



# Falling for the Guy Next Door

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** He's the handsome new neighbor, a rock star and ... completely off-limits.

I, Layla Lovely, youngest sister of the Fabulous Five, have officially become the ninth wheel. All of my sisters have found their soulmates, and although I've been dating a man named Dustin for the last few months—we aren't a match, and I need to end things.

Aside from dating, my social life is going well. My best friend, Emily, has found her newest obsession in Nash Ledger, the singer of a popular indie band called Moonstone. When Moonstone announces a gig at a local bar, Emily convinces me to go see them live. I accidentally have an interesting run-in with Mr. Ledger, but that's just the beginning of our story...

Back home at the cottage, a new renter has moved in next door. The new neighbor has the most wonderful dog, and when I discover the dog's owner and our new neighbor is none other than Nash Ledger, we start a friendship. But having to keep the whole thing secret from Emily creates a snowball of lies that I can't seem to stop. Nonna would be horrified.

In the meantime, Dustin is certain our breakup is just temporary and he becomes that guy—the one who can't take no for an answer—and things take an upsetting turn. So, as usual, I have found myself in the middle of a good deal of chaos, only this time my heart is on the line. *Falling for Guy Next Door* is a dual POV cozy, sweet romance that has all the swoon and sizzle without the spice—Kisses only.

**Total Pages (Source):** 62

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## ChapterOne

### Layla

I couldn't put my finger on it. It was a feeling, a sense of satisfaction, happiness, a moment in time when everything lined up perfectly. It reminded me of the time I won the talent contest in school with a flawless baton twirling routine. My main competitor, Arnie Foreman, sneezed during his piano performance, throwing off his concentration and tempo so badly he had to give up mid-song. Nonna had winked at me as I walked out holding my trophy. She said, "Layla, my tiny treasure, the stars don't always line up like that, but when they do, it's always nice."

That day, it was easy to trace my joy back to the talent contest. Today, there was no clear evidence, no ill-timed sneeze or flawless baton routine to point the way to the perfectly aligned stars. It was a lovely day on the cove—blue sky, emerald green water gently rolling in, and just enough breeze to cool our skin under the blazing summer sun. "Postcard perfect" was what my sister Ella liked to call it, but postcard perfect days were common in our little slice of the cove. The idyllic setting was one I'd found myself in many times. It wasn't our heavenly section of beach giving me that feeling of joy. I just couldn't put my finger on the source.

I glanced around the circle of beach chairs. We'd dragged them down to the cove for our wedding planning lunch. Isla, the second eldest of the fabulous five Lovely sisters, had recently gotten engaged to Luke Greyson, a man who'd had all of us at the word "hello." He was handsome, rich and, most importantly, he adored our sister.

Aria, the eldest Lovely sister, had a pad of paper on her lap. She'd been writing down

suggestions for wedding locations. Ella, the middle sister, had carried her laptop down to the sand and connected it to her phone's Wi-Fi hotspot. She was the professional writer of the family, and she was rarely without her computer. She was also the expert researcher, and, as location ideas were tossed out, Ella's fingers would fly over the keyboard to look up cost and availability. Ava, the adventurer of the group, kept suggesting exotic locations like a beach in Belize or a winter ski wedding in the Alps. Those locations were fitting for the wedding of Luke Greyson, heir to a massive old money fortune, but Isla liked things kept simple. And then there was me, Layla, the youngest. I had little to add. Not that I wasn't thrilled about Isla's engagement to Luke, but her marriage came with the sad reality that one of my sisters would be moving out of the tiny cottage that the four of us shared. Nonna's storybook cottage had been our home and the cove below had been our backyard for years. After the profound heartbreak of losing our mom to illness, our busy dad shipped us off to live with our grandmother. Nonna welcomed us with open arms. Growing up in her tiny, creaky and drafty cottage was nothing short of magical.

I'd had the least amount of time with our mom, but I remembered her holding my hand while I sounded out the words in my books, and she always brushed my hair, reminding me only a few people in the world were blessed with copper-colored hair. (Of course, I'd found that hard to believe because Aria had the same copper hair.) Still, she always made me feel special, and I remembered feeling an ache through my whole body after Dad told us she was gone forever. I was young enough to still wonder if forever was a long time. Now I knew, and yes, forever was a really long time.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but this wedding stuff has made me hungry." Isla leaned over the cooler we'd carried down. "Let's see, cheese and ham, no mayo for Ava." Isla had placed a sticky note on each sandwich wrapper to make sure we got the right one. "Ella, extra mustard." Isla winked as she handed the sandwich over to Ella. "Extra cheddar for the big sis of the group." Isla handed the sandwich to Aria. "And here's mine." She sat back with a slight grin, knowing full well I didn't have a

sandwich yet. We were all grownups, but my four sisters still loved to tease me. “Oh, that’s right.” She leaned into the cooler and pulled out my sandwich. “Cheese only for my baby sister.”

Everyone laughed, as if it had been a real “gotcha” moment. And as they laughed, it hit me—the reason I felt so completely happy this afternoon. I could finally put my finger on it. In the past few years, every one of my sisters had found their soulmate. Isla, of course, had dreamy Luke. Aria had found Dex, a man who’d come with some baggage, some family strife and a heart that was nearly as massive as his build. Ella had stumbled unexpectedly on the man of her dreams while pursuing a story about a cursed house, and recently, even Ava, the one sister I’d counted on to stay single and unattached with me, had discovered true love with a man who she’d considered an enemy until they realized they were madly in love with each other. For months our gatherings had included at least one or more of their respective soulmates, but today, it was just us, Nonna’s fabulous five.

Ella caught me grinning into my bottle of iced tea. “What’s going on with you, smiley?”

I shrugged. “Nothing. This is nice.”

Aria looked out at the water. “It is. The weather is great today.”

“No, not that,” I said. “I mean, the weather is nice.” I realized I’d started something that would have been better kept to myself. But that wasn’t really my style, as all of my sisters could attest. “It’s just nice to be here, all of us. Just us,” I added.

Isla, who was always the most intuitive, caught on first. She smiled. “You’re right, Layla. It is nice—just us for a change.”

Heads nodded in agreement.

Now that we had sandwiches free from their wrappers, a group of gulls moved in with curious orange beaks and black beady eyes. We watched them as they watched us.

“Look, Layla, isn’t that Peggy?” Ava asked. “There, at the end of the group.”

A gull with a black streak on her beak was standing in the group. She wore an orange band around her leg. Peggy was one of the gulls the wildlife rescue used to keep track of the flock. “Yep, there she is. Haven’t seen you in a while, Peggy.” I’d named the gull Peggy after a girl in middle school. One day, I’d removed my friendship bracelets to wash my hands in art class, and when I went to put them back on, my orange one was gone. As we left class I spotted it on Peggy’s wrist. When I confronted her about it, she told me it belonged to her.

“I wonder what ever happened to Peggy,” Ella said.

Aria lifted a brow. “Uh, she’s right there, staring at your sandwich.”

“No, I meant the bracelet thief, Peggy,” Ella said.

“How long do they live?” Isla asked.

We all looked at her in confusion.

She laughed. “I guess that wasn’t the smoothest transition. I meant the gulls. Seems like we’ve been seeing Peggy out here every summer for years.”

We all looked at Ava for the answer because she was the flora and fauna expert. “I think if they avoid all the usual pitfalls of being a gull out on the water, they can live about fifteen years. Peggy’s getting up there in bird years.”

I raised my bottle of tea. It caused the birds to shift around in anticipation that something might be thrown their way. “Oh, relax, guys, and raise your little beaks in toast. To another fifteen years, Peggy.”

My sisters lifted their drinks and joined in the toast.

We returned to our lunch.

“Audrey leased her cottage to a long-term renter,” Ella said as we each reached toward a bag of grapes that Isla held up. We all glanced instinctively up the hill to the small cottage at the top. Beach peas covered the hillside with papery blossoms that ranged from lavender to royal purple. The vines grew all the way up to the patio at the back of the house. Audrey was our neighbor growing up, but she no longer lived in the cottage. She decided to keep the place as a beach rental, which was a great relief to all of us. Developers were constantly trying to get their hands on Audrey’s and Nonna’s cottages because they were built on what was considered prime real estate. The views from our cottages were the finest on the cove, and both houses had a short trip downhill to what was, without a doubt, the finest strip of beach for miles.

“She doesn’t usually rent long-term,” Aria said. She was already wearing her oldest sister stern brow, newly concerned about the renter. “Who are they?”

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Ella rolled her eyes. “How would I know? Audrey said the person was working somewhere nearby and needed the place through October. She said it made her life much easier to just have one person in the house for several months.”

“That makes sense,” Ava said. “I thought I saw a truck parked in the driveway yesterday, but I haven’t seen anyone yet.”

“Me neither, and if there is someone there, they’re quiet.” Ella worked from home, so she’d be the first to know if someone had moved in next door.

My phone vibrated in my beach bag. I reached in and pulled it out. Seeing Dustin’s name on the screen made me sigh ... and not in the dreamy way Isla sighed whenever Luke’s name popped up on her screen.

“Want to get an ice cream later? I’m off early.”

“I’m with my sisters right now, but I can meet you at the ice cream shop after three.”

“Sounds good.”

I dropped the phone back in the bag.

“Was that Dustin?” Aria asked.

“How’d you know?” I asked.

“Because you wear that same look on your face whenever it’s him. And it’s not a

look of admiration or longing.” Aria had taken on the role of guardian when our dear Nonna passed away just as I graduated high school. She made it her job to keep up on all our social lives, especially mine. I was almost thirty, but it seemed I’d never be old enough to lose the baby sister title.

“I thought you were going to break up with him,” Ella said.

I stretched my legs out and dug my feet into the warm sand. “I can’t break up with him.”

All faces turned toward me with puzzled brows.

I dug my feet even deeper to reach the cooler sand beneath the surface. “Look, I am now the third wheel whenever I’m with any of you, which, I guess, makes me the ninth wheel when we’re all together. That’s why this has been so nice, just us gals. I’m not going to show up to Isla’s wedding without a date.”

“But Luke and I aren’t getting married until next year. And if we can’t find a wedding venue, we might just elope and leave the whole wedding idea behind. I’m not entirely opposed to that.”

Aria and Ella turned to Isla with expressions that assured her elopement was not on the table. Ava, on the other hand, nodded along with Isla’s notion of eloping. I was on Aria and Ella’s side, but it would make life much easier on me if I didn’t have to worry about having a date to the wedding. Dustin and I had been dating for three months, and I’d been wanting to break it off for the last month. I’d discovered fairly quickly that he wasn’t my type. He rarely laughed and didn’t take teasing or joking well. He took himself far too seriously. On the other hand, he had no problem laughing if I tripped or spilled a drink or did something embarrassing.

Isla decided to get the attention off her. “Layla, don’t keep dating him just because of



the wedding. That's silly. Don't string him along, or it'll be harder to end things."

Ella picked up the bag of grapes. "Yeah, really, Layla, that's just silly."

I crossed my arms and rested back.

"It's not silly, guys," Ava came quickly to my defense. "Layla, we'll all be together for the wedding, and you're not a ninth wheel. You're a Lovely sister, and the men in our lives can never break that bond between us. Isla's right. It'll only be harder to break it off if you let it go on too long. It's not fair to Dustin."

I shrugged. "I'm seeing him later. I'll let him know it's not working out." I rested my head back.

"Well, I hate to end this fun lunch break, but I've got to head back to the café and finish prep for tomorrow," Aria said.

"Yep, I need to get to the bakery for some prep work, too," Isla said.

I lifted my head. "I thought we'd at least have time for a swim." I looked at Ella and Ava.

Ella shrugged. "I've got work waiting."

Ava was avoiding eye contact. It was summer, so I knew she didn't have to get back to the college because classes ended weeks ago.

"You've got plans with Jack, don't you?" I asked.

She crinkled her face in an apologetic smile. "We're driving along the coast and going out to dinner."

Isla sat forward suddenly. “Hey, guys, I just had an idea.”

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We all looked at her.

“Here, right here on the cove,” she declared.

A few looks of confusion crossed the half-circle. “My wedding. We could get married right here on the cove, my favorite place in the world. Our favorite place in the world. We’ll keep it small, just close friends and family.”

Aria laughed. “Uh, did you forget about your future mother-in-law, Cruella de Vil on steroids? Do you think she’s going to go along with a small, intimate wedding on the cove?”

“Who cares what she thinks?” Ava asked.

But Isla was already rethinking her idea. Some of the enthusiasm washed out of her expression. “You’re right. She’ll put up a big stink.”

Ava sat forward. “You’re the bride, right? See what Luke thinks before you cross the cove off your list. I personally think it’s a brilliant idea.”

“It’ll be the closest thing to having Nonna at the wedding,” I added.

Isla’s smile was back. “You’re right, Layla. It would be like having her nearby. I’ll talk to Luke about it later.”

Aria and Isla were the first to get up. Chairs were folded and Ella and Isla grabbed the handles on the cooler for the hike up the hill. I stayed seated and pulled out my

phone.

Ava folded her chair. “Aren’t you coming up?”

“Nope, unlike the rest of you, I don’t have any commitments right now, so I’m going to stay and work on my tan.” I pulled my straw hat out from my bag and pushed it on my head.

My phone rang as I rested back. I hoped it was Dustin cancelling our ice cream date. My sisters were right. I needed to break it off with him. I figured three months of dating deserved an in-person breakup. I could do it over a cone of rocky road. The ice cream might soften the blow.

I pulled out the phone. It was my best friend, Emily. We’d been best friends since fifth grade. Back then, Emily and her parents were new in town, and Emily had made the unfortunate decision to wear a red pair of shorts with a yellow T-shirt on her first day of school. The other kids started calling her “ketchup and mustard,” and she ended up alone and in tears at recess. I felt bad for her and walked over to talk to her. She was funny and smart, and we became instant friends.

“Hey, Em, what’s up?”

“What’s up? ‘What’s up,’ she asks,” Emily said as if talking to a group of people about the phone call.

“Uh, yeah, seemed like a reasonable way to answer the call.” Ella had left behind the bag of grapes, so I helped myself to one while I waited for Emily to tell me the apparently big news she was bursting to share.

“I’ll tell you what’s up, bestie. You know that band, Moonstone, that I love?”

“You mean the one that you talk about incessantly because you are obsessed with the lead singer? Yep, I remember. It’d be hard to forget since you send me a constant stream of Moonstone social media.”

She scoffed. “You exaggerate.”

“Actually, I might even be understating the whole thing. What about them? Don’t tell me. You reached out to the singer, and the two of you are going to elope to Hawaii this weekend because he realized he just couldn’t live without you.”

“Well, that’s almost verbatim the way my daydream went this morning, but since you’re being so flippant about it—” She pretended as if she wasn’t going to tell me, but I knew better.

“Sorry, flippant mode turned off. What’s going on with Moonstone and their dreamy, hunky singer?”

“They’re going to be playing at the Comstock Bar tonight over in Fairview. We’ve got to go see them in person. I’m planning to make myself quite visible to the singer. Who knows? Maybe a Hawaiian elopement isn’t that far in the future.” It was what I loved most about Emily. She always dreamed big. Although this wasn’t all that big. Emily was pretty and funny, and while it seemed the lead singer of the band had an impressive following, mostly starry-eyed groupies like Emily, it wasn’t as if he was a superstar. “So, you’ll go with me, right? I don’t want to go alone. Please.”

“All right. I could probably use a margarita or something tonight. I’m going to break up with Dustin this afternoon.”

“It’s about time. It was so obvious that you two weren’t a match.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m still holding out hope for a fairy-tale ending like my sisters all

managed. Just don't think it's in the cards for me."

"Well, the bass guitarist is kind of cute, although I think he is supposed to be temperamental. He once smashed a guitar on stage."

"I think they all do that. Anyway, that's all right, Emi. I'm going on a man hiatus after I break up with Dustin. It's been one disappointment after another, and my sisters' boyfriends have all set the bar very high."

"Ugh, here comes the boss," Emily lowered her voice. "I'll pick you up at eight, and expect several fashion photos before then. My outfit has to be perfect. I need to catch his attention while he's up on stage."

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“Maybe a dress with neon lights that say ‘I love you,’” I suggested.

“Funny friend. See you later.” She hung up quickly, which meant her boss, Lucille, or dragon lady, as Emily liked to call her, had returned to the shop. Emily worked in a dress boutique in Fairview. The boss was always angry and yelling, but Emily refused to quit because she got a twenty percent discount on clothes, and she also got to grab the newest styles as they came in the door.

I dropped my phone in the bag, rested back and closed my eyes. I was about to drift off when something cold and wet touched my arm. I sat up and found myself staring into the big brown eyes of a shaggy dog. His beard was covered in wet sand, and he seemed to be smiling at me.

I pet the top of his head. “Well, hello, sweetie. You must be my new neighbor.”

### ChapterTwo

Nash

“Rocky!” I called out to the yard, but the dog didn’t come trotting back like I expected. I was sure he was out on the beach terrorizing gulls. My phone rang as I walked to the window where I had a fairly good view of the sand below.

“Hey, Becky, what’s up?” My sister was taking care of our mom. Mom had gotten in a car accident a year ago, and it had wrecked her back. She went from being a vital, energetic woman who managed the local grocery store to a woman hunched over in pain and reliant on a walker. The doctors performed three surgeries. We were still

paying for those. The insurance only took us so far, but when subsequent surgeries, home care and intensive physical therapy were added to the list, the insurance company all but ran to hide under rocks. Becky worked part-time near home and earned a stipend as Mom's home caretaker. She didn't seem to mind, but I worried she spent far too much time at home and away from friends. Becky and I were twins, but she was always the introvert, and I was the extrovert. Since I'd turned thirty, I was starting to see her way of thinking. Sometimes it was nice to be at home, hanging out and watching a movie or reading a book. I was working two jobs and sending a good portion of everything I earned to Mom and Becky. It was the only way to make sure they could keep the house and car.

"Mom is having a bad day today," Becky said. "I think it's the weather. We've got rain in the forecast." Our childhood home, the one my dad worked hard to buy and then just as quickly left so he could be with his newfound love, Jill, was located in the heart of Texas. Sometimes it was dry as a bone outside, and sometimes, the rain fell like it was never going to stop, even in summer.

I glanced out at the crystal blue skies over the ocean and felt a twinge of guilt. I decided not to mention the fantastic weather. The window of the cottage was dusty on the outside, but I still had a clear view of the beach. After a sweep from right to left, I spotted my dog. It seemed he'd found a stunning pair of legs. I couldn't see the rest of the woman because she was facing the ocean and wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and sunglasses. She was petting Rocky's head, and, not surprisingly, he was enjoying the attention.

"Rocky's found a volunteer ear scratcher down on the beach." I decided to give it a few seconds. Rocky's tail was swishing back and forth, and from the movement of the hat, it seemed he and the woman were having a nice chat.

"How is the new construction job?" Becky asked.



“Good. It’s a little hot right now, but the supervisor lets us have a lot of water breaks. They’re building a three-story office slash apartment building. I’ve been guaranteed work through October, and it’s good money. With that and what we’re earning at local gigs, I should be able to send you enough mortgage money for the next six months.”

“I’m talking to Nash,” Becky called into the next room. “Who else would I be talking to? Not like I have a long contact list,” she muttered in between. They were words meant for no one in particular. “We started with a new physical therapist, and he’s tougher. He doesn’t let her get away with taking it easy on the exercises. I think that’s what she needed.”

I listened to all the updates on Mom’s condition and, at the same time, watched the scene below. The woman was still hidden under a big hat, but Rocky had coaxed her down to the water. My dog had a smile that could melt hearts, and boy, did he know how to use that secret weapon. Her long, tanned legs carried her across the sand. She held her hat on her head as she followed Rocky to the edge of the water. My dog didn’t hesitate to jump right into the waves. Even through the window, I could hear the woman squeal with laughter as she waded in after him. I had to hand it to the mutt—he was a master flirt.

“What do you think?” Becky asked.

I realized I’d lost the thread of conversation, and I winced in shame. “Sorry, Beck, I was watching Rocky play in the water.”

“Fine. Then I won’t bore you with the details of my riveting life.” She was mad, and I couldn’t blame her.

“I got distracted.” I had no intention of telling her that the object of distraction was a nice pair of legs and an even nicer laugh. “What were you saying?”

She grunted in anger, then continued. “I was thinking of having a contractor come out and put in one of those walk-in shower-tub combos, so Mom can get in and out on her own. She’s against it because she insists it’ll make her feel really old, but frankly, it would really help.”

“How much do they cost?” I asked. It was a reasonable question, given that I was already working two jobs to make sure they didn’t lose the house.

“Right, so it’s all about the money. Never mind that my back hurts from having to practically lift her in and out of the tub and shower.”

“I was just asking so I know how much to save up. Get some quotes. And I’m sorry about your back, Becky. I know you’re working hard. We’re both working hard.”

“I know. Sorry, I got so snappy. I think I’m going a little stir crazy.”

“Why don’t you look into hiring one of those home care people who’ll come and sit with mom for a few hours, so you can go out with your friends,” I suggested.

A scoffing laugh came through the phone. “The few friends I had have moved on, either out of state or they’ve gotten married.” It seemed there wasn’t anything I could say to Becky today to pull her out of her mood. I couldn’t blame her, and at the same time, I wasn’t entirely sure how to fix the situation. It was just bad all around.

Rocky scratched at the door. I glanced toward the beach. The woman had picked up her things and left the sand. I couldn’t see her anymore. “I’ve got to get a towel and dry off Rocky. He was playing in the ocean.”

“So you did manage to snag that little cottage you were showing me. Nice.”

“Maybe we can arrange for someone to watch Mom for three or four days, and you

can fly out here. Whisper Cove is a really cool small town from what I've seen. I haven't had a chance to explore it yet, but I hear there's a great café and bakery."

"That would be nice. Well, I've got to start the process of getting Mom in the car for the drive to physical therapy."

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“All right, Becky. Talk to you later. And think about a trip out here. I’m sure we could swing it.”

“I’ll think about it. Bye.”

I walked to the bathroom, grabbed a towel and headed to the front door. I opened it up. Rocky was sitting, trying to show me that he’d been a very good boy, but the wet, sand-coated fur was telling me a whole different story. I opened the towel, and he hopped to all fours and gave himself a shake that sprayed cold water across my legs. I dropped the towel over his head and rubbed him vigorously. He loved it and wiggled like crazy under the towel.

His big face popped up from under it, and he looked at me.

“So, flirt-master, you sure know how to pick ‘em. Was she as hot up close as she looked from the window?”

He barked once. I had my answer.

### ChapterThree

Layla

I’d practiced my break-up speech a dozen times. It was going to be the classic version of “it’s not you, it’s me,” but when I spotted Dustin at the ice cream stand with a big, enthusiastic smile, my resolve to break up with him crumbled. No wonder so many people broke up through texts.

Maybe he wasn't so bad—that's what I was telling myself as I walked half-heartedly toward him. He immediately leaned in for a kiss. I quickly turned my head, so the kiss landed on my cheek. Dustin looked disappointed, and I felt that same disappointment. My instinctive move to turn my face was the alarm bell I needed. I had to end things.

"Rocky road?" he asked excitedly.

"Sure." Rocky road was his favorite, but I wasn't in the mood to make ice cream decisions. I felt bad. I should have never let it get this far.

The summer crowds had swept into town weeks ago, and each day they seemed to grow in size and liveliness. Juniper Road, the street that cut through town, was packed with cars and bikes, and the sidewalks were a maze of pedestrians. Isla's bakery had blown up on social media a few weeks into summer, and I was sure the increase in visitors was directly connected to the bakery. Aria's café was always a popular hot spot, too. Both of my sisters were doing incredibly well with their businesses, and I couldn't have been prouder. I was front-of-shop manager for Isla's bakery. She'd come up with the title, and I couldn't deny that I liked it.

"Wow, this town sure gets crazy during summer." Dustin sold tools for a living. He lived in Fairview, which was inland and much more like a city than a small town.

"Our summer tourist season is crucial to our economy," I said.

Dustin was a few inches taller than me with blue eyes and blond hair. He was nice looking, but he tended to make a lot of faces that made him look almost childish. Like now, as he looked around while we waited in line.

"Not sure what the big draw is." His face crinkled.

“Really? You don’t see the draw? It’s one of the prettiest beach towns on the coast. But you don’t have to see the draw. Obviously, thousands of other people do see it.” Maybe I’d find that courage to break up with him after all.

Dustin was never tuned into my feelings (another check against him) but there was no missing my angry tone. He stupidly decided that turning on some condescending charm would help the situation.

His face drooped slightly as he tilted his head at me. “Aww, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. It’s just a town. It’s no big deal.” He pressed a hand against my back and actually thought this was a good time to try again for a kiss. I leaned far away from his puckered lips. He opened his eyes. The girls behind us in line giggled behind their hands, and that made Dustin’s jaw tighten.

“Why are you being so grouchy?” he muttered between clamped teeth.

“I’m not grouchy. I’m angry. There’s a difference, but you wouldn’t know because you never, ever pick up on cues. You know what—I don’t want ice cream. I don’t want this anymore either.” It was definitely not the tactful breakup I’d been envisioning on the way over, but Dustin had suddenly made the whole thing much easier.

I left the line. Dustin followed. “Oh, come on, Layla. You can’t seriously be this mad because I don’t think Whisper Cove is worth all the hype.”

He caught up to me and tried to grab my hand. I snatched it away quickly. I turned to him. He looked genuinely distraught, but I forged ahead. “Look, Dustin, this just isn’t working. It was a nice three months, but it’s time for us to move on.”

This was supposed to be the moment where he said, “If that’s what you want, then fine. Later.” And then he was supposed to turn on his heels and stomp away without

another word.

Instead, he reached for my hand again. I moved it behind my back. “You can’t mean that, Layla. This has been great.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s been nice but not great, Dustin. I want great. You want it, too, but the two of us are never going to be great together.”

His expression of sadness morphed quickly into rage. “Fine. What a waste of time you were. You think because you’re some spoiled little brat who grew up in a stupid beach town and because you turn a lot of heads that you can just use people.”

Tears poked my eyes as I spun around and hurried to my car.

“Look, I’m sorry I said that, Layla. I didn’t mean it. Let’s talk this over,” he called to my back.

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I hadn't expected him to react that way. I was glad I never had to see that ugly side of him again. I climbed in the car and started it. I startled when he knocked on the passenger window. "Come on, Layla. You're making a mistake. Let's talk about this."

I discreetly brushed away a tear, worried he'd think it was because I was hurting from the breakup, but it was from his harsh words. I shook my head and put the car in gear. The traffic delayed my dramatic exit. I didn't look his direction, but I could feel him staring at me through the window. Finally, there was a gap between cars, so I shot into the hole. Again, traffic really ruined my big exit at the stoplight, but at least I was on my way. I got far enough that I found the courage to look up in the rearview mirror.

Dustin was still standing there, fists down at his sides, flared nostrils and an expression that was half rage, half hurt. I should have stopped this sooner, but three months was hardly a long commitment. I'd ended it abruptly, but I was sure once he got over the sting, he'd move on to someone else. For the first time since I'd told him it was over, I felt the tension leave my body. My hands shook slightly as I gripped the steering wheel, but it was finished, and I was relieved.

A text came through as I reached home. It was from Dustin. "This isn't over. We'll talk after you've cooled down from your tantrum." I jumped out of the car and ran to the house.

I was shaking again as I shut the door behind me. Ella was sitting on the couch, typing away on her laptop. She looked up and immediately pushed aside the computer. I ran straight into her arms and sobbed. I was too shaken to spit out the



words.

“Does this have something to do with Dustin?” Ella asked.

I nodded against her shoulder.

“Did you break up with him?” she asked.

I was still unable to speak. The words were caught in my throat. I nodded and showed her his last text. She stared at the phone for a long minute, then looked up. “This is just his male ego talking. I’m sure he was hurt. He’ll realize it’s over soon.”

I shook my head, sniffled and finally got the words out. “I thought he’d just say ‘whatever’ and walk away, but he followed me, insisting we should talk about it. I didn’t think we were together long enough for that kind of reaction, so it scared me.” I lifted my hand to show her how badly I was shaking. Ella took it and pressed it between hers. I could feel the adrenaline and angst floating away, standing in my cozy cottage with my sister.

“Let me make you a cup of herbal tea. In the meantime, block him so he can’t call or send texts.”

“Good idea.” I sat down on the couch with a plop, as if my leg muscles had given out on me. “At first, I wasn’t even going to break up with him, then he got rude and that cruel streak I’d seen a few times came out, and next thing I knew I was telling him it was over. I wasn’t mean. I just said we both needed to go our own ways. He was angry and hurt and all the things that might come after dissolving a long-term relationship but not a short one.” I shook the whole scene out of my mind. “You’re right. I’ll block him and that’s that.”

Ella filled the kettle. “You’ll be fine. Like I said—you hurt his ego, and some people

have a hard time dealing with that.” She came out and sat next to me on the couch. I rested my head against her shoulder. “I knew I’d feel better once I talked to you. Thanks, El.”

“Look, Layla, I know this has been hard for you, all of us having boyfriends, but you know you’re still top priority in all our hearts.”

“I know, El. You guys are top priority in my heart, too. And since I’m now giving up on men completely, I’ve resigned myself to becoming the one unattached Lovely sister. Men are not worth the stress.”

Ella shrugged. “Well, some of them are.”

## ChapterFour

Nash

Isat in the back room tuning my guitar. Betty, the manager of the Comstock Bar, was a grumpy woman who’d barely acknowledged us when we arrived. She’d pointed out the cramped back room for us to get ready and where we could sit for breaks between sets. Betty wasn’t the only grump in the building.

“If you’d move to the left, we could fit it through the door without me having my arm torn off,” Seth growled at Bosco as they carried Ronnie’s drums into the bar. Everyone had been disappointed ever since we’d had to turn down a European tour, one with expenses paid and plenty of publicity for the band. That had been my fault. There wasn’t any way I could leave the States and leave my sister solely in charge of our mom. In a way, it was for the best. We’d all been arguing a lot lately, and it seemed there just wasn’t enough friendship glue left between the four of us. Bosco, or Alan Burke, as his parents called him, and I had been friends since high school. He was an amazing bass guitarist. He stumbled upon Ronnie at a party. She’d filled in

for the band's drummer that night and blew everyone away. Seth joined us when we advertised for a keyboardist. He also had a great singing voice. I'd told Bosco they should move Seth into lead vocals and go on that European tour without me, but he insisted it wasn't Moonstone without me at the microphone.

We'd been playing as a band for six years. It felt like the end of an era, and I wasn't all that sad about it. Moving around from town to town, sleeping in crummy motels and eating diner food was fun for a few months, but after a few years, it became drudgery. In our twenties we'd all dreamed of becoming the next big rock stars, flying around in private jets with nonstop parties and trashing swanky hotel rooms. None of that sounded appealing anymore. Though I wouldn't turn down a private jet.

Ronnie carried in her cymbals and set them on a stack of crates. Their clang echoed off the walls. "There's a line around the parking lot to get in," she said cheerily and slipped right past her two bandmates struggling to get her drums through the narrow passage. Ronnie stopped in front of me and tapped my chest with a drumstick. She had red hair that was cropped so short it looked like the top of her head was on fire. Both earlobes were lined with tiny gold hoops, and she had a dragonfly tattoo on the side of her neck. "I'll bet they're here to see the hunky lead singer."

"Yeah, won't they be disappointed when they see him in person," Bosco chided. Ten years ago, Bosco was built like a tank—buff, with a neck that matched his head in width. He'd played football in high school, but much to his dad's disappointment, he'd quit football to follow his musical dreams. Once he'd left behind the gridiron, he let the muscles go, too. Now he was tall and lanky, and he could move around on stage as if he had no skeleton to hold him back.

Betty, the owner, came marching to the back of the bar. "I thought you'd be set up by now. There must be two hundred people waiting in line to get inside, and my capacity is only three hundred." She was growling about it and weirdly smiling at the same time, so I couldn't tell if she was happy or angry about the long line. "Hurry and get

set up. In twenty minutes, I'm going to open doors and start letting people in." With that, she marched back the way she came.

Bosco looked over at me. "That was strange. I couldn't tell if we were in trouble or if she was about to sign us to a month-long gig."

"Actually, we're already signed up for a month," Ronnie said as she scrolled through her phone. We'd handed Ronnie the job of arranging gigs mostly because the three of us couldn't be bothered with the mundane task. Sometimes she forgot to keep us in the loop, but since none of us wanted the scheduling job, we never complained. Bosco didn't look pleased. His dark brows lowered, reminding me of his dad whenever we were in trouble for something back in high school and he was gearing up to lecture us.

"When did we agree to a month-long gig? I was hoping to spend a week in Hawaii at the end of the month," Bosco said.

"Well, if you don't want me to be in charge of scheduling anymore?—"

Bosco shook his head. "Never mind. Whatever. Hawaii will still be there after the month is up."

We set up the stage. It was a nice one, wide with good lighting and plenty of space for our sound equipment. With all of us working together it didn't take long. Betty, seeing that she was about to make a fat profit for the night, gave us each a free beer, and we returned to the cramped back room to hang out until it was time to start.

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Betty had made good on her promise to open the doors. Voices and laughter rumbled through the building. Glasses clinked and music blasted out of a jukebox. We all had our ways of gearing up for a night on the stage. Ronnie liked to play games on her phone. Bosco usually found some place to stretch out his legs, rest back his head and close his eyes for a few minutes. This time he'd found an old cardboard cutout of a beer mug to rest against. Seth and his girlfriend, Brianna, had been trying to buy a house, and he was spending a lot of his spare time looking at real estate listings and loan sites. I, on the other hand, preferred to step outside and get some fresh air before going on stage. And since it had been a hot summer day and the air conditioning in these crowded bars was never great, I decided to take advantage of the fresh night air before having to stand in front of hot lights.

I stepped out the back door into the large alley where the van was parked. I walked to the corner and saw that most of the line had gone inside. Some people were wearing Moonstone shirts, which was cool to see. We'd gotten a big enough following to have a few record producers interested, only we didn't have enough original songs for an album. We just couldn't pull it together and find time to write more. A song-writing session almost always ended with all of us mad at each other. We were a great team on stage but not so great behind the scenes.

I stood at the corner and gazed up at the stars. It was a clear night, and the summer heat had been replaced by a cool breeze. Even though the bar was inland a good ten miles, I could smell the ocean trailing along with the wind. While most people were piling into the bar, one patron came shooting out as if something was chasing her. She was slender with long, tanned legs sticking out from a denim mini skirt and short brown cowboy boots. Her long hair was tied up in a ponytail, and even from the distance, I could see she was pretty.

As her boots scooted along, she kept looking behind her. She reached the corner where I was standing but didn't pay any attention to me. She looked back again, and this time, a man walked out of the bar. His head turned back and forth as he searched the parking area. The woman gasped, spun toward me, and her eyes rounded.

"Quick, hide me." She took my hands, and we turned in a circle until she had her back against the building, and I was standing in front of her.

I was probably having far too much fun because she was obviously worried the man would see her. He walked in the direction of the corner. I placed my hands against the wall on each side of her to block more of her from view with my arms. I leaned forward. "Should I pretend to kiss you?"

"Sure." She hopped up and looked past my arm, then seemed to realize what I'd asked. "I mean, pretend, yes. See, he's this guy who I broke up with today, only he didn't take it as well as I hoped. I knew he wasn't for me. Kind of a nudge, if you know what I mean?"

"Nope, not really. And I can't blame the guy for being upset."

She glanced up over my arm. "Oh, good. He's heading out to the parking lot." She relaxed some and became even more beautiful as her full lips softened.

I stayed in my commanded position. "What's a nudge?"

"Oh. I don't know. I just came up with it because some of the other words floating through my head weren't as ladylike. Not that he deserves politeness. I broke up with him nicely, and he went all nuts on me acting as if we'd just spent the last five years together instead of three months."

I'd been teasing her and enjoying the moment. A beautiful woman using me as a

human shield—that was new even for me, but it seemed this wasn't a funny matter at all. "Do you want me to go talk to him? Tell him he needs to leave."

She turned her big brown eyes up to me and paused a second. I was sure she recognized me, but that was just my big ego talking. "That's very nice, Mr. uh, Mr.—"

"Nash. My name is Nash." The name didn't ring any bells either.

"Right, Mr. Nash. That's nice of you to offer, but it's fine." She looked over my arm again. "That's his blue sedan leaving the parking lot. Honestly, I think he was here to see the band. They're a big deal, apparently. I've never seen so many people at this bar. I came with my friend, Emily." She rolled her eyes, and it was extremely cute. "She is absolutely bonkers about the lead singer. She found a spot near the stage and told me she was going to stand there all night until the lead singer noticed her and then, of course, sparks would fly, and the two of them would drive off into the sunset. In the meantime, I was surveying the big crowd in the room, and boom, there was Dustin just twenty feet away standing behind a group of women all wearing Moonstone T-shirts. I think they had the same plans as Emily. When I spotted Dustin, my heart dropped to my stomach. He was the last person I wanted to see tonight. I was sure he hadn't seen me, so I snuck through the crowd."

"Except he followed you out of the bar."

"Yeah, I guess I have to work on my 'sneaking around in a crowd' skill. Thank goodness I found a good hiding place."

I hadn't moved my arms.

She smiled shyly. "Thanks for being my human shield. I think it's safe for me to leave the fort now, but I really appreciate your help."

“Trust me, it was all my pleasure.”

“I better get back to Emily. She refused to give up her spot near the stage even though her best friend was clearly in distress. That’s how crazy she is about the singer. Are you here with friends?”

I nodded. “Sure am, and I should probably get back to them.”

Her smile stole my breath. She was hurrying back to the bar before I could say goodbye. “Hey, wait, you never told me your name!” I called to her. She didn’t hear me before she disappeared back into the bar.

## ChapterFive

Layla

The jukebox was still blasting tinny-sounding music through the crowded building, and the patrons were talking loudly over the discordant noise. I’d been to Comstock Bar plenty of times, but I’d never seen it this packed. It seemed Emily wasn’t the only major Moonstone fan in the crowd. I found her exactly where I’d left her when I raced out the door on a shot of adrenaline. I’d managed to push the stressful breakup out of my head, so I could enjoy a night out, but seeing Dustin had fired up all the cylinders again. He’d left the bar, but now I was on high alert for his return.

Emily had been staring dreamily up at the stage as if she could conjure the singer with her mind. The equipment was set up, and from the energy bursting from the audience, I was sure they’d be coming on stage soon.

Emily tried to feign a look of concern as I reached her.

“Don’t bother, pal. I was clearly distressed, but you wouldn’t walk out with me,” I



said.

“I didn’t want to give up this prime spot.” She pointed up at the microphone stand.

“In a few minutes, he’ll be standing right there, mere feet from me, and I will put my plan in motion.”

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I laughed. “What kind of plan? You’re not thinking of jumping on stage and throwing yourself at him?”

Emily rolled her eyes. “I’m not a lunatic. I’ll just catch his attention as often as I can and send him brainwaves that tell him I’m crazy about him and that we belong together.”

“Yes, clearly you’re not a lunatic.”

Emily shot a cursory glance around the tightly packed room. “Speaking of lunatic—where is Dustin?”

“I saw his car leave the parking lot. Thank goodness. I tried to sneak outside, but he spotted me and followed.” Then the last few minutes came back to me. I’d been so distraught about running into Dustin that I nearly forgot the handsome stranger in the parking lot. I laughed.

Emily looked over. “What’s so funny?”

“It’s nothing really. When I spotted Dustin coming out of the bar, I improvised. This guy was standing at the corner of the building, so I pulled him around to hide me.”

Emily raised a brow. “And what if that guy you used as a human shield was even crazier than Dustin?”

I shrugged. “I hadn’t thought of that. I was so freaked out about seeing Dustin, most of my sense and reason, something Aria says I lack naturally, flew out of my head.

All I knew was that I didn't want Dustin to see me. Besides, the guy had a nice smile. He was good-looking, actually, in that rugged, intense sort of way." I got up on tiptoes and looked around the room for the short black hair. He was at least six feet tall and would be easy to spot, but I couldn't find him.

"Do you see him?" Emily asked.

I shook my head. "Maybe he decided it was too crowded to bother. I've never seen this place so packed. It's positively vibrating with enthusiasm."

"I told you; Moonstone has a big following."

"Well, I'm going to order a glass of wine. Do you want one?"

"Sure. I can't leave the spot. There are all sorts of vultures waiting to move in."

I glanced around, and she wasn't wrong. We were getting dirty looks and conspiratorial whispers were taking place between friends. It seemed they were all waiting for Emily to break her determination and step away from her spot at the stage.

"Maybe you shouldn't drink anything," I said. "I don't think you'll be able to use the restroom tonight."

"I don't plan on leaving this spot at all, so I'll sip slowly. Go fast. I plan on widening my stance, so I can take up enough room on the floor to hold your spot. Don't be long though. Not sure how long I'll be able to hold people off."

"Right." I saluted her. "Permission to leave my post."

Emily waved her hand at me. "Stop making fun. This is serious stuff. I'm not messing

around here.”

“Right. Serious stuff. Off I go and wish me luck.” I elbowed my way up to the bar. Betty Comstock’s older brother, Tommy, was behind the bar filling glasses with foamy beer. “What can I get you, Miss Lovely?”

“Hey, Tommy, I see she has you working tonight. Never seen it so crowded.”

Tommy shook his head. “Just hope we don’t run out of beer.”

“Well then, to help with that, I’ll take two glasses of white wine.”

“Coming right up.” I turned to look at the barroom as I waited for the drinks. I held my breath as I surveyed the room. No sign of Dustin. I relaxed. It seemed seeing me had made the prospect of a night out so unpleasant, he took off. It would certainly make my evening more pleasant knowing he wasn’t standing somewhere in the room watching me. I convinced myself that him leaving instead of pursuing a conversation with me was a good sign that this was really over and done.

“Here you go, two white wines.”

I paid for the drinks and then with some strategic planning and movements, I got back to Emily without spilling more than a few drops. Getting to her exact location took some fortitude. It seemed that a few of the earlier vultures had moved into my section of floor.

Emily looked sharply at the woman standing next to her. “Excuse me but you’re standing in my friend’s spot.” She motioned toward me.

The woman turned around, snorted in disgust and inched out of the way. She moved behind us, and I was sure she wasn’t smiling politely at our backs.

“Well, now I’m extra curious about this band and their lead singer. The crush of people in here is almost too much.”

“Yep, we don’t get bands like this coming through here often. I knew it was going to be a packed house.”

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I sipped the wine and glanced around the room. This time I wasn't looking for Dustin. I was looking for my tall, handsome human shield. He must have decided against stepping inside. I couldn't blame him. Something told me the bar was past fire capacity.

Emily must have spotted my disappointment from not seeing Mr. Nash.

"What's wrong? Is he back?" she asked with some effort to show concern. She was just too far gone in Moonstone groupie land to care much about her friend tonight.

"No, I don't see Dustin. I was looking for that cute guy who hid me from view."

Betty came out on stage to let everyone know we were at capacity, and if we left, we wouldn't get back in. There was another lecture about leaving the bathrooms the way we found them and not leaving drinks unattended. People chatted animatedly through her admonishments.

"What did he look like?" Emily asked as she half-listened for the words she was waiting for.

I opened my mouth to answer just as Betty welcomed the band to the stage.

A woman with fiery red hair came out first, twirling her drumsticks. She climbed behind the set of drums. A short, stocky man wearing a black beanie, even though it was hot in the club, waved to the crowd and stood behind the keyboard. A tall, thin guy with a bass guitar hanging around his shoulder came out next. His wave got a round of cheers, and a few people yelled out "Bosco!" so I assumed that was his

name. And then I could literally hear women sucking in their breaths and holding them as they waited for the singer. The room erupted like a volcano when he walked on stage holding a guitar and flashing a big white smile.

I stared up at him in shock. “That’s him,” I said under my breath.

Emily didn’t hear me. She’d moved a few inches closer to the stage. She clapped so hard; I thought she might break some fingernails. “Isn’t he dreamy?” she asked without looking away from the stage.

I nodded. There was no sense in bringing up my story again. Emily would have forgotten all about it after tonight. She would probably have a hard time remembering her own name after standing so close to her crush.

I leaned in. “What did you say his name was?”

“Nash, Nash Ledger. He’s even more gorgeous in person.”

The stage lights made his gray eyes an ethereal color, and Emily was right. He was gorgeous, dreamy and all the other adjectives she’d be spilling out the rest of the night. I laughed to myself. For a second, I thought I might run into my friend from outside and get better acquainted. I guess I was joining the long list of groupies who had to admire Nash Ledger from afar.

Nash picked up the microphone. “Hello, everyone, we’re Moonstone.” There was another round of cheers loud enough to shake the light fixtures and slosh some beer foam over the rims of glasses. Nash turned around. He was wearing faded jeans and a gray T-shirt. “We’ve got Seth on keyboard.” Seth played a few bars to applause. “The unsinkable Ronnie Brown on drums.” She played a few beats to applause. “And, of course, Bosco on bass.” Bosco strummed some impressive notes on his bass guitar. I realized then that we were deafeningly close to the speakers, but Emily didn’t seem to

notice. She hadn't pulled her gaze away from Nash. "And I'm Nash Ledger." His last name was drowned out by the screams.

It was like being at a Beatles concert in the 60s. I wondered if we'd even be able to hear the music. Fortunately, the rambunctious crowd quieted down. Nash's gray eyes swept around the room. With the stage lights in front of him and the dim lights at the back of the bar, I was sure he couldn't see more than ten feet in front of him, so Emily's plan wasn't too bad. She would definitely be one of the admiring faces he saw staring up at him all night.

"I'm going to dedicate this first song to a young lady I met earlier tonight. I'm happy to be your human shield anytime." His eyes swept down, and our gazes clashed. He winked before singing a rock classic, Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl." It didn't take more than a few seconds for me to see what all the hype was about. His voice, slightly gritty, yet smooth like cream, filled the room. The sound, coupled with the way he looked, the way he moved on stage, created a spellbinding magic that took my breath away.

Emily grabbed my hand, startling me from the trance. "Did you see?" she asked excitedly. "Did you see that? He winked at me. I'm sure of it." She gripped my hand. Her wine sloshed over the other hand. "I might faint. My plan is working. I'm telling you, La-la, by the time we leave here tonight, I'm going to be Nash Ledger's girlfriend." Then her smile faded some. "I wonder what he meant about the human shield." She was in such a tizzy about the wink, she'd forgotten my story about the parking lot encounter. It was just as well. There was no way I was going to spoil the moment for her. She was on top of the world—certain that he'd dropped that wink her way, and heck, maybe she was right. After all, she'd been right about Nash Ledger. He really was something.

ChapterSix



Nash

The first set was over, and I'd found it hard to focus on the music. The brown-eyed beauty, who'd inadvertently stepped into my life in the parking lot, pulled way too much of my attention her direction. I felt sorry for the guy she hid from. I was willing to bet that even after only three months, she wasn't the kind of person you could easily walk away from. Before the end of the second set, she'd left her spot near the stage. Sitting close to the speakers got old fast. If she'd moved farther into the barroom, I couldn't see her from the stage. I was plenty disappointed but even so, I was going to stay in the back for break.

"You going out to the barroom?" Bosco asked.

"Don't think I'm in the mood tonight," I said. I pulled a bag of chips and water bottle out of the cooler we'd brought along. "I need a break." Stepping into the barroom during breaktime meant spending the whole time signing autographs and smiling for photos. It wasn't a break at all.

"Suit yourself. I saw a few cuties in the crowd, and I plan to scoop up some phone numbers." He walked out. Ronnie had gone out to the van for some peace and quiet, and Seth stepped out to call Brianna.

I pulled my phone out of Bosco's guitar case, where we stored them between sets. There was a message from Becky to call her. She sounded frantic on the voicemail, which put a knot in my stomach. I called and she picked up on the first ring.

"There you are," she said.

"I was on stage, Beck. What's wrong?"

"I'm sitting in the ER. Mom slipped getting out of her chair. She was in a lot of pain,

so I had to call an ambulance. They're doing X-rays now."

I closed my eyes and absorbed yet more bad news. An ambulance ride was going to add to the medical debt we'd been accumulating since Mom's accident. "Jeez, Beck, poor Mom. Do you think she broke something?"

"Not a doctor, remember? Just an underpaid caretaker." Her voice wobbled. "Sorry, it just shook me up, that's all."

“Should I come home?”

“And do what? You’ve got a good paying job right now, and your band gigs will help pay some of these bills. There just isn’t anything for you out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Listen, I’ve got to get back on stage in five minutes. I need to gulp some water and eat something. Leave a message if you hear anything, otherwise I’ll call you on the next break.”

“All right, Nash. Knock ‘em dead, eh? Still being followed by your bevy of groupies? Of course you are. Some things never change. I’ll call if I hear anything.”

“Thanks. And Beck, just say the word, and I’ll fly home.”

“Let’s hope that’s not necessary. Someone’s got to make money. Bye. Love ya.”

“Love ya.”

Ronnie came inside and grabbed a bottle of water. I guzzled mine in a few seconds and opened a second one. “It’s hot out there,” I said.

“I’ll say, and I’m sitting at the back of the stage, away from the lights. Someone needs to invent stage lights that cool the air,” she suggested.

“I’ll get right on that,” Seth said as he came from the front of the bar. He was holding a beer.

“Where’s Bosco?” I asked. “We go back on in five.”

“Last I saw, he was flirting with a hot doll, probably trying to get her number. She was a looker with copper hair. Shiny like a new penny.”

I sat up and choked on a gulp of water. Ronnie reached over and smacked my back. “Just learn how to drink from a bottle?” she quipped.

I ignored her comment. I was too interested in Bosco’s copper-haired friend. “Was she wearing a short denim skirt and cowboy boots?”

Seth rubbed his chin. “Come to think of it, yeah. Great pair of legs.”

Ronnie rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s it then, she’s obviously relationship material. She’s got great legs.”

Bosco returned right then with a sour look on his face.

Seth laughed. “I guess we don’t need to ask if he got her number.”

Bosco grumbled something under his breath as he grabbed a water. “She claimed that she just broke up with someone, and she wasn’t ready to make any friends.”

Seth laughed again. “Uh, did you explain that you were interested in skipping the friend stage?”

I kicked the bottom of Seth’s shoe. Hearing the two of them talk about her that way made me mad.

“Ouch, why are you so grumpy?”

I shook my head. “Not grumpy. Trying to rest before we go back on stage.”

Bosco tossed several bar napkins at me, and they fluttered down to my feet. “Unsolicited phone numbers handed to me on my way back. One of those belongs to the friend of the woman I was talking to. I think her name is Emily. She’s cute. Not sure if she’s your type though.” Bosco was still angry about not getting the phone number he wanted. He tilted his head at me. “Exactly what is your type? You haven’t dated anyone steadily since high school and even then, it wasn’t for longer than a few months.”

Ronnie patted my shoulder. “Nash is holding out for the right person.”

“That’s not it,” Seth said. We all looked at him. Seth was always big on trying to analyze us.

Seth shrugged and stood up. “Why stick with one flower when you can have an entire bouquet?”

We laughed. Ronnie the hardest. “That was a Seth classic,” she said between laughs. “I’m going to collect a whole book of them and publish it once we’re rich and famous. It’ll be titled *Stuff Seth Says*.”

“Real original.” Seth rolled his eyes. “Think it’s time to get back on stage. Our adoring fans are waiting.”

“You mean Nash’s adoring fans,” Bosco said angrily. He wasn’t going to let go of his failed attempt easily. I, for one, was glad his usual strategy didn’t work on his latest target.

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“Hey, Bos, did you get her name?” I asked as we headed to the stage.

“Told you, it was Emily. She wrote it on the napkin.”

“No, not her. The woman with the cowboy boots. Did you get her name?”

Bosco stopped and looked at me, and I wished I hadn’t asked. “Ah, I see, you spotted her, too. She was right up by the stage for most of the first set, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Great, so I guess that’s game over for me,” he said angrily. I really regretted asking. It wasn’t as if I was going to see her again, and frankly, Bosco and I just didn’t need any other sources of contention between us. We were slowly losing that fluid connection that years of friendship had created.

“Yeah, she told me,” Bosco growled. “Find out for yourself,” he said as he pushed past me. He made sure we clashed shoulders hard.

People started clapping and cheering as Seth and Ronnie walked on stage. I took a deep breath. As far as breaks went, this last one wasn’t the least bit relaxing.

### ChapterSeven

#### Layla

I’d moved away from the stage and the speakers. I’d been enjoying the music, especially the singer, but the noise was giving me a headache. Emily had stayed glued to her spot, but seeing her face as she cut through the crowd told me she’d had enough, too. Nash Ledger might have been handsome and a pleasure to watch and

listen to on stage, but even Emily's crush had its limits. The bar was extremely crowded, and it was still warm outside. The air conditioning system just couldn't keep up. It was hot and stuffy, and even a cold glass of wine or beer wasn't going to help.

Emily was pale as she reached me. "I need to get out of here before I have a panic attack." Emily was very prone to panic attacks, but fortunately, I'd known her long enough that it never surprised me. I'd learned how to calm her right out of them.

"Take my arm," I said. She gripped me like a little kid might grip their mom in a crowded supermarket. I led her through the crush of bodies to the exit. The rush of fresh air that swept in made both of us sigh with relief.

"I'll drive. Let's do your breathing exercises as we walk to the car," I said and started the count pattern of taking in air, holding it and releasing it. She leapt right into it, and I counted for her all the way back to the car. By the time we sat down inside the car, Emily was breathing normally and color had returned to her face.

She rested back against the passenger seat. "I don't know what happened."

I started the car. "Really? We were packed like sardines in a hot room where beer flowed more freely than oxygen, and while their music was great, I think they could have lowered the volume on the speakers. My head is still throbbing."

"Mine too." We both reached instinctively to turn down the radio.

I laughed. "A sure sign that we're getting old is both of us reaching to turn down the volume. How about a plate of pancakes at the diner?"

"Hmm, sounds good."

I turned the car in the direction of the all-night diner. Emily looked much better. Crisis averted. She spun slightly toward me. "I'm so disappointed I didn't get to talk to Nash. He never came out from the back room. Snob." She turned forward again with a slight pout, then sighed. "He's even dreamier in person." She gasped. "I can't believe Bosco was trying to get your phone number. He looked kind of surly as he walked away. I doubt many girls turn down that request."

"Well then, he can't be too disappointed because he will no doubt walk out with a phone full of new numbers tonight."

"Do you think he'll call me?" Emily asked with wide eyes.

"Bosco?"

She huffed. "No, silly. Nash. I sent the number with Bosco. Nash winked at me when he started the first set, so I'm holding out hope."

I nodded about the wink, though I wasn't convinced it was intentional or even directed our way. It seemed like Emily's plan had a lot of holes. First, she had to rely on a surly Bosco handing his buddy a girl's phone number. And something told me Nash got plenty of numbers slipped his way during their shows.

I pulled into the diner. The lot was mostly empty. It was well past the dinner hour and a few hours too early for the after-midnight customers. It was nice and cool inside the restaurant. We easily found a table and both ordered the blueberry pancakes with whipped cream.

Emily's cheeks were pink again.

"You look way better than when you walked up to me in the bar," I said. "I thought you were going to pass out."



“I thought I was, too. I stubbornly wanted to hold on to that spot near the stage. Like you, my head was throbbing from being so close to the speakers and from staring so intensely up at the lit stage. The wine started giving me a stomachache, and I had this horrible vision of throwing up, right there in front of Nash Ledger. Of course, I also envisioned swooning and having him jump down from the stage to catch me in his strong arms.”

I’d considered telling Emily about my personal encounter with Nash for about five seconds. I wasn’t sure how she’d take it. This dream, this massive crush, was all hers. I wasn’t going to tiptoe into it and spoil it for her. And she was right. Maybe he would call her. I knew nothing about the man except he had a mesmerizing voice and he’d helped me out of a bind in the parking lot.

“Emily, I want to support you on this quest of yours, but promise me that you’ll keep your head about it. Nash Ledger probably leaves each show with dozens of phone numbers.”

Emily sighed dejectedly. “I know. I was hoping to make it to the end of the night. I thought if I stuck it out while the bar was emptying, I might have a chance to meet him personally, to put a face and personality to the number on the napkin.”

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“And I have no doubt he would be instantly smitten, Em. Maybe you can reach out to him on social media, and introduce yourself and let him know he has your number on a napkin.” I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to be encouraging her, but I also knew my friend. She didn’t give up on dreams easily. It was both a good and bad quality. When we were in seventh grade, she was determined to become student council secretary, even though she was the definite underdog. She was running against Isabel Brooks, a cheerleader, who also happened to be the vice principal’s daughter. But Emily handed out flyers and free pencils with her name on them, and she made sure to talk to everyone. Isabel was far choosier and only talked to the people in her popular social circle. Emily won by fifty votes. In that instance, her persistence paid off. There’d been plenty of times when it didn’t, like when she was determined to land a leading role in the school play. She practiced the lines and dancing and singing for months, but in the end, she didn’t even get a small role. She was devastated.

“I’ve reached out to Nash many times on social media. To be honest, he doesn’t spend much time on there. The band has group social media accounts, but they’re mostly to announce upcoming shows and update fans on songs. I’ve got a better plan. Moonstone is playing at the bar again on Wednesday night. I’m going to show up there, and this time I’m sticking it out even if I pass out cold on the floor in front of the stage.”

“Not sure if that’s the most brilliant plan you’ve ever had.”

The pancakes arrived, and I was glad for the diversion. I had this feeling that Emily’s newest obsession was going to end badly, namely with her being heartbroken and me spending the next few weeks sitting with her in front of the television while she cried about not ending up with Nash Ledger. If only the band hadn’t come to town. It was

always much better to have big dreams that you knew never had a chance of coming to fruition. The letdown was easier when you knew in the back of your mind the big dream was never going to happen.

For a few minutes we lost ourselves in our stacks of fluffy blueberry pancakes. “I was so caught up with the band on stage, I didn’t let you finish your story,” Emily said. “You said a cute guy helped you outside when Dustin followed you out of the bar.” She lowered her fork and furrowed her forehead. “Do you think Dustin is going to stalk you?”

I was relieved she quickly moved on from the first question, even though the second one was slightly alarming. I finished my bite. “No, he’ll be fine. I’m sure seeing him at the bar was a coincidence. I thought I gave him the slip, but he must have spotted me. He probably wanted to plead his case again. He seemed to think we just needed to talk it out and everything would be fine, but it’s over, it’s very over. He’ll come to that conclusion, too. I’m sure of it.”

We each took a few more bites, then Emily put down her fork. “Oh my gosh, too much whipped cream and maple syrup. Wait, you never finished your story. So, who was this knight in shining armor? Was he inside the bar? Did you get to talk to him again?”

I shook my head. “It was hardly a knight’s performance. It was nothing, and no, I didn’t talk to him again. So, what are you doing on your day off tomorrow? I was thinking I might go down to the beach, read a book, take a swim. I love working at the bakery with Isla, but it’s so exhausting, I find that I want to spend my time off just relaxing.”

“I’ll bet. And you have to get to work so early. The dress boutique is stressful, too, during the summer months, and working for the dragon lady doesn’t help. I promised my mom we’d go to lunch tomorrow. Will you come with me Wednesday night to

see the band again?”

“I can’t, Em. If I’m not in bed by ten, I can’t focus at work. You’re on your own. I’ll have to hear all the details afterward.”

“Darn. Well, I guess that makes sense.” She picked up her fork. “Guess I don’t want these pancakes to go to waste, even though they’ll be going to my waist.” We both laughed at her little quip and dug our forks in.

## ChapterEight

Nash

I slept late and woke to Rocky barking to go out. “Just a second, buddy.” The sun was already pushing past the curtains. I swung my feet off the bed. I picked up my phone and relaxed when I saw there were no new messages from Becky. The doctors had sent Mom home. She’d suffered bruising but, thankfully, no broken bones in her fall. Becky sounded exhausted and at the end of her tether when we talked. That was around midnight. We were resting before our final set, and Becky was just waiting for the doctor’s release order, so she could take Mom home for the night. If only someone would figure out a way to be in two places at once. Then I could be there for my mom and sister and still be out making money to support them. It was hard being stretched like this. I badly wanted to be there to lend a hand, but there wasn’t any way to make money in or around our small town, and the band gigs paid better than most jobs, so that meant traveling around the country.

I pulled on my swim trunks. There was no sense in living near the ocean and not taking a swim. The cove was a little too mellow for my liking. I preferred some waves for bodysurfing, but a quiet swim sounded good, too.

I headed across to the door. Rocky was twirling his tail like a helicopter blade. I

opened the door, and he shot out. “Stay in the yard,” I called to him knowing full well he’d ignore that order. There was no fence around the beach house, so as far as Rocky was concerned, the entire cove was his playground.

My throat was always sore after a night on stage. Becky had come up with a warm tea, oat milk and whipped honey elixir, and I had to admit, it worked. It always tasted good, so it was an easier solution than gargling with salt water.

I brewed the tea, splashed in the milk and dropped in a spoon of honey. I carried the cup across to the window, so I could keep an eye on Rocky. He wasn’t in the yard. My gaze swept out to the beach below. A woman was swimming in the glassy water. She turned and floated on her back. I recognized the legs as the same ones I spotted sticking out from the beach chair yesterday afternoon. It was Rocky’s new friend.

I straightened as Rocky came into view. He was trotting happily across the beach, kicking up clumps of sand with his big paws. “Don’t do it,” I muttered. “Come on, buddy, don’t do it.” And then he did it. Rocky went bounding into the water toward his new friend. The dog was a pretty good swimmer, but he also never hesitated to latch on with his paws when the water was too deep for him to touch the ground. “No!” I yelled to an empty house. Rocky tossed a big paw at the woman who was relaxing on her back. She startled and sat up quickly, so quickly she sank beneath the surface before popping back up.

I put the cup down on the coffee table. The damage was done, but the least I could do was go down, call in my badly mannered mutt and apologize profusely. I raced out the door and down the sandy trail to the beach below. I expected to hear yelling or, at the very least, see her shooing Rocky away. Instead, laughter mingled with Rocky’s exuberant bark. The two of them were swimming side by side. I couldn’t tell who was having more fun, the woman or the dog. From my vantage point, I would have put my money on the woman.

I waded in, deciding it was time to meet my neighbor and to apologize belatedly for my dog. I whistled and Rocky immediately dog paddled in a circle to swim my direction. The woman noticed her swimming partner had disappeared. She stopped and turned around, treading water as she stared at me.

“Sorry about his manners,” I called to her.

“I don’t mind at ...” Her words fell off. She tilted her head, then her lips parted in surprise. “It’s you,” she said and then swam toward me.

I hadn’t noticed the color of her hair because it was wet and slicked back, but as she swam closer, I recognized her face. It wasn’t one you would ever forget.

“It’s you,” I said back to her as she emerged from the water. She was wearing a pale green one-piece swimsuit cut high on the thighs. A breath caught in my chest. She was incredible.

Rocky was pleased to have his friend back. He immediately rubbed his face against her leg. She laughed and ruffled the hair on his head. It stood straight up in spikes.

I had never had a problem talking to women, but suddenly, I was tongue-tied. She’d overwhelmed all my senses, and I couldn’t find words.

She smiled at the awkward pause and confidently stuck out her hand. “I suppose I should have introduced myself last night since I used you so brazenly outside the club. I’m Layla.”

Rocky barked, and at the risk of being both upstaged and humiliated by my much smoother, cooler wingman, I finally spoke. “Nash Ledger and, like I said last night, it was my pleasure.”

She smoothed her wet hair back. It was shiny under the late morning sun. “I know who you are ... now. Admittedly, when I asked you to be my human shield, I had no idea. But my best friend, Emily, filled me in on some of the details on the way to Comstock Bar last night.” She squinted one eye. “Texas boy who works construction when he’s not strumming a guitar or making the women lightheaded with his voice. When you said your name was Mr. Nash?—”

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“Uh, you said it was Mr. Nash. I told you my name was Nash.”

Layla bowed her head. “You are right. And I’m feeling rather silly that I didn’t know it was you that I’d pulled around to hide me.”

“And pretend kiss,” I added. “Haven’t forgotten that part.” And Nash Ledger was back. I was crediting my dog with finding my mojo again. I really needed to have him out as wingman more often.

Layla was suntanned, but I could see a pink blush on her cheeks. They were dotted with light brown freckles that were only visible on her naturally golden skin when standing close and in sunlight. Her eyes were cocoa brown, and they were surrounded by thick, long lashes that matched her dark copper hair.

The water pushed in and out around us, lapping at our shins and occasionally washing over Rocky’s back. He’d had enough of the sea, and he trounced out of the water, apparently satisfied that he’d finished his mission of getting his new friend and his dad together.

Layla lifted a hand to shield her eyes as she looked up toward the house. “You’re staying in Audrey’s cottage? You’re the new neighbor.”

“So, you’re one of the Lovely sisters,” I said. “I suppose I should have guessed. Audrey mentioned that you were in the cottage next door in case I needed information about the town. She said no one knew Whisper Cove like the Lovely sisters.”



Layla was nodding along with that assessment. “I can also recommend some great eating places in town.” She peered up at me through those long lashes and once again, a breath caught in my chest. “You might have already been to Whisper Cove Café, but I think I would have remembered if you’d walked into the bakery. I work there. My sister, Isla, owns it, and I heartily recommend it. She’s a fabulous baker.”

“I’ll have to stop by. I haven’t had a chance to get into town yet, but Audrey did mention the café and bakery.”

“My sister, Aria, owns the café.”

I laughed. “That makes sense.”

I’d lost track of my wet dog. He’d found Layla’s towel and was rolling around on it to dry off. “Oh wow, I’m sorry. I’ve got some dry towels up at the cottage if you need one.”

Layla laughed at Rocky as he rolled back and forth, occasionally stopping mid-roll with his wet paws up in the air. “I don’t live far, remember?”

I raked my hair back, embarrassed. “Right. Duh.”

“I’ve got some cold apple slices and iced teas in that cooler if you’re interested. You’ll have to sit on Rocky’s towel though. I only brought down one chair.”

“Sure, and can I say that’s very neighborly of you considering my dog has been acting like a monkey escaped from the zoo this morning. And yesterday.”

Layla looked over at me as we trudged across the hot sand. “Yesterday?”

“I was up in the house talking on the phone and keeping an eye on Rocky. I saw him

barge in on your sunning session.”

“He did and I welcomed it. He’s such a honeybunch.”

We reached the towel. Rocky finished his rolling extravaganza with a wild shake. Fortunately, he’d gotten most of the water off on the towel. Rocky trotted over and looked up at her with that lost, stray puppy dog look he’d perfected when I spotted him at the rescue. He’d walked to the front of the pen and stared up at me, and that was it. Minutes later, he was sitting in the passenger seat of the truck with one of his big paws on my arm letting me know that we were now best friends and never to be parted again. And he was right.

Layla crouched down and hugged him, wet, sandy fur, and all. “We had a few cats growing up here at my grandmother’s cottage, but never a big, cool dog like this. I’ve always wanted one. My sisters and I are so busy, we’ve never had time for one.”

“Well, I’m sure Rocky will gladly step in to that void anytime you want. I have a feeling I’m going to have a hard time getting him to follow me home after this.”

I straightened out the towel. Rocky had left it with the pungent smell of wet dog. Layla sat in her chair and twisted around to reach into the cooler. She pulled out a bag of sliced apples.

Rocky immediately pushed his nose against the bag. “Does he like apples?” she asked.

“He likes anything that doesn’t bite back.”

Layla laughed as Rocky nibbled the slice of apple in her fingers. She handed over the bag. “Here you go. I suppose it would have been more polite to offer them to you before Rocky.” She rubbed the side of the dog’s big face. “It’s just, he’s so

irresistible.”

“Yep, I’ve heard that before. I always consider him my wingman, but really, it’s more like the other way around.” I ate the slice of apple and turned to her. “Did you have any more problems last night, after the incident outside?”

Layla stretched out her long legs and dug her toes into the sand. “No, I think Dustin left after he saw me. I hope that’s the last I’ll see of him.”

I nodded. “That’s good. You didn’t stay for the whole show.”

Her lips parted in surprise. “How do you know that?”

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“For the first set you were standing right up front, then I didn’t see you anymore. I admit, I was disappointed.”

She rubbed her feet back and forth in the sand. “Your speakers were too loud.” Her face popped up. “Not that I didn’t enjoy the music. Truly, Nash, your voice is incredible. I see now why my friend, Emily, is such a huge fan.”

“Emily was the blonde with the yellow sundress standing next to you?”

Layla nodded. “Yes, and I guess I told you that she has a big crush on you. In my defense, I didn’t know I was talking to the object of her desire. And since it seemed half the women standing around the stage were there because of their crush on the lead singer, I guess I didn’t reveal too big of a secret. I never told Emily that we met outside. But just to let you know—she really is a wonderful person, funny and pretty and she loves to laugh. She handed Bosco a napkin with her phone number on it.”

I felt myself sinking into the sand with disappointment. I was sitting there slowly developing a major crush on Layla, and she was busy trying to divert my attention to her best friend, a clear sign that Layla had no interest in me. Bosco mentioned that she’d turned him down because she wasn’t interested in any new friendships.

“Uh, yeah, I got a few napkins last night.” I watched as Rocky trotted back down to the water to chase gulls.

“Any chance you might call her?” she asked sweetly. “Never mind. That was nosy and stupid of me. It’s just Emi is my best friend, and she, well, she deserves something great and you seem pretty great.”

I didn't answer.

"Sorry, that was pushy of me," she said.

"No, you were doing something nice for your friend, and knowing she's your close friend assures me she's a very cool person."

"She is. Maybe I can introduce you sometime if Emily is visiting." She covered her mouth. "Nosy and pushy again."

"No, that's fine. Sure, I'd love to meet her, but—well—you know I'm only here until October."

"I know, but honestly, I think just meeting you will be like a trip to the moon for her." She picked up the bag again. "More apples?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks."

She rested back, and I'd never seen anyone look so adorable just by tilting their head. "I suppose a guy like you already has someone, a sweetheart waiting back in your hometown, in Texas. And gee whiz, Layla, that certainly wasn't nosy," she said to herself. "I don't know what's gotten into me."

"It's all right, really. Not nosy at all. I get the same question a lot. I'm always traveling and working. I don't think it would be fair to any woman, so there's no one." Right then, Rocky came bounding back to the towel and sat on me. "Just me and the sand monster, here."

"Oh, but he's such a cute sand monster and a worthwhile friend, I'm sure."

"That he is."

Her phone beeped. She pulled it out of her bag and pressed her fingers to her lips. “It’s Emily. I can’t just drop the bomb and say ‘Hey, Emi, I’m hanging out with Nash Ledger on the beach.’ She’ll split in two. Literally.”

I laughed. “Literally?”

“Nope, you’re right. The other one. Metaphorically. My sister, Ella, is always correcting me on that mistake. She’s the writer in the family.”

“So, no café or bakery?”

“Nope, that’s Isla and Aria, the two eldest. Ella is in the middle, then there’s Ava. She’s a scientist, and she’s been around the world many times. She teaches at the university.”

“Impressive bunch. So, you’re the baby?” I asked.

“Yes, the spoiled-rotten, over-coddled princess of the family, or so Aria likes to say whenever we’re not getting along. It’s all right because I call her the elderly dictator. But we almost always get along, so those sibling knives don’t come out too often. How about you? Got any brothers or sisters?”

I nodded and realized then that I left the house without my phone. I was never without it since the accident. It seemed whenever I left it behind or couldn’t look at it, Becky called with some sort of emergency. “I’ve got a twin sister, and now that you bring her up, I need to get back up to the house and check to see if she’s called.”

Layla watched, puzzled, as I hopped to my feet. “Hope it wasn’t something I said.”

“No, not at all. This has been really nice. My sister is taking care of my mom. Mom had an accident a year ago, and she’s still recuperating. Becky, my twin sister, calls

me when there's a problem. I raced down here to make sure Rocky wasn't bothering you and forgot my phone."

"That makes sense." She peered up at me with a smile. "So, dreamy and a good son and brother—nice combo. Emily has good taste."

"It was really great finally meeting you, Layla. I guess I've got Rocky to thank for that."

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“Any time you need me to watch him, you know, if you’re busy or need to rush back home to Texas, I’m happy to have him.”

“Thanks, that’s really kind.”

“It’s the least I can do for my human shield.”

I left with the image of her incredible smile etched in my mind. I’d finally met someone who I wanted to get to know better, but she was playing matchmaker for her best friend. Story of my life.

### ChapterNine

Layla

The whole house smelled like a movie theater. I’d returned from the beach starving for lunch, but the refrigerator was pitifully bare. And the cupboards weren’t much better. Microwave popcorn had seemed like my best option, but now as I nibbled it from the bowl I wasn’t so sure it was a great choice after all. I’d allowed it to go just those few crucial seconds too long, resulting in a slightly singed flavor. Unfortunately, my choices had been limited.

Technically, four of us lived in the cottage, and we traded off grocery duties. It was Isla’s week, but she’d been so busy with the bakery and with planning a wedding, she never got around to shopping. The small cottage, slightly leaning and drafty in the winter, was usually filled with food and people, but Ava was rarely home anymore now that she’d found Jack. Ella was home often, but today she’d gone up to



Grimstone Manor to help Rhett pick paint colors. Aria lived in town, closer to the café, so I had the place mostly to myself these days. Sometimes that was nice, but most of the time I hated it. I'd grown up with so many sisters and all of us close in age, I'd rarely been alone. With all of them in solid relationships, I was feeling abandoned. That was the reason I'd stuck it out with Dustin longer than I should have. I wanted a significant other to fill in the void my sisters had left behind.

I nibbled the overly salty, super greasy popcorn with one hand and scrolled through my phone with the other. Moonstone was now in my Instagram feed. There were some gorgeous pictures of the lead singer. He really was something, and kind, too, and he had a super cool dog, always a bonus. I couldn't believe that the man Emily had been talking about nonstop for months was now my neighbor.

I should have picked up my phone straightaway and called Emily to give her the big news, but I'd held off. I wasn't entirely sure it was my place to step on Nash's privacy by revealing where he was living. And when I mentioned the possibility of them meeting, he seemed less than enthusiastic. He probably had so many women after him, he had to always keep his guard up. If I told Emily, she would probably end up camping on my driveway just to "accidentally" bump into him. On the other hand, I was feeling somewhat traitorous about not telling her. She was absolutely bonkers about the man, which, in turn, reminded me why it was probably best not to let her know he was living next door. Of course, if she eventually found out, she'd be really mad at me for not telling her. It was quite the conundrum.

Normally, this would have been one of those topics I'd talk out with a sister. Probably Ella because she was best about giving her opinion without a lot of judgment behind it. Aria always added in judgment, but her advice was usually solid. Isla used to be one of my favorite sisters for advice, but now she was my boss, and she was a starry-eyed bride-to-be, so the dynamics there had changed some. Ava always had a much more worldly view about problems, and this wasn't a worldly problem. This was just me and my best friend since elementary school, and there was

a boy involved. With Emily, there was always a boy involved. In ninth grade, she'd followed Scott Evans around like a puppy dog, badly wanting him to ask her out, so when he asked me out instead, I had no choice but to turn him down. I never told Emily, of course. But this was different. Nash hadn't asked me out. He'd just moved into the cottage next door. And for now, I'd leave it at that. I didn't want to intrude on his privacy. It seemed he had a lot going on in his life, and the last thing he needed was for my best friend to camp out on his doorstep.

The front door opened. I heard Rhett's deep voice before he and Ella stepped inside. She was holding several bags of groceries. Rhett came in from behind with a few more. My sister stopped a few feet in the door and wiggled her nose in the air like a dog at a barbecue. "You burned the popcorn. Now we'll be smelling it for weeks."

"I opened the patio door, and it's not really burnt. I'm eating it, but now I see that a wondrous amount of groceries have walked in the door, so I've been saved from eating the rest."

I hurried over to help Ella with the bags. "I thought it was Isla's week," I said.

Ella scoffed. "Isla is so bogged down with her bakery and the wedding; she hardly remembers her name right now."

I nodded in agreement. "It's really disconcerting, isn't it? Isla is usually the steadiest and most grounded of us all."

Ella put her hands on her hips. "I thought I was the down-to-earth sister."

Rhett kissed the top of her head as he sidled past with his bags. "You just spent an hour in the attic because you were sure you'd heard a ghost up there."

I laughed. "Well, was there a ghost?"

Ella huffed. “No sign of one, but seriously, how on earth does that massive mausoleum of a house—a house, may I remind both of you, that is considered cursed due to a parade of untimely deaths—how does a house like that not have a ghost? I mean the two go hand-in-hand. Big, creepy old house and restless spirits.”

“Not loving your description of my house as creepy and old.” Rhett leaned into the refrigerator with two cartons of milk.

Ella tilted her head at him as he emerged from the fridge. “Do you have a better description?”

Rhett’s eyes rolled up to give it some thought. “Nope. Guess that’s why they pay you for your words.” He held up a package of sliced turkey. “Should I bother to put this away, or are we making sandwiches?”

“Hmm, yes, sandwich, please,” I said. “I’m starved. Had a very exhausting morning sunbathing on the beach.”

Rhett pulled a loaf of Isla’s bread out of the bread box. “You two, go relax and prepare to be amazed by my sandwich-making ability.”

Ella shook her head slightly at me to warn me it wasn’t all that amazing.

Rhett cleared his throat. “I saw that.”

Ella swung around and blew him a kiss. “Can’t wait for your sandwiches.”

“Yeah, well, they might not be great now because my confidence has been shaken.”

I grabbed Ella’s hand and dragged her to the couch. “Need your advice. I’m caught in the middle of something, and I think I’ve made the right decision, but I want your

opinion.”

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We sat on the couch, and seconds later, wonderful Rhett carried out two glasses of iced tea. “Ladies.” He set the glasses on the table. “Your lunch will be right up.”

Ella looked at me. She was wearing a huge grin. “Doesn’t he make an adorable butler, a Rhettbutler?”

Rhett played along with theGone with the Windcomparison and bowed. He was one of those ever-elegant men, even dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, like today. His beard stubble was pretty heavy, too, but that only made him more appealing.

Rhett returned to the kitchen to fix the sandwiches. Ella leaned forward and grabbed the teas and handed me mine. I took a few good gulps to wash away the salty grease from the popcorn.

“So, what calamity am I solving this afternoon?” Ella asked.

“Not sure I’d label it a calamity, and I’m not entirely sure it can be solved. Emily has this massive crush on the lead singer of a band.”

Ella nodded. “Sounds about right. Your friend can be a little over the top with her obsessions.”

“I know. I love that Emily is passionate about things, but sometimes I wish she’d tone it down, especially when it comes to falling in love. We went to see the band last night, and I thought after standing in a hot, crowded bar, some of the shine would wear off. She almost had one of her infamous panic attacks. I talked her down before it gripped her. Then we went out for pancakes, and all she could talk about was Nash

Ledger, the lead singer. She's determined to meet him and win him over."

"Well, let her go on thinking that. You know Emily, some other shiny object will be dangled in front of her in a few months, and she'll shift her obsession." Ella sat up straighter. "Wait. Nash Ledger of Moonstone? Oh, he's gorgeous. Rhett, remember I told you there was a band I wanted to see in town? We should go."

Rhett walked out and crossed his arms. "Let me tell you a little story that will let you know how I feel about that prospect. I once took a girl to a Green Day concert. Spent a week's pay to buy tickets right up front. She was madly in love with the singer, and she spent the entire concert screaming his name and blowing him kisses up on stage, while her date"—he pointed to himself—"Mr. Chump, stood next to her holding her coat and purse. I spent a week's pay to act as a hat stand, and to top off the evening, we had to listen to their music the whole way home. She talked about him the entire drive and insisted more than once that he winked and blew kisses back to her. It was all in her imagination. Needless to say, I learned my lesson on taking a girl to see her rock star crush in concert."

Ella blinked up at him for a second. "You could have just said no. And I'm a little past the screaming and blowing kisses stage. Unless he's really worth it." She blew Rhett a kiss. He returned to the kitchen, and she turned back to me. "I'm still trying to find the calamity in all this."

"Again, calamity was your word," I said. "Here's where it gets tricky. This morning, while I was on the beach, I met our new neighbor."

"Did you? Who is it? A family?" Ella was usually more astute than this.

"It's him," I said.

Ella smiled weakly. "Okay, it's a him." She looked puzzled.

I grunted in frustration.

“It’s the gorgeous lead singer,” Rhett called from the kitchen.

I tapped Ella on the arm. “See, Rhett got it, and he didn’t even see this arched brow.” I pointed to my eyebrow. “An eyebrow that was obviously trying to convey a big ta-da moment.”

Ella waved off my sarcasm. “You’re telling me that Nash Ledger is living next door in Audrey’s little beach cottage?”

I nodded emphatically. “That is exactly what I’m telling you. So, do I tell Emily or not? I don’t want to intrude on his privacy, but at the same time, if Emily finds out, she’ll think I’m a traitor.”

“How does he look in person?” Ella asked.

“Really? And they call me the flighty one? Focus, woman, focus, and may I remind you that your extremely attractive boyfriend is slaving over the stove—well, over the kitchen counter—for us at this very moment? But since I know you’re going to ask again—he’s head-to-toe dreamy, and he seems to be a good guy, too. And he has a cool dog.”

Ella sat back with a serious furrowing of her brow. “So, your dilemma is—tell Emily or don’t tell her. Gosh, Layla, I don’t know which way to go here. Which way are you leaning?”

“I thought it best not to tell her because she would probably camp out on the driveway to see him. Not good for any of us, especially Nash. I’m sure he already has plenty of problems fighting off fans.”

Ella's eyes rounded. "He's that hot, eh?"

Rhett cleared his throat. "Still here, just a few feet away in the kitchen."

"And you know I adore you," Ella called back. She turned to me for confirmation.

I nodded. "He's pretty spectacular."

"But what if Emily finds out that he's been living right next door to you and you didn't tell her?"

I sighed. "And that is where the problem lies. She'll be so angry and hurt and betrayed and all the bad stuff that goes along with something like this."



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Ella sat up with an idea. “Just play dumb. If she finds out, pretend you didn’t know.”

“I thought of that, but it seems like lying.”

“It’s definitely lying,” Rhett added as he carried the plates out to the front room.

“See, I’m not sure I can pull off a whopper of a lie like that. It’s bound to slip out.” I sat back with a growl of frustration. “For now, I’m not going to say anything. I actually hoped I could introduce them at some point, but Nash didn’t exactly jump at my suggestion. I’m sure he’s really busy. Oh, well, I’m starved, and your incredibly hot boyfriend has fixed us sandwiches that look so good they’re practically dancing on the plate.”

Rhett smiled as he settled into the big armchair with his plate. “Have I mentioned that Layla is my favorite Lovely sister?”

Ella looked at him incredulously.

“Well, after Ella, the ghost hunter, of course.”

I laughed as I picked up my sandwich. “What are you planning to do if you do find a ghost in the house?” I asked.

Ella shrugged. “Haven’t gotten that far yet on my plan, but it sure would make a great story.”

ChapterTen

Nash

I climbed out of the truck. The early morning sun was still working its way through the fog that rolled in the night before to blanket the town. The cold mist had brought a reprieve from the heat, but I was certain once the fog burned off, the sun would beat down on the worksite with all its might. My work boots felt hot on my feet, and I hadn't even started the day yet. It was early, but there was already a line outside the bakery. I considered getting in the truck and forgetting about the pastry, but the line seemed to be moving quickly. I'd been telling myself I badly wanted to try a pastry, but I knew my real reason for stopping in at the bakery. I just needed to see her, get a glimpse of her, and hopefully take her smile with me to the workday.

The two women in front of me paused their conversation to glance back at me. One whispered something to the other and then giggled. I glanced at my reflection in the window to make sure I didn't have something on my face. My gaze looked past the reflection. She was standing under the sparkling chandeliers inside the shop, smiling at a customer as she handed him a box of baked goods. I hadn't been imagining it. She was incredible.

"Hey, aren't you that singer?" a guy asked from behind.

I glanced over my shoulder and nodded. Something about the guy looked familiar, but I couldn't place the face. "Yeah, how's it going?" I said with a chin lift and turned back around.

"So, you work construction? That's your day job? I'd have thought you were raking in enough money with your music to not have to work."

I smiled. "Well, I wish that were the case, but it's not." I faced forward again. It was my turn to step into the bakery. In those few seconds, Layla spotted me, smiled sweetly and then that smile turned to a frown. Total disappointment. The guy behind

me had slipped in, too, and my memory was jogged. It was him; the man Layla was hiding from outside the bar.

I reached the counter and was disappointed when one of the other women behind the counter stepped up to help me. Layla was helping a woman who was buying several loaves of bread that needed slicing and packing. Her smile hadn't returned, and her thin shoulders looked tense as she pushed the bread through the slicer. It wasn't exactly the bakery visit I'd been hoping for.

"Uh, I'll have two cheese Danish," I said.

The woman turned away to get the pastries. Layla wasn't making eye contact with anyone. She was tense as she rang the woman up. Then it was his turn at the counter.

Layla's mouth was pulled tight. "What can I get you?" she said coldly to him.

"Layla, I'm not here to buy anything."

"Then please step aside, so I can help the next customer." Layla waved her hand, and the weasel reached over the counter and grabbed hold of it.

"Let go, Dustin," she said quietly not wanting to cause a scene in her sister's bakery. Unfortunately, the scene had already started.

"Please, Layla, I saw you the other night at Comstock. I was so broken up about you running from me that I couldn't even go back inside. Let's talk. Please."

"I'm working, Dustin."

When he didn't let go, I stepped over to their section of the counter. I leaned down and spoke quietly into his ear. "Let her go ... now."

He peered sideways at me. “This isn’t any of your business.”

I looked at him. “You’re right, but if you don’t let her go, you’re going to be walking out of here with far fewer teeth than when you walked in.”

Dustin released his grip. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Layla rubbing that same wrist. I really did want to knock some teeth out.

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“Are you threatening me?” he asked. His face crinkled like a whiny little kid.

“Me? Hmm.” I tapped my chin. “Yeah, I guess I am, but that’s only because I asked you nicely the first time and you didn’t listen.”

Dustin stuck out his chin, glared at Layla, then sneered at me before leaving. I looked up again, and Layla had disappeared into the back. I paid for my pastries and walked out. Dustin was nowhere in sight, but after seeing him in action, it seemed Layla had good reason to hide from him. He had a problem.

I’d reached the truck when I heard Layla call me. “Nash, wait.”

Layla hurried to me in her pink polka dot apron. Her hair was pulled back off her beautiful face. She stopped just short of me and lifted her hand to brush away a fallen strand of hair. I took gentle hold of her hand to look at the red marks on her wrist.

“Now I really wish I had knocked out his teeth.” I let go of her hand.

“It looks worse than it is.” She peered up at me. “I just wanted to thank you for stepping in ... again.” Her lips turned down at the ends. “I had no idea he was going to be like this. It’s really disquieting. I’m deleting all my dating apps. I’m done trying to meet the right man. I always end up with the wrong man. Dustin has been a good lesson. So, thank you again.”

“The dating apps aren’t worth the trouble.”

She reached up and tucked that same strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re not going

to tell me that Nash Ledger is on dating apps. You must get inundated with requests for a match.”

“You’re right, I’m not on there, but for the same reason as you. The matches never worked. And I never added singer of a rock band to my profile because yes, then I’d get inundated. But when I’m just Nash who works construction and enjoys mountain biking and hanging out with friends, then I get a normal number of requests.”

“Right. A normal number. This guy in front of me.” She shook her head. “Not buying it.” I was relieved to see she wasn’t still upset about Dustin’s visit to the bakery. “Well, neighbor, I guess I’ll see you around. By the way, how is my favorite guy in the whole world?”

I pointed to myself, knowing full well who she was referring to.

Her smile had fully returned. I was relieved to see it. “Well, since you’ve stepped in to save me twice, I suppose you should be my favorite guy right now, but my grandmother taught me never to lie. I’m talking about Rocky.”

“Yeah, I sort of figured that. That guy steals my thunder all the time, and he never even has to threaten to knock anyone’s teeth out. If I know my dog, and, I do, he’ll be spending the next eight hours curled up on the couch, sliding off like a boneless fur bag several times to nibble on his kibble and lap up some water.”

“Eight hours. That’s a long time to spend alone. You know, I get off at half past two. I could take him down to the beach or out on a walk. Oh my gosh, please let me take him on walks.”

Everything about her was irresistible, and on top of it, she was nuts about my big, messy, mannerless dog. “Rocky would love that.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out my keys. “Here, take this key. I’ve got a spare one at the house. His leash

is on the hook by the door, and there's a canister with poop bags attached. I have to warn you, he's not always the best on a leash, especially if there's a cat or squirrel involved."

Layla nodded. "I'll keep watch for enemy intruders on our walk. Well, what do you know? The day started crummy, but it's gotten way better. Can't wait to take Rocky out for a walk. Thanks. Oh wait." She crinkled her small nose. "This is awkward. I don't think I've ever asked a man for his number, but since I'll have the highly sought-after and highly respectable job of Rocky's dog walker, maybe it'd be a good idea to exchange numbers. It's all right if you don't want to give it out. I'm sure being famous and all that?—"

I laughed. "Right. Famous. My good friend, Mick Jagger, did advise me not to give my number out to anyone except hot women, so I guess that rule still holds. Really, I don't mind at all. In fact, you're right, it's a good idea what with your important position and all. Although you might rethink 'highly sought-after' once you've been out in the world with my goofy dog at the end of a leash." I took out my phone, and she pulled out hers. We traded them and put in our numbers. The hard part would be not picking up the phone to talk to her just because I wanted to chat.

There was a slightly awkward exchange of smiles as we handed our phones back.

She pointed her thumb over her shoulder. "Better get back before my boss gets mad. I'll keep you posted about the walk."

"Looking forward to it." I watched her stroll back to the bakery. "Lucky damn dog," I muttered as I climbed into the truck. At least Rocky was going to get to be part of Layla's life, and, since I was his owner, I supposed that meant I'd see more of her, too. It was a win-win, and those didn't happen often.

I pulled out a pastry and took a bite. "Jeez, that's good."

## ChapterEleven

Layla

The workday was winding down, and it had started with a bang. I walked to the back to help Isla clean some baking pans. “How are you doing after the incident with Dustin?” Isla asked.

She wiped her hands on her apron and walked over to the sink where I was stacking pans. “I was thinking, maybe you should have Dex talk to him, you know, give him a little scare. Nothing bad, just enough to make him understand that it’s in his best interest to let this whole thing go.”

“I know Dex would relish the idea,” I said. Aria’s boyfriend, Dex, was built like a freight train, and no one messed with him. He was very protective over all of us, but sending Dex to see Dustin seemed like overkill. “Like I said, someone stepped in this morning, and that seemed to do the trick. Dustin scurried out, red in the face, and thankful to be leaving with all his teeth.”

“That’s right. You said it was our new neighbor, who also happens to sing in a band, and who your friend Emily is nuts about. I guess she has good taste.”

“She sure does,” I said under my breath. Isla couldn’t hear me over the clanging of pans.

I finished my closing chores, blew Isla a kiss and hurried out the door. I was anxious to get home and change for the dog walk. Ava and Jack were having lunch on the back patio when I arrived at the cottage. I poked my head out to say hello, but they were so involved in their flirty lunch neither noticed me.



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Jack was one of those cool professor types, with rolled up shirt sleeves and an intellectual-ish look on his face. Although, the whole academic aura was shattered when I looked out and caught Ava hand feeding him a bite of her chicken sandwich. Ranch dressing dripped on his chin as he nodded his head in approval.

“I always wondered what went on behind the closed door of the staff lounge at college,” I said.

Ava and Jack laughed as they looked toward the door. Jack wiped the ranch dressing from his chin with a napkin. “I suppose you thought we were all sitting at tables exchanging dissertation nuggets and scholarly opinions,” Jack said.

“Well, I certainly didn’t think you were exchanging sandwich bites. I’m just here to change, and then I’m taking the neighbor’s dog on a walk, and I’m ridiculously excited about it.”

Ava turned more my direction. “Which neighbor? What dog?”

“The man who’s renting Audrey’s cottage has the coolest big dog. His name is Rocky. Carry on with your lunch.”

I always smelled like sugar after a day at the bakery. I normally showered after work, but something told me Rocky wouldn’t mind the scent. I pulled on shorts and sneakers and went out to the kitchen for a quick snack and glass of water. My plan was to walk Rocky down the road all the way to the end, where the public beach access trail started. It was a relatively quiet road, and aside from Mr. Roberts’ barking dogs behind his front gate, there weren’t many obstacles to pass.

I walked next door and pushed the key in the lock. Rocky started barking. I opened the door. “Hey, Rocky, it’s me. Your new best buddy.”

Rocky leapt off the couch, knocking over the guitar that was leaning against the sofa. It made a clamoring noise, which panicked the dog. He scurried over to me and sat down with a worried look. I rubbed the top of his head. “It’s all right. No damage done.” I walked over and picked up the guitar. There were some sheets of paper with words and musical notes scribbled on them in pencil. Emily mentioned that the band had been sought after for a record deal, but they didn’t have enough original songs for an album. It looked as if Nash was working on one of those songs. The papers had been sent into disarray from Rocky’s sofa dismount, so I straightened them. My eyes just happened to pass over some scribbled lyrics. “Copper hair and a smile that could break a heart in two.” I stared at the words a second, then shook my head with a laugh.

Rocky’s cold nose pushed against the back of my calf. “Well, sir, we’re going on an adventure.” I headed toward the hook with the leash, and Rocky bolted past me, sat beneath it and started twirling his tail around fast enough to cause a breeze. He sat perfectly still like a gentleman as I attached the leash to his collar. I smiled, pleased with myself for handling this like a pro. Then, I opened the door, and he shot out like a torpedo. I pulled the door loudly shut behind us and followed behind like a kite on the end of a string as Rocky headed down the driveway to the road.

“Whoa, there, buddy. You’re pulling too fast.” My feet finally caught up to him, and once the tension on the leash lightened, Rocky slowed his pace. He dropped his head to start a sniffing extravaganza like I’d never seen before. His nose must have brushed over every blade of grass, every crack in the sidewalk, every mailbox post before he finally tired of sniffing. He lifted his big head and trotted proudly ahead of me, tail in the air and ears shifting forward and back. We headed toward the small green space at the end of the road. It wasn’t a park, more of a big shade tree with a bench below it.

After marking some territory, Rocky returned to sniffing mode. His tail began to wag wildly as he picked up the scent of something that excited him. His head shot up and he barked once. A squirrel dashed out of a nearby shrub and ran for the tree as if his tail was on fire. Stupidly, I hadn't braced myself for what would follow. Rocky bolted, and the leash left my hand. He ran for the tree and, once at the trunk, got up on his hind legs. His two front paws were halfway up the tree. His ears fell back as he stared up into the branches.

My body relaxed with relief as I reached him. I was sure he'd take off at a full run, and I'd have to chase him. He was so fast I'd never catch him and then I'd have to let Nash know that I'd lost his dog. Rocky stayed there, pressed against the tree, in a dog-squirrel game of chicken.

It was such a funny sight; I pulled out my phone and leaned in with Rocky for a selfie. "All right, Rocky, I think we've pestered the squirrel long enough. Let's go."

He released a doggie sigh of defeat as he pulled his paws off the trunk and started back toward the road. My phone rang as I pushed it into my pocket. It was Emily. I froze. I wasn't exactly sure why. Actually, I knew why. Walking Nash Ledger's dog was like a massive act of betrayal. I hadn't even let my best friend know that I was living next to her crush yet, and here I was out walking his dog. Maybe it was time to come clean. As Ella liked to point out—no one dealt with guilt worse than her baby sister, and she was right. One time I borrowed Jenny Furman's pretty ladybug pencil sharpener, and I liked it so much I didn't return it. I put it in my backpack hoping she wouldn't notice it missing. By the time I got home, my stomach hurt, and I was in tears. I spilled out the whole confession to Nonna in loud sobs. She walked me right over to Jenny's house to return the sharpener and apologize. I felt better, but the guilt of my indiscretion made it hard for me to ever look Jenny in the eye again.

I considered letting Emily's call go to voicemail but decided to just confess. "Hey, Emily, what's up?" Rocky trotted ahead, once again tail in the air and ears on alert.

Now that I knew how he'd react to a squirrel, I was ready.

"I'm on my lunch break."

"Wow, that's a late break." Rocky stopped to sniff some shrubs, so the walk was paused.

"Tell me about it. I was so hungry it felt like my stomach was chewing itself. We had a sale, and the shop was packed. I love summer, but it's hard work."

"I know. The line to get in the bakery lasted until eleven o'clock." I was about to mention the incident with Dustin, something I would have normally called her about right away, but I didn't want to explain how it ended. I now had two stories that involved Nash Ledger and both were the kind of stories that you'd definitely relay to your best friend, but I couldn't talk about either of them with Emily. At least not right now.

Rocky's nasal inspection was interrupted when a cat decided to meander across the street. The cat looked the dog's way with that typical cat arrogance and kept walking at a leisurely pace. Cats were smart, and this one knew his big furry nemesis was attached to a leash that was attached to a human, so he could stroll across without worry. Rocky didn't react as wildly as with the squirrel, but his tail started wagging and he barked.

Emily laughed. "Did you just bark?"

"Yep, been taking bark training. Woof, woof."

"I hope you're not paying too much for that training. Are you out on the beach?"

She'd given me an out. I could just say yes and mention that there was a dog out on

the sand, but lying always came with guilt, and I was having such a great time on my walk with Rocky, I didn't want to spoil it with a stomachache.

“Actually, I'm out walking this big, wonderful dog named Rocky.”

There was a pause. “You got a dog, and you didn't tell your best friend?” Boy, if only that was the big secret I was keeping.

“He belongs to my neighbor, the man renting Audrey's cottage for the summer. He has to work all day, and I told him I didn't mind taking Rocky out for a walk in the afternoon.”

“Well, you've always wanted a dog. I guess that's the second-best thing. What's he like?” she asked.

“Big and shaggy, sort of like a Muppet with a long tail.” We reached the end of the road and began to circle back. We walked on the opposite side, so Rocky could gather up a whole new crop of smells.

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“I meant the owner, the new neighbor. You said it was a man. What’s he like?”

It was my turn to pause. Just out with it, Layla. “Well, Emi, now try to absorb this information with dignity and decorum, all right?”

She laughed. “Uh, okay, Miss Big Vocab, I think I can handle that. What—is he some kind of serial killer or something?”

I scoffed. “Would I volunteer to walk a serial killer’s dog? For that matter, what would a serial killer be doing in a cozy cottage on the cove?”

“I don’t know—trying to blend in with the summer crowd?” She grunted. “All right we’re getting into one of our comedic, senseless debates. Obviously not a serial killer, so what’s the big deal? Why the warning?”

“It’s Nash Ledger,” I blurted it so fast I might have said Lash Nedger.

Emily clucked her tongue. “All right, I guess I’m not going to get the truth out of you because I only have fifteen minutes left on my break.”

“It’s the truth, Emi. I was waiting for the right time to tell you. I didn’t want to intrude on his privacy, so I didn’t say anything yesterday ... when I found out it was him.” My voice trailed off because of the deafening silence coming through the phone. She was so quiet I could hear the muffled voices of customers in the shop. “Emi?”

“You’re telling me, your best friend of many years, the friend who held your hand as

you sobbed at your grandmother's funeral, in fact, the friend who sobbed right along with you, that you've been living twenty feet away from Nash Ledger, the man of my dreams, my future husband, and now you're even out walking his dog? What else haven't you told me? Let me hear it so I can feel the full weight of betrayal all in one shot."

"See, this is why it was so hard to tell you because even though I had nothing to do with him moving in next door, I knew you'd blame me for it, like it was something I planned. And it's more than twenty feet to Audrey's door. It's at least fifty feet. And you know how much I love you, Emi, and you were so supportive after Nonna died. That alone makes us sisters in spirit for the rest of our lives."

"You're deflecting. Fine. I know you didn't plan this betrayal, but you should have told me. When can I meet him?"

I laughed. "Cool transition there from betrayal to how can I meet him. I'm not sure, Em. I don't want to be that pushy neighbor, hey, come for a party, hey, let's meet for coffee, hey, come meet my best friend, she's nuts about you." And then it hit me. I'd already told Nash that part. Emily sensed there was more to my sudden silence. She couldn't read my mind like my sisters, but she could get pretty darn close.

"What aren't you telling me?" She groaned sadly. "No, don't tell me he's married. How dare he? He never mentioned it on social media. He's got all of us spending our days dreaming about him, and all this time he's been married. Are there kids, too? Please don't tell me there are two adorable twin toddlers who look just like Nash."

"Whoa there, bestie. You're spinning out of control. He's not married and I'm walking his only child, and he looks nothing like Nash. However, he is just as adorable."

"Phew. So there's still hope." Emily seemed to be talking more to herself than to me.

“When can I meet him?” And there it was. My main worry coming to the surface.

“Let me see what I can do.” She squealed, but I talked through the squeal. “No promises, Emily. He’s a busy man, and like I said, I’m not going to be a nosy, pushy neighbor.”

“No, but you got yourself a pretty sweet dog walking job. Was it your suggestion?”

I blew out a puff of air. “It was.”

“Aha. So, you like him, too. I guess that puts me at a big disadvantage. For one, I’m not a beautiful, sparkly Lovely sister. I’m just a sidekick friend. And two, hmm, where was I going with two? Oh, that’s right. Proximity. You’ve got proximity on your side.”

“Are you done now, you crazy woman? I would never try for him, and I’ve got my two reasons, too. One, you love him, and so that puts an end to it because you are my best friend who held my hand and sobbed with me through Nonna’s funeral. Plus, you always gave me half of your Hostess Twinkie at lunch. Those aren’t the kinds of things I dismiss easily. Two, uh, you’re right, it’s hard to hold onto all the thoughts—that’s right, two—I offered to walk his dog because as you well know since we’ve been besties since your ketchup-mustard days, I’ve always wanted a dog to hang out with. And Rocky is super cool, dare I say even cooler than his owner.”

“Don’t see how that’s possible, but I suppose you’re right. I’m acting crazy. I’ve got to get back out on the floor before dragon lady snorts fire. We’ll talk about our plan to get me hitched to Nash Ledger later. And be careful with that dog. He certainly won’t fall in love with the best friend of the woman who lost his dog.”

“I’ll try my best. Bye.”



Before I pushed the phone into my pocket, I decided to send off the photo with Rocky standing at the tree. I wrote “there was a squirrel” under the picture and sent it to Nash, then I put the phone in my pocket. Rocky glanced back at me, and I was almost sure I spotted an eye roll. Apparently, he didn’t approve of me spending part of our quality time on the phone. “Sorry, you have my full attention now. Let’s forge ahead, pal.”

## Chapter Twelve

Nash

“Hey, Ledger,” Brian, the foreman, cupped his hands around his mouth to call up to me, but since I was only two stories up it wasn’t necessary. He had a booming voice. “Take your afternoon break and remember to hydrate. It’s hot out here.” Also, not necessary since it was easy to notice the heat. Things had changed since I started working construction right after high school. Back then, we would have never gotten an afternoon break no matter the weather, and the word “hydrate” would never have left the foreman’s mouth. My first foreman was a guy with the nickname Tank, and it fit. I never even knew his real name, but I had a few good mental ones for him whenever he found it necessary to yell at me for doing something unavoidable like dropping nails or tracking dirt onto the plywood subfloor. Rain could have been pouring down on his crew in sheets, and he’d expect us to carry on. There were tons of accidents, but in those days most accidents were just pushed aside, and you were asked “Can you still work? If not, go home and don’t come back until you can lift a hammer.” One time I cut my thumb badly on a cardboard cutter. I wrapped an old rag around my hand and kept working because I didn’t want to lose the hours. I must have bled all over the damn site because by the time the workday ended the rag was soaked red. That would never fly nowadays. There were a lot more rules and regulations, and my eighteen-year-old self would have appreciated that.

I adjusted my tool belt and climbed down the ladder. My truck was in walking

distance, and I had a jug of ice water and two bananas on the front seat. I walked toward it, opened the door and instantly regretted leaving bananas in a closed truck. It was too hot inside, so I grabbed the fruit and water and walked over to the picnic tables, where a few other workers were taking a break. I sat next to Sid, a guy who'd been working construction for thirty years and had the leathery skin to prove it. He'd been talking about retirement all day. Apparently, this was his last job and then he and the "lil' missus" were moving to Florida, and it was going to be nothing but "golfing and piña coladas until they chuck me in a six-foot hole."

"Hot today, eh?" Sid asked as he sipped a can of soda.

"Sure is." He said the same thing every day as if there was some big change in weather that we'd all missed.

"How come you young kids only drink water?" he asked as I took a swig from my jug.

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I sighed with satisfaction. “Cuz it’s the only thing that quenches thirst in this kind of heat. That soda would only make me thirstier.”

“No way. There’s nothin’ like a cold can of cola to quench thirst.”

“Nah, Sid,” his friend Tony said. Tony was ten years younger, and had also been pounding nails since he was a teenager. “Nash is right. You need water on days like this. Especially with that whole diabetes thing going on inside that rusty old tin can of yours.”

I half-listened to the conversation as I pulled out my phone. For safety reasons we weren’t supposed to look at our phones until we were on break. Becky hadn’t called or texted, which was a relief. It meant things were going all right at home. There were a few texts from Bosco about switching up the song list and one from Ronnie about needing a lift to the gig Wednesday night, and there was a text from Layla. I opened it and stared down at the photo. Rocky was supposed to be the center of the picture, but I was far more interested in the woman standing next to him. She was leaning her head sweetly toward my big dog as he stretched up on the trunk of a tree apparently trying to reach a squirrel far above.

“Whooee, nice dog and nice gal.” I could smell Sid’s Italian sub as he breathed over my shoulder. “Is that your girl?”

“My neighbor. She’s walking my dog.”

“Now that is what I call a fine neighbor. Lucky you.” The bench wobbled as Sid and Tony got up to return to work. I had a few more minutes, so I considered texting her,

then decided it was a long, hot day and hearing her voice would be a nice boost to get me through the rest of it. I was thrilled that she picked up on the first ring but reminded myself not to read too much into it.

“I did warn you about the squirrel obsession,” I said.

Layla’s laugh sounded amazing through the phone. “You did and I’m embarrassed to admit that I thought you were exaggerating. I wasn’t quite ready for his reaction, and he broke free. He raced to the tree and stopped there. I think we’d still be standing there if I hadn’t coaxed him along.”

“Believe me, you would be. Rocky has the attention span of a fly, but when it comes to squirrels, he’s like a grandmaster chess player just waiting for the squirrel’s next move.”

“Well, other than the squirrel incident, we had a wonderful walk.”

“I feel like I should pay you something for doing this.”

“No way. I’ve been wanting a dog for a long time, but we never had the time or space to give one a proper home. This is purely for my pleasure. You’re helping me fulfill a dream.”

“I think Rocky feels the same way. I’ve got to get back to work. I really appreciate this. Maybe I could take you to dinner sometime. It’s the least I can do.” She was quiet on the other side. Real smooth, Ledger. She just got done with one stalker, and there you are trying to trick your way into a date.

“You don’t need to do that,” she said finally. Her voice didn’t sound the same. “You know, it would be great if I could bring Emily over to meet you one day. I don’t want to intrude on your privacy, but she’s absolutely dying to meet you. It would mean a

lot to her ... and to me. I hope you don't mind that I mentioned you lived next door. I wasn't going to because, again, the privacy issue, but she's my closest friend, and I couldn't keep such an important secret from her."

I was feeling a little gut-punched about her response. She was making it clear that she had no interest in anything beyond being a friendly neighbor. "Uh, yeah, no problem. We'll work out a time so I can meet Emily." I put my jug back in the truck and slammed the door shut harder than necessary. "Thanks again for walking Rocky."

"My pleasure. See you later." She hung up.

"Luckiest damn dog in the world," I muttered as I headed back to the worksite.

## ChapterThirteen

Layla

Isupposed I shouldn't have been the least bit surprised when Emily showed up unexpectedly at my door. Her hair was neatly plaited into a French braid, and she was wearing a new shade of shiny red lipstick. I could smell her perfume long before she stepped inside.

"Oh, hey, I was bored, so I thought I'd drop by and see my very best friend in the whole world." She plastered on a big smile.

I rolled my eyes. "Drop the act, Emi, I know you far too well to fall for it. Come inside. Ella and I are making some salads. Do you want one?"

"Salad, ew, no, you know I don't likegreenfoods." Emily patted her purse. "I brought my Moonstone CD collection for some autographs."

I stopped and turned to her. “Emi, I told you I’d have to talk to him and set something up. We can’t just walk up to his door and knock. We’re not going to do that. It’s rude.”

She waved off my statements. I loved Emily, but sometimes she could be annoying. “I’ll just hang out. Maybe we’ll see him out on the beach. I mean, it’s a public beach, so anyone can walk along down there, including me.” She walked to the kitchen window, which gave the best view of the cove but only half of the sandy beach.

Ella smiled down at the chopping board as she sliced celery. “You’ll have to go out on the patio to see all of the beach below.”

I shot her a “gee, thanks” look, and she shrugged.

Emily swung away from the window. “She’s right. What was I thinking?” She glanced at the bowls of salad and wrinkled her nose. “Do you have anything cold to drink? Oh wait, never mind. I don’t want to mess up my lipstick. What do you think?” She’d told me about the bold shade of red she bought online.

“Very nice, but if you’re thirsty, I’m sure you could sip some tea gently.”

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She shook her head. “No, I’ll wait until after we?—”

I raised a brow. “Until after we?”

“Well, you never know.” She walked to the purse she’d dropped by the sofa, pulled out a stack of CDs and headed out to the patio.

The glass door was open, and there was only a screen between us, so I lowered my voice considerably. “I told her I’d set something up, but here she is. I’m not going to walk her over there, no matter how much she begs and pleads.”

Ella handed me my salad and a glass of tea. “How did the dog walking go?”

“It was a blast. He’s very cute and funny.”

Ella looked over at me. “The dog?”

“Yes, him too, but the owner—he’s really charming.”

“And incredibly good-looking,” Ella added.

We stepped out onto the patio. Emily was on her tiptoes staring down at the beach. “No sign of him yet, darn it.” She stomped back to the table and sat down with a plunk. I busied myself with the tasty salad, even knowing full well that she was staring at me so hard, she might have drilled holes through the side of my face.

“Did Rhett find that clawfoot tub he was looking for?” I asked Ella, deciding to

ignore the harsh gaze coming at me.

Ella was finishing a bite of salad, but she nodded. She took a sip of tea to wash down the bite. “It’s an antique that’s been restored. He’s trying to buy mostly antiques from the era when the house was built, so that the restoration is authentic.”

“That’s a great idea. That house is going to be so beautiful. Who knows? Maybe one day you’ll be mistress of the manor.”

Ella laughed. “That does sound like a position I’m well suited for, doesn’t it? Me and my striped socks and sweatpants. I guess you could call it casual elegance.”

“Well, we could get you a corset and bustle to wear under your sweats.”

We had a good laugh and continued with our salads. Emily grunted in frustration and got up from the table. She walked to the end of the patio and hopped up on tiptoes to keep watch over the beach.

Ella leaned closer. “She’s really obsessed with him, isn’t she?”

I nodded. It wasn’t her first obsession, but it was certainly her fiercest.

Emily squealed as I took a bite of salad. She spun around and clapped quickly and lightly. “He’s down there. First, I saw the dog and then I saw him and—” She raced over to me and grabbed my hand.

I dropped the fork into my salad. “Jeez, Emi, you’re going to take my arm out of the socket.”

“We need to go down there now before he goes back to the house since my best friend won’t take me next door for a proper introduction.”



“It seems we’re overusing the whole ‘best friend’ label these days and for nefarious, almost blackmail-style purposes.” I got up reluctantly. In a way, this was good. I could get the introduction over with, and we wouldn’t have to show up at Nash’s door.

Ella was a little too amused about the whole thing as she chewed her salad behind a big, smirky grin.

“Fine, let’s go,” I said.

Emily pulled me along to the trail that cut down the hillside and led to the beach below.

Halfway down, I stopped. “What about your CDs?” I didn’t want her to come up with an excuse to bother him again.

Emily bit her lip in indecision. She looked up toward the patio and then down at the beach. Nash and Rocky were walking down by the water. The sun was just starting to set. The dying light highlighted the man beautifully. Emily released a soft sigh. “Forget the CDs. I just want to meet him.” She gave me a pleading look.

“Since he’s out on the public beach, I guess it wouldn’t be too much of an invasion of privacy.”

We continued the trek down to the sand. Strangely enough, I felt a slight surge of nerves as we reached the sand. I was sure it had only to do with me being fretful about bothering Nash when he was out on a walk. Even out on the public beach it felt intrusive.

We were only a few steps across the sand when Rocky spotted me. He barked wildly as he raced toward us.

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Emily backed up in fear. “That’s a big dog. And he’s soaking wet.”

“It’s all right. He’s friendly.” I held out my arms. Rocky bounded up to me and hopped up on his back legs. He braced his front paws against me like he’d done with the tree. “You big, wet sweetie.” I rubbed his head.

Emily had been so taken aback by the dog; she hadn’t noticed that Nash was heading toward us until he called Rocky.

“Rocky, get over here.” Nash reached us. He looked down at the wet, sandy paw prints on my shirt. “I’m sorry about that, Layla. He’s such a clown around you.”

I rubbed the sand off my shirt. “You know I love that about him.”

Emily nudged my arm. The dog was no longer a concern, and her entire focus was on the man standing in front of us. I could swear she’d stopped breathing as she stared longingly at him.

“Nash, this is my best friend, Emily.” I added in the “best friend” qualifier to make sure he knew this wasn’t just any acquaintance but the woman I’d been telling him about.

Nash’s smile flashed white in his tanned face. “Nice to meet you, Emily. I hope Rocky didn’t scare you too much. He tends to get a little wild when he sees Layla.”

Emily finally released that breath, and it came out as a laugh that was edged with hysteria. I sensed that she was barely holding it together. “No, no, he didn’t scare me

at all. I love big dogs.” She reached toward Rocky and then rethought it and retracted her hand. Emily had been bitten by a dog when she was four, and so it naturally followed that she was never a dog person. She stood with the oddest smile plastered on her face, and I knew there were a hundred questions she wanted to ask him, but she’d been stunned into silence by his nearness.

“So, you’re out for a sunset stroll, eh?” I asked, since it seemed my normally loquacious friend had forgotten how to speak.

Nash glanced toward the ocean and the horizon line that was now being muted with splashes of pink and orange. “Since I grew up landlocked and a good four-hour drive from any ocean, I love to come down here just before sunset. Everything, the sand, the water, the sky and even the birds, morph into this incredible watercolor canvas at this hour.”

“I agree. When we were young, my sisters and I would hike down here with our paper pads and paint sets and paint the sunset. None of us were Van Gogh, that was for darn sure, but we still had a blast.”

I hadn’t meant for it to turn into a conversation between just the two of us, but Emily was still standing like a starstruck, lovestruck fan. I knew just how to bring her into the conversation.

I took her hand. The gesture startled her out of her trance. “Now, Emi is an amazing artist. I used to be so envious of her in art class. The teachers always used her work as an example, and her art won ribbons at the county fair.”

Nash smiled at her. “That’s so cool. I’m like Layla. I envy people who can draw and paint.”

Emily practically melted into a puddle. “But you’re so talented on the guitar, and I

love your original song 'Without You.' I tear up every time I hear it."

"That's kind of you to say."

Emily had regained her composure. "Is it about someone in particular, or do I want to know? Because if there's a girl behind it, I'll be positively heartbroken, both for you and for me, because I like to pretend it's about me." (She'd really regained it.)

Nash laughed. "It's not about anyone. Just came up with the melody, and to be honest, Ronnie helped me write the lyrics. She's the true poet of the group." His gaze flicked my direction for a second, and it felt like something caught between us, something that was significant, intimate almost. It sent a shockwave through me, and I felt it keenly after he pulled away his gaze. Was I falling for Nash? Ugh, that was the last thing I needed, especially with the way Emily felt about him. I pushed away the thought. It was pointless to even consider.

"I'll be at your show on Wednesday night," Emily told him. "I've got some CDs that I would love for you to sign. Maybe I could meet up with you backstage." (And my occasionally pushy and always determined friend was entirely back.)

"Uh, yeah, I'm sure we can manage that." Nash raked his fingers casually through his short, dark hair, and Emily stared at him with such adoration it was hard not to laugh. "I'm going to head back up. I've got a frozen pizza in the oven," he said.

Emily's eyes sparkled. "I love frozen pizza."

"Yes, well, we've got one up in the freezer," I told her with an admonishing look. "It was good seeing you again, and I'm going to take Rocky out tomorrow, if that's all right?"

"Of course. He'd love that." Nash looked at me once more, and there it was again,

that moment that felt far more intense than it should have given the context and casual conversation.

Emily and I stayed on the sand for a few more minutes, mostly so that Emily could catch her breath before climbing back up to the cottage.

“I think he was inviting us to pizza,” she said.

“I think you were hearing what you wanted to hear.” I took her hand, and we started back to the path.

“He’s even dreamier than I imagined, and trust me, I imagined a lot of dreaminess. Do you think he liked me?” she asked.

“Oh my gosh, Emily, how could I possibly know that after a short conversation on the beach?” I stopped and looked at her. “Just remember, Nash has a ton of fans who are all just as crazy about him as you are.”

She smiled slyly. “Yes, but they don’t have direct access to him like I do.”

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“And that is where you are wrong. There is no direct access. Spotting him on the beach is one thing, but that’s where the intrusion on his privacy ends. Got it?”

I didn’t like that she was still wearing that plotting smile. “Right. Got it. Does that mean you don’t have a frozen pizza?”

I pulled her along. “C’mon, I think we’ve got one.”

### ChapterFourteen

Nash

It was Wednesday, so I’d hoped for a smaller crowd size. The summer heat had made the bar hot and stifling, but people were still trickling in long after it seemed the room was packed to capacity. I’d been looking for one, and only one, face in the crowd. I saw her friend, Emily. She’d found the same spot up front near the speakers and was standing with another woman. Layla wasn’t with her.

I was glad when the last set was finished. Bosco had been in a bad mood all evening, and it seemed the rift between us was getting wider and deeper. I knew this was still about the European tour. I planned to talk to him, to all of them, while we were packing up the van. I realized I was ready to let this whole thing go, the band, the nightly gigs, the constant movement around the country. Unfortunately, I needed the money, so I’d have to find another way to supplement my day job.

“Nash! Hi, Nash,” a voice called down the hallway. “Let me through, Betty, he’s a friend.” It was Emily. Betty was blocking her from walking down the corridor.

“It’s all right, Betty. Like she said, she’s a friend,” I called.

Betty rolled her eyes and begrudgingly allowed Emily to walk through. Betty had unofficially appointed herself as our band’s one-woman security team. Emily practically flew down the dark, narrow passage. A smile nearly split her face in two.

“Thanks so much. I didn’t think she was going to let me through,” she said breathlessly. “She’s always such a grump. You were amazing tonight. I had to leave my friend, Raylene, out in the barroom because I didn’t want to bother you too much. But you said you’d sign my CDs.”

I was hot and thirsty. “Follow me. I’ve got to get some water, then I can sign them.”

Ronnie looked up from her phone when we walked inside. She raised a brow. “Uh, Ronnie, this is Emily. She’s a friend of Layla’s, the woman who’s been walking Rocky.” I grabbed a bottle of water and offered one to Emily, but she declined.

Ronnie looked pointedly over at Bosco who was putting his guitar away. Ronnie knew Layla was the woman Bosco tried to hit on at the last show, and her rejection had put him in a bad mood for the rest of the night. He hadn’t noticed the exchange. Or, at least, I thought he hadn’t.

He clicked shut the guitar case. “You hired a friggin’ dog walker for that mutt of yours?”

“My friend, Layla, lives next door to Nash,” Emily added excitedly.

Bosco shrugged. “Well, that’s convenient.” Then his face turned up. “Wait. Layla?” Bosco looked at Emily. “You’re her friend, the napkin phone number,” he added, unnecessarily.

“That’s right. You were talking to Layla that night.” Emily put on a sweet frown. “I’m sorry she didn’t give you her number. She’d just broken up with a guy, and he didn’t make it easy—if you catch my drift.”

“Whatever,” Bosco said rudely. He shot me another glower and snatched up his guitar case. “Let’s get the van packed. I’m beat, and I wanna leave.”

Seth popped his head in right then. “Van doors are open. Ronnie, are the drums ready?”

“Not sure, let me ask them. Oh, that’s right. They’re not living beings, so they’re probably ready.”

Seth held out his hand in question. “What did I say? Jeez, maybe you should carry them out on your own.” Seth left. We were all tired, and the stage lights had made the room extra hot.

I smiled weakly at Emily. She was still standing with a smile as wide as the Grand Canyon.

“The CDs?” I asked.

“Oh, right.” She tapped the side of her head playfully. I guzzled the water as she dug into her purse and pulled out three CDs and a purple pen.

I started signing them. “Why didn’t Layla come with you tonight?” It seemed like a perfectly reasonable question, but something about it shrank her giant smile.

“Why didn’t Layla come?” she repeated. Her tone had lost its enthusiastic, lyrical quality.



“Just wonderin’.” I shrugged to let her know it was no big deal, but she read it as something entirely different. Maybe she wasn’t wrong about that. The truth was—for the last two days at work, I’d rushed to pull out my phone at break time, hoping there’d be a text or photo from Layla. It seemed my usually comedic dog hadn’t done anything entertaining enough to warrant it.

“Uh, yeah, she has to work early, so she didn’t want to come out tonight.” The boisterous Emily had grown quiet. I finished signing the CDs and handed them back with a smile and wink.

“Thanks so much for listening to our music. It’s people like you who keep us playing and singing.” I was working hard to repair whatever it was I’d just done, but she smiled faintly, and that was when I noticed her eyes were glassy with tears.

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“Emily? Is everything all right? Should I get your friend?”

Emily shook her head and sniffled. “No, I’m fine. Thank you for signing these.” She held up the CDs, then dropped them in her purse.

“Sure thing and hey, maybe we’ll meet again down on the cove.”

Emily nodded, turned and hurried back down the corridor.

Seth tapped the side of the doorjamb. “I need help with the drums. Bosco is out front talking to a couple women. Only time I’ve seen him smiling all damn night, so I decided not to interrupt.” Seth looked around the room. “Is your cute fan gone? I saw her standing up near the stage all night. She never took her eyes off you.”

I ignored his comment. “I can help with the drums.”

Ronnie, Seth and I got the drums packed in the van just as Bosco came around the corner with a wide grin. “He must have gotten a number,” Ronnie said. “Maybe now the ride back to the rental house won’t be so miserable.”

Bosco reached us.

“Hey, guys, I think we need to talk,” I said. I figured catching Bosco in a good mood was as good a time as any.

“Can’t it wait until tomorrow?” Ronnie asked. “I’ve got a bubble bath with my name on it waiting at the house.”

“It won’t take long, Ronnie.” I looked over at Bosco. He’d crossed his arms and put on his best look of indifference to let me know nothing I said was important to him.

I forged ahead. “Look, I know you’re all really disappointed about Europe, and I’ve said this before, but I’m going to make the offer again. Just go without me. Seth can handle the vocals, and maybe you could hire that guy, Jason, the one who subbed in on keyboard after Seth broke his hand. Then you’d have a full band.”

Ronnie was shaking her head. “No can do, buddy. I brought that up to Esther, the woman setting up the tour, and she said they only wanted Moonstone with you on lead vocals. So, you see, the rest of us are just the expendable riffraff of the group. You’re the one they want.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you should ask her again,” I said.

“What part of that little speech didn’t you get, Ledger?” Bosco snarled. “It’s you they want. The rest of us are expendable. I’m beat. Let’s go.”

They got into the van. I watched them drive away and walked over to my truck. I climbed inside and pulled out my phone. No messages from Becky. I tossed my phone aside and started the truck. Tonight felt like the beginning of the end of the band, and that hurt almost as much as it relieved me.

## ChapterFifteen

Layla

“Sticky. I’m always sticky,” I told Isla as I walked into the back. She had a streak of flour on her forehead. I pointed it out on my own forehead, and she reached up with a heavily floured hand and added to the original streak.

“Better?” she asked.

“I guess that’s one way to look at it.” I walked over to the sink to wash the glaze off my fingertips. “I think there’s too much glaze on your cinnamon rolls.”

Isla looked up from her mound of bread dough. Worry creased her brow. “Did one of the customers complain?”

“No, just me. I’m covered with it all the time. When I was at the café for lunch, I ordered a burger. It tasted like cinnamon roll glaze.”

Isla waved off my concern and set to work kneading the yeast dough. “People really like those cinnamon rolls.”

“Gee, how crazy is that? Soft buttery bread wrapped around cinnamon and brown sugar and dripping in sugary glaze. And people actually like that stuff?”

Isla shook her head. “All right, Miss Sarcasm, start washing those pans.”

“Yes, boss.” I smirked at her. My phone was ringing in the office. “Wonder who could be calling right now.” I gave her my little-sister, pretty-please look, and she nodded her head toward the office. I hurried in to answer it. It was Emily. I’d told her to call me with all the band night details, but it was strange that she was calling before I got off work.

“Hey, Emily, I’m just about to wash pans. Can I call you?—”

Emily’s snuffle came through the phone.

“Emi?”

“Do you like him?”

“Uh, gonna need more context, Em. Do I like who?”

She sniffled again. “Nash Ledger. You like him, don’t you? Because he certainly likes you. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have asked about you last night.”

“So what if he asked about me? He knows we’re friends. Do you know how many times I get that same question when I’m out and run into someone we both know?”

“No, it wasn’t the question he asked. It was the way he asked it. Disappointment. I could hear it in his tone. He was thoroughly disappointed that you weren’t there.”

“So, you’re an expert on intonation analysis now? Emily, you’re reading too much into a simple question.”

“You didn’t answer me,” she said. “Do you like him?”

“He’s a really nice guy, and he has this great dog and?—”

“No, I’m not asking about the dog. I want to know if you like Nash Ledger, and you know what I mean by the word ‘like’ so don’t twist it.”

“Emily, I don’t know what you’re going on about. I walk his dog, and we live on the same road, and he’s only a temporary resident. That’s all there is to it.”

“So, you’re not interested in Nash and you’re not seeing him—you know—secretly,

behind my back?”

“I’m seeing his dog, so if that’s a problem for you, then too bad, because I like Rocky.”

“I’m sorry. I’m being a crazy person. I was sure I noticed something, something in his expression when he asked about you.” Her tone was far less strident. “Do you promise not to start seeing him?”

She’d calmed down and then turned right back to crazy town. “Fine, whatever, I promise. This is all stupid because he’s just a temporary neighbor. Gosh, I just realized that Rocky will be leaving, too. Now you’ve ruined my mood. Thanks a lot, pal.”

She giggled. “A little payback for the tossing and turning I suffered through last night as visions of my best friend kissing and holding hands with my future husband dashed through my dreams.”

I shook my head. Sometimes Emily could be too much, even for me. “I’ve got to get back to work, Emi. Try to find some gravity and come back to earth. Sometimes your dreams detach you from reality, and that’s when they’re no longer dreams but problems. He’ll only be in town for a few months?—”

Emily gasped excitedly. “A few months? I thought he’d just be here a few weeks. How come you didn’t tell me?” There was a touch of accusation in her tone. I was done with the call.

“Seriously, Emi, just listen to yourself. I’ll talk to you later. And I promise that there is nothing going on between Nash and me. Goodbye.” I hung up, and my last few words still hung in the air. Something about them made my limbs feel heavy. I shook off the feeling and left the office.

Isla looked up from her work and spotted something in my face that made her stop what she was doing. “Everything all right?”

I blew out an exasperated puff of air. “Just Emily being Emily. I love her, but sometimes she can be a lot.”

Isla smiled. “Trust me, we all know that. Are you walking the dog again today?”

That question brought a smile back to my face. “Sure am. I better get to work on these pans because my new best friend will be anxious for our date.”

## ChapterSixteen

Nash

Sid and I had been framing walls on the second story all morning. The sun was beating down so hard, Sid’s face was red and beaded with sweat. I turned back and noticed that he looked unsteady on his feet. “Whoa, Sid, you all right?” I raced over and took hold of his arm.

“Feeling a little dizzy.”

I whistled down to the foreman who was standing on the first floor. “Brian, need a little help up here. I think the heat has gotten to Sid.” I led him over to a stack of lumber that was shaded by a tarp, and he sat down with a plop.

“Guess you and Tony were right. I need to swap my colas for water occasionally.”

“I think that’d be a good start.”

Brian and his assistant, Jeremy, climbed the ladder to our work area. Brian was

holding an emergency bag and a bottle of water. “Jeez, Sid, you look terrible. Why didn’t you say something earlier?” Brian looked up at me. “Good call. Jeremy and I will take it from here. Why don’t you take your lunch break early, and don’t forget to hydrate.”



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I crouched down in front of Sid and patted his hand. “Hope you feel better.”

“Thanks, kid, I’ll be fine. Not much can take down Sid Stratton.”

I climbed down the ladder and walked to the truck for my lunch cooler. I glanced at my phone. There were two voicemails—one from Ronnie and one from Becky. Becky hadn’t called in several days, which wasn’t unusual, but today she’d left a message to call her. The inside of the truck cab was too hot, even for a short phone call. I grabbed my water and pulled open the tailgate to sit on. It was hot, too, but not as suffocating as the inside of the truck.

Becky answered. “Hey, Nash, how are things there at the beach? Hot like here?”

“Actually, yeah, the sun is blazing today.” I glanced up to the work section I’d just climbed down from. Jeremy was taking Sid’s blood pressure while Sid drank a bottle of water. He looked better already. “How’s Mom?”

“She’s fine. Grumpy today, but then that’s usual.”

“Constant pain can do that to a person. That and her whole life came to a crashing halt after the accident. She was always so active and busy, and now she’s stuck on a couch.”

“You’re telling me something that I’m painfully aware of, Nash,” she said snippily. I probably deserved it. She was right. No one would know better than Becky.

“That’s one of the reasons I called. Do you have a minute?”

“Yeah, just started my lunch break.” Across the way, Jeremy and Brian were making sure that Sid got safely down the ladder. I was relieved to see he was all right.

“First of all, I got a quote for one of those walk-in shower and tub combos. Eight thousand with installation. I’m not sure what you would do with one if it wasn’t installed. Anyway, Mom doesn’t want one, and there’s a chance she might not need it.” It seemed one of Becky’s new, big ideas was about to be dropped on me. She spent a lot of her day researching ways to help Mom, which was great, only the solutions usually came with an unaffordable price tag.

“I figured one of those walk-in combos would be six to eight grand. What’s your new idea?” I hadn’t meant to sound condescending, but apparently, I’d missed the mark.

“Great, so you’re already saying no before you hear what I have to say.”

“You’re right, Beck. Sorry. Go ahead. I’m listening.”

“You know how I’ve been part of this support group for people taking care of family members with debilitating injuries?”

“Yes, how’s that going?”

“Actually, really good. We meet on video chat once a week. There’s this guy, Oliver, he’s taking care of his brother who had a skiing accident that nearly paralyzed him. Oliver’s actually kind of cute, and wow, I just said that to my twin brother. I really need to connect with my girlfriends again. Anyhow, ignore that last part. Oliver told me about this orthopedic specialist who specializes in traumatic back injuries. He has great reviews online. People say he gave them their lives back. His main office is just an hour away, in the city, so I called and got lucky. They had an opening for a consultation. I took Mom there yesterday, and Dr. Burman looked over all her medical records and MRIs and X-rays. He thinks he can help get her back on her

feet.”

“Wow, that does sound promising. What does the insurance company say?”

The silence that followed answered the question for me.

“Let me guess,” I said, “they won’t cover it.”

“Of course not. They say it would be an elective surgery. Can you imagine? A surgery that would put her back on her feet would be elective.”

“How much is it? Or do I want to know?”

“Let’s just say we could put a walk-in tub in both bathrooms and then buy two each for the neighbors. It’s around sixty-thousand.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“We’ve got to do something. Now that Mom’s heard the encouraging news, she’s excited about it.”

“Damn, Becky, how are we going to swing something like that? The house is already mortgaged.”

“I was thinking maybe we could do one of those crowdfunding things, you know, and use your social media to help it flourish, only Mom says she won’t accept charity. She says it’ll make her feel pathetic because there are other people out there who need more help than her. I tried to explain to her that it wasn’t really considered charity, but you know, she’s from a different time. There’s just got to be a way we can come up with the money.”

“Give me some time to think about it. Anything else? Are you guys good on money right now? I don’t get paid until next Friday.”

“We’re good. Any chance there’ll be an extra forty grand in your paycheck? A summer bonus for working in the hot sun?”

“That’d be sweet, but I won’t get my hopes up. I’ve got to eat, so I can get back to work. I’ll give it some thought. Bye.”

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I was surprised when I called and Ronnie answered. She hated talking on the phone. “Hey Nash, you got my message?”

“You mean the one that said, ‘call me, there’s something up?’ That’s why I called you.”

“Someone’s feeling ornery. Well, like I said in the voicemail, there’s something up.”

“Something good, I hope, because that would balance out the conversation I just had with Becky.”

“Is your mom okay?”

“Yeah, I mean, she’s the same, but Becky found some specialist who thinks he can help her.”

“But it will cost a million-trillion dollars, and the insurance company will only cover ten percent?”

“Something like that. What’s up?”

“I think it’d be better if we all have a meeting. We haven’t had one in a long time, and frankly, it feels like when we’re not on stage, then I’m the only person holding this band together.” She sounded aggravated, and she was right to be. She’d been keeping our scheduling and social media together, and it wasn’t fair. We paid her a stipend for it, but it wasn’t nearly enough. “Come to the house tonight at seven. I’ll order some pizzas, and I’ll just warn you that Bosco has been in a terrible mood all

day.”

“What else is new? I’ll be there. Hey, and get one without pepperoni. Can’t stand that stuff.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. See you then.”

Sid was inside the office trailer. I assumed they were calling his wife to come pick him up. I’d be framing alone for the rest of the day. I carried my cooler over to the picnic benches that were shaded by a pop-up canopy. Two coworkers, Greg and Sam, were eating their lunches.

“Hey, Ledger, what happened with Sid?” Greg asked.

“I think the heat finally got to him. He drinks sodas to hydrate,” as I said it, I noticed that Sam had a can of orange soda in his hand.

Greg looked over at him. “Told you so.”

Sam shrugged. “Sid’s got fifteen years and fifty pounds on me. Besides, I just like sodas with my lunch. I drink water all the time.”

I sat down.

Greg lifted his chin at me. “Did you hear? There’s a problem with the rough electrical inspection. Looks like the electricians will have to redo some things, or the inspector will shut down the worksite.”

It was the last thing I needed. “For how long? Is it a sure thing?”

“We’ll know more by the end of our shift today,” Sam said. “Frankly, I’m looking

forward to a little time off. It's so blasting hot out here. I might take my board down the coast for some surfing."

Greg shook his head. "The life of a bachelor. Neither of you have to worry about some lost hours because you're not supporting a family. Even a few hours less on the check is a hardship."

I didn't respond and focused on my sandwich. If this was the bachelor life, then I was definitely doing something wrong.

## ChapterSeventeen

Layla

Rocky pranced ahead of me, tail and head high. He'd scared a few sparrows out of a shrub and was feeling pretty darn good about it. I finished work feeling a little uptight and upset about my conversation with Emily. She was taking all this way too seriously. I knew she had a major crush on Nash. She really had her sights set on the man. My intuition told me all of this would end in a big disaster with me having to console Emily and her broken heart.

Rocky pulled in the direction of the tiny park. He was hoping to meet up with his squirrel nemesis at the big tree. Nose to ground, he led me that direction, then stopped beneath the tree to stare up into the branches.

"I don't think he's here today, Rocky. Sorry to disappoint."

Right then, Rocky's big head snapped in the direction we'd just walked. He growled low and angrily at something. I looked in the same direction but didn't see anything, not even a bird.

He barked once, and it startled me. I looked back again but still didn't see anything. "C'mon, you're just making up invisible things because you're sad about the squirrel."

We kept walking. An onshore breeze had carried in some puffy white clouds but not enough to shade the hot sidewalk. Even Rocky looked like he'd had enough. "Let's turn around. We're both going to need some water."



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The big dog stopped again, lifted his head and growled. I glanced around, and this time I got a chill, a creepy-crawly feeling that someone was watching me. It was probably only because Rocky was acting oddly, but still, I was anxious to get back home.

Thankfully, that was the end of Rocky's growling episode. He started pulling as we got within sniffing distance of his house. We reached the door and went inside. Rocky walked straight to his water dish, and I hung up the leash. The pile of note pages and the guitar were back in the same spot. I took a moment to have my own daydream about Nash Ledger. He was sitting on the couch in just his board shorts with a guitar across his lap while he strummed out a melody for a new song. His rich, amazing voice was singing the words. Rocky's cold nose popped me out of the very nice daydream.

I patted his head. "You want a treat?" Nash had left a box of dog treats for after the walk. I handed him a snack, patted him on the back and headed out. It had been a long day, and I was ready to just relax at home.

I walked across the yard that separated the two cottages. I'd ridden my bicycle to work and hadn't put it away in the shed yet. I reached it and stared down at the bike seat. Someone had placed a red rose on it. I glanced around frantically, but there was no one in sight. It had to be Dustin. Just when I'd started to relax and get comfortable thinking he'd finally moved on, he did something like this. He might have thought it was a romantic gesture, but it made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Then, an even more distressing thought occurred to me. Had Dustin been following me on the walk? Had Rocky spotted him? Would he do something weird like that? I didn't want to know the answer.

I picked up the rose, tossed it into the bushes and pushed the bike to the shed. My phone rang as I locked up the shed. I pulled it out of my pocket. If it was Emily, I was going to let it go to voicemail. I couldn't deal with her in this manic state more than once a day. All the angst and stress of the afternoon melted away when I saw it was Nash.

"Hi, we're back home. Got the big guy back safely," I said.

"That's great. Did you have a good walk?"

"We did," I said without much conviction behind it.

"Uh-oh, did he chase a squirrel again?"

"No, much to his dismay. No squirrels in sight." I headed to the house. The rose had really knocked me off balance, and suddenly, all I wanted was to be safely inside.

"The squirrels probably sent out a group text letting their buddies know that a big, silly dog was now part of their afternoon."

I laughed. "That could be." I stepped inside and locked the door behind me, something I rarely did. Our little cottage was so off the beaten path, we usually only locked doors and windows at night. Luke and Rhett had lectured us about leaving it unlocked so much. At the time, Ella, Isla and I had rolled our eyes, but now I was starting to see their point. "Hey, Nash, does Rocky sometimes—gosh—I don't know how to describe it—does he sometimes stop and look super alert and growl at things that aren't there?"

Nash chuckled. I could hear electric saws buzzing and nail guns snapping loudly in the background. "You mean his 'I see dead people' stare? Yeah, he does that occasionally at night, in a dark house, but out on a walk? Hmm. Not sure if I've ever

seen him do it. Did it happen a lot today?”

I was feeling foolish for bringing it up. “Oh, just once or twice,” I said lightly. “It was probably just a cat behind us watching to see what the big dog was up to. How is your workday? I can hear a lot of activity in the background.”

“Yeah, the building is going up fast. I’m on a water break. It’s hot. The guy I was working with today got sick from the heat. I thought he was going to collapse.”

“Oh wow, that’s not good. Is he all right?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. He’s near retirement and has diabetes but insists on hydrating with sodas.”

“Probably not the best decision. And this has been an extra hot summer. Rocky was glad to get back to his water bowl.”

“Well, break’s over. Thanks again for taking Rocky out.”

“My pleasure.” I hung up and walked to the window to survey the beach. There were several families with little kids playing in the water. No one looked out of place. No sign of Dustin. I was letting my imagination run away with me.

I’d been thinking about a swim all day, but now it didn’t sound as inviting. I headed in to shower away the sugary stickiness of the day.

## ChapterEighteen

Nash

It was only Seth and Ronnie when I got to the rental house. The three of them had

decided to get a place together to save money, but something told me it wasn't working out too well. Even Seth looked as if he'd had enough of bunking with the others.

Ronnie tossed some paper plates on the table. "There's beer in the fridge," she said as she walked past me with a slice of pizza.

Seth was just finishing a phone call. We ended up in the kitchen together. "What's going on?" I asked.

He looked up, surprised. "I thought Ronnie told you."

"Uh, she said I needed to come to the meeting. No specifics given."

"Great. Ronnie, I thought you told him," Seth said as he walked out with a beer.

"Why is it on me? This is all you, buddy."

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“So, you didn’t say anything to Bosco either?” Seth asked.

I stood in the doorway of the kitchen listening to a conversation that had more holes than Swiss cheese.

Ronnie pointed to herself. “Again, why is it on me? You’re just afraid that Bosco is going to blow his stack. Well, I’m not going to be the messenger.”

“Messenger for what?” Bosco asked curtly as he walked in the back door. He was wearing board shorts, and his sandy feet were in flip-flops. He stared down at the pizza and scowled at me. “Cheese? Really, Nash, why can’t you just take the damn pepperonis off the pizza?”

“Lovely to see you, too, pal.”

Bosco scoffed. “I think we left ourpaldays far behind us, Ledger.”

“Seems that way.” I walked out with a slice of pizza and a beer. We waited for Bosco to join us.

Ronnie looked down at Bosco’s feet. “Seriously? You couldn’t wash your feet off before you drove back home? There’s a big cleaning deposit on this place, and we won’t get much back if we’ve left sand in the carpet. In fact, that was a specific request of the persnickety owners—no sand in the house.”

Bosco ignored her and sat down with sandy wet shorts on the couch, dropped off his flip-flops and stacked his sandy feet on the coffee table.

Ronnie looked as if she was about to spit fire at him, and I would have liked to see it. She tamped down her rage by pulling her attention from Bosco. He was obviously just trying to push buttons. “Well, Seth, the floor is all yours.”

Seth stared down at his paper plate for a second. “Guess I’ll just spit it out. Brianna’s dad has offered me a managerial position at his lumber yard. It’s too good to pass up. Having a steady job will help Bri and me qualify for a house, and frankly—” He looked at all of us. “Well, I don’t think I’m the only one who feels like this band is going nowhere and coming apart at the seams.”

“That’s because we can’t do Europe,” Bosco said. “That would have given us a boost.”

I looked at him. “I told you, take the band to Europe. I’m fine with that.”

Bosco glowered at me. “No one wants us without the golden boy, so it’s easy for you to say that—like you’re being a big hero and all that because you know it’s not going to happen.”

I dropped the rest of the pizza on the plate and sat back with my beer. I had nothing else to say to Bosco, and something told me anything I did say would be met with wrath. Obviously, Seth had sensed we were heading for the end, so he’d found himself a good way out. I, on the other hand, needed the extra cash we got from shows. Not that breaking up the band sounded like a bad idea. It was mostly about the loss of income, which if I thought about it, wasn’t a great reason to play in a band. Years ago, it had been about creating music, seeing people excited to hear us, gathering new fans wherever we went, but that just didn’t seem to be enough anymore.

“I think it’s great you found a steady job, Seth, and it does sound too good to pass up.” I looked at Ronnie. “Haven’t heard from you yet.”

“Well, I already knew about it for the last twelve hours, so I’ve had more time to process the whole thing.” Ronnie looked at me. There were tears in her eyes. “Being in this band has been the best thing that’s ever happened to me, but it seems the writing is on the wall. Time for all of us to move on.”

Bosco shoved the coffee table with his feet and stood up. “Yeah, whatever. Good riddance to all of it.” He stormed out. Ronnie and Seth looked at me. They were right. Bosco was my best friend or, at least, he was at one point in time.

I gave him a few minutes out back alone, finished my beer and then walked outside. Bosco was standing at the railing on the deck staring out at a yard that was mostly grass with a few shrubby plants.

“Should have stuck with football,” he growled. “Then my dad would actually have respect for me, and now that the band has failed, he’ll have extra grist for looking down on me.”

“Jeez, Bos, is that what this is all about? Who cares what he thinks? Even when you were playing football, he found reasons to put you down. That was his parenting style, and frankly, you were a lot better at being a son than he was at being a dad.”

He spun around. “What am I supposed to do now?”

“I could put in a good word for you with the construction foreman.”

He turned back around and braced his hands on the railing as he stared out at the small yard. “I’m not standing out there in the hot sun pounding nails into wood.”

“Well, you’re a helluva bass player. I’m sure you can find another band. You must have some money saved from all these gigs.” Unlike me, Bosco only had himself to take care of and worry about.

Bosco's head dropped slightly. I was reading it as embarrassment. "You don't have anything saved?" I phrased it as a question, but I already knew the answer. Bosco loved to spend money. When we weren't working, he was traveling and buying expensive things like cars and three-hundred-dollar shoes.

"I'd lend you some money, but you know where all my earnings go."

Bosco nodded. His shoulders were slumped in defeat. I could remember a time when he was always laughing and joking and enjoying life. That Bosco had slowly been disappearing, and I hated to see it.

"Man, who'd have thought Bosco and Nash, two of the campus big shots, would have ended up like this?"

I laughed. "Like what? You act like we're both living in cardboard boxes out on a city sidewalk. The band has done pretty well, and we've got a following to prove it. We've been packing that bar for our shows. And let's face it, you're the top musician in the group. Ronnie can pound a beat well, and Seth's keyboard skills are good, but you—you're phenomenal on that bass. Critics are always mentioning your incredible skills in their reviews. You were great at throwing a football, but your talent on the field was nothing compared to your talent on the stage. I think once you put out the word that you're looking for a new band, you'll have tons of people contacting you. A new band might just be the fresh start you're looking for."



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Bosco turned and crossed his arms casually as he leaned against the railing. “It’d be nice to get out from under your shadow for a change.”

I shook my head. “Right, well, that’s the end of my pep talk. Take it or leave it or just stand there and let your old man get into your head like he used to do before games. You’d have done way better on the gridiron without his constant lectures hanging over you.” I turned to walk back inside.

“How are they?” he asked quietly. “Your mom and Becky? I know you keep a lot of it to yourself, but I also know it’s always hanging there—the worry, the weighty responsibility.”

I turned back and leaned next to him on the railing. “It’s not good. Things will seem like they’re improving and then there’s a setback, and Becky is starting to fray at the edges.”

“Can’t blame her. Still can’t believe your mom is in such a bad way. Man, she always had more energy than all of us, and she was always in a good mood. I envied you, even though your dad was long gone.” He chuckled. “I probably envied you because your dad was long gone. But your mom—she was always cool. Made me feel good to be at your house.”

I reached up and patted his back. “We had some good times, didn’t we?”

Bosco nodded. “Sure did. So, is that it for you? I know Seth has decided to go mainstream, and I never have to worry about Ronnie because she’s always got so much going on in her life, the band isn’t a big deal for her. I think I heard her talking

to a few friends about an all-girl band. She's probably sick of us lumps of clay."

"Yeah, Ronnie will always come out on top because she works hard at it. To be honest, I haven't given it much thought. I wasn't expecting this bomb tonight, but I've noticed we just aren't cohesive anymore, and I think that's usually the red flag that tells you it's over. I need the gig money, but right now, I don't have the heart or soul to start looking for another band. I've got a good job on the construction site at least until October, maybe longer if we don't finish by then, and maybe they'll hire me full time. I like working with my hands."

Ronnie poked her head out the back door. "Just making sure no blood has been spilled."

Bosco chuckled. "If there had been it would have been this guy's. Is there still pizza left?"

"Yep."

We both pushed off the railing. "Seriously, you couldn't just pick the pepperoni off?" Bosco asked as we headed inside.

"Much more fun to aggravate you." I clapped his shoulder, and he walked in ahead of me. It seemed, for now at least, we'd patched up what remained of our long friendship.

## ChapterNineteen

Layla

Once again, it seemed I would spend the evening alone. I didn't bother cooking anything. It wasn't worth it for one person. I buttered a few pieces of toast and carried

my gourmet dinner out to the back patio. The sun had set an hour earlier, but the cool coastal breeze hadn't settled in yet to drop the temperatures. Heat still radiated in soft billowy puffs off the sand below.

My phone beeped with a text. I hadn't spoken to Emily since she called me at work and basically accused me of having something going with Nash. This whole thing had really pushed her overboard, and I wasn't in the mood to talk to her right now. I hoped she'd come to her senses soon because I missed having my best friend around, especially lately, when I was feeling mostly abandoned by my sisters.

The text was from Ella. "I'll be home late. Rhett and I just started a movie."

"That's fine. Have fun." I put the phone down and picked up my sorry slice of toast. I crunched away on it as I gazed out at the cove. The moon hadn't shown up yet to crease the rippling surface with its usual streak of gold, so the water was inky-black. When we were younger, we'd always go for a swim when the moon was full. The sand would be almost blindingly white on those nights, and the moon showered the dark, choppy tide with glittering light. It always felt way different and more exciting than swimming in the daylight. There were shards of light everywhere, but the sea itself was still black beneath the surface, so we'd giggle with nerves, thinking about what might be down there, below that rugged surface, creatures and monsters we couldn't see. Those same creatures and monsters would, of course, disappear once the sun was back in the sky, but we loved to shriek and scream about all the wildly tentacled possibilities during our night swims.

I was halfway through my very uninspiring dinner when I heard a guitar playing quietly next door. Nash must have had the same idea as me and gone out to his back patio. I sat there for a few minutes listening to him play a song I'd never heard before. It was a good melody, one that was mostly rock and roll and a bit country. It made me sway back and forth as I nibbled my toast. The toast crunching was drowning out the music, so I put it down on the plate and turned my ear that

direction. He hummed along with the tune. Even his humming was rich and soothing. I could have easily walked around our cottage and over to his side and out to his patio, but the terrible conversation with Emily splashed through my head. It was ridiculous really, since we had nothing but a neighborly friendship. Nash had certainly never said or done anything to make me think he was interested, and I'd turned those thoughts off myself because of Emily. I sat back and listened to the guitar for a few more minutes, then stood up. My feet moved in that direction before my brain knew what was happening.

Rocky hopped up first. Nash had been focused on his playing. He turned to see what had gotten Rocky's attention. His white smile was bright under the dim patio light.

Nash put down the guitar.

"No, don't stop. I walked over so I could hear it better."

"That's all right. I'm sort of composed out for the night."

I sat down on one of the patio chairs. "It's an original? I thought as much. I really like it."

"Yeah? Great to hear. It's just something I've been messing with."

Rocky came over to sit next to me. I raked my fingers through the curly fur on his head. "I thought he might be sleeping already after our big walk."

Nash always smiled when he looked at his dog. "Nah, he waits for me to go to bed, but he's definitely much more tired in the afternoon when I get home. I'm sorry if he scared you today. Not sure what got into him. Like I said, he does that at night sometimes, but not usually on a walk."

“Maybe he saw a cat or something,” I said.

“Yeah, but there’s something else, isn’t there? You don’t look convinced by the cat theory, but I sense that it really bothered you.”

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I shook my head. “It’s nothing really. I don’t want to make a big thing about it.”

Nash sat forward and placed his forearms on his thighs. “What happened, Layla?”

I hadn’t mentioned the rose to anyone, but it was still there in the back of my mind, bothering me. “After I dropped Rocky back home, I crossed over to my house. Someone had left a red rose on my bike seat.”

“An admirer?” he asked, then his face smoothed in comprehension. “It’s him, isn’t it? Dustin?”

“I think so. I’m not sure who else would have put it there.”

“Do you think he was following you on the walk?” His jaw and shoulders tightened.

“No,” I said too abruptly. “I have no proof of that. It was just an unsettling afternoon, which really saddens me because I look so forward to my walks with Rocky.”

“Aw, Layla, I’m sorry that happened.”

The look on his face was so genuine with concern, my throat tightened. I forced a smile. “Not your fault and I’m not worried about it.”

“If you need me to talk to him,” he started, but I shook my head.

“I don’t need to bother you with my troubles. I’m sure you’ve got plenty of your own to deal with.”

He smiled weakly. “Is it that obvious?”

“Let’s just say you give a whole different vibe when you’re on stage, but tonight as you hummed along with your guitar, you sounded sad. Anything I can do or say that will help?”

He stared at the ocean. The moon had just started to paint the water with its glow, and that same unearthly glow was reflected in his eyes. “There’s been nothing official yet, but actually, it might be nice to talk about it with someone other than my band. Can you keep a secret?”

I smiled. “Each of my sisters would have a different answer for that, but I’d say yes, I can. Especially when in service of a friend.”

“I’m glad we’re friends, Layla.” Nash looked at me. “Moonstone is breaking up. It’s only just starting to hit me. We’ve been together for a long time, so not playing together is going to leave a pretty big hole in my life.”

Naturally, my first thought was to call Emily with the news. It would be devastating for her, but Nash had asked me to keep it to myself, and I would do exactly that. “Oh wow, Nash, I didn’t see that coming. What happened?”

Nash relaxed back on the chair and shrugged. “It was more or less an expected ending. We were starting to grow apart, and the enthusiasm, the thrill that came with playing in a band and gaining followers had begun wearing off. We had an opportunity for a European tour, but I couldn’t leave the states because of my mom and sister. I told them to go on without me, but the tour was for the whole Moonstone band.”

“You mean, they didn’t want the band without Nash Ledger,” I said.

“I guess, and that didn’t help the rift that was growing between Bosco and me. But tonight, for the first time in a few years, we talked. Not like bandmates but like high school best friends. It was nice, actually. We grew up together, and we were close like brothers.”

Immediately I thought about Emily and how much we’d shared together growing up. Memories that were irreplaceable and would have been entirely different if Emily hadn’t been part of them.

“I’m glad at least that rekindling of an old friendship came out of your decision to break up. Boy, there are going to be a lot of heartbroken fans out there, including my friend, Emily. Don’t worry, my lips are sealed.”

“I’m sure Ronnie will make a statement on social media after we finish up this gig at Comstock. I guess I’m still trying to get a grip on the whole thing. And here I am, coping by trying to write a song—for a band that will not exist next month.”

“No need to stop writing and singing and creating music. It’s good for the soul, I’m sure. And here I came and interrupted. I won’t bother you anymore. I know you were busy with your music. It’s just—I was feeling a little lonely and—” I got up, but he took hold of my hand before I could turn away.

Nash held my hand and stood up. I had to tilt my head back to look at him. He was quite the picture, standing on a shadowy back patio under the starlight.

“Layla, I’m just going to say it—I like you.” He chuckled and released my hand. “Well, that didn’t come out nearly as cool and suave as I hoped. Look, I just think, I think the two of us should get to know each other better. I’d really like that, but ...” His words faded as he looked at my face. I realized then that was exactly what I wanted, only there was a very big, boisterous, daydream-filled impediment in my way. “That’s all right. I get it. You’re not interested, and you’re in the middle of



trying to break free of a bad relationship, and here I am making a move. Not exactly smooth.”

This time I took his hand. “Getting to know you better sounds wonderful.”

“But? I sense there’s one of those coming.”

“My friend, Emily, she’d never forgive me.”

“Emily is not part of my life. She’s sweet, but we’re not ever going to be a couple. It’s you I want to get to know, you I want to spend more time with.”

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I gazed up at him and could feel my heart breaking with each word. “You were just telling me about you and Bosco. Some friendships come with a lot more than just hanging out together occasionally on the weekend. Emily and I have a lot of history together, both good and bad. Emily would never forgive me and then I’d lose my best friend. I know, it sounds strange.” I released his hand, or he tugged his away first, I wasn’t entirely sure. “We’ve always been there for each other, and it feels, it feels like betrayal.”

“I get it, Layla. I’m not going to push the idea, but hey, if you decide you want to get to know me better—I’m all for it.”

“Thanks. Can I still take Rocky out on a walk tomorrow?”

“Oh man, that dog of mine. I need to learn his secret. Yes, of course. But are you sure? After what happened?—”

“I’m not going to hide in the house because Dustin couldn’t handle rejection. And maybe I’m wrong about all of it, and I have some other secret admirer who decided to leave me a rose.”

“That doesn’t sound far-fetched to me at all. Goodnight, Layla.”

“Goodnight, Nash.” I stopped and rubbed the top of Rocky’s head. “Goodnight handsome.”

Nash chuckled behind me as I headed across to the cottage.

## ChapterTwenty

Nash

Ifed Rocky, checked his water and grabbed my keys. A light fog had coasted in overnight giving everyone and all the critters in nature a break from the incessant heat. It was almost cool enough to consider running back in for my sweatshirt, but I skipped the idea.

My phone rang as I sat down behind the steering wheel. An early morning call from my sister was never good. I braced myself for bad news.

“Hey, Becky, what’s up?”

“I wanted to let you know that the specialist, Dr. Burman, had a cancellation on his surgery schedule. He can fit Mom in two weeks from today, otherwise, he’s booked four months out.”

I slumped down in exasperation. She sounded so excited and hopeful ... and pushy, something she was good at. “Seems like you’re forgetting that we have no way to pay for an operation like that.”

“I spoke to the office manager, and she said we could pay it in five installments with the first installment due on the day of the surgery.”

“Beck, that’s like twelve grand. We don’t have that.”

“Are you sure we can’t take more out of the house? Mom thought there was still plenty of equity.”

“Mom’s really up for this too, eh?” I asked.

“I haven’t seen her in this good of a mood in a long time. It’s her chance to be out of pain and become active again.” Becky paused and said something away from the phone. “Mom wants to talk to you.”

“Uh, I’m just on my way to?—”

“Nash, baby, how are you?” Mom sounded weak and nothing like herself. The constant pain and disappointment of not getting better was wearing her down. Becky knew what she was doing. It would be much harder to disappoint Mom.

“I’m good, Mom. How are you after that last fall?”

“Better.” Her voice wavered. “Do you think there’s any equity left in the house? I thought there might be because the house down the street sold for four hundred thousand, and it’s not nearly as nice as ours.” Mom had pushed aside the fact that our house needed a new roof, and the driveway was just patches of cement dotted with weeds. And that was probably only the start of it.

“Mom, we already took out a second, and that was the maximum amount we could take. There’s not enough equity to borrow. It would take more than two weeks to get a loan even if we did try it.”

Her sniffles came through the phone, and they landed like stones in my gut. “I’ve let both of you down so much, and financially, we’re in ruins.”

“No, we’re not in ruins, Mom. I just don’t know how to get the money for that operation. I’m not giving up on the idea. Tell Becky to grab the spot on the doctor’s calendar. We can always cancel. I just need some time. But Mom, no promises, all right? Is there any way you can appeal it with the insurance company?”

“The financial manager in Dr. Burman’s office called them to make the case that this

would help improve the quality of my life, but it was still denied. Apparently, I'm not close enough to death or in enough pain to make it anything but elective. They're not really interested in quality of life. Enough about me, sweetie, what are you up to? How is the band?"

I had no intention of bringing up Moonstone's demise. It would only compound her worries, and she didn't need that. "The band is good. Bosco was asking about you."

"Aw, that's sweet. Give him a hug for me."

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“I’m just heading to the worksite, Mom. I’ll do some brainstorming but no promises. How is therapy going?”

“That guy is brutal, but I have to admit, I feel a little better.”

“That’s good to hear. Tell Becky I’ll talk to her later. I don’t want to be late for work.”

“All right, baby. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Mom.”

I’d considered stopping at the bakery for a pastry (and to see Layla, if I was being honest with myself), but the phone call had thrown off my time. A stop at the bakery would make me late, and while the foreman was cool about breaks and safety, he was a stickler about clocking in on time.

Twenty minutes later I pulled up to the worksite. A few of the guys were taking off hardhats and safety vests. An official-looking county truck was parked at the entrance to the site, and three electrician trucks were parked just past it. The supervisor, Brian, was wearing a frown that nearly touched his toes.

I pulled the truck up to Sam and rolled down my window. “What’s going on?”

“Electricians have the site for the day. There were some problems with the original designs that the inspector caught, so we’ve got the day off. Guess it’s not so bad since it’s Friday. Long weekend.”

“And a smaller paycheck,” I reminded him. I turned the truck around and headed back to Whisper Cove. I’d had only cereal for breakfast, so I decided to head back to town and check out the café. I could have gone to the bakery, but my morning had started out badly, and I wasn’t sure it was going to help my mood seeing Layla, beautiful and amazing, behind the counter and knowing that we were never going to be more than neighbors.

It was far easier than I expected to pick out Layla’s sister from the three women working inside the café. She was beautiful with the same stunning copper hair and brown eyes. “Morning, welcome to Whisper Cove Café,” she said as she looked past me. “Just one?”

I glanced around the room. Most of the tables were filled, and the room buzzed with conversation. “Yes, I can sit at the counter.”

She had a great smile like Layla, but that seemed to be where the similarities ended. Layla had a much more carefree way about her. Her name tag said Aria. I decided to introduce myself.

“You’re one of the Lovely sisters,” I said.

She handed me a menu. “That’s right. Are you in town for the weekend?”

“Actually, I’m here for a few months. I’m Nash Ledger, and I’m renting the cottage next to your grandmother’s house, Audrey’s cottage.”

Her brown eyes rounded. “Our new neighbor. I heard there was a long-term renter at Audrey’s. Have you met my sisters yet?”

“I’ve met Layla. She’s been walking my dog while I’m at work, and Rocky is smitten.” I was, too, I thought wryly.

Aria laughed. “My baby sister has wanted a dog for most of her life.”

Right then, a very big, very tough looking man wrapped in a cook’s apron came out from the kitchen area. “We’re going to need more spinach. The bunches in the refrigerator are wilted.”

“Dex, this is Nash Ledger. He’s renting the cottage next to Nonna’s.”

I received a rather scrutinizing gaze from the man and then he nodded. “Nice to meet you. You’re the one with the dog.”

“That’s right. Rocky.”

Aria turned to him in surprise. “How did you know that?”

Dex shrugged. “Sometimes I’m included in group texts, and Isla, Layla and Ella were talking about Layla’s new furry friend.”

Aria put her hands on her hips. “So, my sisters were having a group chat, and I wasn’t included?”

Dex shrugged again. “Sometimes you’re too bossy. Don’t forget to put spinach on the grocery list.”

Aria turned back to me looking a little flustered and miffed, but there was a slight smile trying to break free. “I’m not that bossy,” she insisted as she filled a glass of water behind the counter. “I mean, if you had four little sisters, you’d be bossy, too.”

“Hey, my sister is three minutes older than me, and she’s been bossing me around since she was able to talk.”



Aria picked up a pot of coffee and pointed at the empty cup in front of me.

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“Please.” I pushed the cup toward her, and she filled it.

“So, Layla is walking your dog? She always wanted her own dog, but we were so crowded in the cottage, and there wasn’t much time for a pet. I’ll bet she’s thrilled.”

“Rocky is even more excited.” The topic struck me with a jolt of worry. Yesterday’s walk sounded as if it had been anything but thrilling. I was home today, so I could go with them ... just in case.

“I’ll let you decide.” She patted a menu and walked out to the dining room with the pot of coffee. The incredible aromas floating from the kitchen were making the decision hard, so hard that I went with a boring favorite, scrambled eggs and biscuits. Aria came back and took my order. She paused before walking away. She tapped her chin with the eraser end of her pencil.

“Is there more to your friendship with Layla? Forgive my forwardness, but I’m the bossy big sister, remember? And, frankly, looking at you—well—is there?”

I chuckled. “You’ve definitely got the big sister thing down, and no, unfortunately, Layla is mostly interested in the dog.”

Aria tilted her head in question, and I realized my mistake. “Unfortunately?” she asked.

“Let’s just say I’m jealous of my dog right now. He’s supposed to be my wingman, but this time it’s been the other way around.”

She tapped the pencil on her chin once more then stuck it behind her ear. “Interesting. I’ll go put your order in.”

I pulled out my phone. There was a text from Becky saying Mom was on the doctor’s schedule, and she added a fingers-crossed emoji. But I was going to need a lot more than an emoji for this one. I had a few ideas, but none of them very promising. I decided to set one of the ideas in motion.

I sent a text off to Ronnie. “Since we’re breaking up, what about your friend Maxwell, the guy who offered to buy some of our songs? Maybe we should consider his offer. We’re all going to need the money.” I sent the text off. It would be a four-way split and not that much money to start with, but every little bit would help.

My guitar was worth some money, but I wasn’t sure how much. That one would hurt a lot more than the songs though. I’d had the guitar for ten years, and it was like an old friend. I put my phone in my pocket. So far, all my ideas would only scratch the surface of the cost of the surgery. On top of that, the band was breaking up, the jobsite was shut down for the day and for the first time in years, I’d met a woman who I could see myself falling in love with, and she had no interest in me. I wasn’t sure how much further south my luck could go.

## ChapterTwenty-One

Layla

The summer weekenders had poured into the bakery all morning. The trays and shelves were almost bare by the time we shut down for the day. I’d ridden my bike to work, and now I regretted that choice. I was exhausted. Isla looked even worse than I felt as I was leaving, and she still had to do prep for tomorrow. Saturday would be even busier than Friday. I told Isla that perhaps her baking was just a littletoogood.

Even after the bike ride home I was still looking forward to walking Rocky. The heat wave we'd been enduring all week had finally broken, and there was a nice, salty breeze to cool the temperature even more.

Ella was sitting on the sofa with her laptop as I walked inside. She looked up and laughed. "You look as if you just ran a marathon, and not in a good way."

"Says the woman who literally leaves her bed, crosses a ten-foot floor and plops down on a lumpy sofa to start her workday. Believe me, you'd look this way too if you'd been on your feet all day, racing up and down the counter and piling sticky treats into boxes. Poor Isla looked as if she might fall asleep on her feet. I sure hope she can find a good baking assistant soon. It's a lot of work for one person."

"How's that been going?"

"It's hard to find people who want to relocate to a small town for work." I poured myself a glass of ice water.

"Yes, but it's such a brilliant small town."

"Well, we think it is, but I suppose it's not everyone's cup of tea." And that statement led me to think about Dustin. I hadn't given him even one minute of thought during my busy day, but now he was back, looming like a great, cold shadow. "I think Dustin has been hanging around the house," I said it quickly, like it wasn't all that important.

Ella closed her laptop. She only did that if there was something serious to discuss. "You mean he's stalking you?"

"No," I said briskly. "I mean, what is stalking, exactly? I found a red rose on my bicycle seat yesterday when it was parked outside the cottage. I don't think that

qualifies as stalking. I can't believe he's still holding out hope that we'll get back together."

"It happens. He obviously has some issues he's dealing with because you made it clear. Are you sure it was him?"

I shrugged. "Who else would it be?"

"What about our hot new neighbor? Maybe he's got a thing for you."

"Nash was at work at the time. And he doesn't have a thing for me, not really, anyhow." I finished my water and headed to the bedroom to change.

"'Not really, anyhow' is definitely not a 'no,'" Ella called to me.

"Word nerd," I called back to her. I took a quick shower to get un-sticky and changed into shorts. Rocky would be wondering where I was. Hopefully, today's walk would be better.

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I crossed the yard and checked my phone for the first time all day. It had been so crazy at work, I hadn't had time to look at it. There was a text from Nash that he was home early, which would explain why his truck was in the driveway. He wanted to walk with us. That notion sent a case of nerves through me, the good kind of nerves. After we spoke last night, I came to the conclusion that I really liked Nash, and if Emily hadn't been in the center of us like a big, brick wall, I would have taken him up on the idea of getting to know him better. On the other hand, it was for the best. A guy like Nash would have a lot of female friends, and he was only here temporarily. It would be hard to fall for a guy, only to have him pack up his truck and wonderful dog and leave town a few months later. This whole episode had taught me one thing—I needed a dog in my life. Since all the sisters had their significant others, it was time for me to find one, too. Only mine would have four paws and a wagging tail.

I found myself a little breathless as I reached the door, and I was certain it wasn't from the short walk across to the cottage. I could hear that same melody from the night before coasting out the open windows. I knocked and that breathlessness turned into a slight tremble as I heard his footsteps cross the entry.

Nash pulled open the door. He was wearing a white T-shirt that contrasted nicely with his tan. "Layla, I wasn't sure if you were coming. I texted you, but I never heard back." Rocky came shooting past him to greet me with an exuberant bark.

I was glad to have Rocky as a buffer because I was still feeling shaky. It was a sure sign that I liked Nash more than I would let myself admit.

I crouched down to talk to the dog. "Hey, buddy, sorry I'm late." I stood up, and

suddenly, Nash and I were just inches apart. “The bakery was busy, and I didn’t get a chance to check my phone. Am I too late for a walk?”

“No way, and Rocky is expecting it. I’m so well-mannered that I’ve left you standing on the stoop. Come inside, so I can put his leash on.” Nash seemed kind of nervous, too, but I wouldn’t allow myself to believe that the lead singer of a rock band ever got a case of jitters, and especially not over me.

Nash walked over to the leash. “I hope you don’t mind me tagging along.”

“Well, you will be a bit of a third wheel,” I said with a chuckle. “But after yesterday’s walk, I welcome the company.”

“Do you think Dustin will be out there again, waiting for you?”

“I know he works on Fridays, so I don’t expect him.”

Nash looked disappointed. He handed me the leash. “I’ll let you have the honor. Plus, I think Rocky prefers it. The weather today is such a change from last week,” Nash said. “Of course, this would be the day the jobsite was shut down.”

“For good?” I asked abruptly. “Is the job over?” I didn’t want him to leave. That much was clear by my frantic reaction.

“No, just for today. There was a problem with the inspection, so the electricians had to come in and fix things before we can continue. You won’t be rid of your new neighbor that fast.” His gray eyes looked blue in the sunlight. They were unusually light and amazing.

Rocky stopped at his favorite shrub. “He likes to clear the bushes of any of those pesky birds.” As I said it, two sparrows flew out. “There. Mission accomplished. I

heard you practicing the song again. I like it. If your band is breaking up, then—never mind. Not my business. Or did you guys change your minds?”

“No, I think Moonstone’s demise is inevitable. It’s just that occasionally something or someone inspires me to pick up my guitar and start composing.”

“There’s no reason for you to stop playing guitar. And who knows? Maybe you’ll find another band to play with.”

“It would be far in the future if I do decide that. I’ve got too much on my plate right now to even think about it.”

I looked over at him and caught him in a pensive moment. He looked undeniably sad.

Rocky led us across the patch of green to the “squirrel tree.” “I’m sure you’ll be back at work on Monday,” I said.

“Yeah, I’m not too worried about that. But I count on money from our shows. I’m supporting my mom and sister, and there’s this really expensive operation, and they’re both expecting me to come up with the money.” He shook his head. “Wow, did not expect all that to come rolling out. Sorry about that.”

We stopped under the tree for some shade and to let Rocky do his nasal inspection.

The look on Nash’s face made me instinctively reach for his hand. Despair was rolling off him in waves.

“I don’t mind. Really. You mentioned an operation? I know you said your mom was recuperating from an accident. Is this something that will help her?”

Rocky concluded that there were no squirrels in the area, so he forged ahead.



“The specialist seems convinced he can help her, but the insurance company has decided a surgery that will help her is an unnecessary, elective surgery.”

I stopped. “They won’t pay for it?”

He raked his fingers through his dark hair. “Not surprising, unfortunately. And then I did something really stupid. I told my mom and Becky that I’d try and find a way to get the money. I didn’t want to disappoint them, and the specialist had an opening. But the more I think about it, I want to kick myself for giving them hope.”

I wrapped my free arm around his. It was just a gesture of support, but as I did it something profound went through me, the crazy notion that having my arm entwined with his felt really right. “I wish I could help. I have about five hundred dollars saved, and it’s yours if you want it. I know it’s not much, but I’m not a good saver. I’m very good at spending, however. My grandmother would give me my allowance and then say, ‘try to make it last a few days, my angel.’”

“Thank you, but I couldn’t take your money. You lived in the cottage with your sisters and grandmother?” he asked. He seemed happy to lift the focus off his problems. I couldn’t blame him. They were big, far bigger than I would have imagined for someone like him.

“Yes, our mom died when we were in grade school. She got sick, and the doctors just couldn’t figure out how to save her. I was the youngest, so I have the least memories of her, but when I think about her, my whole body aches with not having her in my life.”

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“Wow, I’m sorry, Layla. That must have been so hard. My dad left when I was a kid, but my mom was so amazing. She stepped in, and we hardly noticed him missing. She never let us see how badly she was hurt by what he’d done.”

“That’s what it was like with my grandmother, Nonna, as we called her. My dad had to travel for work, and he was more than happy to send us to Nonna. And as sad as we all were, lost little girls without a mother, we were also content and happy with Nonna. She helped us see past our grief to the magic that still surrounded us every day. That’s why we’ve never sold the cottage. It means too much to all of us.”

We stopped at the end of the road where I usually turned Rocky around. He busied himself with the grass along the sidewalk. Nash and I stopped. He seemed better than a few minutes earlier, so I reluctantly released my hold on his arm.

We both looked up from Rocky at the same time, and our gazes smacked together and stayed that way. “Layla, I’ve already laid myself bare once, so I’m going to do it again. I’d really like to get to know you better. Maybe we could just not tell Emily ... at least at first and then we could see which way it goes. I know you just had a rough end to a relationship, but I’m not that guy.”

“No, you’re the guy who has women piling into a crowded bar, dressed in band shirts and screaming at the sight of you.”

“That’s just a band thing. When I’m not on stage, I could walk through that same crowd, and barely anyone would look my way or even recognize me.”

I squinted an eye at him. “Somehow, I don’t think that’s true.”

“Look, if it’s reassurances you want—I already started my day with a giant promise I knew I couldn’t fulfill, so I won’t do it again. I’m sort of floating right now, and I will be even less anchored once the band is through. My track record with women hasn’t been great, but you’re different, Layla. I can’t remember the last time I felt nervous about seeing a woman, but I heard you coming up the front steps, and I swear my heart started racing. I couldn’t wait to see you.”

I sighed in surrender. “Me, too. And this time it wasn’t about the dog. Well, maybe a little of it was about the dog.” Rocky seemed to know we were talking about him. He nudged my hand, so that I’d stroke his head. “Maybe more than a little.”

Nash laughed. “Yeah, I get it. I’m second in line, but as long as I can get into that line—I’ll be happy.” He took hold of my hand and gazed down at me in a way that seemed to indicate the possibility of a kiss. It wouldn’t be unwelcome. The kiss didn’t come, and that was because he was waiting for a more definitive answer from little, ole reluctant me. Only it wasn’t reluctance that kept me from giving an answer. It was good old-fashioned fear. And this time—it was two-pronged. I feared destroying my friendship with Emily, and I feared that if I gave this whole thing a whirl, I’d end up heartbroken.

Nash took my hesitation as no. “It’s all right.” He dropped my hand. “I understand. Just thought I’d give it one more try.”

“You’re leaving in October,” I said before he could walk away. “Am I supposed to fall in love with you and then just as easily say goodbye as soon as your construction job is over?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead. I just thought it’d be nice to see where this goes.”

I nodded. “All right,” I said quickly.

Nash looked at me as if he wasn't sure he'd heard it. "All right?" he asked.

"All right. But I warn you, if you break my heart, I'm never going to forgive you."

Nash reached up, and his finger grazed my face as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "That makes two of us."

Rocky was the first to trot off toward home. He knew he had a treat and water waiting at the end of the walk. Nash and I held hands as we walked his dog back to the cottage. We didn't say another word about it, about us. It felt really tenuous right now and knowing that I'd eventually have to bring it up to Emily had formed a lump in my stomach, but something about it, something about his big hand wrapped around mine felt incredibly right.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Nash

Layla was having dinner with her sisters, so we said goodbye after Rocky and I walked her back home. Rocky seemed upset that she wasn't coming back with us. I know I was. I badly wanted to kiss her but decided not to push my luck. Things were still unsteady at this point, but her saying yes to giving us a try had felt like a winning lotto ticket in an otherwise dreary day.

We were definitely starting out with some major hurdles, but sometimes hurdles made a relationship stronger. The walk had left me feeling inspired to work on the song. It was almost finished, and I had no idea what to do with it, but it was something that had started inside my soul, and I badly needed to release it.

My phone rang before I could pick up the guitar. It was Ronnie finally getting back to me. "Well," she said in a serious huff. "It's two for selling and one for not selling."

“Let me guess—Bosco was the holdout.”

“No, actually, Mr. Big Spender is strapped for cash. He said he didn’t care what we did with the songs. He’s kind of down in the dumps about the breakup. I guess I’m feeling it, too. How on earth did the Beatles walk away from each other? Did Paul just look at John and say, ‘hmm, not feeling it anymore.’ Crazy, right?”

“Actually, I think the cracks started with John and Yoko.”

“I think you’re right. Well, I started this diversion, so I could work up the courage to tell you that it’s me. I’m the ‘no.’”

“Seriously, Ronnie?” It made some sense because she was the only one in the group who’d worked hard to stay financially stable all this time.

“I know. It’s just I feel like those songs are the only thing we have to still hang onto, the only legacy our band will leave behind. We’d probably have to sign some non-compete clauses and take our music down, and we still make some decent download money on our songs.”

I sat back. I’d been selfish. I wasn’t thinking about how my bandmates would feel about giving up our rights to our original songs. There weren’t many, but the few we’d managed to produce were pretty darn good.

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“You’re right, Ronnie. Always the voice of reason. Forget I asked. It’s no biggie, just looking for a way to make a big pile of cash ... fast.”

“Does this have to do with your mom? You mentioned a specialist the other day. How’s she doing? Medical bills piling up?”

“Yeah, but what else is new? There’s a specialist who says he can help her. Now all we’ve got to do is find a way to pay for it.”

“Sorry to hear that, Nash. You know I could lend you fifteen grand ... with interest. You know me—always a businesswoman. Would that help at all?”

“That’s cool of you to offer, Ronnie, and I’m going to give it some thought.” Rocky was staring at the cupboard where I kept his food. “I’ve got to go. Rocky wants dinner.”

“Well, think about the loan. I could have my financial guy draw something up between us.”

“Thanks, Ronnie, I will.” I hung up, and the first thought that went through my head was never borrow money from a friend. Bosco and I had broken that promise a few years back when he fell behind on his rent. I lent him the money and then mostly forgot about it until I really needed it back. He didn’t have it, and we’d stopped talking to each other for a while. He was embarrassed, and I was mad I’d broken that golden rule in the first place. I would never get into such a big loan debt with Ronnie because it would mean another payment, and with no more shows, I was going to be short each month as it was.

I crossed the room, and Rocky began his dinner dance—a series of spins while his tail did its helicopter blade impersonation. I filled the bowl and headed back to the couch to finish the song. Before I sat, I stopped and stared out at the cove. The sun was setting in a dusky orange sky, and a group of snow-white gulls sat on the sand, preening themselves. Even though everything felt unsteady and depressing at the moment, I'd had one huge bright spot in my day. Layla and I were going to attempt to take our relationship further than just friendly neighbors.

It might end up being a big, bad mistake. Or, just maybe, it would be the best thing to happen to me in a long time.

## ChapterTwenty-Three

Layla

Isla had a few updates on wedding plans, so we all agreed to meet over at Aria's for snacks, wine and sister time. I, for one, was thrilled that I was going to have my sisters all to myself for the evening. Of course, the timing could have been better. Now that Nash and I had decided to step out of the friendship borders and dive a little deeper into a relationship, I wouldn't have minded hanging out with him this evening. But then, taking it slow was probably the better option. It gave me time to absorb the idea and come up with a strategic plan to not entirely alienate my best friend. Since the relationship was still in such an early (very early as in not really started) stage, I knew it was best not to mention it at all to Emily. If things progressed, and something inside me seriously hoped they would, then I'd break it to her gently. I just wasn't sure how to manage that yet, but I'd worry about that problem when I slammed right up against it.

Ava and I reached the house at the same time. We hugged and headed inside. Isla was setting out chips and guacamole. The blender buzzed with margaritas as Aria dipped glass rims in salt. There was a platter of tamales and tacos in the middle of Aria's

table.

Ella was slicing lime wedges and placing them on the salted glasses.

Ava picked up a chip and dipped it in a bowl of salsa. “Wow, I wasn’t expecting this kind of spread. Aria said snacks, so I was prepared for pretzels and wine.”

Isla handed me the first margarita. “It’s a theme I’m experimenting with for the wedding reception. I was thinking of a whole buffet of Mexican food. Everyone loves tacos and chips. People could build their own tostadas, and we could serve several variations of margaritas.”

I sipped the drink. “Hmm, I say we take a vote, and mine is yes. Love the idea. People always serve all that stuffy food at receptions—tiny roasted pigeons sitting next to three braised carrots.”

Isla laughed. “I believe they call them squabs because they’re still babies and yes, you’re right. I’ve gone to a lot of weddings where the food wasn’t the least bit enticing. I haven’t discussed this new idea with Luke, but he’s always game to try anything.”

Aria smiled as she handed her a margarita. “You mean anything that will set his snooty mom’s hair on fire? Something tells me she’s more the baby pigeon type.”

Isla raised a brow at her.

“What? We might as well call ‘em what they are instead of sugarcoating it with a weird name likesquab,” Aria said. “But back to the main point—what about the infamous Mrs. Greyson?” We started filling our plates. “What did Luke think of the Whisper Cove idea?”



“He loved it. The infamous Mrs. Greyson has not been consulted about it yet,” Isla said. “It’s almost a waste of time to even consider the cove because she’s never going to approve.”

“That’s her problem,” Ava said.

“Yes, but having her at the wedding with a terrible, grouchy, disapproving look on her face is going to ruin the whole day. And trust me, Margaret Greyson’s presence is not one you can easily ignore. She’s like this big, obtrusive—” Isla paused to find the right word.

“Thorn?” Ella offered.

“Yes, that’s it. She’s like this big, obtrusive thorn that will stand there in the center of everyone making faces at everything and letting people know, in no uncertain terms, that she doesn’t approve of any of it, bride included,” she added with a waver in her voice that caught all of our attention immediately.

As if choreographed, we all set our plates and drinks down and surrounded her for a group hug, something we’d gotten down to an art over the years. We gently circled her and each other with our arms and let Isla have a few moments to sniffle it out.

“I’m fine,” she said after a deep breath. We all lowered our arms but still surrounded her. “I’m just tired. Business has been crazy, and I’m still looking for a baker to help out, but there aren’t many applicants, and the ones I’ve spoken to on the phone have been lacking in—well, everything.”

“You’re too much of a perfectionist,” Ella said. “Hire someone and then you can shape them into the baker you were hoping for.”

“But there’s more to this than not finding an assistant,” Aria said with a serious brow.

We always counted on her to play the role of parent in these situations, and she wasn't wasting time stepping into those shoes.

“You’re right,” Isla said.

Aria put up a finger. “Hold that thought.” She motioned to the food.

We picked up our plates and glasses and headed out to the small front room to find our places on the sofa and on the floor sitting around the coffee table. Once we’d settled in and gotten comfortable, Isla took a sip of margarita—for fortification, it seemed. The suspense was killing us. Or maybe it was just me.

“Has something happened between you and Luke?” I blurted. I’d been working with her all week and hadn’t noticed a thing. I supposed I’d selfishly been too overwhelmed with my own problems.

“No, Luke is wonderful. We’ve never been happier. I still have to pinch myself occasionally to make sure this is all real. It’s not Luke at all, and I love Rachel and Hazel, but his parents—they’re so hard to like. Is that terrible to say?”

“Not at all,” Aria said. “And since they live eight hours away, you won’t have to see them much.”

“I know. It’s just that—you know—they’re his parents, and I’ll be marrying him knowing full well that his mother doesn’t approve of the match.”

“You know what?” I said confidently. “She might not approve of it right now, but once she gets to know you, our wonderful Isla, she’ll realize she was wrong and change her opinion.”

Isla laughed. “First of all, Margaret Greyson is never wrong, at least not in her own mind. And I don’t think she’ll ever learn to like me.” Isla gave herself a little shake. “You know what? My pity party is over. I’m marrying the most wonderful man in the world, and this wedding is going to be whatwewant. So, with that in mind—it looks like we’re going to have a small ceremony on the cove and”—Isla looked hopefully at Aria—“if the owner of the Whisper Cove Café approves, I thought it would be the perfect place for our reception.”

Aria’s eyes rounded with excitement. “Yes, of course, you can have your reception in the café. What about food? We don’t have much Mexican food on the menu.”

Isla smiled sweetly. “I’ve sort of been conspiring with a certain person about cooking up a feast for the reception.”

“So, you and Dex have been planning all this behind my back?” Aria tried to sound angry and insulted, but she was too excited about the prospect of hosting the reception. “Well then, I guess that settles it. Whisper Cove Café is officially the reception destination.”

I clapped first, and everyone else followed. I lifted my glass for a toast. “To Nonna, the wedding guest who’ll be there in spirit.”

“To Nonna!” we cheered. We sipped our drinks and paused the conversation to taste some of the delicious food.

Ella nodded. “Hmm, much tastier than baby pigeon.”

We all laughed and then the conversation turned away from the wedding and more toward everyday topics. I badly wanted to mention my new possible relationship with our handsome neighbor, but I decided it was best to keep it under wraps for now. After all, it could very well end up going nowhere. That thought dampened my

spirits, which, in turn, made me worry that I was already heading toward heartbreak, and we hadn't even started yet.

Ella thought she was being discreet when she leaned closer to me for her question. "Any more roses?"

My sister, Aria, had the hearing of a jackrabbit. "Roses? Who got roses?"

All focus turned to me. I shot Ella a glare. She shrugged and smiled briefly in response. "Uh, it wasn't roses. It was a rose, a single stem. Someone left it on my bicycle seat when the bike was parked outside the cottage."

Curious looks instantly turned to concern. "Was it Dustin?" Isla asked.

"I'm not positive, but I think so. I think it was his last-ditch effort to get back together."

Ava put down her glass. "Are you considering that?"

I gave a fervent shake of my head. "Gosh no, never in a million years."

"Maybe we need to send Dex to talk to him," Aria said.

"No, please." I shot another scowl at Ella for starting this topic. "I would never bother Dex with something so trivial, and frankly, I don't think it's fair that we expect him to always be the—" I paused, and as usual Ella filled in the gap.

"Henchman?" Ella asked.

I looked at her. "Really? That's a word?" I waved my hand toward her. "What she said. It's not fair to Dex. I love that he's so protective over all of us, but this is

something I can handle myself. Dustin was just more heartbroken than I expected after such a short time together. And with that—topic switch. I need to hear what’s happening in everyone’s relationship since I’m the sister on the outer edge of true love’s bliss.”

Everyone looked at each other to see who might start or have something interesting but not too personal to tell.

“Rhett told me he loved me,” Ella blurted awkwardly. She quickly picked up a chip and shoved it in her mouth, so she wouldn’t have to expand.

“Oh my gosh, El, that’s wonderful,” Isla said. “The important thing is—how did you react?”

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Ella's cheeks flooded with a blush. "It wasn't how I envisioned it or how I would have written it in a novel. I stood there and stared at him for a long time because my mind just couldn't accept that I heard the words right. Then Rhett fidgeted and looked embarrassed. We were standing in his kitchen waiting for our frozen lasagna to heat. Then he said, 'Guess you weren't ready to hear that' and he turned to check the oven. Once I realized I hadn't imagined or misheard him, I teared up and threw myself into his arms. At some point with my sniffles and my face smashed into his chest, I blubbered out the words 'I love you, too.'"

Isla lifted her glass. "Here's to saying 'I love you.'"

We joined in and then I set my glass down. "I want that," I said. "To hear 'I love you' from someone who means it and someone who means something to you." I leaned over and hugged Ella. "I'm happy for you, El. He's the best, and you deserve nothing less."

Ella hugged me back. "Thank you, and it will happen for you, too."

We got back to eating and laughing and gossiping and all the things I missed whenever we weren't together. It was never going to be the same now that they'd all found partners, but the connections between us were as strong as ever. No matter what happened in my life, my sisters were always there to help me celebrate or pick up the pieces.

ChapterTwenty-Four

Nash

I'd worked on the song all evening. It was nice to have quiet time, away from work and the band and all the other distractions, so I could focus. The song was finished, and I had to admit, it sounded good. But then I had some incredible inspiration for this one. Headlights swung past the house. I glanced out the kitchen window. Layla's car pulled into the driveway.

I picked up my phone and before I could stop myself, I sent off a text. "Nightcap?"

The answer was sweet and simple. "Sure." We were both obviously tiptoeing through this thing. There was nothing solid enough yet to go barreling into it all-cylinders-firing. I didn't want to make a misstep and blow it before it even got started, and I knew she was still feeling the frailness of the whole idea because of her best friend. I didn't want to mess that up either. I just didn't think it was fair to avoid trying this just to keep her friend happy.

The knock on my door caused a breath to catch in my chest. Admittedly, it happened every time I saw Layla. She was that stunning and not just on the outside. Rocky heard the knock and reacted with his usual "fierce guy" growl but started wagging his tail before I even opened the door.

"Rocky knew it was you," I said. My dog was very useful for breaking the ice.

"Rocky, my buddy." She hugged him, then with a moment of awkwardness that quickly melted, she hugged me.

"Second in line," I quipped. "I'll take it. After all, I don't have big brown eyes and a fuzzy muzzle and a smile that could melt a scoop of ice cream off the top of Everest."

Layla was wearing a light green sundress and sandals, and she was breathtaking. I was sure she'd look just as amazing in a heavy winter coat and beanie.



She placed her purse on the side table. “What exactly is a nightcap? I’ve heard the term, but I wasn’t entirely sure. I assume it has nothing to do with an actual cap.”

“It’s an old-fashioned term for one last drink before bedtime.”

“I thought that might be the case. I’ll just have a glass of water, if you don’t mind. I know that seems boring, but my sisters and I just finished two blenders full of margaritas and a load of spicy food.”

“Lucky you.” I walked to the kitchen and filled a glass with ice water and grabbed myself a beer.

We sat on the couch. Rocky walked over and stared up at me to let me know he was going to climb up on the couch between us. I shook my head. “No chance, buddy. Tonight, she’s my guest.”

Rocky released a loud dog sigh, turned away and lumbered to his bed. Layla watched him walk away, head and tail down. “Aww, he looks so sad.”

“He’s really good at the poor, neglected dog act.”

Rocky climbed onto his plush pillow, turned several circles to find the exact right spot and plopped down with another sigh.

“As you can see, his life is just one hardship after another.”

Layla laughed. “That pillow does look far more luxurious than my bed.” She turned back to face me, and I had to give myself a second to catch my breath. “So, Nash Ledger, now that we’ve opened this Pandora’s Box, tell me about yourself. I know you sing in a band, you have thousands of fans, you work construction during the day, you’re helping to support your sister and mom and you have the world’s coolest

dog, but fill in the missing pieces.”

“Man, after that list, I wish I had something good and intriguing to add. Hmm, one time I won an apple pie at the school fair because I managed to dunk the principal in the dunk tank. One throw and down he went. I was really determined because the guy always found reasons to suspend me.”

Layla looked at me skeptically. “Found reasons?”

“I guess he didn’t have to look too hard because I sort of handed him the reasons. In my defense, I didn’t cause the minor explosion in the chem lab. That was Bosco, only I took the blame because his dad ...” I decided not to finish the sentence.

Layla predicted the ending. She crinkled up her nose. “Did Bosco have a strict dad?”

“You could say that. He was always looking for some way to put Bosco down. Never the opposite.”

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“I can’t imagine growing up with that kind of parent,” Layla said. “Nonna could be strict, stuck in her old country ways, but she knew how to keep control without being harsh.”

“My mom was great, but she didn’t have control over me. I look back on those times now and wish I’d been a better son.”

Layla put her hand on mine. “But you’re making up for it now.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Layla glanced over at Rocky. He’d started up his usual chorus of snores. “Have you always had a dog?”

“Off and on. After my dad left, I was pretty out of control. One day, my mom came home with this big dog, a collie mix. Angus was from a rescue, and frankly, he still holds the ‘Coolest Dog in the World’ title.”

Layla looked quickly over at Rocky.

“It’s all right. He’s asleep. Angus went everywhere with me. Not to school, of course, but boy, I would have loved that. I probably would have behaved better just so I wouldn’t disappoint Angus. He was so smart. I was sure he could understand everything I told him. When he was thirteen, we had to put him down because of cancer. It took me a long time to recover. Nothing felt right or the same after he was gone. My mom told me I missed that dog far more than I’d ever missed my dad, and she was right. Angus had been a far better friend and protector than him.”

Layla was turned slightly toward me. She rested her head against the couch and gazed at me in a way that made me want to pull her right into my arms. “Even though it must have been devastating to lose him, I’m glad you had Angus,” she said softly.

“Me, too. What about you? What should I know about you other than you have four sisters, you grew up in Whisper Cove, you adore my dog and you often have the faintest aroma around you—sugar and vanilla—I think.”

“Ugh, that’s from working in the bakery.”

“Don’t say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“I guess it’s better than smelling like garlic or fish. I went to school with a girl whose dad owned a fish and chips kiosk down by the beach. I swear the neighborhood cats used to follow her to school.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that might be bad. So, what should I know about you?”

“Gosh, let me think. I’m kind of a dull bird, really.”

“Not true at all.”

“Well, if you grew up with Isla, a master baker whose personal beauty outshines even her gorgeous baked creations; Aria, a master businesswoman and all-around expert advice-giver; Ava, who has seen most of the world and can name any plant or animal by its Latin name and who also is so gorgeous—I’ve seen drivers stop in the middle of the road to look at her. Seriously. Not kidding. There’s smart Ella who writes and knows facts and vocabulary that would put the toughest SAT test to shame, and then there’s me, Layla. I will be the first to admit I was babied and coddled and adored by my four older sisters, and I’ll be the first to admit that I lapped it up like a hungry kitten at a bowl of milk. By the way, milk is bad for cats. Just adding that in case you

decide to get a cat.” She lifted her head, and her brown eyes rounded. “Do you think you might get a cat?”

“Not in my near future and if I did, I’d have to get full approval from you-know-who.” I nodded toward the sleeping dog.

“That’s right. I did see Rocky grow still as a statue when he saw a cat out on the road. I expected him to bark and pull ahead like he did with the squirrel, but it was a much more dignified response.”

“That’s because he’s scared to death of cats. At least that’s my theory. I got him from a rescue when he was two, and they mentioned something about him not working out in a household that had three cats, so I think there’s some heavy history there.”

“Oh, poor baby, maybe he could see a therapist. So, what else about me? I’m not a master baker, but I’m pretty skilled at eating cookies and cupcakes. My advice is often best taken with the proverbial grain of salt. I haven’t been farther than two hundred miles in either direction from Whisper Cove, and my SAT scores were nothing to brag about. Hmm, I don’t like olives. Seriously do not like them. Nonna would always put them out in a bowl at Christmas, and Ella would stick them on each finger and then eat one at a time right in front of me. It was traumatizing, really.”

“Remind me not to take you to an Italian restaurant or a deli, for that matter.”

“Well, I do love pasta, as long as there are no olives in the sauce. I used to be a pretty decent baton twirler, but I’ve since retired from the sport because I look ridiculous in the colorfully sequined little dresses that went with baton twirling.”

“I bet you’d still look hot in sequins.”

“Maybe I should have left that life detail in the old memory box. Here’s something

interesting—I once found a diamond ring down on the cove. Turned out to be fake but my ten-year-old self was sure I'd found some lost pirate treasure.”

“Don’t know if they were plundering fake diamond rings.”

Layla laughed and then covered her mouth to stifle a yawn. “Excuse me. Guess the workday and those margaritas are getting to me.”

I sat up. “You’re right. I forgot you worked all day, and you start early. I suppose tomorrow will be a busy day at the bakery, being the weekend.”

She groaned. “Yes, the weekenders will pile into the shop for their treats. I told Isla to start baking less delicious stuff, but she wasn’t buying my suggestion. Again, my advice is not usually stellar.” Layla yawned again.

“C’mon sleepyhead, I’ll walk you home.” I stood up and offered her my hand. She dropped her small hand in mine, and I closed my fingers around it and helped her to her feet.

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For a second, we stood close together, so close I could have counted the freckles on her nose. Then her forehead bunched in worry. “No, you can’t kiss me,” she said.

I stepped back as if she’d slapped me. The truth was I’d been thinking about it, but she obviously didn’t want the kiss. “I’m sorry. I won’t.” I wasn’t sure how to take the rejection, but it had sure put a kink in an otherwise fun visit.

Layla shook her head. “Jeez, I am tired. I meant don’t kiss me, not tonight. I just spent an evening eating salsa and tamales.” She covered her mouth with her fingers. “When we—if we kiss, I don’t want you to think about onions and jalapeños.”

I chuckled and pulled her into my arms for a hug. “Even onions and jalapeños would taste good on those lips, but we’ll wait until the timing is right.”

Layla smiled shyly and then snuggled against me. Her soft hair tickled my chin.

“Hmm, I don’t know about onions and jalapeños but your hair smells like flowers.”

“It’s the shampoo I use, and I’m now going to start following the influencer who suggested it.” She stepped back, and her heel tapped the guitar leaning against the sofa. “Oops, sorry about that.”

“Not a problem.” I took her hand to lead her out.

“How’s the song going?” Her question was followed by another sleepy yawn.

“I think it’s done.”

“I’d like to hear it sometime.”

“Soon.”

A salty haze had drifted in to whitewash an otherwise dark night. There was a single porch light on at her cottage and a light on inside. We stopped at the door.

“I guess living next door to the girl I like has its advantages. That was the shortest walk home ever. When I was fifteen, I was dating this girl, Megan, and she lived three blocks away, which wasn’t bad, only to get to her house we had to pass by the Arnolds’ house, and they had two of the meanest Rottweilers. There was a fence around the yard, but when those two massive dogs raced toward you and threw themselves at the fence, it didn’t seem like a good enough barrier.”

“That would be scary.” She reached up and picked a dog hair off my shirt. “It’s sweet that you walked her home. The boy I liked when I was fifteen used to come by and stick rocks in our mailbox. Don’t ask me why, but apparently, he thought that would win me over.”

“Yeah, at fifteen most of us guys aren’t thinking too straight through the hurricane of hormones. And, if I’m being honest, it wasn’t my idea to walk her home. It was an order from my mom. It wasn’t a big deal, and I always managed to get a kiss, which was at least some compensation for having to walk by those dogs, not once, but twice.”

Her brown eyes glittered under the porch light. “Well, I owe you a kiss, then. After your invitation, I was congratulating myself on my earlier decision to wear a cute sundress for dinner with my sisters instead of my usual shorts and T-shirt. But I’d forgotten all about my salsa breath.”

“I have high praise for the dress, and I’ve always been a big fan of salsa. Now go in



and get to bed.” I leaned over and kissed her cheek. I turned to leave.

“I know tomorrow is Saturday, but I can still walk Rocky ... if you don’t mind.”

“We’ll both be waiting for you. Goodnight, Layla.”

“Goodnight, Nash.”

## ChapterTwenty-Five

Layla

As predicted, the bakery was bustling with activity. We all raced around nonstop for the first two hours until the crowd finally slowed. Instead of a line to the corner, there was only a short line of three people out on the sidewalk. I slipped into the back quickly for a cup of coffee.

Isla was frosting fudge brownies. “What a morning.” She saw me filling a cup of coffee. “You’re feeling it, too?” she asked.

“Feeling what?” I took a sip of coffee and relaxed at the comforting taste of it.

“The margaritas. I had to drag myself out of bed this morning.”

“That’s because, for you, morning is the middle of the night.”

The margaritas hadn’t helped, but as tired as I’d been, this new thing I’d started with Nash had made me too anxious and excited to sleep. Since I couldn’t talk to anyone about it yet, I’d been internalizing the whole thing on my own—right through the midnight hour and beyond.

I took another bracing sip of coffee. Even Isla's strong brew wasn't going to cut through the brain fog this morning.

“Seriously, Isla, I don’t know how you do it.”

“Me either. I’ve got to find another baker. Ella’s right. I’ve got to cool down the perfectionist side of my brain and find someone who I can mold into the baking assistant I want.”

“I better get back out there.” I drained the cup, put it in the sink and headed out of the kitchen. I froze in the doorway. Dustin was at the counter. He spotted me before I could slip back into the kitchen.

“Layla,” he said with a slightly desperate tone.

Isla noticed I hadn’t moved. “What’s wrong?”

I looked over my shoulder at her and mouthed the word “Dustin.”

Isla put down the spatula full of frosting. “Right. Stay here. I’ll handle this.” She marched past me and right up to the counter. I backed up into the kitchen and out of view.

There was still enough activity in the bakery that I couldn’t hear their conversation over the noise. I waited a few minutes and silently chastised myself for being the frightened little sister. Here I was nearly thirty and still waiting for my big sisters to protect me. I took a deep breath, straightened my apron and headed to the front of the shop. Dustin was just leaving.

Isla turned around. “He’s gone.”

“I see that. What did you say to him?”

“I asked him if he seriously thought following you around was going to make you like him more. I told him he needed to save his dignity and move on. Not sure if he’ll take the advice. I did, however, use my meanest glare when talking to him.” She pointed to her baby blue eyes and lowered her brows.

I giggled. There was nothing more ridiculous than my beautiful, princess-y sister trying to look mean. “So, you pulled out the big guns, did ya? Your kitten glare?”

“Oh, shut up. I can glower pretty fiercely when I want.” Her face relaxed. “Seriously, I’m worried, Layla. The man is obviously obsessing over the breakup. Maybe we need to get Dex involved.”

“That’s a big jump from your formidable kitten glare and therapist’s advice to a bulldozer with iron fists.”

“Well, it’s up to you, of course, but I’m not sure you should let it go on much longer.”

“I’ll think about it.” Ten minutes later I had another visitor, one who I was usually glad to see, only I was hoping to avoid Emily for a while, at least until I knew how all this was going to turn out.

Emily came up to the counter. “The usual. How bad is it when you have a ‘usual’ at a bakery?”

“I don’t think it’s bad at all.” I walked over and pulled a pecan roll off the tray. “Should I bother with the whole pretense of putting it in a bag?”

Emily snatched a napkin from the dispenser. “Nope, just hand that baby over. I need

my pecan bun fix. It's been a long morning at the shop. Lucille decided to have a sidewalk sale. Talk about spur of the moment. I walked in this morning, and she was snapping her fingers at me." Emily attempted to snap her fingers, but they were already sticky with glaze. "'I've decided to have a sidewalk sale, Emily, so carry tables and racks outside.' Next thing I know, I'm dragging tables and boxes of clothes out to the sidewalk. People were rummaging through the stuff like it was lost treasure."

"We've been crazy here today, too. This is the first lull all morning. I love summer, but I won't be sad to see it end this year."

"Well, I've got to get back to the shop. You're going with me to Comstock Bar tonight, right? Moonstone is playing, of course. I think they'll be here for a few more weeks."

I hadn't even thought about it, but now that she brought it up, a knot grew in my stomach. How was I going to go with her to watch the band, holding two big secrets in my brain, one that the band would be breaking up, and two, the real big one, that I'd become more than just Nash Ledger's dog walker.

"Oh, come on," she pleaded. "If you don't go, then I'll have to ask Kelly, and she whines the whole time about it being too loud and too crowded and that there aren't any cute guys in the bar. She's one big, continuous complaint, that one."

"Let me see how I feel later." The truth was I loved the idea of going to watch Nash on stage. It would just be more enjoyable without the big secrets hanging overhead. "I didn't get much sleep last night."

Emily scooted closer to the counter. "How is he? The neighbor? Have you seen him recently? Has he asked about me?"

The lies were going to give me a stomachache, but I didn't have time to come up with a workaround. "I've spotted him a few times, but we haven't spoken." All morning I'd been wishing the flow of customers would stop, but now, I was thrilled when a group of three women stepped inside. "I've got to get back to work, too, Emi. I'll let you know later about tonight."

## ChapterTwenty-Six

Nash

Rocky and I walked up from the beach, both of us soaked and salty. "Stay," I told him. He sat and looked very insulted as he looked up at me. I walked inside to get a towel, and the dog hopped up enthusiastically for a brisk rubbing. I lifted the towel, and he gave himself a major shake.

Ronnie showed up a few minutes later. I wasn't expecting her, but she was the one bandmate I was always glad to see. "I was just at Whisper Cove Café having a late lunch. That place makes awesome sweet potato fries." She patted her stomach. "Rocky, my man, what are you up to?" She petted him and then lifted her hand. "Didn't know he was wet."

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“We just came up from the beach.”

Ronnie walked over to the window and looked out. “Oh wow, this is a nice view. Way better than the one we’ve got. Today, the man across the street decided to go shirtless while he washed his car, and he’s not exactly a cover model, if you know what I mean. I had to close the curtains just so I could eat my breakfast.” Ronnie plopped down on the couch next to the guitar. I instantly tensed when I realized I hadn’t cleared away my song notes. “What’s this?” She picked up the papers.

“Just a song I’ve been messing with. Something to do when I’m bored.” The tension in my body released when she tossed the papers aside.

“Speaking of songs—if you really need the money, maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to sell them. Not sure we’d get much for them though. Our numbers haven’t been great. I think our fans can sense that things are cooling down in the band. And honestly, I haven’t been posting nearly as much social media for that same reason—things haven’t been great between us.”

“Want a cold soda?” I asked as I headed to the refrigerator.

“Nah, I just ate a ridiculous amount of food. No room left.” She leaned forward and rested her arms on her thighs. “Have you given any more thought to a loan? Like I said, I could get my financial guy to write something up. Nothing too complicated.”

I returned with my soda. I hadn’t changed yet, so I didn’t sit. “I’m not sure I could swing another payment, Ronnie. It’s really cool of you to offer, but I’d end up getting underwater, and I don’t want it to bust up our friendship.”

“Yeah, I guess that sometimes happens when money is loaned. But what are you going to do about your mom’s operation?”

“Not sure. What time are we getting to the bar tonight?”

“Seven. And Bosco is back in a terrible mood. I think ending this band might just be the thing we all need to get our lives restarted. We’re growing stale and grumpy, and like I said, I think the fans sense it. Plus, we haven’t put out an original in a long time. That’s never good for business.” She glanced over at the papers again. “Is this anything? I was thinking if we put out one more song before we broke up, we could at least get downloads on our site moving again.”

I shook my head. “Like I said, just something I’ve been doing when I’m bored.” The song I’d written was more or less just for me. I hadn’t written it for the band, but I didn’t need to tell Ronnie that.

“Well, I’m going to head back to the house. I was up way too late binge-watching some stupid thriller that took such a drastic, implausible turn I felt cheated by the ending. Now I need a nap, so I can pound drums tonight.” Ronnie stood up. She looked at me. “I’m going to miss it though.”

I nodded. “Yeah, me too.” I walked her to the door. I had an hour to eat, shower and get ready for the highlight of my day, my week, my year—a dog walk with Layla.

Man, I had it bad for the woman. Her gentle knock sent my heart racing. Rocky was at the door barking like crazy. He had it bad, too. Layla smiled and hugged me before petting Rocky. I considered it a small victory. She swept inside like sunshine. Those words danced through my head. They were lyrics in my new song, and they fit perfectly.

“What a day. We sold out of everything. There were only crumbs left on all the trays.



I did, however, hide one of these before they were all gone.” She held out her hand with a fudge-topped brownie wrapped in a napkin. “You have not lived until you’ve eaten one of Isla’s brownies.”

“Oh, wow, this looks amazing. And I’ve got milk in the fridge.”

“Let’s walk first since Rocky is obviously waiting. That way you can savor each bite.” We looked over at the leash hook. Rocky sat below it and stared up as if he thought he could move it with his mind.

“I guess he’s ready to go.” I put down the brownie, reluctantly, and clipped on Rocky’s leash. “Boy, the sacrifices I make for you, buddy.”

“Don’t forget,” Layla said as she took control of the leash. “He brought the two of us together.”

“Nope, I won’t ever forget that.” I took her hand before we reached the road. She gazed at me with those cocoa brown eyes, and I felt the shadows in my life vanish. I’d spent so many of the last hours working and singing the song, the lyrics were on repeat in my head. I’d decided to record myself singing the song just to see how it sounded. If it wasn’t good enough, then I’d push it back into oblivion never to be heard by human ears—only dog ears. “I’m glad you’re here, Layla.”

“Me, too.”

We headed to the road, and Rocky moved right into his sniffing routine of the shrubs and grass lining the road.

“Are you coming to the show tonight?” I asked.

“Emily came into the bakery this morning to buy a pecan bun and secure an answer to

that question. It's either me or Kelly, the professional complainer. I didn't tell her 'yes' right away because—well—it's not too bad pretending this isn't happening when I'm not with her. I can easily talk in circles around the subject if we're just having a text chat or phone call. Face-to-face is harder, but standing in the same room with the two of you—I'm not sure I can manage it."

"I get that. Maybe it's time to tell her," I suggested.

"I thought I'd wait and see if this ..." Her words trailed off.

"If this is anything?" I asked. Rocky had stopped, so I turned toward her. "I know, for me, I'm all in, Layla. I can't sleep or eat or breathe without thinking about you."

Her pink lips turned up at the sides. "Remember the parade of yawns last night? I could hardly keep my eyes open, but once my head hit the pillow, my eyes shot open, and all I could think about was—was this—us. I guess what I'm trying to say is—I'm all in, too. I just wish there weren't so many jagged edges to smooth out first."

"Jagged edges? You mean Emily." Rocky was the tour guide, and he'd decided to move on. We trailed behind him.

"She's one of them, but there's another one, one that might be even more jagged-y than my best friend's obsession with you."

“What’s that?”

“You’re only here until October. Then what? Am I supposed to turn off my feelings and wave at you as you drive off in your truck ... with my, I mean, your dog?”

I took hold of her hand. “How about we worry about that when we get there?”

She bit her lip for a second. “I’m not good at that, but you know what? You’re right.” She stopped and pointed at me. “Then you better turn off some of that charm, so I don’t fall head over heels for you, because if you leave in October, I’m going to be really mad. No broken heart, right?”

We reached the tiny park, and Rocky, always a creature of habit, trotted right over to the squirrel tree. We stopped under its shade. I wrapped my arm around her back and pulled her closer. “I can’t promise anything, Layla. All I know is I want to be with you, and I haven’t said that to anyone ... ever.”

She reached up and touched my face. I pressed my cheek against her hand.

“You know, I didn’t eat salsa at all today,” she said.

“That is the best invitation for a kiss I’ve ever heard.” I put my hands on her face and lowered my mouth to hers. The kiss would have gone on longer if there’d been a squirrel in the tree to hold Rocky’s attention, but there wasn’t, and as I held Layla, she was suddenly yanked away by my dog.

“That almost felt personal,” I joked as we gave up on continuing the kiss to follow

Rocky. “I think he did it on purpose.”

“I’m blaming it on the squirrel. He should have been in the tree,” she said.

We reached the end of the road and hung out there for a bit while Rocky sniffed anything he might have missed yesterday. “If I do show up tonight,” Layla started, “we’ll have to play it cool and just act like neighbors. I’ll tell Emily soon, but I need to find the right place and time. I hope you understand.”

“I do but it’s going to be hard putting on the neighborly expression when I’ve got this on my mind.” I wrapped my arm around her back and pulled her closer. This time Rocky gave us a respectable amount of time for a decent kiss—until a squirrel dashed across the road.

“Oh!” Layla gasped against my mouth. “He’s loose,” she said frantically.

Rocky had returned to his squirrel tree. He was occupied, so I took advantage and kissed her once more. “This time, the squirrel was the good guy,” I muttered and then kissed her once more for good measure.

## ChapterTwenty-Seven

Layla

If only Emily hadn’t sent me four fashion photos, so I could help her dress for the night. If only she hadn’t called me twice to let me know that she planned to stand up close to the stage again, so I should bring earplugs if I was worried about the noise. If only she hadn’t picked me up ten minutes early and come to the door with an eager, starry-eyed expression and the wordsNash Ledgerleaving her lips three times before we even got to the car. For some reason, I’d hoped the highly improbable would happen, and Emily would have gotten over her crush. I couldn’t blame her though. I

found my own crush on Nash was growing exponentially.

I'd dressed down for the occasion with shorts and a tank top. I hoped not showing any enthusiasm for the night would throw her entirely off the trail. Pretending to mostly ignore Nash was not going to be easy, especially if we were standing up near the stage, but I'd been working on my poker face in the mirror for a few minutes before Emily arrived, and I was sure I had nailed a good one. I needed every tool in my arsenal tonight. I was nowhere near ready to tell Emily what was happening. I was still holding onto hope that she'd lose interest in him.

"We've got to hurry. Remember how crowded it was last weekend? I don't want to stand in the middle where he can't see me. Our last spot was perfect."

I sat in the passenger seat. "Except for the speaker giving us both a headache and you nearly ended up having a panic attack."

"Don't ruin the night with your predictions. Quick, knock on something wooden," she said as she searched for something wooden in her very un-wooden car.

I reached over and knocked three times lightly on her head.

"Very funny. I was in the same spot on Wednesday, and it went fine." She'd been exuberant and excited, then suddenly, she slumped in the driver's seat and put on her best frown. "I forgot how that night ended." She looked at me. "Please try and turn off the Lovely lights, so you don't blind him from seeing me in the crowd." She pulled out onto the road.

I laughed. "I'm sorry. What are the Lovely lights?"

"Oh, please, those are the blinding lights that shine in everyone's eyes whenever one of the Lovely sisters is in the room."

I stared at the side of her face as she kept her eyes on the road.

“That might possibly be the most ridiculous thing you’ve ever said, and that says a lot because as I’m sure I don’t need to remind you—but I most certainly will—you were the girl who asked the high school biology teacher if they took the frogs back to the pond once we were through dissecting them.”

Emily leaned her head back with a laugh. “Mr. Grant was barely able to hold it together. I guess it was just wishful thinking on my part.”

“Very wishful.”

“Poor frogs,” she said.

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“Well, anyhow, I have no mythical light to shine, and I will be there mostly in spirit. I didn’t get much sleep last night, and I’d planned to nap today but never got to it. One glass of wine and I’ll be having trouble holding these eyes open.”

“Uh-oh, why didn’t you get any sleep? I’ve been so exhausted after work I’ve been falling into bed right after dinner.”

I’d stepped in it, and now it seemed I’d have to lie and that was how it began, the snowball of lies that usually formed once one lie had been tossed out. “I don’t know. Too much coffee in the afternoon, I think.” And now I was getting smooth at lying. I looked up toward the top of the car and silently asked Nonna for forgiveness.

“At least we both have the day off tomorrow,” she said. “I was thinking, maybe we should go for a swim down at the beach.”

“You hate swimming in the ocean.” I knew exactly why she’d suggested it but wanted to make her admit it out loud.

“I don’t mind it that much. As long as there are no jellyfish.”

I nodded. “That’s right. I forgot about your jellyfish trauma when you were little. Well, I’m very connected to our strip of the cove, but I have no control over the jellyfish.”

“I can just put my feet in. I need a reason to show off my new bathing suit.”

“I was thinking about a bike ride,” I suggested.

She looked over at me with a pronounced pout. “You’re trying to keep me from seeing your new neighbor. That’s pretty selfish of you, bestie.”

“I’m not. If you want to go down to the beach and stroll back and forth all day in your new swimsuit, go right ahead. I’ve hardly gotten any exercise since I started at the bakery, so I’m going to go on a bike ride.”

“Exercise? I thought you were walking your neighbor’s dog, or is that over?” she asked with a little too much glee.

“I’m still walking Rocky,” I said curtly to let her know there was nothing more to say. I didn’t need to add to my lie tally because the current one was already making my stomach feel gurgle-y.

“Lucky you,” she said wryly.

We sat in silence for the remainder of the trip, which didn’t bode well for the rest of the evening. I was regretting saying yes. I should have let her go with Kelly the whiner.

The parking lot was already half-filled when we pulled in, and a line snaked around the bar. That worsened Emily’s mood. “Great, now I’m not going to get my favorite spot. We should have left way earlier.” She had the nerve to shoot an admonishing glare my direction as if I’d made us late.

“What are you looking at me for?” I asked. “I was ready when you arrived—ten minutes earlier than you said you would, I might add.”

“Whatever. Let’s just hurry and get in line.” She pulled into the first open parking spot, and we climbed out of the car, both of us grumpy and tense from the exchange in the car.



The doors opened just as we reached the line, so we didn't have to wait outside too long. The line did give me a clear view of the patrons who were waiting to go inside, and I didn't see Dustin amongst them. That would have been the cherry on top of an already tense evening.

Emily had her arms crossed, and she was wearing the grumpiest face I'd ever seen.

"I didn't make us late," I said again in my defense.

She stared forward at first, ignoring me, then dropped her arms with a sigh. "I know. I'm sorry. I didn't expect there to be such a big crowd already. I guess the band just keeps growing in popularity. Who knows? Maybe they'll get that big record deal soon and then I'll have my own special room on the tour bus as I travel around the country as Mrs. Ledger."

I laughed. "Wow, that is the biggest mood transition I've ever seen, and I witnessed it in real time."

"Sorry I was grouchy." Emily wrapped her arm around mine. "I've decided we can just push our way up to that prime spot. I'm not above using my bony elbows." She demonstrated with her free arm.

"You're on your own with that, Emi. I agreed to join you tonight, but engaging in elbow combat was not part of the plan. I think we'll be fine a little farther back. It gets hot up near the stage, and all the bodies always end up pressing forward, which was probably the main source for your near panic attack at their first show."

"Yes, but it was worth it. I got to stand right up front just feet away from Nash, and don't forget, there was that wink."

Emily was still thinking about the wink that may or may not have happened and that

may or may not have been directed at her.

We finally got inside. We were on a break from the heat wave outside, and that relief transferred indoors. The barroom was much cooler than the first night.

“Thank goodness, the air conditioners are working well tonight. It won’t be nearly as suffocating in here,” I said, but Emily wasn’t listening. She was on her toes trying to get a look over the crowd, planning out her strategy to elbow her way to her spot up front. It looked like an impossible task. There was already a group of people standing in our old spot. The maze of people standing between us and her chosen spot didn’t stop her. Determination was Emily’s middle name ... unfortunately.

“I’m going in. Are you with me?” she asked.

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“Nope. Not going in with ya. I’ll stay back here and avoid being elbowed and pushed and scowled at. Good luck. I’m with you in spirit.”

“Coward,” she said with a smile. She turned toward her focal point, took a deep breath and forged ahead. She returned before I could even blink. She was holding her side and looking decidedly less confident about her plan.

“I just got the worst elbow in my side.”

“I’m sorry, but you knew what you were facing going in. After all, you were going to use the same weapon.”

“Yeah, but before I could draw my weapon some bottle-blond with a hideous green sundress drew first, and man, did she get me when she thought I was trying to pass her.”

“In her defense, you were trying to pass her,” I said.

Emily shrugged off that detail. “I did get some good intel though,” she said, sticking with the combat theme. “The eagle has landed,” she said in her best covert voice.

“Uh, the secret service is here?”

“No,” she rolled her eyes. “The band just pulled up out back. And I was thinking ...”

“Oh no, you’ve got that same twinkle in your eyes you had when you talked me into sneaking into the movie theater through the emergency exit. Nonna was so mad at

me, to this day, I still tremble with fear when I think about her face as she picked us up at the theater security station.”

“That was probably not our finest hour. But this isn’t nearly as illegal. The band is no doubt parked in the alley, and they’ll be busy going in and out as they move equipment. And I happen to be with Nash Ledger’s dog walker. Let’s go around to the alley and wait to see him. You can say hi and casually reintroduce me to him. It’s way better than standing close to the stage—and those loud speakers.”

A lump formed in my stomach with each word. This was why lies were so insidious. They fed on more deceit and then grew like the giant blob in that vintage horror movie until the original lie became so big it literally started devouring everything in sight.

Emily grabbed my arm. “What do you say? We won’t stay there long, just long enough to talk to Nash and say hello.”

“They’ll be busy, Emi. We’ll be in the way.”

“That’s why I promise we won’t stay long. Come on, he owes you because you walk his dog.”

“I do that strictly for selfish reasons. I love walking Rocky.”

Emily did her head tilt, pleading gesture.

“Oh my gosh, are you serious? Fine, let’s go out there. It’s possible we won’t even see them.” I hoped that was the case, but if not, I was ready to put on that poker face for a quick interaction with Nash. I was just his dog walker, and we certainly didn’t kiss five times today during and after that dog walk.

There were still people filing in, and we were the only people walking out. One of the drink servers was clicking a counting device to keep track of how many people were inside. Our leaving threw her off, and she grumbled at us. “You might not get back in,” she said sharply. “We’re almost at capacity.”

I looked at Emily. “Are you still willing to risk it?”

Emily bit her lip in thought. “Yes, let’s go.” We walked along the side of the building. My first interaction with Nash came back to me, vividly, as we approached the corner.

Emily glanced over at me. “What are you smiling about?”

“Smiling?” I asked too abruptly. There it was again, the lie blob growing to epic proportions. “Just glad to be out of that crowded bar.”

We rounded the corner. A white van and Nash’s truck were parked in the alley. Bosco and Nash were carrying a speaker down a ramp.

Emily grabbed my arm and startled me. “There he is,” she squealed.

Nash looked up to see who’d come down the alley. He nearly dropped the speaker. Bosco growled at him angrily about it, then he spotted us.

“The bar entrance is on the other side,” Bosco scolded.

“It’s all right. They’re here to see me,” Nash said.

There was only one light bulb hanging over the back door, but it was enough light for Bosco to recognize us as we got closer. “That’s right. Your newest conquest,” he said snidely.

The words were meant for Nash, but they hit me like shards of glass. Was I merely his next conquest?

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“Shut up, Bosco. Let’s get this inside.” Nash turned our way as they carried the speaker past. “Be right back,” he said to me.

We stood in the mostly dark alley, Emily practically producing her own glittering light with excitement and me standing in a hurricane of emotions, guilt, nervousness and worry that I’d jumped into this too fast.

Nash returned a few minutes later, and I could feel Emily’s entire body tense next to me. Mine was tense, too, but for an entirely different reason and because of the big blob lie, the name I was now calling it. I couldn’t just come straight out and ask Nash if I was merely his newest conquest because tonight, I was just his dog walker and inconsequential neighbor. And darn him for looking especially good tonight in a gray shirt that matched his eyes.

It seemed Nash was working extra hard to smile at Emily, which, in retrospect, might not have been the best idea. It would only encourage her to think she’d be walking out with his marriage proposal tonight.

“Was it already too crowded inside?” he asked Emily and then dropped a fleeting smile my direction.

“No, we just thought we’d say hi,” I said. “You remember my friend, Emily.”

“Sure do.” He stuck out his hand, and I thought my friend might melt through the asphalt beneath her when she took it. “Good to see you again.”

I was having a minor meltdown about the conquest comment, so my smiles were

limited. Nash seemed to sense something was wrong because, aside from his smile, he shot me a concerned look.

A wide, uncomfortable silence followed. Emily always ended up tongue-tied when she was nervous, and judging by the way she was fidgeting on her sandals, she was very nervous.

“Well, we don’t want to keep you,” I said. My plan to vacate spurred her into action. She wasn’t going to miss out on the opportunity to talk to him longer.

“Will there be any new songs tonight?” she asked. “It’s been a while since you guys produced a new one. I keep checking your site, hoping something new will pop up.”

Nash raked his fingers through his hair and exchanged a conspiratorial look with me. They still hadn’t announced the band’s breakup, which was another big, secret/lie I was keeping. “Uh, you know, keep an eye out tomorrow. Might be something new.”

My eyes rounded in surprise. I knew he’d been working on a song—“just somethin’ I’m messing with,” he’d told me more than once. Was that the new song?

Emily clapped excitedly. “I can’t wait. Are you performing it tonight?”

“No, not tonight. Well, I need to get back inside.”

“We need to go, too, Emi, otherwise we won’t get back in.” My enthusiasm for the whole night had really bottomed out. “Nice to see you again, Nash,” I said politely.

“Yes, you too.” It was all so formal and dry it made me grit my teeth. Emily and I turned to leave, and unexpectedly, his hand brushed mine. It was hard not to show a reaction. Emily didn’t notice. Behind us I heard the door to the building open and shut. I could still feel the heat of his hand on mine as we headed back to the bar.



## ChapterTwenty-Eight

Nash

“Hey, Rocky.” The dog met me at the door. He hated being home alone at night, and I hated to leave him. Tonight had been a top-to-bottom disappointment. It had started with Bosco and me getting into it about something stupid—where to set the drums and keyboard on the stage. For a brief moment, it seemed we’d patched up our differences, and I thought breaking up the band might actually work in favor of our friendship. We’d have no more reasons to argue. But it seemed I’d been imagining the truce between us. The tension was just as abrasive as ever, and after seeing the women coming around the corner, Bosco stopped talking to me for the rest of the night, not exactly ideal when we were playing as a group.

I gave Rocky a treat. Sensing that I was home for the night, he took himself off to bed. Layla’s visit had been the other rough part of the evening, which was especially crummy because it should have been the opposite. Even with our pretend act. Something was wrong, but because of our act, I couldn’t ask her what it was. I spotted her in the audience during the first set, but never saw her again.

One set blurred into the next. The bar was crowded, the lights hot and the air grew thick with the smell of people and beer. During breaks, the four of us hardly looked at one another. It was the kind of heavy silence, slightly tinged with anger and that grim feeling of failure, that could be expected with the breakup of a band. We knew it was all coming to an end, and not a great one at that. Sales were down, and the four of us had drifted apart creatively, socially and in every way necessary for a group to be cohesive and successful.

I landed on the couch with a thud. It had been a long night, but I was always far too wired after a gig to fall asleep. I glanced at my guitar. It had been with me since I bought it from a pawn shop right after high school. At the time I bought it, I had no

idea of its value. I knew it was worth good money after I'd had more than one offer to buy the thing after playing for parties and in small dives.

A light knock on the door made me sit up straighter. I knew the knock. I hurried to the door. When I'd returned home, there was only one dim light on in Layla's cottage, so I figured she was fast asleep, and all my worry would have to wait until morning.

I pulled open the door. Layla was wearing sweatpants, flip-flops and a white tank top. "Excuse my attire," she said. "I fell asleep on the couch, and then your headlights swept through the house and I woke up."

"I'm sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

"Am I your 'newest conquest'?" The words shot out so fast it took me a second to decipher them.

"What? My newest conquest?" As I said it, the tension-filled moment with Bosco came back to me.

"God, Layla, not in a million years. Come inside."

"I can't stay long because my dreams are waiting for me back at the cottage. You weren't in any of them tonight, but that's not to say you haven't been the star in several of them recently."

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I took her hand and pulled her inside. “That was just Bosco, being Bosco.”

She turned around. “I thought the two of you patched things up.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. The guitar strap always irritated it during a show. “Yeah, I thought so, too. I’m not like that. I’m not into conquests. That’s Bosco’s territory. He was just lashing out at me because he asked you for your phone number, and you turned him down.”

Layla pressed her fingers to her chin. “Did I?” She winced. “You’re right. I did. That guy comes on strong.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve tried to tell him that, but it only made him angry. I guess it’s true that sometimes you grow out of a friendship. Even with all the history we share, Bosco and I just don’t seem to work anymore.”

Layla tucked her hair behind her ear. It was messy and ruffled from sleeping, and every inch of her was adorable. “Sometimes I feel like that’s happening between Emily and me. We have a lot of history together, too. She was mad at me tonight because I pulled her away from you too fast. I was feeling so uncomfortable about the whole thing, and then, well, I had a bee in my bonnet, as Nonna used to say. Bosco’s words worried me.”

I walked over to her and took her into my arms. She snuggled instantly against me. “You are not a conquest. You’re a triumph.”

She started vibrating in my arms with a giggle.

“Too cheesy?” I asked.

“Like blue cheese, cheddar and pepper jack all rolled into one.” She lifted her face and peered up at me. “Oh, wow. I always forget how gorgeous you are. I take back the cheesy thing. You can say it again. I think it’ll be less cheesy if I watch you saying it.”

I shook my head. “Nope, moment is ruined.” I leaned down and kissed her.

Layla was still peering up at me with that amazing brown gaze as I lifted my mouth from hers. She reached up and touched my face, something she did a lot and something I was growing to love. “See, you should have started with that,” she said in a near whisper.

I kissed her again. The clip-clop of heavy paws came tramping down the hallway.

Layla pulled out of my arms. “There you are. I was trying not to feel hurt that you didn’t greet me at the door.” She crouched down to hug Rocky for a second. “There, I feel better now. I can go home with Rocky smell all over me.”

“Trying not to feel majorly hurt by that,” I said and pulled her back into my arms. I couldn’t get enough of holding her. “What happened to you tonight? I didn’t see you after the first set. Couldn’t stand the hoarse, nasal-y sound of the lead singer?”

“Actually, he was about the only good part of the night. It was so crowded in there. Are you sure the band should break up? You’ve got some really rabid fans. My best friend included. She tried three times to get closer to the stage and returned to me at the back of the bar each time with a grumpy pout and new bruises.”

I dropped my arms, took her hand and led her to the couch. “I’ve gone back and forth about this whole breakup many times in my head, and I always come to the same

conclusion. It's over."

"Emily will be devastated, and I can tell you having to hold all these secrets from my friend might just be the death of me." She rubbed her stomach. "I feel like I swallowed a bagel whole, and it's just sitting in my belly."

I pushed the hair back off her face. "A bagel?"

"It's the only thing I could think of. Sometimes being in your presence makes me lightheaded."

"I feel the same way, Layla. I think Ronnie's going to post the announcement about the breakup after our last show at Comstock. That might help with that bagel, but the other secret—well—that's up to you."

"I know. And honestly, Emi was being so grouchy on the way to the bar I almost just blurted it out. Then I chickened out because clearly, I don't mind having a whole bagel sitting in my stomach. Oh Nash, can this work? I really want it to work."

"Me too, and yeah, I think it can work. Like I said—we'll cross bridges when we get to them."

Layla covered her mouth to stifle a yawn.

I chuckled. "And just like you preferring to go home smelling like Rocky, I'll try not to be too insulted that I bore you into a series of yawns every time you visit."

Layla covered her face. "I'm so embarrassed ..." She lowered her hands. "And tired. It's the story of my life now that I'm up at dawn to work at the bakery."

I stood up and offered her my hand. "Let me walk you home, sleepy. I know it's been

a long day.”

Layla put her hand in mine, and I helped her to her feet. “Gosh, will this be our whole dating life? Walking Rocky and you walking me home after I embarrass myself with a plethora of uncontrollable yawns?”

I looked over at her as we stepped into the cool night air. It was a clear night with thousands of stars hanging overhead. “Is there such thing as a controllable yawn?”

She thought about it on the way across the yard. “I don’t know. Good question. I’ll have to try it sometime. And the worst part about it is I look like a hungry baby bird when I yawn. At least that is what my sisters used to tell me when we were young.”

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We reached her door. “An adorable baby bird,” I said.

This time I didn’t need to reach for her. She wrapped her arms around my neck. “Thank you, again, for walking me home, and next time we meet I’ll try to be more rested.”

“I was hoping we could see each other tomorrow. I’ve got a meeting with the rest of the band in the morning at their rental house. We’ve got lots of details to work out for shutting everything down. It’s technically a business. ‘Band’ just sounds way cooler.”

“I don’t think you’d have as many fans if you were lead singer of a business. I’m going on a bike ride in the morning, so I guess after you get back, we can get together.”

“Sounds good.” I kissed her. “Sleep tight and I hope I’m in a few of those dreams.”

“Oh, I think you will be, Mr. Ledger.” She opened her door, turned and blew a kiss before disappearing inside.

I headed back across. I’d decided to record my new song and post it on social media for the heck of it. I was wide awake still, so tonight seemed as good a time as any. I’d tell the band about it in the morning. I looked back at Layla’s cottage before shutting my door. Rocky barked once.

“Yep, buddy, I’ve got it bad, too.”

Layla

It was what Nonna would have called a glorious morning and not one for pouting or complaining. That was usually her way of telling the five of us to get out into the fresh air. I'd talked Emily into taking a bike ride down to the marina and back. The mild temperatures had settled in over the cove, and that always added energy to an already frenzied summer weekend. We pedaled down the bike lane through town. There were plenty of other riders in the lane. The bike rental shop on the marina would have had a line early this morning, and as we pedaled past the kiosk, Dave, the guy who ran the stand during spring and summer, was sitting reading a magazine. His bike racks were empty. He waved as Emily and I rode past.

The marina was bustling with activity, too. Lots of pleasure boats had moored in the public slips for the weekend, and there were at least a dozen boats anchored off shore. Emily finally found the space to ride up next to me as we rolled slowly down the wharf that connected to the marina. The fish and chips kiosk had opened early, and the smell of battered, deep-fried fish smacked into us as we passed. We reached the part of the wharf where the wooden planks were too rough and splintery to ride over. I pulled out my lock, and we secured our bikes to one of the bike racks.

Emily and I walked toward the slips. On weekends, there were always glossy, expensive pleasure boats to admire. "Oh, look at that one." Emily pointed to a boat that was long and sleek enough to be categorized as a yacht. "I could see myself stretched out on the sunning deck with a fancy cocktail in my hand and one of the deckhands fanning me. And, of course, the deckhand would look just like Chris Hemsworth."

"Of course."

"I suppose that's not such a big daydream for Isla." Emily looked over at me. "Does Luke have a yacht? Other than his fancy electric car, I've never seen any of the



goodies that come with being a billionaire.”

“That’s because Luke is one of those cool, understated billionaires. I don’t think he likes all the fussy trappings that come with being obscenely rich. I’m sure his family probably has a yacht parked somewhere in the world.”

“That’s what I’ve heard. People have those yachts, and they only leave the harbor once every few years. What a waste. I’d be sailing that thing up and down the coast just to go shopping.”

“You know, Emi, I believe you would do exactly that.”

“What’s happening with the wedding plans?” She asked me the same question every time, but she knew darn well I was sworn to secrecy. Isla wanted to keep everything under wraps until we got closer to the date and until plans were firmed up. I was sure it was mostly because marrying Luke Greyson meant having to avoid nosy reporters, and the last thing she wanted was her future mother-in-law to hear about plans through the media.

“You know that’s top secret, Emi, but if it goes the way Isla is leaning, it’s going to be fabulous.”

“I can’t wait.” Emily grabbed my arm. “I will be invited, won’t I? I’m counting on meeting some of Luke’s rich, single friends. It’s a good thing neither of us are dating anyone right now. The two of us should absolutely show up without dates. Just think, a sea of handsome, rich men all waiting to meet wonderful us. Maybe that yacht dream isn’t so farfetched, after all.”

We stopped at a bench at the end of the marina. It had a fantastic view of the harbor, the jetty and the vast blue Pacific beyond. It truly was a breathtaking day. “It sounds like you’ve finally moved on from Nash Ledger,” I said hopefully. It was the break

I'd been waiting for.

"Never. It's just being amongst all these yachts I allowed myself to dream about marrying a rich man. Unfortunately, I don't think Nash has much money, and wild, wealth-building fame just doesn't seem to be in the cards for Moonstone. I mean there's still a chance. You saw that crowd last night. They've got a lot of fans. But since I love him with all my heart, I'd learn to live without the yacht. But just think what it would be like to have a yacht and Nash. Wow, that's my new dream."

I slumped against the back of the bench. I was sure she'd finally lost interest in Nash. She normally had a short attention span when it came to her newest obsession, but not this time, apparently. It seemed I'd have no choice but to tell her my news. And now was as good a time as any. I sat up straighter and took a few deep breaths to gather some courage. All I got was the salty taste of the sea and that darn fried fish. Before I could say one word, Emily's phone buzzed.

She pulled it out of her pocket. "It's from Kelly," she said with little enthusiasm. She put the phone back.

"Aren't you going to look at it?" I asked, obviously glad for the delay on my confession.

"I'm sure she's just going to complain about something stupid." Her phone beeped again.

"Seems like it's something important." I hadn't gathered enough courage yet.

"Fine. I'll bet she's going to tell me that the sky is far too blue this morning to enjoy the weekend." She was laughing at her prediction as she opened the text. "Hmm, she's asking if I saw the new Moonstone song. That's right. There's supposed to be a new song." She tapped on the link, and a video popped up. "Looks like it was filmed

on a phone.” She tapped it. “Nash is playing his guitar sitting on a couch. Must not have been done in a studio like some of their other videos.”

Nash’s deep voice came rolling through the phone. “Copper hair and a smile that melts my heart. Couldn’t love you more.” I froze. Was the song about me? Would Emily notice those first two words? Copper hair? The song was good. Really good. It was a pretty big ego boost to believe it was written about me.

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“Wow, I love it.” Emily scrolled down. “It’s already gotten more than fifty thousand views. This might be exactly what they need to get the band moving. Maybe I’ll be on that yacht with Nash, after all.”

I released the breath I’d been holding. Emily hadn’t noticed that he spoke about copper hair, and there was no reason she should have. They were just lyrics. “Something he’d been messing around with” was how he’d described it, only his half-hearted effort might have paid off this time. Maybe the band would stay together. I hoped the song went viral and generated enough revenue to pay for Nash’s mom’s operation.

Emily put away the phone. “Gosh, he’s breathtaking. And that song. I think it’s going to be a hit, a big hit. Well, I think I’m all bicycled out this morning. I’m going to head back home. Swim later?”

“Are you still trying to convince me you like swimming in the ocean?”

“Nope, I just want an excuse to parade around in my new swimsuit in front of Audrey’s cottage. Although Nash is probably not home today. It’s his day off, and he’s a future rock star, so he’s no doubt hanging out with the band figuring out their next move.” Emily spoke confidently as if she had an insider’s track on Moonstone.

“I’m not sure what my afternoon is looking like.” Another lie to feed the blob, and I almost deflated that blob with my big confession before backing out. “I’m going to ride my bike a while longer. It’s too nice a day to be inside.”

We walked back to where the bikes were locked together. We parted at the end of the

wharf. “We’ll talk later,” I said. There’s something I desperately need to tell you, I thought, but never uttered a word of it aloud.

## Chapter Thirty

Nash

The door swung open before I could knock. “Get in here,” Ronnie whispered loudly. “The two blockheads are still sleeping.” She continued in a fast-talking whisper. “They stayed up till three in the morning watching a horror movie marathon. I still can’t get the sound of suspenseful music and blood-curdling screams out of my head.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me along to the small front room. “Sit,” she commanded.

I sat. “Uh, officer, what did I do wrong?”

Ronnie pulled out her phone. “What did you do wrong?” She was still hissing through a whisper.

“Why are we being so hush-hush?” I asked, mimicking her dramatic whisper routine.

She sat next to me with a plunk. “Because I wanted a chance to talk to you about this before those two found out.”

“All right. You’re starting to freak me out, Ronnie.”

She held her phone up and pushed it close enough to my face that I had to lean back. It was my video. I hadn’t looked at it since I posted it.

“Oh wow, you found my video. I was just messing around.” I was done whispering.

“Well, your ‘just messing around’ already has a hundred thousand views. Your song, the one you apparently wrote in secret, has gone viral. Fans are begging to download the new track. Of course, I had no idea that this little gem of a video existed out there in the internet-o-sphere, but it’s bringing some great traffic to our site. I noticed that our downloads and streams had gone through the roof overnight. Then I saw your video.” She held up her phone. “Hundred and fifty thousand. This will be at a million by noon.”

I sat back, flabbergasted. “I don’t know what to say. I swear I was just working on this song that I had no real plans for. I got inspired ...” I stopped, but it was too late. Ronnie caught what I said.

She sat forward with a teasing grin. “Aha, I wondered if there was some inspiration behind this song. Does this inspiration, by any chance, have copper hair?”

I nodded and relaxed back against the couch cushions. “She does, and since none of our other originals ever went viral, it seems I needed that inspiration to finally write something people loved.”

Ronnie was scrolling through her phone as I spoke. “They love it all right. We need to get the song up on our site as soon as possible. This thing has big download potential. My gosh, Nash, you nailed it, and it didn’t even take any professional sound editing or studio. Just you on a couch with your guitar.”

The news had hit me like a sonic blast, but I was slowly absorbing it. “Wait, do you think we could make enough that I could pay for that first installment on my mom’s procedure?”

“If things keep going the way they are, and I see no reason why they wouldn’t, then yeah. I think we’ll all be making a solid chunk of cash. Your new video was just what

we needed to introduce fans to our music.” She paused and got a funny look on her face. “I don’t want to go all legal-eze on you, but you posted this on the band’s social media and used our fan base?—”

“Ronnie, it’s all right. Of course we’ll share these profits. We’re still a band at the moment, and to be honest, I’m hurt that you would think otherwise.”

Ronnie laughed. “Sorry, that was my greedy financial brain talking. I know you’re not like that. I’m like that, so I always expect other people to be the same way.”

Footsteps pulled our attention to the hallway. Bosco was shirtless, in a pair of shorts. He was rubbing his hair, and it stuck out in every direction. His face had that just-woke-from-a-heavy-sleep look, but he was staring intensely at his phone. “What the?—”

“Yep, our singer posted a little song he’d been messing around with, and well, it’s on fire,” Ronnie said.

Bosco glared at me. It was exactly the kind of reaction I expected. “You posted a song without our input?” He was about to start on a rant, but Ronnie stopped him.

“Our downloads are through the roof,” she said.

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Some of the tension in his bony shoulders faded. “Yeah?”

Ronnie nodded. “We’re going to make a lot of money on this.”

Bosco pulled his glare away from me. “Would have been nice to know about the song,” he muttered as he headed to the kitchen.

“And you’re welcome,” I said. “I hadn’t planned for it to be anything but me messing around with my guitar.”

“He had inspiration,” Ronnie teased, unhelpfully.

Bosco turned from the refrigerator with a carton of orange juice. He chugged some and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You mean my inspiration. I spotted her first.”

“Well then, that makes her yours. Sometimes, you’re such an ass, Bos.”

“Thanks, I take that as a compliment.” He lifted the carton to drain the contents.

“That was my orange juice,” Ronnie complained.

“I’ll pay you back. It seems we’re all going to be rich soon.”

“Once again, you’re welcome,” I said.

Seth came down the hallway, more dressed and put together, but with the same



baffled expression as he held up his phone. “What the heck is going on?”

Ronnie patted my shoulder. “Our boy Nash did a little thing, and it’s turning into a big thing.”

“Whoa, bro, you sly devil,” Seth said. He walked out and sat on the couch. “What does this mean for the rest of us, for the band?”

“It means more money for all of us,” I said. “But I think everything else still stands, right?” I looked at Seth. He was the one who got the dissolution ball rolling by taking a day job offer from his future father-in-law.

It didn’t take Seth long to agree. “Yeah, I’m still taking the job.”

Bosco came out. He’d been the lone holdout on a breakup, but he sat down and said, “Yep. I’m done. I’m going to move on, and I think that’ll be best for all of us.”

Ronnie nodded along, but with less enthusiasm. “I’m going to miss all of you.” Her voice wavered, and that was unusual for Ronnie.

I patted her leg. “It’s the end of an era, and we’ve all got our futures ahead of us.”

Seth lifted his phone. “And this will help give all of us a boost in that future. Thanks, Nash.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Ronnie said.

They both looked at Bosco. He pretended to be scrolling through his phone. He finally looked up. “Yeah, I guess you did good.”

“I’ll take it,” I said to Ronnie who was rolling her eyes. “Well, let’s talk another time

about how we're going to dissolve this band. I've got someone to see." I headed toward the door.

"Your inspiration?" Ronnie called to me.

"Yep." I walked out and headed to my truck. I sent off a text. "Any chance we can hang out? I'd really like to see you." There was no quick response. She'd mentioned a bike ride. I put the phone down and drove back to the cottage.

It was a great day, perfect weather, not too hot. I was dreaming about a swim and picnic on the beach when I pulled onto the small road leading to the cottage. At first, all I saw was Layla standing next to her bike and looking at something across from her. When I passed the last tree on the sidewalk, the object of her focus came into view. It was Dustin.

I pulled into my driveway so fast the tires chirped and the windows rattled. I stopped the truck, jumped out and raced over to Layla. Dustin pointed angrily at me. "You are somehow always around. Are you stalking Layla?" Dustin asked.

It was hard not to laugh. "Uh, I think someone should look in the mirror when they ask that question."

Layla scooted closer to me. She was tense with fear as I took her hand.

"Get your hands off her!" Dustin yelled. "Leave. This is a personal conversation between me and my girlfriend."

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“I’m not your girlfriend, Dustin.” Layla’s quiet, shaky tone made my throat tighten.

I had no idea how long they’d been standing out on the driveway, but I was glad, now, that we delayed the meeting.

“I told you, Layla, we just need to talk about it and smooth things out. We had a good thing.”

Layla shook her head. “No, no we didn’t.”

I took a step toward him, and he backed up defensively. “If you come near me, I’m calling the police.”

“Don’t you see? You’re trespassing on Layla’s property. Maybe you should call the police. We’ve got something to report.”

Dustin backed up another step. “Just leave. I’m only going to talk to her.”

I shook my head. “You’re the only one leaving. She’s told you no. She doesn’t want to talk to you, and showing up to harass her and scare her is not going to force Layla to change her mind. You’re only pushing her away more. She obviously wants nothing to do with you.”

“Oh, I see, you’re planning to make your move on her. Well, she’s taken.”

I actually started to feel sorry for the guy. He was really detached from reality.

“Dustin, just go,” Layla said. “Otherwise, I will call the police.”

Dustin looked over at her. “You don’t mean that, Layla.”

Tears were rolling down her face. She nodded. “Yes, I do. We are never going to be together. Never. Please move on.”

Dustin’s eyes darted toward me.

“You heard her,” I said.

Dustin grumbled something under his breath as he marched down to the road, climbed in his car and drove off. I turned around, and before I could say a word, Layla threw herself into my arms. She sobbed for a few minutes and was still trembling when she finally caught her breath.

She peered up at me through teary eyes. “You hear about this happening to other people, but you never think it’s going to happen to you. He was blocking the path to the front door. I was contemplating getting on my bike and riding away, but I think he might have chased me in his car and that seemed scary. I’m glad you got home when you did.” She pressed herself against my chest.

I wrapped my arms around her. “Me, too, Layla. Me, too.”

## Chapter Thirty-One

Layla

I was so shaken; I couldn’t sit still. Nash had walked me into the cottage. I paced around the small living room. “I can’t believe he showed up here. I don’t think he meant me any harm.” I looked at Nash. “Do you think he would have hurt me?”

Admittedly, for a few seconds there, I was scared. Okay, more than a few seconds.”

“I’ll be honest, Layla. I think you should talk to the police. Maybe you need a restraining order.”

I knew he hadn’t meant to scare me, but I could feel the color drain from my face. “Restraining order? That’s what they do in the movies, on detective shows when someone psychotic needs to be kept away from a victim. Surely not in this case.” I looked at him, hoping he’d say “you’re right.” But he didn’t.

“Let me get you a glass of water,” he said. “You look pale.” He walked to the kitchen.

“That’s because you mentioned a restraining order. That sounds so big, so legal, so dramatic.”

Nash filled a glass with water and returned to the living room. The look of concern on his face only made my heart ache more for him.

“I’m sorry I mentioned it,” he said as he handed me the glass. “It’s just that the guy standing on your driveway a few minutes ago needs help—some serious help—and in the meantime, we need to make sure he stays away from you.”

The pacing was only making me more agitated, so I finally settled into the comforting, worn cushions of Nonna’s big chair. Sometimes I got lucky, and the lightest scent of her lilac hand lotion would puff up from the chair. I really needed that lilac scent right now. I drank the water.

“He seemed like a regular guy,” I said. “If he hadn’t upset me so much, I’d almost find it in my heart to feel sorry for him.”

Nash sat on the end of the couch closest to the chair. “I agree. It’s just hard to work up too much sympathy because he was so harsh and angry.”

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“I had no idea he’d react like this. Like I said—I’ve read stories like this online, but you never think it’s going to happen to you. I was sure I knew how to weed out the bad eggs on those dating sites.”

“Some people are really good at hiding their true selves. Ronnie dated a guy for a year, and she was really into him until she found his second phone. The one where he kept all his family photos—recent family photos. He had a wife and kids, and there was no divorce in their future. Although that probably changed after Ronnie followed him home one night and threw all the stuff he’d been keeping in her apartment on the front lawn.”

“Like I said—these are all plots for movies. Not real life.” I finished the water. “And I’d had such a nice morning. Emily and I rode bikes.” Then something important came back to me. The main event of the morning had been washed away by the unsettling experience, but I was thinking clearer again. “Let’s not talk about it anymore right now. It’s giving me a stomachache. Now, sir, please tell me—” I rested my elbow on the arm of the chair and settled my chin casually on my palm. I blinked a few times dramatically. “Anything out of the ordinary happen to you this morning?”

Nash smiled. “You saw the video.”

“I saw a viral video of an incredibly hot man singing a great song, a love song that will have all his fans swooning.”

“I only wrote it to make one woman swoon.”

I lifted my chin from my hand. “Do I dare dream that the copper-haired girl in your

song is yours truly?"

"Don't know any other copper-haired women." He tapped the side of his head. "Scratch that. I know one other, and your sister is incredible, but her boyfriend looks like the kind of guy who could turn me into mashed potatoes, so I'm sticking with my original inspiration for the song. You."

"You met Aria and Dex?" I asked excitedly.

"I went to the diner. They're both very cool."

"Dex is really protective over all of us."

Nash nodded. "I'll remember that."

"Ella thinks I should have Dex talk to Dustin."

"Hmm, might not be a bad idea. But I think a restraining order is the best way to go."

I sat up straighter. "I know. Hmm, if only I had access to a big dog, a dog who could be by my side all day for protection."

Nash laughed. "I'm going to assume you're not talking about my giant, stuffed animal dog who would just as soon lick an intruder's face as growl at them. And I could see him now in the bakery. I don't think he'd be focused on protecting you."

"Yeah, I suppose the baked goods might be a touch distracting for him."

"A touch, yeah. What are you doing the rest of the day? I thought we could hang out. But after this morning, I'll understand if you just want to stay home. I do, however, plan to stand sentry at your door. Rocky will, too."



“I’m not going to hide, and you’re right, I’ll give some thought to getting a restraining order. But it’s Sunday, day one of my weekend, so let’s do something. We could go down to the beach or take Rocky for a walk. Aria’s got the café open till noon on Sunday, so we could go grab sandwiches.”

“The beach sounds good to me. Then we can play it by ear. I’ll go home and change, and be back here in twenty?”

“That works. Oh, and Nash, thanks so much for being there just now. I’m not entirely sure how bad it was going to get.” A shiver went through me as I replayed the scene in my head. “He didn’t even look like the Dustin I knew standing across from me on the driveway.”

“I’m sorry this is happening to you, Layla. But I’m here, right next door, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Ababy blue sky with small, wispy clouds hung over a mostly calm ocean. A group of gulls were floating peacefully about twenty feet off shore, just far enough to make Rocky give up the idea of trying to chase them. He’d settled on the end of Nash’s towel with a big chew bone. He was in a complete trance as he gripped it with his big, furry paws and gnawed on the end.

Nash glanced at his phone.

“Everything all right?” I asked. “How is your mom doing?”

“I talked to Becky briefly this morning. They’re still talking about the specialist.”

I sat forward in my chair. “Do you think you’ll be able to manage it? I wish there was something I could do to help, Nash.”

He spun around on his towel to face me. “You already have.”

“I have?”

“You know that song? The one about the copper-haired girl?”

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I felt my cheeks get warm. “I vaguely remember it,” I said with a smile.

“You were absolutely my inspiration. Moonstone’s sales are off the charts today. I’m not sure how long it’ll last, but I think I’ll at least have enough for the initial payment. Maybe even more.”

“Wow, I had no idea. I knew it was getting a lot of views this morning when Emily showed it to me.”

He stood up. “It’s getting hot. Let’s go for a swim.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” I started walking and then picked up my pace. “The sand is hotter than I expected. My sisters love to tease me about my overly sensitive feet. They used to imitate me running down to the water. Nonna used to say I looked like a high-stepping, gaited pony.”

Nash put out his hand. “Hop on my back. I’ll carry you down to the water.”

I hesitated. “Really?”

“Hop on.”

I climbed on his back and wrapped my arms around his neck. He wrapped his arms around my legs. I rested my chin against his shoulder and pressed my cheek against his. “I can’t remember the last time I had a piggyback ride. I highly recommend it on hot sand, although I don’t think I’ll be able to return the favor.”

Nash started jogging to the water. I laughed and tightened my grip on him. His feet plunged into the frothy water lapping at the shore. He carried me a few more feet, then I let go and floated into the cool waves. Seconds later, I was wrapped around him again, this time face-to-face. He held me while treading water. The tide lifted us up and dropped us down.

Nash kissed me lightly on the lips. “Hmm, salty. Not bad. Ever have one of those days when you can’t believe how great everything is going, and because things don’t always go great, instead of enjoying the day, all you can do is worry that all the greatness will stop and something terrible will happen?”

“I think that’s a normal feeling,” I said. “Nonna used to say ‘enjoy the good stuff and don’t fret about the bad because you know both of them will always be somersaulting through your life.’”

“She sounds like a cool grandmother. You and your sisters, you were really nuts about her, weren’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. She’s still with all of us in spirit. Always. She just had that kind of presence, and she was such a big influence on our lives. So, I guess what I was trying to say, in Nonna’s words, is just enjoy it for now and deal with the bad when it happens.” I wiped a streak of sand off his face.

I hadn’t planned for the simple gesture to turn into something, but it did ... turn into something. Nash reached up and held my hand against his face. He closed his eyes for a second, then opened them. “This is turning out to be so much more than I expected, Layla. I can’t stop thinking about us. I feel like there’s been something important, something crucial missing in my life for a long time. Even when the band was doing well, I never felt settled, and that was long before my mom’s accident. And now it feels like I have that missing piece. It’s you. I needed you in my life.”

Every word was winding its way softly and soundly around my heart. “I feel the same way, Nash. I’ve never felt this. This is different, so much more, so significant that I almost feel like I can’t let go for fear that you’ll disappear and this will just be a dream.” I knew now how my sisters felt when they met their soulmates. There was dating and relationships and then there was this. I couldn’t put a solid description to the way I was feeling. All I knew was it felt overwhelming and right.

We stayed entwined together floating up and down in the cool water of the cove. Yep, it felt overwhelming and it definitely felt right.

## ChapterThirty-Two

Nash

My phone vibrating on the coffee table and overly loud music on the television woke me from a deep sleep. My eyes skimmed past the clock on the wall. I was sure it said 2:30. I assumed since it was still dark outside that meant 2:30 in the morning and not afternoon. Soft hair brushed my arm, and I woke up fully. I was slumped back on the couch, and Layla was sleeping soundly with her head in my lap. There was an empty pizza box on the coffee table. The evening was coming back to me. Layla and I had spent the whole afternoon and evening together, mostly talking about family, future dreams, childhood embarrassments. We ordered a pizza and binged a marathon of old comedy movies. We were so comfortable in each other’s company that at some point during an Abbott and Costello movie, we both dozed off.

I rested my head back, not wanting to wake Layla. She moaned softly and curled herself deeper under the blanket I’d carried out from the bedroom. My phone buzzed again, and I startled, obliterating my plan not to wake her. A text in the middle of the night was never good news.

Layla stretched and yawned, then sat up suddenly. “Oh jeez, did we fall asleep?”

“We did.”

Layla stayed cocooned in the blanket as she sat back on the sofa.

I reached for my phone. My heart rate had jumped into overdrive. I was relieved to see it was a text from Ronnie and not Becky.

“Is everything all right,” Layla asked.

“It’s from Ronnie, which is weird at this hour.”

Layla looked across to the clock. “Oh wow, it’s the middle of the night. I guess none of my sisters are home, otherwise they’d have called me.”

I opened the text. “Call me if you’re up. I just opened an email from Concord Records, and you’re going to want to hear what they have to say.” I stared at the text, trying to decide if I wanted to call her. It was late, and my head wasn’t on straight enough to hear about business deals.

“Is Ronnie okay?” Layla asked.

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“Yeah, just something about an email from a record company.”

Layla finally emerged from her blanket shell. “Maybe it’s about the new song.”

I nodded. “Could be.”

She wrapped her arm around mine and cuddled closer. “You don’t sound excited about that.”

“I don’t know. The band seems finished. Bosco and I are never going to make good bandmates again. I only hope we’ll be able to salvage our friendship once Moonstone is in the past.”

“I can sense it’s over for you whenever you talk about the band. Are you going to call her? Wait, why is she still up?”

“Ronnie is one of those people who can survive on four hours sleep. She stays up late and gets up early, and she’s always energetic and ready to go.”

“Lucky her.” Layla stretched and made a cute little sound effect to go with it. “Isla always says she wishes she had twenty-six hours in a day.” Layla looked over at me with a questioning brow.

“Right, guess I’ll give Ronnie a call.”

“I need a drink of water. I’ll give you some privacy, and after the call you can walk me home—if that’s all right.”

“Of course.”

Layla walked to the kitchen, and I called Ronnie.

“You’re up. I wasn’t expecting you to call this late,” Ronnie said. She sounded wired as if she’d been drinking espresso.

“What’s up?”

“Concord Records wants to buy the rights to ‘Couldn’t Love you More.’ They just signed Sugar Ivy, and they’re in need of song material. Their agent thought your song could take them to the top of the charts. They offered three million, and we’d still retain the rights for three months. So, we could add the song to our site and earn off it until then. What do you think? Seems like a good deal.”

“Yeah, it’s a really good deal.”

Layla politely stood in the kitchen and sipped her water. I waved for her to come back to the couch. I wanted her near me again. She tiptoed back in her sweet attempt to not disturb the conversation. She pulled her copper hair back, tied it in a loose knot and sat down next to me. It reminded me that the song was for her. How would she feel about me selling it off to another band? How would I feel about it?

“Let me sleep on it, Ronnie. I’ll call you in the morning. Have you mentioned anything to Bos and Seth?”

“Not yet. I figured this was really all on you. It’s your song.”

“Thanks. I’ll get back to you in the morning.” I hung up and put the phone down.

Layla brought her feet up and beneath her on the couch. She tugged the blanket



around her once more. “Was it good news? I’m trying to read you right now. It looks like someone knocked the wind out of you, but I can’t tell if that’s good or bad.”

“A record company offered to buy the rights to the song for three million dollars.”

Her lips turned down in a frown.

“Right. It’s the song I wrote for you, so I won’t sell it.”

“It’s not that. I assume it means Moonstone will go on to be a major band with round the world tours and round the world groupies, and you’ll forget about your dog walker in Whisper Cove.”

“No, that’s not what buying the rights means.”

There was nothing cuter than Layla looking puzzled. “So, you won’t be big rock stars?”

“Nope, thank goodness. Don’t get me wrong, twenty-year-old me wanted nothing more, but even being just a well-known local band is draining. The company wants the song for this new up-and-coming band called Sugar Ivy. We’ll get to keep the song up on our site for three months and then it’ll come down, and the new band will get to record it for their first album.”

I turned to face her on the couch and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “But I wrote that song for you, so if you don’t want us to sell it, that’s fine.”

Layla’s brows bunched together, perturbed. “Just what kind of a selfish princess do you think I am?” She tilted her head side to side. “Okay, admittedly, I am occasionally a princess. But you need that money for your mom and sister. You’ve got to sell it, Nash. It’ll solve so many problems and give your mom her life back.”

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I pulled her into my arms. “You are something else, Layla Lovely. Princess Layla Lovely.”

“Besides, you’ll just have to write me another song.”

“It will be my pleasure.”

“I hate to say it—” she said.

“Then don’t.” I tightened my arms around her. “I don’t want to let you go tonight. I saw you standing in the kitchen. I ached to have you next to me, and you were only ten feet away.”

“Then I guess it’s lucky I live right next door.” She laughed. “I just realized I’ve fallen for the boy next door.”

“Trust me, Layla, he’s fallen hard for you, too.”

### ChapterThirty-Three

Layla

Frantic knocking woke me from a deep sleep. It took me a second to get my bearings. The room was still dark because the curtains were drawn, but daylight seeped around the edges. I’d gotten to bed late. Nash and I had a hard time parting. We’d talked until nearly dawn, until a hazy gray light had started to creep into the eastern sky, then Nash walked me home and kissed me goodnight ... or good morning, I supposed.

Ella wasn't in her bed, which didn't surprise me. She was with Rhett, and Isla and Ava had stayed out all night, too. There was another knock, which reminded me why I woke from the deep sleep in the first place. I pulled on my shorts, a sweatshirt and flip-flops and walked to the door. A moment of terror struck me. What if it was Dustin on the other side? Nash and I'd had such a wonderful day together, I'd all but forgotten about Dustin's unwanted visit.

I stopped at the door. "Who is it?"

"It's me, of course," Emily said in exasperation. "Didn't you get my message?" My phone was on the charger in the kitchen, and I hadn't looked at it yet.

I opened the door, and Emily burst in. She looked me up and down and rolled her eyes. "Seriously? Armageddon hits the town, and you're still sleeping? It's nearly nine."

"And my day off and one of the few days I get to sleep longer than the sun." There was enough chill in the cottage for me to zip up my sweatshirt. If anyone else had used the word *armageddon*, I would have been alarmed, but to Emily, the end of the world was always just around the corner, and it was usually something far below the catastrophe level—like she broke the strap on her favorite purse or dropped her phone in the gutter.

"You didn't get my message? Where are your sisters? Surely, they've heard since Isla's bakery and Aria's café were hit."

"I'm the only one home. What are you talking about?"

Emily grunted in frustration, but I sensed she was thrilled that she had some major news to break. "Someone walked through town last night and broke a bunch of shop windows. The bakery and the café got hit."

“That’s crazy. Are you sure?”

“Saw the damage with my own eyes.”

I hurried into the kitchen and yanked my phone from the charger. There were five messages from Isla, Aria and Ella combined.

I flicked my finger across the screen to listen to the voicemails, but the front door opened and Ella walked in. “Have you heard?” she asked.

“Emily was just telling me.”

“I had to wake her up,” Emily said.

“Tattletale. I didn’t get much sleep.” It wasn’t a lie. I just didn’t fill in the details of why I lacked sleep. “How bad is the damage?” I asked. “Do they know who did it?”

“The damage was to front windows, and I know both Aria and Isla have insurance to cover it, but there’s glass everywhere, and everything in Isla’s front window will have to be thrown away. I talked to Officer Tuttle.”

Emily giggled. “I’ll bet he was more than happy to give his favorite Lovely sister a few details,” Emily teased. Owen Tuttle or Officer Tuttle, as we all called him even though it felt weird, had had a long running crush on Ella.

Ella ignored Emily’s comment. “A few cameras picked up someone dressed in black pants and a black hoodie. They’ve concluded it was a male by the way he walked and carried himself. He kept his face well-hidden, and it was dark. He was carrying a baseball bat. When I was talking to Owen, outside of the café, he got a call from the precinct that they’d had an anonymous tip come in about the suspect’s identity, so he rushed off to learn more about it.”

“You were at the café?”

“I was helping Aria and Dex sweep the front sidewalk. Isla is over at the bakery with Luke and Rhett. I was chosen to go home and find out why our little sister wasn’t answering her phone.”

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I smoothed my hair back. “I sleep in one morning, and the whole world unravels. So typical.”

Ella turned her head. “Who’s that? Someone just pulled into the driveway.”

“Probably Ava,” I said as we headed to the door.

Ella pulled it open. “It’s Owen.” The police car had pulled into Audrey’s driveway. “I wonder what he’s doing.”

Emily gasped. “Do you think Nash is the culprit?”

I shook my head. “Boy, you sure are ready to throw your true love under the bus fast. I’m sure it’s a mistake. Nash didn’t do this.”

“How can you be so sure?” Emily asked.

And there it was—my giant blob of a lie back to remind me it was still lurking around. “I just am,” I said dismissively.

Officer Tuttle hadn’t seen us come up behind the squad car. He straightened his belt, walked up to the door and knocked. Nash didn’t answer right away, and I knew why. He’d only just gotten to bed a few hours earlier.

“There sure are lots of people sleeping late today,” Emily said with a sideways glance.

“Nash Ledger, this is the police,” Owen said sternly through the door.

“Maybe Emily’s right,” Ella said. “It sure doesn’t seem like a cordial visit.

Rocky started barking wildly, and Tuttle backed up a step. The door opened a few seconds later.

“Oh, he looks so sleepy,” Emily whispered. “But still incredibly handsome.”

Nash stepped out on the stoop, and his puzzled gaze instantly found me. I shrugged to let him know I had no idea what was going on. Ella moved closer to the scene, so Emily and I followed.

“Nash Ledger?” Tuttle asked.

“That’s right. What’s going on?” Nash’s face smoothed, and he looked worried. “Did someone get hurt?”

“No, but there was some significant damage in town to the shops, and we had an anonymous tip that someone saw you smashing windows with a bat.” Tuttle pulled out his notepad and opened it. “They said it was the singer with the viral song. They recognized you from the video, apparently.”

“Oh wow, hediddo it,” Emily whispered. “So disappointing.”

“I’ve been here all night, so the tip was wrong,” Nash said.

“Then you won’t mind if I have a look around,” Officer Tuttle asked.

“Go ahead.”

Tuttle turned around and realized we were close by. “Excuse me, ladies, I’ll need you to step over to your property. This is official police business.” He gave Ella an apologetic smile, and at the same time, I got the sense that he was enjoying getting to play the important officer with dangerous business.

Nash looked at me.

“You’re wrong about this, Owen. I mean Officer Tuttle.” Owen kept up his search of the landscaping around the cottage. For a second, he paused with a serious look. He pulled on a latex glove, pushed his arm into a shrub and pulled a baseball bat free.

Nash’s chin dropped. “That’s not mine. I’ve never played baseball. I didn’t do this.”

Officer Tuttle placed the bat in his car. “Nash Ledger, I’m going to take you in for questioning.”

I raced forward. “No, he didn’t do it. He has an alibi. I was with Nash until early this morning.”

Behind me I heard Emily suck in a gasp-y breath. Officer Tuttle turned around and looked at me. “Are you telling the truth?”

Ella stepped forward now with her arms crossed. “Did you just ask my baby sister if she’s a liar?”



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Tuttle's face turned red. "Uh—no—I mean, I'm just making sure he has an alibi. After all, I just found the bat used in the attack in his shrubs."

The cat was certainly out of the bag and the box and whatever else a cat might get itself into, so I walked across to stand next to Nash. "I was with him all night. We were right here in this cottage." I avoided looking in Emily's direction. This was my fault for not telling her earlier. Now I'd had to drop the news like a bomb.

"Layla and I were here all night. Someone is trying to frame me."

And as he said it, I figured out who. "Your anonymous tip—was it a man?" I asked.

"Yes, he wouldn't give his name."

"That's your culprit," I said. "Start with Dustin Iverton. He might just be your man."

Officer Tuttle looked disappointed that he hadn't caught the vandal, but something told me there'd be an arrest soon. "I might need a signed statement from both of you," Tuttle said.

I nodded. "Just let us know."

Officer Tuttle got in his car, phoned something in on his two-way radio and drove away. I finally found the courage to look at Emily.

She scowled at me, turned and stormed over to her car.

Ella watched her peel out of the driveway. “I take it Emily still didn’t know you two were seeing each other?”

“No,” I sighed. “Me and my stupid blob.”

Both Nash and Ella looked at me.

I shrugged. “It’s a long story. I’ll give her a few hours and then go see her. She probably won’t talk to me for a week, but we always find a way to patch things up.”

“That’s true,” Ella said. “I’ll let you two talk. I’m going back to town to help with the cleanup.”

“Tell Aria and Isla I’ll be there soon.” I turned back to Nash and immediately walked into his waiting arms.

“Thanks for that and I’m sorry about Emily,” he said.

“Nah, she’ll be fine. I’m sorry that I got you into this. If not for me, Dustin wouldn’t have come up with this diabolical scheme.”

“Hopefully, a few months’ jail time and some serious legal bills will knock that guy on the noggin. He really needs it.”

“He does. And I take back what I said about starting to feel sorry for him.” We stepped into the house. Rocky was waiting for us at the door. His tail wagged wildly when he saw me. “I guess someone is waiting for a walk. What did you decide about the song?”

“We’re going to sell it to the record company. I already let Becky and Mom know the operation was a go, and they’re nervous and excited. I sure hope this helps.”

“I think it will. I can feel it in my bones.”

Nash laughed and pulled me to him. “You can feel it in your bones?”

“Yep, it’s something Nonna always said, and she was always right.”

Nash lifted my chin and kissed me lightly on the lips. “I think I’ve found the most beautiful good luck charm in the world.”

“Or maybe I’m your lucky penny.” I pointed at my hair.

“Definitely my lucky penny.”

All of us spent a good two hours cleaning the shattered glass from the sidewalks and the shops. I sat in the café, staring glumly at the plywood Rhett and Dex had used to cover the ugly gaping hole left behind by the broken window. Ella and Isla were busy grilling Nash about our new relationship and I sat with Rhett and Jack, talking about mental health and the things that caused people to go this far off the deep end. Rhett knew too well about that. We all did. His ex-wife tried to murder Ella by locking her in Rhett’s coach house and setting fire to it. We all still shuddered knowing how close our dear sister came to a grisly end.

“Bacon and tomato sandwiches coming right up,” Dex yelled from the kitchen. The comforting smell of bacon had already helped bring us all back to earth some after the crazy start to the day. Ella had spoken to Officer Tuttle. When pressed, Dustin confessed to all of it. He told Tuttle that our breakup had pushed him to the brink of a nervous breakdown. It was hard to believe the whole thing had been so hard on him, but then like Jack had explained—everyone deals with problems differently. Some people just don’t have the right coping mechanisms to keep things in perspective.

My phone rang. It was Emily. “Excuse me, guys, I need to take this.” I hadn’t spoken

to Emi since she'd stormed off from the house. Frankly, I was pretty nervous about it.  
“Hey, Em.” I said gently.

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“You should have told me. I feel like a fool after going on about Nash and talking nonstop about my dream of being his wife and the whole time?—”

“No, it wasn’t the whole time. And I’m sorry, Emi. I’m a coward. A terrible coward and I let a big blob of lies grow into something so big, I couldn’t get control of it.”

She giggled. “Like the horror movie? Remember when we watched that and we laughed through the whole thing because the special effects and acting back then were so campy?”

I released such a long sigh; I blew some napkins off the table I stood over. “Will you forgive me?”

“I guess so, but I want full access to all the details of your romance.”

“Well, I don’t know about full access, but I’ll fill you in when appropriate. I have to say, Em, I was sure you’d give me the cold shoulder for a month. I’m glad that’s not the case.”

“I figured you went through enough with that creepy stalking act from Dustin, and there’s nothing I can do if Nash prefers you. Plus, well, I’ve sort of been keeping a secret of my own.”

Dex carried out a tray of bacon and tomato sandwiches and plates piled high with fries. We’d all worked up a big appetite.

I refocused on the phone call but those fries weren’t making it easy. Aria spotted me

across the way and waved and pointed at the food as if it needed pointing out. I waved to let her know I was coming.

“What’s the secret?” Emily’d had lots of big ta-da announcements that turned out to be less than awe-inspiring.

“I’ve been texting back and forth with Connor, the guy working at the fish and tackle store.”

“Really? He’s cute and very sweet. I’m happy for you.”

“He’s no Nash Ledger, but we made a date to have a drink next week.”

“Fun. That sounds promising. Hey, Emi, Dex just made some delicious sandwiches so I’m gonna eat. I’m really glad you’re not mad.”

“You know I can’t stay mad at my bestie,” she said.

“Love ya.”

“Love ya, too.”

I hurried back to the food tables. Nash patted the chair next to him and winked. I sat down beside him. Isla lifted her glass of soda. “I’d like to welcome the newest member of our group, Mr. Nash Ledger. I hope we don’t scare you off, because I’ve seen the way my sister looks at you, and I think you’re a keeper.”

Nash nodded with a shy smile.

“To the newest member of the group,” Ella cheered and everyone followed.

And just like that, I was no longer a third wheel or a ninth wheel or a spare wheel, in general. Plus, I got a really cool dog out of the whole deal.

## ChapterThirty-Four

Nash

Three weeks later

Layla crossed the yard with Rocky the second I stepped out of my truck. It was perfect timing, because she was the only person I wanted to see right then. The trip to Texas had been good, but I was glad to be back. Layla hurried over and jumped into my arms. We kissed and hugged long enough to cause Rocky to try and wiggle his head between our legs.

We finally managed to come up for air. I grabbed my bag with one hand and Layla's hand with the other. "How was Rocky? Did he behave?"

"There might have been a few too many treat sessions, but that's on me. I just can't turn down those big brown eyes."

"Yeah, he does know how to work that pleading puppy look."

We stepped into the house. The beautiful cove came instantly into view, and I realized I'd really missed the place.

I set down my bag and walked over to look out at the beach. "It's official. I love Whisper Cove. At home, I wake up to a view of the neighbor's brick garage. This is so much nicer."

“How is your mom?” Layla asked.

“She’s improved a lot. The drastic change is hard to believe. And she’s smiling again. My mom was always one of those people who found humor in everything, but the pain she was suffering—it brought her really low. This specialist was a genius. He knew exactly what her problem was, and he took care of it. Now she’ll have some months of physical therapy, but he doesn’t see why she couldn’t get back to her normal life by the end of the year. She was already making big plans for Christmas baking. She makes these chocolate-dipped brown sugar shortbread cookies that melt in your mouth.”

“That’s sounds yummy. And your sister?”

“Becky is making plans to go back to college. She’ll still work part-time, and I’ll help with the rest of the bills. Which brings me to something else.” We sat on the couch, and Rocky planted himself at my feet. “I’ve spoken to Audrey. She’s letting me lease this place through the winter for a good price. While I was in Texas, I had a few video chats with a man named Aaron Sumner. He’s a master carpenter who lives in Fairview, and he’s looking for an apprentice. I’ve always wanted to learn carpentry and to learn it from someone like him is a one in a million opportunity. I start after this construction job is finished. He’ll pay me, not quite as well as the construction company, but I’ve got enough coming in from music downloads to fill in the gaps.”

Layla sat up excitedly. “So, you’re staying?”

“You didn’t think I’d be able to walk away from you, did you?” I took her hand in mine.



“Well, I was hoping to make it impossible for you.”

“And you have. Rocky feels the same way.”

Layla laughed. “The two of you were talking behind my back, eh?”

“We have our guy chats, and you’re one of our favorite topics. What happened with Dustin’s hearing?”

“He’s going to do some jail time and pay for all the damages, and Aria insisted I ask for a restraining order. I still can’t believe it got that far.” Layla scooted closer to me and rested her head against my shoulder. “I’m glad you’re back, and I’m really glad you’re staying.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Layla. For the longest time I felt like something was missing in my life, and it turned out she was right here in Whisper Cove just waiting for me to find her.”

“I’m really glad you found me, Nash.”

Epilogue

Layla

One year later

Margaret Greyson muttered a string of words not fit for a lady, or, for that matter, a wedding day, as she trekked across the sand in her shiny green high heels. It wasn’t as if it was a surprise to find that the ceremony was taking place on the beach. Isla had even added a note to her guests about dressing for sand and sun. Apparently, her future mother-in-law thought sand and sun meant high heels and a snug designer

dress. She was also decked out in enough diamonds to make the gulls eye her jewelry as if it was rock candy.

“This whole wedding is worth it just for this moment.” Luke’s sister, Rachel had come up next to me. “My mom hiking across hot sand in ten-thousand-dollar heels.”

I looked over at her. “Ten thousand? Dollars? One pair of shoes?”

Rachel smiled. “Trust me, those are her cheapest pair. I suppose I should help her, although it is more fun watching this.” Rachel headed toward her mother. Luke’s dad, Marcus, had stayed behind in the cottage to make a few phone calls. Apparently, even his son’s wedding day wasn’t off limits for business.

Nash came up behind me and whispered in my ear. “Have I mentioned how hot you look in that bridesmaid’s dress?”

His breath tickled my neck. I giggled as I spun around. “Uh, about a dozen times, but that doesn’t mean you should stop saying it. Thank you for helping Dex set up that arch. It looks beautiful.” A wrought iron arch had been wrapped in pink roses and vines, and behind it was a small, portable dais for the ceremony. Luke’s grandmother, Hazel, had applied online to be ordained, so she could perform the ceremony. She’d been sitting on one of the chairs practicing her speech since she arrived. She was dressed adorably in a teal blue dress with white pearls and earrings to go along with the beach theme. Our dad, Harold, and his wife, Helen, were sitting a few chairs down. It had been a while since we’d seen either of them. Dad had gotten older, and he was having problems with his knees; at least, that was the main topic of conversation I had with him. He was almost a stranger in our lives, and as Nonna always loved to say—that was his loss. At least they’d made the trip for the wedding.

Rhett and Jack had formed an almost instant bond when Jack had joined the family group, and the two of them were standing in the shade of the hillside, talking.

Dex walked over. It had taken some effort, but Aria finally found a suit big enough to fit his massive build. The coat was stretched tight, but he looked incredibly handsome. “I’ve had word from big sis that you’re wanted back up at the house,” he told me. “And Nash, you can give me a hand grabbing a few more chairs.” Dex had taken Nash under his wing as the newest member of our large group.

“Yep, I’m coming.” Nash turned to kiss me.

Since there were guests going in and out of our home, Nash lent us the cottage next door, which he now owned, so Isla could get ready without disruption. I’d been sent down earlier to make sure everything on the beach was going smoothly. Other than Margaret Greyson’s grumpy tirade, everything was moving along.

I walked up the path to Nash’s house. Rocky met me as I stepped inside. “This is all a lot of chaos, isn’t it, Rocky? Thanks for watching over my sisters.”

A flurry of laughter floated out from the spare bedroom where Isla had set up her makeup and hair stations. Isla had decided to allow her golden hair to be down, but she had pinned up the sides with sparkly clips. She’d opted for simple makeup, appropriate for a beach wedding. And her dress was simple white silk with a lace bodice and long flowing train. The emerald choker and earrings Hazel had given her as a pre-wedding gift sparkled on her neck and ears. She looked nothing short of stunning.

Ella sat on the edge of the guest bed frantically typing on her laptop. She’d come up to a deadline, and the wedding had caused her to get behind on work. Ava was behind Isla’s dress, trying to straighten out the folds. Aria stood in front of Isla with her hand on her chin and a scrutinizing gaze. The beautiful diamond engagement ring from Dex sparkled on her finger. “I think you need a little more blush,” she said. Margaret had offered to send her professional makeup and hair team for the wedding, but Isla had turned down the offer, knowing full well they wouldn’t be able to achieve the

pretty, natural and coastal look she envisioned.

“No more commentary, Aria, seriously,” Isla said curtly. The stress was getting to her. Up until a week ago, she’d handled her wedding plans seamlessly, even managing to keep Margaret happy by accommodating some of her requests, but last week, it suddenly hit my sister that she was truly getting married. Not that she had even the slightest doubt that she was going to live happily ever after with her prince, but because we’d all grown up so close in our small town, her marriage to Luke Greyson was going to change all that. She’d have her own house to run, and our wonderful little cottage would just be a place she came to visit.

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Isla looked my direction. “What say you, makeup expert?”

Suddenly, my throat tightened and tears pricked my eyes. “Oh, Isla, you look magical. Nonna would be in tears. She always said you were her little princess, and she was so right.”

Isla started waving her hand frantically in front of her face. “Oh, no, here we go again. Tears. No tears.”

Aria glowered my direction for starting it and fanned Isla’s face, too.

Isla finally pushed Aria’s hand away. “Enough, I don’t care. I need a Lovely sister hug right now, but be careful of the dress.”

Ella pushed aside her laptop, and the four of us circled Isla but only gave her a light hug. “I just want you girls to know,” Isla said, “this changes nothing. We are still the fabulous five, and I have something for everyone.”

We dropped our arms, and Isla walked over to a silver box that was sitting on the makeup table. She opened it up and pulled out five silk and lace garters. “I had them made out of Mom’s wedding dress and Nonna’s lace shawl.” She handed each of us a garter. “I wanted to make sure they were both with us in spirit.” Now we were all fanning our faces frantically.

“Why do tears have to cause such a catastrophe when you’ve put on fresh makeup?” Ava asked.

Aria held up her hand, like a teacher taking charge of her class. “All right, we look ridiculous, and I don’t think the fanning does anything except make us perspire, and yes, we’re dressed in silk, so there’ll be no sweating, only perspiring, and please, keep that at a minimum. Deep breath, everyone.” She was using the big sister tone she’d perfected growing up when we were all acting like squirrely brats and getting on her nerves.

And we still reacted immediately to the tone. We all took several deep breaths.

“Better,” Aria said. “Let’s put on the garters before the tears start again.”

A thin pink satin ribbon had been woven into the lace that circled the garter. I pulled the delicate circle up to my thigh. “I still remember Nonna sitting in her shawl in the big chair, a fire roaring in the hearth and her delicious shortbread baking in the oven,” I said. I looked at my sisters. We were all unique in our own ways, and that never got in the way of our love for each other. The opposite in fact. We loved each other more for what we brought to the group, to the fabulous five. “Nonna and mom would have been so happy with this marriage, Isla.”

“I think Nonna would have been happy with the way all of our stories are turning out,” Ella said. “In fact, the way her own stories matched us and how they followed us into our adult lives almost seems too coincidental to believe.”

Aria put out her arms signaling another group hug. “That’s because as we all know too well our grandmother was nothing short of magical.”