



# More Than a Billionaire

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** Her brother's best friend is the guy of her dreams. If only he'd see her as more than a friend.

Skylar Schultz has spent half her life loving Franky Middlebury, the only guy who's ever seen her as more than heiress to the Schultz Chocolate fortune, but she's always been firmly positioned in the friend zone. As much as she cherishes their friendship, she wishes he would see her as so much more than his best friend's little sister. Things aren't going well for Franky. His girlfriend left him, he's unhappy as a partner in his father's law firm, and he feels stuck in a life he didn't really want. The one bright spot is Skylar. She's there for him in a way nobody else is, filling his stressful days with laughter and offering unending encouragement. As their friendship progresses, they begin to rely on each other as they're faced with family drama and career changes. All the while, Skylar hopes their newfound closeness will blossom into more, but Franky is more complicated than the happy-go-lucky guy he appears to be. And when someone new walks into his life, will she be the fresh start he's been longing for or will he finally see the one who's been there for him the whole time?

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## PROLOGUE

12 years ago

May

There was a spring in Franky Middlebury's step as he walked up to the Schultz family home and rang the doorbell. Fresh out of college, he was looking forward to a relaxing summer break back home in Grand Rapids before he left town again for law school.

The door of the expansive eight-bedroom mansion opened, and he was greeted by Gerard, the Schultz's butler. Sebastian, the eldest Schultz sibling and Franky's best friend, had always described Gerard as a household manager, but it was more fun to call him the butler, and Gerard didn't seem to mind. Franky kind of wished there was a Gerard at his house to manage the household, but it wasn't in the budget. Not that his family was hurting for money, but their fortune paled in comparison to the Schultz Chocolate empire.

"Hello, Mr. Middlebury."

Franky wasn't sure how long Gerard had been working there, but he'd been around for as long as Franky could remember. He was looking a little more aged than last time Franky had seen him, though, with greying hair and goatee. But one thing that never changed was his kind eyes and impeccable manners.

"Hola, Gerard. How's it goin'?"

“Fine. Congratulations on your graduation.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

Gerard nodded politely.

“Is Bash here?”

“Sebastian will arrive shortly. Come in and make yourself at home.”

Franky stepped inside. “Is anyone else here?”

“Miss Skylar is outside by the pool.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

Franky was no stranger to the Schultz’s home. He’d walked through their front door countless times over the years, always greeted warmly and welcomed in as if he were a member of the family. The days he and Sebastian had spent hanging out there during their childhood were filled with fond memories. And that’s how he envisioned the next three months. No studying, no schedules, no responsibilities. Just two friends making the most of summer before real life took hold.

He meandered through the house, taking in the space he knew so well. It hadn’t changed much over the years, except for the fresh floral displays and updated family photographs on the walls every once in a while. And he loved that it stayed the same. It was familiar and comfortable, like a home should be. The exact opposite of his parents’ house. His mom was constantly redecorating, even more so after he moved out, and he was never sure what he’d find when he came home, which was one of the reasons he’d stayed away so much during college.

He walked through the large kitchen, past the breakfast room to the open french doors that led to the pool area. His gaze landed on Skylar, and he stopped dead in his tracks.

She was wearing a bikini, lying on her back on a lounge chair, long brown hair the color of their Granny Schultz's famed chocolate truffles fanned out behind her, eyes closed while sunning herself. He didn't remember her legs being so long and shapely. She had clearly spent some time in the sun recently as her skin was tanned, and he wondered if she'd gone somewhere for spring break. He swallowed hard as his eyes continued to roam because Skylar had curves. Curves that weren't there when he left for college. Curves he really needed to stop looking at.

Skylar had always been a pretty girl, and of course, he knew she would grow up one day, but he was unprepared for the transformation. She was no longer the little girl he had picked on, who acted like one of the boys, climbing trees faster than all of them, following him and Sebastian around as if they were the coolest guys on the planet. She wasn't the skinny, thirteen-year-old girl who had waved goodbye to him from the doorway four years ago. No, this was a whole new Skylar that he had not been expecting.

Franky stood still just inside the door. He knew he needed to make his presence known, but he couldn't speak, and he couldn't seem to pull his eyes away.

"Hey, Franky!" Sebastian's voice caused both Franky and Skylar to jump.

"Oh, hey, Bash!" he managed despite his rapidly racing heart.

Skylar's wide eyes stared in Franky's direction, and he gave her a nervous smile and a wave.

"When did you get here?" Sebastian's gaze bounced back and forth between his friend and his sister.

“A few minutes ago.”

Sebastian passed on his way to the pool deck and elbowed Franky hard in the ribs.

“Oof!” Franky bent over, holding his side. “What was that for?”

Sebastian turned back and looked him straight in the eye, lowering his voice so only Franky could hear. “Dude, that’s my sister.”

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Franky watched Sebastian walk over and sit down next to Skylar, who pulled a cover-up on over her suit. He hated himself for being disappointed about that.

Come on, Franky! Get it together. This is Skylar!

“Are you gonna stand in the doorway all afternoon?” Skylar asked. “Come sit by me and tell me how it feels to be a college graduate.”

Franky moved to the empty seat next to Skylar. “Only if you tell me how stoked you are to graduate high school in a few weeks.” His gaze fell to her legs for an instant before he checked to see if Sebastian had noticed.

He had, and he didn’t look pleased.

“So stoked. I’m ready for it to be over,” she said.

“No more pencils, no more books,” he replied.

Her laugh was like the loveliest melody he’d ever heard. Being up close to her, she was even more beautiful, if that was possible. It was like he was seeing her in a whole new light.

His eyes locked on her bow-shaped lips as she answered a question her brother had asked her. He must’ve been staring longer than he should, because Sebastian suddenly said, “Hey, let’s go get some food, Franky.”

The scowl Sebastian wore on his face spoke volumes.

Well, this is inconvenient.

The next three months flew by. It wasn't exactly the carefree, fun-filled summer Franky had hoped for since Sebastian had gone straight from graduation to working for his family's company, Schultz Chocolate, which was one of the most well-known companies in the world. Sebastian had always wanted to be part of the legacy his father, Ephraim, had built, and he had hit the ground running. Franky couldn't begrudge him that. He was happy his best friend knew what he wanted to do with his life. If only Franky felt the same about his future.

Franky's entire academic life had been aimed at following in his father's footsteps—University of Michigan Law School, Dad's alma mater, followed by a position at the firm, where he would work until he made partner. Some days, he wasn't sure why he was doing it. Most days, his heart wasn't in it. And he'd definitely been having doubts since graduating college.

Law school had hovered like a dark cloud, casting a shadow over Franky's entire summer vacation, pushing into his thoughts, reminding him how many days were left until classes began, and filling him with dread. Thankfully, he'd spent plenty of time with Skylar, and somehow, being around her, so full of goodness and optimism, kept the darkness at bay.

She was so easy to talk to, and they were always laughing, which wasn't something he'd experienced often with girls. He was the funny guy, and most of his past girlfriends quickly tired of his silly personality. But Skylar never seemed to. Joking around with her shifted easily into flirtation, but he never acted on it.

He couldn't.

She was his best friend's little sister. She was too young for him—not even eighteen yet. She was about to start college and have all sorts of new experiences, and he

already envied every guy who would have the privilege of dating her when she got there.

Franky wasn't very good at dating relationships. No matter how well he thought they were going, his inability to take things seriously usually sent the ladies running. It wasn't that he couldn't be serious or commit. He'd been in long-term relationships before. But being vulnerable with another person was scary, and when they got too close, he often masked his fear with humor, which was usually the beginning of the end.

Sebastian's unspoken warning that first day had been crystal clear, and he was right to be protective of his sister. He knew Franky and his dating history better than anyone. And Franky was smart enough to know Skylar deserved better.

But every time she was around, he felt drawn to her, and he couldn't stop thinking about the beautiful woman she had become or the way he felt when he was with her. Like he could truly be himself for once. It was a welcome change.

Sadly, when he left for Ann Arbor tomorrow, all of that would end, and the dark cloud would overtake the next three years of his life.

He shook that thought away and focused on the beauty beside him.

"I can't believe you leave for law school tomorrow." Skylar sat next to Franky on the edge of the pool, skimming her toes across the surface of the water, glowing blue from the underwater lights.

They'd had many conversations in this spot over the past few months, and Franky couldn't help but feel sad that this would be the last one for a while.

"I know. Summer went too fast." He could feel the heat from her arm, warming his



across the inch that separated them.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for college. What if I screw it all up?” Skylar’s arm was almost touching his now.

“You? How could you possibly screw it up?” He tried not to think about how close they were.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. What if everybody hates me? People know who I am because of my family name. What if they think I’m getting special treatment? What if I get so stressed about it that I can’t study and I fail all my classes?” She paused. “What if I go on a date and the paparazzi follow us?”

Franky didn’t like that last comment. “You’ve thought about this a lot, haven’t you?”

She nodded. “I’m overthinking it, right?”

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“Just a bit.” He chuckled.

“What’s it really like?”

“A lot less crazy than you’re imagining it in here.” He reached over and gently tapped her forehead, and she giggled. “It’s what you make of it, really. There are some people who spend the entire four years with their noses in books and others who party it away. I like to think I had a good balance of the two.”

She smiled over at him, causing butterflies to awaken within his stomach. But that was nothing new when he was close to her lately.

Skylar lightly splashed at him with her foot. “That’s what I want. A good balance. I want to do well, of course, but I want to enjoy myself, meet people, have new experiences, and make memories.”

“Exactly. You will. And people won’t care you’re a Schultz. Most people will be too wrapped up in their own lives to notice.” He bumped her shoulder with his, just wanting the contact.

“I hope you’re right.” She grew quiet for a minute and then her expression turned shy. “So, how was your date?”

A buddy of his from Dad’s law firm had set him up on a blind date with a fellow law school student last week. It was more of a favor than anything. Definitely not a love match.

Franky looked over at her curiously. “How did you know about that?”

“Bash.” She stared down at her feet in the water.

Was Skylar jealous? Because if she was, he liked it.

“Are you going out with her again?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“She was nice, but not really my type, I guess.”

Her lips lifted in a hint of a smile. “Oh.”

“I’m leaving anyway. Not the best time to start a new relationship.”

Her smile disappeared. “Yeah.”

“Does it bother you that I went out with her?” He was dying to hear her answer.

“Uh ...” Her face screwed up, and even in the dim evening light, he could see her cheeks had colored a pretty shade of pink. “No, I didn’t mean ... I was just curious.” She was cute when she was flustered.

He watched her with a big smile on his face, curious what was going on in that mind of hers.

She abruptly stood. “It’s too hot tonight, don’t you think? Aren’t you hot? Because I’m hot.” And with that, she dove into the pool.

He chuckled and hopped off the side into the cool, refreshing water and swam toward her.

She came up from underwater and rolled to float on her back.

He struggled to keep his eyes off of her and dove under to distract himself before he did something stupid. Because he couldn't stop thinking that this was the last night he'd see her before they went their separate ways for a while.

He quickly swam away from her, down to the bottom at the deepest part of the pool, and stayed there until he couldn't hold his breath anymore. It was a little longer than he should've, and he was gasping when he finally came up for air.

"Hey! Don't do that!" Skylar cried.

"What?" He wiped the water from his eyes and saw her look of alarm and her quivering chin. "Sky, what's wrong?"

"When I was younger, I used to have nightmares about people I love drowning." She shivered, despite the hot, humid night air. "Seeing you down there, all still like that, freaked me out."

He recalled Sebastian telling him about that years ago, and he moved toward her, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'm really sorry, Sky. I forgot." He shouldn't have touched her, because now, he wanted more.

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“It’s okay.” She reached up and rested her hand on his chest, and a sudden warmth spread throughout his body.

Part of him wanted to move his other arm around her waist and pull her against him, just to see what it would feel like to be that close to her. His gaze dropped to her lips, and images of kissing her flew through his mind’s eye. He swallowed hard, his heartbeat picking up pace, and he noticed her breaths were coming more rapidly now too.

Don’t be stupid, Franky. This is sweet, innocent Skylar, who’s far too good for you.

This wasn’t the first time he’d been tempted to kiss her this summer, but he couldn’t, no matter how much he wanted to feel her lips against his right now. It would make visits home awkward and cause problems between him and Sebastian. Not to mention the age difference.

But she looked like she wanted him to. And he wanted to. So badly.

Against his better judgment, he leaned closer, and she mirrored his movement until her body pressed lightly against his. A millisecond before he lost all resolve, a giant wave splashed over their heads, courtesy of Sebastian’s sudden cannonball.

They wiped the water out of their eyes as Sebastian bobbed up from beneath the surface. His gaze was firmly fixed on Franky.

Skylar splashed her brother, who laughed and took off for the other side of the pool. She gracefully swam after him, leaving Franky alone, drowning in guilt for what he’d

almost done.

After a night of swimming, plenty of laughs, and great conversation, Franky said his goodbyes to the Schultz family. He gave Skylar a quick hug because he knew he was being watched, and then Sebastian walked him out.

They shook hands, which turned into a hug and a few pats on the back.

“Good luck at the family biz, Bash.”

“Good luck at U of M.”

“Thanks, man.”

When they stepped back, Sebastian kept Franky’s hand in his grip for a few extra seconds and looked him straight in the eye before letting go. “This is kind of awkward, and I didn’t think I needed to say it, but I feel like I have to after what I witnessed earlier.”

Franky already knew what he was about to say.

“You know she’s only seventeen, right?”

“I know.”

“She’s barely out of high school, Franky.”

Franky raked his fingers through his hair. “I know, man. I’m sorry. But I swear to you, nothing happened between us.”

Sebastian eyed him. “That’s not what it looked like.”

Franky took his finger and drew an X over his chest. “Cross my heart.”

“I love you, man. You know that.” Sebastian paused. “And it’s because of our many years of friendship that I really don’t want you dating my sister.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t want to lose my best friend, and I don’t want my sister getting hurt, and I’m afraid both of those things would happen.”

Franky waved him off. “Say no more.”

“It’s not that I don’t think you’re a good guy—”

“Bash.”

“She’s never even had a boyfriend, and you don’t have the best track record—”

“Bash, stop. I get it. I won’t date Skylar.”

Sebastian looked him in the eye. “Promise?”

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“I promise.”

ONE

Present Day

The wind whipped Skylar Schultz’s long brown hair against her face as she drove along Lake Drive with the top down on her shiny red Porsche convertible. It was the perfect late June afternoon, made even more so by the handsome man currently in her passenger seat.

“I should’ve pulled my hair up.” Skylar gripped her locks, holding them at the base of her neck to keep them under control.

“Me too.” Franky jokingly pushed his honey-blond bangs back from his forehead and held his other arm up, pretending in the most dramatic way to shield himself from the wind, which had her cracking up.

Skylar pressed the brake as she came to a red light in Eastown and quickly twisted and tied her hair in a knot before the light turned green.

Franky laughed as he watched her. “You girls do the craziest things with your hair, and yet, it works.”

“It’s a talent.” She smiled.

“Thanks for helping me with all this, Sky.” Franky glanced over his shoulder at the



pile of garbage bags filling the back seat, all bursting with clothing belonging to his ex-girlfriend, Fiona, who had recently ditched him for an Italian guy she met on their European vacation.

“Of course.” She patted him on the forearm, but what she really wanted to do was lean over and plant a kiss on that full bottom lip of his, which was sticking out slightly in an adorable pout. “Are you okay?”

He nodded resolutely. “Yeah, I am. Good riddance, I say.”

“Absolutely. You deserve so much better.”

The traffic light turned green, and Skylar drove on toward the clothing donation center, thinking what a complete idiot Fiona was. If Franky was hers, she would never let him go. No matter how charming some Italian guy seemed. Because there was nobody in the world like Franky, and Skylar could only dream that he was hers, and had been since she was thirteen years old. She couldn’t remember a time when she hadn’t loved him.

A frequent fixture at their house since he and Sebastian were in private school, Franky was the first boy who had ever paid attention to her. He’d always been so sweet, actually talking to her rather than treating her like a nuisance as some of her brother’s friends had. Franky was handsome and funny. He was the class clown, the life of the party, and she found it easy to be herself with him. They could talk about anything and nothing. And his attention made her feel special.

But it had always been a one-sided, unrequited kind of love because he was her brother’s best friend, nearly five years her senior, and he’d never seen her as anything other than Sebastian’s little sister. That hadn’t stopped her from wishing they were more or from comparing every other guy to Franky. Nobody came close.

The men she met usually fell into two groups—creeps who were only interested in her for her money and guys who were too intimidated by her family’s notability to ask her out. Being the heiress to the Schultz Chocolate fortune sure didn’t help when it came to dating. The only guy who’d ever looked at her as Just Skylar, without the billionaire status getting in the way, was Franky.

When they arrived, Franky stood and grabbed hold of the car door, swinging his legs over the side to exit rather than opening the door like a normal person. Skylar smiled to herself. Everything about Franky made her smile.

Skylar got out of the car, and they worked together to unload the bags from the back seat and trunk, dropping them into the donation bin.

“What if Fiona calls and wants her stuff back?” Skylar asked as she closed her trunk. “Because I think I saw some Prada in those bags.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Her loss.”

“That’s the truth.” Skylar’s expression turned serious.

He smiled over at her, seeming to catch her meaning.

“Besides,” he said, “after what she did, I’m not going through the hassle of shipping all this stuff to her ... in Italy!” He threw his hands up like he was pointing in the direction of Italy, his eyes and mouth open wide, as if the idea was complete insanity, which made Skylar giggle.

Franky turned his attention to her, pointing a finger her way with a sly grin on his face. “You, Skylar Schultz, are the sweetest.” He rushed her and scooped her up in a hug, planting a kiss on her cheek as he set her down. “Let me buy you dinner as a thank you for all the help.”

She could barely contain her smile. “I would love that.”

The late afternoon sun glinted off of Reeds Lake, and a soft breeze off the water caused Skylar’s hair to tickle her neck. The cozy table for two on the deck of Rose’s Restaurant would’ve been completely romantic if Franky felt anything more than sisterly love for her. But she was enjoying being out with him. Every moment with him was a gift.

The waitress arrived at the table with their main courses—salmon for her, grilled pork tenderloin for him—and they dug in. Their meal was peppered with light conversation and plenty of laughter. Franky was always entertaining, with his great sense of humor and happy spirit. His cheerfulness was contagious. And he wasn’t too hard to look at either.

“So, are you home for a while?” Skylar asked. “Any more big trips planned?”

Franky had a habit of coming and going from their lives for long periods of time, depending on who he was dating. He got wrapped up in the women he was with, and along with his job as an attorney, he usually didn’t have time for anything else. At least that’s how it had been in the past. The end of his latest relationship meant he would be around more. At least until he met someone new. But Skylar hoped maybe this time would be different.

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“Dad wasn’t exactly happy when I took so much time off to traipse around Europe with Fiona,” Franky replied, “so I’d say travel is off the table for a while. I have to make it up to him, and I’m pretty sure he’s going to throw all the toughest cases at me.”

Franky had worked at his father’s law firm since he graduated from law school, working his way up, killing himself with insane hours until he finally became a partner. All the men in the Middlebury family, going back several generations, had been lawyers and judges, so it made sense that Franky would follow in their footsteps.

“But you like your job, right?” she asked.

His face screwed up. “It is what it is.”

“I thought it was what you always wanted—to be a partner in your dad’s firm.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Have you ever once heard me say that?”

She considered his question. “I guess I assumed it’s what you wanted since you worked so hard for so long to get there.”

“You know what they say about assuming.”

She tilted her head in amusement. “Ha ha.”

He grinned. “I still can’t believe you’re vice president now.” He raised his hands then

bowed to her. "I'm not worthy. I'm not worthy."

"Stop!" She waved him off, laughing at his homage to Wayne's World.

"Seriously, I'm really proud of you."

"Thank you." Her cheeks warmed, but his kind words brought her little happiness as she considered the truth he had revealed about his job. She regarded him with a serious expression on her face, causing him to tilt his head and quirk his brow.

"What? Do I have something on my face?" He swiped at his mouth.

She slowly shook her head. "I think you should do the thing that makes you happiest in life, Franky, and if that's not being a lawyer, that's okay."

His eyes met hers as one side of his mouth lifted slightly. "Tell that to my father."

She gave him an understanding smile, and they grew quiet as they looked at each other. His emerald eyes were more vibrant than usual, enhanced by the sunlight and his olive green T-shirt. Her pulse quickened as the seconds passed by with their gazes locked.

"Thanks again for helping today, Sky." He broke his stare and grabbed his wine glass, holding it up toward her.

"It was my pleasure." She tapped her glass against his then took a sip. "I'm really sorry it didn't work out with you and Fiona." That wasn't the truth. She didn't like seeing him hurt, but when she heard the news, she might've done a happy dance around her living room.

"I'm not." He smiled over at her, which caused her stomach to flutter. "We weren't

right for each other anyway.”

“Why’d you stay with her so long then?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “But what I do know is I’m happy to be here right now, hanging out with you.” He reached over and lay his hand atop hers. “You’ve always been a good friend to me, Sky, and I need a little loyalty in my life right now.”

Skylar’s heart sank at the word friend, but she smiled anyway. She wanted so much more than that, but if a friend was what he needed, a friend was what she would be.

“How about you? Any boyfriends I don’t know about?”

Skylar snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“Why do you say that?” He squeezed her hand. “Any guy would be lucky to have a girl like you.” His gaze traveled over her face, landing on her mouth, and Skylar’s heart skipped a beat. His eyes moved to hers, and it seemed as if he was about to say something more, but instead, he took another sip of wine and looked out across the water.

She let out a breath and willed her pulse to slow. His expression reminded her of a summer night years ago when he’d looked at her the same way. She’d been young and naive and read too much into it, and she wasn’t going to do the same thing tonight. Getting her hopes up for nothing was a habit she really needed to break.

All she could do right now was be the best friend to him she could be. And maybe, just maybe, friendship would blossom into more.

TWO

Since returning to the firm, Franky had been buried in work. As expected, Dad had assigned him some real doozies. The long hours at his desk seemed to drag on, and though it had only been a few days, another vacation sounded really good already.

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He should've been working, but instead, he found himself scribbling a few lines of song lyrics on the corner of a legal pad and humming a tune. It had been a long time since he'd written music, something he'd dabbled in since high school. But ever since his conversation with Skylar on Dump Fiona's Stuff Day, he couldn't get her words out of his head, and he'd felt the creativity stirring within him again.

I think you should do the thing that makes you happiest in life, Franky, and if that's not being a lawyer, that's okay.

That night, he had sat down at his keyboard and picked out a tune. He'd spent hours playing and filling several notebook pages with lyrics. No great masterpiece, in his opinion, but it was enough to remind him how much he missed writing music.

In the year he'd been with Fiona, he hadn't written a single melody or lyric. He hadn't written anything since making partner at the firm, actually, and that realization saddened him.

It had been so long since he'd felt like himself. He'd been moving through life, doing what was expected of him for years. The trip to Europe was supposed to help, but truthfully, it was Fiona's idea. And once he was there, he'd seen the cracks in their relationship right away, leading up to their time in Florence, where she'd met the man who had romanced her away from him.

He thought he'd be more broken up about losing her, but he wasn't, which was very telling. And now that he was home, all he wanted was to move on, to reconnect with who he was, and stop feeling so lost in the world.



A soft knock sounded on his office door.

“Yeah,” he called out.

The door opened, and Skylar’s pretty face peeked inside. “Hey, am I catching you at a bad time?”

“Not at all.” He stood and walked toward her, holding the door open. “Come in.”

“I don’t want to take up too much of your time. I know you’re a busy guy.”

“Don’t forget important.” He grinned. “Busy and important.”

“Of course. That goes without saying.” She smiled, and his day was made. Being around her was always so easy, and she was a welcome distraction from the misery that was his job. “I stopped by to bring you this.” She handed him a small paper bag, and he grinned when he opened it.

“Fish tacos. You read my mind.”

“I also came to ask if you’d like to go to the Schultz Chocolate Fourth of July party with me tonight. It’s on the roof of the building with the best view of the fireworks in the whole city and—”

“Sold!”

She startled at his interruption.

“You had me at ‘party with me.’”

Skylar laughed. “Good. It’ll be fun. It starts at eight.”

“I’ll have to meet you there after I finish up here, though.”

“Then I better leave you to it, so it doesn’t take you all night.” She turned to leave and looked back over her shoulder. “See you before the sun goes down.”

He smiled as he watched her leave. Now that he had extra motivation to get his work done, he was on a mission.

The afternoon passed by quickly and became evening as he worked. He hummed the tune he’d been working on earlier as he rushed through writing the final emails of the day then packed up and headed for the exit, anxious to get to the party.

“Francis, can I see you in my office, please?” His father’s voice echoed down the hallway after him.

“Of course.” He groaned inwardly as he turned on his heel and walked into Dad’s office, hating that he was making Skylar wait.

“Have a seat, my boy.”

Franky did as his dad asked, plopping down with a sigh and staring at the nameplate on his desk, which read “Wayne Middlebury, Attorney at Law.”

“How are you settling back into things?”

“Fine. I wasn’t gone that long, Dad.”

“Did you make any progress on the Walters case?”

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“Some.” Franky didn’t feel like elaborating, so he changed the subject. “How’s it going with Gus’s case?”

Skylar’s brother, Gus, had recently been sued by a sorry excuse of a man, Milton Hanley, who had caused nothing but trouble for Skylar since she’d briefly dated him after college. According to Gus, he’d been at a bar when Milton entered and spouted some inappropriate comments about Skylar, which led to Gus shoving Milton and threatening him. Now, he was stuck with the guy suing him for assault and battery.

“I think we have a good chance of getting him to settle,” Dad replied.

“He’s a creep.”

“Yes. It’s too bad Skylar got herself mixed up with someone like that.”

“If I were Gus, I would’ve done the same thing.”

“I hope I’ve taught you better.”

Franky’s eyes narrowed. “I’m pretty sure the Schultzes raised their children just as well as you raised me. Gus is his own man. He made the decision to defend his sister. If I had a sister, I’d do the same. Heck, I would do the same for Skylar any day. She’s like a sister to me.”

“Let’s hope Milton Hanley settles. And keep me updated on the Walters case.”

“I’ve got this, Dad.”

“See that you do.”

Franky stood and straightened his suit jacket and walked out as fast as he could without actually running.

The roof of Schultz Chocolate was hopping when Franky arrived. A live band played, while people mingled, drinks in hand, enjoying the warm summer night as they waited for the fireworks show to begin.

Franky scanned the crowd for Skylar, but when he didn't see her, he made his way to a table filled with all manner of appetizers and helped himself.

He strolled along the edge of the rooftop, lined by plants and bushes, as he nibbled on fruit and prosciutto goat cheese crostini. The sun was setting, leaving the sky ahead shades of pink and purple fading into deep blue. He looked up, his gaze following the line of a jet trail across the sky, and when his eyes traveled down from above, a beam of warm golden hour sunlight illuminated Skylar, seated on the wide ledge at the far end of the roof.

“Hey, beautiful.” He set his plate on the ledge and climbed up beside her.

“You found me.” She smiled over at him.

“What are you doing over here all alone when the party's back there?” He tilted his head in the direction of the band.

“This is my spot,” she replied. “I come up here sometimes when I need to get away from the stress of the job. Watching the river calms me and helps me clear my head.”

“Everything okay at work?”

“Yeah. Nothing major. Just need a hideaway sometimes.”

“I wish I had a rooftop hideaway.” He lifted his plate and offered Skylar some appetizers. “If I did, I’d probably never leave.”

She snatched a crostini and grinned.

“Where’s the rest of your family tonight?” he asked.

“My parents are here somewhere. They like to come and mingle with the employees.”

“Any word from Gus?”

“Only the call from Adelia letting me know he’s with her in California. I wish he hadn’t taken off when he found out Milton was suing him. I know he probably feels like Dad asking him to lay low and step away from the company during the lawsuit was a huge slap in the face. He’s been trying so hard to change his ways over the past year, and he was doing so well until all this.” Skylar lowered her head. “I feel like it’s all my fault.”

Out of the three Schultz children, Gus had always been the one to give the tabloids the most material for their publications. He’d been reckless in his twenties, and shaking that reputation wasn’t easy.

“Hey.” He reached over and touched her chin, turning her face toward his. “It’s not your fault Milton is such a jerk, and you aren’t responsible for your brother’s choices.”

“You’re right. I just have this feeling Gus is in a really low place right now, and with him being across the country, I can’t do anything to make it better. I feel so helpless.”

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Without thinking, he put an arm around her lower back and pulled her into his side. She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“It will all work out,” he told her.

“I hope so.”

He liked holding her like this, comforting her. He’d do anything to put a smile back on her face.

“Where’s Bash tonight?” he asked.

“Sebastian ... or should I say Kurtis ... is out with Genevieve.”

Franky laughed loudly. “I know your brother’s been hurt in the past by girls going after his money, but I still can’t believe he lied to this girl about who he was.” Sebastian was the most straight-laced, honest guy on the planet, so to find out he’d hidden his true identity from a girl he was interested in was quite shocking.

“I told him it was crazy, but you should’ve seen the look in his eyes when he asked me to help him keep the secret. He really likes her.”

“I know. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this into a girl so quickly.”

“Me neither. And Genevieve is so sweet. But he wants to make sure she really didn’t know who he was or have ulterior motives before he tells her the truth.”

“I get that, and she seems legit.”

“I agree. But we thought the same thing about Serena before she conned us all, so I can understand his hesitation.”

Franky remembered well the heartbreak Sebastian suffered after Serena’s betrayal. Being wealthy had its blessings, but it also had its share of curses—not knowing if someone was using you for your money being the biggest.

“I really hope this doesn’t blow up in his face,” he said.

“Me too.”

They were quiet for a minute, and he inhaled slowly, taking in the scent of vanilla that was always present when she was around. He liked how warm and soft she felt against his side, but he knew he couldn’t get too used to it.

Franky suddenly perked up as the notes of a familiar song began to play. “You know what we should do.” He spun his legs around and jumped down, holding his hands out to Skylar, thankful for the distraction.

She looked over her shoulder at him and raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Dance.” He tilted his head toward the band.

Realization crossed her face. “Oh, that’s right. This is your song.”

He laughed, remembering a night several years ago when he’d taken to the piano at a Schultz Foundation gala to play “You’re the Inspiration” by Chicago.

“You should get up there and play it with the band.” She jumped down and grabbed

his hand, tugging him toward the stage.

“Oh, no! No way!” He pulled her to a stop. “There will be no encore presentation tonight.”

“But you performed it so well at the gala. I never knew you had such a good singing voice.”

“That was a one-time show.” He tapped the tip of her nose for emphasis, and she wrinkled it at him, which was perfectly adorable.

“Come on! Play something.” Her lower lip stuck out in a pout.

Sudden longing stirred within from the desire to kiss that perfect lip, and he groaned. “Don’t look at me like that. I can’t say no to that pout.”

She smiled widely and clapped her hands together as she headed off toward the stage. He needed a few minutes to himself anyway. Calm your hormones, man.

When the song wound down, Skylar spoke to the members of the band, pointing in Franky’s direction, and they motioned for him to join them.

Franky rolled his eyes at Skylar, who was beaming as he climbed the stage. The man at the keyboard stepped back, allowing Franky to take his place.



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“We’ve got a special guest in the band tonight,” the lead singer announced. “A friend of the Schultz family, Mr. Franky Middlebury.”

The audience applauded as Franky stepped up to the keyboard and stretched his fingers, positioning them over the keys, shifting his neck side to side.

The lead singer stepped closer, covering his microphone. “Do you have a song in mind?”

Franky thought for a few seconds then nodded. “I sure do.” He glanced at Skylar, who was standing front and center, and gave her a wink as he tapped his foot on the ground and pressed the keys for the first notes of what he thought was perfect for this Fourth of July evening, “Born in the U.S.A.” by Bruce Springsteen.

The guys in the band all grinned and nodded and joined in with their instruments, and soon the crowd was singing along. It was amazing and electric. Franky’s fingers took off with a mind of their own. The song flowed out of him and through the keyboard, filling the air with music, blending perfectly with the other instruments. At one point, his fingers flew frantically back and forth, a whirlwind of notes coming out as a spontaneous arrangement, and he was lost in it. He hadn’t realized the others had backed off and given him an impromptu keyboard solo until he heard sudden cheers, and he noticed pretty much everyone on the rooftop terrace gathered around the stage.

He nodded his head in appreciation and eased the tempo down as the others played again. The song soon came to a close and applause filled the air once more.

Franky took a bow, and even the guys on stage clapped for him.

“Hey, man, you’re really good,” the guitarist said as the others walked over.

“Thanks,” Franky replied. “I was classically trained pretty much from the time I could hold a rattle.”

“Our keyboard player, Dean, is moving soon, and we’re looking for a replacement if you’re interested.”

Dean gave a wave. “We haven’t found anyone near as good as you.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I don’t really have the time.”

The guitarist took a card from his pocket. “Well, if you change your mind, give me a call. We’d love to have you join.”

The band returned to their places and started another song as Franky stepped off of the stage.

Skylar flew at him, jumped up, and threw her arms around him. “That was awesome.”

“You’re biased,” he said into her ear.

She let go and returned to the ground. “Maybe a little, but seriously, I love listening to you play.”

“It felt good. I don’t play much anymore.”

“That’s a shame.” She took hold of his hands, which sent unexpected tingles up his arms. “These hands are magical.”

He had a sudden urge to run his hands along the smooth skin of her arms and show

her how magical they could be. He shook his head and jerked his hands from hers, leaving her with a look of confusion. Why couldn't he stop thinking about her that way tonight?

He quickly pulled the business card from his pocket and held it in front of her face, eager to escape the awkward moment. "I guess I could quit being a lawyer and join a band if I wanted to."

She snatched the card from his fingers and stared at it with wide eyes. "What, really?"

"They need a keyboardist."

"Franky, you should do it." Her face lit up as she handed the card back.

"Right."

"I'm serious. This could give you something fun to look forward to when you aren't in court or working on cases."

He smirked. "I'll think about it."

"I'll come to all your shows and be your groupie." She winked.

"You would, wouldn't you?"

The smile she gave him warmed his heart. Being around her was definitely good for his ego.

### THREE

The annual Schultz Foundation fundraiser was something Skylar looked forward to every summer, but this year's event was different than years past because Genevieve Willis—the woman Sebastian was head over heels for—was at the helm. She had settled into her new position as event coordinator effortlessly, organizing a unique afternoon of family-friendly activities, with an elegant regatta gala to end the day. So far, the event had been very well received, and everything was going off without a hitch.

Skylar sat next to Franky inside her dad's yacht, Charm III, watching family and friends board, waiting to head out from the dock on Macatawa Bay onto Lake Michigan for the start of the regatta. She wasn't sure what had her more excited—watching the big race or spending more time with Franky.

They'd been hanging out a lot the past few weeks, and she was loving every moment of this new phase of their friendship. In the past, they hadn't spent much time together without Sebastian around, but she wasn't complaining about the alone time with Franky. At all.

“So, your brother's still keeping up the farce, huh?” Franky asked.

When they had first arrived at the yacht club, they had seen Sebastian across the yard, talking to Genevieve, but as soon as he spotted them and their parents, he had quickly taken off.

“He's laying low until the gala tonight,” she explained.

Franky shook his head. “Does he really think he can go on like this much longer, pretending not to be a Schultz?”

“He’s taking her out tomorrow to finally tell her the truth.”

“I don’t envy him that conversation. She probably won’t take it very well.”

“I don’t know. They’ve grown really close, and I think they might actually love each other. I’m hoping for the best.”

“So am I. He deserves to find the right girl this time around.”

“Yes, he does.”

She stole a look at Franky, who was watching people board the boat. He was so handsome, it made her heart ache. To be this close to him and not be able to reach out and run her fingers through his sun-streaked hair or feel the tanned skin of his arm beneath her fingertips was torture. Unrequited love was the worst.

“Speaking of the right girl.” Franky tilted his head toward the side door as Genevieve stepped onto the yacht.

Skylar waved her over.

“Hi,” she said sweetly as she took a seat beside them.

“Hey, Genevieve,” Franky greeted her.

“Are you guys having a good day?” she asked.

“We are,” Skylar replied. “Everything is going really well so far, Genevieve. You

should be really proud.”

“Thanks.” Genevieve pushed a loose blonde hair behind her ear and gave a humble smile.

Minutes later, the yacht began to move slowly through the channel, and Franky clapped once and rubbed his palms together. “So, who are we rooting for?”

Skylar looked at him as if he’d lost his marbles. “The Schultz crew. Who else?”

“There are a lot of great crews out there. Schultz is gonna have some tough competition.”

Skylar glared at him. “Traitor.”

He chuckled. “I’m not saying Schultz won’t win, but I’m not discounting the others right away. Gotta give everyone equal consideration.”

Skylar glanced over at Genevieve, who looked downhearted, and she was certain it was because of Sebastian. She looked at Franky and stuck her bottom lip out, tilting her head in Genevieve’s direction.

Franky reached across the space with his foot and tapped Genevieve’s leg. “Why the long face?”

Genevieve gave a forced smile in reply.

He guffawed. “That was about as sincere as Skylar when she says I’m funny.”

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“You are funny,” Skylar said with a wink.

“I’m sorry,” Genevieve replied. “I just wish Kurtis was here.”

Skylar and Franky exchanged a look. She would never get used to hearing Genevieve call her brother Kurtis—the name he’d given her when he pretended he wasn’t a Schultz—and she felt horrible for playing along with this charade and lying to Genevieve for him.

“He’ll be here,” Skylar told her.

Genevieve’s eyebrows lifted. “He will?”

She nodded. “He had some things to take care of today.”

“What things?”

“I don’t want to spoil anything, but you’ll see him at the gala tonight.”

This seemed to calm Genevieve as she breathed out a sigh of relief and turned her attention to the boats outside, all lined up and ready to race.

Skylar looked at Franky again, who seemed equally concerned with the situation Sebastian had gotten himself into.

“Want to head up top to watch?” Franky asked the girls as he stood.

Skylar jumped up enthusiastically.

“I think I’ll watch from inside,” Genevieve told them.

“Are you sure?” Skylar asked.

She nodded in reply.

“Okay. We’ll see you after.” Skylar glanced back at Genevieve once more before following Franky to the upper deck. Once this was over and the truth was out, she hoped Genevieve would be able to forgive Sebastian.

On the main deck, Skylar’s dad was seated with some work friends, chatting and laughing.

“Is there a Charm One and Two?” one of the men asked, regarding the name of the yacht.

Dad shook his head. “Have you never heard this story?”

“Can’t say that I have,” his friend replied.

“Well, the meaning is twofold. It all started back in college.” Dad gave Skylar a wink as she passed by, and she smiled as she followed Franky to stand by the railing, keeping her ears open as her father told the story he’d shared with her when he bought the yacht.

They weren’t waiting long before the regatta was signaled to begin, and the sailboats took off across the shining Lake Michigan water. It was a captivating sight, and seeing the crews in action always gave Skylar a thrill. The yacht gave them the perfect view of the race, and Skylar found herself jumping up and down when the end



grew near.

Franky chuckled beside her.

She looked over at him. “What?”

“You’re cute, that’s all.”

“I’m cute? What am I, twelve?” she joked.

He locked eyes with her. “No, you’re not.” The tone of his words sent a thrill through her, but she knew better than to make too much of it. Franky had a flirtatious personality. It was just how he was. It didn’t mean anything.

The Roaring Twenties themed gala that evening was the perfect ending to what had been a very successful day of events for the Schultz Foundation. Skylar stood next to the stage, all fancied up in a black flapper dress with gold sequined patterns and fringe along the bottom, listening to the snappy jazz tunes, and watching the guests take a spin around the dance floor. Her hair was styled in thick waves and pinned up in the back, with a matching gold and black headband to complete the look. Glancing around the room at all the 1920s era fashion made Skylar feel as if she’d been transported back in time.

“Sky!”

She startled at the sight of Gus rushing toward her, looking very dapper in a brown suit, complete with vest and bowtie, with his usually loose, wavy hair smoothed back.

“Have you seen Bash?”

“You’re back! Are you home for good?” She cocked an eyebrow at him. “Does Dad know you’re here?” Gus was supposed to steer clear of company events for a while as part of the whole laying low thing, yet here he was at the biggest event of the year.

“There’s no time to worry about that now. Is Sebastian here?” There was an urgency in his voice.

“Not yet. Why? What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you later.” He rushed off before Skylar could get an answer out of him, kicking her level of concern up a notch. She wanted to rush after him and find out what was happening, but it was almost time for her to present awards to the winners of the regatta.

“Wow!”

She spun around just as Franky let out a slow whistle, clearly admiring her ensemble. Her eyes traveled from his slicked-back hair, over his dark grey pinstripe suit with white tie, down to his two-tone black and white shoes.

“Were you going for the twenties gangster look?” she asked.

He smirked. “Want to be the Bonnie to my Clyde?”

Skylar laughed. She wanted to tell him she’d be anything he wanted her to, but

instead, she said, “I’d rather not if we meet the same fate they did.”

“I think we could pull it off. What a life that would be.”

“You’re so unhappy that you’d rather turn to a life of crime?”

“My job is like the worst chore in the world, so ... maybe the gangster life is for me.”

She gave him an amused look, and he held out his hand.

“Dance with me, Bonnie?”

Butterflies awoke in her stomach. “Sure, Clyde. I thought you’d never ask.”

Skylar followed him onto the dance floor, and he took her hands in his, stepping side to side then back, guiding them to the rhythm of the music. She tried to imitate what he was doing, and just as she got the hang of it, he extended one arm across between them, moving to spin her around and under. She stumbled a little as she turned, bumping into his arm and laughing as she came back to face him again.

“That was pretty good,” he told her. “I think you’re a natural.”

“What is this dance?”

“It’s the jitterbug.”

“And how do you know the jitterbug?”

“YouTube, of course.”

Skylar laughed. “You really committed to the twenties theme, didn’t you?”

“Darn right, I did. Want me to teach you the Charleston next?”

She cracked up, still trying to figure out their current dance without tumbling face-first onto the floor, but before she could answer, he brought her closer and slid one of his arms around her back. If he messed up the dance steps or accidentally stomped on her toes, she wouldn't have noticed. All she could focus on was the feeling of his strong arms around her and their bodies pressed together.

“This is fun, don't you think?” His smile made her weak in the knees. It was one of her favorite things about him. When Franky smiled, it was genuine. Not fake or forced or manipulative, like some people she knew. Milton.

“It is,” she replied, trying to act as normal as possible amidst her rapidly beating heart and fluttering stomach. “I didn't think you were going to show tonight. I'm glad you made it.”

“This look takes time.” He glanced down at his suit, which made her laugh. “You know I wouldn't miss the gala.” He loosened his grip and spun her out before bringing her back to him again. “But this one tops them all.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I've never had this much fun at one of these things before.”

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“Well, Genevieve did a great job with everything,” Skylar said.

“Not because of Genevieve, Sky. Because of you.”

She gave him a coy smile. “Who, me?”

His cute chuckle was quickly becoming her favorite sound.

The music soon ended, and the guests returned to their tables. Skylar and Franky moved to the side of the dance floor as Genevieve took to the stage.

“I’m up after her speech to give out the regatta trophies,” Skylar told him.

He leaned close and whispered, “I’ll save you a seat.”

His breath tickled her neck and sent chills up her spine. “Okay.”

She watched him walk over and take a seat at the table with his parents. She was so preoccupied by Franky, she hadn’t been paying much attention to Genevieve’s speech, until Skylar heard her say, “And now I’d like to introduce you to the man who has made the biggest impact on me since I arrived.”

Wait, that’s not right. Genevieve was supposed to introduce her next so she could give out the trophies.

“A man who believed in me when I wasn’t sure I could pull off this event in six weeks’ time. A man who helped me with every last detail of this gala and took

absolutely no credit for it.”

Were those tears in her eyes?

“He’s a man of many talents ... and many faces.”

Skylar followed Genevieve’s gaze, which was fixed on Sebastian, and she suddenly had a very bad feeling. Oh no! Does she know?

“The president of Schultz Chocolate. Sebastian Schultz, everybody.”

Skylar stared at Genevieve with mouth hung open and watched as she quickly exited the stage and rushed out of the building with Sebastian on her tail. Skylar scrambled to the mic, dumbfounded.

“Uh ... sorry for the confusion everyone. My brother, Sebastian, played a large role in putting together the events today, working with Ms. Willis to make this the most successful fundraiser to date.” She proceeded to give a recap of the regatta and award the winners, but all the while, her mind was on her brother and what was happening between him and the woman he loved.

As soon as she exited the stage, Franky was waiting for her.

“That was crazy,” he said.

“I need to find Bash.”

“I’ll come with you.” He took hold of her hand, which sent tingles up her arm, but she couldn’t think about that now.

They walked quickly out of the room and along the hallway toward the exit. Through

the glass doors, Skylar spotted Sebastian, dressed very Gatsbyesque, standing alone, staring upward at the night sky.

She shoved the door open. “Bash! Are you okay? What happened?”

“She’s gone. It’s over.” His voice cracked.

“How did she find out?” Franky asked.

“I don’t know.” He looked devastated. “It doesn’t matter. I never should’ve done this in the first place. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“There you are!” Gus’s voice echoed across the parking lot as he quickly approached, followed closely by their friend, Adelia.

“Is the gala over already?” Adelia asked.

“It is for me,” Sebastian mumbled as his gaze fell to the sidewalk, his shoulders slumped.

“Adelia? You didn’t tell me you were coming.” Skylar walked over and hugged her. They’d been best friends since childhood summers in Malibu, where their families had neighboring homes.

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“I flew in for moral support for Gus for this party.” She looked at Sebastian. “We’ve been trying to find you, Bash.”

“We drove to every place we could think of.” Gus’s voice held the same urgency it had earlier in the night. “I’ve been calling you for hours, but it kept going straight to voicemail.”

“My phone died,” Sebastian replied.

“I saw Genevieve earlier today,” Gus told him. “She was looking at a picture of you, me, and Sky at one of the past fundraisers. The caption on the photo told our names. She knows who you really are.”

A strong feeling of guilt came over Skylar. She couldn’t imagine the shock Genevieve must’ve experienced to learn Sebastian’s real identity that way. She probably felt so hurt and betrayed. By all of them.

“You’re too late.” Sebastian’s head hung low as he took off across the parking lot in the direction of his car.

“Bash!” Gus called after him.

Adelia touched his arm. “Let him go.”

Gus’s eyes shot to Skylar’s. “What happened in there?”

Skylar filled him in on the events that had transpired, and they all watched sadly as



Sebastian drove away. A few minutes of quiet hung over the group. None of them seemed to know what to do next.

The music from inside escaped when someone opened the door, drawing their attention back to the gala.

“There’s nothing more we can do now. Do you want to go inside?” Adelia asked Gus.

“We might as well. Or that dress you’re wearing will be for nothing.” Gus extended his arm to her.

“This old thing.” She grinned as she flipped her long blonde tresses over her shoulder. Adelia looked ready to walk a red carpet, and being the daughter of Hollywood’s most famous and beloved couple, she had walked a few in her life. She glanced between Skylar and Franky. “Are you two coming?”

“Not yet,” Skylar replied.

Adelia nodded and gave her a knowing wink.

Skylar lingered where she was, and Franky remained by her side. “You can go in if you want,” she told him.

He stepped close enough that she could feel the heat of him through his sleeve. “Not a chance. Are you okay?”

“I feel so awful for Bash. He really loves her, and I know he’s in a lot of pain right now. I wish I could make it better.” Tears filled her eyes, and she didn’t try to hold them back.

“Hey, come here.” Franky reached up and brushed one of her tears away then drew

her into his embrace.

She wrapped her arms around his back and rested her chin on his shoulder. “I hate that he’s hurting.”

“I know.”

Skylar stood in Franky’s embrace for several long minutes. There was nowhere in the world she’d rather be than in his arms, but she wished it were under different circumstances.

He finally leaned back and looked at her, taking hold of her upper arms. “I love how much you care about people, especially your family. We’re all lucky to have you in our lives.”

A thank you was on her tongue, but his sudden tender kiss to her cheek stopped her words short. His lips were soft against her skin, and the spot where they had touched tingled as he brought her close to him again. She melted into his comforting embrace, enjoying the blissful feelings washing over her. His lips had been so close to hers. All she would’ve had to do was turn her head and see what it felt like to kiss Franky for real. But for now, this was enough.

## FOUR

The sight of Skylar’s smiling face coming toward him on the sidewalk outside the law firm was like the clouds parting and giving way to the sun. After the week Franky’d had, she was exactly what he needed.

“Aren’t you a vision?” he said as she wrapped him up in a hug.

“It’s good to see you too.”

He breathed her in. It was probably weird that he knew her warm vanilla scent, but he craved the comfort it brought him.

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She started to pull away, and he groaned, tightening his grip.

“Don’t let go yet,” he begged.

She let out a little laugh that was music to his ears. “Bad day?”

“Change day to week and bad to dismal.”

“Dismal? Wow, I’m sorry.”

He didn’t want to let go yet, but he couldn’t think of a valid reason to keep hugging her, so he gave her one last squeeze and released her. “How was yours?”

“Not the best. It was Genevieve’s last day of work today.”

His mouth fell open. “She quit?”

“Yeah, the day after the regatta, she put in her notice. I tried to tell her about Serena targeting him so maybe she’d understand his reasons for keeping his real identity from her, but I’m not sure it did any good. She’s still gone, and I feel terrible for the part I played in keeping up this lie for him.”

“I understand. How’s Bash doing?”

“Not good. He looks so sad. My heart breaks every time I see him. I’m a little worried.”

“We should take him out to the Grill tonight, try to get his mind off things and cheer him up.”

“I like that idea. Not sure he’ll go along with it, but it’s worth a try.”

“Is he still at the office?”

Skylar shook her head. “I think he went home early today.”

“Let’s go get him. It’s easier for him to say no if we call him than if we show up on his doorstep.”

She smiled. “Good thinking.”

“Well, I’m more than just a pretty face,” he said with a wink.

They laughed together as they walked across the parking lot.

“Can we take your car?” Franky asked.

“Sure. Want to drive?”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Do you really have to ask?”

She giggled as she tossed him the keys, and he rushed ahead to open the Porsche door for her.

“Thank you, sir.” She smiled as she climbed into the passenger seat.

He rounded the front of the car and got in. The radio was already on when he started the car, and he took off down the road, listening to a commentary on climate change

and farming. The woman stated that switching from beef to beans would give people the needed proteins in their diets while lowering the emissions from farming the crops to feed the animals that are consumed, thereby reducing greenhouse gases.

Franky screwed up his face. “What are we listening to?”

“It’s NPR. All Things Considered.”

“Why?”

She chuckled. “I enjoy listening to them talk.”

“Beef to beans? I have to give up burgers and steak to save the planet?”

“That’s not what she said.”

“That’s exactly what she said.”

“She said reducing the amount of beef we consume, not completely eliminating it.”

He swiped across his forehead dramatically. “Phew! That’s a relief.” His expression turned thoughtful. “Now I’m craving a New York strip.”

Skylar laughed and switched the channel to music, filling the car with the latest pop tunes.

“Better.” Franky smiled over at her. “You’re so knowledgeable and well-informed.”

“I feel like my brain is always working and wanting to learn new things.”

He shook his head. “Once I step outside the office or the courtroom, I’d rather not think about anything at all. My job requires me to pay attention to every little detail. And at times, it’s too much, and my brain feels totally fried.”

“I didn’t know you felt like that. I bet it’s difficult not thinking about your cases when you’re away from work.”

“I try to compartmentalize what I learn about these people and the fact that their freedom sometimes depends on me, but I don’t always succeed. It can be a heavy burden sometimes.” He didn’t usually get so deep with people, and he glanced over at Skylar, who was giving him a sympathetic look. “I didn’t tell you all that to make you

feel bad for me. I was simply explaining why I'd rather listen to the latest cheesy pop song than have some woman tell me why I shouldn't eat a burger."

Skylar's laugh was so light and carefree. He could walk out of the courtroom after the biggest loss of his career, and just hearing that laugh would make it all better.

Being with her so much lately was filling the need for companionship he'd been feeling since he returned from Europe. He didn't like being alone, and her friendship had become invaluable to him.

They soon arrived at Sebastian's townhouse, and Skylar pressed the doorbell. The door opened a minute later, and Franky was surprised at the sight of Sebastian—dark circles under his eyes, still wearing the day's work clothes, and looking thinner than usual.

"Dude, you're a mess," Franky said.

Skylar slapped the back of her hand against his chest.

"No, he's right," Sebastian told her. "I am a mess. I don't know how to get over her."

This was bad. Worse than after Serena's betrayal.

"We're here to help," Franky said as lightheartedly as he could. "First step. Get out of the house. We're taking you to Sunset Grill tonight."

Sebastian groaned. "I don't know, you guys. I'm not really in the mood."

"You'll feel better once you get there," Skylar said.

"And get some fish tacos in your belly," Franky added.



Sebastian didn't look so sure.

"I get it. You'd rather stay home and mope and feel sorry for yourself," Franky said. "I've been there. But I got through it, and you will too. Just do what I always do."

Both Schultzes were staring at him now.

"Fake it till you make it. Don't feel like smiling? Fake it. Don't want to laugh? Fake it. Eventually, you'll start to feel better, and you'll smile and laugh for real again." He should know. It was practically his life's mantra.

Sebastian gave him a weak smile. "I'll try."

"Besides, when have you ever turned down fish tacos?"

"True," he replied. "Come in, and I'll get changed."

Skylar and Franky sat down in the living room and exchanged concerned glances as Sebastian went to change.

"You didn't tell me he was this bad off," Franky whispered.

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“See why I’m worried?” she replied.

Minutes later, Sebastian returned in jeans and a T-shirt and sat down on the sofa to put on his tennis shoes. “Whose car did you come here in?”

“Mine,” Skylar replied.

“Then we’re taking my car. You know how I hate squeezing into the back seat of yours.”

“Whatever you want.”

“And I don’t know if I want to go to the Grill. The last time I was there was when we took Genevieve.”

“That’s fine. I’m up for anything.”

“So am I,” Franky said. “Although, now that fish tacos were mentioned, I’m craving them badly.”

“You’re the one who mentioned them,” Skylar said with a laugh.

“There are no fish tacos in the world as good as Sunset Grill’s. How could I not bring them up?” Franky teased.

“Okay, fine.” Sebastian stood and grabbed his keys. “The Grill it is.”

“I was joking around, man.”

Skylar stood. “We can go somewhere else, Bash. Really.”

“I’ll have to go places we went together eventually. I guess now’s as good a time as any.”

“Only if you’re sure,” Skylar said.

“Let’s just go before I change my mind.”

They headed out to Sunset Grill in Holland, a lakeside restaurant owned by the Schultz family. It was a hidden gem among the area eating establishments, out of the way and quaint, a favorite among the locals, and the food was spectacular. Franky’s mouth watered just thinking about their menu selections.

Once inside, they went to the private dining room upstairs with windows overlooking Lake Michigan. Sometimes Franky and Skylar ate on the back deck with the customers, but most of the time, they chose this room to avoid lurking photographers, who sometimes focused their attention on the Schultz heirs. Usually, the paparazzi were focused on Gus and his tabloid-worthy ways, but they spent a fair share of time targeting Sebastian and Skylar as well, especially where their dating lives were concerned.

“Hey.” Franky elbowed Skylar as he perused the menu. “Fish tacos are okay to eat, right?”

She looked at him curiously. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

“I mean, as far as global warming goes. It’s not beef or beans.” He gave her a silly smirk.

“Oh my gosh, you are ridiculous.” Skylar playfully smacked his arm.

“What are you going on about?” Sebastian asked after he ordered fish tacos for himself and handed the waitress back the menu.

“Inside joke.” Franky made eye contact with Skylar, and it crossed his mind how pretty she was when she smiled at him the way she was right now.

His eyes turned to Sebastian, who was watching them with a look of concern. He wondered if Sebastian didn’t like him hanging around Skylar, and the promise he’d made to his friend all those years ago came to mind.

Throughout dinner, Franky and Skylar tried to keep the conversation going and stuck to surface topics like the weather and work to keep Sebastian distracted.

“Anything new regarding Gus’s trial?” Sebastian asked.

Franky nodded. “The lawyers are in discussions and getting things on the calendar. Milton had several witnesses who saw it all go down, so next up will be their depositions.”

“Do you think this will drag on?”

“These things can take time, sometimes months or even a year.”

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“I hope it doesn’t take that long,” Skylar commented.

“My dad thinks there is a very good chance Milton will settle without taking this to trial, so let’s hope that’s how it all plays out.”

Skylar scowled. “I hate that Milton’s doing this to Gus. I hate that I ever got involved with him in the first place.”

“Sometimes people aren’t who they seem to be,” Sebastian said. “You think they’re one thing and you find out you were completely deceived.” He stopped talking and looked deep in thought.

“Bash.” Skylar reached across the table and squeezed his hand.

“Sorry. I just wish I had thought things through a little more before I decided to hide who I was from Genevieve.”

Franky and Skylar exchanged glances.

“I hated that Serena lied to me and pretended to be someone she wasn’t. And I did the exact same thing with Genevieve.”

“Not the same thing at all,” Skylar said. “Serena had bad intentions from the start. You didn’t, Sebastian. That’s not who you are. You’re a good man who made a bad choice. But you’re not a bad person. And you are nothing like that woman. Don’t ever think you are.”

“What she said,” Franky added.

Sebastian was quiet.

“I saw Genevieve before she left today,” Skylar said.

His eyes lifted to hers.

Franky wished Skylar would’ve changed the subject. The point of the night was to get Sebastian’s mind off of Genevieve, not send him deeper into sadness and despair.

“I told her about Serena,” Skylar admitted.

“What? Why would you do that?”

“I wanted her to know you had a reason for what you did. I thought maybe it would help her to understand why you did it.”

“And did she?” The look of hope on his face was heartbreaking.

“I think she understood, but it didn’t change the fact we all lied to her, and she doesn’t trust any of us anymore.”

Sebastian stared down at the table, and Franky felt for him, losing the only woman he’d ever truly loved. Franky had never been in love like that before, but he was all too familiar with the pain of a woman walking away from him.

After a long silence, Sebastian looked up at them. “I’m so sorry to both of you.”

“For what?” Franky and Skylar asked in unison and exchanged glances.

“For asking you to lie for me. For putting you in that position. It was wrong, and I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“Of course,” Franky said. “You didn’t even have to ask.”

Skylar stood and rounded the table to her brother, wrapping her arms around him from behind. “I forgive you. And I’m sorry things turned out the way they did, Bash. But I refuse to give up hope that things will work out for you two. If we give her some time—”

“I don’t think that’s going to make a difference. What I did is unforgivable. And I don’t blame her for never wanting to see me again.” He shook his head sadly. “It would take a miracle to get her to forgive me for this.”

“Well, I believe in miracles,” Skylar said. “Don’t give up.”

Franky admired Skylar’s positivity. He wasn’t sure it was making any difference with Sebastian’s mood tonight, but she had Franky believing anything was possible in life. It was clearly a gift she had, helping people see the best in every situation. The world needed more women like Skylar Schultz, and he was blessed to have her in his corner.

## FIVE

Did we do more harm than good?” Skylar asked as she climbed into her car after returning to Sebastian’s home.

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“It’s going to take him a while to get past this,” Franky replied, “and every little step forward is going to help him in the long run.”

“I hope so.” Her heart ached for her brother, but she had meant what she said. Genevieve was a wonderful person with a kind heart, and Skylar was certain she loved Sebastian. She truly believed that once some time had passed, they would find their way back to each other.

After a few minutes of silent travel, Franky reached over and squeezed her hand. “Don’t be glum, sugarplum.”

She cracked a smile.

“That’s better. Want some ice cream?”

A bigger smile spread across her face.

“Want some Captain Sundae?” he asked.

“We don’t have to drive all the way back to Holland.”

“If Captain Sundae is what you want, Captain Sundae is what you’ll get.”

She chuckled. “I’d be fine with Dairy Queen, honestly.”

He shook his head. “No, that just won’t do. Not for you.”



“You’re extra silly tonight. And very rhyme-y.”

“You bring it out in me.”

“And apparently, I make you channel Dr. Seuss.”

“I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream.”

Skylar cracked up laughing. “That’s not Dr. Seuss.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Close enough.”

She shook her head at him.

After a few beats of silence, he said, “I feel happier with you around.”

She glanced over to find him smiling at her, and her cheeks warmed. That was the sweetest thing he’d ever said to her. She could only hope he would grow so happy with her around that he would catch feelings and want to be with her forever.

That had been her hope for as long as she could remember. He was the one she’d always wanted. And the one time she’d tried dating someone else had been a complete disaster. Her brief time with Milton proved that she had horrible instincts when it came to dating. But then, Milton had been very good at pretending to be something he wasn’t. He came off as this great guy with a budding real estate career when in reality he was a snake who was after her money and her body. She was just glad she came to her senses before he caused her any real damage—financial or physical.

“What’s your go-to sundae when you come here?” Franky asked when he turned into the Captain Sundae parking lot.

“Tammy Turtle,” Skylar replied.

“I’ve never had that.”

“It’s yummy with praline pecans. You should try it.”

“Maybe I will. I’ll be right back.” He got out and went to stand in line.

Skylar watched Franky go to the window and place the order. He stepped to the side to wait and looked over at her with a silly face.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He did the same, but in an overexaggerated manner, and she laughed. His playfulness made her feel like a kid again.

“Is it okay if we go to the lake house?” he asked when he returned to the car with sundaes in hand.

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“Sure.” Skylar’s heart soared, knowing he wanted more time with her.

When they arrived at Schultz Cottage, Gus was just leaving the house with a box in his hands.

“Hey,” he greeted them. “What are you guys up to?”

Franky held his ice cream cup in the air. “Eating melted sundaes.”

"Mine never had a chance to melt." Skylar grabbed her empty container and carried it with her. “What are you doing?”

“Picking up some stuff I left here and trying to find things to do while I’m not at the office.”

“I’m sorry you have to stay away right now, but you can still help. You’ve been getting all the emails I’ve copied you in on, right?”

“Yeah, I get them, and I appreciate that. I just wish I could be there in the building, proving to Dad I’ve changed for the better.”

“I know. Just be patient. It will happen.”

He smirked. “We’ll see.” He put the box in the back seat. “You kids have fun.”

Skylar ran over and gave him a hug.

“See ya, Gus,” Franky said.

Gus departed, and they headed into the house. Skylar got bottles of water from the fridge while Franky slurped up the rest of his melted ice cream.

She giggled at the sight of him with his head tilted back, tongue sticking out to catch the last drop.

“You were right.” He licked his lips and swiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. “Tammy Turtle was tasty.”

She laughed and handed him a napkin before heading out onto the lakeside deck.

Franky followed, and they leaned against the railing to watch the sun dip below the horizon.

“It cracks me up that your family calls this place a cottage.” Franky looked back at the massive house behind them.

Her parents had owned this house on Lake Michigan since she was a little girl, and it was one of her favorite places in the world. It wasn’t small or simple as the name would suggest, with its three stories, multiple bedrooms, jacuzzis in every bath, game room, patio with hot tub, and great room with windows spanning the length of the house to showcase the lake. Definitely not the definition of a cottage. But despite its size, it had never felt anything but cozy and welcoming to her. It was a place she could go if she needed solace and had on many occasions.

“Lake Michigan sunsets are the best.” Franky raised his water bottle to his lips, and Skylar tried not to stare at his mouth.

“Yeah.” She glanced over at the fire pit. “Should we start a fire? I think we’ve got the

fixings for s'mores."

"Didn't we just have dessert?"

"We could still start the fire."

"If you want." His eyebrows lifted. "Or I could kick your butt at pool."

"You always say that, and I always beat you."

"Once!" He raised his index finger in front of her face. "You beat me once."

"Okay, it's on!"

They both looked toward the house at the same time and took off, racing through the door and down the stairs toward the game room.

"Ready for another butt-kicking?" she threw over her shoulder at Franky, who was on her heels.

"Not tonight, my friend." He let out a devious laugh as he cut around her and reached the pool table first.

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“Put your money where your mouth is.” She eyed him as she positioned the triangle and filled it with the balls.

“A bet?” He rubbed his hands together and grabbed a pool cue. “This just got a lot more interesting. What are you thinking? Fifty bucks?”

“That’s all you want to bet? But you’re so confident you’ll beat me tonight.” She removed the triangle, took a pool cue, and purposely leaned across the table in a provocative way as she aimed for the cue ball. “I thought you’d at least bet a hundred.”

He seemed at a loss for words as he watched her, and he swallowed hard, jumping when she sent the cue ball cracking into the others.

She chuckled as she straightened, knowing her flirting had worked to throw him off. But he still hadn’t said a word, and it wasn’t like Franky to be speechless.

“One hundred then,” he finally managed.

“Hmm, what will I spend my winnings on?”

“There will be no winnings for you.” He came up behind her and gave her ribs a quick tickle, and she shrieked.

They were evenly matched, both skilled at the game. Things were close all the way through until each had only a few balls left.

Skylar paused and eyed Franky, who was chewing on his bottom lip. The pressure was on, and he was obviously afraid he was about to lose a Benjamin. She took her turn, hitting the last of her remaining striped balls into the pockets.

The next shot wasn't an easy straightforward one, with two solids blocking the path to the eight ball. Her only option was to bounce the cue ball off the rail and pray it hit just right.

Franky chuckled. "Oh yeah! Daddy needs a new pair of shoes."

"Shhh! You're breaking my concentration."

"You might as well forfeit now."

Skylar narrowed her eyes at him. "Eight ball in the corner pocket." She positioned herself, lined up the cue, said a quick prayer, and hit the cue ball. After it bounced off the rail, she thought she'd hit it at slightly the wrong angle, but as it neared the eight ball, she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet in anticipation. The cue ball hit just so, sending the eight ball straight toward the corner pocket, where it easily dropped in and disappeared.

"Nooo!" Franky dropped the stick on the floor with a clink, and Skylar threw her hands in the air.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

He groaned and folded over with his upper body across the table.

Skylar rushed to him and pounded a rhythm on his back with her palms like she was playing the bongo drums.

He straightened, and she wrapped her arms around him from behind. “I won! Pay up!”

“Let go of me.” He pretended to fight her and act defeated.

She laughed and squeezed him tighter. “You showed a valiant effort.”

He chuckled as he twisted to release himself from her grip, wrapping his arms around behind her waist, and pulling her in until their faces were inches apart. And in that instant, everything changed. His laughter faded, as did hers, as he held her body against his. The heat coming off of him made her knees weak. Their breaths mingled as the tension between them crackled. Neither said a word for long, emotionally-charged moments. Neither made a move. They breathed together and held each other, and she could feel his heart beating hard along with hers, which was so loud in her ears, she was sure he could probably hear it.

Skylar had no idea what to do next. She feared if she moved or spoke, she would break the spell, and this felt way too good to risk it. Franky didn’t seem in any hurry to let her go either, which made her giddier than her thirteen-year-old self every time he had paid attention to her.

The chime of Skylar’s cell phone sounded, successfully breaking the mood, and Franky dropped his arms. Disappointment overcame her as she moved around the table to see who had texted. Her heart was still beating rapidly, her skin tingled everywhere, and she felt a chill from the loss of his warm body against hers.

“Good game,” he said softly.

She smiled. “You too.”

And then she saw Adelia’s text.



Adelia: Thought you'd want to see this if you haven't already.

Attached was a link to an article with a photo of her and Franky out and about in Grand Rapids with a headline that read "Conflict of Interest? Schultz Heiress Dates Lawyer Involved in Brother's Lawsuit."

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Skylar groaned. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What is it?”

She walked over and held her phone out to show him the article.

“It was only a matter of time before someone took our picture and spun a tale for the tabloids,” he said.

She stared at the photo of the two of them. “I’m really sorry, Franky.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I’ve been friends with your brother for a long time. It’s not my first rodeo.” He sidled up beside her to look at the photo again. “Bright side. That’s a really good picture of us.”

She let out a little laugh. “It really is. We look good together.” Once the words were out, she almost wished she could take them back, but Franky made light of things, as usual.

“We’re very attractive people, Skylar. There’s no getting around that fact.”

She elbowed him.

“The tabloids are going to take their pictures and tell whatever lies they want. We know the truth, and that’s all that matters. I’m proud to be seen with you, Sky. I love that we’ve been hanging out.”

“Me too.” She knew exactly where she wanted this conversation to go, especially after their embrace, but she had no idea what he was thinking.

“You make me look good,” he teased.

She smacked his arm playfully.

“Seriously, though, I love spending time with you, and I feel like I can tell you anything.”

“I feel the same way.” Her hopes soared higher than they ever had before, as high as a hot air balloon floating up to the clouds, and she held her breath in anticipation of what he’d say next.

“I’m glad. And I want you to know that if you ever need me, I’m here for you. Anytime. Aside from your brother, you’re one of my closest friends.”

And faster than she could exhale, the balloon popped and sent her hurtling back to the friend zone.

## SIX

The latest documents for the Walters case were a blur on Franky’s computer screen. He should’ve been preparing for depositions, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the way Skylar had felt in his arms. Warm, soft curves melting into him. The heat of her breath against his mouth. He’d come so close to burying his nose in her hair and getting lost in the scent of vanilla. But if he had, he wouldn’t have been able to stop himself from kissing her. And where might that have led? His mind wandered, imagining them making out, breathless and horizontal on the pool table. The chime on his computer signaled a new email and brought him out of his daydream. He rubbed his hands over his face and shook his head.

He'd pushed all attraction for Skylar out of his head years ago. For Sebastian. For the good of their friendship and his relationship with their family. He couldn't think of her as anything other than a friend. And he hadn't for a long time. But last night, she'd leaned over that pool table the way she had, obviously flirting with him. He was used to their fun and flirty banter. He was not used to that look in her eyes or the way it had set his heart racing.

Thank God for that text from Adelia because that kind of thinking could've gotten him into trouble. He really needed to start dating again and put a little distance between them so he wouldn't do something stupid and selfish and ruin their friendship forever.

On his way out for lunch, Franky spotted Gus, walking down the hallway with Dad and Oliver Wood, a police officer and friend of the Schultz family. Oliver had intervened for Gus on many occasions, including the night he allegedly "attacked" Milton. Now, he was being called in by Milton's attorney in an attempt to use his testimony against Gus.

"Hey, Gus," Franky said as he approached them. "Oliver."

"Franky." Gus greeted him with a handshake as Dad disappeared into the conference room.

"Nice to see you, Franky." Oliver shook his hand.

"Here for depositions?"

Gus nodded. "Waiting on Milton and his lawyer. Did you and Sky have fun last night?"

Franky's pulse stuttered. "We did. Until she hustled me out of a hundred bucks."

“Good for her.” Gus’s laugh faded abruptly as his gaze fixed on the front entrance.

Franky turned to see two men walking toward them—a short, bald man with a briefcase and a tall, black-haired man with boy-next-door looks, who he could only assume was Milton Hanley. This was the first time Franky had seen the guy in person, and Skylar’s ex was nothing like he expected. Based on the way the Schultzes talked about him, Franky had pictured a greasy sleazebag, not the good looking guy walking toward them now, and it wasn’t hard to see why Skylar had been attracted to him. Franky’s mind envisioned the two of them together, and he had a sudden and violent dislike for Milton Hanley.

Gus glared as Milton approached.

“Gus,” Milton said.

No words left Gus’s mouth, but the narrow eyes and twitch of his jaw were answer enough.

“See you inside.” Milton’s tone was antagonistic, and he smirked as he followed his lawyer into the conference room.

Gus groaned as soon as the door closed. “This whole thing is such a waste of time and money.”

Franky patted him on the back for encouragement. “It’ll be over before you know it.”

“Not soon enough.”

“Want me to sit in with you?”

Gus shook his head. “Nah, I know how busy you are. I’ll survive.”

The door opened, and Dad motioned for Gus and Oliver to come inside.

Franky didn’t envy Gus the afternoon he was about to have. Listening to Milton’s witnesses was sure to infuriate him. Hopefully, Dad would be able to keep Gus in line. He needed to sit quietly and listen and not let his temper get the better of him because that would not help his case in the least.

When Franky returned to his office after lunch, he had a voicemail regarding one of the witnesses for the defense of the Walters case. A subpoena had been issued, but the man could not be found to serve it to.

This was the crap that drove him crazy about this job. He didn't want to worry about Joe Schmo not showing up for a meeting. And the further he got into this case, the more certain he was that the defendant was actually guilty of embezzling from the company he worked for. If his father hadn't known the guy, Franky was sure he wouldn't have taken him on as a client. But he had, and now Franky was forced to find some kind of loophole to keep the guy out of jail.

More and more, he was realizing this was not what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. But that kind of thinking was ridiculous. Wasn't it? Law had been his focus for more than a decade. He ate, slept, and breathed it. He'd never worked in another job, only at his father's law firm. And how on earth could he tell Dad how he felt?

No. He was a partner now. He was established in his field and doing well in it. There was no way he could start over in a whole new profession in his mid-thirties. And how many people really ended up doing something they loved for a living?

He shook his head and dialed the number to return the call.

Law was his life, whether he loved it or not.

## SEVEN

The tradition of family Saturday breakfasts had started when Skylar and her brothers were kids and had carried over into adulthood. No matter what was happening in their lives, they could come together and catch up with each other. Being with her family for those breakfasts always made Skylar happy. And today, it felt extra wonderful since it had been a while since all of them were able to be there together.

“How did the depositions go this week?” Dad asked Gus.

Skylar could see her brother tense up at the question.

“Can we not talk about the case, please? I’d love it if I could think about anything other than the reason I don’t have a job right now.”

“All right,” Dad replied, making no other remarks about what Gus had said.

“I heard you and Franky had fun the other night,” Gus told Skylar.

“Oh?” Skylar felt put on the spot, and her cheeks warmed, wondering what Franky told him.

“He said you hustled him out of some money.”

Skylar laughed. “I guess his pool game could use a little practice.”

Gus turned to Mom. “Can you pass the salt?”

“You and Franky sure have been spending a lot of time together,” Sebastian commented.

“Mhmm.”



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At the moment, Skylar was afraid things were weird between her and Franky after the other night. Being in his arms had felt so good, and she was sure he felt something more than friendship when he held her that way. At least, she hoped he did. But he hadn't answered her texts all week. Not seeing him or hearing from him in days after spending so much time together lately was putting her on edge. It felt like a step backward in their relationship or whatever was going on between them.

"Just be careful there," Sebastian said. "He's good at friendship but really bad at relationships."

Her brow furrowed with a mix of annoyance and concern. She didn't need her brother interfering in her dating life, but maybe he knew something she didn't.

Mom handed the salt and pepper to Skylar to pass on to Gus. "What would you like to do for your birthday, Skylar? It's a big one for you."

Skylar had mixed feelings about turning thirty in November. In some ways, she felt like she had accomplished a lot and was where she wanted to be at this point in her life. She was happy with her job at Schultz Chocolate, and while she knew there was much more she could do there, she was content in her position for now. But there were other things she still longed for in life—the most important being a husband and family.

When she thought about where she'd like to celebrate this milestone birthday, the answer came almost immediately. "I want to have it at the winery."

"Oh, the winery," Mom replied with excitement in her voice. "I hadn't thought of

that.”

Besides the cottage on the lake, Schultz Winery was Skylar’s other favorite place on the planet. Located on the Old Mission Peninsula in Traverse City, the winery had been around since the early 80s. Mom and Dad had visited the area on a vacation once, and Mom had fallen in love with it. Especially the wineries they came across. It was a spark of an idea at first, suggested by Mom, and then Dad made it happen.

“I love it up there,” Skylar said, “and it’s been a while since we spent any time there as a family.”

“Sounds lovely,” Mom said. “I’ll make the arrangements.”

“I haven’t been to the winery in forever.” Gus wore a reminiscent expression. “Does Izzy still work there?”

“Gus, no!” Skylar warned.

“What?” He feigned innocence.

“Stay away from the Zanetti girls.”

Roberto Zanetti ran the winery, and he’d been there since the beginning. He and his wife, Rose, had three daughters—Isabella, Gabriella, and Ariana—and a son, Luca.

“Izzy and I were friends,” Gus explained.

“Horizontal friends,” Sebastian said with a chuckle.

“That’s a lie.” Gus narrowed his eyes at Sebastian then looked at Skylar. “We made out once, and I didn’t even get past second base.”

“Augustus, really,” Mom scolded. “Is this appropriate talk?”

There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye when he turned his attention back to his breakfast. “Sorry, Mom.”

Honestly, Skylar didn’t know if Izzy still worked at the winery. She had worked the front desk for a while after high school, Skylar knew that much, but she had also been attending college for a business degree at the time. So maybe she was long gone by now. But with Gus’s track record with women, there was no way Skylar would encourage him to pursue anyone right now, let alone one of the Zanettis.

As Mom suggested ideas for the party, Skylar grew excited at the thought of spending time at the winery. She hoped things with Franky would be back to normal by then because she couldn’t imagine not having him there.

When breakfast was through, Skylar waited for her brothers to leave before she approached their father. “Can I talk to you for a minute, Dad?”

“Sure, sweetie.”

She followed him down the hallway to his study and took a seat in the wingback by the window, while her father settled into the chair across from her. The room always smelled like cherry pipe tobacco and the spicy scent of Dad’s cologne.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Dad, I think you should let Gus come back to the office. Even if it’s only part-time or after hours.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Skylar.”

“We’ve been emailing every day since he came back to town. He’s been on top of things and staying up to date. He’s serious about keeping up on his work even though he’s not there. It’s been really helpful getting his input. And he’s been staying away, just like you asked.”

“What about the gala?” he asked.

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Skylar's stomach sank. She was hoping he didn't know about that.

"Glenda Middlebury mentioned seeing Gus there with Adelia Allen. Did you see him?"

"Yes. They were there."

"And what was all that business with Genevieve rushing out like she did? I heard she quit."

"She left for personal reasons."

"Is this something I need to be worried about?"

"Not at all. It's been taken care of."

"It's a shame to lose her. She really went above and beyond for this year's fundraiser. I was very impressed with her."

"So was I, but she decided to move on." She continued before he could say more. "It would help me and my workload to have Gus back. I didn't realize all he actually did until he wasn't there to do it anymore. I always assumed he goofed off in his office all day long like we teased him about, but I was wrong. We all were."

Dad shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, Skylar. It's not the right time. His lawsuit is still a hot topic. Once the dust settles, we'll revisit this."

As she left his study, she let out a sad sigh of disappointment, knowing there was nothing she could say to convince him otherwise. Skylar loved her father and respected his decision to protect the company he'd built, but she didn't agree with shutting Gus out.

Skylar's phone rang the moment she climbed into her car to head home.

"What are you doing on Labor Day?" Franky asked before she had a chance to say hello.

"Uh, I don't know yet. Why?"

"How would you like to do the Mackinac Bridge Walk with me?"

"Are you serious?" Though she had lived in Michigan her whole life, Skylar had never taken part in the popular annual tradition. Every Labor Day, tens of thousands of people walked the five-mile suspension bridge, connecting the lower and upper peninsulas of Michigan.

"A group of us from the firm are going. Some are bringing their families. I thought it would be fun to bring a friend."

Skylar couldn't help but cringe when he said friend. Not that she didn't love their friendship, but he kept mentioning it, like he was trying really hard to drive it home.

"Sure, that sounds fun."

"Awesome! What are you doing right now?"

"Just had breakfast with my family."

“Nice. I saw Gus at the office Monday for depositions.”

“How’d that go?”

“Milton’s friends told their side, and they brought in the bartender, who was working that night. If it goes to trial, there’s a good chance Gus will lose.”

Skylar’s heart sank.

“I saw your ex too.”

She groaned. “I’m sorry. He’s the worst.”

“I didn’t know you dated Clark Kent.”

She chuckled. “I’m not going to lie and say his looks weren’t the first thing that drew me in.”

“He definitely did not look like I expected him to look,” Franky said.

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“How did you expect him to look?”

“Like the guy that played Kate Winslet’s boyfriend in the movie Titanic.”

“Leonardo Dicaprio?”

Franky laughed. “No, the other guy. Her sleazy fiancé who chased them around the ship with a gun.”

She laughed heartily. “Billy Zane.”

“Billy Zane. Yes!”

“That’s what you thought Milton would look like?” She couldn’t stop laughing.

“I wasn’t expecting him to look like such a nice guy. I was expecting a villain.”

“Well, he looks a lot nicer than he actually is,” she replied.

Milton Hanley was a chameleon. At first meeting, this tall, dark, and handsome man came off as friendly and charming. It was funny that Franky had called him Clark Kent, because he had always reminded her of Christopher Reeve from the old Superman movies, with his blue eyes and chiseled jaw. He had charmed her with his smarts and what seemed to be kind and sincere compliments, but those had actually been clever lies to lure her in. And she’d been particularly vulnerable and lonely that summer after graduating college because Franky had started dating someone new. Again. And she’d grown tired of waiting around for him to notice her.



Milton preyed on that and pretended to be someone he wasn't, and she soon recognized the way he changed his personality depending on who he was with. He'd been tender with her at first, but eventually his true nature showed through, and he got rough, wanting to go farther with her physically than she was willing to go. Especially since they hadn't dated for very long.

Nobody in her family was sorry to see him go when she finally dumped him. But he continued to be a thorn in their side.

"I'm sorry you ever had to deal with a jerk like him," Franky said.

"Me too." She paused. "Also, I don't think Billy Zane is a sleaze in real life."

"I meant the character he played."

She laughed.

"Hey, do you wanna do something today?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Okay, good, because I'm coming to get you in twenty."

"I'm not home yet. I'm sitting in my car at my parents' house. Want me to meet you?"

"Yeah, meet me downtown."

"What for?"

"There's a music festival going on."

Skylar was relieved that Franky had called and excited about spending the day with him rather than sitting home alone, watching Netflix, but confusion plagued her. They had shared a moment, at least she thought they had. But if she was wrong, if she was reading too much into it, like she'd done in the past, bringing it up might ruin what they had. This week without talking to him had been bad enough. She couldn't risk a repeat.

## EIGHT

Skylar's mind wandered as she watched the rich, green landscape of northern Michigan pass by outside her window. The Bridge Walk was set to begin bright and early the next morning, so they were driving partway the night before. With the recent mention of the winery, Skylar decided it was the perfect place for them to stay.

All kinds of what-if scenarios cycled through her brain, but she didn't want to get her hopes up and ruin the weekend, so she pushed those thoughts aside and glanced over at Franky, who was humming a tune.

Their day at the music festival two weeks ago had led to them seeing each other pretty much every day. Sometimes it felt like they were dating because they were together all the time and did things couples would do—minus any kind of affection, of course. Anyone who saw them together might assume they were a couple, but Franky had kept things totally platonic since the night they'd played pool. He hadn't so much as put his arm around her, which was disappointing. Skylar tried to keep her feelings in check, but it was getting harder and harder to pretend she was okay with only friendship.

The moment they pulled up to the winery, Skylar thought she might burst with joy. It had been way too long, and being there again, with Franky this time, was like a dream.

She climbed out of the car and took in the large Tuscan-style villa before her, which held an inn, restaurant, tasting room, gift shop, and the wedding and event space. She turned her eyes to the rows and rows of vines, sloping down the hill toward the Grand Traverse Bay beyond, and she could've cried at the postcard-perfect view.

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Franky grabbed their bags, and they headed inside. As soon as she walked through the doors, Skylar was instantly struck with a sense of nostalgia. The artwork and decor were so familiar, and she felt transported back to her childhood.

Skylar walked across the lobby and was taken aback when she saw the girl behind the reception desk. She looked familiar, but no, it couldn't be. The last time Skylar had seen her, she was a teenager with long, unruly brown hair, gangly arms, and skinny legs.

“Ari?”

Ariana Zanetti's brown eyes raised to meet hers. “Can I help you?” The awkward girl Skylar remembered had been replaced by a beautiful young woman.

Skylar removed the sunglasses she'd forgotten she was wearing. “It's me. Skylar.”

Ari blinked a few times before recognition hit. “Skylar Schultz! Oh my goodness!” She rounded the counter and gave Skylar a hug. “It's so good to see you. I didn't know you were coming. How are you?” Her eyes landed on Franky as she let go.

“I'm doing well.” Skylar looked over at Franky, who was staring back at Ari with that grin guys get when they're in the presence of a beautiful woman. She felt a twinge of jealousy but pushed it down inside. “This is my friend, Franky. Franky, this is Ariana Zanetti.”

“Call me Ari.” She held her hand out to him, and he shook it.

“Nice to meet you, Ari.”

“Her father has been running this place since it opened,” Skylar told him.

“Coming up on the fortieth anniversary in a few years,” Ari said.

“Has it really been that long?”

Ari nodded.

“Sounds like a good time for a celebration.” Skylar had a feeling her father would want to do something special for that milestone and recognize all Roberto and his family had done to keep Schultz Winery running.

“I think we can come up with something.”

“How long have you been working here?” Skylar asked.

“Since high school. I worked part-time after I graduated, and tried the college thing for a while, but it just wasn’t for me. I’m happy here. And who wouldn’t want to go to work to this view every day.” She pointed to a series of framed photographs on the wall behind her, showcasing a view across the vineyard to the bay beyond in each of the four seasons.

Skylar gasped. “My pictures.”

“Your pictures?” Franky asked.

“I did a project one year during high school for a photography class and gave the finished pictures to Roberto and Rose.”

“They’re great,” he commented.

“I didn’t know they were displayed here.”

“You captured this place beautifully,” Ari said. “They’re a welcome sight when we start work each day.”

“I’m so happy to hear that.” Skylar smiled. “Do any of your other siblings work here?”

“All except Gabby.”

Her eyes widened. “Luca’s still here?”

“He is. Papa’s teaching him everything so when he decides to retire, Luca can take over.”

“That’s awesome. I haven’t seen him in such a long time.”

“And you just missed Izzy actually.”

“Oh, I would’ve loved to see her again. Where’s Gabby living now?”

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“She and her husband, Corey, live in Grand Rapids.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, he’s a surgeon at Spectrum. She’s Gabby Reynolds now.”

“I didn’t know she got married.”

“It was a small family-only wedding a few years ago.”

Skylar shook her head. “So much has changed. I’ll have to look her up and congratulate her.”

Ari smiled. “So, are you staying here tonight then?”

“We are. I called and talked to your mom. She said there were a couple of rooms available for us.”

Ari clicked around on the computer and rolled her eyes. “She always says that without checking the computer. And as I suspected, she didn’t put you in the reservation system. Let me check to see what we’ve got.” She clicked around some more. “We do have one private cabin left. Is that okay? There’s only one bed, but we can get you a cot.” She looked between the two of them apologetically.

Skylar glanced at Franky.

“Your call,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“That’ll be perfect,” Skylar told Ari. She couldn’t control the butterflies that had taken off in her stomach at the thought of sharing a cabin, just the two of them.

“Sorry about Mama. She’s computer illiterate, even though we’ve been using these things for decades now.”

“No worries. I’m just glad you have a place for us. We’re heading up to walk the bridge tomorrow, and Franky’s never been here, so I thought it would be nice to come stay and shave a little time off our drive tomorrow.”

“Oh, fun. Have you walked the bridge before?”

“No. Have you?”

“Tons of times. We used to go as a family when we were little.”

“Is it scary?” Skylar asked.

“Not really. They used to only close one side of the bridge for walkers, so when the cars drove by on the other, you could feel that, and the rumble of the tires over the grated sections was kind of loud and freaky, but now they close down the whole bridge, so it should be much more peaceful for you.” She reached behind the desk and handed over a key to the cabin. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you want Luca to help with your bags? I can get him if you want.”

“That’s okay,” Franky abruptly replied before Skylar could respond. “I’ll handle our bags.”



“All right.” Ari raised an eyebrow, probably as curious about Franky’s sudden reply as Skylar was. “You’re all set.”

Skylar gave Ari a friendly wave on the way out of the building, and they walked along the path that led to the private cabins.

“That was very gentlemanly of you.” Skylar glanced at Franky, who had her bag over one shoulder, his over the other, and was pulling her suitcase behind him.

“I am very manly. Thanks for noticing,” Franky joked.

“Gentlemanly, I said.”

“Gentle and manly. Two of my best qualities.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “What am I going to do with you?”

He didn’t reply to that but changed the subject. “Nice you had a little walk down memory lane in there.”

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“I can’t believe Ari, Izzy, and Luca are still here. We all used to play together when we were kids. They’ve lived here and taken care of the vineyard our whole lives.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

“Their dad, Roberto, grew up on a vineyard in Italy and came here to the states after he met his wife, Rose.”

Franky let out a whistle at the spectacular view beyond their cabin. “No wonder they stayed here all these years.”

Skylar paused beside him and took in the sight. “I know. Isn’t it pretty? I love it.”

“It’s one of the prettiest places I’ve ever been, and I’ve traveled all over Europe.”

“Me too. I’ve seen some beautiful vineyards in Italy and the south of France, but nothing beats having a place like this here in our home state.”

Skylar opened the cabin, and Franky brought their things inside.

“Sorry we couldn’t each get a room at the inn.”

“Hey, not a problem. It’s nice that this place stays so busy.” He looked around the space before walking over and peeking his head into the one bedroom. “Nice big bed. That’ll be comfortable for me tonight.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, and he started laughing.

“I’m fine with the couch or a cot. Unless you want to share the bed.” He winked.

Her cheeks were instantly on fire. She wouldn’t complain one bit if he wanted to snuggle up with her tonight.

“You know I’m teasing, right?” he asked.

“Of course, I do.” She waved him off and carried her bag into the bedroom, taking deep breaths to calm herself.

“Want to go for a walk before dinner?” he asked.

She walked out of the room, smiling from ear to ear. “I’d like nothing more.”

They took their time ambling along the path that wrapped around the edge of the vineyard, while Skylar reminisced about being there as a child, playing in the rows.

“I think this would be a really peaceful life.” Franky touched a leaf from one of the vines as they passed by. “Growing grapes and making wine. Living in a place like this.”

“Seems pretty perfect, doesn’t it?”

He smiled over at her.

“When I was younger, before I decided to go to school for business, I thought about moving up here.”

Franky looked taken aback. “You never mentioned that the summer before you left for college.”

Skylar's heart stuttered in her chest. They had never talked about that summer. All the conversations they'd had during those months, both silly and serious, had meant everything to her. But she was just a kid then, fresh out of high school, and most of the time, she'd felt as if he was humoring her or hanging out with her to pass time until Sebastian got off work. Except for that last night in the pool, which she was pretty sure wasn't even real. Her teenaged brain had surely taken a simple look he'd given her and skewed it into something way more than it was meant to be. All these years, she assumed he'd forgotten about that summer. But he obviously hadn't. And now she was curious how much he remembered.

"I've never told anyone," she replied.

"Not even your family?"

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

"I'm a Schultz."

"So."

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“So it was always a given that I carry on the family legacy.”

He nodded. “I get that.”

“Is that how you’re feeling about the law firm?”

“I’ve always felt that way. Like it was expected of me to follow in my dad’s footsteps.”

“Exactly.” It was nice to be with someone who understood where she was coming from.

“I think you’re the only one who really gets me.” He gave her a grin that melted her heart.

“Same here. I’m so glad I told you. I could never tell my brothers, and I didn’t feel like I could tell other friends. I thought it would make me sound ungrateful for the opportunities I’ve been given.”

“I bet Adelia would’ve understood if you’d told her. She followed in her parents’ footsteps with the acting.”

“She probably would’ve, but at the time, she was busy, modeling in Paris or somewhere, and we didn’t talk as often.”

“I see.”

“It’s nice to have someone to confide in.”

His arm brushed against hers and goosebumps spread from the place it touched.

“How long have you felt this way?” he asked. “Like, when did you first consider moving up here?”

“The summer before senior year, I came here and helped out for a few weeks. It was wonderful, and I loved learning about the entire process, from the growing all the way to pouring a glass for the visitors.”

“So, what changed?”

“My dad sat us kids down and told us we are the future of Schultz Chocolate. He said one day the three of us will be running the company when he retires. He was all emotional about how he never thought it would become all it has and how he did it all for us and the future generations of Schultzes. I had been so close to telling my parents I wasn’t going to college after all.”

“But you obviously didn’t.”

She shook her head.

“And you regret it?”

“I don’t. I haven’t really thought about any of this in years.” She smiled wistfully. “But whenever I come up here, I wonder what might’ve been.”

He nodded. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what-ifs lately.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Have you?”

“Yeah. What if I quit my job to write music? What would my life be like if I did?”

Skylar was excited to hear he was seriously considering this.

“What if my dad disowned me? Would I be able to make a living?”

“I highly doubt your dad would be anything but supportive. But if he did, you’d figure it out. I would help you.”

“You would?”

“Of course. There are a lot of avenues for songwriters. Do you want to write for other people or perform your own songs?”

Franky chuckled. “Well, seeing as my voice is more Weird Al Yankovic than Al Green, I’d probably want to write for others.”

“Hey, I love Weird Al, and I’m sure he makes a good living with his songs.”

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He broke into a chorus of Weird Al's "Eat It," and Skylar cracked up laughing.

They turned a corner, coming up on the main building, and a blond man crossed their path and nodded his head in greeting.

"Evening," Franky said.

Skylar smiled in reply, and the man stopped in his tracks.

"Sky?"

Her mouth dropped open when she realized who this tall, brawny man was. "Luca?" Her voice squeaked a little from excitement.

"It is you. Oh my goodness." He rushed toward her with open arms.

She walked to him, very aware of Franky standing behind them while Luca wrapped his muscular arms around her and pulled her tightly against his broad chest.

"How are you?" she asked.

He let go and looked at her. "I'm good. You?"

"Good." She looked over at Franky. "This is my friend, Franky Middlebury."

"Hey, I'm Luca Zanetti. My family runs the place."



Franky shook his hand. "Skylar told me."

Luca looked at Skylar again. "What are you up to while you're here?"

"We're walking the bridge for the first time tomorrow morning," Skylar replied.

"You picked a great year for it. Supposed to be a beautiful morning."

"I heard you were hanging around here, learning the family business."

"That I am. If you want, I can give you a tour." Luca glanced over at Franky as if suddenly remembering someone else was standing there. "Both of you."

"We'll think about it," Franky replied.

Luca motioned toward the winery. "You should come up for dinner."

She nodded. "We will in a bit."

"Okay, maybe I'll see ya in there."

"Maybe."

He waved at them as he took off.

Skylar had forgotten how handsome Luca was. She'd had a crush on him when they were younger, but nothing much ever came of it. Mostly because she was in love with Franky the whole time.

"Should we get cleaned up for dinner?" Franky asked.

“That sounds good.”

They headed back to the cabin, and Franky elbowed her.

She elbowed him back.

“So, Luca ...”

“What about him?”

“Did you two ever date?” Curiosity was written all over his face.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“We were just friends.”

“You never thought about it?”

“Maybe.” Having him ask her about another guy felt strange.

“You’d make a nice-looking couple. He’s a strapping young lad.” He said it jokingly, but it annoyed her that he seemed to be encouraging her toward Luca.

“Okay, yes, I thought about it. He’s a good-looking guy, and I have eyes.”

A hint of a frown touched his face but disappeared as quickly.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.”

Back in the cabin, Skylar ran a brush through her hair, added a little powder to her face and blush to her cheeks, and applied a fresh coat of lip gloss. All the while, she

couldn't stop wondering about Franky's questions. Oh, how she wished she could read his mind because she was dying to know what was behind all that.

"Ready?" Franky asked through the door.

She took a deep breath, shook off the feeling, and they headed out to dinner.

Everything about the restaurant looked the same as it had when Skylar was little. Of course, they'd made slight improvements to it over the years, but it still held its original charm. The dining room was quaint and classy with dark wood tables surrounded by deep brown high-back cushioned chairs and decorated with centerpieces of candles and lengths of leafy garland. The room was filled with Labor Day weekend guests, but Rose and Ari had a private table reserved for her and Franky when they arrived and proceeded to spoil them all evening long.

"This is delicious," Franky commented on the filet mignon he was currently devouring.

Skylar nodded as she sipped her merlot. "Everything is amazing here."

Franky closed his eyes and savored another bite. "This was a very good idea."

She smiled at him when he opened his eyes again.

Luca walked through the door and across the edge of the room then. They made eye contact, and he gave her a wink as he passed by. She smiled in reply, but when she looked at Franky again, his posture had turned rigid.

"If you want to ask him to join us, be my guest." Franky's tone seemed clipped.

"Why would I do that? He's working."

He shrugged his shoulders and took a large gulp of his wine before turning his attention back to dinner.

Was he jealous? The thought sent a thrill through her. What she wouldn't give for him to care enough about her to be jealous when another man showed her attention.

"We should start the fire," Franky said when they returned from dinner.

Skylar laughed. "It's not that cold out." The temperature was in the low sixties, and there wasn't much of a chill within the cabin.

"You can't stay in a cabin with a fireplace and not use it, can you?"

"I guess not."

Franky headed toward the door, and Skylar walked over and pressed the button beside the gas fireplace, and it blazed to life.

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He stopped and stared at the flames. “Oh man, I was all prepared to go cut wood and rub two sticks together for you.”

She giggled. “Aw, thanks. That’s sweet.”

“I am a real sweetheart.”

“Yes, you are.” She smiled at him.

He grabbed a couple of cushions from the sofa and arranged them on the floor closer to the fireplace, plopping down on one and patting the other as he looked at her.

She sat down beside him crossed-legged.

“This is nice,” he said.

“It is.”

“I’m glad we came up early.”

“Me too.” She stared into the fire. “And thanks for letting me talk earlier.”

“Hey, I meant what I said. I’m here for you anytime. Anything you need. If you need someone to listen, I’ve got ears for that. If you need advice, I’ve always got plenty to say.”

She smiled over at him. “That’s the truth.”

He narrowed his eyes teasingly and continued. “If you need to get away, I’ll take you anywhere ... in your car, of course.”

That made her giggle.

“And if you just need a hug, I have these.” He held his arms out, and she took that as her cue to move into them.

She wrapped her arms around his back, and he pulled her close and planted a kiss on her temple. It was the first affection he had shown her in weeks, and oh, how she wanted to stay right there all night.

“Thanks for inviting me this weekend, Franky.”

“Thanks for suggesting we come here. You’re the best.”

“No, you are.”

“No, you are.”

She giggled. “No, you are.”

“Okay.”

She let go and pushed against his chest, sending him tumbling backward off the cushion.

The cabin filled with their laughter, and they talked and laughed the night away, and though Skylar still longed for him to see her as more than a friend, she felt perfectly content. This was the best time she’d ever had with him.

## NINE

The air was brisk, and the sun was occasionally obscured by clouds on Labor Day morning as thousands of people gathered to follow the governor of Michigan across the Mackinac Bridge. Franky and Skylar had arrived to meet his parents and the other lawyers and their families just before nine—a couple of hours after the first of the walkers had started on their journey. With traffic shut down until noon, they still had plenty of time to walk the length.

Franky couldn't help noticing how pretty Skylar appeared in the morning light. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore a "Middlebury & Associates" long-sleeved T-shirt and body-hugging black leggings, which he was trying very hard to keep his eyes off of.

He'd been fighting his attraction to her for weeks, and last night, he had found it especially difficult to keep his hands to himself. Being alone in the cabin together was the ultimate test, and he'd never prayed so hard for self-control in his life. Skylar had been very cuddly, sitting close while they talked, making it difficult to pay attention. And her hugs were heavenly. He'd never felt happier than when she was in his arms, which made him wonder what if. But every time he let his thoughts travel down that road, he remembered that she was like family, and if it crashed and burned like all of his other relationships, there would be major fallout. Not just between them, but in his friendship with Sebastian and the rest of the Schultz family. As much as he cared for Skylar, he couldn't risk that. She might leave him like all the others. And he couldn't take the chance that he might hurt her and ruin the most important relationships of his life.

"Keep up, slowpoke." Skylar broke his train of thought, and he walked faster to catch up to her.

"Should've had a second cup of coffee, I guess."



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As they walked, the young daughter of one of the attorneys kept running ahead of them, spinning around, then running back and circling them. She was adorable with wide blue eyes and a smooth brown bob.

“What’s your name?” the little girl asked him.

“I’m Franky. Who are you?”

“Fiona.”

Franky looked over at Skylar, who had a knowing expression on her face.

“That’s a pretty name,” Skylar told her.

“What’s your name?” the girl asked.

“I’m Skylar, but my friends call me Sky.”

Fiona’s eyes grew wider, and she pointed up. “Like the sky up there?”

“Yep.”

She smiled. “I like that name. I wish my name was Sky.”

“Why? Your name’s so pretty.”

“It is?”

Skylar nodded. “Pretty, just like you.”

Fiona grinned and squeezed between them, grabbing hold of their hands.

They laughed as they walked, swinging their arms and lifting her until she was squealing with delight.

“Is she bothering you?” Fiona’s dad asked.

“Not at all,” Franky replied.

Fiona kept them entertained for a good portion of the walk until they reached the area of the bridge with the open grates. That freaked her out, and she was in her daddy’s arms in a flash.

Skylar seemed to be a little freaked out herself. “I don’t like the grates.”

“They’re safe.”

“I know, but you can see straight down to the water. I don’t want to think about falling down there.”

He reached over and wound his fingers through hers. “You’re not going to fall. Cars drive over these daily.”

Her gaze met his, and she gave him the sweetest smile before turning back to watch where she was going.

He couldn’t take his eyes off of her, and her smooth, soft hand in his made his heart beat a little faster.

She gripped his hand firmly as they walked, oblivious to his stare. His fingers intertwined with hers seemed to give her the strength she needed to make it across the grates and onto the final stretch of solid pavement. He could feel the moment relief came over her when her hold loosened.

“Better?” he asked.

“Much.”

“Good.” He kept holding her hand because he wanted to.

Skylar’s cell phone rang, and she pulled it out of her pocket. Her eyes widened when she saw the screen, and she answered immediately. “Genevieve! It’s so good to hear from you. How are you?” She watched the ground in front of them as she listened. “I think Sebastian is staying at the lake house for the holiday. Why?” A huge smile spread across her face at whatever Genevieve was saying. “You are? Does this mean what I think it means?” She looked over at Franky with excitement in her eyes as she listened. “You’re very welcome. Good luck!”

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As soon as she hung up, she let go of his hand and closed the space between them, wrapping her arms around his neck. He stopped right in the middle of the crowd of people to lift her in a hug.

“Good news, I take it?”

She dropped to the ground and continued walking. “Genevieve moved to Montana for a job at a horse rescue, but she’s coming back today to talk to Sebastian. I asked her if this means what I think it does, and she said she hopes so.” She squealed. “I’m so happy for them. He’s been a miserable shell without her, and I’ve been praying and praying something would bring them back together. Thank God she’s going to talk to him.”

“That’s awesome.” The pure joy on Skylar’s face was breathtaking, and Franky was happy everything seemed to be working out for Sebastian.

They walked on for a few minutes, the sun peeking out from behind the clouds and warming the air, and Skylar’s fingers suddenly intertwined with his again.

It felt right, holding her hand. But he worried about giving her the wrong idea.

“I forgot to tell you,” she said, “We’re having my birthday party at the winery this year.”

“That’ll be nice,” he replied. “What birthday is it?”

“Can I keep celebrating my twenty-ninth indefinitely?”

“The big three-oh, huh?” Their age difference didn’t seem as big a deal as it had when she was seventeen and he was twenty-two.

Skylar scrunched up her nose.

“Are you worried about turning thirty?”

“Not really. I’m kind of looking forward to what my thirties hold, actually.”

“All good things.”

“You think so?” she asked.

He nodded. “I know so.”

“You’ll be at my party, right?”

He screwed up his face at her. “Do you even have to ask?”

“Good, because I want everyone I love there with me.”

His heart warmed to hear her say that, and he noticed her blush as she turned her head away.

“Sky.”

She hesitantly turned her eyes to his.

“I love you too.”

Her lips turned up in a slow smile.

“Will your party be big or small?” he asked.

“Big!” She spread her arms out.

Franky laughed at her enthusiasm.

“But not too big. Family, close friends, some friends of the family, maybe some coworkers.”

“So, huge then.”

Skylar chuckled.

“And the Zanettis will be there, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

Franky didn't know why it bothered him that Skylar and Luca had a connection in the past. She said they had never dated, but he wondered if there had ever been feelings there for either of them. The way Luca looked at her made Franky want to punch him in that handsome face of his. But it wasn't jealousy. He was just feeling protective of his friend. Yeah, that was it.

When they reached the end of the bridge, Fiona left her father's side to run over and give each of them a hug. She was precious, and while hearing his ex-girlfriend's name had surprised him, he couldn't help but smile at the adorable girl.

“Are you thinking about Fiona?” Skylar asked when they walked toward the shuttle that would take them back across the bridge.

“She's cute.” He knew she wasn't talking about their adorable bridge-walking companion.

“I meant ... the other Fiona.”

“I try not to think about her if I can help it.”

“Did you love her?”

He was thoughtful for a few moments. “I wanted to believe we had something

special, but I don't think I was ever really in love with her."

"She's a fool for letting you go. If I was her—" Skylar abruptly stopped talking as if she had said too much.

"If you were her, what?" He knew he shouldn't go there with her, but he was dying to know what she was going to say next.

"Nothing, I just think she's awful for doing what she did to you."

He pulled her into his arms before they climbed into the shuttle, soaking in the feeling of holding her again, if only for a moment. "Thanks, Sky."

When he let go, she smiled. Why did her smile make him happier than anything had in a very long time?

TEN

Change was in the October air, and not only in the leaves that were starting to turn bright autumn colors. Genevieve's visit with Sebastian last month had gone very well, and the Schultz family was about to start planning a wedding. Skylar's prayers had been answered, and she was overjoyed for her brother and his new fiancée.

After a nice family dinner to celebrate the engagement, they moved to the family room, where Sebastian stood by the fireplace, looking all serious and official. He had hinted at another announcement, and Skylar was dying to know what it was.

"By now, you all know that I've asked Genevieve to marry me, and she has agreed." He couldn't stop smiling, and Skylar could feel his happiness. "Before I decided to propose, I spoke to Dad and Mom about a decision I've made. Effective immediately, I will be stepping down as president of Schultz Chocolate."



Skylar gasped. Genevieve's mouth hung open. Gus looked pleased.

"I will be moving to Montana to be with Genevieve," Sebastian concluded.

"What?" Genevieve shook her head. "No, you can't leave your job for me. That's crazy."

"I've made my decision, darling. I can't be away from you, and when we marry, I know you'll want to stay on at the Rescue. You were meant to work there, and I won't ask you to walk away from it."

"But you love your job." She had tears in her eyes, and it was clear she had no idea he was planning this.

He sat down next to her on the loveseat and took her hands in his. "I love you more."

Skylar's heart ached for that kind of love.

"Who'll take over your job?" Gus interrupted their sweet moment.

"I've left that decision up to Dad." He nodded toward their father, who had taken Sebastian's spot by the fireplace.

"I've thought long and hard about this decision," Dad said, "and I've decided Skylar will move into the position of president in Sebastian's absence."

Skylar's heart leapt in her chest. What?

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“What?” Gus burst out. “Why? I’m the next oldest. It should be me.”

Any hint of happiness she might’ve felt was dashed by her brother’s reaction. She understood where he was coming from, but it also hurt to hear him say that.

“Augustus.” Dad gave him a scolding look. “With the issues you’ve had over the past few years and your upcoming court date, I have to think about what will be best for the company at this time.”

“This is crap.” Gus stood and stared their father down. “Nothing I ever do is enough.”

“Gus.” Skylar’s heart shattered for her brother.

“What do I have to do? Tell me, Dad. Because I’ll do it.”

“You’ll still have your position as vice president for the time being.”

“For the time being? What does that mean?”

“It’s dependent on this lawsuit.” Dad stepped closer to Gus and lay his hand on his shoulder, looking him straight in the eyes. “I know you want to be taken seriously in this company, and I want that for you. I do. But as I’ve told you before, until we see that you’ve changed ... until you’re ready to settle down and be serious, this is how things are going to be.”

Gus was clearly devastated, as if the weight of the world had settled heavily on his shoulders. He looked around the room at his family, from face to face, and stopped on

Sebastian. “Congratulations on your engagement.” He turned and began walking out of the living room, and Skylar felt a sense of desperation, trying to think of anything she could say that would get him to stay.

“Augustus,” their father called after him.

Gus turned and locked eyes with Dad. “I’ll be going now. It’s obvious where I rank in this family.”

“Gus,” Skylar begged. “Please, don’t.”

The sadness in his eyes broke her heart. “Kick some butt as president, sis.”

And then, with no further arguments or angry scenes, he turned and walked out of the house.

Tears burst from Skylar’s eyes. Not only for Gus and how upset he had been at the announcement, but for herself. Mom wrapped her arms around Skylar and let her cry for a while. What should’ve been a happy moment for her was now tinged by Gus’s outburst. And there was also a part of her that feared this new responsibility. President was a lot. Was she ready for it?

When Skylar’s tears finally subsided and the sadness of Gus walking out of the house had dulled a little, Mom stood, brushed her hands over her slacks to smooth them out, and looked at her children.

“What do you say we teach Genevieve how to make Granny’s truffles?”

Genevieve sat up suddenly from her place in Sebastian’s arms. “Oh, I’d love that.”

Skylar headed to the kitchen with Mom and helped her get out the supplies. She

glanced toward the family room, noticing that Sebastian and Genevieve hadn't followed, and returned to find them kissing. They were so sweet, it made her heart ache, and she thought of Franky.

Nothing between them had changed since the Bridge Walk. They snuggled up on the couch together while watching movies, he held her hand sometimes when they were walking, and at times, the way he looked at her made her knees as wobbly as Jell-O. She loved being with him, but she felt increasingly discouraged. If something was going to happen between them, wouldn't it have happened by now? It wasn't like there hadn't been plenty of opportunities.

She entered the family room, hating to break up the sweet moment. "Come on, lovebirds."

They got up and moved past her toward the kitchen, and Skylar took hold of her brother's wrist to stop him.

"Congratulations." She couldn't stop the tears from falling again—a mix of happiness for Sebastian's engagement, worry over her new position, and sadness at Gus's outburst.

"Thank you." Sebastian wrapped her up in a tight hug and said, "He's gonna be okay. I know it."

"I hope so."

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Skylar stood at Franky's apartment door after spending the evening with her family, teaching Genevieve how to make truffles, and trying to have a nice time together, even though what had happened with Gus hung heavy over the day.

When Franky didn't answer right away, she knocked again.

Footsteps neared, and the door opened to reveal Franky in only a pair of blue plaid boxer shorts.

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Skylar's eyes widened. Smooth muscled chest, thick biceps that had been wrapped around her many times, and good golly, Franky had abs. She tried to look away, but she was unsuccessful. He clearly spent plenty of time at the gym these days.

“Hey, Sky, what are you doing here?”

“Uh ... do you always answer the door in your underwear?”

He didn't seem bothered by his lack of clothing. “Sometimes.” He stepped back and opened the door for her. “Come on in, and I'll get dressed.”

She stepped inside his apartment and took in the place. In all the times they'd hung out, they hadn't spent any time at his place. It was an open floor plan with high ceilings, but smaller than she expected. It felt very much like a bachelor pad, and she was pretty sure it was the same place he'd been living since he finished law school.

Franky in his personal space was kind of fascinating. He walked ahead of her, picking up discarded clothing, kicking shoes out of the way, grabbing a dirty plate and napkins from the coffee table. She tried to keep her eyes off of his backside in those boxers but was unsuccessful once again.

“I never would've pegged you for a slob.”

He looked back over his shoulder. “I'm not a slob. You caught me on a lazy day.”

“Sure.” She gave him a cute smile.

“So I’m not a neat freak. Sue me.”

“That’s your job,” she teased.

“Har har har.” He cleared a balled-up throw blanket and hoodie from the couch cushion and motioned for her to take a seat.

“Thanks.”

“Be right back.” He scurried off to his room and returned in a T-shirt and jeans. She couldn’t help but prefer him with less clothing.

He walked into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of water for each of them, then took a seat beside her and bumped her elbow with his.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“I had kind of a rough day, and I just needed my friend.”

“I’m sorry. Tell me all about it.”

Skylar spilled her guts, sharing about Sebastian’s announcement, her father’s decision about the president position, and Gus’s reaction.

“Wow.” Franky stared ahead. “That is a lot to take in.”

“I know. I don’t think I’ve really let it all sink in yet.”

“I can’t believe Bash is moving to Montana. That seems crazy.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine Schultz Chocolate without him working down the hall from

me.” The thought made her heart ache. “I don’t know if I want to imagine it. And the same with Gus. He was really starting to show up. We were getting into a groove, then everything went wrong. I don’t even know what to do. It’s been me and my brothers for years, and now, out of the blue, I’m on my own and in charge of it all.” She got a nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Bash won’t leave you in the lurch. I’m sure he’ll help you out in the transition.”

“I don’t doubt that. I just ...” Thinking about Gus’s reaction and how he left broke her heart, and tears surfaced again.

“Hey, Sky. It’ll be okay.” He put an arm around her, and her tears spilled down her cheeks.

She turned into him, wrapping her arms around his waist, crying into his shoulder.

“Let it out,” he whispered as he held her tight.

“I’m scared.”

“Of what?” He pulled back to look at her, his hand reaching out to brush away her tears.



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“Everything is changing so fast, and I want things to stay the same. I want my brothers to help me run the company. I don’t know if I want to do this alone.”

“Things can’t stay the same. Change is a part of life, whether we like it or not.” There was something in his eyes she couldn’t quite interpret, and he looked as if he wanted to say something more, but he didn’t.

“I know you’re right, but ... what if I don’t want this. Without my brothers, there’s nobody else to take over, so I have no choice but to do it.”

“I know you. You’re strong, intelligent, and capable, and I believe you can do this. But if it’s not what you want, you need to tell your dad.”

She shook her head. “I’m just confused right now. Gus and I make such a good team. I wish my dad could see that. Now everything’s ruined. He’s probably going back to California again, and we won’t see him anymore.”

“Well, I know he’ll be here at least until next week because he and my dad are meeting with Milton and his attorney to discuss a settlement.”

“He better settle.”

“From what I’ve deduced about Milton, I really think he will.”

She let out a sigh of relief.

“So maybe you can talk Gus into staying before he takes off again.”

“Maybe.”

He wrapped his arm around her and leaned back, pulling her with him so she was tucked against his side. “It’s going to be okay, Sky.”

She turned to look at him. “Thanks for being here for me and letting me talk. I needed this.”

“Any time.”

Their eyes met and held, and his gaze fell to her lips. Her pulse quickened. Was this it? Was it finally going to happen?

“You know what we should do right now.” His voice was soft and deeper than usual.

She stared at his mouth. Making out on the couch for hours crossed her mind.

“We should go out and celebrate your promotion.”

Her eyes met his again. “I don’t know if I’m in the mood to celebrate right now.”

He abruptly stood and clapped his hands together. “Pick a restaurant, any restaurant. I want to spoil you tonight.”

“I just had dinner with my family.”

“Dessert then.”

“We don’t have to go out. I know you’d probably rather chill in your undies for the night.”

He laughed loudly and held a hand out to her. “Come on, Sky. I want to take you out.”

A slow smile spread across her face. “Okay.”

## ELEVEN

Seeing Skylar cry broke Franky’s heart. She was so tenderhearted when it came to her family, and he loved that about her. He’d never seen the nervous, uncertain side of her, though. Knowing she wasn’t always as strong and put-together as she appeared made him feel even more of a connection with her, like they had more in common because of their work woes. And the fact that she’d turned to him when she needed someone to talk to made him feel good. Really good.

“Where would you like to go?” Franky asked Skylar as they walked out to her car.

“Captain Sundae closes for the season this weekend. We should go there one more time.”

“Good choice.” Franky climbed into the driver’s seat. “Want the top down?”

She shrugged.

“This might be the last warm night before the cold weather arrives. Plus, we can stargaze on our way.”

“You better be watching the road, not the stars.”

“I shall follow The Big Dipper all the way to the ice cream.”

Her giggle made him look over at her.

Skylar rested her head against the seat and tilted it sideways to look at him. “You’re sweet to do this for me.”

“Hey, it’s the least I can do after all the times you’ve been there for me. You’ve listened to me complain about work for months, and you’ve made me actually believe something better might be possible.”

“It is.” She gave him a sweet smile.

“You might not feel so sure about your job at the moment, but once all your initial doubts and fears are gone and the situation with Gus gets sorted out, you’re going to be excited about your new position, and you’ll be glad we took the time to make a big deal of your accomplishments.” He reached over and squeezed her hand. “I’m so darn proud of you. You deserve to be spoiled for a night.”

A huge smile spread across her face. “Thank you.”

They drove on to the ice cream shop, where a long line of customers were waiting. It seemed everyone had the same idea as they did.

“We can go somewhere else,” Skylar said.

“Nah. Worth the wait.” Franky got out of the car and went around to open her door.

They took their place in line and chitchatted while they waited. Franky could think of worse things than standing beside Skylar for fifteen minutes. And in no time at all, it was their turn.

“Sorry for the wait. What can I get ya?” the young guy behind the window asked.

“Two Tammy Turtles, please,” Franky replied.

“You remembered.” Skylar’s smile was sweeter than the ice cream they were about to enjoy.

“Of course, I did.”

The smile remained on her face while they joked around and waited for their order. Franky was happy to see her smiling after the day she’d had.

The guy handed their sundaes through the window to Franky. “Have a great day!”

“Thanks, you too.” Franky took the sundaes and turned to hand Skylar hers, but she didn’t take it. Her smile had disappeared, her eyes were wide, and her lips were pressed together in a firm line as she stared over his shoulder.

“Sky?” he asked, about to turn around.

“Well, if it isn’t Skylar Schultz.”

Franky turned to see Milton Hanley, accompanied by a tall brunette, stepping up to the back of the line. He turned back to Skylar. “Just ignore him.”

“Not even going to say hello?” Milton asked. “That’s not very kind of you.”

Skylar looked around Franky and glared at her ex. “What do you know of kindness?”

“I know it wouldn’t be very neighborly of me to pretend I didn’t see you.”

“We’re not neighbors,” she snapped. “And haven’t you done enough to my family? Just leave us alone.”

“You mean hasn’t your family done enough to me?”

“That’s rich coming from you!”

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“I will be rich once this lawsuit’s over.”

Skylar took a step toward him, and Franky grabbed her wrist to keep her from doing something she would regret.

“Come at me like your brother did, Skylar. Two lawsuits are better than one.”

Franky could feel her shaking with rage. “He’s not worth it,” he whispered in her ear. “Let’s get out of here.”

She looked Franky in the eye. “I’m not letting him ruin this night for us. We’re staying.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, and he let her go but took hold of her hand, which was still shaking.

Milton said nothing more, which Franky was thankful for, and they walked over to the outdoor seating area, lit by strings of bare light bulbs, and took a seat at one of the picnic tables.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I haven’t seen him much since we broke up, and I still get the same uneasy feeling I got toward the end of our relationship. I never knew if he was going to be the sweet Milton he was when we first met or the Milton who was verbally abusive and tried to get me to do things I didn’t want to do.”

“He didn’t force himself on you, did he?” Franky felt sick at the thought.

“No, but sometimes I felt like he might, especially toward the end, and that’s why I broke it off.”

Franky watched Skylar poke at her sundae with the spoon, taking small scoops once in a while. He glanced across the yard at Milton and his date, who were heading their way. Milton wore the cockiest grin on his face, and Franky saw Skylar tense up when she noticed them take a seat at the nearest table.

The man infuriated Franky, and he knew Milton’s type all too well. Constantly pushing people’s buttons, causing trouble for anyone who crossed him, leaving chaos and misery in his wake. He’d seen this kind of bullying behavior in court cases many times.

“I changed my mind. Can we go?” Skylar asked seconds after Milton and his date sat down.

“Absolutely,” Franky said.

They weren’t five steps away when Milton said, “Aw, come on, don’t be like that. I know you’re still hung up on me, but can’t we be civil in public?”

Skylar spun around and marched toward his table too quickly for Franky to stop her.

“I’m the one who dumped your sorry butt, and no, I will not be civil to someone so despicable. You’re an evil, conniving, narcissistic jerk, and I’m sorry I ever got involved with you.” She turned her attention to Milton’s date. “Let me offer you a little advice about this one ... run ... as fast as you can.”

Franky’s heart nearly burst with pride at how she’d handled that, especially seeing



Milton's shocked expression and the nervous look on his date's face as Skylar walked away.

"Let's go." She took Franky's hand in hers and tugged him along behind her.

When they got into the car, they burst out laughing and couldn't stop.

"You didn't see his face," Franky told her. "He couldn't believe you said those things. And his date ... I think you made an impression."

"Good. I hope I ruined Milton's plans for the night and saved that girl a lot of heartache."

Franky gazed at Skylar with complete admiration. "You are awesome."

She looked away shyly. "Whatever."

"You are, Sky. I feel like I see a new and different side of you every day, and I love it."

A blush colored her cheeks as he started the car and drove off.

"So, what should we do now? Go home?" Skylar asked.

"Do you want to go home?"

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“No, I’m all pumped up on adrenaline right now.”

He laughed. “How about Carmichael’s?”

“The karaoke place?” she asked.

“I think it’s open mic night.”

“So, you’ve been there before?”

Franky nodded. “I used to go all the time. Your brother and I used to go with some buddies in high school, and our band would play.”

Skylar’s mouth fell open. “I’m sorry, what? Did you say your band?”

“Yeah, why? You didn’t know we had a band?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“How did you not know that?”

“I knew you guys played together sometimes, but I thought you were goofing around in your basement or something. Did your band have a name?”

Franky chuckled. “The Hot Chocolates.”

Skylar burst out laughing. “Oh my gosh. Are you kidding?”

“The girls in the audience didn’t seem to mind.” His eyebrows bobbed up and down.

“Groupies.” Skylar rolled her eyes.

“Hey, if I remember right, you told me if I joined a band, you would be my groupie.”

She grinned. “I guess I did say that.”

“If I play something tonight, will you stand beside the stage and pretend to be my biggest fan?”

She smiled over at him with a twinkle in her eye. “I won’t have to pretend.”

His stomach somersaulted at the soft, sweet tone of her voice. Sometimes he wished he could ignore all the reasons he couldn’t take her in his arms and kiss her senseless.

Carmichael’s had been a favorite hangout spot during high school and occasional visits home from college. Those years were the highlight of his creativity, filled with hours of songwriting and playing covers with Bash and the guys. But once he got into the thick of law school, studying for the bar exam, and working at the firm, all of his musical artistry had fallen by the wayside.

He didn’t know what made him think of Carmichael’s tonight, but there was something about being with Skylar that inspired him. She reminded him of fond memories from days gone by, and he wanted to share this place with her.

When they walked into the club, a man and woman were on the stage, singing a duet.

“Open mic.” He pointed at the stage. “Told ya.”

“What are you gonna sing?” She winked.

“Any requests?”

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Whatever you want. I don’t care.”

“Something classic or something I wrote?”

“Original Middlebury, please,” she replied with a smile.

He shook his head and grinned. “You asked for it.”

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Franky walked to the front and put his name on the list. He gave Skylar a thumbs up and went to the bar to get them drinks.

“Thanks for bringing me out tonight,” Skylar said when he returned to the table. “I needed this more than I knew.”

“I know you did. I know you.”

“Do you now?”

“I like to think so. But I have a feeling there’s a lot more to learn about you, Skylar Schultz.”

Even in the low light of the restaurant, he could see the blush on her cheeks.

They watched the other performers, and then Franky’s name was called, and he headed to the stage. He had no idea what he was going to play, but he’d always been good at improv when it came to music, so he sat down behind the piano and adjusted the microphone toward his mouth.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. You are about to witness the very impromptu writing of a song, here and now, on this stage. No preparation, no music arranged. Heck, I don’t even have lyrics yet.”

The audience laughed.

“I am about to write a very special song for my beautiful best friend, Skylar, sitting

right over there.” He pointed to her, and she smiled at him before giving a little wave to the crowd as they all clapped and whistled.

Franky took a deep breath and thought about Skylar as he touched the piano keys and pieced notes and chords together. He stumbled around a bit until he found a tune he thought sounded like her. It was light and melodic, with a hint of wistfulness. And now that he had found the song, the lyrics began to pour out of him.

He knew he wasn’t the most talented singer in the world, but he could carry a tune. And the lyrics weren’t worthy of a Grammy or anything. He simply pictured things he and Skylar had done together and did his best to find words that at least sort of rhymed. It was all for fun anyway.

Sunshine and summer breeze

Long walks and fall leaves

No matter the season

You are the reason

I’m smiling

His fingers danced over the keys as he continued on.

Fireworks and ice cream

Road trips and ... wineries

He smirked at the horrible attempt at a rhyme and got a few laughs.

Wherever we go

Together, I know

I'll be laughing

He kept going, coming up with a chorus and another verse, trying not to slaughter the rhymes and keep the music flowing along. It wasn't half bad.

When he reached the chorus for the final time, he glanced out into the audience and locked eyes with Skylar as he sang.

All I have to do

Is look at you

And life is better

Life is brighter

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All I have to do

Is look at you

He changed the last two lines of the chorus at the last second.

This song's for you, Skylar

You make my life brighter

He played a final chord on the last word, ending his impromptu songwriting attempt.

The spotlight from the stage illuminated the tears streaming down Skylar's smiling face, and he was pleased that he had given her a little bit of happiness in the form of a song.

The room filled with applause, and he stood and took a bow before taking the stairs down and returning to Skylar.

She stood and opened her arms to him, still crying, and buried her face in his neck as he wrapped her up in his arms.

"Franky." Her voice was muffled against his shirt. "That was ..."

"Did you like it?"

"Thank you," she said as she lifted her head and looked into his eyes. "Did you really



not write that ahead of time?”

“Couldn’t you tell how I stumbled on so many of the notes? And some of the lyrics didn’t rhyme at all.” He cracked up laughing.

“I don’t care. It was beautiful. I can’t believe you wrote me a song.”

“I meant every word. You’re all that is good and beautiful in my life right now, and I would be miserable without you.”

“Stop it.” She took a seat at their table again and grabbed a napkin to wipe her cheeks and blot her eyes. “You’re making me look a mess.”

“You’re always gorgeous.” Maybe he shouldn’t have said that, because her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink again.

She waved off his flattery. “Did you mean what you said up there about me being your best friend?”

“Of course.”

A smile spread across her face. “You’re my best friend too.”

## TWELVE

Northern Michigan was past its peak for fall colors, but there were still areas of pretty leaves clinging to the trees when the Schultz family traveled north in early November. Skylar gazed out the window of the Escalade as they zoomed by the remaining reds, oranges, and yellows. She was delighted to be celebrating her thirtieth birthday at the winery with her family, but her excitement over Franky arriving later that night eclipsed everything and everyone.

She knew it probably wasn't wise to hold onto these feelings she had for him, but calling her his best friend and writing her such a beautiful, spontaneous song at Carmichael's had only made her fall deeper.

There were moments when Skylar could've sworn he felt the attraction too. A look, a touch. But it never went further. And she was afraid it was all in her head, like their almost kiss all those years ago.

"Have you heard from your brother?" Mom interrupted her thoughts. "I left him a message, but he didn't reply."

"I haven't heard from Gus since the day he left your house." She noticed Mom's head tilt down sadly. "Maybe he'll surprise us all and show up this weekend."

"Maybe."

The party wouldn't be the same if Gus didn't show, and Skylar was disappointed she hadn't heard from him. He had left Michigan the week after the settlement with Milton was finalized and headed back to California to stay with Adelia. She only knew that because Adelia had told her. He hadn't even bothered to inform the family where he was.

What a relief that Milton had settled. He was still a jerk for putting Gus and their family through all of that, but at least it was over. She wondered if standing up to him at Captain Sundae that night had done anything to help the settlement along because it wouldn't have surprised her if Milton had dragged Gus into an actual trial just because he could. Thankfully, it hadn't come to that. Maybe now he would leave them all alone.

"Isn't that a lovely sight?" Mom said as Dad turned into the drive.

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Skylar leaned over to look out the windshield and was filled with indescribable happiness as she took in the view of the winery surrounded by what remained of the fall colors.

They pulled up to the entrance and headed inside, where they were warmly greeted by a friendly face.

“Happy birthday, Sky!” Izzy exclaimed as she came around the desk and gave her a hug.

“Izzy! It’s so good to see you again.”

“You too. I’m sorry I missed you last time you were here.” She let go and turned to the others. “Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Schultz.”

“Hello, Isabella,” Dad said.

“Hello, dear.” Mom greeted her with a hug.

They small talked while Izzy checked them in then headed upstairs.

In her room, Skylar found a lovely bouquet of pink roses, and her heart skipped a beat, hoping they were from Franky. She snatched the card from the arrangement.

Happy 30th, Sky.

Sorry I couldn’t be there to celebrate with you.

Love, your favorite brother,

Gus

Well, that answered that.

She dropped the card onto the table and admired the flowers. They were beautiful, and she wanted to love them, but they were a poor substitute for her brother being there for her.

As she unpacked her things and settled into the room, she continuously checked the clock. It would be hours before Franky arrived since he was leaving after work, and she tried to rein in her emotions, but she was far too excited to see what the weekend held.

Raindrops pelted the windows of the restaurant as Skylar and her parents ate dinner. The sun had set an hour before, and every time vehicle headlights flashed by outside, her heart skipped a beat, wondering if it was Franky.

The restaurant was fairly busy, despite being past the tourist season. Fall was their busiest time because of the leaf lookers, but since the tree branches were mostly bare now, their guests would soon thin out as well.

Skylar watched as the Zanettis did their thing. Izzy was greeting guests and showing them to their seats. Luca was helping his mom, Rose, serve the guests. Roberto mingled, talking about the wines that best complimented their meals. And she'd seen Ari at the reception desk earlier. She loved that running the winery had become a family thing for them.

Rose stopped by the table, carrying a tray of various scrumptious-looking pastries. She was short and stout with dark blonde hair twisted in a neat bun at the nape of her

neck, and she had the most beautiful blue eyes and the kind of smile that lit up the room. Skylar had always thought Luca and Izzy bore the strongest resemblance to their mom, especially the square shape of their faces and their blond hair.

“Who’s in the mood for dessert?” Rose looked in Skylar’s direction. “The birthday girl?”

Skylar smiled and was about to reach for a cream puff when Dad snatched it and popped it into his mouth. “Hey! I think, as the birthday girl, I should’ve chosen first.”

Dad chuckled as he chewed. “Sorry, sweetie.”

She chose a cherry turnover instead and savored the Michigan cherries in every bite.

Rose stayed and talked to her parents for a while, and Roberto joined soon after. They talked about the old days, how much the place had changed, and Roberto’s plans for the future of the winery, but Skylar was only half listening. She was too distracted by Franky’s imminent arrival.

She leaned over to her mom and spoke quietly. “Is it rude if I leave early? Dad might talk for hours.”

Mom chuckled softly. “It’s fine, sweetie.” She leaned in and gave Skylar a hug.

Skylar laid her napkin beside her plate and stood, making her way around the table to hug her father. “Goodnight, Dad.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart.”

She said goodbye to the Zanettis and headed out, but on the way to her room, she spotted Franky across the lobby, standing by the reception desk. Butterflies bolted to

and fro in her stomach, and she moved stealthily up behind him, covering his eyes with her hands.

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He chuckled. "Hello, Skylar."

She let go immediately. "How'd you know it was me?"

He looked over his shoulder at her. "You always smell like vanilla."

Her cheeks warmed as he turned back to Ari at the counter and took his room key.

"I thought you'd never get here," Skylar said.

"Friday rush hour traffic took forever to get through." He faced her and grabbed his bag.

Skylar wrinkled up her nose. "That's the worst."

He yawned. "Man, that's such a long drive. I am beat."

"I was just heading up to my room. I'll walk with you. What floor are you on?"

"Third."

"Me too."

He motioned toward the staircase. "Lead the way."

The two of them climbed the steps to the third floor and turned down the hallway. Franky stopped at the door across from hers. "This is me."

She laughed and pointed over her shoulder at the door behind her. “That’s me.”

“Well, hello there, neighbor,” he said with a grin.

Skylar chuckled as he swiped the key card and opened his door, and she followed him inside.

“Nice place,” he observed as he wheeled his suitcase in behind him. He walked over and looked out the window at the dark parking area illuminated by a few streetlights. “Could be a better view.”

“I’ve got the best view. If it wasn’t dark, I’d show you and brag.”

“Well, aren’t you special?”

She laughed.

“Show me your room,” he said.

Her stomach flipped. “Okay. Yeah. Come on.” She rolled her eyes at herself as she pulled his door open and headed into the hallway. Could she sound more eager?

Franky followed, stopping directly behind her while she got out her room key. He was standing so close, she was overcome by the masculine scent of his cologne and the warmth of his body at her back, and her hands began to tremble a little.

Slow, calming breaths.

Somehow, she managed to unlock the door and keep herself from leaning back against his body and resting her head on his chest. Another minute and she would’ve been tempted to bury her fingers in his hair and pull his head down until their lips



met.

She wondered how he would've reacted if she'd done that.

Once inside, she walked over to the window. "This is it."

He moved to stand beside her, his arm pressed against hers. "Wow! You do have the better view. Vineyard in the dark."

"Don't forget the bay in the dark."

"I'm totally missing out on these dark views. Those parking lot lights ruin it all for me. I might have to complain."

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Skylar chuckled. “Right? But it is my birthday, so I guess I deserve the best view.”

Franky suddenly turned and drew her into a hug. “You do deserve it.” He pulled back and leaned down enough to plant a soft kiss on her cheek before pulling her close again. “Happy birthday.”

The butterflies in her stomach went crazy. “Thank you.” Her reply was muffled by his shoulder, which she had buried her face in. If only she could stay there all night, breathing him in, enjoying the feeling of his strong arms around her.

“So, what’s on the agenda for tonight?” he asked as he abruptly let go and headed back across the hall to his room.

Skylar followed after him, thrown by his sudden exit. “Just hanging out. My parents are downstairs reminiscing with Roberto and Rose. They could be there all night.” Skylar flopped down on his bed and watched him open his suitcase.

“If you’re tired, I can go,” she said.

He shrugged as he dumped his suitcase on the bed behind her. “I suddenly feel a second wind coming on.”

She smiled to herself. “If it weren’t for the rain, we could’ve started a fire outside on the patio.”

“That’s a bummer.”

“We could go try out wine in the tasting room,” she suggested.

“We could. If you want.” He went about stuffing his clothing in the dresser drawers.

“Is all of your family here already?”

She shook her head. “Only my parents. Bash and Gen get here tomorrow.”

“What about Gus?”

She shook her head. “Not coming. Didn’t you see the giant guilt bouquet in my room?”

His head tilted sympathetically. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” She stuck out her bottom lip. “I’m sad.”

“Let’s go taste some wine. That’ll cheer you up.”

She laughed. “Okay.”

In the tasting room downstairs, they found Luca behind the counter.

“You’re just working everywhere tonight,” Skylar said.

“I go where I’m needed,” he replied.

“You remember my friend, Franky.”

“Yes. Nice to see you again.”

“You too.” Franky’s reply sounded clipped.

Luca turned back to Skylar. “So, it’s your birthday party this weekend, huh?”

“It is.”

He smiled sweetly. “Happy birthday.”

“Thank you.”

“I remember when you were here for your sixteenth birthday.” Their eyes met for a few brief moments. She and Luca had shared a kiss that night after weeks of flirting during the summer.

Her cheeks warmed. “I remember that too.”

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He gave her a smile. “Want me to tell you about the wines?”

“Sure.”

Luca thoroughly educated them, and they tasted their way through a flight.

Franky’s entire demeanor had changed. He barely spoke the entire time, and they didn’t linger long after they finished.

“What’s up?” Skylar asked when they were headed back to their rooms.

“What do you mean?” His brow furrowed at her question.

“You’re not normally this quiet.”

“I guess I was more tired than I thought, and the wine has me all relaxed.”

She knew him well enough to know that was an excuse, but she didn’t press.

Outside their rooms, she paused in the hallway. “Want to watch a movie or something?”

He looked deep in thought for several seconds before he answered, “Sure.”

“My room or yours?”

His eyes met hers, and his eyebrow lifted.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean for that to sound so suggestive.” She looked away nervously.

He chuckled. “I know what you meant. Yours is good. You have the better view, after all.”

She giggled as she opened the door, and he followed her inside.

“What should we watch?” She grabbed the remote and turned on the television, flipping through the channels to find the guide. Her face screwed up as she scrolled. “Not much of a selection tonight.”

“Are you kidding?” Franky snatched the remote from her hand and clicked down a few channels. “Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves. It’s classic Costner.”

“I haven’t seen this in forever.” She climbed onto the bed and scooted back to lean against the headboard. “I wish we had popcorn.”

“Want me to run down to the front desk and ask if they have any?”

“You don’t have to. Besides ...” She reached over to the nightstand and grabbed the basket of treats she’d discovered upon arrival. “The Zanettis left me this for my birthday.”

Franky snatched the basket out of her hands.

“You sure are grabby tonight.”

He pulled almonds, crackers, and Schultz Chocolate truffles from the basket. “These will do.” The first thing he opened was a truffle. “Open up.”

She laughed nervously as he held it an inch from her mouth and leaned forward to

take a bite. The way his eyes were fixed on her lips made her stomach somersault, and she took the remainder of the truffle from his hand.

His gaze remained on her lips for several beats before he turned away to open a pouch of honey roasted almonds and scooted back to sit beside her.

Skylar couldn't have paid attention to the movie if she wanted to. Franky's arm was firmly pressed against hers, and she could feel his body lift each time he took a breath.

She tried to follow the story and cracked up whenever Franky quoted lines from the movie. And when they reached Robin and Marian's kiss by the water, she glanced hesitantly at him and found him looking at her.

“What?”

He twisted his lips to the side. “What was that moment between you and Luca earlier?”

“What moment?”

He gave her a look. “The mention of your sixteenth birthday.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that.”

“Nothing.”

An expression of disbelief crossed his face.

“Okay, fine. We kissed. It was only the one time, and he only kissed me because I told him that old saying was true about me.”

“What old saying?”

“Sweet sixteen and never been kissed,” she replied sheepishly.

“So he did something about it.”

“Yeah.”

“Because he liked you.”

Skylar shrugged. “I don’t know if he ever really liked me.”



“He did.” Franky smirked. “He does. I can tell.”

“We don’t even know each other anymore.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s not into you.”

“I think you’re wrong.”

He shook his head. “I’m not.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m a guy. I just know.”

They were quiet for a few minutes as they watched the movie.

“Are you interested in him?” Franky suddenly asked.

Skylar was confused. “Why all the questions about Luca?”

He shrugged.

“Why, Franky? Why do you care if Luca and I are interested in each other?”

“Because at least one of us should be getting lucky this weekend.” He chuckled.

She stared at him with a straight face until he looked at her. “Don’t do that. Don’t make jokes. Be serious for once.”

“I just feel ... protective of you, I guess.”

“And that’s the only reason?”

He glanced down. “Yeah, what else would it be?”

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“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

“That’s the reason.”

“Well, thank you for your concern, but I’m not interested in a long-distance relationship with Luca.”

“Good.” Franky looked satisfied with that answer and went back to the movie.

But Skylar was more confused than ever, and she couldn’t stop wondering if Franky was being honest with her or if there was more to it than he was letting on.

### THIRTEEN

Thirty minutes before Skylar’s party was to begin, she stepped out of her room in an elegant red evening gown, prepared to celebrate her thirties in style. The dress was form-fitting, flowing to the floor, with a low neckline, open back, and a long slit up one side that stopped mid-thigh. She felt beautiful and sexy, and she might have chosen this dress to get a reaction out of Franky too.

As she came down the stairs, her family came into sight. Franky was there with them, and the enraptured look on his face made all the time she’d spent getting ready totally worth it.

Dad held a handkerchief out to Franky.

“What’s this for?” he asked with a look of confusion.

“Close your mouth, son. It’s not polite to drool.”

“Dad!” Skylar couldn’t believe he had said that or that Franky actually seemed to be blushing.

Her father chuckled as he opened his arms to her. “Happy birthday, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she replied as she hugged him.

Mom, Sebastian, and Genevieve all took turns showering her with hugs and birthday wishes before they headed into the banquet room.

And then it was just her and Franky.

“Sky ...” He shook his head as his eyes traveled down the length of her dress and back. “You are a knockout.”

She was sure her cheeks were the shade of her dress.

“I’m not just saying that. You are drop-dead gorgeous in that dress.”

“You’ve seen me in a dress before.”

“Not this one.” His gaze held a newfound intensity, one which Skylar liked. Very much. He was looking at her the way she had always wanted him to. But she wasn’t sure what it meant, if anything, and she was afraid to hope.

“Are you ready to go in?”

“I am.” She slid her hand through the crook of the arm he offered her, and they headed into the banquet room.

The rustic aesthetic fit seamlessly with the rest of the building's decor—thick wood posts and ceiling beams, exposed brick on a couple of the walls, and pipes running along the ceiling. Antique lantern chandeliers hung from the beams, and candles lined the tables, giving the space a warm glow. Off to one side was a small round table with a slab of wood in the center, holding a two-tier birthday cake. A few fall leaves and twigs were decorative additions to the cake with its thin layer of icing, which allowed some of the cake to show through. And on the top was a dark metal letter S in a swirly script and a cluster of Michigan cherries.

Skylar glanced over at Franky and almost laughed out loud at his goofy grin. “Why are you smiling so big?”

“I was just thinking, ‘Eat your heart out, paparazzi.’ If only they could see us now.”

She chuckled.

“Seriously though, you’re the most beautiful girl in the place, and I’m the lucky son of a gun who gets to be by your side.”

She had a feeling this wasn’t the last time she was going to blush tonight.

He led her to her family’s table and pulled out the empty chair next to her Grandma Mabel. Skylar sat down beside her maternal grandmother, her only living grandparent.

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“Hi, Grandma,” she said. “I’m so happy you made it.”

“Happy birthday, Skylar. How are you, my dear?”

Skylar felt Franky sit down at her other side and rest his arm along the back of her chair.

“I’m doing well. How about you?”

“Life is good. I just got back from a trip to Vermont with my girlfriends.”

Skylar smiled. “You’re my hero, Grandma. You really are.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because when I’m your age, I hope I’ll still be going on adventures, just like you.”

“There are so many things in this world to see, and I want to see as many of them as I can while I’m still around.” Grandma winked at her.

“Grandma, do you remember Franky?” She motioned toward him.

“Of course, I do.”

Franky leaned closer as he turned to face Grandma and rested his palm against Skylar’s bare back, sending waves of warmth flowing outward from the point of contact. She silently applauded herself for choosing the open back dress.

“Hello, Mrs. Fraser,” Franky said. “How are you?”

“I’d be better if you called me Mabel and took me for a spin around the dance floor after dinner.”

Franky laughed. “I look forward to it.”

Skylar smiled over at him, and his eyes held hers for a long moment before he lowered his arm and turned straight in his chair.

“How are the wedding plans coming along?” Grandma asked Sebastian and Genevieve. “Are you getting married in Grand Rapids?”

Sebastian smiled over at his fiancée then looked back at Grandma. “Actually, we’ve decided to get married in Montana, where we’re living now.”

“Summer in Montana would be lovely for a wedding,” Grandma replied.

“I’m sure it would be, but we’re getting married in February.”

Grandma’s eyes widened. “Oh my, whatever for?”

“We don’t want to wait,” Genevieve answered for him. “We know it might be tricky if the weather doesn’t cooperate, but we’re ready to be married. And you’re all invited to come early for the wedding.” She looked around the table at the others as she spoke. “We’d like all the family to come and spend the week together before the big day.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Skylar responded.

“You’re welcome to come too, Franky.” Genevieve smiled then gave Skylar a

knowing look.

“I’m there,” he replied.

Skylar was elated to hear him say that. A week together in Montana. This was going to be a very good year. She could feel it.

“How’s everything at the office, Sky?” Sebastian asked as he lay his fork and knife on his empty dinner plate.

“It’s going great. Thank you for all your help in the transition.”

“You know I’m always just a phone call or text away. And I can fly in whenever you need me to if you’re feeling overwhelmed.”

“I admit, it was an adjustment taking on added responsibilities, but I think I’ve found my groove.”



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“That’s great, Sky.”

“I’ve had some meetings lately that have me really excited for the new year. One with the ad agency that’s going to put together our Super Bowl commercial this year.”

“Did you go with the same company as last year, like I suggested?”

“Actually, the marketing team and I decided on another company. Their pitch was better, and they were much more organized when it came to budget and production timeline.”

Sebastian nodded his approval. “Sounds like you’ve got it under control.”

Skylar caught Dad’s eye, and he winked at her. She could see he was happy with how she’d stepped into her role, and that’s all she wanted, for her father to be pleased with the way she was running things.

The instrumental music which had been playing during dinner ended then, and a band took to the stage and started playing popular songs from the 80s and 90s.

“Are you ready to hit the dance floor, Mabel?” Franky asked Grandma.

Her face lit up. “I certainly am.”

Franky stood and held his hand out to her. “May I have this dance?”

“Yes, you may.”

He helped her up, and the two of them headed across the room. Franky looked back over his shoulder at Skylar and smiled.

Seeing him dance with her grandmother was heartwarming. They talked and laughed as they swayed. He spun her out like he had Skylar at the regatta gala, only not in quite as lively a manner as those dances from the 1920s. When the song ended, they kept dancing for another and continued their conversation. Skylar was dying to know what they were talking about so seriously.

The music picked up after that, and Skylar made her way to the dance floor, where Franky was dancing like a wild man with some of her younger cousins. She joined in for a while, but couldn't possibly keep up with them, so she returned to her seat for a break.

Skylar's clutch suddenly began ringing, and she opened it to check her phone. Adelia. Just who she needed to talk to.

"Hello!"

"Happy birthday to you," Adelia singsonged.

"Thank you. I wish you were here. I need your sage advice."

"If I could've taken a break from filming, you know I would've been there in a heartbeat."

"I know."

"Why? What am I missing?"

Skylar glanced across the room to make sure Franky wasn't within earshot. "Franky's

being all sweet and attentive tonight. He keeps watching me and giving me these adorable smiles that make me melt. I wish I knew what it all meant. I can't read him."

"Are you wearing the red dress like I told you to?" Adelia asked.

"Yes."

"Ha! It totally worked then. He's finally seeing you for the gorgeous, sexy woman you are."

"Or it means nothing and he's just being extra nice because it's my birthday."

"Nah. He's falling in love."

"One can only hope."

"I wish I was there to see it with my own eyes. Your relationship is like a movie script I'd totally act in sometime."

"You'd play the role of the mom, right?"

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“Take that back! I might be thirty, but I still look young enough to play a twenty-year-old.”

Skylar laughed. “I take it back. You could play a teenager.”

Adelia snorted. “I don’t know about that.” Someone in the background called Adelia’s name. “I’m sorry, Sky. I’ve got to get back to work. I’m sorry again for missing your party.”

“It’s okay. At least you have a reason for not coming, which is more than I can say for Gus.”

“Oh, Sky. Please cut him a little slack right now. He’s hurting.”

“I know he is, but we’re his family.”

“And he’ll come home when he’s ready.” Skylar could tell Adelia was walking now as her breathing increased. “I really have to get back to set.”

“Go act your heart out.”

“I love you, Sky. Happy birthday.”

“Love you too.”

Skylar let out a sigh as she put away her phone.

“Hi.”

Skylar looked over to see Luca take a seat in Franky’s empty chair. “Hi.”

“Having a good party?” he asked.

“I am.”

“I’m glad.”

Skylar eyed his work attire. “Your parents and sisters are here. Why are you working tonight?”

“We had an employee call in sick, so someone had to fill in.”

“You seem to work a lot around here. Don’t you ever take a break?”

“I’m taking one right now, aren’t I?”

Skylar hadn’t properly admired him last time she was there, because she had been with Franky, but Luca was ruggedly handsome with strong arms and rough hands, no doubt from many hours of working around the winery. He still had the nicest hair—dark blond waves that curled over his ears and flipped just so at his neck. The kind of hair that begged for fingers to run through it. He’d aged a little, but like a fine wine, the years had only improved him.

The music slowed then, and Luca stood and held out his hand. “Would you like to dance?”

“Sure.” She smiled up at him as she took his hand and followed him onto the dance floor.

He drew her close, swaying gently to the music. “I never forgot about that kiss, by the way.”

She looked at him in surprise.

“I thought about you sometimes over the years, wondered how you were, what you were doing.”

“You did?”

“You didn’t think about me?” he asked.

“Maybe.”

“I wondered if I had stayed in touch with you, if anything would’ve happened between us.”

She was taken aback.

“Obviously, you didn’t feel the same.”

“I guess I didn’t think I was anything special to you.”

“Did I give you that impression?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t leave that weekend thinking you liked me. I thought you kissed me to help me get it over with, so I could say I’d finally been kissed.”

“I did. But I liked you, Sky. I always have.”

She smiled up at him but didn’t feel anywhere near as many butterflies as she had when Franky had looked at her earlier. “I liked you too.”

“Good to know.” He gave her a sweet grin. “Are you dating anyone?”

“I’m not.” She looked across the room at Franky, who was dancing with his mom.

“But I like someone.”

“Should’ve made my move years ago, I guess.”

She let out a little laugh. “I guess.”

The song came to an end, and he let go of her and lifted her hand to his lips, kissing the back. “Maybe someday.”

She gave him a smile just as Franky gripped her arm, ripping her hand from Luca's grasp. "Franky!" She called back over her shoulder as Franky led her across the room. "Thanks for the dance, Luca."

He gave her a little wave and a crooked smile.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I need to talk to you." Franky led her out of the room.

Skylar shook her arm from his grip and stopped walking. "What's come over you?"

"Where can we go that's private?"

Something about the edge in his tone made her wonder if he was jealous because she'd been dancing with Luca. She had to know, so she started walking. "Come with me."

It had been a long time since Skylar had been to the wine cellar, where the barrels of wine were stored to age. She led Franky through a door, down some stairs, and opened another door, flipping on a set of overhead lights as they entered the cool, dark room. She thought he might be interested in seeing the place and curious about the process, but he was only looking at her.

"What's this all about?" she asked.

"You want to date him, don't you?"

"Who? Luca?"

"Yes, of course, Luca."



“Hey, don’t get so snippy.”

“Do you? Want him?”

She rolled her eyes. “I told you before, I don’t.”

Franky began to pace. “I saw you up there, dancing and flirting with him.”

“What are you talking about? I danced one dance with him, and we weren’t flirting, we were talking.”

“That’s not what it looked like from where I stood.” He wouldn’t stop moving and his hands kept opening and closing into fists as he walked.

“Why is this bothering you so much?”

“It’s not.”

“Franky, stop pacing and look at me.”

He stopped in his tracks, a foot away from her, and stared into her eyes.

Her stomach fluttered at the intense expression she saw there. “Would it make you feel better if I told you I won’t go out with him?”

“I knew it, you like him.”

“Of course, I like him. He’s a nice person.”

“Pfft!”

“What is wrong with you? Why are you acting this way?”

“Because that guy wants to get in your pants. That’s all he wants.”

Her eyes widened. “Franky Middlebury! Be careful what you say next!”

“It’s true.”

Skylar couldn’t believe what he was saying, and then it struck her. All of his questions and comments last night. His overreaction after seeing the two of them

dancing. Was she right? Was he jealous? She wasn't sure she could trust herself after misreading him for so many years. She needed to be sure.

"You know what," she said, "as my best friend, you deserve complete honesty, so I'm going to tell you the truth."

Franky's eyes were fixed on hers as if he was hanging on her every word.

"I do like Luca. He's sweet and easy to talk to, and I'm not going to lie and say I don't find him attractive. I always have. In fact, while we were dancing, he told me that he's thought of me over the years and wondered if we should've stayed in touch. He wondered if something would've happened between us if—"

She didn't get the rest of her sentence out before Franky's hands were cupping her cheeks, and his lips were suddenly on hers. She couldn't believe this was happening. She could barely breathe as he kissed her, firm and deep, not soft and passionate like she'd always imagined it would be.

This was not how she expected their first kiss to happen, sparked by a jealous argument. But still, Franky was kissing her. And no matter what she had imagined, this was what she had always wanted. Wasn't it?

## FOURTEEN

Warm, pillowy soft lips pressed against Franky's in the damp wine cellar. His mind was whirling. This hadn't exactly been his plan when he'd pulled Skylar away from the party, but he couldn't stand there, watching her pressed up against Luca for another dance. A possessive urge had taken hold of him and would not let go. And Grandma Mabel's inquisition about his love life and obvious comments about how wonderful Skylar was hadn't helped.

And now, here they were, kissing in the wine cellar.

Skylar's hands slid around his waist as if she was trying to get as close to him as possible, and that was all he wanted. To be close to her. He stepped forward, moving her back against the nearest barrel.

This wasn't like him, to be spurred on by jealousy, but finding out they'd kissed once then seeing them dancing had caused his chest to tighten and his heart to race. And before he knew it, he was dragging her out of her own birthday party.

Franky deepened the kiss as he held Skylar's body against his. The way she kissed him back was better than anything he'd imagined. They had a perfect give and take going, and he never wanted it to end. One of his hands traveled down her side and came to rest on her perfectly curved hip, while the other skimmed across the silky skin of her back.

She let out a soft sigh, and fear suddenly jolted through him.

What am I doing?

He pulled his lips away, and she rested her head on his shoulder and pressed a soft kiss to his neck. The sensations her mouth caused made him dizzy. The intelligent half of his brain told him to stop this immediately, but the idiot half made him hesitate and bask in the feelings washing over him.

"Franky," Skylar whispered.

Something about hearing her voice in that intimate tone snapped him back to reality, and he went still as she continued pressing those warm lips just below his ear.

He swallowed hard as he shifted, grabbing hold of her arms so he could put some

distance between them.

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Eyes filled with uncertainty and confusion met his.

He glanced down at the floor then back at her. His pulse still raced, his breaths were coming hard, but feelings of guilt and dread came over him as he realized what a huge mistake he'd just made.

"I'm so sorry, Sky. I never should've done that."

"Oh." She stared down at her feet, her lips swollen from their kisses, her breath still as ragged as his.

What was going through her mind? Was she disappointed? Because he hadn't been alone in this. She'd been right there with him, not pushing him away, kissing him as feverishly as he'd kissed her.

"Why did you do it then?" Skylar broke the heavy silence.

"Can we blame it on the wine?" he replied nervously.

She shook her head sadly.

"Look, I realize what a gigantic error in judgment I just made. I was getting tired of Luca's paws all over you and that stupid flirty grin when he talks to you."

The corner of Skylar's mouth turned up. "You were jealous."

He paused. "Yes." He was. There was no use in denying it. But he needed to explain.

“Only because I felt like I was your date for the weekend, and he kept showing up everywhere.”

“He works here. Of course, he was going to be around. And you never said you wanted to be my date.”

“Well, isn’t it sort of understood that the best friend is your date when you don’t have one?”

Her face screwed up in confusion. “What exactly are you trying to say, Franky?”

He let go of her arms and ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know, really.” He was confused too and didn’t understand why he had kissed her the way he had. It wasn’t the way he wished he’d kissed her, the way he’d often thought about kissing her.

They stood in awkward silence, and he hated that he’d caused it. Things had never been anything but comfortable between them before. And this was one of the reasons he never should’ve gone there.

He took hold of her upper arms and looked her in the eye. “Please tell me I haven’t messed up our friendship, because you are the most important person in my life, and I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t lose me,” she said quietly.

He let go of her and shook his head, disappointed in himself. “Honestly, I had too much to drink tonight, and I’m so sorry for crossing the line with you.” He hadn’t had that much to drink, really. Not enough to alter his decision-making. But it felt like a safe excuse to explain away what had no clear explanation.

“I had too much to drink too,” Skylar mumbled.

He was disappointed to hear her say that. He’d wondered if maybe she felt something more for him based on the way she kissed him back, but obviously, he’d been wrong.

“I promise I won’t let it happen again.”

Skylar was quiet, and he watched her as he awaited a reply. Her eyes traveled around the room, avoiding his, and he wished she’d say something.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“It just took me by surprise.”

“I know this came out of nowhere. I think I was being territorial.”

She gave him another bewildered look.

“I love our friendship, Skylar.”

“So do I.”

“I guess I don’t like the idea that you dating someone might change it.”



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“I’m not going to date Luca.”

“Maybe not, but you’ll find someone someday, and he’ll be the one you spend all your time with. You won’t even think about little old me anymore.”

“What if I don’t want to spend my time with anyone but you?”

His heart skipped a beat at her words, and he swayed. Maybe he did have a little too much to drink.

“Are you okay?” Skylar asked.

“My head’s spinning a little. Probably from that kiss.” He winked, trying to make light of the whole thing, but she wasn’t having it.

“You need some water and a place to sit down.” She took hold of his arm and led him toward the steps. “Sit here for a minute.”

He started up the stairs. “I’m fine.”

“Franky.” She tugged gently on his arm.

“Really, Sky. I’m okay.”

She didn’t look so sure, but she followed him. When they reached the main floor, she straightened her dress and took a deep breath in and out before walking across the lobby.

Franky took hold of her wrist to stop her from returning to the party. “Are we okay?”

“Of course.” She gave him a smile. It was weak, but it was a smile nonetheless. And it filled him with hope that maybe things wouldn’t be horribly awkward between them after this.

Skylar walked with confidence, but he could tell she wasn’t over what had happened. And honestly, neither was he.

“I have to say ...” He glanced over at her. “You are a really good kisser.”

She smacked his arm.

“Too soon?”

The old reliable mask of humor was back. It felt easier to divert than to deal with what he’d done. He hadn’t been joking about the kiss, though. It was going to take him a long time to erase the memory of kissing Skylar Schultz.

## FIFTEEN

Skylar’s body was still tingling from the kiss while her heart was simultaneously crumbling in her chest. Knowing the kiss had been fueled by all the wine Franky had consumed sent her previously blissful mood spiraling downward into despair.

She had lied when she told him she’d had too much to drink too. She hadn’t. She’d barely had a glass. But what was she supposed to say? He obviously didn’t feel the same way she did.

Maybe she should’ve just been honest. Maybe he would’ve seen her differently if she had. Or maybe it would’ve ruined their friendship forever. That was the last thing she

wanted. She needed him in her life.

“Where did you two run off to?” Sebastian asked as they walked across the foyer toward the banquet room.

Skylar’s cheeks warmed. “I showed him the wine cellar.”

“In the middle of your party?”

“Yep,” Franky said. “I had to see those barrels.”

Sebastian eyed them before turning his attention to Skylar. “Mom was looking for you. It’s time for the cake.”

Skylar started toward the door, but Franky gently took her wrist. She looked over her shoulder at him.

“Are you sure we’re okay?” He asked quietly so that only she could hear. He looked nervous, as if he was truly afraid he’d ruined everything.

She turned, summoned up all the courage she could, and hugged him, even though she was dying inside. “We’re okay.”

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When she let go, she noticed the worry had left his expression and was replaced with a smile.

She faked her best sweet smile in return. "Drink some water."

He chuckled.

Sebastian was watching them with an expression of concern.

"What?" she asked as she passed him on her way to the banquet room.

"Are you okay?" He fell into step beside her.

Skylar fought off the tears that were burning behind her eyes and forced a reply. "I'm fine."

"Did he do something?"

She looked over at him. "Please, drop it."

"There's my girl." Mom's expression was filled with concern when she caught sight of Skylar. "Is everything all right?"

Skylar glanced at Sebastian then back at their mother. "Everything's great."

Mom tilted her head like she knew Skylar wasn't telling the truth. "Shall we cut your cake? I think people are ready for dessert."

Skylar nodded and followed her mother to the cake table.

Dad took the microphone from the stage and meandered over to where they were standing, and everyone took their seats.

“Thank you all for coming to celebrate Skylar’s big three-oh with us tonight.”

The guests whooped and cheered, and Dad took hold of Skylar’s hand and brought her into his side with an arm around her. “When Harriet and I were young and dreaming of starting a family, we both hoped and prayed for a little girl. I know, most men dream of having a son to carry on the family name, but I wanted a daughter who looked just like her mama. And when that first baby was coming, we were both sure that’s what we were going to get. Instead, our son, Sebastian, was born.”

“Love you too, Dad,” Sebastian called out.

Everyone laughed, and Dad chuckled. “Then baby number two was on the way, and Harriet was so certain it was going to be a girl that we had the nursery painted pink. And our second-born, Augustus, blames those pink walls for his early interest in girls, even though the walls were only pink for a few weeks of his life.”

Laughter filled the room.

“So, when our third child was coming, we were pretty much resigned to another boy. And wouldn’t you know it, our sweet little baby girl finally arrived, with big beautiful eyes staring up at us in wonder, and our family was complete.”

Skylar smiled over at him.

“And go figure, she looks nothing like her mama and a whole lot like me.”

He got a few more laughs.

“I can still see her in pigtails, climbing trees and playing tag with her brothers, doing flips off the diving board into the pool. But then I look at her on a special night like tonight, all grown up, and I don’t know where the time has gone. Skylar, I’m so proud of the beautiful woman you’ve become. You have exceeded any expectation your mother and I have ever had for you, and you continue to show us what it means to be kind, loving, talented, and so strong.” He squeezed her tighter against him. “Happy birthday, sweetheart. We love you.”

“Thanks, Daddy.” She turned into his arms, and he placed a kiss on her cheek before hugging her tightly.

“Third time’s the charm,” he whispered.

She laughed and brushed a tear from her cheek.

Mom hugged her next. “Happy birthday. I love you.”

“Love you too,” Skylar replied.

“And if you need to talk later, you know I’m here.”

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“I know, Mom.”

Mom kissed her cheek, then Skylar moved to stand beside her cake and put on her best smile as the guests sang “Happy Birthday.” She didn’t look at Franky, though. If she did, she feared she would break down crying, so she stared at the S on her cake instead.

Why did he have to kiss her like that if he didn’t mean it? Why was it a mistake? She thought things were changing between them. They’d grown so close lately. Why didn’t anything turn out how she wished it would?

“Make a wish!” It felt like Mom had been in her thoughts.

A wish. Her one big thirtieth birthday wish, and she needed to make it count.

She closed her eyes and thought for a moment. Franky. He was what she had always wished for.

Make it count.

With that thought, she made her wish and blew out all of her candles at once.

SIXTEEN

Franky remained on the sidelines for the remainder of the party. His mind was a jumble of thoughts, all centering on Skylar. He was torn between his attraction to her and the friendship he was terrified of losing. But it was more than just physical, there

were feelings involved. Feelings he'd shoved aside all those years ago. Feelings he hadn't realized were so strong until he saw her with another guy.

He watched her, standing across the room with a group of guests, talking animatedly about something, smiling brightly. Man, he loved her smile. It was the best thing he'd ever seen. It could turn his day around in a moment and had on many occasions.

Her eyes turned and met his, and he swore his heart stopped for a few beats. Maybe things could be different. Maybe he wouldn't fail at a relationship with her like he'd failed at all the others. Or maybe he would and the whole thing would go down in flames. His heart clenched at the thought.

He was so tired of thinking, questioning every decision in his life, regretting the path he'd taken. It was exhausting. Just once, he wanted to do something that would make him happy without second-guessing whether it was the right choice. And at the moment, that something was to steal Skylar away and lose himself in her kisses.

But before he could put that plan into motion, Sebastian was suddenly at his side.

"What happened earlier tonight between you and Skylar?" he asked.

Franky glanced over at Sebastian. "Nothing."

Sebastian's brow furrowed. "I know my sister. She looked on the verge of tears."

"She did?" The thought that he'd upset her saddened him. She'd said they were okay, and now he wondered how much damage his actions had actually caused.

"You would tell me if something was going on between you, right?"

Franky was quiet.



“Right?” Sebastian eyed him.

“What if something was? Would that be so bad?”

Sebastian pressed his lips together in a thin line, and Franky wouldn't have been surprised if steam came out of his ears at any moment.

“I know you two weren't off touring the wine cellar. And she was clearly upset. What happened?”

“Fine. I kissed her.”

Sebastian's silence filled the space between them.

“Are you mad?” Franky asked.

“Not mad ... concerned. Why was she so upset?”

“I don't know.”

“Did you say something?”

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Franky thought back to the minutes after the kiss. “I apologized for crossing the line. I told her I’d had too much to drink, that it was a mistake.”

“I see. And was it?”

Franky shrugged his shoulders. His desire not to upset Sebastian warred against his need to fess up about his feelings for Skylar. The promise he’d made not to date her was over a decade ago. Did it even still apply?

But before he had a chance to ask, Sebastian shook his head disappointedly. “Get it together, man. Seriously. Please don’t drag Sky into your long line of failed relationships.”

Franky’s stomach dropped at his friend’s harshness, but Sebastian wasn’t wrong. What if they got together and he followed his usual pattern of being unable to fully commit? What if she left him like all the others? His heart squeezed painfully in his chest, imagining his life without her in it.

“It’s clear you have no idea what you’re doing with my sister,” Sebastian broke through his thoughts.

“Skylar is the most important person in my life. And I do feel something more for her, Bash, but I don’t want to risk what we have. I don’t want to hurt her.”

“It seems like you already have.”

Franky felt tied up in knots.

“Skylar isn’t looking for a good time, she’s looking for forever.” Sebastian patted him hard on the shoulder. “Remember that.”

## SEVENTEEN

The fallen leaves crunched underfoot as Skylar strolled around the vineyard with her camera in hand. It was brisk this early in the morning, but she didn’t mind as she inhaled the fresh air, breathing deeply in hopes of a little clarity.

As she walked, she sent up a prayer that God would heal her heart and help her to get past her feelings so she and Franky could remain friends. She wanted him in her life, but she wasn’t sure their friendship could go back to normal now. Not until the memory of their kiss faded. Everything felt different, and she wasn’t sure she could go back to pretending she wasn’t in love with him.

She snapped a few photographs of the grapevines with the sunrise glowing behind them. Her camera had been collecting too much dust lately. She had forgotten how amazing it felt to capture the perfect shot.

Skylar rounded the corner of the trail and was startled by the sight of Luca walking her way.

“Morning,” he said when he spotted her.

“Good morning.”

He rotated and fell into step beside her. “Mind if I join you?”

She shook her head and gave him a polite smile, even though she’d been enjoying the solitude.

“You’re up early,” he said.

“I thought I’d start my thirties with a clear head, and walking out here makes me feel at peace.”

“Me too. I’ve lived other places, but there’s no place like it.”

“I know what you mean. There’s something about it. It feels like home.”

He nodded. “You’re not the first person who’s said that very thing. It’s special.”

They walked on for several minutes in silence.

“You seemed upset about something last night,” he said.

She looked over at him. “What do you mean?”

“Toward the end of your party.”

“Oh. Yeah. Personal stuff,” she replied.

“Do you want to talk about it? I’m a pretty good listener.”

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“I wouldn’t want to bother you with my relationship drama.”

“You aren’t a bother, Sky. I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t willing to listen.”

Skylar sighed. She needed to tell someone, and Luca was a neutral party. Why not?

Luca listened intently as she shared about her feelings for Franky, their friendship, and the kiss last night.

“It’s silly, right? We’re friends. That’s all we’ve ever been. I just need to get over it.”

“Your feelings aren’t silly, Skylar. You’re allowed to feel the way you do. But he took advantage of you, kissing you like that. That’s not okay.”

“It’s not like I didn’t want him to kiss me.”

“Even if he’d had too much to drink and wasn’t thinking clearly, he shouldn’t have done it.”

“He was jealous that I danced with you.”

“If I was out with my best platonic girl friend, I wouldn’t kiss her if I got drunk. Unless I had some kind of deeper feelings and my lowered inhibitions caused me to act on them.”

Skylar raised an eyebrow at him.

“All I’m saying is he was sending you some seriously mixed signals. He said it was a drunken mistake, but there might be something there he doesn’t realize he feels that led him to kiss you. He did admit he was jealous.”

“Yeah, but he said it was because he felt our friendship was threatened.”

“Maybe, but I saw the look in his eye when he pulled you out of that room, and I don’t think it had anything to do with friendship.”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to get my hopes up again.” But as she said those words, she knew it was too late to stop the desire for Luca’s theory to be true.

Luca put his arm around her. “I’m sorry. I was giving my opinion from an unbiased outside perspective.”

“I appreciate that. I really do.” Skylar leaned into his side as they came up the hill to the winery. She was no less confused, but her mood had definitely lifted during their talk.

“It was my pleasure.” Luca stopped and gave her a hug.

She squeezed him tightly, and over his shoulder, she spotted Franky standing with Sebastian and Genevieve near the entrance. His eyes were locked on her and Luca, and she knew she shouldn’t, but she felt guilty.

“Morning,” Sebastian said as they approached.

“Good morning.” Skylar tried to sound chipper.

“Morning, all,” Luca replied. His gaze turned on Franky, and the muscle in his jaw twitched.

Franky simply stared at him.

Nervous butterflies flitted around in Skylar's stomach at the silent exchange.

"Are you heading out?" Luca asked.

"We are," Sebastian replied, even though Luca was addressing Franky.

Luca turned his attention to the others. "Well, it was good to see you again, Sebastian."

"You too, Luca." Sebastian held a hand out, and Luca shook it.

Skylar watched Franky during Luca's farewell exchange with her brother and Genevieve, but he didn't look her way once.

Luca nodded toward the inn. "I better get to work. I'm glad we got to talk, Sky." He gave her a smile and a wave as he departed.

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“See you later.” Skylar waved goodbye and noticed the suitcases on the sidewalk. “I wish we could stay longer and spend more time together. I miss you guys.”

Genevieve hugged her. “We’ll be together for the holidays, and then for the wedding.”

Skylar smiled at that. “I can’t wait.”

“We’re moving into the new house this week,” Sebastian told her, “and we have a lot of work to do to make it ready for our guests.”

“Oh, you guys, that’s so exciting. I’m happy for you.”

“But if you need me for anything, you know you can call. I want to keep supporting you until you are fully transitioned into the new job.”

“Thanks, Bash. It’s nice to know I’ve got your help if I need it, especially with Gus being gone and everything.”

He stepped forward and gave her a hug.

“I really thought he’d come this weekend,” she said sadly.

Sebastian hugged her tighter. “I know.”

Skylar let go and gave Genevieve another hug. “Thanks for coming.”



“We wouldn’t have missed it,” Genevieve replied.

They grabbed their suitcases and walked over to load them into their car, leaving her and Franky alone.

“Are you leaving too?” She noticed his suitcase.

“Yeah.” He glanced toward the winery and back at her. “Meeting up with Luca this morning, I see.”

“Not meeting up. I was out for a walk, and we ran into each other.”

“Convenient.”

“The party’s over. I’m not your date anymore, so why does it matter?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t.”

Her eyes narrowed. “We talked about this last night, Franky. You apologized for acting jealous and territorial. But I take one walk with another guy, and I feel like I’m doing something wrong where you’re concerned.”

Franky held his hands up in defense. “Okay, I get it.”

“It can’t be this way every time I meet someone. Our friendship won’t survive.”

He looked away, and Skylar grew quiet as she composed her thoughts.

“I’m thirty years old, Franky. I want to fall in love and get married and start a family of my own. I want that more than anything. And ... as my best friend, you should want that for me too. You should be supportive of me wanting to find someone nice,

like Luca, to spend my life with. You can't have me all to yourself."

Franky's brow furrowed, and the corners of his mouth turned down. "I know that."

She wanted to bring up their kiss again and press him further to see if there was any truth to Luca's theory. Oh, how she wanted it to be true. She wanted him to tell her to look no further, that he was the one she should be with.

Franky came closer and took hold of her hands, and her heart picked up pace.

She squeezed his hands, hoping he was about to tell her what she longed to hear.

"I'm sorry for acting so weird this weekend. I'll try to be more supportive and less overprotective from now on. And I'm so sorry again for last night. You deserved better from me, and I promise to be on my best behavior from now on." One side of his mouth curved up as he gave her those puppy dog eyes that were always her weakness.

Skylar forced a smile to hide her disappointment. It was clear Franky harbored no deeper feelings for her. Luca's words had taken her hope to an all-time high, and Franky had just knocked it back down again.

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Franky frowned at her. “Give me a real one.”

Skylar scrunched her eyebrows together in confusion. “What?”

“I know your smiles, Sky. And that one was faker than fake.”

### EIGHTEEN

It wasn't like Franky to drown his sorrows at the local bar after work, but after the day he'd had—make that month—that's exactly what he was doing.

The Walters case had been a gigantic defeat. The client had been found guilty and ended up with jail time at the sentencing that morning, and his father had reamed him out after the disappointing ruling. Franky had never felt like such a failure in his father's eyes than in that moment. He'd also never wanted to quit more than he had today.

On top of that, he didn't like the way things had been going since Skylar's birthday. She had been the one good thing he had to look forward to every day, but she'd been busy this month in her new role as president of Schultz Chocolate and hadn't been able to spend time with him. Earlier that night, he'd sent her a text, asking her to meet him, but it had gone unanswered. After his horrible day, all he wanted was to see her smile and hear her laughter, but considering what he'd done at her party, a little space was probably for the best. Sebastian had been right. Franky had no idea what he was doing, and he couldn't drag her into a relationship that was doomed to fail. He needed to set clear boundaries for himself when it came to Skylar or risk losing her. Her friendship was more important than anything.

But today, he was missing his best friend, and he felt more alone than ever. So he'd driven to the closest restaurant with a bar, where he had been seated for the past hour, wallowing in self-pity.

"Hey, Franky. How's it going, bud?" Lionel Howell, one of the corporate attorneys from the firm, approached with a friendly wave.

"Hey, Lionel," he mumbled.

"Bad day?"

"You didn't hear about the Walters case?"

"Oh, I heard. I didn't want to rub it in."

Franky smirked. "Thanks, I guess."

Lionel patted him on the back. "Would you like to join us?" He nodded toward a table across the room.

Franky looked at the table of familiar faces and shrugged. "Why not?"

"Great."

He followed Lionel to the table and greeted everyone with handshakes or fist bumps.

"Sorry about the Walters case," one said.

"Man, it happens," another said.

"Yeah, thanks," Franky replied. "Maybe let's not talk about it."

“Great idea,” Lionel said as the waitress arrived to take their orders.

Franky glanced around the restaurant. A few groups were seated at tables, and a handful of couples were tucked away in small booths. A hockey game played on the television above the bar, and the majority of the bar stools were filled, except the one he’d been seated in.

He looked toward the front door as a woman entered. Her light blonde hair immediately caught his eye, and he watched as she scanned the room, her eyes lighting up with recognition at their table. His interest increased as she approached.

“Sorry I’m late.” She removed her grey wool peacoat and hung it on the hook by their table.

“No worries,” Lionel said. “Glad you could make it.”

The woman took the empty seat across from Franky.

“Hello,” she said when her eyes met his.

“Hello,” he replied.

“Have you two met?” Lionel asked.

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“We haven’t had the pleasure,” Franky replied, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Francis Middlebury, this is Ivy Prescott. Ivy’s a recent addition to the team.”

Franky liked the way her lips parted when Lionel introduced them.

“So, you’re Francis.” She held out her hand, and he shook it. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“You too, Ivy.” He glanced at Lionel then back. “So, you’re in corporate law then?”

“I am.”

“I haven’t seen you around the office.”

“I only started two weeks ago, and I’ve been settling in. This is the first chance I’ve had to get out with anyone from the office.”

Franky had been buried in the Walters case with little time out of his office, so it made sense that he hadn’t met her until now.

“Where did you work before?” he asked.

“San Bernardino.”

“California? What brings you to Michigan? Because I’m sure it’s not the weather.”

The sound of Ivy's laughter made him smile.

"Maybe I wanted to experience the seasons." She gave him a coy smile.

"I got her the job," Martha, another colleague, piped in. "We went to law school together, and when I heard we were looking to fill another position, I immediately thought of Ivy. She is brilliant, top of our class. I knew she'd be perfect."

"I was in need of a change," Ivy added, "but my former employer wasn't happy to see me go."

"Their loss is our gain," Franky said, earning him another smile.

The conversation at the table was lively, and Franky was glad he had joined them. He was curious about this beautiful woman, who seemed to love everything there was about law. Not only corporate law, but all aspects. Their conversation continued long after the others had dispersed. Ivy was fascinated by the Walters case and what he felt had gone wrong. He'd come there to escape all of that, but for some reason, talking to her made him feel better.

"I really thought the jury would side with Walters. We presented enough doubt that it should've turned them, but it didn't."

"Don't feel bad. It happens to the best. Sometimes you can do all the right things and still not get the results you're hoping for."

"Exactly. I did everything I could to defend him."

She lay her hand on his, which sent tingles up his arm. "Don't beat yourself up over it. I know I haven't seen you in action, but from what I've heard, you are incredible in the courtroom."

Franky sat up a little straighter. “Is that so?”

She nodded. “I’ve been wanting to meet you since the day I started.”

He was instantly intrigued. “How did you know who I was?”

“You’re Sebastian Schultz’s best friend. Doesn’t everyone know who you are?”

“I guess I don’t think much about that since we’ve been friends forever. But yeah, people often know my name because of him.”

“What’s it like having a famous best friend?”

“We’ve known each other since we were young. Our families are old friends. So, to me, he’s just Bash.”

“The Schultzes seem like a nice family from all I’ve seen of them in the media.”



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“They really are.” He took a swig of his drink. “What about you, Ivy Prescott?”

“What about me?” She sipped water through her straw, and his eyes fixated on her lips.

“What about your family? Are you originally from California?”

“I’m actually from Connecticut.”

“And you and Martha went to law school together?”

“Harvard,” she replied.

His eyes widened. “Wow! Impressive.”

She shrugged. “I did okay.”

“So, how did you end up in California?”

She glanced away for a moment. “My boyfriend and I moved there together.”

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “I see. And did he move to Michigan with you?”

She paused for a few beats, not making eye contact. “It didn’t last between us. That’s one of the reasons I took the job here. Moving there with him was a serious lapse in judgment. It derailed my original life plan. But I’ve put that behind me and am back on track and in control of my life.”

That seemed more in line with the confident air this woman projected.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

She nodded resolutely.

“What’s this life plan you mentioned?”

“When I was in law school, I knew exactly how I wanted my life to turn out. Graduate, pass the bar, get a great job, move up to partner.”

“That’s all career stuff. Don’t you have any aspirations where your personal life is concerned?”

She pursed her lips. “I’d like to meet someone and marry and have two kids—a boy and a girl, of course—before I’m forty. But after my disaster of a relationship, career comes first from now on.”

Franky rested his elbows on the table and leaned closer. “But what if you meet someone before you see all your career goals come to fruition? What if someone comes into your life who understands your dreams and supports you in them? What if that person is who you’re meant to be with? Will you push him away?”

“I guess I would have to take that under advisement,” she said with a smile.

Franky chuckled. “Good answer. I like that you’re focused on what you want. I wish I knew what I wanted.”

“Don’t you?”

He laughed. “Not at all.”

“But you made partner. That doesn’t make you happy?”

He leaned across the table and whispered, “Can you keep a secret?”

She leaned closer, and Franky caught a whiff of a very pleasant floral perfume.

“Of course,” she replied.

“I don’t like being a lawyer.”

Her eyes widened and lips parted. “Are you serious?”

“As death.”

She looked taken aback. “I’m sorry, I’m just ... I’m in shock. You’re so good at what you do.”

“I believe in doing the best I can at whatever I do, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t rather be doing something else.”

“What would you rather be doing?”

“Like I said, I wish I knew.”

Ivy had a confused expression on her face. “Forgive me. I’m trying to wrap my head around this right now.”

“Why is it so hard to believe?” he asked.

“Because you’re where I want to be and yet you’re not content in it. I hope I don’t feel that way when I get there.”

“That won’t happen.”

“How do you know?”

He reached across the table and laid his hand on hers. “Because I can tell that law is your passion, Ivy. It’s clear as day. To hear you talk about it, it’s the best thing you’ve ever experienced. So when you reach your goals, which I know you will do,

your feelings are going to be the exact opposite of mine.”

She smiled shyly, and he took back his hand.

“Why did you become a lawyer if it wasn’t what you felt called to do? Your father?”

“Pretty much. I wanted him to be proud of me. I wanted to carry on the family business, I guess. And also, I didn’t have a lot of direction or purpose in my twenties. I did what I thought I was supposed to do, not what I wanted for my life. And I didn’t spend much time figuring out what it was I was meant to do either. Not until recently.”

“What happened recently?” she asked.

“I reconnected with an old friend, and she has really opened my eyes to the idea of doing something else with my life.”

“Is she your girlfriend?” Ivy asked.

He quickly shook his head. “Just friends.” He liked this woman and didn’t want to give her the wrong impression about him and Skylar.

“She sounds like a very good friend.”

He nodded and smiled. “She’s the best. Because of her, I’ve been more introspective over the past six months than I have in my entire life.”

“I’ve always been introspective,” she told him. “Except for the five years after law school that I like to pretend didn’t happen, I think I know myself and what I want pretty well.”

“Sorry you went through a hard time,” he said, “but it seems like you came out of it well.”

“It helped make me who I am today, which is a good thing.” She took another drink of water. “Deep down, I knew it was the wrong choice. He was jealous of my successes rather than celebrating them. But love made me blind, and I hate that. I feel like such a cliché when I think back on that time in my life.”

“Hey, we all make mistakes.” Some more than others.

Their conversation continued for hours, covering all things from childhood to siblings to friends before touching on favorite television shows, movies, and foods. This girl seemed too good to be true. She was funny and intelligent and supermodel beautiful. And he liked her. A lot.

When the bartender told them it was closing time, Franky stood and took her coat from the hook and helped her into it. “I had a great time talking with you.”

She turned to face him. “So did I.”

“So have you taken it under advisement yet?” Franky asked.

“What’s that?”

“Me asking you out.”

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“I thought you were talking in hypotheticals.”

“Not so much.”

She laughed.

“I know you said you’re focused on your career right now, and I do respect that, but I’d really like to get to know you better.”

Ivy stepped closer and leaned in to leave a soft kiss on his cheek. “I’d like to get to know you better too.”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a little smile. “How about Saturday night?” he asked.

Ivy smiled. “Saturday’s perfect.”

Once they’d said their goodnights and parted ways, his mind turned to Skylar as it so often did. His feelings for her weren’t going away, but she didn’t feel the same, and he knew it was better for everyone if he kept the lines of friendship firmly in place and tried to move on. And perhaps Ivy would be the one he moved on with.

## NINETEEN

Though festive songs filled the banquet room of Schultz Chocolate for the annual Christmas party, Skylar was in no mood to celebrate. An hour had passed since the party began. An hour she’d spent waiting for Franky to show up like he said he

would. The excitement she'd had when she walked through the door had dissipated a little more with each minute that ticked by.

He'd been texting her often since they returned from Traverse City, and she knew it was because he was afraid he'd damaged their friendship irreparably. Honestly, she hadn't been responding to his messages because the rejection still stung. He'd texted her earlier in the week, asking her to meet him for a drink after a really bad day in court, and she should've responded, at least to tell him she couldn't make it, but she hadn't. Then the past few days, his messages had stopped.

Was him not showing up tonight because he was upset she hadn't replied? Maybe he'd forgotten. He'd agreed to come with her to this party before all that happened at her birthday. But they'd had enough conversations about it that she didn't think he needed a reminder, and he wasn't one to skip out on obligations, which was why she was pretty sure she'd been stood up.

She went back and forth over whether to text him or not, and just as she was about to compose a message, her phone rang.

"Gus!" Skylar was ecstatic to hear from her brother, who had been mostly silent since he left for California in October. "I'm so glad you called. How are you?"

"I'm okay," he replied.

"Are you still at Adelia's?"

"Yeah." He paused. "Where are you?"

She hesitated. "Schultz Chocolate Christmas party."

"Oh." His simple reply spoke volumes.



She felt bad that he wasn't there. "I'm sorry, Gus. Should I not have mentioned it?"

"It's fine."

"When are you getting in?" She was excited to finally see him again and have the whole family together for the holidays.

"I'm ... not coming home for Christmas."

Her mood fell even further. "What? Why?"

"You know why."

"Gus, this is ridiculous. You missed Thanksgiving. You missed my thirtieth birthday party."

"I know. I'm sorry. Did you get my flowers?"

"Yes, but it wasn't the same as having you here."

He was silent.

"Did you tell Bash you aren't coming?"

“No.”

“It’s Christmas, Gus. We’re your family. We should be together.”

“I can’t right now.”

She was at a loss for words, searching for something to say to convince him to come home. Things couldn’t go on like this. He needed to return to Michigan and make things right. She missed him and needed him back at Schultz, and she hated that he was staying away and missing important family moments. The impending tears stung her eyes, and she walked down the hallway into a nearby room.

“Are you still there?” he asked.

She sniffled, trying to hold back the tears. “Yeah, I shut myself in a conference room so I could hear you better.” Another sniffle.

“Sky, please don’t cry.”

“I hate that this is happening. I hate that you’re so far away. I hate that I got the job you wanted.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Okay, maybe I don’t hate the job.”

“Listen, I don’t begrudge you the position. You’re great at what you do, and you

deserve it.”

“But—”

“Dad wants me to prove that I’ve changed, but he won’t give me a chance. I know I slipped up last summer and brought a lot of negative press to the company and the family, but I thought after four months, he might actually give me a shot. Being passed over again was a slap in the face.”

“I really believe Dad wants you home and in this company again. The more time that passes after that whole debacle with Milton, and the more he sees you’ve changed, the better things will get. You’ll see.”

“I wish I had your confidence in this situation.”

“Coming home for Christmas would be a great first step.” And she needed him there. She needed to be surrounded by her family right now when she was feeling so low.

“Sorry, Sky. Not going to happen.”

“Please, Gus. It won’t feel like Christmas without all of us here.”

“I don’t like disappointing you—”

“Then don’t.”

“But I have to do what I think is right for me. And right now, this is it.”

“Well, at least tell me you’ll be with Adelia for Christmas. I don’t want you to be alone.”

“I won’t be alone.”

She let out a resigned sigh and opened the door, no longer feeling like talking. “I better get back to the party.”

“Yeah, you should.”

“Merry Christmas, Gus.”

“Merry Christmas, Sky.”

Her tears were still close to the surface as she joined the party again. Her brother wasn’t coming home, and Franky had stood her up. Some Christmas this was turning out to be.

She typed out a message to Franky but hesitated to send it. Maybe he had arrived while she was off talking to Gus.

With a deep breath and head held high, she closed her phone and wandered through the crowd of partygoers, searching for Franky. He’d been known to arrive late for events in the past. The Roaring 20s gala came to mind, and she smiled as she remembered his getup and their dances. That seemed so long ago, and so much had changed since that night.

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After circling the room several times with no sign of Franky, her sadness turned to annoyance. She checked her phone again, hoping for a missed message, only to notice the text she'd drafted earlier, asking where he was. Her thumb hovered over the send button as sadness enveloped her. Franky from last summer never would've left her hanging like this. He'd always been excited to spend time with her and never would've stood her up. She abruptly closed her phone with the message left unsent. She wanted the old Franky back.

### TWENTY

Franky couldn't recall any of his first dates ever going as well as this one was. Ivy was beautiful and brilliant, and while her intelligence intimidated him a little, it was nice to have a conversation with someone who understood the inner workings of his job. But getting to know more about who she was outside of work was what he really hoped for.

They had just ordered their meals when Franky's phone chimed.

"Sorry. Thought I turned that off."

"Don't worry about it," Ivy replied. "Mine's always on."

Franky pulled out his phone and glanced at the screen, and his shoulders sank at the reminder message.

7:00 p.m. Schultz Christmas Party.

“Oh no.” He groaned.

“What is it?”

“I forgot about something, but I can take care of it later.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded.

Ivy remarked on the holiday decorations in the restaurant and talked about her family’s plans for Christmas in Connecticut, but Franky was barely paying attention. When their food arrived, he took a few small bites, but mostly pushed it around his plate. He kept picturing Skylar at the party, waiting for him to show. He could clearly envision her look of disappointment and the tears slipping down her cheeks because of him, and he felt like the lowest of the low.

“Francis?”

He looked over at Ivy as he came back to reality. “I’m sorry, what?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t mean to be distracted. That reminder on my phone earlier was for the Schultz Christmas Party tonight. I told my friend, Skylar, I’d go with her, and I completely forgot.”

Ivy raised her hand in the air to get the attention of their waiter.

“No, Ivy, it’s fine.”

“It’s okay. You should go make things right with your friend.”

“Really?”

“Of course. We can do this again another time.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” she said.

“I feel awful.”

“I’m not hurt or insulted, Francis. If I was, I would tell you. I’m not the kind of girl to hide how I feel.”

Franky liked that she was so forthright. It was a refreshing change from the type of girls he’d dated in the past, who never said what they were really thinking.

The waiter arrived, Franky handled the bill, and they headed out to his car.

Ivy pulled out her phone. “You go on ahead. I’ll call an Uber.”

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“What? No way. I’m driving you home first.”

“I insist. There’s no time to waste.” She gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“We’ll see each other around the office.”

He shook his head in wonder. “You are something else, you know that?”

“I know.” She grinned then motioned toward his car. “Now, go!”

He climbed into the car and started up the engine, and she waved as he took off. He watched her in the rearview mirror with a smile on his face.

As soon as she was out of sight, he called Skylar. No answer. He hung up and tried again with the same result, this time letting it go to voicemail.

“Sky, I am so sorry about the party. I’m on my way there right now.”

He raced through the streets, exceeding the speed limit more than once to get downtown, praying he wouldn’t get pulled over. When he arrived, he parked his car as quickly as he could and ran for the building. The elevator ride to the floor where the party was being held seemed to take a lifetime. He only hoped he wasn’t too late to make amends.

The doors to the elevator slid open, and he followed the Christmas tunes down the hallway to the party. He scanned the room, spotting Ephraim and Harriet Schultz, but he didn’t see Skylar. He walked the perimeter, his gaze darting from group to group, but she was nowhere in sight.



He pulled his phone out again and texted.

I'm here.

There was no reply.

"Are you looking for Skylar?" a woman behind him asked.

He spun around to see Skylar's assistant, Joy, who wore a perpetual smile on her face. Her red hair stood out against her green Christmas sweater with the reindeer on the front, and her full cheeks looked rosier than usual.

"Yeah, I am," he answered. "Is she here?"

"She left early."

Franky's chin fell to his chest.

Joy raised an eyebrow at him. "You better get her something real nice for Christmas this year."

Franky's eyes met hers, and she gave him a knowing look.

He laughed and nodded. "Do you think Tiffany's can get something here by Christmas?"

"Of course. The more karats the better." She winked as she turned to go. "Merry Christmas."

"You too."

Franky left the building with his head hung low. Even Skylar's assistant knew he'd stood her up, which made him feel like a loser.

Back in his car, he tried calling her again. Another unanswered call, one more apologetic voicemail, and an equally remorseful text message later, he started up his car and drove to her place. He rang the doorbell and knocked, even though all the lights were off inside. After several tries, he returned to his car and slammed his palm against the steering wheel in frustration. The last thing he wanted was to cause more of a rift between them, but he feared that's exactly what he'd done.

In the days that followed, Franky continued to send messages, but all went unanswered. He tried her house a couple of times too. Still not home. Getting the cold shoulder from Skylar felt like the worst thing in the world, and he needed to make things right, which was why he was currently approaching her place again on Christmas Eve. There were lights on this time, which felt promising.

He raised his hand to knock, but the door opened before he had a chance.

Skylar's eyes widened in surprise. "Franky? Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Merry Christmas Eve." He held out a bouquet of red and white roses, noticing she was dressed for the winter weather and carrying her purse. "Where are you off to?"

"Dinner with my family. Bash and Gen flew in last night." She reached out and took the flowers he offered.

"I'll have to give him a call. Maybe he can squeeze in a drink with me."

Skylar admired the roses. “These are lovely, Franky.”

He took hold of her arms, and she looked up at him. “I’m so sorry about the Christmas party. I completely blanked and went out with a colleague from work.” He wasn’t sure why he didn’t tell her it was a date.

She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s fine.” Her words said one thing, but her sad eyes and slightly downturned mouth told another story.

“I was going to make it up to you by taking you out tonight to see Christmas lights, but you clearly have plans.”

“Yes, I do.” Her tone held a hint of bitterness.

“Please don’t be mad at me. I can’t stand this.”

Skylar sighed. “It was humiliating being stood up like that.”

“I’m so sorry.”

She bit down on her lower lip, which gave him a sudden flash of kissing her in the wine cellar, and he immediately shoved the memory deep down inside.

“Why don’t you come to dinner,” Skylar said. “We could go out after.”

His brow furrowed. “Are you sure? It’s a family dinner.”

“And you’re like family. Plus, Sebastian would be happy to see you.”

He only cared about being with Skylar right now. But spending time with the Schultzes was much more appealing than staying home alone or sitting through dinner with his parents, being grilled by Dad about work. “I’d love to. But only if you’re sure it’s not an imposition.”

She shook her head. “It’s not.”

“Okay then.”

The genuine smile she gave him made him feel like, even after such a gigantic friendship fail, everything was going to be all right.

After she’d put the flowers in water, they departed together for Granny’s Place, another restaurant owned by the Schultz family, lovingly named after Granny Schultz, whose truffles were what started Schultz Chocolate in the first place.

“Did you get the invitation to Sebastian’s wedding?” Skylar asked as Franky drove.

“I did. They sure put this all together really quickly.”

“I know. I’m excited. Genevieve is the perfect addition to our family.”

“You didn’t mention Gus. Will he be there tonight?” Franky glanced over at her and noticed a sad expression crossed her face. “What’s that look?”

“He’s not coming home for Christmas.”

“Oh, no. That sucks. Are you okay?”

“Not really. I get that he was disappointed and needed space, but the lawsuit is over now. Milton settled. I don’t understand why he can’t come home and get back to work and prove to Dad that he’s made positive changes in his life. And missing Christmas ...”

When she paused, he could see how hurt she was by this. “I’m really sorry. I think everyone deals with their issues in very different ways, and Gus obviously needs more time to figure himself out.”

“You’re probably right. But it won’t feel like Christmas without my brother here.”

Franky reached over and squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry.”

She smiled at him. “Thanks.”

When they arrived at the restaurant, the waitress escorted them to the reserved seating area on the all-season porch, where the family was already waiting. Granny’s Place was located in an old historic mansion, which had been converted into a restaurant and event space. Franky had been there many times with the Schultzes, and he was continually impressed by how the place had been kept up over the years—the original heavy wood trim and wood flooring, paneled ceilings and walls, and the old fireplace. And that was only the first floor. The rest of the three-story mansion was used for wedding and event rooms, as was the outdoor patio space. But Franky liked the wraparound porch the best with its tall windows, looking out over the expansive lawn, and the original brick tile flooring.

“Franky.” Sebastian stood and greeted him with a handshake and hug. “I think I’ve seen you more in the past few months than I have in the past few years.”

“Are you complaining?”

“I guess I can tolerate your ugly mug.”

They laughed, and Franky shook hands with Ephraim and gave Harriet and Genevieve each a kiss on the cheek and wished them a Merry Christmas.

The meal was delicious, and the company splendid. Being without Skylar the past month had been miserable, and it felt really good to be in her presence tonight. Their conversation was easy and light, almost as if nothing had happened, but it felt too good to be true. And the scowl Sebastian was throwing his way was enough to remind him why he needed to be very careful how he proceeded.

"This was a great idea!" Skylar beamed, staring out the car window as Franky drove through the Christmas light display at Fifth Third Ballpark. The twinkly, colorful bulbs reflected in her eyes, and all felt right in Franky's world.

She glanced over at him. “Hey, are you going to Bash and Gen's the week of the wedding?”

Franky nodded. “I'm planning on it.”

“Maybe we could fly out together. I'd much rather travel with a friend than by myself.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he replied.

A smile spread across her face. “Good.”

They rounded the back side of the drive through the ballpark and came to a giant tunnel of lights that served as the exit. Franky watched Skylar more than the display. Her expression of wonder was better than any light display could ever be.

When they returned to Skylar’s place, Franky walked her to the door. He hated that there was still a hint of awkwardness, making him second-guess himself. He could tell she was trying hard to keep things normal, but it was still there, hovering between them.

“It’s all right to be mad at me, Sky. I deserve it.”

Her lips twisted to the side, and she avoided eye contact.

“I’ve made some stupid mistakes with you lately, and I’m sorry. Failing at relationships seems to be my specialty.”

She glanced at him then looked away again. “You wouldn’t fail if you knew what you really wanted in the relationship.”

He nodded. She wasn’t wrong. He’d kept each of his girlfriends at arm’s length, never sure if she was the right girl for him. And he’d been giving Skylar all kinds of mixed signals, which wasn’t fair.

“What I know for sure is I don’t want to lose you,” he told her.

Their eyes met, and he stepped forward and wrapped her up in a hug, which she returned. There was nothing he loved more than her hugs. She squeezed with just the right amount of pressure, and he could feel her fingertips pressing into his back, like she was holding him to her. He couldn’t help but hold her tightly to himself in

response.

“Please forgive me,” he whispered into her ear and placed a soft kiss on her cheek. He tried to ignore the way she shuddered when his lips touched her skin, but it affected him.

She leaned back and looked up at him with a breathtaking smile. “I forgive you.”

His eyes traveled over her face, taking in the beauty in his arms, and landed on her lips, so smooth and soft and inviting.

Her smile fell, and she stared at his mouth, sending his heart racing.

Sebastian’s words echoed in his mind. She’s looking for forever.

He groaned inwardly and loosened his hold on her.

She gave him a sad smile as she let go and opened the door. “Merry Christmas, Franky.”

“Merry Christmas, Sky,” he replied.

Once the door clicked shut behind her, Franky let out a breath. That was close. He knew what it felt like to kiss her, and he’d almost given in again. But Skylar couldn’t be the girl for him, no matter how much he loved her. The fear of her walking away from him if it didn’t work out was terrifying enough to keep him from going there. He and Skylar could never happen.

## TWENTY-ONE

Skylar could hardly believe her eyes. She blinked and brought her phone closer as she



zoomed in on the photograph of Gus and a petite brunette, standing on the steps of the Los Angeles courthouse, him in a suit and her in a short lacy dress. The headline above the photo read “Schultz Playboy Weds in Secret Ceremony.”

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“Not so secret anymore,” Skylar mumbled as she opened her phone and dialed her brother. The new year was starting off on a strange note, that was for sure.

“Hey, Sky,” Gus answered after several rings.

“You’re married?” She couldn’t help the loud, high-pitched tone of her voice.

“Paps didn’t waste any time, did they?”

If it weren’t for the paparazzi, would he have even informed the family that he was married? Skylar wasn’t so sure.

“How did this happen? I mean, when did you ... who is this girl you married? How did you meet? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“That’s too many questions all at once.” He laughed.

She didn’t feel much like laughing. “Okay, start at the beginning.”

“Her name is Merritt. Adelia introduced us, and it was love at first sight.”

Skylar’s laugh was close to a cackle. Gus had never been one to fall in love. He hadn’t really dated in the past. Never long term anyway. And now suddenly he was in love and ... married? She could barely wrap her head around this.

“When did you meet?” she asked.

“When I came back here in October.”

She was annoyed by his answer. “Why is this the first I’m hearing about her?”

“I wasn’t sure how serious she was about me, and I didn’t want to jinx it.”

Hearing about it after the fact added another wound to the ones Gus had given her recently. And it hurt that her brother had excluded the family from this important moment in his life.

“Sky? Say something.”

“I’m just in shock, I guess. I never thought you’d be the first one of us to get married.”

“Neither did I, but when you know, you know. That’s what people say, right?”

“People do say that.”

There was more silence on Skylar’s part because she honestly didn’t know what to say, and Gus didn’t speak either.

“Does she make you happy?” Skylar asked.

There was a pause before he finally answered. “Yeah, she does. She’s smart and beautiful, and for some reason, she loves me.”

It was not the answer she expected. “So, what will you do now? Will you stay there in California?”

“Yeah, we’ll stay at the house in Malibu for now. She runs her own business here in

LA.”

“Really? What kind of business?”

“A cosmetics company.”

“Wait, Merritt? You don’t mean Merritt Cosmetics, do you?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. You’ve heard of it?”

“Oh my gosh!” Skylar was more than a little starstruck. “Adelia sent me some of her products, and they are amazing. She is going to be huge.”

“We hope so.” She couldn’t help but notice how sincere he sounded.

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“I’m happy for you, Gus. I really am.”

“Thank you.”

She let out a sigh. “I can’t say I’m not disappointed that you didn’t let us be there for your wedding, though.”

“We wanted quick and simple. Neither of us wanted a big wedding. We just couldn’t wait to make it official.”

“I can’t wait to meet her at Bash’s wedding.”

“We’ll be coming to Michigan before that so I can introduce her to Mom and Dad.”

This filled Skylar with excitement at welcoming his new wife to the family. “Let me know when. I want to be there to meet my new sister-in-law.” The thought of having a sister thrilled her.

“I will. Thanks, Sky.”

“See you soon.”

After they hung up, Skylar stared at the phone, still in shock. Gus was married. A year ago, he was off wining and dining every woman in town, it seemed. And now, he was a husband. She wondered if Sebastian had heard the news yet. What about Mom and Dad? Gus should really be the one to tell them.

She pulled out her phone to call Franky but paused. A few months ago, she wouldn't have hesitated to tell him this crazy news, but everything felt different now. Nevertheless, she needed to tell someone. Now. So she went with a text instead.

Skylar: I have news!

Franky: Oh? Do tell.

Skylar: My brother is married!

Franky: Wait, I thought the wedding was in February.

Skylar: Not Bash ... GUS!

Franky replied with an astonished face emoji.

Skylar: He eloped with a girl he met a few months ago.

Franky: I don't even know what to say to that.

Skylar: Me neither.

Franky: Wow! Never a dull moment in the Schultz family.

Skylar: You can say that again.

Franky: Never a dull moment in the Schultz family.

Skylar: Funny.

Franky: Do you need to talk?

Skylar: Maybe later. I'm in shock.

Franky: OK. I'm here. Always.

Skylar: Thanks.

She added a heart emoji but deleted it before she hit send. She hated that she felt the need to edit herself with him now.

Her mind returned to their Christmas Eve together, and while things had felt more normal between them, something had definitely shifted. Her heart ached, knowing they could never go back to the way things used to be.

### TWENTY-TWO

In the month since Franky had met Ivy, they'd had dinner a couple of times and a few coffee dates. This snowy January morning was the first time they'd met up before work for breakfast, and he couldn't think of a better way to start his day than to stare into those beautiful blue eyes of hers.

"You said you wanted to talk to me about something." Franky took a sip of his coffee.

"I'm not one to beat around the bush, so I'll get right to it." She reached across the table and rested her hand atop his. "We've known each other for a month now. We've been out together numerous times, and I like spending time with you."

"And I like spending time with you."

"I want to date you, Francis. Officially."

He nearly spit his coffee out. He'd never had a woman initiate a relationship with him like this before.

"You do?"

"Yes. Things are different than they were with my ex. I know what I want. I know you are someone who respects a woman with a career. And I like you. Very much."

He turned his hand until they were palm to palm and looked into her eyes. "I like you



very much too.”

“So, it’s official. You’re my boyfriend.”

A chuckle escaped him. It was the most unexpected beginning of any relationship he’d had. He had always been the one to pursue, and he liked that she’d turned that on its head. Taking control of what she wanted in her life was an attractive quality, and he wasn’t at all upset that he was what she wanted.

“There’s something else.” She scooted her chair close beside his.

He reached up and tucked a hair behind her ear. “What’s that?”

Ivy abruptly leaned in and planted a kiss on his mouth.

He buried his fingers in her hair and kissed her for the first time, smiling to himself. He hadn’t expected to meet Ivy the night he walked into that bar. She’d been a necessary distraction at first, but she had quickly become more.

He wondered if Skylar would be happy for him and his new relationship. Things were still strained there, and their communication was lacking over the past few weeks.

He pulled away from their kiss and mentally smacked himself. Why was he thinking of Skylar at a time like this? Why couldn’t he get her out of his head?

A couple days later, Franky’s phone rang with a call from Skylar. His nerves kicked up a notch when he saw her name on the screen. He’d been hesitant to tell her anything about Ivy, but now that they were official, he knew it was time.

“Hi! I have news,” he announced when he answered.

“Hey, I’m the one who called you. You can’t hijack the conversation.”

He chuckled. “Sorry. What’s up?”

“Gus and his wife are in town.”

“That was the strangest sentence you’ve ever said.”

She giggled in that adorable way of hers. “I know. But Merritt is wonderful. I met her last night, and I love her. Gus found himself a good one.”

“That’s great. Still weird that he’s married, though.”

“That’s for sure. Your parents were invited over for dinner tonight, and I thought maybe you’d want to come and meet her.” She paused. “And I miss you. I haven’t seen you since Christmas Eve.”

“Of course, I’ll come. Do you want me to pick you up on the way?”

“That would be perfect.”

“All right.” He briefly considered inviting Ivy along too. He wanted them all to get to know the wonderful new woman in his life. But something told him to wait for another time.

“What news did you want to tell me?” she asked.

The words wouldn’t come. “You know what, since we’ll see each other tonight, I’ll tell you about it then.”

Skylar gasped. “What? You’re going to make me wait all afternoon?”

“Yep.”

“You’re the actual worst,” she replied.

“You love me.”

“What’s not to love.”

Their words hung in the silence between them, feeling heavy and important, and as per usual, he diverted away from the seriousness. “Now you’re just going to give me a big head.”

“I don’t think it can get any bigger than it already is.”

He laughed heartily at her quick comeback. “Touché.”

On the drive to the Schultz’s, Franky and Skylar talked and laughed as they always did, but there didn’t seem to be a right time to mention Ivy. Skylar needed to know, but after all that had happened between them lately, he wasn’t sure how she would react. And he was relieved when she talked about other things and didn’t ask what his

news was before they got to her parents’.

Just after they pulled into the driveway, another car arrived. Gus and a petite brunette, who Franky assumed was his new wife, Merritt, got out of the car and walked toward them.

“Hey, newlyweds,” Franky said as they approached.

“Franky.” Gus greeted him with a handshake and a hug. “How are you, man?” He patted Franky on the back then turned to Merritt. “Franky, this is my wife, Merritt.”

“Hello,” Franky replied.

“Franky’s an old friend of Sebastian’s and pretty much family around here.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Merritt said.

“Likewise.” He greeted her with a hug, and she let out a little surprised laugh.

“What did you two do today?” Skylar asked.

“Toured the factory with Dad and showed her the office,” Gus replied as he slid his arm around his wife’s waist.

“Dad went on the tour with you?” Skylar asked. “How long did he talk your ear off?”

Merritt laughed. “Not long. But honestly, I could’ve listened to him all day.”

“Well, God bless you. I’m sure you just made his whole year.”

They laughed as they entered the house, arriving just in time for dinner. Ephraim and

Harriet and Franky's parents were already seated and chatting, and they joined them at the table. Franky and Gus mostly listened as their fathers talked business. Skylar got into a conversation with Merritt about her cosmetics company, which Franky found much more interesting than what their fathers were saying. Then Harriet began talking about going to Montana the week of Sebastian's wedding.

Gus elbowed Franky and nodded toward his mom. "Are you going to Montana for wedding week?"

"I am. I assume you and Merritt will be there."

Gus nodded. "Yep. We'll be there."

"Oh, Sky." Franky wasn't sure what came over him in that moment or why he thought now was the right time, but he cut into her conversation with Merritt and said, "I might not be able to travel out to Montana with you after all."

She looked taken aback. "Why not?"

"I met someone."

### TWENTY-THREE

Skylar felt like she'd been sucker punched in the gut. He met someone? She thought maybe his news was that he was finally walking away from the firm or maybe that he realized he was hopelessly in love with her. Not this. Not someone new. Not again.

She knew her face probably gave away exactly how she was feeling in that instant, but she summoned all the strength within to pretend it didn't bother her. "You met someone?" Her voice caught a little.

Gus high fived Franky. "All right! Where'd you meet?"

"I went out for drinks with some work colleagues, and she was there. Turns out, she's one of the new corporate attorneys at the firm." Skylar hated the way his face lit up as he talked about this woman. "We started talking and ended up totally closing the place down."

"Sounds like you really got along," Merritt said.

"Yeah." Gus put his arm around Merritt. "Sounds a lot like us. We talked all night when we first met."

"Yeah, it was definitely one of those kinds of nights. Her name's Ivy, and she's awesome." Franky smiled over at Skylar, and she felt like throwing up. "I'm inviting her to the wedding."

Franky turned away when his father asked him a question, and Skylar was thankful

for that because there was no way she could hide her devastation.

“Will you excuse me?” Skylar said to nobody in particular as she pushed back her chair and bolted down the hallway for the bathroom, tears spilling over as she walked.

“Sky,” Merritt whispered loudly from behind her.

She wiped at her cheeks and turned to her sister-in-law. “It’s stupid. I don’t even know why I’m crying.”

“Because you like Franky. It’s obvious.”

Skylar’s eyes widened as she glanced down the hallway. “Please, don’t say anything.”

Merritt took her arm and led her into the bathroom for privacy. “Talk to me.”

Skylar blew out a breath and rested her back against the bathroom door as she proceeded to fill Merritt in on her longtime crush on Franky and the timeline of their friendship. “Since he came back to town last summer, we’ve gotten really close. He’s become my best friend, and it felt like things were changing between us.” She covered her face with her hands and groaned. She hated everything about this. He’d met someone new. What was she going to do now?

“Hey, maybe it won’t work out with this Ivy person.”

Skylar let her arms drop to her sides. “I don’t know. How am I going to get through the wedding seeing him with another girl?”

Merritt reached out and touched her arm. “I’ll be there if you need to talk or hide out,

whatever you need.”

“Thank you, Merritt. It’s nice to have someone to talk to about this. My brothers would tease me if they knew. I’m so happy to have a sister.”

Merritt smiled, and they returned to the dinner table. Skylar felt calmer, knowing her new sister had her back.

When the meal was finished, the parents retired to the family room to visit, and the four of them remained at the table to talk. Franky did most of the talking when he and Gus started sharing travel stories, of which Franky had many. But Skylar wasn’t in the mood to talk. In fact, she barely heard anything he was saying. Her mind was stuck on the fact that he was asking this Ivy woman to be his date to her brother’s wedding. And he had ditched her. She couldn’t believe he’d done that. They had made plans to go together, and he had changed things without even considering how she would feel about it. It felt like the Christmas party all over again.

After Gus and Merritt turned in for the night, she and Franky headed out.

“So ...” He broke the awkward silence that hung between them in the car.

“Is that what you wanted to tell me?” Skylar asked. “About the woman you met?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t going to tell you like that, but when your mom mentioned Sebastian’s wedding and Gus asked if I was going, it just came out.”

An awkward silence fell over them.

“She’s really great, Sky.”

“When did you meet?”



“A month ago.”

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Skylar's eyes widened. "And you're just telling me about her now?"

He shrugged, looking guilty.

A sudden realization struck her. "Is she the reason you stood me up at the Christmas party?"

He pressed his lips together in a tight line, and he looked even more guilty than before.

"I see." Now, she was fuming.

"I should've told you sooner." He glanced over at her then back at the road. "I like her, Sky, and I think you will too. Maybe we can go out to dinner soon, the three of us. I'd love to introduce you."

There was no way on earth Skylar was going to agree to be the third wheel on one of Franky's dates.

He glanced over at her again. "Are you okay?"

She stopped clenching her jaw long enough to answer. "I'm fine."

His expression said he doubted that, but he had the good sense not to reply. There was no more talk of Ivy or anything else. It was the first time they'd ever gone an entire car ride without talking, and it was pretty much the worst thing ever.

That night, Skylar lay in bed, sadness overwhelming her, pulling her down into a murky mire, dragging her under the surface. She'd never felt this low about Franky's past girlfriends, but something was different. Maybe it was because of how close they'd grown. Maybe because her hopes of them becoming more than friends had risen higher than ever before—especially after the kiss.

Her heart ached, and her chest tightened as if the tears were just under the surface, but they would not come. She stared up at the ceiling, wishing the emotions would release. She would feel a whole lot better if she would cry already.

A sad thought suddenly crossed her mind.

So much for Franky's birthday.

She'd been hoping to drag him away for a fun adventure, just the two of them. But now that he had a girlfriend, she knew she couldn't.

The longer she lay there thinking, the more her sadness turned to annoyance. He had gotten all worked up and kissed her because he didn't want Luca to come between them and change their friendship. It felt like he didn't want her, but he didn't want anyone else to have her either. Yet, he had gone out and met someone new less than a month after her birthday, and now, he had ditched their plans for her brother's wedding without talking to her first.

Inconsiderate. Selfish. Thoughtless.

Her mind returned to their Christmas Eve hug. He'd held her close and lingered there with her in his arms. His lips had touched her cheek so softly. Remembering his tenderness made her heart ache because it didn't mean what she wanted it to mean. He didn't feel the same. His heart was with someone else.

## TWENTY-FOUR

Back when they were in private school together, Franky wouldn't have imagined Sebastian settling down in Montana, but as he drove the rental car down the long driveway, through expansive pastures, winding around and over hills to the log cabin at the base of a magnificent mountain, it somehow felt right. He couldn't have been happier for his best friend. Sebastian had found the love of a lifetime, his forever, and had followed Genevieve across the country to allow her to follow her dream of taking care of rescued horses.

Franky glanced over at Ivy, who had fallen asleep on their drive, and wondered if she was his forever. He enjoyed her company, and she was definitely a woman his parents approved of—strong, capable, a brilliant attorney. Outside of work, they had little in common. They were complete opposites in many ways, but the desire to make this relationship work was strong, especially after all his past failures. Sometimes, though, it felt as if something was missing, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

As he pulled up to the house, he spotted Skylar coming out the door with some of her family, and his heart warmed. He'd missed her more than he realized, and he couldn't get out of the car fast enough.

He made introductions and greeted the family with hugs, anxious to get to Skylar. When he reached her, he lifted her off the ground in a giant bear hug. Normally, she laughed when he did that, but not today.

"Why didn't you call me back?" he asked her quietly. She hadn't returned any of his calls lately.

"Things were crazy at work," she replied.

"Since when does that keep you from calling me?" he asked as he set her down.

“Sorry.”

He held his hand out toward the woman standing behind him. “Skylar Schultz, this is Ivy Prescott. Ivy, this is Skylar.”

Ivy smiled sweetly. “It’s so nice to finally meet you. Francis has told me so much about you.”

“Nice to meet you too.” Skylar smiled, but it was her polite, fake smile.

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They gathered their things and moved toward the house. Franky looked back over his shoulder and saw Skylar in a deep conversation with Merritt. He'd never seen such a sad expression on her face, and it broke his heart that he couldn't go to her and hold her and let her cry it out on his shoulder. But it was best to leave that up to her sister-in-law this time.

Franky leaned his head back and opened his mouth, letting the snowflakes melt on his tongue as he luxuriated in the warmth of the hot tub. When he looked out toward the mountains, barely visible in the night, the snow seemed to fall halfway and disappear beyond the line of light given off from the house.

"I have to say, you've got yourself a pretty good life here, my friend," Franky told Sebastian.

"It's not where I saw myself, that's for sure." He looked across the deck toward the house. "I thought when I found someone, we'd settle down in Grand Rapids, and I'd work full time for the family business. I imagined raising my family there. But things don't always turn out how we think they will. And seeing Genevieve here, working with the horses. It's what she was meant to do."

"What about you?"

"I'm starting to settle in and find my place here, and I know it will take time, but it's a great place to live. And I'm still helping out with Schultz remotely when Skylar needs me."

"She seems to be happy about the job."

“I think she is.” Sebastian glanced over at Gus then back at Franky.

Franky had nearly forgotten Gus was there because he was sitting so quietly. He probably didn’t appreciate them talking about the job Skylar had taken from him, so he changed the subject.

“Where’s your wife?” Franky asked.

Gus shrugged his shoulders.

“Is something wrong?” Sebastian asked his brother.

But there was no time for Gus to answer that question as the door to the house opened, and the ladies emerged. Their laughter echoed around the yard as they made their way across the snow-covered deck, trying not to slip. They reached the hot tub safely, removed their robes, and climbed in.

Franky tried to keep his eyes off of Skylar. It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen her in a swimsuit before, but it had been a long time. His eyes flitted to the yellow of her bikini, covering her smooth skin, and he forced himself to turn his gaze to the dark outline of the mountains again as he thought about Ivy asleep upstairs.

Genevieve moved through the water and settled in next to her soon-to-be husband, Merritt took a seat across from Gus, and Skylar sat next to Franky.

He tried not to react when her arm skimmed his under the water, but he couldn’t help it. And then her arm rested against his, and an electric current surged up his arm and through his body.

“Where’s Ivy?” Skylar asked.

“She has a thing about bacteria in hot tubs and pools.” He shrugged his shoulders, moving his arm away from hers, needing the distance.

Skylar’s mouth turned down in a little frown the moment he put space between them.

He hated when she didn’t smile, so he bumped his shoulder against hers playfully, trying to will things back to normal between them. “How come you didn’t bring a date?”

“Well, isn’t it sort of understood that the best friend is your date when you don’t have one?” Her words hearkened back to his own the night of her birthday party, and she gave him a tight-lipped smile.

His heart sank. “Sky, I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you say anything?”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about it.”

But worry about it he did. After that silent ride home from her parents’ house, he knew she had been upset with him, but he thought it was because she found out he’d been out with Ivy when he stood her up for the Christmas party.

“Look at that,” Genevieve suddenly said. Her eyes focused on the sky as the heavy snow-filled clouds slid away, and everything around them became light and shadow as the bright moon revealed its face. “I see stars.” She glanced over and smiled at Sebastian, who hadn’t been looking at anything but her.

The stars were brilliant without the light from neighboring cities, but the thing that caught Franky’s attention the most was the moonlight shining off the mountain peaks. He elbowed Skylar and nodded toward them, and her eyes widened in awe.

“That’s beautiful.” Skylar stared at the mountains for a long minute before looking at



him with a sweet smile. “I’m glad we got to see that together.”

His heart warmed. “Me too.” That’s better.

This was the Skylar he had missed. His friend. He hated the distance that had been growing between them, but this, right now, felt normal and good.

“I hope you brought work gloves along with you,” Sebastian said.

Franky raised an eyebrow. “What for?”

“We’re putting you to work.”

“I’m a guest here,” he replied.

“Think of it as working for your room and board.”

Franky laughed. “You’re funny.”

“We’d love it if you helped, Franky,” Genevieve cut in. “It will mean more to know we all put a little of ourselves into our special day.” She gave him a wink.

“I like that.” Genevieve truly was an exceptional woman, and Franky was happy to know her and pleased his friend had found someone like her to spend his life with.

They chatted about plans for a while, and then Franky noticed Skylar and Genevieve exchanging looks with Merritt.

“I have a great idea,” Genevieve said. “Who wants some hot chocolate? Made with Schultz Chocolate, of course.”

“Me!” Skylar said with a grin.

Merritt raised her hand out of the water, but Gus didn’t reply. Something was going on with him. He had been sulking the whole time, and he and Merritt hadn’t spoken since she climbed into the hot tub. Trouble in paradise already?

“Can I help, babe?” Sebastian asked.

Genevieve nodded, and the two of them climbed out of the hot tub together. Sebastian wrapped his fiancée up in a towel before grabbing his own, and they headed into the house together.

“We’ll help too, won’t we, Franky?” Skylar smiled sweetly at him again.

“Sure.” He smiled as they toweled off and robed up and followed the others into the house.

Once inside, Skylar leaned closer. “I think Merritt and Gus needed a moment alone to talk.”

Her warm breath against his neck sent goosebumps across his skin, and he tried to ignore that and her vanilla scent, which somehow hadn’t been washed away by the hot tub chemicals.

“I picked up on something going on between them,” Franky said. “Hope everything’s okay there.”

Genevieve gathered the supplies for the hot chocolate and pulled out a pot. “Sebastian taught me to make this the way Granny Schultz used to.” She beamed with pride. “It’s so good.”

Skylar went about helping her. “Granny Schultz’s hot chocolate was always the best.”

A little while later, Merritt burst through the door, her wet feet slapping against the wood floor as she headed straight for her room. Gus entered the house seconds later, hot on her tail.

The four of them stared wide-eyed at the scene before exchanging curious glances. They continued on with the task before them, but Gus and Merritt's voices carried enough that it was clear they were arguing.

It went on for several minutes, and then all grew quiet.

Skylar's brow lifted. "I wonder what that was about."

"All married couples fight," Genevieve said. "Sebastian and I aren't even married yet, and we have our fair share of arguments, but we always talk it out and make up."

"That's probably what they're doing right now." Franky's eyebrows bounced up and down.

Skylar gave him a playful smack on the arm, and they laughed together as if nothing had changed.

Sebastian wrapped his arms around Genevieve's waist from behind and nuzzled the back of her neck. "I like making up."

Genevieve let out a little giggle and shooed him away as she poured the hot chocolate.

Franky looked over at Skylar. "Okay then. I think that's our cue." He took hold of her elbow and led her toward the door.

“Where are we going?”

He grabbed two of the mugs Genevieve had filled. “To have our cocoa in the hot tub.”

TWENTY-FIVE

I’ve missed you.”

Franky’s words surprised Skylar. “Have you?”

“Of course, I have. Why would you even ask that?”

She shrugged her shoulders and took a sip of her cocoa before setting it on the edge of the hot tub. “I figured you wouldn’t give me a second thought since you and Ivy are in the honeymoon stage of your relationship.”

“Yeah, things are new and fun between us, but that doesn’t mean you and I can’t still hang out. You haven’t returned any of my calls lately.”

“I told you, I’m busy with—”

“Work. I know.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Hey, taking over Sebastian’s job has been a lot more than I expected, and I’ve had to set aside a lot of my extra time to get up to speed. I don’t want to suck at this and let my dad down. So, it’s not because I don’t want to spend

time with you. I'm trying to stay focused."

That was only partially true. Because she had been avoiding him because of this new girlfriend of his. She couldn't pretend all was normal. Not very well anyway. Maybe she'd have Adelia give her acting lessons because she was pretty sure Franky could see right through her.

"Are you sure it's not because I backed out of flying out here with you?"

She avoided eye contact as she pushed her damp hair back.

"Once again, I've hurt you without meaning to. I wouldn't blame you if you never talked to me again."

Skylar's mouth tilted to the side. "And I thought Gus and Merritt brought the drama tonight."

Franky chuckled.

"Honestly, I was hurt when you stood me up, and then I found out Gus wasn't coming home for Christmas. I felt abandoned. Not only by my brother but my best friend. And I thought flying out here together would fix that, and then you ditched me."

"Sky." The remorse was clear on his face.

"But I never asked you to be my date, Franky. That was my own miscommunication."

"I'm very sorry for disappointing you. That's the last thing I ever wanted to do."

If only he knew how disappointed she'd been every day since their kiss because it hadn't turned into more.

She lifted her hand to float on the surface and flicked a little water his way, which he returned as a splash in her face.

"Hey!" She splashed back a few times, and he pinched his eyes closed, spitting water out of his mouth like a fountain.

They laughed, then grabbed their mugs for another drink of tasty hot chocolate.

"When we get home, are you going to return my calls?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe."

"Gee, thanks." He rolled his eyes.

"I wish we could hang out like we used to," Skylar said.

"Why can't we?"

“Your girlfriend.”

“She knows we’re friends, and she’s fine with it.”

“I just worry about you.”

His brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t have the best luck with relationships, and I worry about you getting hurt again.”

“It’s different this time,” he replied with a little smile.

That wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “How so?”

“I guess because Ivy is also an attorney, it feels like we’re on equal ground or something.”

Ugh! There was that beaming face again when he mentioned her.

“I’ve always dated women who relied on me. I was the money in the relationship. But Ivy has her own money. She doesn’t need me to take care of her in that way, and that’s a nice change.”

I don’t need your money either. Just you. Skylar wished she had the courage to voice her thoughts.



“And because we work together, she understands me and the demands of my career. She just gets me.”

Skylar’s heart shattered all over again. She thought she was the only one who truly got him.

“I hope the three of us can spend some time together. Once you get to know her, you’ll like her too, Sky.”

She wanted to tell him no. She wanted to tell him that spending time with them would be more than a little awkward and why. She wanted to tell him that he should stop seeing Ivy and give her a chance instead. But she couldn’t, and she wouldn’t.

Instead, she said, “Yeah, that sounds nice.”

Maybe she was a decent actress after all.

The next morning, Skylar awoke early and headed down to the hot tub again. The snow was falling lightly, and she loved the feeling of soaking in the bubbly water while the snowflakes tickled her nose.

She tiptoed down the stairs, hoping not to disturb anyone, and headed out the back door to the deck. It was warmer outside than she remembered, probably because she was wearing her pajamas and not a bathing suit. The sun was shining between the clouds, unlike yesterday’s overcast sky.

Her steps felt funny as if she were walking on clouds. She stared down at the layer of snow beneath her feet and realized she hadn’t put any shoes on. Come to think of it, she had forgotten to put her swimsuit on under her pajamas.

She shook her head in confusion and was about to turn back toward the house to go

change when she spotted something in the hot tub. She stepped closer and noticed the edge of a robe sticking over the side.

Something about it filled her with a sense of dread as she moved closer and saw the robe was worn by a man floating face down in the still water. Her heart pounded hard in her chest, like the rhythm of a racehorse running full speed ahead. She rushed to the side of the tub, grabbed hold of the man's ankle, and tugged. His body glided through the water and rolled over, and her breathing stopped at the sight of Franky's cold, lifeless face staring up at her.

Skylar cried out as she shot up in bed. Her breathing was erratic, and her heart continued to race. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and her pajama top was soaked clear through. She covered her face with her hands and let the tears fall. It had been years since she'd had a nightmare about someone drowning. Why now?

She climbed out of bed and headed into the Jack and Jill bathroom just as the door to the adjoining guest bedroom opened.

Ivy gasped. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was going to brush my teeth, but I can wait."

Skylar's eyes traveled past Ivy and caught a glimpse of Franky. He was alive and well, still asleep in bed, his bare torso on full display, and sudden and unavoidable tears burned her eyes.

"You can use it first," Skylar managed as she spun and rushed from the room, shutting the door hard behind her just as the dam broke.

She threw herself onto the bed and tried to silence her sobs by burying her face in the pillow. The last thing she wanted was for Ivy to hear her crying. But she couldn't control it.

Minutes later, a soft knock sounded on the door, but before she could reply, the latch clicked, and the door opened.

“I’m finished.”

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Skylar lifted her face enough to see Ivy standing in her doorway. “Thanks.”

Ivy didn’t move to leave as Skylar hoped she would, and Skylar turned to look at her, knowing she was revealing red eyes and blotchy tear-stained cheeks.

Ivy’s expression turned sympathetic. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude. Is there anything I can do?”

Skylar shook her head. “I’ll be fine.”

“Do you want me to get Franky for you?”

“No!” Her reply came out louder and more hastily than she wanted.

Ivy’s eyes narrowed a smidge. “All right. I’ll leave you alone then.”

Skylar was thankful when the door closed. She rolled onto her side and snuggled her pillow into her neck, staring out the window at the snowy mountains. She knew it was going to be hard, seeing them together, but did she really have to see that? Knowing they were sleeping in the next room over was bad enough, but to see him lying there in the bed, wishing she was the one in his arms instead of Ivy, was excruciating. And after the dream she’d had ... seeing him like that in the hot tub ...

She took a deep breath in and let it out, then repeated that several times until she felt calm enough to get up and ready for the day.

The bathroom was empty when she entered, which was a relief. She hated that Ivy

had witnessed her crying, and Skylar wondered if she would tell Franky what she'd seen.

As she stared into the mirror, applying some Merritt Cosmetics concealer to get rid of the blotches and dark circles under her eyes, she reminded herself why she was in Montana in the first place. Her focus had been on Franky and Ivy since they'd arrived, but this week was supposed to be about Sebastian and Genevieve's wedding. She needed to set aside her feelings about Franky and put on a happy face for her brother, and that's what she resolved to do.

## TWENTY-SIX

During breakfast, a car carrying Adelia pulled up in front of the house. Skylar couldn't express in words how happy she was to finally have her friend there. She knew Adelia would give her the best advice. She always did. But girl talk would have to wait until later. This day was all about decorating the horse barn for the wedding.

The wedding coordinator doled out instructions, and everyone worked throughout the day, hanging hundreds of twinkly lights from the rafters, constructing a small stage for the ceremony, lining up chairs, and decorating the long dinner table that ran the length of the horse stable.

The day wasn't all work and no play, though. Delicious BBQ was catered in for dinner, which everyone enjoyed, except Skylar, who didn't have much of an appetite. Her earlier resolve hadn't lasted a day, but she couldn't help it. Seeing Franky and Ivy together was painful. She tried to ignore them and stay busy, but they were constantly in her peripheral. And witnessing them kissing left her with an upset stomach that she was certain would become an ulcer. Plus, Ivy kept staring at her all day, which was weird. Probably because she'd seen her crying. She wished she could hide out in her room until the wedding.

Someone turned on the sound system that was set up for the big day, and country music poured out of the speakers. Genevieve and her sister, Rhonda, took to the dance floor and started up a little line dancing lesson. They looked as if they were having fun, and Skylar figured this was a good way to distract herself, so she joined them, dragging Merritt onto the floor with her. She stomped, kicked, clapped, and twirled, letting herself enjoy every minute of it, and it did cheer her up. That is until the music slowed and everyone coupled up.

Skylar moved to the side of the dance floor. Alone.

I will not cry. I will not cry.

“May I have this dance?” Dad held his hand out to her.

Skylar smiled and moved into her father’s arms. “Thanks, Dad.”

“I haven’t seen much of that beautiful smile this week. Is everything okay?”

The tears were close to the surface, as they had been all day, but she fought them back with all her might. If she replied to his question, she feared she would lose the fight.

“That Franky sure is a special guy, isn’t he?”

She looked at her dad, who was watching Franky and Ivy, then his gaze turned back to her.

“I’m sorry if you’re sad about them.”

Her mouth fell open a little. “How did you know?”

“Whenever he’s around, you have the same look on your face your mom had when she first fell in love with me.”

“Oh.” Dad had always been good at reading people, especially her.

“But I haven’t seen that look as much lately.”

A tear drifted down her cheek, and Dad brushed it away and drew her close. She buried her face in his chest and let some of the tears fall.

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“If he can’t see what’s right in front of his face,” Dad whispered, “then he’s a blind fool, and he’s not worthy of my daughter’s love.”

“Daddy.” She looked up at him. “He’s a great guy. You know he is.”

Dad’s head bobbed up and down. “I do know that. But maybe there’s someone even better for you.”

She sniffled. “Maybe.”

He hugged her again and whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

A sudden clinking noise came from across the room, and everyone’s attention turned to Franky, who was hitting a horseshoe against a metal stake as he pointed at Sebastian and Genevieve. “Show us the love!”

“You’re supposed to clink glasses,” Skylar pointed out.

“I improvised,” he replied. “Now, pucker up, you two!”

Sebastian dipped Genevieve back and planted a kiss on her lips, and everyone cheered. The groom then left his bride’s arms and snatched the horseshoe from Franky, clinking it again, looking in the direction of Gus and Merritt.

Gus waved Sebastian away. “This is your wedding, Bash.”



“Hey! We didn’t get to do this for your wedding. Come on!” Sebastian said.

Skylar couldn’t have agreed more. She so wished they could’ve been there for Gus and Merritt’s wedding, even if it was a simple courthouse affair.

The room filled with chanting. “Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!”

Gus looked over at Merritt and shrugged his shoulders, then took her face in his hands and planted a quick kiss on her lips.

“Booo!” several people bellowed.

So he kissed her again, this time with purpose, and everyone cheered them on until they were pretty much making out, oblivious to anyone but each other.

Dad cleared his throat loudly, which made Skylar laugh, and Gus and Merritt’s kiss finally came to an end.

“See.” Dad bumped Skylar’s arm with his. “That’s what you need. Someone who adores you the way Gus adores Merritt.”

Everyone worked into the evening to finish all the tasks Genevieve and the wedding coordinator had given them, and before they knew it, the barn had been transformed. When the others began to disperse, Skylar went in search of Adelia, who she’d seen head into the stables with Gus. She really needed someone to talk to, besides her dad.

As she approached the stall at the far end, she heard Adelia’s laughter. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Gus.”

“I’m not ashamed of something that isn’t true. Merritt and I are married in name only. You know this. And when the year is up, we’ll part ways, just like we planned.”

Skylar gasped, and they looked over at her, standing frozen outside the stall.

“Sky! I didn’t mean for—”

“Is that true?” Skylar’s eyes bounced back and forth between Gus and Adelia and landed on Gus. “Your marriage isn’t real?”

The guilty expression on Gus’s face spoke for itself, and Skylar shook her head disappointedly. “I can’t believe you would do this. What were you thinking?”

He let out a deep breath. “I was thinking I wanted to be taken seriously for once, that I wanted you all to see that I’m not the bad seed after all. Yes, I’ve made many mistakes, but I’ve changed, and I wanted a chance, but nobody would give me one. So, I found a way to clean up my image and show you all that I was capable of being a good guy.”

“By using Merritt?”

“She’s using me too.”

“How?”

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“I’m helping her go global with her company.”

“So it’s all about the money.” She closed her eyes and shook her head back and forth sadly, thinking about what Dad had said to her earlier. “I was so excited for you two. You seemed so happy and in love. Do you even like each other or is it all for show?”

“Not at first. But I’ve come to really care for her. She’s one of my best friends, actually.”

Tears filled Skylar’s eyes from the constant disappointment that surrounded her lately. “Nothing is ever the way we wish it was.” Her mind went back to Franky.

“Sky, I’m sorry.” Gus took a step toward his sister, but Adelia stopped him with a touch to his arm.

“Come on, Sky. Let’s go talk.” Adelia took her by the arm, and they walked out of the barn together, leaving her brother behind.

“I can’t believe he did this.” Skylar sat on her bed in the guest room, facing Adelia, both seated with their legs crossed. She was overcome with a mix of anger, annoyance, and hurt. “After all the trouble he’s gotten into, I know he wants to prove he’s changed, so why would he lie about his marriage?”

“He’s willing to take the chance because he really thinks this will prove that he’s capable of settling down and being serious.”

“Doesn’t he know it will backfire in the worst way if the truth comes out?”

“Somewhere in that brain of his, he truly believes this is the answer.”

Skylar blew out a slow breath. She wished she understood the workings of her brother’s mind. Her eyes turned to Adelia. “I can’t believe you knew this whole time and you didn’t tell me. Why didn’t you talk him out of it?”

“At first, I tried. I gave him all the reasons why this was a horrible idea. But you know Gus. He made his case very convincingly, and I agreed to go along with it.”

Skylar lay back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. “I really thought he had found the right girl. Merritt is so great, and they seem to love each other. I can’t believe that’s all an act.”

Adelia shifted and lay back next to Skylar. “Honestly, I think they’re falling for each other. I’ve never seen him like this with a girl before. And I’ve seen the way she looks at him.”

“That kiss they shared earlier!” Skylar fanned her hands in front of her face, and Adelia did the same, and they started laughing. “They were all over each other. That couldn’t have been fake.”

“I don’t think it was.”

Skylar grew quiet for several beats. “I’m afraid Franky is falling in love with Ivy.”

Adelia rolled onto her side and propped her head up with her arm. “Has anything else happened between you two?”

Skylar shook her head. “He knows something’s up with me, though. I’ve been avoiding him, and I hate it. I hate everything about it. It was weird between us after my birthday, and then he met Ivy. Things are so awkward now. I want to go back to

when it was just the two of us. I feel like I've lost my best friend."

"You still have me," Adelia said with a smile.

Skylar chuckled and took Adelia's free hand in hers, giving it a squeeze. "I know I do. It just hurts. I don't know how not to be in love with him. It's a part of who I am, this love I've always had for him. I was a kid when I first loved him, and now I'm all grown up, and that love has only gotten stronger. It's there in the corner of my heart, and I'm holding out hope for something that will never be."

She paused.

"What if he marries her?" Tears spilled over and trailed down her temples.

"Oh, Sky." Adelia grabbed a tissue from the nightstand and handed it over. "That probably won't happen. Franky loves you. Don't lose hope."

"He loves me as a friend. But he'll never return my feelings, not in the way I want him to."

"I don't believe that."

Skylar's lower lip quivered as she wiped the tears. "That's why I'm so sad Gus and Merritt's marriage is a sham. It gave me hope, seeing Gus find love. I thought now that both of my brothers found their other half, maybe it was my turn. But it all turned out to be a lie."

"Don't be so sure. Gus says it's only an arrangement, but I don't believe it. And maybe neither one of them realizes it yet, but they are perfect for each other."

"I think so too." Skyler wiped at her face again and sat up. "Do you really think

they're falling for each other?"

"I do." Adelia sat up too.

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Skylar took in a deep breath and let it out. “Okay, then I’ll keep what I heard in the stable to myself for a while and see how this plays out.”

“And in the meantime, we should make sure they’re in as many situations where they have to pretend to be a couple as we can.”

Skylar laughed. “I like that.”

“And Sky, don’t give up on Franky. He may think Ivy is the one for him, but I’ve seen you two together. Your friendship is special. And there’s something you two have that he and Ivy don’t.”

“What’s that?”

“History.”

### TWENTY-SEVEN

The day before the wedding was much more relaxed than the previous one. Not that Franky minded helping decorate the horse barn, but he was looking forward to hanging out with the guys while the girls went snowshoeing with Genevieve after lunch. He was also hoping to talk to Sebastian alone and ask when he knew Genevieve was the one for him. He’d been thinking a lot about his relationship with Ivy and how to know when was the right time to progress to the next step. He’d never been good with that in the past, and he really didn’t want to mess things up this time.

Franky had just settled into a comfy chair to watch a little television with the guys

when the front door opened, and Ivy entered the house. His eyebrows drew together in confusion, and he stood and walked toward her as she was hanging her coat in the closet.

“How come you didn’t go snowshoeing with the rest of the girls?” he asked.

“I have weak ankles.”

He didn’t mean to laugh, but it came bursting out.

Ivy frowned. “I’m serious. I sprained my ankle often when I was young, and my doctor said I have weak ankles and should be careful.”

“But you wear high heels all the time. Aren’t boots for snowshoeing more stable for your ankles than those?”

“Probably, but I didn’t want to risk it. Do you really want me injured before the wedding?”

“Of course not. Come here.” He gently took her arm and pulled her into a hug. “It’s just ... I wanted you to spend some time with Skylar so you can get to know each other.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

He let go of her and searched her face. “Why not?”

“She has feelings for you, Francis.”

His heart skipped a beat. “What? That’s crazy.”



“Is it?” She raised an eyebrow at him.

Franky glanced into the other room at the guys and grabbed hold of her hand, leading her up to their room for privacy. Once inside, he closed the door securely and faced her again.

“What makes you say that?”

“Women’s intuition.”

“Well, you don’t know Sky or our friendship. It’s not like that with us.” Their kiss flashed through his mind.

“Never?”

He opened his mouth to speak but paused.

Ivy eyed him. “Maybe you should tell me again the history of your friendship.”

“I told you all there is to tell.”

“Are you sure? Because I’m getting the sense that there’s something you’re hiding.”

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He approached her and took her arms. “There isn’t.”

“Then you won’t mind humoring me.”

Franky let go and walked across the room, flopping down on the bed. This was ridiculous. He hadn’t thought Ivy was the jealous type. She’d never been bothered by their friendship before.

She stared at him, clearly waiting for him to talk, so he repeated everything he’d already told her about their friendship. When he was finished, he slapped his hands on his knees and stood. “There you have it.”

“So, nothing romantic has ever happened between you?”

He tried to ignore the memory of Skylar’s soft lips moving against his.

“See, there it is again!” she exclaimed. “That look! What aren’t you saying?”

“Okay.” He turned away and stared out the window. “We kissed once.”

“I knew it!”

He spun to face her again. “It meant nothing. We were both drunk, and we completely agreed it was a mistake. There were no feelings involved.”

Ivy’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, Ivy. I’m sure.”

“Maybe there were no feelings on your part.”

“Why are you so certain about this?” His stomach was tied up in knots.

“I saw her crying the other day, and when I asked if she wanted to talk to you about whatever was bothering her, she cut me off with a very emphatic no.”

His mouth scrunched to one side. “That’s what you’re basing this on? She could’ve been upset about any number of things she wouldn’t want to tell me about.” His heart ached at the thought of her crying and the possibility he had hurt her in some way without realizing it. He seemed to be doing a lot of that lately.

“True,” Ivy replied. “But she had a certain look in her eye, one only another woman would understand.”

“I think you’re blowing this way out of proportion.”

“Perhaps. But I have a good sense about these things. I’m rarely wrong.”

Franky shook his head. “Well this time, you are.”

“Don’t be so sure.” She grabbed her hairbrush from atop the dresser and headed into the bathroom then poked her head out to look at him. “I know how much she means to you, but I’m afraid she and I are never going to be as close as you want us to be.”

It bothered Franky that she’d said that. It was as if she’d completely written Skylar off because of her suspicions. But what if Ivy was right? He dismissed that thought immediately. Skylar didn’t feel that way about him. If anyone had feelings to deal with, it was him.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

Every moment of the wedding overflowed with the love Sebastian and Genevieve had for each other. It was contagious, and Skylar couldn't help but fix her eyes on Franky, standing across the stage from her at Sebastian's side, and think of all the times she'd pictured a happily ever after with him.

But Franky's eyes weren't on her, they were on his date. And as she stood on that stage, listening to her brother vow to love Genevieve forever, she knew she couldn't continue to envision Franky as the man she wanted to spend her life with. It wasn't going to be easy to shake the dreams she'd had for as long as she could remember, but she could no longer cling to the hope that his feelings might one day change.

When they walked the aisle together for the recessional, Skylar's arm linked through his, and he smiled down at her. She smiled back, but his telltale frown told her he knew she was faking it.

The reception events went by in a blur—the introductions, the meal, the toasts, the first dance. Before Skylar knew it, she was standing on the sidelines of the dance floor, watching all the couples sway together to the music, and she felt very alone. The newlyweds were lost in each other. Gus and Merritt, too, appeared to be in love, and maybe they were. Mom and Dad looked so cute with their heads leaned together as they danced. And Franky ... he and Ivy were talking and laughing as they danced, and that was almost worse than seeing them show affection.

As the music faded and blended into another slow song, Merritt approached.

“Hey,” Skylar greeted her. “Are you having—”

Merritt abruptly took her arm, moving onto the dance floor, and Skylar shuffled along in her high heels, hoping she wouldn't take a tumble.

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“What’s happening?” As soon as the question was out of her mouth, they stopped in front of Franky, and she noticed Gus dancing with Ivy across the dance floor. She appreciated what Merritt was doing, trying to push her and Franky together.

“Hello, ladies,” Franky said.

“Hey, Franky,” Merritt replied. “Looks like you’ve lost your dance partner.”

“It would appear that way. Would you like to dance?”

“I was about to get a drink, but maybe Sky would.”

Franky held his hand out to Skylar. “Take a spin with me?”

Skylar couldn’t hold back her smile. “Sure.”

He led her onto the floor and slid one arm around her back, taking her hand with the other. Her entire body tingled from the joy of being this close to him.

“You look beautiful,” he told her.

“Thanks.” She gave him a little smile. “You look really good in a tux.”

“Do I?” He raised an eyebrow at her and grinned.

She nodded. “I like this one better than the gangster suit at the gala last summer, though.”

He let out a loud laugh. “Ah, yes, I’d almost forgotten about that ... Bonnie.” He winked.

They danced for a minute in mostly comfortable silence. There was still a hint of awkwardness, particularly from the things she had bottled up inside that she needed to say. If only she could summon the courage. Instead, she went with a safe subject.

“It was a beautiful wedding, wasn’t it?” Skylar turned her eyes on her brother and his new wife.

Franky looked their way too. “It was. It’s really made me think about a lot of things.” His eyes met hers again, and her stomach flipped.

“Oh, yeah?” she managed, despite her nerves. “Like what?”

“The future. What I want out of life.” He looked in Ivy’s direction, and Skylar’s heart sank.

“What do you want, Franky?”

Her use of his name brought his eyes back to hers. “I want someone to spend my life with. Like Bash and Gen. Like Gus and Merritt. Like our parents.”

Their gazes held for several long moments before he turned his attention on Ivy again.

“I think I’m falling for her,” he admitted.

Skylar’s heart squeezed. She wanted to jump up and down like a child and scream, “No! Not her! Me!”

Franky looked her in the eye. “You like her, don’t you?”

She didn’t want to answer that. He watched her, awaiting a response. Heat rushed to her cheeks as nerves churned around inside her, and suddenly, the delicious meal from dinner wasn’t sitting quite right in her stomach anymore.

She stopped dancing, her hands falling to her belly.

“Hey, are you feeling okay?” Franky seemed to sense the change in her. “You look a little pale.”

“I think I need some air.” Skylar rushed off and made her escape from the barn just as the song was coming to an end. Her feet moved toward the house as quickly as her heels would allow in the snow, and she didn’t look back. She barely made it through the door and into the half bath before she lost her dinner. The stress of all her dashed hopes and dreams had really done a number on her stomach this week, and hearing him talk about Ivy like that was all it took to send her to her knees in front of the toilet.

After cleaning herself up, she dabbed her face with the hand towel and stared at her reflection for a long time.

How did I get here?

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How did things change so much since last summer?

Why does it feel so much harder than before?

I don't want to lose him, but I can't do this anymore.

She fought back tears as she opened the bathroom door and startled at the sight of her mother, leaning against the wall across from the door.

"Mom, what are you doing in here?"

"Franky told me you weren't feeling well. He was worried about you."

Her chin began to quiver, and the tears fell.

"Skylar." Mom took hold of her, wrapping her up in love, sheltering her from the world. "Please talk to me."

"I love him, Mom," she whimpered as the tears spilled over.

"Who? Franky?"

Skylar nodded into Mom's neck.

"Oh, sweetheart." Mom gently rubbed up and down her back. "I've suspected as much for a while now. I'm so sorry. It must be hard seeing him with someone else."



“It’s awful.” She pulled back and wiped her face, taking in a deep breath. “But I’ve decided that it’s over. I’m done being in love with him.”

Mom looked skeptical. “I’m not sure you can turn it off like that, sweetie. That’s not how love works.”

“But I can’t go on this way. I can’t go on pretending with him, acting like we’re only friends when I want so much more. I have to cut ties, at least for a while, for my own wellbeing.”

“Have you told him that?” Mom asked.

Skylar shook her head. “I’m afraid to. What if he doesn’t understand? What if I lose him forever?”

“Don’t you think suddenly shutting him out of your life will do more damage than telling him the truth?”

Skylar sniffled.

“You two have a special friendship, and if it’s as strong as I think it is, nothing will break it. But I think it’s a chance you’re going to have to take.”

Their friendship was special, and they had been through a lot together. Still, she was hesitant.

“I don’t know if I can do it. Because what I want more than anything is the best-case scenario, but I know I’m not going to get it.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Franky’s in love with Ivy. He told me as much tonight.”

“That may be. And if he doesn’t feel the same way you do, at least you’ll know for sure, and maybe it will help you move on from your feelings faster.”

Skylar took in a shaky breath. “I’ll think about it.”

Mom hugged her again. “I love you, and I’m sorry you’re hurting. I wish I could make it all better for you.”

“I know, Mom. I love you too.”

Mom let go. “Are you coming back to the reception?”

Skylar shook her head. “I need some time to myself. But you go ahead.”

“Are you sure?”

She waved Mom toward the door. “Go on. I’ll be fine.”

Mom gave her an understanding smile and walked out the front door.

Skylar sat alone in one of the great room chairs, staring out the window toward the lights of the barn. Her mind raced through all the things that had happened that led her to this place. If only she’d been honest with Franky sooner. If only she hadn’t agreed with him that their kiss was a mistake. If only she’d been brave enough to tell him how she really felt, things might be very different. And if she had, maybe Ivy wouldn’t be in his life now.

She shook her head. No, she couldn’t think that way. She couldn’t think about the what-ifs. All that mattered now was what she did moving forward. The more she thought about Mom’s advice, the more sense it made. These feelings of hers had been harbored for far too long. She had to let them sail. Because if she kept the status quo, how many more years of her life would pass by, waiting for something that might never be?

“I have feelings for you, Franky.” Skylar shook her head at her reflection in the rearview mirror. “No, I can’t just come out and say it like that. Can I?” She took a deep breath in and let it out in a huff.

A week had passed since the wedding, and while Skylar had spent every day putting off talking to Franky, something wonderful had happened in the Schultz household.

Gus ended his fake marriage to Merritt.

That might not seem wonderful, but it was. He flew home to do the right thing and tell their parents the truth, only to find Merritt there waiting for him, declaring her love, which he wholeheartedly returned. Adelia had been right. The two of them had fallen in love with each other for real.

On top of that, Dad and Gus worked out their issues, or at least began to, and Gus was invited back to Schultz Chocolate to work alongside Skylar as co-president. She couldn't have been more pleased with how all of that turned out. It was going to be wonderful to have Gus by her side again.

But while her brother's situations were finding happy resolutions, Skylar struggled with the decision she'd made about Franky at Sebastian's wedding. In her daily life, especially with work, she was always confident and sure, and she didn't like feeling uncertain and confused. The only remedy was to get it over with and finally talk to Franky, which was why she was now driving toward his place, practicing what she would say when she got there.

"Let's try this again. Franky, there's something very important I need to talk to you about, and I know this is probably going to seem like it's coming out of nowhere, but I love you." She groaned. "This is ridiculous. He's going to laugh. And then he's going to reject me."

Her stomach was in knots by the time she pulled up in front of his place. She had no idea how this was going to go. If he returned her feelings, it would be the greatest thing that had ever happened. But if he didn't, she knew she had to step away, at least for a while, to allow herself time to fall out of love with him, to give their friendship a chance to survive. She needed to be honest with him about all of that, no matter how much it terrified her.

She stared out the windshield of her car, watching tiny snowflakes land on the glass and melt away, working up the courage to walk to his door. Closing her eyes, she said a quick prayer for the strength to go through with this and peace no matter what the outcome. All the while, she fought back tears at the thought of losing him.

After several minutes, she finally went to his door and rang the doorbell. Muffled footfalls approached, and her heart skipped a beat when Franky opened the door and greeted her with a huge smile.

“Hey, you. What are you doing here?”

She swallowed and gathered all of the strength she had. “Uh ... there’s something important I need to tell you.”

Ivy’s blonde head suddenly made an appearance over Franky’s shoulder as she wrapped her arms around his middle from behind. “Hi, Skylar.”

Her heart sank. Why hadn’t she considered the possibility that Ivy might be there?

Franky covered Ivy’s arms with his own. “I’ve got something important to tell you too.” He lifted Ivy’s hand from where it rested against his stomach and held it out toward Skylar. “I asked Ivy to marry me, and she said yes.”

Skylar felt as if her heart had actually stopped beating at the sight of the shining diamonds on Ivy’s slender ring finger. She couldn’t breathe. Her throat felt as dry as a desert. Was it closing up? How close was she to passing out? She couldn’t formulate a sentence. The sparkling stones had knocked every word she’d planned and practiced straight out of her brain.

Her gaze lifted from the ring and took in Ivy’s happy expression.

“What do you think of the ring?” Franky asked. “Did I do good?”

Her phone suddenly rang in her purse, and she fished it out, unable to control the trembling of her hands.

The office. Thank God.

“I’m sorry. I have to take this,” she mumbled. Completely flustered, she turned and walked to her car, climbed in, and drove away, leaving her phone unanswered.

## TWENTY-NINE

What was that all about?” Ivy disappeared into the apartment, and Franky closed the door behind them and followed.

“I’m not sure.” Franky’s heart was in his throat, and he was reeling. She had come there with something important to tell him and took off so abruptly. What had happened?

Ivy went to the couch, and he settled in beside her. She wound her right arm around his and held her left one out, admiring her three-carat pear-shaped halo engagement ring.

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“I love it, Francis. So much. It’s the perfect ring.”

He leaned toward her to give her a kiss, but she jumped up from the couch and returned with her laptop, a legal pad, and a pen. She tore off the top page and handed it to him. “Is this list important?”

Franky glanced at the paper. Fireworks, ice cream, road trips, wineries. “It’s not a list, it’s ... never mind.” His heart ached. They were a few of the lyrics from the song he’d written for Skylar. He had planned to polish up the music and record it for her birthday, but he hadn’t finished.

“We need to start planning if we’re going to get married in the fall. It’ll be March in a couple days, which gives us seven months. And I think we should have an engagement party soon. What do you think?” She didn’t wait for him to answer and began jotting lists on the notepad. “I have five friends I’m going to ask to be in the wedding, so you need to figure out who will be standing up with you and ask them soon. We’ll want to invite them all to the engagement party.”

Franky could barely catch up, and he chuckled. “Hey, I’m happy you’re so excited, but take a breath.”

She smiled. “I am excited. This is our wedding. It’s a huge deal. And I only plan to do this once, so I want to do it right.”

“Whatever you want, I’m okay with it.”

She started talking again, going over some venues she had in mind for the

engagement party, but his thoughts wandered back to Skylar's face. Hers wasn't the look of surprise someone gets right before they express their excitement at their friend's happy news. Hers had been a look of complete and utter shock.

"Who are you going to ask? Sebastian, I assume," Ivy said.

Franky finally registered what she was saying. "Yeah, I for sure want Bash to stand up with me."

"Who else?"

He really only cared to have Sebastian as his best man, but he struggled to think of others. There were a few guys he would call friends from the law firm, but nobody he was very close with. The only other person who was really close to him was Skylar.

"What about Sky?"

Ivy stared at her lists. "What about her?"

"She's my best friend."

She looked over at him. "Are you asking if Skylar can be a groomsman?"

He nodded.

Ivy shook her head. "I want a traditional wedding with men on your side and women on mine. I know she's your friend, but maybe we can ask her to do something else for the wedding. She's into photography, right? Maybe she could take engagement pictures for us."

Franky had a nagging feeling this had more to do with Ivy suspecting Skylar of



having feelings for him than wanting to be traditional, but he let it go. In the end, he chose Sebastian, a couple college buddies, and a couple friends from the firm. But his choices felt forced.

The planning continued, but Franky was distracted.

“Do you think she seemed upset?” he asked.

“Who?” Ivy was in the middle of writing something down.

“Sky.”

Ivy stopped writing and looked up at him.

“Maybe I should go see her and make sure she’s okay.” He moved to get up, and Ivy’s hand pressed firmly against his knee.

“This is our engagement, Francis. We should be celebrating, not worrying about Skylar. She’s a big girl. I’m sure she’ll be fine. And we have a lot of plans to talk about.”

Franky felt unsettled. “I know, babe, but she’s my friend. Something was off with her.”

“Can you please not call me that.”

“What? Babe?”

“Yes. My ex called me that, and it became very grating.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

He pulled her close and moved toward her lips. “Maybe you should take a break from lists to make out with your fiancé.”

She chuckled but pushed him away. “Too much to do.” She leaned in and pecked him on the cheek. “When we’re done here, I’m all yours.”

He rested his head against the back of the couch while she opened her laptop and looked up wedding venues. Her voice was so soothing as she described each one, that he started to drift off.

In his partially asleep state, his mind envisioned a winery wedding with the ceremony in the vineyard. He and Sebastian were standing at the end of the aisle, and the bride came around the corner, but instead of Ivy, it was Skylar’s face he saw smiling back at him.

His eyes popped open.

“Welcome back,” Ivy said with a giggle.

“Sorry.” He rubbed his eyes.

“I asked if you had any suggestions for where to get married, and you mumbled something about the winery in your sleep. Did you mean Schultz Winery? Because I

bet that would be beautiful in the fall.”

“It is beautiful in the fall.” Franky smiled to himself as he remembered Skylar walking beside him that night before the Bridge Walk.

Ivy jotted “Schultz Winery” down on the paper, and Franky immediately regretted mentioning it. He wanted Ivy to be happy and have the wedding of her dreams, but he wasn’t sure he could marry her in the place that meant so much to Skylar. And to him.

### THIRTY

The ballroom at the Grand Plaza Hotel was decorated to the nines. Silver vases as tall as Franky, filled with white and pale pink roses, lined the centers of the tables. The room was professionally lit, highlighting a cake table with a wall of pink and white flowers behind it, and the space was filled with two-hundred people, more than half of which Franky did not know.

This was a much more elegant affair than Franky would’ve chosen, and it felt more like a wedding than an engagement party. When the topic had first come up, he had immediately pictured the upstairs room at Sunset Grill with the view of Lake Michigan. An intimate gathering of family and close friends. But a huge party was what made Ivy happy, and that’s all that really mattered.

Considering the size of this soirée, Franky was surprised she had pulled it all together in six weeks, but since the proposal, everything had quickly turned ultra-serious, and wedding plans were full speed ahead. Not that he didn’t think getting married was serious, but there wasn’t a conversation lately that didn’t surround the big day. He understood that weddings required a lot of planning, and he knew they would have plenty of time together once they were married, but what about in the meantime? They both had full caseloads, and when they weren’t working, all of her attention was

on the wedding. Part of him wanted to go back to the way things were—just dating and getting to know each other without the pressure.

When it came to her job, Ivy was known for being incredibly organized and razor-focused. When it came to the wedding, she was overly methodical. Almost before the engagement ring was slipped onto her finger, she had called their parents, chosen her five bridesmaids, drafted her side of the guest list, and chosen venues.

Franky looked around the room and checked the time. The last half hour had been spent going from person to person, meeting Ivy's extended family and friends. He was happy to finally meet so many of them, but the one person he wanted there, needed there with him, the one whose support he wanted more than anything, was nowhere in sight. Each time a guest entered the room, his eyes darted in their direction, and he was continually disappointed.

Several minutes later, the door opened, revealing Ephraim and Harriet Schultz, followed by Sebastian and Genevieve. But when Skylar wasn't with them, Franky's shoulders sagged, and the breath he'd been holding came out in a huff.

"What's wrong?" Ivy asked.

"Nothing. The Schultzes are here."

"Oh, wonderful." Ivy took his hand, and they moved across the room to greet their guests.

Franky got a firm handshake from Ephraim and a hug from Harriet, and just as he was about to ask Sebastian where Skylar was, the door opened, and there she stood.

The simultaneous excitement and relief he felt at the sight of her burst out. "Sky!" He moved around Sebastian and Genevieve and walked straight for her. "You made it!"

“I did. Sorry we’re—”

Franky hugged her and lifted her off the ground like he used to.

“Late.” The last word of her sentence came out with her breath as he squeezed her tightly.

“I’m so glad you’re here. Thank you for coming.”

She gave him a weak smile.

“I hate that we never see each other anymore.”

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Skylar opened her mouth to reply, but his fiancée didn't give her a chance.

"Franky, I think we should address our guests now." Ivy slid her arm around his.

He shrugged his shoulders at Skylar. "Duty calls. We'll talk later, okay?"

Skylar nodded. "Yeah, later."

Franky glanced over his shoulder as they walked away and locked eyes with Skylar. He would've much rather stayed there talking to her than stand in front of a room full of mostly strangers.

Ivy guided him to stand by the cake table and handed him a microphone. He attempted a few jokes, which made the guests laugh, before Ivy took over and thanked everyone for coming, then turned the microphone over to her father, who gave a heartfelt toast.

The rest of the evening was filled with dancing, cake, and more mingling than Franky had ever done in his life. But he was distracted the entire time because he didn't see Skylar anywhere. They really needed to talk. Everything had felt off since the day she bolted after hearing of their engagement. Since then, their conversations—if you could call them that—had consisted of a few brief text exchanges, but Skylar always cut them short because of work.

He hadn't been sure she'd show up for this party, but seeing her walk through that door meant everything to him. He couldn't go through with this if he didn't have her support. And not being able to talk to her lately was starting to get to him.

Honestly, he was worried about her. She'd been acting strangely for a while now, and he didn't like feeling as if something was going on with her that she wouldn't talk to him about.

Franky approached Sebastian, who was talking with their old private school buddy, Ashton.

"Hey, have you seen your sister?" he asked.

Sebastian shook his head.

"I saw her talking to your fiancée earlier," Ashton said.

Franky scanned the room to find Ivy and made a beeline when he spotted her. "Hey, do you know where Skylar went?"

"I haven't seen her in a while."

"I was told you two were talking earlier, and I need to speak to her."

Ivy shrugged. "I think she left."

"She left?" His eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

"I saw her walk out the door, so I'm pretty sure she's gone."

"Why?"

Ivy's gaze shifted side to side, and he had the sense that she was hiding something.

"What did you two talk about?"

“She told me she liked the decorations.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

She eyed him. “What are you implying?”

“Nothing, babe.”

Ivy tilted her head disapprovingly, and her lips twisted to one side at his use of that word.

“Sorry. I forgot.” He took hold of her hand and squeezed it, and she softened, moving into his arms to give him a hug.



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“You’re forgiven.” She planted a soft kiss on his cheek then went to mingle some more with her guests.

Franky pulled his phone out of his back pocket and typed a text to Skylar.

Franky: You left? We didn’t get to talk.

No response.

Franky: I know something’s going on with you. Please talk to me.

The dots bounced on his screen, signaling that she was typing, and anticipation stirred within him.

Skylar: I can’t right now.

Franky: Why? I don’t understand what’s happening.

When she didn’t reply, he took a few moments to decide what to say next.

Franky: I know things have changed since summer, but you’re still my best friend, Sky. I don’t want to lose you.

Skylar: We’ll always be friends.

Franky: Can we meet tonight? We really need to talk.

After a long pause and several cycles of the dots bouncing then disappearing, her response finally came through.

Skylar: Meet me at my spot.

## THIRTY-ONE

Skylar sat on the rooftop ledge of the Schultz Chocolate building and stared out along the river toward the lights of downtown. Tears filled her eyes as she remembered her conversation with Ivy at the party earlier that night.

“Have you decided where you’ll get married?” Skylar hadn’t really wanted to hear any of the wedding details, but she’d asked to be polite.

“We’re talking about getting married at the winery in the fall. Wouldn’t that be the perfect location? Franky said it’s gorgeous up there when the trees change colors.”

“The winery?” No, she couldn’t mean ... surely not ...

“Your family’s winery,” Ivy replied, completely oblivious. “It’s only six months away, but I think we can pull it off. I put this together in only six weeks.” She motioned around the room.

Skylar stood there in shock, unable to respond. The memories she and Franky had made at the winery were precious to her. She couldn’t believe he would actually consider getting married there.

“Oh, and we were wondering if you’d take some engagement pictures for us. Franky told me you’re talented at photography, and he was supposed to ask you about it, but he keeps forgetting.”

She had no idea what to say to that. Thankfully, a couple approached to speak to Ivy, and Skylar used that as the perfect time to escape. She hadn't wanted to attend their party in the first place, and being put on the spot like that was more than a little uncomfortable.

Leaving without talking to Franky had obviously upset him, but she couldn't stay and risk breaking down crying. She couldn't believe any of this was happening. On Christmas Eve, when she'd told him he wouldn't fail at relationships if he figured out what he wanted, she hadn't meant for him to get engaged to the first girl he met. What she'd actually wanted was for him to figure out how he felt about her.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Skylar brushed away her tears and glanced over her shoulder to see Franky coming toward her.

He raised his hand in a wave. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

"I've been up here since I left the party."

Franky climbed up to sit beside her on the ledge and leaned to the side, bumping her shoulder with his. "Hi."

"Hi." When he smiled at her in that adorable way of his, all she wanted was to hug him, but she couldn't. She was hurting too much. "I didn't expect you to leave your party so soon."

"I snuck away. It seems Ivy's family are partiers, and most of my guests had already gone home. She won't miss me."

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Skylar smirked. “I doubt that.”

He eyed her. “Are you going to tell me why you left so early?”

The silence stretched out between them while she tried to assemble her thoughts.

“I have this feeling you don’t like Ivy,” he said.

Skylar sighed.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

“It’s not that I don’t like her. She seems like a nice person. I just miss you.”

“Sky.” He put his arm around her back and pulled her into his side. “I miss you too.”

She let her head fall on his shoulder, and her heart ached from how good it felt to be there with him like that.

“Is that all it is, though? I feel like there’s more. That day you stopped by, you were going to tell me something.”

“Remember how you acted at the winery when Luca showed me attention?”

He nodded against her head. “Yeah.”

“You didn’t want another person in the mix because you were afraid of it changing

our friendship. Well, that's how I feel about Ivy. She changed everything. And I ..."

She wanted to tell him everything, but she'd been holding it in for so long, it was hard to finally say the words.

"I know things are different," he said, "and we'll probably never get to spend as much time together as we used to. And I know that sucks, but friendships change and evolve, and I really hope we can find a new normal for us. I need you in my life, Sky. I need your support and your blessing. And I want you to like Ivy. Will you at least try?" He turned his head, attempting to make eye contact with her. "For me?"

She managed a weak smile, not really agreeing, but he seemed to take it like that and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"I don't like not talking to you," he said.

She looked over at him. "I don't like not talking to you either."

"Then let's stop not talking."

She chuckled at his silly wording, but her heart was heavy because she knew she needed to do the opposite and walk away from him for a while. And he had to know their friendship was about to be changed forever.

"Things are different now. They have to be. You're getting married." Her voice caught a little on the word married, and she hoped he didn't notice.

"But I still need my friend."

His arm around her lowered and settled at her waist, and while she wanted to snuggle closer into him, she chose to sit up straight and lean forward, away from his arm.

He took the hint and moved his arm back. “Are you upset with me?”

“I’m just sad things didn’t turn out how I thought they would.” She was about to elaborate when he pulled her into a hug.

“Come here.”

She closed her eyes and soaked in every moment, knowing this was probably the last time she would be in his arms like this.

“Hey, once all this crazy wedding planning is done and the wedding is over, things will calm down, and I’ll have more time for hanging out. And maybe you can squeeze me into your busy schedule, Madame President.”

She let go and smiled up at him. More time? Did that mean what she thought it meant?

“There’s that smile I love.” He tapped the end of her nose with his fingertip.

Oh, how she loved the way he smiled at her too.

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She shook her head and turned back to the subject at hand. “When you say more time, does that mean you’ve decided to leave the firm soon?”

“Oh, uh, I’m staying,” he replied sheepishly.

Skylar’s mouth fell open a little. “But I thought you were miserable. What about writing music?”

He snorted. “That was a pipe dream.”

“What? No, it wasn’t.”

“It was. Ivy made me see that leaving the firm after working so hard to reach that goal and spending all that time and money on education would be a waste. Pursuing artistic endeavors is rarely successful, and they certainly don’t pay as well.”

Skylar’s jaw dropped as he spoke.

“Having Ivy there makes it much better anyway. And it’s my father’s company, the family legacy. I should carry that on for future generations.”

Anger bubbled up within her. After all of their talks about him hating law and choosing that field because of his father, he was awfully quick to let his dream of something better go. But what could she say to him? How could she convince him when his fiancée had clearly talked him out of it?

He eyed her. “You’re quiet all of a sudden.”

“Ivy’s wrong, and you know it.”

“Now, hold on. I—”

“We talked about you leaving the firm, and now you’re suddenly resigned to staying in a job you said feels like the worst chore in the world? I’m sorry, no.”

“I thought a lot about it, and I realized she was right.”

“She’s not!” Her volume increased the more worked up she got. “You are an amazing songwriter and pianist. You have so much talent, and I know you can use that and find something you’ll be excited to do for the rest of your life. Not spending your life in courtrooms, defending the Milton Hanleys of the world.”

His eyes were wide, and his mouth hung open this time.

“I feel like you’re making this decision for all the wrong reasons, and you’re going to regret it, Franky. If Ivy truly wanted what was best for you, she’d encourage you to go for your dreams, not settle.”

He remained silent.

“Do you want to know the real reason I left the party tonight?”

“I don’t think I could stop you from telling me if I tried.”

“Ivy told me you’re getting married at the winery. My winery!”

He looked down at the street below.

“Whose idea was that?”



“Hers,” he replied. “I knew you wouldn’t be happy about that. But it was just one of the venue options. It’s not set in stone, Sky.”

“She seemed to think it was.”

“We don’t have to get married there.”

The tears threatened again. “The winery has always been one of my favorite places. You know that.” She made herself look him in the eyes. “When I think of it now, I think of you and the time we spent there in that little cabin by the vines.”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. “I know.”

“I can’t stop you from getting married there. It’s your life, and you can do what you want. But if that’s what you choose to do, I won’t be there.”

“Skylar.” Franky grabbed hold of her hand and held it between both of his. “We’ll choose someplace else. I promise.”

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“Really?”

He squeezed her hand and lifted it to his lips, planting a kiss on the back of it. Skylar’s eyes slipped closed at the feel of his soft lips against her skin.

“Really,” he replied.

“Because it feels like she’s calling all the shots. In your career and now this.”

His eyes narrowed as he released her hand. “Hey, I made the decision to stay at the firm. She didn’t make me do anything I didn’t want to do.”

Skylar fought the violent urge to roll her eyes. “If you say so.”

They sat in awkward silence.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” Franky finally said.

“Me neither. I just want you to be happy. Truly happy.”

Their eyes met.

“I want the same for you, Sky.” Whenever he smiled at her, everything felt right in the world. And although things were so far from right at the moment, she managed to smile back at him.

“My birthday wish was about you, by the way,” she said.

“It was?” His eyes dropped to her lips for a millisecond.

“I wished that you would find the thing you’re meant to do in life, that thing you’ll wake up every morning excited for. And I know that’s not being a lawyer.”

Franky grew quiet. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just know that I believe in you, and I know there’s something more for you. You just haven’t found it yet.”

His arms wrapped around her again, and he held her for a long time. And with each minute that passed, her heart broke a little more.

“You know I love you, right?” he said.

She nodded against his chest, tears filling her eyes. “I love you too.”

They let go and sat staring out at the river for several minutes before Franky elbowed her gently, his usual way of trying to lighten the mood.

“I have a favor to ask ... I don’t know if I should ask you this after the conversation we just had.”

Her curiosity was piqued. “What kind of favor?”

He cringed as he said, “I was wondering if you’d take some engagement pictures for us.”

She tensed at the thought of photographing them, all snuggled up, celebrating their love. “Ivy already mentioned it to me.”

“Oh, she did?”

Skylar nodded.

“Well, if it’s too much to ask, you can tell me, and I’ll understand. It’s just, you’re the most talented person I know, and you have such a great eye. I know you’d capture us perfectly.”

She loved how much he loved her photographs, but having to stare at their lovestruck faces while she took the photos and then again while she edited them was too much. “I can’t.”

“What if I say pretty please with praline pecans on top?” He used his saddest puppy dog eyes.

She groaned. “You’re the worst.” And totally clueless.

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“It would mean so much to me.”

She couldn't believe she was actually considering this, but she couldn't think of a good excuse other than the fact that she was in love with the groom. When it came to Franky, she was weak. And he had now stooped to sticking out his bottom lip and clasping his hands together.

“Fine. But only if I can find time in my schedule. I've got a lot on my plate right now.”

He leaned over and planted a kiss on her cheek. “Thank you! You're the best friend a guy could ask for.”

The smile on his face was almost worth agreeing to this insanity. She knew she'd regret it, but maybe it was a positive step toward accepting the reality of Franky and Ivy and finally getting past her feelings for him.

### THIRTY-TWO

Hey, what are you doing down here?”

Skylar looked up from her computer screen at Gus, standing in the doorway of her office. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“It's Saturday and a holiday. You should be up on the roof, enjoying the Fourth of July festivities with everyone else.”

“I’m not in the mood, I guess.”

Gus wore a look of concern. “You haven’t been in the mood for much in the past few months.”

“So.” Her tone was defensive, and she knew it.

“I’m worried about you. We all are.”

She raised an eyebrow. “All?”

“The family,” he replied. “You haven’t been to breakfast in weeks. You’ve missed work. This isn’t like you, Sky.”

She turned in her chair and looked out the window at the buildings across the river. “Everybody’s allowed to feel crappy sometimes.” She glanced back at him. “You’ve had plenty of experience with that.”

His mouth twisted to one side in disapproval.

“After all the crazy you and Bash have brought on the family this year, don’t you think I’m entitled to a little of my own?”

“Nobody’s calling you crazy.” He paused. “This is about Franky’s wedding, isn’t it?”

She turned back to the window.

“It’s okay to feel sad, Skylar, but you can’t shut the rest of us out. We’re here for you. We can help you get through it.”

“I don’t know how. You got the girl. You get your happily ever after. And I get to

watch my best friend, the man that I love, marry another woman.”

“There’s someone else out there—”

“Don’t start,” she snapped as she held up her hand and stood. “I can’t deal with this right now.”

“Maybe you need to. Maybe you need to talk to someone.”

“Who? You?”

“A professional, Sky.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So you do think I’m crazy.”

“No, and there’s no shame in going to therapy.”

She shook her head. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll get over it. Let’s just go to the party.”

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Gus didn't seem convinced, but he moved out of her way as she closed her office door and quietly accompanied her to the rooftop terrace.

The elevator doors opened to the lively event, and Skylar left Gus's side and headed for the nearest waiter, taking a glass of champagne. All she wanted was to go hide in her spot away from the guests. Well, what she really wanted was to be home, under her comforter, watching Netflix, escaping the woes of life.

She looked down at her outfit—an old ratty v-neck T-shirt and jeans with holes in the knees. Classy. Had she even combed her hair before pulling it up in a messy bun? Her face was without makeup. Her teeth were unbrushed. When was the last time she'd showered? She couldn't find it within herself to care.

She hadn't planned to attend the party tonight. She'd only stopped by the office to catch up on some work she'd missed the past few days, thinking she'd be gone before anyone arrived for the party.

Her eyes scanned the crowd, and she spotted her mom, who was headed her way.

“Happy Fourth, sweetie.” Mom wrapped her up in a tight hug. “Are you doing okay?”

“I'm fine.” She leaned away, moving out of Mom's embrace.

“You haven't been to breakfast lately, and your brother said you've missed some work. I've tried calling.”



“I know. I’m sorry, Mom. I had a summer cold, and I’ve been feeling a little run down, that’s all. I’ll come next Saturday for breakfast. I promise.”

“We would like that.” Mom gave her a loving smile, but she couldn’t hide the look of concern.

“I’m gonna mingle.” Skylar pointed toward some of the other guests.

“All right. Have fun.”

Skylar forced a closed-mouth smile and moved on across the space. When she reached her spot, she took a seat on the ledge. There would be no mingling. She hated mingling anyway, and she was sure Mom had seen right through that.

Lying to Mom didn’t feel good. There had been no summer cold. Skipping work had been happening more often lately, and Gus was right. It wasn’t like her. She used to love coming to the office, but while she still loved her job, she struggled to get out of bed some mornings. She hadn’t been sleeping well, thanks in part to the nightmares that had plagued her since Montana. She regretted avoiding family breakfasts lately too, but she couldn’t pretend that everything was okay. She’d been feeling low for months, moving through her days with no real joy, indifferent about decisions, apathetic to everything in her life. She was in a funk, and she needed to get out of it, but she didn’t know how. In her mind, she knew she needed to shake it off and move on, but she felt stuck in her emotions.

Maybe Gus was right. Maybe she needed to talk to someone.

She hadn’t summoned the courage to fully walk away from Franky yet, though she knew she needed to. They hadn’t seen each other much in the past few months, but they texted sometimes and talked on the phone occasionally, and she pretended all was normal, even though she was miserable.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath in and let it out. The sounds of the band floated across the roof to her. It was the same band that had been there last year, and she smiled, remembering Franky taking the stage, playing the keyboard like a pro, and thoroughly impressing the guests. It was hard to think about last year and all that had happened since. That had been the beginning of the happiest time in their friendship, but now it was all over.

Familiar notes made their way to her ears, and Skylar perked up.

She kept listening, and sure enough, it was “You’re the Inspiration”—the song Franky had sung years ago at the gala but refused to sing last year. The introduction played on, and she laughed to herself. But then the lead vocalist began to sing, and Skylar’s mood shifted.

No, it couldn’t be.

She hopped down and moved at a steady pace toward the stage, her heart racing in her chest. She practically came to a screeching halt at what she found. Franky Middlebury stood center stage with microphone in hand, singing “You’re the Inspiration.” He didn’t notice Skylar, but she couldn’t take her eyes off of him. The first verse ended and went into the chorus, and he pointed out into the crowd as he sang the lyrics. Skylar looked to where his finger was pointing and spotted Ivy’s beaming face. She felt crushed by the weight of her grief, unable to move from her spot, as she watched him sing. And when the song was over and the applause began, he left the stage and swept Ivy onto the dance floor, holding her close, kissing her sweetly.

Skylar felt as if she was having an out of body experience. She needed to get out of there, as far away from this place as she could. Far away from Franky and Ivy and their painful display of affection.

She turned and walked as quickly as she could, pushing through the crowd, accidentally knocking a glass from someone's hand.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"It's okay, Skylar."

She stopped and turned back to a familiar face. "Luca? What are you doing here?"

"Your dad invites our family every year. I happened to be in town this time." He looked at her curiously. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"I just need to get out of here."

"I'll go with you."

"I think I need to be alone."

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“But do you, really?” He raised an eyebrow at her.

Her eyes flitted to Franky and Ivy again then back at Luca, who seemed to understand without words that she needed a friend.

He took her arm and gently led her to the elevator exit. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

The patriotic music playing at the park along the Grand River floated on the light breeze, and fireworks went off above the city as Skylar and Luca walked around downtown. Luca was a good listener, and Skylar found herself spilling her guts about everything once again.

“It must be hard to see him with someone else,” he said.

“It’s excruciating.”

“I’m sorry you’re hurting.”

“Thanks. I know I need to let go. We’ve never been a couple, and this crush of mine is ridiculous.”

Luca took her hand as he spoke. “Hey, it’s not ridiculous. You can’t help who you fall in love with, right?”

She looked over at him and smiled. “Right.” It was strange holding Luca’s hand, but she needed someone to hold onto right now. “My family’s worried about me. I’ve

been skipping out on work and avoiding people. And Franky knows this is all weird for me, that I'm not a fan of Ivy, but he asked me to take engagement pictures for them anyway."

"He did what now?" Luca's eyes widened.

"You heard me."

"Now that is ridiculous."

"Well, he doesn't know I'm in love with him. Why wouldn't his best friend, who loves photography, want to do that for him?"

"That's messed up."

"We're supposed to meet next week, but I don't think I can do it."

"And you shouldn't."

"If I back out, he'll wonder why."

"So what. You don't owe him an explanation. If he's clueless enough not to notice what's going on with you then that's on him. And what kind of guy would pass up a chance to be with you?"

"Luca ..." A shy smile crossed her face.

"It's the truth. Ivy is a beautiful girl, but he's a fool for letting you get away."

"He obviously never had feelings for me other than friendship, and I never told him how I felt, so there wasn't really a situation where he let me get away."

“He’s still an idiot.”

“Stop.” Skylar laughed, and Luca laughed along with her. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed, and it felt good.

“You have a nice laugh,” he commented. “And a beautiful smile.”

“Gosh, Luca, make a girl blush, why don’t you.”

He shrugged and smiled as they walked on, making their way to the Blue Bridge, where they maneuvered through the crowd of people departing the fireworks show. Skylar stepped up to the railing and looked out at the river before her.

“I feel like I need to get away for a while, clear my head, talk to God, that sort of thing.”

“You should come up to the winery.”

“I’m sure it’s all booked up this time of year.”

“You can stay at my place.”

A nervous laugh escaped her. “I need alone time, Luca.”

“I know you do. I won’t be there. I’m going to Italy for the rest of the summer to stay with my uncle and work at the family vineyard.”

“Oh.”

“If you want it, it’s yours.”

Her heart warmed at his generosity. “I’ll think about it.”

He nodded.

“Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I mean it. I can’t tell you how much your kindness tonight meant to me.” She moved toward him and opened her arms to hug him, and he pulled her right in. And for the first time in months, there was a glimmer of happiness in her heart.

Summer at the winery might be exactly what she needed.

THIRTY-THREE

What do you mean, she's gone?"

Franky stared dumbfounded at the old covered bridge before him. He and Ivy had been waiting there for Skylar to take their engagement pictures, but when she didn't show and he couldn't get ahold of her, he called Gus. Hearing that Skylar had left town was not what he expected.

"Where did she go?" he asked.

Gus was silent for several beats.

"Gus? Is she okay?" His mind went to all the worst places. "She's not sick or something, is she?"

"No, it's nothing like that. She took a leave of absence for the rest of the summer ... for personal reasons."

Franky was filled with a sudden mix of emotions, which he could barely process—worry, sadness, anger. He had so many questions. Why had she left without telling him? If she knew she was leaving, why wouldn't she cancel their photo session and reschedule? How long would she be gone? What if she didn't come back? And most important of all ... why did she leave?

Ivy groaned beside him. "This is totally unacceptable. What a waste of our time. I have a case I need to be working on."

He barely noticed as she marched to the car. All he wanted was information about Skylar. "Did she tell you why she left? I really need to know."

"If she wanted you to know, she would've told you," Gus replied.



“But you know, right?”

“I can’t break my sister’s trust, Franky. You know that.”

Franky let out a breath. “Okay, I get it.”

“Sorry, man.”

They said goodbye and hung up, but Franky didn’t move. He felt like screaming. He felt like throwing his phone into the river. He felt like crying.

The honk of the car horn startled him, and he looked over at an impatient Ivy. He understood that she had work to do, but now was one of those times that required a little more sympathy than she was giving him.

He decided not to throw his phone in the river after all and sent Skylar a text instead.

Franky: Sky, what’s going on? Gus told me you left town. Is everything OK?

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:17 am*

He stared at the screen. Message delivered. But there was no reply. A sense of foreboding came over him. Why did he suddenly feel like he was about to lose her forever?

When Franky got home, he plopped down on the couch and leaned his head back. If he closed his eyes, the exhaustion of this emotional day would take over, and he wasn't ready to stop trying to reach Skylar. Throughout the evening, he texted her but still received no reply. His phone showed "read" under his messages, and it annoyed him that she'd left him hanging.

Franky: I'm worried about you. Are you OK?

Franky: Please talk to me. Don't shut me out.

Franky: You know I'm always here for you.

When days of texts didn't work, he resorted to email, which she knew was his least favorite form of communication.

From: Franky

To: Skylar

Date: July 20

Subject: The strongest woman I know!

Dear Sky,

You know how much I love writing long emails (can you hear my sarcasm?), but I feel like this situation calls for more than a brief text, and you aren't responding to any of those so ...

I've been thinking a lot about our friendship tonight. If it wasn't for you, I might still be wallowing in self-pity over Fiona leaving me. And you know it wasn't like she was even the greatest girlfriend. I never thought of her as the love of my life or anything like that. It was just being dumped the way I was. (Humiliating much?)

Is that how you feel about our friendship? Like I ditched you for someone else?

Last summer was the best of my life. Truly. I loved how close we were, and I know things started to change after your birthday party. (Dun, dun, dun!) Looking back, I think that was the moment when everything shifted, and it's all my fault for making things awkward between us, for ruining the special friendship we had.

But Skylar, you are truly my best friend. I've told you things I've never told anyone, and I've always felt like I can be completely honest with you. I thought you felt the same way, but maybe you don't anymore.

And now that you're gone, there is a Skylar-shaped hole in my heart and life that I will never be able to fill with anyone else. (Not even Ivy.)

I miss you. Please write me back.

Love always,

Franky

P.S. I will also accept a text or phone call. ;)

Nine days had passed since Franky learned of Skylar leaving town. Nine days of unanswered phone calls, texts, and emails. Nine days of worrying and overthinking, wondering why she wasn't speaking to him. Had she shut everyone out of her life or only him?

Being left in the dark was driving him crazy, and he was deeply concerned. He worried about her when he woke up in the morning. He worried as he went through his day, moving through meetings and cases and court appearances. He worried about her when his head hit the pillow every night, and it was starting to affect his sleep. Until one day, he could take it no more.

Franky dialed a number on his phone, and a groggy voice answered.

"Dude, why are you calling at one o'clock in the morning?"

"Gus, I need to know where she is. Please."

"Franky, I told you. She needs this time alone."

"I can't sleep. I'm so worried about her. It's making me crazy. I'm begging you."

There was a rustling noise, and Merritt's voice came on the phone. "She's okay, Franky. Trust me. Just give her some time."

"I don't like this. At all. Please at least tell me where she's staying so I can send her flowers or something."

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:17 am*

“I don’t think that would be a good idea right now.”

“When are flowers not a good idea?”

Merritt was quiet.

“Whatever. Thanks for nothing.” He hung up, knowing it was rude, but the frustration was taking over. Why wouldn’t anyone tell him what was going on with her? They were giving him nothing. Not even scraps of information. But he was determined to use his lawyerly investigative skills to figure out where she was.

Everyone he spoke to the next day was tightlipped. He even attempted to talk to Gerard, but he was loyal to the Schultz family and wouldn’t divulge Skylar’s location either.

On his final attempt, he spoke to Skylar’s assistant, Joy, who told him Skylar was up north at the winery, working remotely, and would be out of the office until at least the end of August.

The winery! Of course.

He immediately dropped what he was doing, canceled meetings for the next couple days, and began making plans to head north. After work, he raced home, packed a bag, then called Merritt.

“Hello, Franky,” she answered. “I’m not telling you where she is.”

“I already know she’s at the winery.”

“What? Who told you?”

“Her assistant.”

“Ugh. Traitor.”

“I sweet-talked her a little,” Franky said with a chuckle, “and she knows Skylar is my best friend.”

“I knew you weren’t going to give up,” she replied.

“I need to know if she’s staying at the winery or elsewhere. I didn’t want to call around town, trying to find her, and tip her off that I’m coming. I want to surprise her.”

“Uh ... no, she’s not at the inn.”

“Where’s she staying? A hotel?”

Merritt paused for so long, he thought the signal might have dropped. “She’s staying at Luca’s.”

Franky’s heart plummeted at this news. “What?”

“Franky, I really don’t think you should go up there right now.”

“She’s with Luca?”

“All I can tell you is that she needs this time away. Please let her have it.”

“Right. Got it,” he grumbled and hung up.

So, that’s what this was about. She was with Luca. He didn’t understand why she hadn’t told him about her new relationship or why it was so secretive, but all the worry he’d had over her flew out the window and was quickly replaced with another emotion of the green-eyed monster variety.

## THIRTY-FOUR

The warm yellow glow of the late August sunrise colored the tops of the grapevines as Skylar walked along the dirt path, taking in the beauty. It had become a daily tradition for her these past couple of months, a new habit she knew she would miss when she returned to Grand Rapids. She could keep up the morning walks at home, of course, but it wouldn’t be the same.

Luca’s place, it turned out, was a loft apartment above the detached garage at his parents’ house, which was situated on a plot of land that butted up against the vineyard. The Zanettis had bought the land from Dad when the winery was new so they could live close to work.

The apartment was on the cozy side, but it was all she needed, and being able to get up, throw on a sweater, grab a mug of coffee, and walk out on the property was the best thing about it. It was the perfect escape for her this summer, and it had done her a world of good, though the ache in her heart hadn’t fully subsided.

As nice as it had been to get away and heal, she knew all along that this was only temporary. Soon, she’d have to face Franky and Ivy again. There would be no escaping them in the long term. Franky was like family. He was Bash’s best friend ... her friend. Their parents were close. He chose Ivy, and they would be in her life forever. It was just a fact. One she’d have to find a way to live with.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am*

Skylar sipped her coffee as she made her way to an outdoor table at the winery café, where Rose and Izzy were seated with coffee and scones.

“Good morning,” they both said as Skylar joined them.

“Morning.”

The women chatted as they ate and sipped, and the breeze swept up the hill, over the vines, moving Skylar’s hair gently, rejuvenating her soul.

“Do you think it was selfish of me to leave home like I did?” Skylar asked.

Izzy’s mouth fell open in disbelief as she stared at Skylar. “Are you kidding? Everyone has times in their lives when they should be focusing on themselves. This was your time.”

“I’m not sure my family fully understands, and I feel like some pathetic girl who ran away because of a boy.”

“You ran away for your health,” Rose told her.

Izzy tucked her blonde hair behind her ear and set her coffee mug down. “Are you afraid of what people will think of you?”

“I guess I’ve always come across as this strong and capable woman. I have an important job, and a lot of people rely on me to be a leader. But inside, I don’t always feel very strong. And the sadness I felt about Franky’s engagement ... I couldn’t



shake it, and I knew I needed to do something.”

Rose reached over and laid her hand atop Skylar’s and squeezed. Her kind blue eyes were filled with comfort. “The fact that you recognized what was happening and took steps to heal is important. Roberto went through a period of deep depression when we were younger.”

“He did?” Skylar asked.

“He had left his home country to come here, knew nobody except me. It was a new and different culture. He was homesick and very down. Some days, I didn’t know if he would ever get back to the happy man I married. But then he started working for your dad, and they formed a friendship. Things got better once he found his purpose.”

“You never told me that, Mama,” Izzy said.

“It’s not something we’ve talked about much outside of our marriage, but I think it’s important to share our story if it will help others along the way.” She looked at Skylar again. “Have you thought about talking to someone, a counselor? They can help you make sense of your thoughts and feelings.”

“I’ve been going to a counselor in Traverse City since I’ve been here, actually. It’s been helpful. I’m working on it.”

“That’s wonderful,” Rose said.

“One of the things I’ve struggled with is nightmares about people drowning, specifically people that I love. I’ve learned that dreams like that can mean something is beyond your control, that you’re unable to do a thing to alter the outcome. That’s pretty accurate in my situation. And ever since I opened up about my nightmares, they’ve been happening less and less frequently.”

“That’s awesome,” Izzy said. “So you really have made some good progress this summer.”

“I think so,” Skylar replied. “And I’m learning how to look at my past with Franky and appreciate the time we spent together instead of letting the weight of the memories and my unmet expectations crush me.”

Her counselor had helped immensely with that, encouraging Skylar to let her thoughts and memories of Franky come, to feel whatever emotions they brought, then release them rather than cling to them with all her might and hold them inside, as she had been. She was learning how to let go a little at a time.

“You are a special person, Skylar,” Rose told her. “I can tell you have a lot of love to give, and I believe finding the best version of you and being happy with yourself is the best thing you can do to prepare yourself for your perfect match, and I’m going to pray you find him.”

Skylar smiled. “Pray for sooner rather than later.”

“You and me both,” Izzy added.

They laughed together, and Skylar felt lighter than she had in months.

“Thank you both for everything. You’ve helped me so much this summer.” The friendship of the Zanetti women had meant everything to Skylar. They had been there for her in a way she hadn’t expected, and she would be forever grateful.

“I’m so glad,” Izzy replied.

“It was our pleasure.” Rose smiled.

“I’ve spent a lot of years waiting for happiness to come from someone else when I should’ve been working on myself first. I think I’m going to focus on me for a while. It’s long overdue.”

She would always hold Franky in her heart, but it was time to move on. It was time to finally let him go.

### THIRTY-FIVE

Time crawled by. Days dragged on. Not unusual for Franky's normal workdays, but this felt so much worse. His heart ached. His mind was anywhere but on work, and he couldn't have cared less. Every moment knowing Skylar was staying up north with Luca was making him crazy. He thought of little else. Was she happy? Was she falling in love with him? Were they walking the vineyard together, holding hands, while Franky sat in his stuffy office, looking over notes from boring depositions? What if she stayed there with Luca permanently?

Skylar's face appeared in his mind—her warm brown eyes, that beautiful smile, those soft pink lips. His heart stuttered, remembering the kiss they'd shared in the wine cellar. And this wasn't the first time he'd thought about it since that night. He had wanted to kiss her. For a long time. Since that night in the pool all those years ago and so many times since.

He should've been reading the email that was open on his computer screen, but it was a blur in front of him. Instead, he recalled that warm August night before he started law school. He hadn't forgotten that summer when he'd first seen Skylar as more than a friend. Every once in a while, that night in the pool would pop into his mind, and he'd wonder what might've happened if he'd gone ahead and kissed her before Sebastian showed up. He'd never entertained the idea of dating her. But now that the thought was in his head, he couldn't get it out.

He missed her. He needed her. He was miserable without her, and it took her walking out of his life for him to realize he had been for a long time.

“Knock, knock.” Ivy stood in his office doorway, tapping on the open door.

Nervousness and guilt overcame him. “Hey, are you ready for lunch?” he stammered.

She shook her head. “I know we were supposed to go out with Sebastian, but I am swamped. Will you be terribly upset if I can’t make it?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll give him your apologies.”

She walked over, circling the desk, and leaned down to plant a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you. Have fun.”

He watched her walk out of the office, and relief flooded him.

Ivy was a great girl, but there was so much he didn’t know about her. So much she didn’t know about him. At times, he felt as if he was marrying a stranger, and he knew it wasn’t supposed to feel like that.

He turned off his computer and headed out to the restaurant to meet Sebastian, who was in town for the weekend. As he drove, his mind kept recalling Skylar’s words.

You have so much talent, and I know you can use that and find something you’ll be excited to do for the rest of your life.

Skylar believed in him. She understood his hopes and dreams. Ivy didn’t take his songwriting seriously, and she thought he should put more focus on his job.

The biggest problem in their relationship was that she wasn’t Skylar.

His hands shook as he walked into the restaurant.

“Hey, man.” Sebastian greeted him with a hug. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Franky answered.

Sebastian let go and looked him over as they took their seats. “You look like crap.”

“Gee, thanks.” Franky smirked.

“You look tired, that’s all. Are you okay?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“What’s up? Talk to me.” Sebastian took a drink of his water.

“I’m in love with your sister.”

Sebastian started coughing as the water went down the wrong tube, and Franky patted him on the back.

“Take another drink,” he said, trying to help.

Sebastian coughed several more times before recovering. “I’m sorry, did you say you’re in love with my sister?”

Franky’s fingers raked through his hair. “I think I am.”

“You think you are, or you are?”

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am*

“I am.” Franky grinned. “But I don’t know what to do about it because she’s up north for the summer with Luca.” He dropped his forehead to the table.

“Luca? That’s news to me.”

“Merritt told me. She’s staying at his place.”

Sebastian’s face screwed up, and he shook his head, dumbfounded.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I feel like I should remind you that you’re supposed to be getting married in a couple months.”

“I know, man. I know.”

“But you don’t want to?”

“Ivy is a wonderful woman. But since we got engaged ... no, since before your wedding, I’ve been feeling like something was missing, and I finally realized what it is.”

Sebastian waited quietly for the reveal.

“Skylar is my best friend. She knows me better than anyone. I don’t have that kind of relationship with Ivy. She’s great and all, but we barely knew each other before I proposed. And with Skylar ... she just gets me. She supports me and encourages me.

She wants my happiness above her own. She knows what I need when I don't. And I'm such an idiot for not seeing that sooner."

Sebastian pursed his lips.

"What?" Franky asked.

"This is my sister we're talking about."

"I know it is."

"You remember our earlier conversation, right?"

"Yes, but things are different. I know what I want now."

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. "Do you? Because that's not what it looks like from where I'm sitting."

"Trust me, Bash. This isn't some rash decision. I've been thinking about nothing but her for weeks."

"How am I supposed to trust you? You say you're in love with my sister, yet you're engaged to another woman."

"I've had feelings for Skylar for a long time, but I was afraid to admit them to you because you know me. You know my history. I knew you wouldn't approve, so I tried to ignore them."

Sebastian lowered his head.

"But then I kissed her, and I freaked out because I was so scared I'd mess things up



and she'd leave me, so I put up walls so I could move on and keep her friendship. But everything was messed up after that anyway.

“Then I met Ivy. I didn't expect it to get serious so quickly, but I thought she might be my chance to finally make a relationship work and keep Skylar's friendship. But that didn't work either. Because I don't truly love Ivy, and I don't want to be just friends with Skylar. And every minute that passes, I feel like I'm losing my chance to be with her.”

Sebastian stared down at his glass. “Man, I had no idea you felt that way.” He looked up at Franky. “I feel like this is partly my fault.”

“You were being a good brother, and I don't fault you for that. If I had a sister, I would've done the same thing.”

“You know I'll side with my sister in a heartbeat if things don't work out between you two.”

Franky eyed him. “Are you saying you'd be okay with me and Sky? Because I know I could make her happy.”

Sebastian quieted for several long moments, putting Franky's nerves on high alert. And then he smiled. “I would.”

“Really?”

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am*

“If you’re serious about her, and you have no doubts that she’s the one you want to be with, I can get behind that.”

Franky felt unexpectedly choked up. “That ... that means everything to me, Bash. Thank you.” He swallowed hard. “I don’t even know how Sky feels about me. And I don’t know what I’ll do if she and Luca have gotten serious this summer.” His hands were in his hair again, and he was sure he would start going bald from how much he’d been yanking on it lately.

“I haven’t heard anything about her and Luca all summer. Maybe it’s nothing.”

“I just need to talk to her.”

“What are you going to do?” Sebastian asked.

“I’m going to tear down all the walls.”

Piece by piece, Franky chucked his clothing across the room at his open duffle bag. He was tied up in knots and unsure what he was going to say when he reached the winery, but he had to go. He needed to see her, to tell her what was on his mind, and if she was with Luca now, he would have to accept that. But at least she would know how he felt.

His cell phone rang as he was packing, and the knotted up feeling grew stronger. He took a seat on his bed, took a deep breath, and answered.

“Hey, Ivy. I was just going to call you.”

“How was lunch?”

“It was good. Always nice to see Bash.”

“I’m on my way over.”

“Okay.” He had already planned to swing by her place before he left. He couldn’t go to Skylar until he made things right with Ivy.

“I’ll be there in about an hour.”

Franky sat on the bed, staring out his window. An hour would give him a little time to consider what it was he wanted to say. He hated the thought of hurting Ivy, but now that he’d admitted the truth to himself and Sebastian, he needed to man up and finally be honest. He didn’t want to marry her. His proposal had been rash and sudden, and he was pretty sure they both knew it, but they’d gotten swept up in the romance of Sebastian and Genevieve’s wedding.

His mind wandered to memories of Skylar at the wedding. She had looked stunning that night. But he’d shoved those thoughts down because of Ivy. Now, he let himself think about her, about their dance at the reception, and then he was thinking about all the time they’d spent together over the past year. The open mic night at Carmichael’s suddenly popped into his head. He wasn’t sure he remembered all the lyrics of the song he’d written her, but he started humming the tune, and it quickly came back to him.

He stood and headed for his home office like he was on a mission. Plopping down at his desk, he opened the drawer and pulled out the page Ivy had ripped from the legal pad with the lyrics on it and jotted down the rest that he could remember. He tweaked them here and there, adding a few extra lines that held more meaning.

Just as he was getting into his songwriting groove, he heard the doorbell.

His eyes closed for a moment, and he reluctantly left the song behind and went to answer it.

Ivy stood on his doorstep with a smile on her face. Once inside, she lay her hand on his chest and leaned in for a kiss, which he turned away from at the last moment.

Her brow furrowed. “What’s the matter?”

He lowered his head for a beat before looking her in the eye. “Ivy, we need to talk.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “That’s never a sentence a girl wants to hear.”

Franky motioned toward the couch, and she hesitantly walked over and sat down. He sat in the chair beside her and took a deep breath.

“You’re an amazing woman, Ivy Prescott—”

Ivy held her hand up between them. “I’m going to stop you right there.”

He watched as she straightened her back and lifted her chin.

“I’ve seen this coming for a while, and I can’t say I’m surprised,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Something’s been off with you for the past couple months, ever since you found out Skylar left town.”

“I was worried about her.”

“I know you were, and I know it’s because you’re in love with her.”

Franky’s mouth fell open.

“I’m not blind, Francis. I could always see the connection between the two of you, but I wanted to believe you were being truthful when you said there was nothing more. I should’ve followed my instincts about this from the start and not let things get this far.”

Franky’s chin fell. “I’m really sorry for not being honest with you sooner, Ivy. I wasn’t even being honest with myself about Skylar until now. And I’m a horrible guy for hurting you like this.”

She looked pensive. “It’s strange, really. I don’t feel that upset, and I definitely don’t think you’re a horrible guy. I think you were just misguided.”

He shook his head. “You’re being way too nice to me, considering the circumstances.”

“Well, we do have to work together, so I’d rather we part on good terms.”

Franky stared at her in awe. “I was right when I said you’re an amazing woman, Ivy Prescott.”

Ivy gave him a little closed-mouth smile. “I should probably go.” She stood and

walked toward the door and stopped halfway, turning back to look at him.

Franky stood as she lifted her hand and looked at the engagement ring then slid it off of her finger and held it out to him.

He walked over and took it back.

“Good luck, Francis.”

“You too, Ivy.”

THIRTY-SIX

Sky, there’s a package for you.” Izzy held up a small padded envelope.

“Who’s it from?”

She flipped it over and shrugged her shoulders. “It came Same-Day by courier from Grand Rapids.”

“Okay, thanks. Gus probably sent me something for work.” She took the envelope and headed across the property to the apartment.

Once inside, she made herself a sandwich for lunch and sat by the window that overlooked the rows and rows of vines. She glanced over at the package and thought about work.

She had missed her job. She hadn’t realized how much she loved being a part of the family company until she was away from it. For a while there, she thought she might need to leave it behind, that she couldn’t give the job the attention it needed. She even considered moving up north to the winery. Not that they really needed help, but they

had told her when she first arrived that they always had a place for her if she wanted to stay. While the process did fascinate her, she realized rather quickly that it wasn't for her. Seeing the package from Gus gave her a nudge that told her it might be time to head home.

She took care of her plate and sat down to open her mail, saving the package for last. But inside was nothing Schultz-related. It was a pink envelope and a flash drive. And her heart skipped a beat when she saw her name in Franky's handwriting on the card.

She closed her eyes and took a slow breath in, letting all the nervousness she felt out on a slow exhale. Then she tore open the envelope.

It was a cheesy card with a cartoon and a sentiment about friendship. He hadn't added much to the card except three words that shattered her heart.

I miss you.

Her hands were shaking as she took the flash drive to her laptop and pressed it into the USB port on the side. The drive opened on her screen, and she clicked on a file entitled "For Skylar."

Her audio program opened immediately, and a familiar song began to play—the impromptu song Franky had written for her at the karaoke bar that night so long ago.

Only as she listened, she noticed he had added a verse and changed some of the lyrics.

Firelight and moonbeams

Best friends and big dreams

## Page 110

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am*

Whatever life brings

My heart always sings

When you're with me

Because all I have to do

Is look at you

And life is better

Life is brighter

All I have to do

Is look at you

I love you, Skylar

You make my life brighter

She should've stopped the player as soon as she heard Franky's voice, but she couldn't bring herself to click the button. By the time the last note played, she was in tears. The new lyrics were sweet and all, but her heart broke all over again—for the future they would never have and for the demise of their friendship. Her therapist had encouraged her to end it, to get much-needed closure so she could finally move on.



She dreaded having that conversation with him, but now that she'd received this song, she knew she had to.

A knock at her door startled her, and she desperately wiped at her face.

"Just a second," she called out as she ran to the bathroom.

Another knock.

"Be right there," she cried.

She did her best to look presentable and rushed to the door, unlocking and opening it as quickly as she could.

"Sorry about tha—" Shock jolted through her at the sight of Franky, standing at her door, looking as handsome as ever.

"Sky, what's wrong? Have you been crying?" Franky stepped into her, wrapping her up in his arms.

She held onto him for dear life, inhaling his scent, soaking in what would probably be the last hug they ever shared. "What are you doing here?" she mumbled.

He let go and brushed a tear from her cheek. "I needed to see you." His eyes darted around the apartment behind her before returning to meet hers. "Is Luca here?"

Skylar's brow scrunched up. "No."

"Good, then we can talk. Can I come in?" He glanced back and chuckled. "I mean, I guess I'm already in."

Skylar stepped aside and closed the door as he moved into the room.

He looked around, taking in the space. “Did you take those for Luca?” He pointed at the black and white photographs of the vineyard and closeups of the grapes that Luca had hanging on the wall above his couch.

“No. They’re great pictures, though.”

His eyes continued to scan the decor, moving over the mishmash of furniture and landing on a ratty old reading chair in the corner. “Not really your taste, is it?”

“It’s not mine to decorate,” she replied.

“I’m sure you’ll add your own touch eventually.”

Her face screwed up. “What do you mean?”

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“I never thought you’d shack up with a guy so quickly.” He looked at her for a second. “Doesn’t seem like you.”

Her stomach sank. “Franky, what is it you think is going on here?”

“Merritt said you were staying with Luca.”

Now things were starting to make sense. Her sister-in-law, always trying to play matchmaker.

“I mean, I saw the way he looked at you at your birthday.”

She rolled her eyes. “This again.”

“Are you in love with him?”

“I told you. Luca and I are friends. That hasn’t changed.”

Franky’s eyes darted to hers. “It hasn’t?”

“No.”

“But you’re staying here. I just assumed—”

“Don’t.”

His eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Don’t make judgments and assumptions. Straight out ask me what you want to know, and then go.”

“Sky.” His lips turned down in a frown.

“I’ve been working really hard on myself while I’ve been here, working through a lot of things, and you coming here out of the blue ... it’s threatening to erase all the progress I’ve made. So please, what do you want, Franky?”

“Are you with Luca now?”

“I told you I’m not.”

“So, nothing happened with him this summer?”

“It couldn’t have, even if I wanted it to.” She noticed him cringe slightly when she said that. “Luca’s been in Italy since before I arrived. He offered me his place for the summer so I could get away and figure some things out.”

“Oh.” A smile crossed his face. “Good.”

“Why is that good?”

His eyes suddenly landed on the opened envelope on the table. “Hey, you got it!”

“Today,” she replied.

“Did you like it?” His eyes searched hers.

“You know I love that you wrote me a song.”

“Did you listen to the whole thing?”

“Y-yes.” She fought back tears again, remembering the new lyrics.

Franky moved closer again, and the breath almost left Skylar’s lungs at the sudden rush of longing for him. Her hand lifted automatically, held between them, to stop him from coming too close.

“I meant every word, Sky.”

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She hadn't expected this. She was letting go, moving on, and now, he was suddenly here, telling her sweet things, making her hope. "I can't do this anymore, Franky. We can't be friends."

"What? Why not?" The look of devastation on his face nearly broke her.

"It's too hard." She stared at her hand, afraid to look at him, afraid she would take it back.

He tilted his head, trying to make eye contact, and she finally gave in. "I don't want to be friends either, Sky."

Her confusion was at an all-time high. "I don't understand."

"I love you, Skylar, and I'm tired of ignoring my feelings for you. I'm tired of pretending I haven't wanted to kiss you since that night in your pool all those years ago. And that night in the wine cellar, I wasn't drunk. I kissed you because I was so jealous of you and Luca, I could barely see straight."

Her heart stuttered in her chest, and she swallowed the lump in her throat as her hand fell to her side.

"I've been lost for the past eight months, and I couldn't figure out why things felt so wrong. Then I realized it was when our friendship started to crumble, that I lost my touchstone, the bright spot in my days, my best friend. You're everything to me, Sky. It took you disappearing from my life and the thought of losing you to someone else to wake up and see I already had everything I ever wanted in you. "

He stepped closer to her and softly touched her cheek with his fingertips. “I don’t want to be just friends anymore ... because I’m in love with you, Skylar. I have been for a long time, but I never let my heart go there with you. Because of Sebastian. Because of our friendship. Because of my crappy track record with women and my relationship fears. But I’m here now. And I want to be with you.”

Skylar couldn’t find her words. This was the most unexpected thing that ever could’ve happened. Tears filled her eyes and a sob escaped her, and Franky took her in his arms and let her cry on his shoulder. His words were everything she’d needed to hear, and in all those moments she thought she’d read too much into, she felt completely validated. It hadn’t been all in her head after all.

“Is this real?” she whimpered.

He let go and took her face in his hands. “Real as sunshine and summer breeze, fireworks and ice cream ...”

She giggled as he recited lyrics from the song he’d written her.

“Road trips and wineries.” He shook his head. “I don’t know why I thought ice cream and wineries even came close to rhyming.”

She chuckled, and he gave her an adoring smile.

“Do you want to be with me, Sky?” he asked.

A smile was all she could reply with, and it must’ve been answer enough because Franky slid an arm around behind her waist and pulled her close to him. Her heart raced as she was enveloped in his warmth, and his breath softly whispered across her face as his lips approached hers. She couldn’t believe this was actually happening, but then it did.

Franky's lips pressed softly to hers, and at once, everything clicked into place. It felt more right than anything ever had. She sighed as he kissed her again and again, until they were carried away in the most perfect kiss she had ever experienced.

And then Skylar remembered ... and she jerked back.

"What about Ivy?"

Franky leaned back to look her in the eye. "We broke off our engagement."

A slow smile spread across Skylar's face.

"And you were right, Sky. I can't stay at the firm. I would be settling for something I don't want."

"So, you're leaving then?"

"Dad won't be happy, but it's time."

Skylar attacked him with a gigantic hug, and he laughed. "I'm so happy for you and so excited to see what you do next."

He squeezed her tightly and brushed his lips against her cheek on the way to her ear. "I think I'll do this next." He kissed her neck. "And this." His lips touched below her ear and caused her to giggle. "I was wrong, Sky," he whispered. "Nobody gets me like you do."

Chills ran up her spine as he planted soft kisses across her cheek on a return trip to her mouth, but then he paused, causing her to look at him.

"Why did you leave town, Skylar?"



Now that he'd told her his feelings, she needed to be honest about hers. "I couldn't be around you and Ivy. It hurt too much. I had to come here to get over you."

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One of his eyebrows lifted in a flirtatious way, and Skylar's heart pitter-pattered in her chest. "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Because I didn't think you felt anything more than friendship for me, and I was scared of losing you and what we had."

He brushed a hair back from her face. "So, you love me, huh?"

Her cheeks warmed, and her lips spread into a shy smile.

"I knew it all along."

She rolled her eyes. "You did not."

He chuckled. "I mean, I always felt the chemistry between us, but I did my best to ignore it."

"I've loved you since I was thirteen years old," she admitted.

His mouth fell open at that. "Are you serious?"

She nodded. "I tried to date other people, and we know how badly that all turned out."

He growled at her subtle hint at Milton.

"I never thought you'd see me as anything more than a friend, and my heart broke

every time you dated someone else. But when you actually met someone you were serious about, I felt more heartbroken than I ever had with any of your other girlfriends. Maybe because of how close we got last year. I don't know. I've spent the past couple months alone with my thoughts, praying, going to therapy, figuring out how to accept the reality of my life without you in it, and learning to be okay with that. I was ready to move away for good if I had to so I'd have some distance."

He kept her close, softly caressing her back as she talked.

"I didn't expect you to come here. I never thought ..." She broke down in tears again, and he brought her head to his shoulder and kept his hand there, running his fingers gently through her hair.

"I knew I felt something for you," he said, "but I was so afraid it wouldn't work out, and the thought of you walking out of my life was unacceptable, so I drew the line between us." He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get over myself and do the right thing. But now that I have, there's no going back for me."

She lifted her head to look at him, and he cupped her cheek, brushing her tears away with his thumb.

Franky smiled. "I know what I want, and it's you, Skylar. Only you. What do you think of that?"

Skylar's heart felt as if it might burst in her chest. She answered by sliding her arms around Franky's neck and kissing him as if her life depended on it.

When their lips eventually parted, he leaned his forehead against hers. "Good answer."

A giggle escaped her, and he chuckled, and then they were both laughing and hugging and kissing.

Skylar leaned back to look him in the eyes. “I love you, Franky.”

The grin he gave her was bigger than any she’d ever seen on his face before. “I love you too.”

## EPILOGUE

Since Franky’s declaration of love at the end of August, they’d been inseparable. It was as if they had always been together, and the friendship they had built blended perfectly into the relationship they were exploring. Getting to be in his arms and kiss him all the time was better than any daydream Skylar had ever had over the years. And the best thing was they weren’t taking things slow or easing into the relationship. They were all in from the start, and that felt amazing.

In October, they returned to the winery for a weekend together, and on their last morning, Franky asked her to take a sunrise walk together before they headed home.

Franky draped his arm over Skylar’s shoulder as they walked, and she slipped her arm under his jacket, behind his waist, leaning into him.

“This has been a perfect weekend, and two perfect months together.” She leaned in to kiss his cheek, and he turned his head at the last minute to capture her lips with his.

“Mhmm,” he hummed as they kissed.

“I hate leaving here. I always feel so at peace.”

“We’ll come back in the winter and stay in a cabin and cozy up by the fire.”

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“You read my mind.” She leaned in even closer, and he tightened his arm around her.

When they had walked a ways, they turned along the path at the back of the vineyard, and Skylar stopped in her tracks. There were lantern stands in a long row leading to a table covered in white linen with a lantern and a vase of orange, pink, and red dahlias in the center.

“What is this?” Skylar eyed him.

He smiled. “Breakfast.”

“You are the sweetest. Do you know that?”

Franky shrugged. “I have my moments.”

He led her to the table and pulled out her chair then took a blanket from the other chair and wrapped it around her shoulders before he took a seat. Silver domes covered two plates before them, and he lifted them to reveal an omelet, bacon, and fruit.

“Looks so good,” she said.

“Are you too cold out here? We can have it all brought back to the restaurant.”

“I’m perfect. Everything’s perfect.”

“Good.”

They ate and talked and enjoyed each other's company, and when they were through, he covered their plates again and took her hand. He walked them a little further down to a spot where the sunrise peaked over the tops of the vines, giving everything a warm morning glow.

"You are so beautiful." He gently pushed a hair behind her ear.

She felt a blush color her cheeks. "You're not so bad yourself."

He chuckled as he drew her close and dropped a soft kiss to the tip of her nose. "You know what I want to do right now?"

She raised her eyebrow curiously. "What?"

Franky's face turned serious as he dropped to one knee in front of her and pulled out a ring box.

Skylar's hands raised to cover her mouth. "Franky," she breathed.

"I love you, Skylar. I have never loved anyone the way I love you. And I know we've only been together for two months, but we've known each other practically our whole lives. I don't want to wait to tell you that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I'm more certain about this than any decision I've ever made in my life. I want to end every day with you and wake up in your arms every morning. If not for you, I never would've had the courage to step away from law and pursue music. You make me better. You make everything in life better. Say you feel the same."

She nodded enthusiastically. "I do. You make everything in my life better too."

He opened the box to reveal a sparkling round diamond within. His chin quivered a little as he gazed up at her. "Skylar Anna Schultz, will you marry me?"

Big teardrops slid down her cheeks and dropped to the ground at their feet. The emotion was so strong and the joy so great that she was left speechless.

“Babe?” His eyes were filled with worry. “Is it too soon? Was I wrong to ask?”

“No.”

“No?” His mouth fell open at that word.

“I mean, no, it’s not too soon.” She laughed nervously.

He blew out a relieved breath and searched her eyes, waiting expectantly for her answer.

“Yes!” Skylar enthusiastically declared. “Yes, I’ll marry you, Franky! Of course, I will.”

He jumped up and pulled her into a hug, burying his face in her neck. “Oh my gosh, my heart is beating so fast. You scared me to death when you said no.”

She laughed. “How could you think I would ever say no to you?”

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“I prayed you wouldn’t.” He held the box up between them, and she took in the beauty of the diamond with the morning light reflecting off the stone.

“It’s beautiful.”

He removed it from the box and slipped it onto her finger. “My Skylar,” he whispered as he pressed a kiss to her finger, just above the ring.

She took his hand in hers. “I can’t wait to put a ring right here.” She pressed a kiss to his empty ring finger.

“She said yes!” he suddenly hollered into the sky, startling her.

Sudden cheers and applause came from around the corner as her parents, brothers, sisters-in-law, Adelia, and Franky’s parents all came into view.

“I can’t believe you did all this.”

“I’m pretty great with surprises.”

As they hugged their family and friends, the happiness seemed to flow from person to person, and Skylar’s heart felt like it might burst with joy. She never thought leaving for the summer would set all of this in motion, but it was in the letting go that she finally received the love she’d always dreamed of.