooklyn resolve the turmoil in Carter's heart? Will Crossing Into Brooklyn finally help Carter find her Happily Ever After?

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CHAPTER ONE

I've read my share of romantic stories. I've watched them play out on a movie screen. I've even written a few tales of love. Somehow, year to year, the stories became more fantastical to me. I've experienced lust and the accompanying physical rush. Dizzying anticipation can easily be mistaken for love. Time taught me how quickly lust fades. Love? I've loved. But falling in love and creating a relationship seldom goes hand in hand. Not in my world. Too many complications. Love itself isn't complicated. It isn't a choice. It descends without warning. It devours your soul from within until even the shell that holds you together cracks. I'm no stranger to falling in love. Creating a life with someone who commands that emotion is a different story. Once upon a time doesn't always lead to happily ever after. I don't know that I possess many special talents. The one gift the universe bestowed upon me is the art of falling in love with the wrong person—the wrong person for me. There are stories and there is life. If I can't have the life I dreamed, I can create a fantasy world on the page. The elves and goblins I've assigned names seem more plausible to me most days than everlasting love. Little did I know my stories would lead me to my new Once Upon a Time. But can I find my Happily Ever After?

A writer's life is a set of strange contradictions. Anyone looking in is likely to see a solitary life. I spend hours each day in front of a keyboard. Endless cups of coffee and infrequent sleep accompany deadlines and edits. In my case, pacing to the door to grab the packages I ordered, a quick trip to the kitchen for some junk food to fuel another long night, and an afternoon walk that is too often procrastinated until evening are what a hidden camera would reveal. That has been my life for years. But pictures can deceive. I'm never alone. There is always someone talking to me, begging me to tell their tale. I see them through the words on the screen. I hear them

when I close my eyes. Constant company. It's comforting. Then I met Brooklyn.

OCTOBER 20th

"Seriously, Carter, you need some help."

"Are we talking professionally?" I ask.

"Keep deflecting reality," Ali says.

"Don't get annoyed," I tell my best friend. "I'm not suggesting you're wrong."

"Are we talking about your career?"

"Ha-ha." Relentless is Ali's middle name. She persists in her quest to convince me of two things: I need someone to help organize my time, and I need a girlfriend. In other words, Ali's belief is that I require a woman to give my life purpose. We agree to disagree.

"Why are you so resistant?" Ali asks.

How many times will I need to answer this question? "I'm not resistant. I simply don't agree with your assessment."

"So you've said. Repeatedly. Look at this desk!"

"What's wrong with my desk?"

"Carter—"

"Ali."

“Okay. When was the last time you updated your website?”

I truly have no idea. I’m not about to tell Ali that.

“How many emails are in your inbox?”

No way will I answer that question.

“That’s what I thought. Come on. I have the perfect person to help you.”

“Ali, things are fine the way they are.” Why rock the boat? I like my boats nice and steady.

“Right. I know what you’re thinking. Why rock the boat?”

“Exactly.”

“Because fine is what women say when things are decidedly not that great.”

“Says the expert on women,” I quip.

“We both know I’m right.”

“Who is this perfect person?”

“Brooklyn Brady.”

“Sounds like a porn star.”

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“She’s not a porn star, Carter. She’s been a journalist and an editor.”

“Been?”

“She does some freelance work as a writer, but she’s turned her attention to helping people get organized and maximize their time and profits. People like you.”

“How do you know this Brooklyn person?” I ask.

“She’s a friend of Dixon’s.”

Dixon is Carter’s best buddy from college, Jack Dixon. Not the best endorsement for credibility in my book.

“Don’t hold Dixon against Brooklyn. She’s great.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She is. I met her a couple of times at his place. I promise. She’s terrific. I know you don’t like Jack. You have to admit he has some intelligent and interesting friends.”

“I don’t dislike Jack,” I reply. I don’t. “He is a bit—”

“He’s eccentric.”

“And messy,” I remind my friend. “How many jobs has Dixon had in the last two years? How many times have we fixed something in his garage?”

“Okay. I get it. But Brooklyn isn’t like that. She’s got it together. Trust me. She even helped Jack. I’ve never seen him so calm. Just talk to her. You don’t even have to meet her in person if you don’t like her,” Ali says. “Shoot her an email and tell her what you need.”

“I don’t need anything. You think I need something.”

“We both know you need a lot of things.”

I laugh. Touché. “Leave me this New York person’s information and I’ll think about it.”

“Brooklyn. Her name is Brooklyn.”

“Mm-hm.”

I’ve picked up Brooklyn’s business card a few times. I searched her profile online. I found a few articles she wrote for reputable papers. I located an interview with her about her new business. She sounds qualified. I look at the card on my desk again. Brooklyn Brady. Is that her actual name? Is that a stage name? I have a few authors and journalist friends who changed their name to have a special ring. I could never be bothered. Half the time people assume I’m a man when they see my name in print: Carter Riordan. I wonder if anyone ever looks at my picture on the back cover. Probably not. My stories carry their share of romance, but they’re billed as fantasy adventures. That’s still a realm dominated by men. Sometimes, I wonder if people assume I’m a man because I’ve written the word “cock,” shall we say, liberally. What else does one call it? Penis? That sounds like someone’s in sex education class. No one says “let me see your penis” in bed. A member? Never. As if you pay dues to belong to it. Listen, I have limited familiarity with the member called a penis. I hate

to admit I take lots of my cues from what I read, and a fair bit of porn I've viewed over the years. Then again, I think most people find books and porn serve as their reliable sources when it comes to information about sex. That brings me back to Brooklyn Brady. I have to giggle. No one can tell me that doesn't sound like the name of an adult film star. What could it hurt to send her an email? No commitment, just curiosity. For some unknown reason, I am curious. All right, Brooklyn. How can you help me?

HALLOWEEN

Ali and I have a Halloween tradition. It started the year my youngest nephew stopped trick or treating. We dress up as a pair of witches, vampires, or some other garden variety monster, decorate my front porch, and sit in the rocking chairs to pass out candy. When the bowl is empty, or the kids disappear, whichever comes first, we retreat inside and indulge in pumpkin martinis and horror flicks. I look forward to Halloween every year. I could do without the gory movies, but I've never met a martini I didn't like. I will also take any opportunity to get into a costume. You could say little has changed for Ali and me since junior high, except that we both know we love girls and martinis. And we have bills to pay. A break in the evening entertainment provides Ali with an opening to question me. She's been not so patiently waiting for this chance all night.

"I hear you took my advice," Ali says.

Her triumphant tone makes me instantly regret my decision to contact Brooklyn. "I asked a few questions. She answered them."

"And?"

“And what?”

“Are you going to hire her?”

“I haven’t decided,” I reply.

“Why on earth not?”

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“I sent her some of my thoughts and I’m waiting for her reply.”

Ali shakes her head.

“Her services aren’t exactly cheap,” I say.

“You get what you pay for.”

I snigger.

“You are sick, Carter.”

“Oh, relax. I haven’t ruled it out.”

“I have no idea why you insist on procrastinating the inevitable.”

“Who says it’s inevitable?”

“Even you know you need help,” Ali returns.

I give up. I might hire Brooklyn just to shut up Ali. I might. “I told you, I’m waiting to see what she offers.”

Ali grins evilly. “You looked at her picture online, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“You did.”

“Of course, I looked at her website. Isn’t that what normal people do when they want to learn more about someone’s business.”

Ali smirks.

“What?” I challenge her.

“You think she’s attractive.”

“I don’t think she’s unattractive.”

“That’s why you emailed her.”

“Ali, I don’t write the sickly-sweet romances you spend your Saturday nights reading.”

“No. You write elf sex.”

I snort. I have written elf sex. It’s true.

Ali continues. “Which is why you need Brooklyn.”

“To help me craft Elven sex scenes?”

“If it helps you get them written on time—sure. But no. You need humans of the female variety around to remind you that you can still have sex with humans.”

“Exactly why did you suggest I hire Brooklyn Brady? To help me with my work chaos, or is it because you hope I will get laid?”

“I suggested it because you’re a mess. And because I worry about you.”

“Why?”

“You haven’t been on a date in over a year.”

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“So?”

“Elven sex, Carter. You have taken to writing sex between mythological creatures. I’m not setting you up with Brooklyn. As a bonus to decluttering that thing you call a desk, maybe being around Brooklyn will remind you that there are still women on this planet!”

I laugh. “You should go into the theater.”

“Shut up.”

“Seriously. Maybe you’re projecting.”

“Nope. If I could find a woman worth the effort, I’d jump. At this point, I’d take an elf if she were real.”

I chuckle. I believe that.

“You don’t even look anymore,” she says.

“Ali,” I begin. “Do you remember last week when you lost your glasses?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Do you?”

“Of course.”

“You tore apart your house looking for them. You called me freaking out.”

“Because I needed to drive!”

“What did I tell you?”

Ali huffs. “Stop looking for a few minutes and you’ll find them.”

“Exactly.”

“So, you’re telling me you’re not looking for a woman because if you wait, she’ll find you.”

I’m not telling Ali anything about me. If, and that’s a big if, a woman captured my attention and expressed an interest in some alone time together, I would jump too. “I don’t think this conversation is about me,” I say. “Trust me, I can take care of myself.”

“I’m not touching that,” Ali says.

We both laugh.

“If I hire Brooklyn, it will be to revamp my business,” I explain. “Not to restart my love life—in any way.”

“All right, I’ll lay off.”

“Thank you.”

“About Brooklyn. Not about you and the fact you need a date with something other than that twirling mermaid you bought in Provincetown.”

Leave it to Ali to bring up my vibrator purchase on our last trip to the Cape.

“I can just imagine this next book: The Little Mermaid that Would.”

I throw a cushion from my sofa at her. “Oh, not would, Ali. She will, Ali. She definitely will.”

“That’s more disturbing than elf sex!”

I laugh. I wonder if Brooklyn has any idea about the twisted notes she might find in my files. Elf sex is nothing. “Can we change the subject now?”

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“Sure. What do you think about that woman who works at Steve’s on Saturdays?” Ali wants to know.

So much for changing the subject. Maybe I will hire Brooklyn.

Deadlines. I loathe deadlines. My one major regret about signing with a publisher is the imposition of deadlines. Doesn’t anyone pay attention to words? Dead. Lines. Nothing about the word inspires confidence. I think I’ve become more disorganized since all these impositions started. Trust me, the impositions go hand in hand with the inquisition. I have Ali for the role of High Inquisitor in my life. I find calls from my friendly yet eager publisher frustrating. Yesterday, Nell, she’s my representative, called to see how I was doing. That’s naked code for, “when will you be finished?” Good thing she can’t see the gestures I make on the other end of the call. I always finish on time. It annoys me when she “checks in.” To make things worse, I spent twenty minutes looking for a page of hand revisions I made last week. I hate to admit Ali has a point. I am my worst enemy sometimes. I open my email. I groan. My email is more disorderly than any piece of furniture I’ve ever owned. I can’t tell you my problem. I am intimately acquainted with the delete key. Apparently, not intimately enough. Click, click, click and delete until one email captures my interest. An email from none other than Brooklyn Brady.

Hi Carter,

I’m sorry it took me a couple of days to respond. I’m in London visiting a college friend. I looked over what you sent me and I’m confident I can help. You asked how

long I think we would need to work together. That will depend on how many things you want to accomplish. I've found that some clients choose to tackle more than they first planned. Others stick to the basics and we part ways. I've attached an outline of ideas and my estimate of the hours and fees. I'd love to talk about this in person. I know that inviting someone into your sacred space sight-unseen can be an uncomfortable proposition. If you are free to meet sometime late next week, I would love to have coffee and answer your questions. Let me know and we can make plans. By the way, no one is helpless. I've worked with Jack. That should be my best recommendation. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,

Brooklyn

Anyone who can get Jack Dixon organized is a superhero. If her work sticks, I might elevate Brooklyn to the status of a goddess. I drum my fingers on my desk. What could it hurt to meet Brooklyn? I open the document she's provided and review her proposal. It's reasonable. Not cheap. Reasonable. If she succeeds, it will be a steal. I look at the business card on my desk. The corner has a tiny picture of Brooklyn. I type in her website and visit the "about" page. There she is—larger. I imagine she is larger than life—larger than my life. That isn't the most difficult standard to reach. Something about the glimmer in Brooklyn's eyes suggests she possesses an adventurous spirit. I'm intrigued.

Brooklyn,

Thank you for your reply.

I glance at her business card again. I would like to meet her.

As I said in my first email, Ali speaks highly of you. Ali is also determined that I get

some professional help. She has pointed out that I should be grateful I need an organizer and not a therapist. I suppose that's a win in someone's book. Not mine. But like therapy, admission is the first step to recovery, right?

I would love to meet in person sometime next week. You have my number. If we are considering working together, I might as well tell you that texting or calling is the best way to ensure you reach me. My schedule is open.

No. It isn't. You are on a deadline.

Enjoy London. I haven't been over the pond in a couple of years. Color me jealous.

Hope to speak soon,

Carter

And now I wait.

NOVEMBER 2nd

Ali loves to grill. When I say she loves to grill, I'm not exaggerating. You can find her outside in a snowstorm grilling dinner. Personally, I think she likes to avoid doing dishes, and the grill enables her paper plate addiction. Whatever the reason, barbecues are a year-round event at Ali's. Another year-round event, or should I say, attendee is Jack Dixon. Ali thinks I dislike her friend. I like Dixon just fine. Just fine. He's funny, good looking (in that dorky kind of way), and he's always been a trustworthy friend to Ali. He's also carried a torch for her for over twenty years. She denies it. It's obvious. He's constantly trying to impress her and me. There are times when I want to sit him down and say, "Dixon, Ali likes girls. What I mean by that is

Ali likes to have sex with girls. She likes you just fine. She isn't likely to land in your bed or beside you at the altar. You need to move on." But he knows that. I'm not sure Dixon will ever get over Ali. I feel for him. I do. For some unknown reason, he seems to view me as a threat. Why do people assume that if two lesbians are friends, they must want to sleep together? Allison Ramsey has been my best friend since we were twelve. I can say with total honesty I have never wanted to kiss Ali, touch Ali, or date Ali. Ali isn't like a sister to me. I have one of those too. Ali is my best friend in the entire world. No one drives me to insanity as fast as Ali. No one is there for me quicker, and no one, no matter how much time passes, has my back more than Allison Ramsey. That goes both ways.

"Hi, Carter."

"Dixon. How goes the war?"

"I was winning on Monday. By Friday I was forced into retreat."

I laugh. "I feel your pain."

"I heard from Brooklyn."

I nod.

"Still reluctant, huh?" he asks.

"Not about Brooklyn," I reply. "About anyone."

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“I get it. I let her help me a couple of months ago. It was humiliating.”

“Not exactly an endorsement,” I tell him.

“Oh, no. Not because of Brooklyn—nothing she said. It’s just that we’re friends. I kind of wonder if seeing my chaos changed her opinion of me.”

“Well, if it did, I wouldn’t think she’s that much of a friend.”

“Funny. That’s what she said. I think you’ll like her. You two have a lot in common.”

“Is that so?” I inquire.

“Well, yeah. You’re named after a president and she writes about them.”

Two of the articles I read by Brooklyn were about the current president’s flailing administration. Both her research and her prose impressed me. I’m not convinced because my father named me after Jimmy Carter I belong on the same political playing field as Brooklyn. I find politics interesting. I’ve never had a desire to make my living from, around, or in the political sphere. “That’s an interesting observation,” I say.

“Plus, you love New York.”

I do.

“Ali told me your family is from Brooklyn.”

My great-great grandparents were from Brooklyn. My family is from the Connecticut suburbs. I don't correct Dixon—exactly. “My dad's family lived there for a couple of generations,” I reply. Like tens of thousands of Irish immigrants. I leave that part out.

“See? You've got a place to start!” Dixon's enthusiasm makes me wonder if he and Ali are co-conspirators in a plot against me.

“I guess we'll see,” I reply.

“What about you? Aside from organizational chaos, how's the war in your neck of the woods?” he asks.

“Same day, different deadline.”

“The life of an author.”

“It's sexy,” I reply.

“Oh, yeah? Anyone new on the horizon?”

Here we go. No, Dixon. No one new, old, or moderately interesting. And no, I am not and never will be interested in Ali. Relax. “If you mean have I met any women, no.”

“With your fan club?”

“I don't have a fan club.”

“False modesty? Ali tells me there's an entire page devoted to your fans on Facebook.”

“Readers, Dixon.”

“Right. Fans! I’ll bet there are a few ladies in that club whose fantasies go beyond your novels.”

Yes. Actually, there is. We call those stalkers.

“Hey!” Ali bellows. “Carter, can you get the ribs for me?”

“Duty calls,” I tell him. Saved from the grilling by the grilling. Ironic.

“Oh, shit! Ali, have you seen my phone?”

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“I think you left it in the kitchen.”

“Thanks.”

My phone is not an appendage. Not like it is for my nephews, Jeremy and Phillip. I often wonder if their phones control their heartbeat. I don't like to be far from it. My mom suffered a few falls last year. I missed a call from my sister to tell me my mom was at the emergency room. Ever since, I'm a tad paranoid. As soon as I pick up the device, I notice two missed calls and two voicemails. Might as well listen now while I have some peace and quiet.

“Hey.”

It's my sister, Janet.

“Don't panic. Mom is fine. Jeremy called. He's headed home on the thirteenth. He plans to stay until after Thanksgiving.”

Guess I need to get my guest room ready. A few days at home, and Jeremy will land on my doorstep. We've always been close. He started spending more time at my house when he reached high school. It's his escape. I like my brother-in-law, Tim, but he is hard on his boys. Jeremy is a sensitive guy. Not a kid. He's a man. Tim thinks Jeremy should have his entire life mapped out by now. To be more precise, Tim believes everyone should map their path by freshman year of high school. He likes to compare Jeremy to his younger brother. Phillip is the kid who takes everything in stride. He's a straight-A student, an athlete, and that clean-cut version of suburbia that either invades women's dreams or plaques their nightmares. Jeremy? On the outside,

he looks like your typical bad boy. He likes to ride his motorcycle. He drives in demolition derbies. If you look at him, you might think he's in a gang. He's 6'2 with tattoos up and down both arms, and he has a shaved head. But he's a pussycat without claws. Truly. He likes to camp and fish. He gave up hunting a few years back because he loves animals. I think he's tired of explaining himself to his father. I get it.

My sister, Janet, is the sweetest person you'll ever meet. Not Stepford Wife sweet, she's genuinely down to earth. She teaches elementary school like our mom did. I don't think Janet has ever cared what her boys did for work, where they lived, or who they loved as long as they're happy. Tim doesn't understand how anyone can be happy without goals and structure. Good thing I've never let him into my office.

The second call takes me by surprise.

"Hi, Carter. It's Brooklyn. I was going to text but I'm sitting in the airport, bored out of my mind and thought I'd call. I'm reading your email right now."

She laughs.

"Yes, they do say admission is the first step to recovery. I wish I could charge the rates of a therapist."

Now, I laugh.

"Oh crap. They delayed my flight again."

I laugh more.

"Sorry. I swear, this place is like Middle Earth or something. Anyway. I was wondering if you might be free for coffee on Thursday? It'll give me a chance to catch up on things when I get home. If I get home."

It sounds like Brooklyn might be stuck in London.

“I can text you the address of a café I love. If the city isn’t too far for you. Let me know. Hope to talk to you soon. Bye.”

Thursday in New York. Why not? I pick up the phone to call her back. Voicemail.

“Hey, Brooklyn. This is Carter. I got your message. I hope your voicemail means you’re finally in flight. I’d hate for you to stay stuck in Middle Earth and we’d have to miss coffee. Thursday is great. Let me know the time and where to meet you. I’ll be there. I’ll even bring my checkbook.” If I can find it. “Talk to you soon. Safe travels.”

“Who are you talking to?”

I look up to see Ali staring me down.

“Oh, no one. Brooklyn left me a message. I was just returning her call.”

“Finally going to take my advice, huh?”

“Don’t gloat. I haven’t hired her.”

“Yet.”

I shrug and grab a bottle of beer from the fridge. Yet.

CHAPTER TWO

NOVEMBER 6th

I hate anxiety—nervous anxiety. Meeting people for the first time always makes me nervous. I think that surprises most people who know me. I've always been adept at hiding my unease in social situations. I enjoy meeting people. I prefer to meet them in the company of others. I've never examined why. I've been that way my entire life. I think that's one reason I feel at home as a writer. I don't have to venture into one-on-one meetings with strangers often. Emails and calls suffice for most interactions. If Brooklyn is going to help me, we need to meet face to face. I shouldn't be nervous. We've exchanged emails and text messages for two weeks. I'd like to say obligation led me to accept Brooklyn's offer to meet for coffee. I'd also like to deny that I've listened to her voicemail more than once. I have no idea what compels me to keep listening. I don't know that I imagined the sound of her voice. If I did, the voice that greeted me on my phone was not what I imagined. I've seen Brooklyn's picture. I refuse to admit it to Ali, but she's right. I think Brooklyn's attractive. Everyone looks attractive in their professional head shots. Brooklyn's voice—I can't explain it. Having a voice to accompany the picture made me curious.

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My curiosity has led me wandering down 42nd Street in New York City in thirty-three-degree weather on a Thursday afternoon. Don't get me wrong, I love the city. It's rare for me to travel from Connecticut into New York for a coffee, even if it is a business meeting. If I need to come into the city, I make a weekend of it. Not today. Today, I endured rush hour-traffic to get to Stamford, hopped a thru-train, and rode the hour to Grand Central Station to meet Brooklyn for a beverage. Because I'm cheap, I decide to walk to the café. For. A. Beverage. That's not entirely accurate—for a beverage with Brooklyn Brady. The longer I walk, the more I question my sanity, and the more my fingertips regret my decision not to hail a cab. I hope this coffee meeting lasts more than twenty-minutes. I text Brooklyn when I reach the one-block mark: I'm a block away. Be there soon.

Brooklyn: I'm here. Let me grab our coffees so we can get a table. What would you like?

Me: You don't have to do that.

Brooklyn: If you want to sit inside, yes, I do.

Me: A cappuccino. Nothing special.

Brooklyn: One cappuccino. I will pry a table from someone's warm butt. See you in a few.

Brooklyn's message makes me giggle. Someone's warm butt? I turn the corner and can tell the café is bustling. Not surprising. It's frigid and windy for early November. My stomach revolts when my hand reaches the door. Have I mentioned that meeting

strangers is not my forte? Nerves lead me to ramble and I know it. Ali says it's endearing. Somehow, I doubt most people would agree. Deep breath. My eyes scan the room as I step through the door. Where is Brooklyn? Let's face it, people don't always look the way they do in a photo. I try to picture her. Instead, I hear her voice. I mentally shake myself. Brooklyn. Where is Brooklyn? I chuckle. If I were to ask that question of someone here, I'd receive stop by stop directions to the burrow. My eyes settle on a young woman seated at a bistro table in the corner. Brooklyn. Why am I frozen? I tell my legs to keep moving. I'm not sure they can carry me when my heart has stopped. Jesus. She resembles her picture. Her photo is a far cry from doing her justice. She's stunning. And young. Get a grip, Carter. This is a business coffee meeting. Now, move. She waves. I smile and head in her direction. Be cool, Carter. Don't fidget and don't ramble.

"You made it." Brooklyn reaches her feet to greet me.

"I'm not sure I've ever been as grateful for heat."

"I hear you. I made sure I found chairs that had been recently warmed."

"Thank you." I take a seat across from her. "Sorry if I'm a little late."

"You're not late." Brooklyn passes me a cup.

"And thank you for this," I tell her. "What do I owe you?"

"Well, if you hire me, we can always work it into my fee."

I feel my eyebrow raise slightly. Business flirtation, romantic flirtation, and sexual flirtation are each unique. My head tells me Brooklyn's playful tone is business-related. My body seems to have other ideas. And I'm not entirely sure what to make of the lump that's formed in my throat. Maybe it will keep me from talking too much.

That would be a bonus.

“I don’t mean to put you on the spot,” Brooklyn says. “No pressure. You don’t owe me anything. Not for the coffee, and not the promise of a job.”

“Thanks. But I think we both know if I wasn’t interested in your services I wouldn’t be sitting here.” Oh, my God! I have been joking about Brooklyn having a porn star’s name far too much. What the hell was that, Carter? Interested in her services? Smooth.

“I’m glad you’re open to negotiations.”

Okay. That was flirting. There is no way that was not flirting, and not the business kind. I sip my cappuccino, but it doesn’t help to cure the dryness of my mouth. I manage to smile at her. “So, you don’t think I’m a hopeless case?”

“I like challenges. But, no. I don’t think a person who pays their bills as a writer is hopeless. I have seen the pictures of your desk. That might be a different story.”

Brooklyn asked me to send her some photos of my workspace. I complied. No sense in hiding the truth. Not about my desk. It’s a mess. It’s such a mess that I forgot to pay my electric bill last month. Don’t ask me why I haven’t gone paperless. I think it has something to do with growing up in the eighties.

“How do you think I can help you?” Brooklyn asks.

“I need someone to put things in order.” I hate to admit it. I do. “I tend to avoid things that stress me out.”

“Like all humans.”

“I think I might be on the high end of the avoidance scale.” Why would I admit that to a stranger? Any stranger?

“Interesting,” Brooklyn muses. “I can help you get organized. I think I can help leverage your business as well. Get rid of the extraneous things that aren’t helping you maximize what drives your profit.”

“Marketing?”

“It’s not only marketing,” Brooklyn tells me. “It’s software. It’s files. It’s systems you think help you when all they really do is annoy you.”

“You might be working overtime.”

Brooklyn’s laugh is infectious. I find myself laughing with her.

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“I’m not afraid of hard work, but I doubt you will constitute my worst case.”

“Wait.”

Brooklyn laughs easily. “Jack tells me Ali forced you to email me.”

“Did he? Dixon overestimates Allison’s powers.”

“She’s your best friend?”

“Since seventh grade. I guess if you can survive junior high school as best friends, you can survive anything.”

“That’s the truth.”

I’m curious. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Well, what made you go into this line of work? I’ve read some of your work. I would think you’d be vying for a staff writing position at The Times by now.”

“If only. More like web news. That seems to be where the work is these days. Immediacy and all.”

True.

Brooklyn continues. “Don’t get me wrong, I would love to write for a major newspaper. I still write. It doesn’t pay the bills. Not dependably. I found myself helping friends and colleagues organize their work. A friend suggested I capitalize on my talent. I took his advice. I don’t see myself doing this forever. Not full-time. But it’s a bridge.”

“I get it. I have to ask—how do you feel about traveling to Connecticut? You must have tons of clients available here in the city.”

“I do. But I have to hop a train either way. And my sister lives in New Haven.”

“Ah, an excuse to visit.”

“Not that I need one, but, yes. Besides, I love your books. Why wouldn’t I want to help you sell more of them? Better yet, find time to write more of them.”

She’s read my books? Really?

“You look surprised,” she surmises.

“Probably because I am.”

“Why?”

I don’t have that answer. A small, yet well-known publisher published my last four novels. Fortunately for me, the publisher picked up my catalogue. That has taken enormous pressure off me. Marketing still rests mostly on my shoulders, and getting projects completed on someone else’s timeline is not my strength. That’s why I caved and contacted Brooklyn.

“I love fantasy,” Brooklyn explains.

“I would have pegged you for historical novels or biographies.”

“Because I write political pieces?”

I nod.

“Yeah, well, we all need an escape.”

I agree. “I’ll drink to that. When do you think you can start?”

“When do you want me?”

Heat flushes my skin. What the hell is the matter with me? This is a business meeting with a woman who has to be half my age. Okay. Maybe she’s nothalfmy age. Close enough. She can’t be much older than my nephew, Jeremy. Wait. What if she is younger than Jeremy? Oh, God. Why am I even thinking about this? Now. Here. In front of her. Jesus Christ, Carter, you have lost your mind. I sip my cappuccino, hoping it will cover the rosy tint of my cheeks. She smiles. Stop. No smiling. Now, she laughs. Oh, just kill me and get it over with. I realize it’s been a while—no, it’s been a millennium since I’ve had sex. At least since I’ve had sex with someone other than my mermaid. Sounds like an exaggeration. It doesn’t feel like an exaggeration. I write about the things I don’t have in my life: love, sex, magic, and mystery. Scrap the last one. My entire life is a mystery.

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“That didn’t sound the way I intended,” Brooklyn confesses.

She’s letting me off the hook. Classy.

“I’d be happy to start whenever it works best for you. Is next week too soon?”

“No.” Next week? You mean, I will see her again next week? Oh, God. Why can’t I stop looking at her? Maybe because she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She is. Completely. It’s a bit unsettling. I need to recover. “The sooner the better for my office, and hopefully, my sanity. I admit when I walk into my office, I feel overwhelmed. It’s like a tsunami hit my desk. Can you believe my electric bill got buried under notes? Thank God they don’t shut off the power for one late payment.” Why did I tell her that? Of all things. Because I talk too much when I’m nervous. Be quiet, Carter.

“Never set up bill bay?” Brooklyn asks with a hint of amusement.

“Nah. I know I should. Ali is on me all the time about writing checks. She says it’s for old people. I don’t feel like I accomplish anything if I don’t write out the check and put it in the mail.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

I’m genuinely surprised at her response.

“As long as you don’t lose the bills and the checkbook,” Brooklyn says. “I am curious, though.”

“About my checkbook?”

“In a way. When you say you don’t feel you’ve accomplished anything—”

“Weird, right? I don’t know. My mom taught me to pay bills, balance my checkbook—the whole drill. I remember her sitting at the kitchen table in the evening writing out checks for the monthly bills, tearing off the paper slips, and licking the envelopes. She must’ve had a thousand different address labels. One for every season.” It’s true. I set out to explain. “My mother gave little bits of money to lots of charities. Back then the thank-you gift of choice seemed to be address labels. She had them for Christmas, Easter, and Halloween. She had ones with animals and the American Flag.”

“Sounds like my grandmother.”

Her grandmother? I think I might be sick. Ali’s right. I’m an old person. I ask the most inappropriate question imaginable. Maybe not the most. Close. “How old are you?”

“Older than you think.”

“You don’t know what I think.” Yes, she does. She knows exactly what I think. Maybe not exactly. Close.

“I think I can guess,” Brooklyn replies. “Thirty,” she tells me.

Thirty. Well, that’s better than twenty. Comforting. Or not. Thirty? Dear God. My nephew is twenty-eight. “Thirty is a good year.”

“Is it? I guess I have another couple of months to prove your theory.”

“A birthday soon, huh?”

“January 10th, I’ll reach the wonderful milestone of thirty-one. Then when someone asks, I can say I am thirty-something with confidence.”

Does she have to be charming? On top of drop-dead gorgeous, is it necessary for Brooklyn Brady to be charming? Beauty and charm. These are not my gifts. I was never the last kid picked for dodge ball. I would likely be the last one selected for modeling or charm school. Brooklyn would be at the head of the line. She’d probably be the Head Mistress. There’s a visual I don’t need.

“Carter?”

“Huh?”

“I assure you my credentials are solid.”

Shit. She thinks I’m questioning her credentials. “I have no doubt,” I tell her. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“I just—I tend to think of people in terms of my nephew and my mom. Everyone falls somewhere on that age spectrum. I’m the middle.”

“Let me guess. I’m on the low end of the spectrum.”

“It’s not the best system.”

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“Well, that’s why you’re hiring me,” Brooklyn says. “To improve your systems.”

I think I need something stronger than coffee. Booze. I definitely need booze.

“Carter?”

“Huh?”

“I was wondering if you had plans later,” Brooklyn inquires.

“Later?”

“As in a time after now,” Brooklyn explains.

“Just to get home. Why?”

“Wait. Are you telling me you came all the way here to have coffee with me?”

I shrug. “I didn’t make any other plans. I didn’t want to procrastinate. You mentioned that’s one thing you’d help with.”

“Ah. You did read all the emails.”

“I do my homework.”

“Well, I have an appointment in half an hour, but I’m free later. Would you be open to a late lunch? Maybe we could firm up our plans for next week, set a schedule over

drinks. Unless you need to get back.”

“No. Nope. Sure. A drink sounds good.” Keep rambling, Carter. She only needs an answer once. I hope she doesn’t mind if I start drinking without her. “Do you have some place in mind?”

“I’ll text you the address. About three-thirty? Does that work?”

“Sounds good.”

“I’m sorry to bail.”

“No worries,” I tell her. “It’s been a while since I hit a museum. You’ve given me a good excuse to change that.”

“Glad I could help.” Brooklyn offers me another smile. “See you later.”

“I’ll be there.” Wherever there is. Do museums serve alcohol? Which museum serves alcohol? I wait until she leaves to conduct some more research. What am I doing?

NOVEMBER 5th

There goes my phone. It’s pathetic to admit I’ve become a fifteen-year-old with a crush. I love it when Brooklyn sends me a message. I’ve been getting a lot of messages since our meeting last week. My brief excursion to the Egyptian wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art got me thinking about age. Pharaohs were often kids. Egyptian queens had young lovers. I mulled that over as I walked through the remains of a temple, past sculptures, and ancient art. I felt a little better. Then I collided with a room full of mummies. If Brooklyn was a young, sexy queen, I was

the dusty mummy in the case. Depressing. I left the museum and found the nearest restaurant. Not that I ate. I sat at the bar and downed a couple of martinis until it was time to meet Brooklyn.

After a short cab ride across the city, I sat down across from the object of my inappropriate thoughts for the second time that day. Four hours later, Brooklyn and I parted ways. Four hours. I'm sure I talked through drinks, appetizers, our meal, dessert, and more drinks. Brooklyn spoke. I stammered. I'd like to blame the martinis. I actually think the martinis calmed me a bit. If I hadn't had a slight buzz, I might have spouted off my theories regarding Egyptian queens and dusty old relics. Brooklyn didn't say this, but I'm sure she thought I was too intoxicated to find my way to the correct train. She texted me three times on my way back to Stamford to make sure I didn't nap through my stop. I guess she thinks old people can't tell time. I wouldn't dare make that joke to her. She spent a good amount of her time trying to convince me that age is irrelevant in matters of the heart—assuming both parties have at least reached drinking age. Easy for her to say. I'd like to believe that her messages denote some interest in me—and not my desk or my checkbook. I have to remind myself to check my feelings at my brain and parts southward, and not allow those thoughts into my heart. Bad idea for everyone—me, most of all. Check. No legitimate emotion. I pick up my phone.

Brooklyn: Don't clean your desk before I get there.

Me: Why not?

Brooklyn: Carter. Don't.

Me: Of all the things you could worry about, that shouldn't be on your list.

Brooklyn: What **SHOULD** I worry about?

Me: There could be a sandwich somewhere under the pile.

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Brooklyn: Gross.

Me: Honest.

Brooklyn: Thank you for the warning. I'll see you tomorrow.

Me: I'll be here. I meant to ask you if you'd like to stay for dinner.

Brooklyn: Are you cooking?

Me: Define cooking.

Brooklyn: Is that your way of building my confidence?

Me: Nope.

Brooklyn: Will there be martinis?

Me: At my house? Always.

Brooklyn: It's a date.

Here is my problem. It's not a date. It's a time for us to meet—yes. It's a job. It's an arrangement followed by dinner on a date. It is not a date.

“Hey.” Ali pokes her head into my office. “I let myself in.”

“So, I see.”

“Did you forget that we were having dinner tonight?”

“Shit.”

“You did forget. What gives?”

“Nothing. Trying to stay on pace to meet this deadline is all.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah. But with Brooklyn coming tomorrow, I’ll lose most of the day at the keyboard.”

“Tomorrow is doomsday, huh?”

“I hope not.” I really hope not.

“I was joking,” Ali says. “Do you want to skip tonight?”

“No.” I don’t. I think I need to get my mind off tomorrow. More specifically, I need a distraction from thoughts of Brooklyn. “Where do you want to go?”

“I thought we could order in,” Ali says. “I could use a couple of drinks.”

“Does that mean my guest room can expect company?”

“Good bet,” Ali says.

“Uh-oh. Bad day?” I ask.

“More like I don’t understand women day.”

“No offense, I think that’s every day.”

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“No shit.” Ali groans. “Mexican and martinis?”

“How about margaritas?”

“Can you make those?” Ali asks.

“Have mix, will pour.”

“Well? What are you waiting for? Get pouring!”

“Okay, what gives?” Ali asks me after her third margarita.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re unusually quiet.”

“Am I?”

Ali sets her glass onto an end table and looks me dead in the eye. “You like her.”

I know who she’s referring to. I have no intention of admitting I know. “I like a lot of people.”

“Brooklyn. You like her.”

“What’s not to like? She’s charming.” Utterly.

“She’s charming?” Ali laughs. “You have the hots for her.”

No. Yes. Do I? I like Brooklyn. I imagine many people find Brooklyn attractive, and I would guess a lot of people are attracted to Brooklyn.

“You do,” Ali repeats herself.

“I don’t have the hots for her.”

“Really?”

“Do you have the hots for Brooklyn?” I wonder.

“Hell yes.”

That is more honesty than I expected. I imagine I have the margaritas to thank for that. “I get it now. You wanted me to hire Brooklyn, so you could find an excuse to get a little closer.”

Ali laughs. “Brooklyn’s not interested in me.”

“How can you be sure?”

“She’s not. I’m not interested in her either. I’m not dead. Brooklyn is hot.”

I sip my drink without comment.

“Okay. What is up with you?” Ali asks.

“Nothing. I just don’t know why you keep asking me about someone I barely know.”

“You barely knew Andrea, and you moved in with her a week after you—”

“Yes, I recall. We both know how that ended.”

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“All I’m saying is that you like her. What’s wrong with that?”

I sigh. “Nothing is wrong with liking Brooklyn.”

“Carter.” Ali’s tone is cautious. “You spent a marathon dinner with her last week. I can’t believe all you talked about was your disorganization. I know that’s a lot of ground to cover but—”

“You’re hilarious. We talked about lots of things.” We did. Brooklyn began by reiterating what she’d said over coffee; that she understood having a stranger in my personal space might feel invasive. She thought getting to know her clients was helpful. In my case, I think her plan might have backfired. I care what she thinks of me more now than I did when we sat down to have coffee.

I promised Brooklyn I wouldn’t tidy anything before her arrival. I’ve resisted that temptation. I’m not tempted to explain to Ali how I feel. I like Brooklyn. Yes. I do. I’d like to get to know Brooklyn better. I also live in reality unless I am typing at the keyboard. Everyone gets crushes, no matter how long they live. The first crush I remember happened when I was four. My toddler infatuation with Melissa Gilbert didn’t send up any lesbian red flags for my parents or for me. By the time I was eleven, I knew my obsession with Alyssa Milano was a bit more than admiration. I’ve crushed on teachers, classmates, athletes, and a couple of co-workers. Even my mom still has crushes, and she’s eighty. We’re all attracted to people without fully understanding why. I like Brooklyn. I definitely have a toddler-sized crush on her. Okay. Maybe it’s a tiny bit bigger than that. Unlike Ali, who drowns herself in sappy romances, I understand the difference between a crush and a potential relationship. Brooklyn is working for me. I think she might become a friend. That’s it. And I’d

prefer Brooklyn didn't suspect I have thought about her—amorously. Ali's teasing makes me uneasy.

"I'm just giving you a hard time," Ali says. "Are you regretting your decision to hire her?"

"No." I rarely fib to my best friend. I don't know if I regret my decision. The jury is still out. Time to redirect this conversation, or better yet, end it altogether. "How about a movie?"

"As long as it doesn't have mermaids."

I laugh. Check. The Little Mermaid it is.

CHAPTER THREE

NOVEMBER 11th

One mystery is solved. Brooklyn is punctual.

She looks at me from her perch behind my desk. "Don't look so—"

"How do I look?"

"Like the boogeyman is about to jump out from underneath your desk," Brooklyn says.

"He might."

"Relax, Carter. I'm not here to discover your dirty laundry."

“That’s good because I don’t have any. Not the kind you throw into a basket.”

Brooklyn is surprised. Fair. I suppose it makes sense to assume anyone who can’t keep their work in order would also avoid laundry. That isn’t one of my shortcomings. “I swear,” I tell her. “There are two things you’ll rarely, if ever, find in my house.”

“And those are?”

“Piles of laundry or dishes in the sink. It drives me nuts.”

Brooklyn nods.

“Hard to believe when you look at this, huh?” I ask.

“Not really.”

“Really?”

“Really. This is your corner of chaos. Everyone has one,” she says.

“Everyone?”

“Everyone. You can’t always see a person’s chaos. Everyone has some, somewhere in their life.”

Insightful. “What do you need from me?” I inquire.

“I think I have my marching orders. I won’t discard anything—yet. I’ll start with piles. We’ll review them to see what you want to keep and file or tear and toss. I’ll focus on your paper parade this week. Once that’s in order, I’ll review the software

and professional subscriptions you've been using. It's your decision," Brooklyn reminds me. "What goes and what stays."

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“I don’t have any emotional attachment to any of it,” I say. I don’t.

Brooklyn looks up at me from her seat behind my desk.

“No, really—I don’t.”

“You don’t think you do,” Brooklyn says.

“I don’t.”

“Okay. Then why do you keep all of it?”

Why do I keep everything that pertains to work? “I guess because I’m afraid I will need it again.”

Brooklyn smiles at me. “See? You have an attachment. I understand.”

“You do?”

“Yes. We all have certain things we hold on to because we’re afraid we’ll need them again or we’ll forget about them.”

I giggle.

“That’s funny?” Brooklyn asks.

“Not funny,” I reply. “My ex is a psychiatrist. I seem to remember her saying that

about people who hoard.”

“Well—”

I laugh. My house is not that of a hoarder’s. My desk on the other hand— “Point taken.”

“You’re welcome to stay here with me,” Brooklyn says. “You don’t have to if you have other things to do. We can go through the piles together later. No pressure either way. I understand if you’d rather stay.”

“I trust you,” I tell her. “There is something I need to do. Would you mind if I ran out?”

“Not as long as you don’t mind me being here alone.”

“Nope. I won’t be gone long.”

“No worries. This will take me a few—”

“Years?” I joke.

“Hours,” Brooklyn says.

I make my way out of the room and glance back. Brooklyn is focused on her task. I promised her dinner. When I looked into my refrigerator earlier, I realized dinner might be Dominos delivery. Not the impression I’d like to make. I shouldn’t worry about making any impression on Brooklyn. I doubt she’s given much thought to me beyond our working relationship. I can’t help it. I want her to like me. Pathetic as that might be, it’s the truth. I haven’t cooked for anyone in a long time. I seldom cook anything interesting for myself. Just the basics. I have a thousand gadgets in my

kitchen I never use. Time to put a few to use. The question is, what would impress Brooklyn?

“Shit! Damnit, Carter,” I scold myself. I’m startled by a voice behind me.

“Are you okay? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. I heard you scream.”

“I’m okay. I had a disagreement with my paring knife,” I explain.

Brooklyn moves beside me. A steady stream of red drips into the sink underneath the faucet.

“I guess I don’t need to ask who won,” she says.

I laugh.

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“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Nothing a band-aid won’t fix,” I reply.

“Where are they? The band-aids.”

“I have a box in the upstairs bathroom.” I gesture toward my living room. “Upstairs on the right. They’re in the medicine cabinet.”

“Got it.”

“Carter, you idiot,” I mutter. It doesn’t take long before I hear Brooklyn enter the room behind me. “Could you grab me the towel that’s hanging by the stove?”

Brooklyn grabs the towel and places it over my finger as soon as I turn off the faucet. “Carter, that’s pretty deep.”

“It’s fine. Trust me, I’ve had worse.”

“Do you think you need stitches?”

Probably. “No. Honestly, I’m no stranger to kitchen casualties.”

“Do I want to ask?”

I shrug as she wraps a bandage tightly around my finger. “I dropped a knife on my foot once. Bled everywhere. I ended up needing six stitches.”

“You were cooking barefoot?”

“You could say that.”

A curious tilt of Brooklyn’s head tells me she expects more details.

“Let’s just say I have never baked in the buff again.”

A moment of silence is suddenly filled by boisterous laughter. I should be embarrassed, but I find myself laughing with her.

“Priceless. What were you baking?” she asks.

“A cake for my ex’s birthday. The worst part? I grabbed the knife to cut open a stubborn box of baking chocolate. I hadn’t even started to bake. No cake.”

“Oh no.”

“Yep. I also left her a wonderful present by bleeding on the white rug she had in her dining room. Not the best birthday gift. She loved that rug.” She did. Probably more than she loved me.

“Who would put a white rug in a dining room?” Brooklyn asks.

“Right!”

“Seriously, Carter, are you sure you’re okay?”

“Fortunately, I don’t need my finger for anything important today.”

“Today?” Brooklyn asks playfully.

I blush. “Are you secretly related to Ali?”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t resist.”

“I promise, I’m fine. And I promise not to bleed into our dinner.”

“You don’t need to go to any trouble,” Brooklyn says. “You can order Dominos for all I care.”

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Funny. That's what I thought I would do a few hours ago. "I think I can manage something better than cardboard pizza. How's it going in the den of hell?"

"Hardly hellish," Brooklyn replies. "I'm actually done sorting everything."

"Seriously?"

"Yep. I told you; you will not constitute my most challenging client."

"That's comforting."

"Can I help?"

"Can you help me with dinner?"

Brooklyn looks around the kitchen. "I don't see anyone else here."

"You didn't see the gremlins when you were working in my office?" I ask.

"No. They must've been busy elsewhere. I suspected they were hiding somewhere."

I laugh. I wish I could blame gremlins for my messes. "I invited you to stay for dinner. You don't have to help me prepare it."

"Four hands are quicker than one," Brooklyn quips.

"Fair enough." The last thing I expected this morning was to spend time cooking in

tandem with Brooklyn. I'm beginning to think I should expect the unexpected.

It's funny how the slightest change in environment can alter the dynamic between two people. Brooklyn and I work well together. I was a bit apprehensive when she offered to help me cook our dinner. My worries were unfounded. I discovered that Brooklyn isn't known for her culinary skills. I also learned that she likes to learn. The only awkward moment arrived when I gave her a short lesson on chopping vegetables. She struggled at first. I settled behind her and put my hand over hers. I doubt her body responded the way mine did. As much as I would have liked to prolong my instruction, I forced myself to be brief and step away.

We talked and laughed for over an hour, Brooklyn chopping and me watching Brooklyn chop. It shouldn't have taken more than half an hour to get dinner ready for the oven. I admit it, I didn't want our time to end. Sitting across from her at my dining room table as we consume our handiwork, I wish we could flashback to the kitchen. It's amazing how the couple of feet a table places between two people can feel like a million miles. There's a sudden awkwardness that didn't exist when we were colliding at my sink. I have the desire to fill up the silence with conversation. I don't know what to say. I imagine if I'd presented her dinner as I'd planned, our conversation would have flowed easily with expected pleasantries. She'd comment on the taste of the food. I would thank her. She'd ask where I learned to cook. I'd launch into a story about my mother. I'd already told her about my kitchen foibles. As we moved in tandem, I explained that the recipe for the lasagna we pieced together was my mother's. Bases covered. What now?

Brooklyn lifts her glass of wine to her lips. I watch in rapt fascination. How many times will I look at her and have the same thought? God, she's beautiful. The last thing I want is for her to read my body language. I know I'm staring. Not ogling. Not gawking. It's more than looking at her. When she meets my gaze, it's as if she can

see inside me—not through me, straight into my core. I sip my wine. I need to say something. Anything. “You mentioned your sister lives in New Haven,” I say. “Younger or older?”

“Younger,” Brooklyn tells me. “By two years. But more settled.” She giggles. “Susan got married a month after she graduated college. She was headed to law school.”

“Was?”

“Yep. Then she found out she was pregnant with my niece. That’s when she decided to use her middle name, Susan.”

“I’ll go out on a limb and guess there’s more to that story.”

“There is. Her first name is Chastity.

I laugh. “You’re making that up.”

“Nope. Her unexpected pregnancy might have landed as a bigger bomb with my father than my coming out. But she’s happy. Her husband is great. He’s a computer engineer. I think once the kids are in school full time, she’ll go back and get her law degree. She told me she wants to be home with them for now.”

“How old are they?”

“My niece, Josie, is almost four. My nephew, Chris, turns one on December first. I miss them. You’d think I would see them all the time. It’s not like Brooklyn is all that far from New Haven. It’s crazy how a little distance can feel like an ocean sometimes.”

Exactly. “I understand.”

“You mentioned a nephew,” she says.

“I have two. Jeremey and Phillip. Jeremy is twenty-eight. Phillip is almost twenty-one.”

“Wow.”

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“Yeah. My sister had given up on more babies after Jeremy. She had three miscarriages in as many years. Then came Phillip.” I chuckle. “Total shock. He and Jeremy are about as opposite as you can imagine. They’re both great kids. Just different.”

“Sounds like me and my sister,” Brooklyn says.

“How so?”

“Just what I said before, she’s settled and happily so. I’m still trying to figure me out. If I’m honest, it bugs the hell out of me sometimes. My younger sister has it all together. Me? I’m organizing other people’s work because I can’t figure out what to do about mine.”

“Is that your chaos?” I ask.

“Probably,” Brooklyn concedes.

“What do you want to do?”

“That’s my problem, Carter. I don’t know. I want to be a journalist. I feel like every assignment I’ve gotten, any place I’ve worked is frivolous. It’s like I’m writing for entertainment instead of information. It’s simple. It’s not what I want to do.”

“The devil’s compromise.”

“What?” she asks.

“I call it the devil’s compromise.”

“This ought to be interesting.”

“I don’t know if it’s interesting, it’s more like an observation from my experience.”

“Uh-huh. So, what exactly is this devil’s compromise?” she asks.

“I like to write fantasy. Elaborate fantasy. Long stories that go on for volumes. But those take years to write. They also cost a lot to publish without any guarantee they’ll sell. So, I have to work on stories that take me away from my passion projects. It pays the bills. It’s what my publisher wants, and what my readers request. I have to believe one day the compromise will pay off.”

“And you’ll put your passion into print,” Brooklyn says.

“Yes.”

“I hear you. I just wonder how much I’m willing to compromise.”

“That’s always the question, isn’t it?”

I don’t think I’ve seen Brooklyn frown. Until now.

She groans. “My father thinks I should do one of two things: get married and have babies or get a job in a company that offers a great 401k. Actually, make that three things. He’d be happiest if I did both. Happier still if I would not express my political opinions at the dinner table—or, well, ever.”

I nod. “Don’t feel bad. My dad would’ve preferred I write political speeches rather than stories about elves, goblins, and the occasional alien. Unless, of course, I was

writing about immigration policy.”

Brooklyn laughs. “He’s a political wonk, huh?”

“He was. Let’s put it this way, he named me after Jimmy Carter.”

“You’re joking.”

“Oh, no. I’m not. My parents wanted a unisex name. My dad wanted Kennedy—you know, the first Irish-Catholic president and all.”

Brooklyn leans forward with interest.

“My mother put the kibosh on that idea. If I had been a boy, she was not going to have a son named after the United States’ most infamous philanderer.”

“Now, you are joking.”

“Nope. I’m not. I was born December 13, 1974, the day Jimmy Carter announced his presidential candidacy. My dad was a submariner and a Democrat. If he couldn’t have Kennedy, Carter would have to do. Call it the devil’s compromise. My mother agreed.”

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“I love that story.”

“I guess it could be considered endearing. What about you? Why Brooklyn?”

“My grandmother came here in 1934 from Italy—my mom’s mother,” Brooklyn explains. “My mom’s name is Liberty. After the Statue. My grandparents lived in Brooklyn when she was born. She doesn’t remember it, though. It’s funny that I landed there—for now, anyway. I think my mom believes my name was some kind of prophecy. I want to point out that she named my sister Chastity.”

I haven’t laughed so hard in a long time. Brooklyn winks. I think I may need to mess up my files again, maybe add a few pieces of unnecessary software to the mix. I know one thing for certain, I don’t want our time together to end, not any time soon. “God, I hope our names aren’t omens.”

“Why? No desire to be president?”

“Not really. And I’m allergic to peanuts.”

It’s Brooklyn’s turn to laugh. “I like peanuts.”

I stare at her. Time for another glass of wine. Brooklyn offers me a smile and another wink. Am I that transparent? Probably. I don’t care. I’m sure I can create a little more chaos for Brooklyn to sort through. I top off each of our glasses and raise my glass in a toast. “Here’s to omens.”

“Only the good ones,” she says.

“Only the good ones.”

CHAPTER FOUR

NOVEMBER 15th

It's been a while since both my nephews have been home. I admit I miss the days when they were small, Philip toddling behind Jeremy, and Jeremy leading his little brother into mischief. These days, everyone seems to wander off into separate rooms until they're called for dinner. Jeremy avoids his father, and Phillip's concentration is on his girlfriend. As I suspected, Jeremy asked if he could spend a week at my house. I'm happy to host him. I know my sister will be disappointed.

“He asked you already, didn't he?” Janet asks.

“He did.”

She sighs.

“Jan, I can tell him no.”

“No, you can't. We both know it's best—for him,” she says. “He was home less than two hours and Tim started grilling him about his plans.”

“I heard.”

“I don't know why he can't leave Jeremy alone.”

I offer my assessment. “Probably because he doesn't understand why Jeremy isn't more like him.”

“Maybe. It doesn’t matter. Jeremy is a grown man. He doesn’t depend on us for his welfare, financially or otherwise. Tim needs to respect that.”

I feel horrible. I haven’t sensed deep stress between Jan and Tim in years. Frustration pours off my sister in waves. “Have you told him that?”

“I’ve tried. He says the same thing he always says.”

“Which is?”

“Jeremy has no direction,” she replies.

“He has direction. It’s just not the direction Tim wants him to take.”

“I know,” Janet admits. “I worry he’ll push too far one day.”

“Jeremy isn’t going to abandon you.” I am confident of that reality. Jeremy adores his mother.

“Maybe he won’t abandon me. He doesn’t want to be here, Carter. This is his home.”

I nod.

“I don’t know what to do anymore,” my sister confesses.

“All you can do is support him,” I tell her. “Be his mom, Jan. That’s all you can do. I don’t consider Mom’s house my home anymore and neither do you.”

“It’s not the same.”

I disagree. “I think it is.”

Janet looks at me.

“It’s the same. Mom still lives there, but we have holidays here most years.”

“Yes, but we always visit Mom.”

“We don’t stay at Mom’s.”

“Because we live close.”

I’m not going to win this argument. Time to change tactics. “I guess that’s true. I’m not sure we’d stay at Mom’s for long if we did live far away.”

“I know you’re right. It doesn’t make me feel better. I wish Tim would lay off.”

I wish my brother-in-law would stop hounding Jeremy too. I don’t have any reason

to believe that will happen. “I’ll talk to him.”

Janet’s head snaps to attention.

“Not Tim, Jeremy.”

“I don’t—”

“Jan, Tim’s not going to change,” I say. “If he does, it won’t be you or me who changes him. Jeremy’s got to learn how to change his reaction to his father.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“I am.”

“I know Dad could be—”

“Dad was opinionated,” I say. “And most of the time, I loved that about him. Except when it was about my life.” I chuckle. “I wish I’d learned earlier not to let him trigger me.”

“You know he was proud of you.”

My father loved me. I believe he was proud of the person I became, I’m not sure he felt pride in the choices I made about my career.

“He was, Carter.”

“Maybe he was. It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to you,” Janet says.

Parental approval matters to everyone I know. It isn't guaranteed to anyone. "This isn't about me and Dad. I'll talk to Jeremy this week. And don't worry, I won't tell him about this conversation."

"Thank you."

"No worries. That's what sisters are for."

"What about you?" Janet inquires. "How goes the task of organizing?"

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“Brooklyn says I’m not helpless. That’s a start.”

“But is Brooklyn helping? That’s my question.”

Oh, Brooklyn is helping. Helping to keep me distracted from work. It seems the chaos on my desk has moved to my head.

“Carter?”

“Huh?”

“I asked you if Brooklyn is helping you get organized?”

“One day and the top of my desk is clear, so, yes.”

“Why do I detect skepticism in your voice?” Janet wonders.

“Brooklyn is great.”

“Oh.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No. What?” I challenge my sister.

“Is this arrangement purely professional?” she asks.

“No.”

“Really?”

I know where my sister’s thoughts have traveled. “It isn’t romantic either.”

“Oh.”

I laugh. “Why do you sound disappointed?”

“I would like to see you happy is all.”

“I’m happy.”

“So, you say.”

“I don’t need a girlfriend to be happy.”

“I never said you did. I worry about you being lonely,” Janet admits.

“Lonely? With Ali at my door daily?”

“I’m glad you have Ali. But what happens when Ali finds someone?”

There are many days I wish Ali would find someone. Ali wants a girlfriend, a partner—a wife. I know she does. “I hope Ali does find someone. My grocery bill will be cut in half.”

“Keep making jokes,” Janet says. “One of these days love’s going to knock you off

your feet.”

I purse my lips and shrug. Why do people assume love hasn’t “knocked” me off my feet already? It has—more than once. The problem is, I stayed on the ground while the other person kept walking. The one lasting relationship I had was predicated on friendship and shared interests. We shared an attraction. At least, there was attraction between us at first. My relationship with my former partner, Andrea, took off like a rocket and fizzled like a campfire. If you’ve ever sat beside a campfire waiting for it to die, you know how painfully long it can take. Hours feel like years. You don’t want to create a lot of smoke, so you wait. That’s an apt description of my life with Andrea. The fire between us started to dim immediately. We both tried to stoke the embers, but it was hopeless. I watched for years as tiny sparks faded into blackness. She asked me not to leave. I was tempted to stay. It was warm enough. I knew it would grow colder by the day. It hurt to walk away. Mostly because I felt I failed. My sister told me that marriage is based on friendship, not passion. Maybe. I reminded her I wasn’t married. I understood her point and I still do. Lust can’t sustain a relationship. But I don’t desire to exist in a relationship where the sparks fade before they can ignite. I don’t need a raging fire every day. I do need a few sparks to keep the flame ignited. Maybe that’s my problem. Loving someone and being in love with a person isn’t the same. I’m not sure the latter can last. I don’t want less.

Janet asked me once if I ever miss Andrea. Sure. I miss her. I miss her company. I don’t ache to hold her, or see her, or even to talk to her. We made a go of staying friends for a couple of years. She met someone new, and we slowly drifted apart. I’m okay with that. I don’t regret the time we shared, but I also don’t mourn the loss. By all accounts, she’s happy. Me? I don’t know what defines happiness. I’m content. I’ve grown accustomed to being alone. I don’t know why people assume that living alone means I’m lonely. I’m not.

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“Okay, I get it,” Janet says. “I’ll leave it alone.”

“Thank you.”

“But I am curious about this woman.”

I give up and laugh. “Brooklyn would probably be better suited to Jeremy,” I tell her. “If she wasn’t a lesbian.”

“I don’t get it.”

I resist the temptation to make a joke about marriage. “She’s a bit younger,” I explain.

“Ah. Too young?”

“I thought you were letting it go?”

“It’s just a question.”

I laugh harder.

“That’s not an answer,” Janet reminds me.

I turn away from her and make my way to the refrigerator. “I really haven’t thought about it,” I reply. That’s a lie, and if I were to look at my sister, she’d know it. I retrieve a bottle of beer, open it, and turn back to Janet. She’s grinning. She knows.

“Mm,” is all my sister says.

I shrug again and leave the room in search of Jeremy. We have the same motto: when you know you can’t survive the inquisition—run.

NOVEMBER 19th

“If today isn’t good, Carter, it’s okay.”

“Today’s fine,” I tell Brooklyn.

“I don’t want to take away from your time with your nephew.”

“Jeremy will be here until next weekend. I have plenty of time to spend with him. He’ll be sick of me.”

“I doubt that.”

“Ah, don’t be so sure. He’s going to get put to work next week.”

“Oh?”

“Yep. For some unknown reason, I offered to host Thanksgiving dinner. That means he won’t be working on car engines, he’ll be vacuuming this house.”

“Free labor, huh?”

“Oh, he’ll get paid in food and beer.”

“Sounds like a fair deal.”

“I think so. What about you? What are your plans next week?”

“I don’t have any.”

“Really? I thought you’d be headed to your sister’s.”

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“Normally, I would be. They’re spending the weekend with my brother-in-law’s family in Boston. My parents too.”

“You’re not joining them?”

“I was invited, but no.”

I’m tempted to push for more information, but I sense this is a sensitive topic. “Why don’t you come here?”

Brooklyn looks shocked.

“No pressure,” I say. “I promise I won’t make you help me with dinner.”

“That’s generous,” Brooklyn says.

“I get it if it feels weird. If it helps, Ali will be here.”

“I want to accept.”

“Okay? But?”

“I don’t want to impose, Carter.”

“How would you impose?”

“It’s a lot of work.”

“It’s just dinner. I’m cooking a twenty-two-pound turkey for seven people. My sister will bring at least two pies, and my mother will come with more appetizers than we need for a house of forty. Ali will buy enough booze to last until next Christmas. Trust me on this. Come.”

Brooklyn smiles. “Are you sure?”

“Listen, I know you’re technically working for me. I’d like to think we’re friends.”

“We are friends.”

“Then come. Isn’t that what Thanksgiving is all about?”

Brooklyn takes me by surprise when she kisses me on the cheek. “I’d love to.”

I clear my throat. “Good. It’s settled. I’ll leave you to visit with my computer for the afternoon.”

“Okay. Carter?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

I can’t stop laughing. Jeremy’s imitation of his father is spot-on. I realize the minute I see Brooklyn standing in the doorway that we must sound like a rowdy frat party. I apologize. “Sorry. Jeremy was just putting on an SNL worthy skit for me,” I explain.

“Don’t apologize. It sounded a lot more interesting in here.”

“Ah. My computer files lost their allure already, I take it?”

“Did they have allure?” Brooklyn quips.

“What? You don’t find editing software and sales trackers interesting?” I reply.

“Interesting—yes. Alluring—”

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“Point taken,” I concede. “I’m sure you already guessed this—Brooklyn, this is my nephew, Jeremy.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” Jeremy says.

Brooklyn is smiling. She looks at me. I shrug.

“I guess we’re both in good company then,” Brooklyn says. “Carter talks about you often.”

“I hope she hasn’t said too much,” Jeremy says.

“Nothing that would embarrass you. Yet.”

Jeremy laughs. “Just remember, Auntie, I have a few stories that can make you blush.”

Don’t remind me. And don’t tell them to Brooklyn.

“Is that so?” Brooklyn asks.

“All right. That’s enough,” I tell them.

I catch Jeremy winking at Brooklyn. I’d better not leave them unsupervised. God only knows what he might let slip. He possesses almost as much ammunition as Ali.

“Why don’t you join us?” Jeremy invites Brooklyn to the conversation.

“I don’t want to bother you.”

“Bother us?” Jeremy laughs. “I think we’re probably bothering you.”

“Not at all. I’m at a stopping point,” Brooklyn says.

“Do you need me?” I ask.

“I do. We can finish another time.”

Jeremy gets up from the table. “Hey, I’m here for another week,” he tells Brooklyn. “Don’t let me get in your way.”

“You’re not in anyone’s way,” I tell him. “How about a compromise? I’ll skip off with Brooklyn for a bit, and then maybe we can convince Brooklyn to join us for dinner.”

“What do you say?” Jeremy asks Brooklyn.

“I don’t know,” Brooklyn replies. She looks at me. “Are any sharp instruments involved?”

I roll my eyes. “Not unless you order steak—no. We’re headed to Old Saybrook for dinner at the harbor.”

“It sounds terrific, but I have to get the train back to the city from New Haven.”

“Stay here,” Jeremy says.

Brooklyn and I both spin our heads in his direction.

“What did I say? You’ve got three bedrooms,” he reminds me.

Yes, I do. “Don’t put Brooklyn on the spot,” I warn him. I turn to Brooklyn. “But you’re welcome to crash here. He’s right. I have two bedrooms I never use.”

“Unless I’m here,” Jeremy adds.

Brooklyn wants to accept our offer. I can tell she does. I can also tell she’s hesitant.

“I could call my sister and see if she’d mind if I crash there tonight. I could take a morning train,” Brooklyn says.

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“You could stay here and take the morning train too,” Jeremy offers.

I don’t know if I want to thank him or throttle him.

“I don’t have anything here,” Brooklyn explains. “And you two—”

“Aw, come on,” Jeremy gently goads Brooklyn. “I’ll bet Auntie springs for dinner and drinks.”

I shouldn’t be amused, but I am.

“Ease up,” I tell him.

“Okay. I’ll let you two figure it out,” he says. “I think you should stay. Then we can drink on Auntie’s dime and swap stories.”

That does it. I grab a roll of paper towels from the counter and chuck it at my nephew. “Go clean something,” I tell him.

“I’ll clean the blue bedroom,” he returns. “That way it’ll be ready for Brooklyn.”

I chuckle, take a deep breath, and turn to Brooklyn. “I’m sorry. He means well.”

Brooklyn nods.

“I understand if you need to leave, and I get it if you don’t want to stay here. But you are welcome. I’m sure I can find something for you to wear. We can throw your stuff

in the washer for tomorrow. Remember, I'm great with laundry."

"I'd like to stay," Brooklyn admits.

"You don't need to explain."

"Yeah, I do. You've been so generous, Carter. From the day we met. I feel like I might be taking advantage of your kindness."

There's a measurable pause between my heartbeats. "I think you overestimate my kindness."

"You're paying me to work for you. And you've fed me, invited me to Thanksgiving—"

"Brooklyn, that's just what friends do. It's okay to decline," I tell her. "Don't leave because you think you're imposing. The blue bedroom is next to the room Jeremy uses. You might hate me by morning. He snores like a freight train."

Brooklyn laughs. "Are you sure?"

"That Jeremy snores?"

Brooklyn whacks me on the arm.

"Oh. I'm sure."

"I'm going to owe you a five-star meal in Paris by the time we're done working together," Brooklyn says.

"Nah." I start toward my office. I can feel her eyes on me. "That's not how it works."

I keep moving. I know she's considering my words. She's likely wondering if they carry any deeper meaning. They don't. I don't expect anything from Brooklyn—nothing except the unexpected.

I'm surprised by the reply that comes from over my shoulder. "Well, okay, maybe not five-star, Paris. At least a cardboard pizza in a box."

I laugh. Like I said—expect the unexpected.

"She didn't!" Brooklyn laughs.

Jeremy is pleased with himself. "She did. My mom says she never saw my dad as flustered."

Brooklyn looks at me and shakes her head.

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At least Jeremy has chosen somewhat benign stories to share. Yes, I once knocked on my sister's door dressed as a man. When my brother-in-law answered, I told him I was there on behalf of Gays for God. That was a week after he complained about religious literature taped to the front door. My brother-in-law was so taken off guard, it took him a few minutes to realize it was me. I have to admit, it was funny.

"That belongs in a book," Brooklyn says.

"Or a comedy show," Jeremy offers.

"I was young," I tell them. "And unafraid."

"I wish I could have seen Dad's face," Jeremy says.

It was priceless. I laugh.

"Maybe you should write comedies," Brooklyn suggests.

"I'm not that funny," I reply.

"You could write a comedy with trolls or something," Jeremy says.

"Trolls are not funny," I tell him.

"They can be. Look at Shrek!" he says.

"Shrek is an ogre," I correct him.

“What’s the difference?”

“Ogres eat humans,” I explain.

Jeremy stares at me.

“See?” I wink at him. I notice that Brooklyn is struggling to stifle a yawn. “It’s late,” I say. “I think it’s time for me to turn in.”

“Me too,” Brooklyn says.

“I guess that leaves more beer for me,” Jeremy tells us.

“Help yourself.” I turn to Brooklyn. “I’ll get you something to wear.”

“If I don’t see you before I leave, it was nice meeting you,” Brooklyn tells Jeremy.

“You too. I guess I’ll see you soon enough!”

“I guess so,” she agrees.

I gesture for Brooklyn to follow me upstairs. I show her to the small, blue-inspired bedroom. “You know where the bathroom is,” I say. “Give me a minute. I’ll get you something.”

I leave the room before Brooklyn can reply. I’m anxious to get her settled and get into my bed. I don’t want to linger in any bedroom with Brooklyn for longer than is essential. It’s not that I’m worried I will make a move. I fear she’ll see that I would like to make a move. I don’t want anything to strain our friendship. Experience tells me that attraction can strain the strongest friendship. Feelings? Feelings can break a decade’s long friendship in two. That’s also a lesson I don’t care to repeat. I rifle

through a couple of drawers and settle on a pair of blue flannel pajama pants and a t-shirt with a Democratic donkey that can pass as a match. A few steps and I'm face to face with Brooklyn again.

"Thanks," she says when I pass her the clothing.

"No problem. If you need anything, let me know."

"I'll be fine. Thank you for tonight."

"I didn't do anything."

"Yeah, you did."

I reply with a nod.

“You could say, you’re welcome,” Brooklyn says.

I don’t think I did anything that warrants thanks. That’s the truth. Brooklyn and Jeremy both thanked me for dinner at the restaurant. I see Brooklyn’s eyebrows edge a hair higher and her lips purse with expectation. I wonder if I could refuse this woman anything. “You’re welcome,” I tell her.

“Goodnight, Carter.”

“Goodnight, Brooklyn.” I hope I manage to sleep. Between Jeremy’s epic snoring that carries through the house and the knowledge that Brooklyn is a few steps away, I’m likely to toss and turn until morning. I close my bedroom door and sigh. “What are you doing, Carter?” I ask myself. I answer my questions with a slew of excuses: I’m merely being generous. I’m acting as any friend would. I’m humoring Jeremy. It makes sense for Brooklyn to stay. Why not? I’d do it for anyone—True. I would likely extend the same invitation to any friend. That makes me feel better for about twenty seconds. Brooklyn isn’t any friend. Brooklyn is someone I’m working with—to be precise, she’s someone I’ve contracted to do work for me. That’s not the issue. I know it. I like her. I like most people. That’s not the issue either. I’m attracted to her. That’s happened plenty of times before and I’ve never had an issue controlling those impulses. So? What is my dilemma? “Don’t go there.” How long can I avoid it? I can avoid telling Brooklyn. My enjoying her company is not-so-slowly becoming an ache to enjoy her company more often. Feelings. “Get it together, Carter.” I need to get it together. Brooklyn’s a friend. Period. Maybe I should record that message and play it on repeat while I sleep. Friends.

THANKSGIVING

Janet is a better cook than me. She always has been. She gets that from our mom. I'm the superior baker. I'm not sure how we arrived at the conclusion I should cook Thanksgiving dinner and she should bake. I'll call it the illogical logic of the Riordan family. Typical. I should be tired. I think my nervous energy is keeping me awake. Why am I nervous? Jeremy spent three hours last night prattling on about how "awesome" Brooklyn is and how I'm an idiot if I don't try to date her. I pointed out the fact that she is only a few years older than him. Jeremy? He shrugged it off and told me I was making excuses. Maybe it's a generational thing. I imagine Brooklyn would have the same reaction—not to me dating her, to me dating someone her age. I'm not dating Brooklyn and have no intention to pursue her romantically. What I can't explain is why I feel like I'm about to introduce my lover to my family. Lover? Ridiculous. I'm not worried about what my family will think of Brooklyn. They'll love her. What will she think of our dysfunctional family? I like to think our family put the fun in dysfunctional. We love each other, but it can be a messy affair at times. Why does it matter to me what Brooklyn thinks?

"What did that squash do to you?" Janet asks me.

"I didn't hear you come in," I reply.

"Too busy committing carnage on that butternut squash, I guess."

"Very funny."

"Jeremy let us in the front door," Janet explains. "It's easier for Mom to navigate the front stairs."

True. "Where is Mom?"

“Still standing,” my mother replies. She kisses me on the cheek. “Put the dishes on the dining room table,” she tells my nephew. “Now, what can we help with?” she asks me.

“Nothing,” I answer. “This is my last task for a couple of hours.”

“Good!” my brother-in-law chimes. “Does that mean we can open the booze?”

“I don’t know, did you bring any?” I return.

Tim holds up a bottle of bourbon. “Something I discovered,” he says. “I thought we’d save this for after dinner.”

“Well, since you came bearing gifts—there’s a cooler of beer on the back porch.”

“Carter!” Jeremy’s voice booms through the house. “Brooklyn just pulled up!”

Janet smiles at me. “I’ll take over. Don’t leave your friend in Jeremy’s hands.”

I smile back at her, wipe my hands, and make my way out the back door toward the front of my house. I greet her casually when she exits her vehicle. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Brooklyn opens the back door and retrieves a bag.

“What’s in there?” I inquire.

“You didn’t think I’d come empty-handed, did you?”

“I didn’t expect you to bring anything.”

“Well, I didn’t expect to be invited, so we’re even.”

Before I can continue our banter, Ali pulls up behind Brooklyn's rental car. Deep breath. I pray that Ali is on her best behavior. She loves to tease me. That's fine. The thought that she and Jeremy might double-team me makes me a little apprehensive. I don't want Brooklyn caught in the crossfire. I also don't relish the idea of my feelings becoming a joke over dinner. Another deep breath.

"Yo!" Ali calls to us.

"Yo?" I ask with a chuckle.

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“Hey, Brooklyn. I see you made it to the A-list.”

Ali. I warn her with a glare.

“A, as in always invited,” Ali says. “And I come prepared for a party.” Ali lifts a box out of her trunk.

“Is that a box of booze?” Brooklyn asks me.

“Not just booze,” Ali tells her. “The best booze. Boozy booze.”

I laugh. “This is her excuse to buy strange bottles,” I explain.

“Hey! You’ve never complained about my selections,” Ali argues.

Fair. I haven’t. I enjoy sampling different spirits. That’s a penchant I share with Ali, Jeremy, and my brother-in-law. It’s the one time Jeremy and his father bond. They like to discuss various types of bourbon, whiskey, Scotch, vodka, gin, and rum they’ve discovered. Phillip and my sister are more interested in beer and wine. My mother doesn’t drink much. I think she believes it’s best if someone supervises. She’s probably right.

“What’s in there?” Ali gestures to the bag in Brooklyn’s hand.

“Nothing as interesting as what’s in your box,” Brooklyn says.

“Ah, my box is interesting,” Ali quips.

I shake my head. Only Ali.

“So, I’ve heard,” Brooklyn counters.

Ali wiggles her eyebrows. “Oh? Who’s been talking?”

“All right,” I tell my best friend. “This is a family affair.”

“Without children present,” Ali reminds me.

“Behave,” I tell her.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Can we go inside now?” Ali asks. “I’m dying to see what’s in Brooklyn’s bag.”

Brooklyn loops her arm around mine and winks at Ali. Oh, boy. I can see Ali attempting to hold back a comment. God help me when alcohol is introduced into this equation.

SIX HOURS LATER

“You’ve been holding out on us,” Ali tells Brooklyn.

“I like to play hard to get,” Brooklyn quips.

“Yeah, well now your secret is out of the bag. Literally,” Ali says.

Jeremy comments through a mouthful of cheesecake. “This is like the best cheesecake I’ve ever eaten.”

Brooklyn laughs. “It’s my one kitchen triumph,” she admits. “My gram taught me to make it.”

“Pretty sure you could master just about anything based on this,” I tell her.

“I think the alcohol might be lowering your standards,” Brooklyn replies.

I disagree. “Hardly,” I tell her. Brooklyn holds my gaze. I feel the room’s eyes on us and clear my throat. I retrieve my glass from the table beside me. “But I seem to have run dry.”

My sister follows me to the kitchen.

“Tell me that Tim is driving home,” I say.

“I’m not drunk,” Janet says.

“You will be if you have another whiskey.” Janet seldom drinks whiskey.

“Tim can drive,” she concedes. “Anyway, I needed an excuse.”

“For?” I inquire.

“Carter,” Janet begins.

“That’s me.”

“Uh-huh. Are you planning to tell her?”

“Tell who what?”

Janet stares at me. I sigh as I plop ice cubes into our glasses.

“Carter?” she urges me.

“You should know by now that no one can tell Ali anything.” I pour whiskey into our glasses and hand Janet hers.

“Very funny.”

I sip from my glass and enjoy the slight burn as it travels down my throat. “There’s nothing to tell, Jan.”

“And I’m the Queen of England.”

“You look great for your age.”

Janet laughs. “All right, I get it. Let it go.”

I raise my glass.

“Don’t let it go too long,” Janet tells me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I reply. I don’t intend to continue this conversation. Not now. Not here. Possibly not ever. I make my way for the living room.

It seems there’s no escape for me today. My mother loves to tease me. “Brooklyn tells us you’re not as hopeless as we thought,” she says.

“Me or my office?” I ask for clarification.

“Both,” Brooklyn replies.

“Now, that is the alcohol talking,” I quip.

Brooklyn rolls her eyes. “The only department you might be hopeless in is your propensity for self-deprecating humor.”

Ouch. Brooklyn’s observation is playful, but it strikes a nerve. I’m often accused of deflecting compliments with humor—usually at my expense. I concentrate on the

whiskey in my glass.

“That’s Carter,” Ali agrees.

My eyes meet Ali’s with a warning. She’s too buzzed to care.

Brooklyn picks up on my discomfort. “To be honest, I wish you were a bit more disorganized,” she says.

“Why?” I ask.

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“I’ll miss all these meals when our time together ends.”

“I hope our time doesn’t end at the edge of my desk,” I say. Apparently, my alcohol consumption has lowered my inhibitions. Brooklyn smiles without comment.

Jeremy springs from his seat.

“Where are you going?” my mother asks him.

“To mess up Auntie’s desk. There’s no way I’m taking a chance on missing more of Brooklyn’s cheesecake.”

Laughter fills the room. I manage to grin. Jeremy winks at me. He and I have always shared a close relationship. I forget sometimes that he is a man. He might love to tease me, but he would never make me uncomfortable knowingly. “Heaven forbid anything comes between you and Brooklyn’s cheesecake,” I say.

“No kidding. That stuff is like crack.”

Everyone laughs again.

“You heard it,” my mother tells Brooklyn. “You’d better be prepared for a lot of future invitations. This family is serious about its cake.”

“And its booze,” Janet says.

I’m surprised when my brother-in-law laughs. “Not much beats cake and booze.”

“Sex,” Ali says.

I choke on the sip of whiskey in my mouth.

“What?” Ali asks. “Everyone here has had sex, Carter.”

My nephew, Phillip, takes the opportunity to jab his brother. “Not Jeremy. Unless you count alone time.”

My mother throws her napkin at Phillip. “Leave your brother alone.”

“Yeah. Don’t talk about sex in front of Nana,” Jeremy says.

My mother is no wallflower. She looks at Jeremy seriously. “There’s a reason you’re here,” she tells him.

Janet laughs so hard she snorts. I continue to drink. I’m relieved to notice Brooklyn giggling. Now she knows there is as much chaos at a Riordan dinner as there could ever be on my desk. She casts a glance my way and I feel it in my belly. Once again, I’m thankful for whiskey.

“I’ll walk you out,” I tell Brooklyn. I’m determined to hide my disappointment that she’s leaving. I watch as my family says their goodbyes to Brooklyn. I shouldn’t be surprised that my mother envelops her in a hug. I wish I could hear what she is whispering into Brooklyn’s ear. I’m relieved when their embrace ends and we can head outside.

“Thanks for today,” Brooklyn says.

“Thank you for putting up with us.”

I wish I could make the walk to her car last another block—or three. I take the bag of leftovers I packed for her from her hands while she opens the car door. When she turns to me, my heart races. What am I doing?

Brooklyn searches my eyes for what seems like hours. “Your family is wonderful,” she tells me.

So are you. “They’re okay. I guess I’ll keep them.”

“I had a great time.”

I know better than to ask her to reconsider leaving. “Are you sure you’re okay to drive?” Jesus, Carter. She’s more than okay to drive. How lame can you be?

“I’m fine,” she promises. “I’m going to stay at my sister’s. I actually have some work to get done and having the whole house to myself will be nice.”

“Text me when you get there.”

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“Okay, Mom.”

“Cute. You may be fine to drive, but there will be assholes out there.”

Brooklyn leans in and kisses my cheek. “I’ll text you.”

“Thank you.” I reluctantly hand her the bag.

“I’ll see you next week,” she promises.

Next week will conclude our working arrangement. Maybe I should have let Jeremy mess things up again. “See you then,” I reply.

Brooklyn climbs into the driver’s seat. I close her door and step back. My heart lurches in my chest when she pulls away. What happens after next week?

“Hey! Are you gonna stand out there all night?” Ali’s voice yells from behind me. “Hurry up! Jeremy’s about to open the good stuff!”

I turn and make my way back to the house. I may not be grateful for the box of spirits Ali brought tomorrow. I’m thankful for the distraction tonight. “Yeah, yeah,” I call back. “Don’t open that bottle without me!” I glance back over my shoulder at the empty spot in front of my house. Whiskey sounds good.

DECEMBER 2nd

Occasionally, a change of plans is welcome. Any change of plans that delay the end of Brooklyn's weekly visits is fine with me. I was pleasantly surprised when Brooklyn called on Sunday and asked if I had any desire to join her for some shopping in the city. She explained that her nephew's first birthday party was happening on Saturday and she needed to get some gifts. She thought, perhaps, we might tackle some holiday shopping at the same time—if I was game. Truthfully, I should have declined. My deadline is looming. It's becoming more ominous by the hour. Either way, I wouldn't have been writing today. That's my justification for hopping an early train to meet Brooklyn in Manhattan. Besides, I haven't purchased anything for Christmas. Not one item. I can't wait until one of my nephews contributes some children to my family. I'm terrific at finding presents for babies, toddlers, kids, and teens. Teens are the easiest. They want money. Then they get older and they expect something to open again. It'd be amusing if gift-giving wasn't such a puzzle. I can't buy bottles of whiskey or cases of beer for every holiday. What do you buy twenty-something men? A sweater? Maybe Brooklyn will have some insight.

I step off the train and make my way down a dingy corridor. I love Grand Central Station. It's one of my favorite places on earth. Maybe it's because I remember the first time I came here with my father when I was eight. There's something magical about this place. It feels like the whole world collides when you reach the center. Maybe because the entire world, or some part of it, has traveled through here. I've traveled a lot in my life. I love London, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Seoul, Los Angeles, and Chicago. There is no city on earth that compares to New York City. Perhaps my American roots make me bias. I don't think so. New York is unlike any place on the planet. The moment I set foot in the city, I can feel its pulse. It hums. I don't mean the sound of passing cabs and rushing pedestrians. New York has a heartbeat. I look up at the ceiling of the grand station with the same wonderment I did at eight-years-old.

“Looking for something?”

“No.” I turn and offer Brooklyn a smile.

“It is impressive.”

“I was thinking magical.”

“You are the fantasy writer,” she replies.

I look back upward.

“See something inspiring?” she asks.

“You have a point,” I say.

“I do?”

I laugh and return my gaze to her. I never considered writing a book set in New York City. Why not?

“Oh, I see the wheels turning,” Brooklyn comments.

“You just gave me an idea,” I tell her.

“I did?”

Brooklyn’s given me loads of ideas over the last month that could be labeled as fantasy. This just happens to be the first that might inspire a book.

“Carter?”

“It would be an interesting setting, wouldn’t it?” I look up one more time. “What if it

were a portal?”

Brooklyn chuckles. “I’d read that one.”

“Would you?”

“I would. I’d read anything you write.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

I smile and accept the compliment silently. “So?” I begin. “Shopping?”

“Shopping,” she agrees. “But not before coffee.”

“I never say no to coffee.”

“Good. I hope you can help me today.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, Jeremey mentioned that you always buy the coolest gifts. He and Phillip told me that your presents were the best every year at Christmas when they were kids. I’m terrible at gifts,” Brooklyn explains.

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“No. It is. I have no idea what to buy a one-year-old boy!”

“What did you buy Josie when she turned one?” I ask.

“I didn’t. My mother did all the shopping.”

“Ah. The plot thickens,” I say. “So, you invited me to shop for you.”

“It’s a bonus.”

“A bonus?”

“Yes. I love the city at Christmastime.”

Understandable. The holiday lights, decorations, and added bustle are enchanting. “How exactly is my shopping experience a bonus?” I could be wrong. It is cold outside, but I think Brooklyn is blushing.

“I think it’s something you should share. The city this time of year,” she tells me. “With someone who believes in magic.”

Tingles run down my spine at her words. Or maybe it’s the way she’s looking at me. I know better than to believe I see what I feel reflected back to me. New York doesn’t hold a candle to Brooklyn Brady. She defines enchanting. I look for a way to recover. Quickly. “Are you hoping all my experience will help you uncover where the elves are hiding?”

Brooklyn grins. “Maybe. Maybe if you sit on Santa’s lap, he’ll tell you.”

“I think you might have a better chance coaxing that intel out of Mr. C.”

“Want to make a bet?”

I laugh. I can’t think of anything I’d rather do than spend a day with Brooklyn. No. I can’t think of anyone I would rather spend any day—every day with than Brooklyn.

The thought might knock me over if I wasn't rooted in place. I've never been struck by lightning. I've read countless passages that describe a moment of emotional realization as a lightning strike. I suppose it might feel like a sudden burst of hot energy to most people. Me? I feel the same way I did when I fell off my bike in the sixth grade. Stunned. Breathless. Motionless. It's as if I've hit the ground with tremendous force. All the air has escaped from my lungs. I fear I will never breathe freely again. Not the most romantic description of love. Who said love always came with romance?

"Carter? Hey, if you don't want to sit on Santa's lap, I won't force you."

Breathe, Carter. "What are we betting?" I manage to ask.

"Well—whoever gets the goods on the elves from Santa buys dinner."

"And if Santa refuses us both?"

"Oh, he'll sing."

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I finally laugh. At least I'm breathing again. For the moment. What do I do now? One thing I know, once love makes itself known, it's nearly impossible to banish. That doesn't mean she ever has to know. "Let's get that coffee. I need some caffeine before we ambush Santa."

Brooklyn laughs and loops her arm around mine. She's not going to make life easy. Focus on Santa.

"I think you've been holding out on me," Brooklyn says.

"Me?"

"Yes. You."

This ought to be good.

"I figured it out," she tells me.

"My gift-buying skills?"

"And your Santa-coercing ability," she adds.

"You think so?"

"Yep. It also explains all these fantastical realms you create."

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re an elf.”

I cackle. Literally.

“Go on. Deny it,” Brooklyn challenges me.

“I don’t think most elves are a size fourteen.”

“I don’t think size has anything to do with elfhood.”

“Elfhood?”

“What do you call it?”

That’s it. I need to find a place to sit before I pee my pants.

“Why are you laughing?” Brooklyn asks me.

“I think you should be the one writing fantasy novels.”

“Are you saying you’re not an elf?”

“Would it matter if I denied it?” I ask.

“No.”

I laugh harder. “Can we please find a place to eat?” And pee.

“Since you won the bet, you choose.”

“I don’t care as long as there’s a bathroom.”

“McDonald’s?”

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I would happily take McDonald's. "If you desire a Happy Meal, I'm good with that."

Brooklyn smacks my arm. "I'm not buying you McDonald's for dinner."

"You don't have to buy me dinner at all."

"Nope. A bet is a bet. You found the elves."

I probably should tell her that I learned about the elves' visit to Macy's online. I like to keep her guessing.

"Do you like Middle Eastern food?"

"I like food. Have you seen me?"

Brooklyn isn't amused. "Just answer the question, Carter."

"I do."

"Would you be opposed to hopping across the river?"

"To Brooklyn?"

"It is where I live," she reminds me.

"If you have someplace you'd like to go, I'm game."

“I have some place I’d like to take you,” she says. “Maybe we could drop our bags at my apartment first.”

“Sure,” I agree. Brooklyn is pleased with my reply. I’m not sure I have the strength to deny her anything. That worries me. Actually, it worries me a lot. I’ll worry later.

“I thought you said your place was small?”

“It is.”

“Not for this area.” I silently wonder how Brooklyn can afford this apartment. She does fantastic work. A one-bedroom with a fireplace in Brooklyn Heights can’t be cheap. Turns out I don’t have to wonder. Brooklyn surmises my unspoken question.

“My surrogate parents own the building,” she explains.

There’s a story here.

“My best friend from college,” she explains. “Her parents own it. I think they like having someone they know in the building. I pay less than half the usual rent.”

“It’s fabulous.” It is.

“Thanks. I’d like it to be—well, more like home. I didn’t know if I’d be here for long, so I haven’t done much to make it—well, homey.”

The walls are a bit sparse, but Brooklyn’s décor is both tasteful and elegant. It’s neither modern nor traditional—contemporary. I think that’s how I would describe the setting. It’s also comfortable. The few pictures she has on the walls are campaign

posters. I also notice some framed pictures on the mantle. Blue seems to be her color of choice. I guess that she's spent some time at Ikea. "I think it's great," I tell her.

"Thanks. I don't want to rush you to dinner. We could have a drink here first."

"After I use the bathroom?"

"Oh, my God! Of course! You must be dying."

"Or drowning."

"It's right there," Brooklyn tells me. "So? A drink first?"

“Sure,” I reply.

The last thing I should do is consume alcoholic beverages. It’s already four o’clock. A drink here, a couple at the restaurant, and I’m certain I will land on Brooklyn’s sofa. I don’t need to hear her argument. She’ll remind me that she spent the night at my house. I don’t have any tangible reason to decline the offer. And I know she’ll suggest I spend the night. It was hard having Brooklyn in the next room when I was attracted to her. In love with her? I might hide in this bathroom for the rest of time. There it is—the truth. I have fallen flat on my face for Brooklyn Brady. Dead-end-love is my greatest talent. I never learn. Never. Bam! I fall. Boom! I break. A couple of deep breaths, a splash of water to my face, and it’s time to face the music better known as Brooklyn.

There are few things in life more difficult or painful than concealing your emotions from a person you love. I don’t possess a proficiency in the area of disguise. My mother would say I wear my heart on my sleeve. I can’t afford to do that now—not with Brooklyn. I’ve traveled this road before—fallen for a friend. I was as sure as I could be that she loved me. She did. She didn’t try to deny it. I suppose most people would consider that a gift. She loved me. She didn’t want me as a lover. She never denied she was attracted to me. She never wasted time claiming she didn’t wonder what we could have together. She wanted more. Whatever more is in life. Normal. That’s what she meant. I knew that then. I’ve spent twenty years wishing I’d never confessed my feelings to her. Once I did, there was no going backward. Anyone who says you can stay friends with someone after you’ve said the words, “I’m in love with you,” can’t prove it by me—or to me. Either you make a go of something or you eventually let go of each other. Unless, of course, you manage to fall out of love. That doesn’t tend to happen when someone is in your life daily.

We remained friends for a few years. Not so slowly, we grew apart. Daily phone calls, weekly dinners, and weekend excursions gave way to occasional trips to a movie or getting together with mutual friends. One day, it all evaporated. Not loving her. Having her in my life. It was too much for both of us. She found a boyfriend. I started seeing a woman I met at a conference. Everything changed. I don't know when it happened. I can't point to a conversation, a moment, or an event. I don't know the date of the last time we spoke. She slipped away into the "more" she sought. I let her leave without a comment or plea. The worst part is I knew—on some level, I knew that we would never be together no matter the depth of what we felt. I knew her. I can't claim to know Brooklyn as well. I may avoid admitting to anyone what Brooklyn means to me. I can't deny it to myself. The only way out is through. Silent suffering until, hopefully, one day, I pick myself back up and move on. Make no mistake. I'm no martyr. Not even close. It's not Brooklyn I need to protect. It's me. One last deep breath and it's time to emerge from the safety of my momentary cocoon.

"It's an Old Fashioned," she tells me as she hands me a glass. "I'm not much of a bartender. This is my sister's drink of choice. It's kind of her prerequisite to visit me."

I accept the drink with a smile. "You were telling me about this birthday party—"

"Oh, I was, wasn't I? Is it terrible?"

"I don't know. What is it?"

"One-year-old parties," Brooklyn says. "Like anyone remembers their first birthday."

"I don't think the party is for the baby."

"See? That's what I said."

I chuckle.

“I mean, it’s cute,” Brooklyn admits. “I don’t even want to guess what my sister spent on Josie’s first birthday party. Balloons and streamers. Party hats. Catered food.” Brooklyn rolls her eyes. “And this extravagant Elmo cake that Josie destroyed with her hands.”

“It’s a rite of passage,” I say. “A milestone.”

“I guess, but for whose benefit?”

Fair question. “Everyone’s,” I tell her. “I hear you. I had the same thought with Jeremy. Don’t get me wrong, I loved spending time with him from the moment he was born. It was a lot of fanfare every year for years. I kind of felt bad when it was Phillip’s turn.”

“Why?”

“There was fanfare, just less.”

“It’s funny you say that.”

“Why?”

“I asked my sister about my nephew’s party and she was kind of matter-of-fact about it.”

“Second child. Still a milestone. Just a milestone everyone’s already experienced.”

“That’s kind of depressing.”

I laugh. “Weren’t you the one who said no one remembers their first birthday?”

“Yeah, but we will.”

I sip my drink and watch Brooklyn drum her fingers on her knee. “I won’t do that.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“When I have kids—I won’t do that. I commit to birthday party equality.”

My heart plummets. Another reminder of the distance between us. I gave up any ideas I had about raising a family when Andrea and I broke up. We’d discussed the possibility. Raising kids with Andrea wouldn’t have been easy, but I’ve no doubt we would have made it work. Had we made the leap, I’m sure we’d still be together. At forty-six, I don’t see babies in my future. Brooklyn is thirty. She has plenty of time. “Equal is good,” I agree.

“Come to think of it, my sister has made a few comments about me being the favorite.”

“Not uncommon.”

“Why? Do you think Jan is your mom’s favorite?”

“She is.”

“Hardly,” Brooklyn disagrees.

“Jan will tell you I am the favorite. It’s a lifelong debate.”

“I find it hard to believe your mom played favorites.”

“I see she won you over already.”

“Your family is great.”

“Spend a couple more holidays with us and come back to me on that theory,” I quip.

“Invite me and I will.”

Perfect moment to nurse the drink in my hand.

“Want another one?” Brooklyn asks.

Have I finished this one already? I look into my glass. Almost. “Why not?” What are you doing Carter?

So much for going out for dinner. Three drinks later, Brooklyn is dialing out to order in. “Are you sure you’re okay with having dinner here?”

“Positive.”

“I wanted to take you out. You’ve done so much for me,” she says.

“I haven’t done anything.”

“Oh, no—not at all. You gave me work. You cooked dinner for me and put me up in your home. You took me to a beautiful restaurant by the water. You invited me to Thanksgiving. What did I do? Dragged you to the city to help me.”

I set the drink in my hand on the table and reach for Brooklyn’s hand. “I don’t need you to do anything for me. I like spending time with you. I don’t need anything.”

Brooklyn’s eyes shut for a moment. “I don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage of you.”

“I don’t.”

“I wanted to do something nice for you.”

“Brooklyn, stop. Please. Friends don’t need paybacks.”

“I know, but—”

“No buts. Okay? I would be perfectly happy with a McDonald’s burger and a milkshake.”

“Well, I can do better than that.”

“It doesn’t matter.” It doesn’t. She looks at me and my heart lodges in my throat. She’s going to see through me if I’m not careful.

“At least let me make it up to you with breakfast tomorrow.”

“Breakfast?”

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“We both know that drink in your hand won’t be your last.”

That’s a fact.

“I’ll go with you to the station tomorrow. We can stop for breakfast on the way,” she suggests.

“Will you stop worrying if I agree?”

“For now,” she concedes.

“All right. Then you can take me to breakfast.”

Brooklyn grabs my glass and hers. “Bottoms-up, then!”

Just so long as bottoms-up doesn’t lead to tops-down.

I feigned exhaustion to coerce Brooklyn into heading to bed. I should be asleep after the parade of Speakeasy drinks Brooklyn mixed. I can’t seem to quiet my mind—or any other part of my anatomy. We talked until after midnight. Brooklyn told me she’s considering broadcast journalism. She has a few friends in the business. I think she’d be fantastic. I told her as much. She’s hesitant. I know why. Brooklyn is gorgeous. That isn’t a bias opinion. Anyone would have to be blind not to notice Brooklyn. I watched tons of men and women glance her way while we shopped. She wants to be a journalist not a reporter. I told her she can be on camera and still be a serious

journalist. I offered her at least a dozen examples. In this day and age, her work is likely to reach far more people on camera. That seemed to warm her to the idea.

Brooklyn's not the least bit conceited, not about her appearance or her intelligence. And she is every bit as smart as she is beautiful. She received her bachelor's from Columbia, and a master's from NYU. But people can't see intellect or education when a person walks by. She's aware that others view her as attractive. I think there are times that makes her uncomfortable. She fears what people can see on the outside will eclipse the woman who exists underneath. I can't say I relate. I'm not a woman who has spent much time being complimented for my physical attributes by women or men. People call me funny, kind, sensitive, talented—someone who possesses an “inner” glow. I suppose that's meant to be complimentary. It often feels like a justification to find me worthy. Ali is a bit of a looker. I also wish I could claim I've grown comfortable with the fact that people initially gravitate to Ali when we are together—at least those who are seeking any type of sexual or romantic connection. I've ended up with her rejects or leftovers more times than I can count. My point is I don't know what it's like to be Brooklyn or Ali. I don't need Brooklyn to explain her concerns about being in front of a camera to me. They're obvious. It's also evident she fears expressing those concerns might make her sound vain. Impossible. One of Brooklyn's most alluring attributes is her humility, and I find nearly everything about Brooklyn Brady enticing.

It's becoming more obvious by the minute that exiling my emotions toward her is a pointless endeavor. It's driving me crazy thinking of her sleeping a few feet away. I've played games on my phone, tried to read, attempted to imagine the final chapters of my book—nothing is capable of distracting me from my thoughts of Brooklyn. It'd be simple if sexual fantasy plagued my mind. I know how to relieve that. I also know that lustful inclinations fade and can be replaced with a new object of interest. Have I imagined making love with Brooklyn? Yes. Not often. The pictures that frequent my thoughts are of us cooking together in the kitchen, Brooklyn sitting on Santa's lap, holding her hand—holding her close. It's heart-wrenching. There must have been a

dozen times tonight when the word, “love,” popped into my head. I am completely unprepared for this reality and determined to find a way to keep my cool.

Tossing and turning has become my nightly routine. Maybe when Brooklyn finishes her work next week, she’ll quietly slip away, and gradually my feelings will follow. That’s laughable. Brooklyn isn’t going anywhere. She’s made it clear that our friendship means something to her. It means something to me too. I know I’ll never push her away. The question is when something or more likely, someone will pull her away. I pound my pillow and flop my head back onto it. There’s no sense in fighting the images rolling in my brain. Better to fall asleep thinking about Brooklyn than remain awake until morning. I close my eyes and let my feelings dictate my dreams. Control what you can. That’s what my mother would tell me. Let go what you cannot. I’m still learning the difference. Tonight, I don’t have the energy to resist. I take a deep breath. What could be better than dreaming about Brooklyn?

CHAPTER SIX

DECEMBER 10th

Fifteen hours. That’s how long I sat at the keyboard. I’m relieved to be finished with this novel. I’m also wiped—mentally, physically, and emotionally. I don’t think I’ve ever been happier to click send on an email. Nell can exhale too. One more deadline met. One more story in the hopper. I crawled into bed at five this morning. I could swear I just fell asleep when my phone pings with a message from Nell.

“What’s on deck next?”

Is she serious? A break. That’s what’s next. I need a few weeks before I start thinking about tackling another novel. I’ll think about it after the holidays. I should be grateful for the message. Without it, I likely would have overslept. Brooklyn is due to arrive sometime around nine. That gives me half an hour to make myself look like

something resembling a human—a human woman. Good luck. I pull myself out of bed and head for the bathroom. Lord, help me. I'm not sure who is looking back at me. I swear I've aged about twenty years in the last twenty-four hours. It's going to take a lot more than a hot shower and a vat of coffee to remedy this mess. I don't even think a pound of makeup will help. My eyes look like I spent an epic night smoking pot and drinking whiskey. I laugh. That's probably what a few people think I do after they read my books. Laughing brings about an unexpected coughing fit. Fabulous. Hopefully, a hot shower will help. At least I won't stink. "Realistic goals, Carter," I tell myself as I step into the shower. "Take the small wins." Can I go back to bed now?

I open the door for Brooklyn. She steps inside and sets down her bag.

"You look terrible."

"Gee, thanks."

Brooklyn presses her palm to my forehead. "Why didn't you call me and tell me you weren't feeling well?"

"I'm just over-tired."

I watch as Brooklyn sheds her coat and drapes it over the chair. When she turns to face me again, her eyes narrow with worry.

"I finished the book." I don't have the chance to continue. A deep cough grips my chest.

"Carter." Brooklyn grabs the coffee cup in my hand and places it on the counter. She

takes my hand and starts to lead me from the kitchen.

“I’m fine,” I argue.

“You’re full of shit.”

I start to chuckle. I can’t even be amused without coughing.

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“You need to go back to bed,” she tells me.

“No.”

“Then you should lie down on the couch.”

“Brooklyn—”

“Don’t argue with me. You don’t see you.”

I groan. I know she’s right. “We have things to do today,” I say.

“Oh, no, we don’t. I have some things to do. The only thing you’re doing is resting on this couch.”

“Brooklyn—”

Brooklyn settles me onto my couch and pulls a blanket over me. “Carter, I mean it. You have a fever.”

“You sound like my mother.”

“Yeah? Well, I happen to know the password for your phone. Don’t make me call her.”

I laugh through fits of coughing. I’m sure Brooklyn would do it. “You took away my coffee.”

“Yes, I did. You don’t need to stay awake.”

“But—”

“No way,” Brooklyn says. “How about some mint tea?”

“Mint tea?”

Brooklyn raises her eyebrows.

“Is that a thing?” I ask.

Finally, she laughs. “It’s a thing. I have a couple of tea bags in my bag.”

Her bag’s so large, I wouldn’t be surprised if she had a teapot and the stove to heat it in there. “How about an Old Fashioned instead?”

“How about some cough and cold medicine?” she counters.

“You know, they used whiskey for years to treat coughs.”

“Uh-huh. And they also put sick people in sanatoriums.”

“That’s cheery. I don’t have consumption.”

“Are you going to cooperate or not?” she asks.

“No wonder my mom liked you so much. You’re bossy too.”

“Cute.” Brooklyn starts to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“To make you some tea and find you some medicine.”

“Brooklyn, you don’t have to—” She’s already on her mission. This day is not turning out at all the way I planned.

Something is in my hair. I swat at it. Damn flies. I must have left a window open. Is that giggling? I pry one eye open.

“Hey, there,” Brooklyn says.

“Brooklyn?”

“How are you feeling?”

I’m trying to piece together a puzzle. Am I dreaming? Is Brooklyn really here? Why is Brooklyn here?

“I’m sorry I woke you,” she says.

Slowly, the morning comes back to me. “When did I fall asleep? Oh—God. I’m so sorry.” I sit up quickly and my head starts to spin.

“Take it easy,” Brooklyn tells me. “You don’t need to be sorry. You need to rest.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s a little after two.”

“What? Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“Because you need sleep, Carter. I had work to do.”

“We were going to go through my—”

“I managed. I took some liberties,” she confesses. “Made some decisions about your subscriptions. You can always reinstate them if you want.”

“Did you finish?”

“I did.”

I start to get up.

“What are you doing?”

“If you’re done, I should walk you out.”

“Did you want me to leave?”

She sounds hurt. “No.” I don’t want her to leave.

“Then relax and lie back down. Do you feel like eating something?”

I nod.

“Okay. Soup?”

I nod again. I hate to admit this, but a simple nod makes my head throb. “You don’t have to—”

“Just be quiet,” she tells me. “Do you have any soup, or do I need to go out?”

“There’s some in the pantry.”

“Okay.”

“Brooklyn, I—”

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She smiles at me. "I can handle soup, Carter."

I close my eyes. I don't have the energy to argue. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"I know. I'm sorry."

I wake to Brooklyn's voice in the kitchen. It's dark outside. I can't believe she's still here.

"I'll make it up to you," Brooklyn says. "Drew, you know that's not true."

Who is Drew? None of my business. But who is Drew? I strain to hear.

"Dinner on Friday, okay?" Brooklyn giggles. "Yes, I will make you pancakes on Saturday."

I guess that answers a few things about Drew.

"I'll call you tomorrow when I get home."

I hear Brooklyn's footsteps approaching and force myself to sit up.

"Oh, no. Did I wake you?" she asks.

“No. I’m sorry if I ruined your plans.” I probably shouldn’t have said that. I’m not sure why I said it.

“You didn’t ruin anything,” Brooklyn assures me. “It’s just a dinner date.”

I nod. Clearly, it is more than just a dinner date. I have no right to feel jealous. At all. It doesn’t stop Brooklyn’s call from landing like a gut punch. “I can’t believe you’re still here. You could’ve woken me, you know?”

“I know. I didn’t want to wake you. How are you feeling?”

“Better, I think. What time is it?”

“It’s six.”

“Six? Jesus. I can’t believe I slept that much.”

“You needed it.”

“I guess so. I feel awful, though. You wasted a day here.”

“No, I didn’t. I worked on my resume while you slept. It’s a long overdue necessity.”

I guess that’s something. “Brooklyn, if you want to leave—”

“Actually—I don’t make a habit of inviting myself, but I was hoping you might let me crash here. Again.”

“You don’t need to ask. You should know that.”

“I’d feel better if I stayed.”

“I’m okay. “

“Yeah, I know you’re okay. Humor me.”

I nod again.

“Are you hungry?” she asks.

“I could eat. How about I throw something together, and we can watch a movie?” I suggest.

“One-hundred percent down for a movie. Why don’t I run and pick something up for dinner?”

I groan. Great. Brooklyn has become my mom. Just what she needs. I’m sure she’s thrilled to play nursemaid when she could be having a dinner-breakfast date with this Drew person.

“Carter?”

“I feel horrible.”

“I know you do, that’s why I don’t want you to do anything.”

“No. I feel horrible about your plans.”

“Don’t.”

“You don’t need to take care of me.” I’ll be the first to admit when I’m not feeling well, my emotions get the better of me. I can feel tears welling in my eyes. My chest hurts, and it’s not from coughing.

I don’t know what I see when Brooklyn looks at me. For a second, I think she’s about

to cry too. She puts her hand over mine. “Isn’t that what friends do?” she asks. “You’d do the same for me.”

Yes, it is, and yes, I would. The problem is, I care about Brooklyn differently than she cares about me. What can I say? “Sorry. I’m just jealous because I wish you wanted to make me pancakes in the morning.” No doubt Brooklyn would make me pancakes. I’ve had dinner-breakfast dates with Brooklyn too. That’s not the issue. My problem is knowing what Brooklyn will share with Drew after dinner and before pancakes. This is why remaining friends with a person you’ve fallen in love with is next to impossible—if you hope to avoid heartbreak. I’m not about to share any of that with Brooklyn.

“I would do it for you,” I reply.

“For the record, Carter, I’m here because I want to be, not for any other reason.”

I smile at her. “How about we compromise? I’ll order something to be delivered. You pick a movie.”

“Deal.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“For?”

“Staying.”

Brooklyn squeezes my hand. “I’ll get your phone from the kitchen.”

I’m relieved when she walks away. I need to catch my breath. This will be the second time Brooklyn and I go to bed and wake up in the same house. My thoughts roam

back to Drew. Not the same. I close my eyes and try to breathe. “Get it together, Carter. You need to get it together.”

DECEMBER 12th

“You look like you’re feeling better,” Ali observes.

“You haven’t seen me in a week.”

“No, but I heard you on the phone. Plus, I ran into Brooklyn yesterday.”

“You were in New York?”

“No. Brooklyn was in New Haven. I was at Jack’s. Brooklyn was leaving Jack’s when I got there.”

“Oh.”

“Oh? What’s up with you, Carter?”

“Nothing. Still tired, I guess.”

“Yeah, right. What gives?”

“Nothing. Are we putting the tree up or not?”

“What the hell?” Ali asks.

Shit. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s going on? No bullshit this time,” Ali demands.

“It’s nothing. Really. How was Brooklyn?”

“Fine. Why don’t you ask me what you really want to ask me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bullshit. You want to know if Brooklyn was with anyone.”

“It’s none of my business.”

“No, I guess not, but maybe it should be.”

“What does that mean?” I bite.

“Exactly what I said. You’re in love with her.”

“I’m not—”

“Yeah. You are. I know you. It’s written all over your face.”

Great.

“Why don’t you let her in on your secret?” Ali asks.

“According to you, it’s not much of a secret.”

“Not to me. I’m not Brooklyn.”

“Brooklyn and I are friends. That’s all.”

“Uh-huh.”

“If I’m not mistaken, she’s taken.”

“You mean Drew?”

My head snaps to attention.

“She told you about Drew, huh?”

“No. I overheard her on the phone when she was here the other day.” I explain.

“And you assumed they were together.”

“It wasn’t exactly a puzzle, Ali.”

“They’re not exclusive.”

“Like I said, not my business.”

“Like I said, maybe you should make it your business.”

“Don’t be crazy, Ali.”

“Whatever. It’s your life.”

“Why are you pressing this?” I want to know.

“I think you might be missing a few things is all,” Ali replies.

“Such as?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember the last time a friend stayed to take care of me when I had the flu.”

“It just worked out that way,” I tell her. “Brooklyn is like that. She’s generous and sweet.”

“Yeah, she is. I don’t recall her staying at Jack’s when he’s been sick, and they’ve been friends for six years. And, Carter? When was the last time you invited anyone other than me to a family holiday?”

“It just—”

“Worked out that way. I know. You keep telling yourself that. I’ve known you a long

time. I've seen you in love before. I know the signs."

"Look, Brooklyn and I are at totally different points in life."

"But you love her."

Fuck it. "Yes, I do. Are you happy now?"

"Why don't you tell her how you feel?"

I do not want to have this conversation. I love Ali, but she's pressing her luck today.

"She's not Deb," Ali says.

Ali's words are a knife in my back. No, Brooklyn isn't Deb. I fell in love with Deb Michaelson my freshman year at college. She was my one true love—my one great love. I fell fast, and I fell hard. She was also one of my closest friends. I waited four years to tell her how I felt. She already knew. Everyone knew. It's the heart on the sleeve thing. She said she loved me. I believe she did. But her world wasn't built for a relationship with me. She'd mapped out her future in the eighth grade—something she wasn't shy about sharing. A relationship with me didn't fit into her ideal world, even if she did love me—even if she wanted me. Ali thinks I never got over her. I'll always love her. I'm not in love with her anymore. But Ali's on the right track. Deb and I shared a friendship I cherished. I lost that friendship when I made the decision to profess my feelings. I don't want to do that with Brooklyn.

"She's not Rachel either," Ali tells me.

"No. She's not," I agree. I don't see Brooklyn moving to Paris anytime soon. "I'm not the one comparing Brooklyn to people in my past."

“No? Are you sure about that?”

“Ali, please. I’m not comparing Brooklyn to anyone.” I’m not. There’s no comparison to make.

“Whatareyou doing?” Ali asks me.

“Ali, I’ve been down this road a few times, okay? Brooklyn isn’t going to be in my life every day or even every week now that she’s done working with me.”

“She’s still part of your life.”

“She’s a friend, Ali. How I feel about her doesn’t change the context of our relationship. I’m trying to let it go. I can’t do that with you telling me to hang on.”

Ali takes a deep breath and holds it for a minute. She exhales dramatically. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I’ll let it go,” Ali promises. “Just do me one favor?”

“What might that be?”

“Be sure you want to let it go.”

There’s no need for me to comment. “Let’s get this tree up and have a drink.”

Ali nods.

“I still have some of that bourbon Tim brought for Thanksgiving,” I tell her, hoping to change the tenor of our conversation.

“Why am I not drinking it?” Ali replies.

Good. She’s ready to move on. “I’d like to finish with the step stool and climbing the cellar stairs before we start with drinking.”

“Smart thinking,” Ali says. “You don’t have Brooklyn here to take care of you when you fall on your ass.”

Okay, so maybe she’s not totally ready to let it go. “No. I have you.”

“Who do I have?”

I laugh. “God help us both.”

DECEMBER 13th

Cold medicine and whiskey. I should know better than to indulge when I'm still nursing the remnants of the flu. Ali tried to convince me to go somewhere today for my birthday. I told her I was still feeling the effects of whatever nasty crud gripped me earlier in the week. It's true. I am, along with a touch of the Irish Flu. She knows better than to push me about birthday celebrations. I don't make a big deal out of my birthday. It's just another day. I suppose some of that's because I lost my dad the day before my fortieth birthday. We had a huge party planned. I know it's completely irrational, but I can't help feeling superstitious. I like my birthday to pass without incident. Ali left me a card on the kitchen counter. It's a typical humorous card about the fact that I'm older—even if it is only by two months. I have to hand it to my best friend, she's always been a terrific gift-giver. This year my card includes two tickets to a Boston Bruins game, a reservation at a swank downtown hotel, and a promise of dinner. We have an unspoken agreement. Birthday gifts are always an excuse to plan a getaway. We see a concert, a sporting event, or we visit a place neither of us has ever been. Time together is the best gift.

I'm glad I didn't agree to any travels today. It's dreary, cold, rainy, windy, and altogether blah. It's a perfect day to watch movies, eat junk food, have pizza delivered, and stay in my pajamas. Believe it or not, that constitutes a perfect birthday plan for me. Just as I'm about to settle back onto my couch, a knock lands on my door. I'm tempted to ignore it. It's likely a delivery. I ordered a lot of Christmas gifts online. A second knock tells me whatever is there might be valuable. The last thing I expect to see when I open the door is, "Brooklyn?"

"I don't make a habit of showing up unannounced," she says.

"What are you doing here?" I'm so caught off guard I forget to invite her in from the rain.

“Could I come in?”

“What? Oh, shit. Of course.” I close the door when she steps inside. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s your birthday.”

She remembered my birthday?

“Or did I get that wrong?” she asks.

“No. It is. I can’t believe you remembered that.” I take her coat and hang it in the corner closet.

“I’m good with dates,” she replies. She reaches into her enormous bag and hands me a present.

“What’s this?”

“I thought we just discussed the fact that it’s your birthday.”

“You didn’t need to get me anything. I thought you had plans this weekend?”

Brooklyn looks confused.

Shit. “I wasn’t eavesdropping,” I say. “Not intentionally. I just heard you mention plans on the phone the other day.”

Brooklyn nods but makes no attempt to explain or comment. “I asked Ali if you had any plans for your birthday.”

“Really?”

“Mm. When I ran into her at Jack’s.”

“Huh.”

“She said you don’t usually make any plans on your birthday. I thought I’d take my chances that you’d be home.”

I’m speechless.

“Worst-case scenario, I’d travel back to my sister’s and spend the day with her.” Brooklyn looks at the box in my hands. “Are you going to open it?”

“Oh.” We both take a seat on the couch and I carefully lift the seams of the wrapping paper. I look up at her before I open the plain cardboard box.

“I promise, nothing will jump out.”

I pretend to be skeptical and open the lid slowly. Brooklyn. I start laughing.

“Peanuts we can share,” she says.

I shake my head. Brooklyn is creative. My gift includes a DVD of Charlie Brown’s Christmas, Twizzlers, gourmet popcorn and cocoa, and an assortment of whiskey nips along with a small bottle of Bailey’s. It’s all been wrapped in a vintage Carter-Mondale T-shirt.

“Well? Do you think you might share your peanuts this afternoon?” Brooklyn asks.

If I wasn’t in love with Brooklyn Brady before, I am now. There’s no way my eyes can conceal my heart. I know it. I can feel it. “I love it,” I tell her. “I think you are the first person who’s managed to find suitable peanuts to share with me.”

“I might have brought a few other snacks. You know, for me.” She reaches back into her bag and pulls out a king size bag of Peanut M & Ms.

“Covered all the bases, I see.”

“I try.”

“So, do you really want to spend a Saturday afternoon watching a cartoon and eating junk food with me?” I inquire.

Brooklyn’s gaze holds mine. I feel something shift between us. It’s a bit like standing at the edge of the ocean, the way the solid ground beneath you is washed away for a moment by the ripples of a receding wave.

“If you want to spend a few hours on your birthday with me,” she replies.

I answer with a kiss to her cheek. “Thanks.”

“Happy Birthday, Carter.”

Right now, it is—a happy birthday.

Relationships and love are not topics I would seek to explore with Brooklyn. She’s a

free-thinker—open and curious. I’m not sure how observations about Charlie Brown and Peppermint Patty, Linus and Lucy led to a discussion about our thoughts on love and its place in life. One thing is for certain; Brooklyn Brady is determined to pull me out of my comfort zone.

“You’ve never been in love?” I ask.

“I don’t know. That’s not true. I think I have. I didn’t think about spending the rest of my life with her. Is that strange?”

How do I answer that question? “No. It don’t think it’s strange.”

“Don’t say it’s because I’m young.”

“I wasn’t going to say that,” I tell her.

“Oh.”

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“Although, I think timing has a lot to do with relationships—if they happen and how long they last.”

“Do you mean maturity?”

“No. I mean timing. I’ve known a few people who set a timer for love.”

“A timer?”

“Yeah, you know, like you can set the timer on your microwave for a cake. When it beeps—done. The life timer.”

“There’s a life timer?” Brooklyn asks.

“For some people. At twenty-two they get a degree. At twenty-five they get engaged. At twenty-six they tie the knot. At thirty they have saved enough for a house. At thirty-two they start their family. At thirty-four they add another kid—the life timer.”

“That sounds hideous.”

I laugh. “Mm.”

“Are you telling me you don’t think that sounds boring and dreadful?”

“Maybe not dreadful, but I think it’s a bit hollow and unreliable—if what you want is love. If what you want is to find someone to tick all those yearly boxes, it’s fine. In my experience, love doesn’t arrive when you tell it to or even want it to. It just shows

up. And a lot of times, it shows up at the worst possible time. That's all."

"I guess I never thought about it," Brooklyn confesses. "I haven't felt that."

"What might that be?"

"An inclination to spend every day with someone or to plan for it," she explains.

My only reply is a nod.

"You have," she surmises.

I nod again. More than once. "Sure. The feeling part. I've never been great at the planning piece."

"Andrea?" she asks.

I release a deep sigh. "No. Andrea is the person who came along at a time when I was willing to compromise."

"What was the compromise?"

"True love for comfort. It worked for a while."

"What happened?"

"It wasn't enough—not for me, anyway."

Now, it's Brooklyn's turn to nod.

It's time to change the conversation. "How do you feel about old movies?"

“You mean like eighties movies?”

Brooklyn’s impish grin tells me she’s teasing me. “More like nineteen-fifties,” I say.

“Do you mean like *East of Eden*, or were you thinking something more on the idea of *Godzilla*?”

“I was about to suggest *White Christmas*,” I tell her.

“Ah. A holiday classic. I’m always up for a musical. Bing Crosby is a bonus.”

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I shouldn't be surprised by Brooklyn's reply. She loves history of every kind. I've learned that over the last month. She loves old TV shows (older than me), and she's as likely to listen to big band music as she is contemporary hits. Why should movies be different? I love old movies. I spent more Sunday afternoons than I could count watching them with my Nana. There are few things I enjoy more than spending a chilly afternoon sipping a cup of hot cocoa underneath a warm blanket with a movie from the forties or fifties playing on the television.

"Are you sure you have the time?" I ask her.

"I don't have anywhere to be until eight."

Eight. I wonder what her plans are tonight? I don't have to wait long to get the answer.

"My sister and her husband have a holiday party. I promised I would babysit."

The sense of relief I feel is completely inappropriate. I hop from the couch. "Cocoa?"

"Another cup of cocoa?" Brooklyn asks playfully.

"Brooklyn," I begin seriously. "There are three things in life you can never have too much of: Whiskey, cocoa, and—"

"Sex?"

"You mean with other people?" I quip.

A howl of laughter erupts from Brooklyn.

I shrug.

“You are too much, Carter,” she says. “What is the third?”

“Laughter.”

“Well, I guess I can thank you for keeping me stocked in all three.”

Her reply is warm and heartfelt. “Happy to do my part,” I tell her. It’s not the first moment I’ve been struck with an awareness that I’d do just about anything to see Brooklyn Brady smile. I won’t tell her that.

“And you do it well,” she says affectionately.

Somehow, I don’t think I’ll be able to hide my feelings behind whiskey, cocoa, humor, and old movies forever. There’s only one solution—step back. Not today. Call it my birthday present to myself. Today, I’m going to enjoy every moment with Brooklyn. “Not today,” I mutter. Not today.

December 21st

“Come on, Carter. You’ll have a good time.”

Dixon’s holiday parties are not my idea of a “good time.” Granted, the alcohol is free-flowing, and the food is always good. Ali is also always on the prowl for a girlfriend. Dixon is a lesbian magnet. I’m not joking. Eighty percent of his female friends are lesbians. And he wonders why he can’t get a date? The death of the

lesbian bar has been resurrected in Jack Dixon's living room. It's a fact. I think some of it stems from his infatuation with Ali. Maybe I'm too hard on Dixon. It sucks—being in love with a person who doesn't love you back. Not the way you want them to. That makes me think; maybe if Dixon and I combined our talents—mine for falling in love with straight women (done that a few times) and his for falling for lesbians, maybe we'd both find our match. Or not.

"I don't know, Ali."

"Why not? You're not working on a deadline. You're not working at all."

I'm almost sorry I'm not facing a deadline. I could use an excuse to escape Dixon's Annual Festivus Fiasco. I'm not in a celebratory mood this year. I'm not depressed either. I go through a period I call "funk time," every time I finish a book. There's a sense of relief and an emotional high when I submit my manuscript which is followed by a fast and furious plunge. The same thing happens after a book release. If I decline this invitation, Ali will assume it's because of Brooklyn. It's not. I haven't seen Brooklyn since my birthday. We've had several long phone conversations, and we text a few times a day. I'm grateful for a bit of distance. I hated watching her leave last weekend. It filled me with a sense of loss and dread. I love spending time with Brooklyn. Knowing that she's spending time with another woman enjoying whiskey, cocoa, laughter, and sex plagues my thoughts. Worse, I miss her. This is the first week I've gone without seeing Brooklyn in over a month. Pathetic. Maybe a little distance over the holidays will help me regain my perspective if not my heart. With any luck, my writer's funk and my Brooklyn blues will pass at the same time.

"Okay, I'll go," I tell Ali.

"Good. You'll have fun. You never want to go, and you always have a good time when you get there."

Ali's observation is neither completely accurate nor entirely false. I've always been able to make the best of situations. That often creates the illusion that I'm enjoying myself. I don't mind attending Dixon's gatherings. He does have interesting and outgoing friends. I would never deny that. Dixon has always been kind to me. I always feel a bit out of place at his parties. His friendship with Ali differs from the one Ali and I share. I know Ali isn't interested in him romantically, but I confess I've wondered a few times if she should consider giving it a try with Jack Dixon. I know she will never do that. I understand. She likes to pretend all she wants is a sexy woman to take to bed. Ali is a romantic at heart. She wants a relationship—someone to come home to at night. And she's always hoped for a family. I get it. Getting involved with Dixon would be the ultimate compromise. Ali would never do that—not to herself and not to Jack.

Ali's eyes sparkle with mischief. "Out of curiosity—"

I know where this is going.

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“Have you talked to Brooklyn lately?” Ali asks.

“This morning, why?”

“I was just wondering.”

“Mm-hm.”

“She might make an appearance at Jack’s,” Ali offers.

Is it too late to change my mind? I shrug off Ali’s observation. “She hasn’t mentioned anything about it to me. I think she has other plans.”

“Well, you would know better than me.”

One. Two. Three. Do not throttle your best friend, Carter. I know Ali means well. She’s gotten it into her head that there is some hope for Brooklyn and me to “hook up.” She actually used those words the other day. “You seem to have a lot of impromptu sleepovers with Ms. Brady. You two might just hook up one of these late nights.” I don’t want to “hook up” with Brooklyn. That would be the ultimate disaster. Friends with benefits only works when falling in love with said friend is absent the equation. No, thank you. “Don’t start, Ali,” I warn her.

“Me? Carter, I would never try to start something we both know you’re way too chicken shit to finish.”

Ali is nothing if not determined. “Maybe you can find something to start and finish at

Dixon's this year."

"If Santa gets my letter in time," she replies seriously.

You know, I believe she wrote that letter. "I hope you already mailed it."

"I did. Last Wednesday."

I laugh. "I believe it."

December 23rd

"Glad you decided to have Festivus with the rest of us!"

As lame as Dixon's greeting may be, I can't help but laugh. "I wouldn't miss it."
Mainly because Ali wouldn't let me, but I leave that part out.

Dixon holds up the bottle of Jameson I brought. "And thank you for this."

"It's what I bring."

"And it's why you're invited."

I laugh again. "I appreciate the honesty."

"That's what friends are for—or maybe it's the alcohol."

"Is there a difference?"

Dixon is about to reply when he's pulled away. "Sorry—"

"You are the Master of Ceremonies," I call after him.

"Indeed!"

"And he's off," a voice says from behind me.

I turn to find a pair of mirthful hazel eyes smiling at me. Brooklyn leans in and places a kiss on my cheek. "Merry Christmas, Carter."

"I didn't think you'd be here," I tell her. "I thought you were headed to New Haven tomorrow."

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“Last minute change of plans.”

“Brooklyn—there you are.”

My eyes track to a tall brunette. This must be Drew. She’s got to be close to six feet tall. I’ll bet she plays basketball. Or maybe she’s a long-lost Osmond sister. I don’t think I’ve seen teeth that white on anyone else. I manage to smile at her and avoid voicing my thoughts. Nothing would be more pitiful than extending my hand and greeting her with the lamest of lame observations, “you must be Drew.”

“Oh. Drew, this is—”

“You must be Carter.”

I’m not sure if I want to scream, vomit, run, or punch her in the face. I grin and bear it. “That would be me.”

“Brooklyn’s told me a lot about you,” Drew says.

Has she? Funny. She hasn’t said anything about you. I pivot to my humor. “I’ll be going—”

“Stop it,” Brooklyn says.

“It’s all been good,” Drew tells me.

I can’t tell if Drew is sincere or if she’s dripping so much sincerity, she’s insincere. I

hate that. Where is Ali? Or Dixon? Can't anyone save me?

"Drew's parents are having a get-together," Brooklyn explains. "They live in Fairfield."

The first thought that pops into my head is that Brooklyn has met Drew's parents. None of my business. I shake it off. Dixon lives in Madison, half way between my house and Brooklyn's sister's. Fairfield is a hop, skip, and a jump from both of us. My thoughts turn to how Brooklyn met Drew. Is she a family friend?

"Carter?"

Brooklyn's voice snaps me back to the present. "Sorry. Guess I'm a little tired."

"You're not getting sick again, are you?" Brooklyn asks.

Maybe I should say yes. "No."

Drew leans closer to Brooklyn. "We probably should hit the road."

Brooklyn's strained smile tells me she's uncomfortable with Drew's affection. I wonder if that's because of me. It's probably because I'm acting uncomfortable. I need to remedy that. "It was nice meeting you," I say. Lame. God, that was lame.

"You too, Carter," Drew says.

"Why don't you get the car?" Brooklyn suggests to Drew.

Drew looks at her, then at me, and nods. "I'm sure we'll see each other again sooner or later," Drew says.

God, I hope not. “I’m sure.” I don’t mean to, but I release a sigh of relief when Drew walks away.

“Carter—”

“I hope you have a great Christmas,” I say.

Brooklyn’s eyes search mine. It makes me uneasy—and a little queasy. Knowing Brooklyn was seeing someone was hard. Seeing it up close is next to unbearable.

“Yeah. You too,” Brooklyn replies. She starts to walk away.

Shit. “I have something for you,” I tell her.

Brooklyn turns back.

“It’s in Dixon’s garage.”

Brooklyn is understandably puzzled.

“He mentioned he was going to see you the day after Christmas. I didn’t think you’d be here tonight.” I open the door that goes from Dixon’s kitchen into the garage. Brooklyn’s present is on the workbench. I hand it to her. “It’s heavy.”

“What is this?”

“Open it,” I tell her.

Brooklyn places it back on the workbench and wastes no time tearing the paper off the box. When she reaches inside, she falls silent.

“I saw you looking at one when we were shopping,” I explain.

“Carter—”

“Every writer needs an old-fashioned typewriter.” I believe this to be true. I have several vintage typewriters. I often sit down at one when I have writer’s block. “There’s something about the clicking of the keys and the ink on the page,” I tell her.

Brooklyn pulls me into a hug. “It’s too much.”

“It’s hardly as inventive as the birthday gift you gave me.”

“It’s amazing.”

I clear my throat. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it. I’m glad you gave it to me. It wouldn’t be the same accepting it from Jack.” She places a sweet kiss on my lips. It isn’t romantic—exactly. It isn’t chaste either. “Thank you.”

“You should probably get going.” I reach for the button that opens Dixon’s garage door. It occurs to me that for a place I like to avoid, I spend a lot of time at this house. Ali is always coercing me into helping Dixon fix something. I chuckle at the thought.

“Care to share what’s funny?” Brooklyn asks.

“I was thinking I spend way too many hours in Dixon’s garage.”

“I sense a story you haven’t told me.”

“More than one,” I tell her as the garage door opens. I hand her the gift. “Merry Christmas, Brooklyn.” I look down the driveway to see Drew strolling toward us. “You’d better go.”

Brooklyn hesitates. “I’ll call you,” she promises. “Merry Christmas, Carter.”

I watch as she reaches Drew. Brooklyn looks back at me. I can barely see her smile. My heart lurches. I take a deep breath. The cold air burns my lungs. Fitting. At least I know there is whiskey waiting for me in the house. I watch as the garage door rolls to a close. I’m not sure whiskey will be enough to warm me this time. “Merry Christmas, Brooklyn,” I say before stepping back inside the house. “At least one of us will be warm tonight.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

January 6th

It shouldn't have surprised me when Brooklyn called to suggest we meet for dinner. She said she was tired of talking over text. Brooklyn spent the day babysitting. I guess she felt the evening called for some adult conversation. I admit, the thought crossed my mind that she might prefer to call Drew. I didn't make that suggestion. Instead, I suggested a local British pub for dinner. It's a bit selfish. I love to stroll down Main Street at holiday time. I also love a pint of Smithwicks and a plate of bangers and mash. Classy, I know. I also know Brooklyn will love the place. A bit of live music, a few pints, and the pub atmosphere might help keep my feelings in check. It also should prevent any suggestion of romance.

"I love this place," Brooklyn says.

"Me too."

"You love the beer," Brooklyn surmises.

"Yes, I do."

"I always thought you were more of a whiskey girl."

"I am. Unless the beer is Irish, red, and on tap."

Brooklyn raises her glass. "It is so much better on tap," she agrees.

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“As close as you’ll get to Ireland.”

“Is that your favorite place to travel?” Brooklyn asks.

“I don’t know if that’s how I’d explain it,” I reply. “Visiting Ireland never feels like traveling.”

“How so?”

“It’s more like going home.”

“In your DNA,” she says.

“I guess so. I keep thinking I’ll spend a year there one day and write my epic novel.”

“Why don’t you?”

Good question. “Oh, I don’t know.” Sure, I do. As Ali would say, I’m chicken shit.

“I get it. It sounds terrific until you have to pick up your life and jump across an ocean.”

“Something like that,” I agree.

“I guess that’s my problem. Not jumping across an ocean, changing my career again.”

“Still thinking about broadcast journalism?”

“More like people keep pushing me in that direction.”

“You know, if you don’t like it, you can always move on.”

“Kind of like if Ireland stops feeling like home, you can always catch a flight back here?” Brooklyn asks.

“Touché.”

“I understand,” Brooklyn says. “Making a jump isn’t easy.”

For a writer, I’m not always the best at reading between the lines. It would require an unprecedented level of density to miss the underlying implications of Brooklyn’s statement. Or maybe I would like to believe there is some thinly veiled purpose to her observation. I try to tear my gaze away from hers. It’s pointless. A weight descends on my chest—the weight of the truth. I can run from Brooklyn, avoid seeing her, rationalize and justify every interaction we have. I can’t hide from my truth, no matter how much I wish I could. “No,” I agree. “It isn’t.” I’m grateful when our waitress approaches.

“Any dessert?” she inquires.

“I never turn down anything sweet,” Brooklyn says without looking away from me.

My mouth goes dry. “I guess we’re having dessert,” I tell our waitress.

“I’ll get you a menu,” the waitress tells us. I’m positive I hear her giggle when she walks away.

“Are you okay?” Brooklyn asks. “You look a little flushed.”

She's enjoying this. I raise my glass. "It's the beer." She knows I'm lying. She lets me off the hook. God, help me. I don't know how much resolve I have left. I hope I can keep my cool through dessert, then I can run for cover. For now, I'll concentrate on my beer.

Ali often says I'm a pushover. I can be. I'm also terrible at pretending. Most people would find that illogical. How can a person who creates fictional narratives be pitifully inept at pretense? They aren't the same skill. And if I'm honest, I think one of the reasons I love writing is the ability to avoid my reality. Creating magical realms where the most implausible adventures happen, even love, is a wonderful form of escapism. Unfortunately, my ineptitude at escaping real life is currently nipping at my heels. There is no rule, written or unwritten, that dictates inviting someone into your home for a night cap. Unless the song, *Baby It's Cold Outside*, is your template. If I were romancing Brooklyn, I might add that song to the evening's playlist. I'm not romancing Brooklyn. Minus the music, the scene in my living room might pass as the lesbian version of a Hallmark movie. I started the fireplace, poured whiskey into two glasses, and lit my Christmas tree. I may need to pour myself more booze if one of us doesn't start a conversation soon. Brooklyn is sipping her whiskey and looking at the fire. I'm curious where her thoughts have traveled.

"You're a romantic," she says.

"Is that what you think?"

"You are." She looks at me and smiles. "You believe in true love."

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I study her for a moment. “I’m not sure everyone defines true love the same way. But, yes, I do.”

“I know.”

“I believe in true love for other people,” I tell her.

“Other people? Who might that be?”

“Other. As in not me.”

A million emotions play across Brooklyn’s features. I see confusion, concern, and pain written in her eyes. It’s her sigh that tells me an unexpected story. She feels disappointment.

“Why would you say that?” Brooklyn asks.

“Experience,” I reply. “I believe in once upon a time,” I admit. “It’s the happily ever after part that leaves me skeptical.”

“Someone hurt you.”

“Yes. Me.”

“What do you mean?”

How do I explain this to Brooklyn? Have I been hurt? We’ve all suffered at least one

broken heart—lost love, unrequited love, or misplaced trust. I have a talent for falling in love with women who are either emotionally unavailable, unwilling to take a chance, or simply don't love me. That's been the story of my life. Maybe somewhere deep down it's my protection mechanism. Some part of me always knows my tale will end before it's had a chance to begin. I've written chapter one. I've read chapter two. Once, I may have reached the third chapter in a story. Love and relationships have never meshed in my life. It's the reason I've stayed single the last eight years. I've had relationships. I've shared my home and my bed with a partner who was caring and attentive. But I wasn't in love. I could have stayed, and perhaps I should have stayed. How could I stay with someone when my heart was always restless? I said goodbye. It was the right thing to do for me, and the best thing to do for Andrea. I've dated. I've had a few one-night stands, and the occasional short-lived lover. I thought I might have found love for a brief moment. She took a one-way flight to a job in Paris. I entertained moving to France. She moved on to someone new before I could book a flight. No. Love isn't written in my cards. I accept that. Brooklyn isn't the exception. She's the rule.

"Carter. Why not for you? You can't honestly believe that."

"I do believe it. What about you? Do you believe in true love?"

"I guess that depends on your definition."

"See? It's like I said—not everyone defines it the same way," I tell her.

"How do you define it? True love?"

"I think people confuse love and relationships," I reply.

"How so?"

“You can fall in love with someone and never have a relationship. And you can have a relationship with a person and never fall in love with them.”

“I guess. Why wouldn’t you want to have a relationship when you fall in love with someone?”

“That presupposes the object of your affection returns your feelings, and that the future they want includes you.”

Brooklyn considers my words. “I’ve never felt a desire to be with someone every day. Not every—”

I stop her before she can finish her thought. “Then why is it hard for you to understand what I am saying?”

“Because.”

“Because?”

Brooklyn appears to be struggling with something. “Carter, I—I don’t know what to say.”

“I don’t think you need to say anything.”

“But I do,” Brooklyn disagrees.

“You don’t need to worry about my love life.” I smile at her. “I’m okay with my life.”

“I don’t want you to be okay.”

I narrow my gaze at her.

“No. I mean, I want you to be happy.”

“Who says I’m unhappy?”

“I’m not good at this,” Brooklyn tells me.

“I don’t know what this is,” I reply.

“I’ve never missed someone the way I miss you.”

Not what I expected her to say. I stare at her.

“Please, say something.”

For someone who rambles, I’m speechless. She misses me? Brooklyn misses me?

“Carter, please say something. Anything.”

“I miss you too.” I miss her much more than I want to admit.

“I don’t like the way it feels,” Brooklyn says. “Almost as much as I hate seeing hurt in your eyes.”

“Brooklyn.”

“No. Just listen to me for a minute. I saw it before Christmas. I saw the look in your eyes when you overheard me on the phone with Drew. I saw it when we ran into you at Jack’s party.”

Shit. “Brooklyn, we’re friends. You have every right to spend time with anyone you want.”

“I know.” Brooklyn looks up toward the ceiling. “But why did I?”

What am I supposed to say? “Maybe because you like her.”

“I do. I like Drew,” Brooklyn says. “But she’s not you, Carter.”

It’s a good thing I’m sitting because this conversation has the ability to knock me off my feet. Literally. I’d like to end this train of thought in its tracks. Apparently, Brooklyn can sense that.

“Why don’t you want to talk about this?” she asks.

Because it hurts. It hurts to love you. I don’t want to love you anymore. I don’t want to miss you. I don’t want to hope. I don’t want to imagine. I don’t want to fall down that hole again. It’s too deep. It’s too dark, and it’s too, “lonely.” The world escapes my lips without my permission.

“What?” she asks.

My eyes meet hers. “There is only one thing worse than losing someone you love,” I tell her.

“What could be worse?”

“Being alone in love. Being lonely in love,” I explain. “It’s the worst pain imaginable.” It is. “It’s a hole that can’t be filled by memories. It’s a cavern carved by hope that leads to hopelessness. It’s hell. If I had to write a vision of hell, that would be it.”

“Oh, Carter.”

“It’s the truth, Brooklyn.”

“And you think you’re destined to fall down the hole.”

“Let’s just say I’ve spent my share of time climbing out of it.”

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“I don’t love Drew,” Brooklyn says. “I enjoy being with her.”

I nod.

“I don’t miss her. I miss you. I miss being with you. I miss your presence. I miss your smile. I miss the way you make me feel safe and scared at the same moment.”

It’s too much. Far too much. “Brooklyn.”

“I wish I’d left that party with you,” she tells me.

My heart thunders in my chest.

“I know what I want to see in your eyes,” she continues. “I know what I feel. I have to know the truth. Do you love me, Carter?”

I don’t want to look at her. I can’t lie to Brooklyn. I want to lie. I want to deny my feelings. I don’t want to put them on a shelf or in a box to examine later. I want to banish my emotions. The last thing I want to do is look into Brooklyn’s eyes and tell her the truth. I resent her for asking me to reveal myself to her. Why should I? But I look at her. Her eyes glisten with unshed tears, and my chest aches with my answer. I would shatter my heart and my life a million times over to keep her from the pain I’ve known. “I love you.”

“But you’re not in love with me? Or is it that you don’t want to love me?”

My eyes slowly shut. I am losing my resolve. Love isn’t a choice. It’s never a choice.

If it were, we would never suffer broken hearts. I know that too. “It doesn’t matter what I want.”

“It matters to me.”

“I didn’t ask to fall in love with you.” That’s the truth. “I’ve tried to push it aside from the moment I walked into that café to meet you.”

Brooklyn’s lips curl ever so slightly.

“I’m not a big believer in love at first sight. But I think there is a knowing that happens immediately. Something clicks, and you know the person you’re looking at is meant to be in your life. In what way, or how long they’ll stay, you can’t say. It doesn’t matter. You simply know. It’s not about what I want or what you want—what anyone wants. What we want is based on our decisions. What we feel simply is.”

“No wonder you’re a writer. Sometimes, I don’t know what I want for lunch,” she tells me.

Brooklyn’s confession makes me chuckle. “I think that’s normal.”

“Maybe. My point is—well, I don’t know what my point is.”

I laugh. I do love her.

“I love you,” Brooklyn tells me. “I don’t know if I’ve been in love before. Maybe. This—It’s like my heart is tied into a million knots. It hurts, and somehow, I know the only way it will stop aching so much is for me to love you. To love you. It sounds pitiful.”

“No, it doesn’t. It sounds accurate.” I set down my whiskey and take Brooklyn’s

hand. “I know how to love you. I don’t know how to be with you. And that’s what scares me, Brooklyn. I’ve loved you all this time. I didn’t choose to love you. I have to choose to be with you.”

“And you don’t want that? To be with me?”

My hands quiver and my emotions threaten to choke me. Of course, I want to be with her. “Are you asking me if I want to make love to you?”

She holds my gaze.

“I do.” No point in avoiding it or denying the truth. “I want to touch you so much it’s making me crazy.”

Brooklyn grins.

“But if I do, and you look at me tomorrow and tell me—”

“Carter.” Brooklyn raises a hand to my cheek. “I don’t know what any day holds. I wouldn’t be here if all I wanted was sex.”

“I know.”

“I’m scared too, you know? I understand that you don’t trust me.”

“I trust you.”

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Brooklyn clarifies her meaning. “You don’t trust me not to hurt you. And maybe one day I will. I don’t know. That worries me more than the thought that you might hurt me. That’s another way I know this is real. Please, don’t push me way. Please.”

Push her away? I probably should. I can’t. I make a simple request. “Stay.”

“Carter—”

“Stay here tonight. No expectations except that you are here in the morning.”

“In the guest room?” she challenges me.

“No. I want you closer.”

“Well, that’s something. Can I kiss you now?”

I can’t help myself. I laugh. “Not if I kiss you first.”

“Then hurry up.”

Very well. I search Brooklyn’s eyes. I feel mine brighten with desire, acknowledgment, and hopefulness. She is beautiful. I don’t need flowery exposition or metaphors. Brooklyn is beautiful. Her eyes dance with amusement and anticipation. Soft grey irises transform before my eyes to bluish-green. My thumb runs over her bottom lip. It will take every ounce of strength I possess to take this slowly. I lean toward her and claim her lips softly. My head spins. Her hands encircle my neck and draw me closer. Our kiss is gentle. It’s curious and optimistic. It

reminds me of being a child on a carousel—round and round, colorful and whimsical—full of possibility and wonderment. Reluctantly, I pull away.

Brooklyn's eyes plead with me for something undefinable. "Will you hold me?" she requests.

I pull her into my arms and lie back on the couch. "I do love you."

"I love you too. Carter?"

"Yes?"

"I might not want you to let me go."

I kiss the top of her head.

"Ever," she says.

"Let's start with tonight," I tell her.

She turns to look at me. "Not just tonight," she replies.

I kiss her gently. I understand her meaning. Tonight will give way to the morning and she will still be here. I've always thought that finding someone to love would make me soar. Strange. I feel more tethered than ever before—rooted in place by her presence. Her head falls onto my chest. I take a deep breath and feel her travel through me. We've already passed the first chapter. As I close my eyes, I wonder if loving Brooklyn might be the adventure that ends with "happily ever after." Maybe.

A MONTH LATER

“How’s Brooklyn?”

“Busy.”

“How are you?”

“Not as busy as Brooklyn.”

“Lonely?” Ali asks.

My smile is genuine. “No.”

“Really?”

“She’s busy. She has a big interview at one the networks.”

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“How do you feel about that?”

“What? Brooklyn working as a broadcast journalist? I think she’d be great.”

“I mean Brooklyn being stuck in the city most of the week.”

That wouldn’t be much of a change. The last few weeks, I’ve spent half my time at Brooklyn’s. “Actually, she’ll probably be on the road a lot if she takes the job.”

“And you’re okay with that?” Ali asks.

“If that’s what she wants to do.”

“What about what you want?”

“I learned a while ago to worry less about what I want and focus on what I know.”

“Which is?”

“This is Brooklyn’s career, Ali. She has a life beyond our relationship. She loves to travel. If this is what she wants, I support her.”

“It doesn’t bother you? At all?”

“It’s hard. I miss her when we’re apart.” We haven’t been apart much since we got together. I don’t look forward to periods without her. I also will never hold her back. Loving Brooklyn is the easiest thing I’ve ever done. I continue to learn about making

our relationship work. I do know that holding her back is the fast track to letting her go. I have no intention of losing our relationship—not if there is anything I can do to hold us together.

“Don’t you worry about the distance?” Ali wonders.

“If she’s going to leave me, she will leave me faster by me holding her back.”

“Maybe you should marry her.”

I snort. We’ve only been a couple for a month. “I don’t think Brooklyn is looking for that kind of proposal.”

“What about you?”

“If Brooklyn wants to get married someday, I’ll be happy to oblige. If not? That’s fine too.”

“That settles it. She’s an alien.”

“What?”

“Brooklyn. She’s an alien. You’re a replacement human.”

“You need to stop reading sci-fi kink.”

“Cute. Are you seriously telling me that you’re okay with all of this?”

“No. I’m not. I hate when she’s away. I love her enough to support her.”

“You’re whipped.”

“What is it with you and kink?”

Ali smacks me. Hard. “I’ll bet you have plenty of kink in your life.”

Talk about an imagination. Ali assumes because Brooklyn is young, she’s a bit crazy in the bedroom. I don’t share details about that part of our relationship with anyone, not even Ali. I let her imagination run wild. I know how I look at Brooklyn. I know how Brooklyn looks at me. I feel it more than anyone on the outside can see it. I could say that making love is a small part of our time together. That would be accurate if importance were determined by a number of minutes or hours. Making love is part of the way we communicate. It’s always passionate and loving. The more time we spend together, the more I begin to understand that challenging each other is part of what holds us together. Challenges require and build trust. While I will never share tales of my adventures with Brooklyn in the bedroom, shower, living room, or kitchen with my best friend, I won’t deny the adventure is occasionally kinky. “Jealous?”

“Hell, yes, I am.”

“You need to find someone,” I tell my best friend.

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“Maybe Brooklyn has a friend named Manhattan or Harlem. Oh, I know, London!”

“You just like the accent.”

Ali wiggles her eyebrows.

“I’ll ask her if she has any hot lesbian friends named after cities.”

“Make London the top of the list,” Ali requests.

“And you think I came from aliens?”

“If the antennae fit.”

“How about if the martini fits?”

“Martinis are good. Can we talk about your kinky girlfriend while we drink them?”

“No.”

“Oh, come on!”

“You really need to get laid, Ali.”

“I know! And I have no one to suffer with me anymore.”

“I’m sorry. I hear they have earthly devices for your predicament.”

Another smack. “Says the woman who spent more than a year under the sea.”

I laugh. She’ll never let me forget my friendly mermaid. “Not my fault you never learned to swim.”

Smack!

Maybe I can find Ali something shaped like a double-decker bus to transport her.

I must’ve had too many martinis. I swear I smell Brooklyn’s perfume.

“I see we have a guest.”

I pry one eye open. “You’re here. Are you here?”

“Does it feel like I’m here?”

Oh, yes it does. Please, don’t let this be a dream, and if it is a dream, don’t wake me up. Brooklyn’s hand covers my right breast. “What are you doing here?” I wonder.

“That’s not obvious? I missed you.”

“How did your interview—”

“Stop. Talking.”

Okay. A warm trail of kisses cascade down my neck. Jesus. I fucking love this woman.

“What was that?” Brooklyn asks.

Did I say something? “Nothing.”

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“No?” Brooklyn leans back and takes off her blouse. Slowly.

I reach out to help her and she slams my hands over my head.

“Oh, no. I want you.”

I swear she might break me one day. A feral look sparkles in her eyes. I’m her prey, and she intends to devour me. I lick my lips when she begins to tease her nipples in front of me. It’s delicious torture. I love making love to Brooklyn. I also love submitting to her demands. I’ve never been an assertive lover. I worried about that at first. Brooklyn set my mind at ease. She’s comfortable with her sexuality—every aspect of it. She voices her needs and her desires, and she unleashes mine. As it is with everything, Brooklyn Brady constantly takes me out of my comfort zone. It’s terrifying and it’s exhilarating. There is nothing I won’t give her. She can take all of me. She can ask for anything. Brooklyn knows it and she uses it to her advantage.

“Did you miss me?” Brooklyn asks.

I watch as she removes the rest of her clothing and climbs on top of me. “I always miss you,” I tell her.

Brooklyn’s gentle smile does little to conceal the lust burning in her eyes. Her hand slips between her legs and I groan. It’s an empty protest. She knows that too. Pleasure creases the tiny lines at the corners of her eyes. I am enraptured. Always.

I make my request. “Let me touch you.”

Brooklyn's eyes pin me in place. She reaches for my hands and places them over her breasts.

My thumbs roll across the peaks of her erect nipples. I'm rewarded with an urgent moan. I can feel the movement of her hand as her fingers work to bring about her release. I'm tempted to lean forward and taste her breasts. The sight of her swaying above me, her teeth gripping her bottom lip sends tiny ripples of ecstasy through my core. As she sways, her hand brushes against me. My need swells. Nothing excites me more than the vision in front of me, knowing I am its cause. Brooklyn's lips part. I realize she's reaching the precipice, dangling on the edge of release. I squeeze her nipples gently and feel her legs shake.

"You are so beautiful," I tell her. "So beautiful."

Brooklyn's eyes meet mine. A tear escapes and runs down her cheek. She kisses me just as her orgasm erupts. I hold her close.

"I love you," Brooklyn whispers.

Before I can answer she kisses me again. Wordlessly, she removes everything that separates us. My hands caress her back. Her lips discover my flesh inch by excruciating inch. The heat of her mouth surrounding my nipple brings every cell of my body to attention. Heat floods my veins. My hands thread themselves in the waves of her hair. I feel a deep sense of loss when her kiss strays to my stomach. One kiss followed by another leads her lower. I look down at her. Graceful and strong. Sensual and determined. Brooklyn. She's everything. My heart sings and my body hums. Ripples of pleasure ebb and flow over my skin. Her tongue dances softly over my center. An exploration. A question. A promise. My eyelids flutter and close against passion's rising tide. I know it will pull me under. Like the unexpected strength of rolling waves that suddenly build, I am helpless to resist.

“Perfect,” Brooklyn mutters.

It is perfect. I grip her shoulders and my hips rock in time with the insistent movements of her tongue. I feel her slip a finger inside me. My back arches into her thrust—a plea to let me fall. She is unyielding. Over and over again she takes me to the edge of sanity. Harder. Softer. Never stopping.

“Please,” I beg Brooklyn to release me.

Brooklyn’s hand reaches up and covers my breast. We’ve spent many nights exploring each other, discovering where a tender kiss ignites a tiny spark, and how the slightest touch transforms a spark into a flame. I can barely feel her fingertip on my nipple. My core clenches around her fingers and my body lifts off the bed. She presses her weight against me.

“Brooklyn!” I announce my pleasure. I don’t care if Ali hears us. She wanted a story. She’ll get the soundtrack instead. “Babe. Please. Please.”

Brooklyn refuses to relinquish her hold on me. She teases me with her tongue and her fingers until my body shakes violently. She’s my undoing. I’m sucked under. Time disappears. I may scream. She may moan. All I can hear is the swishing of the blood as it rushes through my veins. It’s exactly like tumbling within an undertow. I can’t breathe. Colors swirl behind my eyelids. I grip the sheets. My heart pounds ferociously. Just when I think I will never recover, I float gently back to the surface. Brooklyn’s smile greets me like the light of the sun. She’s crying. Not sobbing. Silent tears spill over her cheeks. I lift her into my arms.

“Why are you crying?” I ask.

“I love you so much.”

“I love you.” I hold her for a moment. I turn so I can look into her eyes, and I brush some hair from her face. “Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“I don’t want to lose you, Carter.”

“Is this about your interview?”

“They made me an offer.”

I expected this. “That’s great.”

“I declined.”

I’m stunned.

“Then they made me a different offer.”

“Okay?”

“It’s for the Connecticut affiliate.”

I’m surprised and lost.

“Carter—”

“What is it?”

“If I take this job, I’ll need to relocate.”

“Okay?”

“Carter—Here, to Connecticut.”

Carter, you idiot. I smile at Brooklyn. “Brooklyn, are you asking me if you can move in with me?”

“I—I—”

I silence her with a kiss. “Let me rephrase that. Brooklyn, I would love it if you would live here with me.”

“I’m not trying to put you on the spot.”

Time for a deeper conversation. I’ve avoided diving into this possibility because I

never want to push Brooklyn. It isn't easy. I try to let her dictate the pace of our relationship, if not always its direction. I sit up and pull her to sit beside me. "I was prepared to move to New York if you wanted me to."

"You love this house," Brooklyn says.

"Not more than I love you."

"I don't want to push you."

Laughable. "I think we need to set some things straight," I tell her. "I can work anywhere."

"Yes, but—"

"Brooklyn? Can you let me get this out?"

"Sorry."

"I try not to hold back with you."

"I don't want you to hold back with me," she says.

"I know. Sometimes, I do—just a little."

Brooklyn looks worried.

"Not the way you're thinking. I hate when we're apart. You have to know that."

"I hate it too," she says.

“I know you do. With you—well, let’s just say I’m not sure there’s much I wouldn’t be willing to try.”

A seductive grin curls the corners of Brooklyn’s mouth. To some it might seem an inappropriate response. I’m grateful. She knows I’m struggling to open up to her about what I want. It’s her way of diffusing my tension.

“Cute,” I say. “There isn’t anything I want more than for you to live with me. I don’t want you to take this job because you think living here is more important to me than you.”

“I know it’s not,” Brooklyn says.

I'm a tad skeptical.

She smiles at me. "I do know. You worry so much about pushing me, Carter. Sometimes, I think you miss what I want."

"I—"

"I don't care about a job at the network. You know that's true."

"It's a fabulous opportunity—"

"Yes. For someone it will be. That someone isn't me."

"And the job here in Connecticut?" I question.

Brooklyn takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. "I know we're just beginning," she says. "And I know you still worry." She holds up her hand. "Don't try to make me feel better, Carter. I know you. I know that there is a part of you who thinks I'll outgrow you."

"That's not—"

"It's in the back of your brain—not your heart—your brain."

I groan. I can't fool her.

"But you seem to forget that you might outgrow me one day too. I know you don't

think that could happen. It could. It scares the hell out of me.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I assure her.

“How can you be so sure?”

“I know,” I tell her. “I feel it.”

“I keep telling myself that we need to take this slowly,” Brooklyn admits. “What’s the point? What does slowly look like?”

I have no idea.

“I’m not ready for everything I want with you. Not yet,” she confesses.

I feel my eyebrow raise an inch or so.

Brooklyn continues. “I’m not sure I know everything I do want. I know I want to discover what everything means with you. I don’t think New York is the place for us to do that.”

I claim her lips with mine. “Nothing would make me happier than for you to live here with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Brooklyn, I knew the minute I saw you that you would be part of my life. I didn’t know that meant finding home.”

“Carter.”

“I need you to understand that you are the place I call home—not this house.”

“I feel the same way. But can I be honest?”

“Of course.”

“Being here with you—that feels like home to me.”

“Good. Then I guess it’s settled.”

Brooklyn calms and lays her head on my breast. “You know, Ali probably heard us.”

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“Good. Maybe it’ll give her incentive to find a girlfriend.”

Brooklyn giggles.

“On that subject, you don’t have any lesbian friends named London who might be open to dating a mouthy forty-something lesbian, do you?”

“Why? Are you bored with Brooklyn?”

“Never. I like crossing that bridge.”

“Ah, so Ali wants me to set her up,” Brooklyn surmises.

“She might have mentioned it.”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint. I don’t have any friends named London.”

“Damn.”

“I do have a friend named Holland.”

“Does she have an accent?”

“Like a Jersey trucker,” Brooklyn tells me.

“Perfect!”

We both laugh.

“Carter?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Understanding,” Brooklyn says.

“I love you, Brooklyn. No matter what either of us chooses, that will never change.”
It won’t. It simply is.

“I love you too, even if you are named after a peanut farmer.”

“You love peanuts. And you love me in a pair of overalls.” That’s a story for another time.

“True enough,” she admits.

I close my eyes and let myself fall away. I can’t say that I’ve overcome all my fears. I know that one day Brooklyn or I might make a choice that takes us in separate directions. I hope that day never comes. If it does, I hope it’s a long time from now. Brooklyn resembles her namesake in many ways. She’s always evolving and changing. She’s colorful and she’s enigmatic. Most of all, she’s the bridge in my life from a place where fear ruled to a new world where possibility lights my way. She’s the bridge from my past to my future. Funny. Maybe the past repeats itself after all. I look down at her and smile. I would cross into Brooklyn willingly every day. I hope she lets me. “Welcome home, Brooklyn.” I feel her grip tighten. “Welcome home.”