



My Blind Date is a Vampire

Author: *Daphne Bloom*

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Description: Magic. Mayhem. And a little romance! Nursing a broken heart, Julia takes a job far away from home in the little town of Mystic Cove. She has no interest in dating, at least for a while, but the eccentric old lady who owns the local bookstore seems to have other ideas. Julia finally agrees to ONE date. She's surprised when things with her enigmatic blind date go well, but will she face even more heartbreak when she finds out her blind date is a vampire?

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CHAPTER 1

Why did I torture myself? What purpose did scrolling through all the wedding pictures posted online serve except to drive me deeper into depression and serve up a side of righteous indignation? What I was doing was the equivalent of picking at a scab and watching the wound bleed all over again when it was supposed to be healing. I was latching onto my feelings of hurt and betrayal when I was supposed to be moving on.

And yet, I couldn't look away from my phone. I couldn't log off Facebook or Instagram. That's how pathetic I was being right now, but how could I not be? How could I let go of all the feelings I'd been working to move past when the two people who'd hurt me more than I ever thought possible were smiling back at me from the screen, their smiles stretched from ear to ear and stars practically dancing in their eyes.

Yesterday evening, my former best friend Jessica married my ex-fiancé, Toby Wilson. I suppose I should have been thankful they waited a whole year to drive the knife hilt all the way into my back while also letting everyone forget their love was born of betrayal and callousness.

My breath shuddered in my chest, my vision blurring as I saw the names of all the people who posted pictures from the wedding reception with captions of felicitations and blessings for the newlyweds.

"Some friends!" I scoffed, ignoring the steady tears flowing down my cheeks and the salty tang as they pooled in the crease between my lips. Jess hadn't just stolen the

man I loved—or thought I was in love with. Most of the friends we shared chose sides immediately following the outcome of her treachery and cut ties with me with no compunction whatsoever. “They are in love,” they tried to reason. “Why stand in the way of that? You can just find someone else!”

I kept scrolling through my timeline, hating how beautiful Jess looked; she was every bit the golden girl everyone pretended she was, from her impeccable blonde locks twisted into an elegant chignon to the Vera Wang dress—whose design, might I add, looked suspiciously like the wedding dress I’d been salivating over back when she and I were planning my wedding to the jerk she now clung too.

“Et tu, Brute?” I murmured in a teary voice, reading over the lengthy post Mrs. Wilson wrote welcoming Jess into her family. My former future mother-in-law raved about how perfectly matched Jess and her obnoxious son were for each other—not that she was wrong about that—and what a wonderful addition Jess was to the family.

“Where was she when you needed someone to look after you after your herniated disk surgery, you old bat? Matter of fact, where was your selfish jerk of a son?” I growled at my phone before tossing it aside. My heart skipped a beat when it bounced off the mattress and landed with a thud on the floor.

For some reason, that set me off and a sob finally broke past my throat. Four years! Four whole years I’d wasted on Tobias freakin’ Wilson just for him to throw me out with last night’s trash and the only explanation I got was that he wasn’t the same man anymore.

“The heart wants what it wants, Julia. I didn’t mean to fall for Jessica, but it just happened and there’s nothing I can do about that.” He had the audacity to say that to me standing in the middle of our bedroom while Jess cowered behind him in our bed, covering her naked self with the sheets that I had bought.

Toby didn't waste time packing his stuff up, leaving that same night. At least both of them had the decency to look shame-faced when they left. But what rankled more than catching my fiancé cheating on me with my best friend since middle school was that I never got an explanation from Jess, or even an apology. She'd returned none of my calls or messages and refused to meet and before I knew it, all my friends were making up excuses to not hang out with me.

In hindsight, I should have known something was up when Toby started comparing me to Jess, wanting me to lose weight so that I would drop down to the lithe runway model figure that Jess had always flaunted instead of appreciating my hourglass curves. He'd even started nitpicking little things, like how my laugh sounded and my choice of a career. Jess was quickly making her way up the ranks of the corporate world as a lawyer while I'd chosen a "menial job like teaching."

A sharp pain lanced through my heart as I remembered how I used to bend over backward to try and please that guy, how I'd let him steamroll right over me whenever we had to make decisions together. I relented when he said he wanted us to rent a luxury apartment smack dab in the middle of the city when I wanted to live in a nice and quiet suburban neighborhood. And then he got up and left me in that stuck-up place to pay the ridiculously expensive rent on my substitute-teacher salary. Full-time teaching jobs were hard to come by in the city. Not that I stayed there for long; our landlord had kicked me out the moment he learned that Toby and I were over. He was the one with the money in our relationship after all, so it was his name on the lease. I'd already been planning to move out, though. I was still looking around for an affordable place to live when I was evicted and had to move back in with my parents and deal with everyone's well-meaning advice that only made me feel even more miserable.

I knew they were trying to comfort me, but it felt more like they were kicking the dog while it was down. Like they were saying "I told you so" instead of "I'm sorry your heart was broken." No one in my family liked Toby, not my parents, not my three

older brothers and their significant others. Even my twin nephews tended to close up the few times Toby actually showed up beside me to a Bryant family gathering. They only tolerated the man because I was so smitten with him. That'll teach me to ignore my family's intuition, I thought bitterly.

I must have dozed off because when I woke my bedroom was bathed in darkness with only my laptop providing a soft light. I shut the computer down, scowling at the photo of the couple looking back at me and mocking me with their happy ever after. "May you never know the pleasure of an orgasm in your marriage bed," I pseudo-cursed the couple.

My stomach growled, the rumble sounding too loud in the silence of the night, so I slipped my feet into my bunny slippers and picked up my phone, sighing in relief that the screen hadn't cracked, and quietly made my way to the kitchen downstairs. I wondered why no one had woken me up for dinner or why Mom didn't drag me out of my pity party like she usually did and demand that I help her plan her big birthday bash. She was hitting the big six-oh in less than three weeks and was determined to make an event of it.

There was a sticky note on the fridge, letting me know that my dinner was in the microwave. "Calm your butt, I get it!" I murmured to my stomach when it growled again. I could actually feel my intestines trying to digest themselves and was feeling a little light-headed. The last thing I ate was a bagel for breakfast. I heated up the pot roast in the microwave, my mouth watering when the scent filled the empty kitchen.

Dinner was a lonesome affair with just me at the table, scrolling through job listings for a teaching position. I didn't think I'd find something—I'd been checking the boards daily for months—but this time, I struck gold five minutes in.

History teacher wanted. Mystic Cove High School.

“Could it be that the fates are starting to work in my favor on the worst day of my life?” I asked out loud to the ceiling in case there was a higher power listening. I skimmed over the job posting and saved the link so that I could apply for the position when I got back up to my room. Next, I looked up Mystic Cove; it was a town about an hour away from the city, a hot tourist spot in winter and summer. A little valley town nestled between a mountain range and the ocean, I found myself charmed by the pictures I saw and could easily see myself living there. One link in particular caught my eye. It was titled simply, “The Witches of Mystic Cove—A History of Mystic Cove.”

As a history nerd, I couldn’t help but be intrigued. The article detailed everything. Many of the old families were rumored to be witches and warlocks who’d fled religious persecution in the Old World. I found myself immersed in the stories of how the witches of Mystic Cove evaded the brutality of the witch trials back in the 1600s and I somehow fell into a rabbit hole when I saw another article on Mystic Cove, this one written by someone who claimed that there were shapeshifting beasts living in the forests surrounding the town and man-eating ghouls in the cemeteries. The witch article I could believe, but shapeshifters not so much. It seemed to be a hotspot for paranormal activity—if you believed in that kind of stuff. As a historian, I found folklore fascinating, but I couldn’t really say I believed in the paranormal.

Maybe if I got the job, I could conduct a research study of my own, like trying to trace descendants of the founding families and find out if there was any truth to the witch angle. Maybe there was a Wiccan community I could interview. I could even ask to join them just so that I could learn how to hex people. Naturally, my first target would be Toby. I’d hex him so that Jess would make him so miserable that they would divorce in a year.

“Now that would be something.” I smiled, my mood brightened by the thought. I went back upstairs and sent in my application for the job, praying that I’d get it.

CHAPTER 2

Mom's party was in full swing outside while I hid from everyone in my closet. The walls and windows vibrated from the pounding bass of the music blaring from the DJ sound system Bas had rented for the very occasion.

I'd shown my face in front of the guests for an entire hour, maybe two, before I decided that I needed some time away from everyone for a little while if I was going to spend the entire day without going psycho on anyone. Mom had invited what felt like the entire Coleman family—her side of the family—the majority of the Bryants—Dad's side—and the entire neighborhood.

There wasn't a single room downstairs that was empty, the guests spilling out into the backyard, front yard, and down the street where a line of cars was parked on either side. I wasn't ordinarily antisocial during family functions. Right about now, I should have been catching up with my cousins or playing with my nephews or helping Mom out in the kitchen—lord knows she could use all the help she could get with all the platters of food her guests brought despite this party having been catered—but the Bryants and Colemans were nothing if not generous when it came to food.

Word of my broken engagement had spread like wildfire among the family when it happened, and with Toby and Jess's wedding having happened almost a fortnight ago and the happy couple posting their honeymoon adventures all over the internet, it was all everyone wanted to talk about when they saw me. I hated the looks of pity and sympathy. Not to mention the veiled insults from some people insinuating that the breakup might have been my fault. As if that wasn't enough, Mom had made sure to invite all the single men within a block radius and was not-so-subtly trying to set me up with all of them.

Worst of all, though, was the fact that Bas had proposed to his girlfriend a few days ago, but it was like he and the rest of the family did not want to celebrate the news

openly while I was there, as if I was too fragile and depressed to be happy for them. I was beyond happy. I was ecstatic that Bas had finally found someone to put up with him.

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Unfortunately for me, the fact that everyone in my immediate family was all loved up now, including Sebastian, the formerly perpetual bachelor, had caused my mother to flip her switch and ramp up her matchmaking efforts. She was determined not to rest until I had a bigger ring on my finger than the one Jess wore and had an even more extravagant wedding.

After introducing me to three different guys, one of whom was going through a particularly nasty divorce, I'd snuck up to my bedroom and huddled in the tiny closet with my clothes and cell phone for company.

* * *

I still had some time before Mom noticed that I was gone and sent a search party after me. In the meantime, I checked my inbox for any communication from the principal of Mystic Cove high school. I still hadn't told anyone that I'd applied for a job in a different town; I'd even snuck away for an interview on Monday. I didn't want to jinx anything. Not to brag or anything, but I was confident of my chances. Principal Hawthorne and I had clicked during the interview, and I think I passed it with flying colors. She had assured me that she would make her decision by Friday, and it was now late in the afternoon on a Saturday.

Instead of an email telling me that I'd gotten got the job, my inbox was flooded with forwarded job listings from my oldest brother, Charlie, along with some scholarship applications to go back for my master's degree. His way of telling me to get off my lazy butt and get a job already.

Charlie was only trying to help me get back on my feet, I knew that. But it didn't ease

the sting. Did my brothers think I stayed in my room all day, lazing about and mooching off our parents? I was offended that he felt the need to forward all these listings to me when I was capable of doing it myself. Heck, I'd even subscribed to one of those sites that helped notify you of all relevant employment opportunities based on the information provided on your profile. Teaching jobs were just hard to come by in some areas. Many people stay in those jobs for life. The pay might not always be great, but they do have good benefits. Often, someone has to die or retire for a position to open up.

The door to my closet was pulled open with so much force that it banged against the wall. I scrunched my eyes shut against the sudden influx of sunlight, pausing in the middle of angrily deleting all of Charlie's emails.

A tiny figure stood in the open doorway of the closet, curiously peering down at me. "Found ya!" Brandon exclaimed, holding one of those huge swirling lollipops in front of his mouth like a microphone. "Whatcha doing?"

"Hiding," I deadpanned. "Were you looking for me, squirt?" I asked the only other redhead in the family besides Mom and me. Though, Brandon's hair was gradually darkening to a mahogany brown hair with copper highlights like Bennett, my second brother.

"Grandma is looking for you. What are you hiding from? Are there monsters under your bed? Jayden and I always hide in the closet when there are monsters under the bed," the seven-year-old told me in a conspiratorial whisper. He and his brother Jayden were only eleven months apart, so they could pass for twins and were usually glued at the hip. Jayden must have been in the backyard playing in the bounce house with the other kids.

"I'm hiding from the scariest monster of all, kid. Your grandmother can be pretty terrifying sometimes. But don't tell her I said that." I sighed, holding my hand out for

Brandon to pull me up. In an impressive display, he stuffed the lollipop into his mouth and grabbed my hand with both of his sticky hands and pulled me up.

I followed him out of the room, discreetly wiping my hands on the back of my jean shorts. “Where is she?” I asked him as we walked down the stairs.

“Kitchen!” Brandon announced, jumping over the last stair and nearly giving me a heart attack when he stumbled and landed on his knees. Before I could show any concern, he was already running into the kitchen and out the back door to join his friends. I swear kids are made of rubber.

Bas and his new fiancé, Kimberly, were in the kitchen laughing while Mom stacked up empty platters of food and took more out of the fridge, setting them up on the island counter.

Bas was leaning on the counter, scarfing down kebabs, and was the first to see me walk in. “Where have you been hiding? Did Aunt Beth get to you already?” he teased around a bite of his kebab. Aunt Beth was Dad’s older sister and was known to have an extremely sharp tongue. She would mercilessly harp on about other people’s faults and flaws while conveniently playing herself up as a saint. My latest flaw was that I was approaching the big three-oh and was still unmarried with no kids, no job, and no house of my own.

Mom looked up at me when she heard Bas’s question, her expression immediately darkening. “I have been looking for you everywhere. You were supposed to be helping with the food and drinks, but poor Kim had to step in, and after spending almost twenty hours on call at the hospital,” she scolded. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes while Bas snickered behind my back and Kimberly gave me an apologetic smile.

“You make it sound as if I was sneaking off to smoke weed or something. I just needed some peace from all this craziness,” I huffed, grabbing a tray from “poor”

Kimberly and urging her to take a seat. “And you could have easily asked this bozo here to help you out instead of his overworked fiancé,” I pointed out.

“I’m really not that tired, and I don’t mind helping out, Kristen,” Kimberley piped up, trying to diffuse the tension before Mom and I blew up at each other.

“Manning the DJ station is thirsty work,” Bas objected, waving his can of soda pointedly in my face.

“And what about poor Mike? You told him you were going to the bathroom and never came back. The man is out there looking like a lost puppy. The only reason he came to the party is because of you, you know,” Mom griped, not yet willing to let her irritation with me go. My own temper flared. It had been some time since the two of us really went at it, but we both possessed the infamous redhead temper, and mine got me in a lot of trouble with my parents as a kid and teenager. Living with my parents again had the three of us falling back into bad habits.

“No, he came here because of you. You’re the one who put it in his head that I’d be amiable to his advances. The man is going through a divorce, Mom! I don’t need that kind of complication in my life right now, and please, for the love of all that is holy, just butt out of my love life. I’ll date when I’m good and ready and it’ll be someone of my own choosing!” I stormed out of the kitchen, grabbing some platters and depositing them on the buffet table outside.

I spent the rest of the party drifting from one group to another, avoiding my mother. Guilt gnawed at me for the way I’d spoken to her, but I did not regret a single thing I’d said. She was being way too pushy and sticking her nose in where she wasn’t wanted or needed. Her behavior only cemented the fact that I needed to get my own place as soon as possible before either one of us said some things we could not take back.

CHAPTER 3

The call I'd been waiting for all week finally came through the following morning as I was having my morning coffee with my brothers—all of whom had stayed in their old rooms last night at Dad's insistence so that we could all pitch in and clean up after the party. Only Bennett and his wife had gone home since there was no room for them and their boys, but they had come back for breakfast in the morning.

Despite the obsessive frequentness with which I had been clinging to my cell phone all week and checking my emails, text messages, and phone logs for missed calls, when the call finally came through, all I could do was stare at the screen as if it would grow fangs and bite me if I picked it up.

"Are you going to answer that or just stare at the screen like an idiot?" Bas asked me, his green eyes twinkling with mirth. The rest of my family were eyeing me curiously as well. Even Mom, who was pretending to be engrossed in her omelet, had her ears pricked. We'd grudgingly apologized to each other before going to bed last night, but things were still tense between us.

"Jules, you're starting to make me worried. Is there a reason you're not answering?" Charlie inquired, reaching out to pick up my phone. Everyone knew I hated receiving phone calls and preferred communicating through texts and emails whenever possible, but I never just let it ring like this without moving a muscle. I could see why that seemed strange to them.

But there were times when phone calls were unavoidable, and this was one of those times. All I had to do was pick it up from the table and answer.

"I was mentally preparing myself to answer," I shot back, scowling at Bas and slapping Charlie's hand away before he could get a look at the caller ID. Just as I reached out to pick up the phone, the call cut off.

My heart stuttered and skipped a few beats and my chest squeezed painfully tight. For a split second, I feared that I might be having a heart attack at twenty-nine, or possibly an onset asthma attack since I struggled to get air past my throat and down to my lungs. That was until I realized that I'd been holding in my breath. Did I just sabotage myself by not answering the call from Mystic Cove High?

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When the phone screen lit up again, I jumped off my seat and excused myself, rushing out of the kitchen where the entire family was gathered so that I could take the call without anyone breathing down my neck and trying to listen in. Privacy was an outdated concept in my childhood home. Having grown up with three older brothers and parents who took the phrase “sharing is caring” to new heights, it was a miracle that I’d grown up to be as sane as I was—although the question of my sanity was oftentimes debatable. I could feel the weight of their gazes on my back as I walked out of the living room to take the call and knew that I would be facing the biggest inquisition since the Spaniards decided to fight against “heresy” back in the 1400s.

“Hello, Julia Bryant speaking,” I answered, keeping my voice low. I was still trying to build up the courage to tell my family I was thinking of moving away to the small town just one hour away from the city. I walked into the first room I came to, which, ironically enough, considering I was about to poop myself with anxiety, was the downstairs bathroom. Closing the door behind me, I sat on the closed toilet seat and steeled myself to hear what the principal had to say.

“Miss Bryant, it’s Catherine Hawthorne speaking, principal of MC High. How are you doing, dear?” The principal’s voice was so sweet and chipper, it made my teeth ache. I’d already met the woman during my interview and found her to be a force of nature who never stopped moving. A well of positive energy and wide smiles that would make any dentist weep from how perfect her gleaming white teeth were. By the time I walked out of Hawthorne’s office after the interview, my head was spinning and I had a hard time differentiating up from down. Her overwhelming presence had been slightly intoxicating.

The knots in my stomach wound themselves so tight, I felt like I needed to see a doctor. Even though the principal's voice sounded pleasant and not at all like she was about to reject me, my mind was conjuring up all these worst-case scenarios that ended up with me still unemployed by the end of the phone call. My subconscious was already convinced that I'd lost out on the job opportunity and refused to entertain any other outcome.

"Wonderful, Principal Hawthorne. And you?" I lied, my voice shaky and unnaturally high pitched, like a bad Mickey Mouse impression. The principal sighed dramatically on the other side. I could almost picture her rolling her eyes and tossing her thick mane of jet-black curls over her shoulder. The principal of Mystic Cove High was nothing like the other principals I'd worked with before. She had a flair for the dramatic and a sense of style that would make her fit in seamlessly with actors on a Broadway stage rather than handing out detention slips in a high school hallway.

"I am well, my dear. However, I cannot say that I am looking forward to the start of a new semester. I was rather enjoying my summer, devoid of all those sweet hellions I call my students. I hope you are well prepared to deal with them in the next two weeks, and I would advise you to invest in quality hair dye and a brilliant hairstylist because after one week in the halls of MC High, you'll be spotting a few grey hairs." Principal Hawthorne chortled.

There was an expectant silence on the other end of the call while my brain slowly processed everything I'd just heard. My breath caught in my throat. Had she just said— I did not hear wrong, did I? My ears were prone to hearing whatever they thought I wanted to hear and not what was being said. But, no. Principal Hawthorne had just alluded that I got the job!

I tried to reply, but it took a few tries. My vocal cords had momentarily forgotten how to work, and my throat felt like it had a lump the size of a cantaloupe lodged in there. "H-hang on, d-does that mean...I got the job?" I whispered, my toes digging into the

plush bathroom mat at the base of the toilet.

“Yes, you did. Allow me to welcome you to our teaching staff. I’d like to schedule a day for you to come down to the school in the next few days so that we can get the paperwork out of the way and for you to meet your department head. Of course, you’ll get to meet the rest of the staff at the inter-departmental staff meeting a few days before school starts.”

I could feel an excited squeal bubbling up past my throat and immediately swallowed it back down before I burst the principal’s eardrums. Principal Hawthorne was still talking, but I was too lost in my giddiness to pay attention to what was being said. This was the best news ever! My days as a substitute history teacher jumping from one school to another were over! Hoo-freakin-ray for a stable paycheck and freedom! I’d finally get to have my own class and actually build a rapport with my students and other teachers instead of being the faceless teacher no one cared about. I would finally put my degrees in history and education to good use instead of feeling like I’d wasted years of my life studying my butt off to become a glorified freelancer.

I was practically floating on air when I waltzed back into the kitchen. If I strained my ears, I’d probably hear the melodious voices of an angel choir singing hallelujah. My cheeks ached because of the wide smile stretched across my face. If I smiled any wider, I’d make a very convincing Joker. I tried to play it cool and adopt a blank mask when I took my seat at the breakfast table, but my facial muscles would not cooperate.

In the end, I had to resort to biting down hard on my lip to stop myself from blurting out the news. This was not the right time to tell my family that I would be moving away in a couple of weeks. My lips trembled and my heart drummed out a happy little jig as I pictured having my own quaint house in a picturesque town miles away from my well-meaning but overbearing family. Peace at last!

“You smoke pot in the bathroom or something? You look like Chucky’s long-lost, deranged twin,” my second oldest brother, Bennett, snickered into his cup of coffee. I stuck my tongue out at him—very mature—and his wife, Sara, smacked him on the back and apologized for him while my Mom scolded me for being rude.

“Who’s Chucky?” my nephew Jayden asked innocently, making all three of my brothers laugh at the old joke.

“No one you need to know right now, sweetie,” Sarah answered, ruffling her son’s hair and giving me an apologetic smile. She and Bennett were childhood sweethearts, so she knew all about the nicknames my brothers coined for me. It used to bother me, but after twenty-nine years of hearing the same old jokes, I was immune to all of the teasing—for the most part.

My mother and I were the only redheads in the family before Brandon came along. It shouldn’t have been something that bothered me growing up, except that while my mother’s hair flowed down in elegant waves of auburn-colored strands that framed a classically beautiful face, I was a true carrot top. My hair was a riotous mass of ginger curls that appeared to have more than one shade of red mixed into springy coils and took hours to straighten only to spring back into their original shape the second I stepped out the door.

As a kid, I’d been called everything from Raggedy Ann to Chucky and a whole host of other names that drew attention to my flaming head of hair, my alabaster complexion, or the smattering of freckles that dotted down the bridge of my nose, chest, and shoulders. When the movie *Brave* came out just as I started college, one of the guys in my class started calling me Merida in a juvenile attempt at flirting and the name had stuck for all four years of my college life. But it was at least a step up from Chucky.

If I thought no one would notice the sudden lightness to my mood or that they’d keep

their questions to themselves, I was woefully wrong. There was no such thing as privacy in my family.

“So, what’s got you in such a fine mood? Are you finally getting laid later tonight or something?” Bas pressed on, and I knew he would keep hounding me until I gave them a straight answer. Dad choked on his tea, no doubt loathing the image Bas had just put in everyone’s minds. I kicked him under the table as Sarah threw her napkin on the table, glaring at us even though the brother she wasn’t married to was the one who was being crude. “Kids, why don’t we watch some cartoons while Auntie Julia and the family have a chat?” She ushered the boys to the living room and everyone immediately looked at me.

“Jeez, can nobody mind their own business in this house? Instead of pushing me into doing something or telling you something, why not wait until I’m ready to let you all know?” I groaned, pushing my bowl of half-eaten oatmeal away.

“Why are you getting so defensive? If you don’t want to tell us, then don’t. What crawled up your butt and died? How much longer are we going to have to walk on eggshells around you? It’s been almost a year since you broke things off with that scumbag and yet here you are, moping and walking around Mom and Dad’s house with a storm cloud over your head!” Bas exploded, taking everyone by surprise.

Silence fell across the breakfast table, everyone’s gaze swinging from me to Bas.

“Pumpkin—” Dad began, speaking up for the first time that morning, but I cut him off before he had the chance to say anything.

“Is that what you all think? That you need to walk on eggshells around me just because I had a bad breakup? Since when did you three start catering to my ‘delicate feelings’?” I scoffed.

“What are you talking about? When have we ever not cared about your feelings or anything you’re going through. You’re our baby sister. It’s only natural that we care when some low-life loser hurts you. It’s natural that we’re protective of you and want to see you get back out there instead of hiding away from the world.” Charlie glowered at me.

I felt like pulling my hair out by the roots. “I didn’t say that you don’t care about me, just that you’ve never felt the need to treat me with kid gloves. Not when even when I was bed-ridden for days on end because of my asthma attacks.” I took a deep breath and gave all three of my brothers a pointed look. “I seem to recall in my junior year, you all made fun of me and my panda eyes when I came home with mascara running down my face after getting dumped. I know for a fact that Bas still has pictures. You send them to me every year on my birthday. So why you feel like I should be coddled now is beyond me.”

“Did you not see yourself after you discovered what Toby and Jess did? You barely spoke to any of us and went on that crazy health kick. I was half afraid you’d kill yourself from overexerting yourself so much,” Bennett chipped in.

“It’s true, Pumpkin. You kind of just fell apart. You went into this dark place that none of us could reach, and right when we started seeing glimpses of the old you again, we got word of that dang wedding. I guess we’re all afraid that you are going to retreat back into your shell again,” Dad chimed in with a pleading voice. Unlike Mom, he was the peacemaker. He usually left all the talking to our mother, so whenever he stepped in, that’s when you knew that the time for fun and games was over.

A lead weight settled in my gut as I flashed back to the shell of a person I became post-breakup. All my adult life, I’d happily declared that I would not let myself—my emotional wellbeing—be dictated by a man. Never allow any decisions I made to be influenced by a man unless it was something I truly wanted. In fact, I’d often mocked

women around me who allowed the actions and whims of their lovers to sway their feelings and those who fell apart from one cruel word, wondering where their pride and self-esteem had vanished to. I'd proudly declared I'd never be that kind of woman, willfully ignorant of the fact that my entire world currently revolved around Toby and the future I'd envisioned for us.

I'd crumbled like a house of cards after the engagement was called off. Looking back, I could see why my family worried for me. I was determined to be better than Toby's ideal woman just so that I could rub it in his and Jess's face. Going to the gym twice a day, starving myself to lose weight, spending an exorbitant amount of money on a new wardrobe when being a substitute teacher didn't pay much. But I was sure I'd find a permanent teaching position in no time, and for a short while, I felt good about myself until the teaching job I'd been all but assured for one of the inner-city high schools was passed to someone else. The fragile confidence and bravado I'd wrapped myself in so as not to confront my feelings disintegrated like ash around me and I spiraled.

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I don't remember what brought me out of my slump, but Dad was right. These days, I was feeling more and more like the me before Toby and I got together, and I wasn't about to surrender this new sense of freedom quite so easily.

"Well, there's no need to worry about me. I'm already set to get my life back on track. I was going to wait until it was cemented in writing, but I got a job, and that's what the phone call was about," I announced in a smug tone. It might have been purely my imagination, but I thought the sun coming in through the kitchen windows shone a little brighter after I broke the news, as if it was responding to the looks of relief and bright expressions on everyone's faces.

"Which school will you be working at? Is it a permanent position?" Mom asked after the excitement died down and they'd all offered their congratulations. "You can continue living here with us until you've saved up enough money to get a new place. I know how expensive renting an apartment in this city is," she continued.

"Actually, the job is in Mystic Cove, so I'll be moving out in a week or two if all goes well," I replied, nervous excitement bubbling in my stomach. It was now hitting me that I'd really gotten this job and was embarking on a new chapter of my life somewhere where I wouldn't run the risk of running into Toby or Jess or any of my old pals. Somewhere where my family couldn't just pop into my house all willy-nilly without calling ahead.

My happiness was short-lived, though. "So far away? There are so many schools in this city. Why would you go looking for a job in a small town? Will the pay even be that good? Have you tried applying for a teaching job in private schools? I hear they pay far better than public schools, let alone small-town schools," Mom argued, her

brows furrowed. And just like that, my mood tanked again. I grit my teeth together, swallowing the nasty retort dancing on the tip of my tongue.

“Mystic Cove is not that far; it’s just a two-hour drive away. It’s not like she’s moving to the other side of the world,” Bennett spoke up, coming to my defense.

“And whether it’s private school or public school, it doesn’t change the fact that a teacher’s salary is complete crap. But it’s not like she’ll be completely destitute or anything.” As usual, Bas’s attempts at bringing levity into a tense conversation missed the mark altogether. I ignored him, trying to listen to what my mother was saying over the rush of blood in my ears and ensuring that the prickling sensation in my eyes did not result in actual tears.

“I know, but Mystic Cove is a tourist town. The property value and market value of the houses will be through the roof. Not to mention there was a string of killings two years ago that have gone unsolved. Two college girls who decided to spend their spring break in the town were found in their hotel room, their throats torn and their bodies completely drained of blood. What if the murderer targets you?”

“I have a higher chance of being mugged, raped, or killed if I step out the front door here in the city than being targeted by a murderer in a small town. You’re worrying yourself needlessly over something that will never happen. Mystic Cove is a safe haven compared to the city, Mom. I’ve already accepted the job and I’m heading over to the school Monday morning to sign my employment contract and I plan to do some house hunting while I’m there,” I declared, making it apparent that I would hear no more arguments from her.

CHAPTER 4

Regardless of my mother’s reservations, I met with the principal the following week and dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s on all the necessary employment forms and met

with other staff members of Mystic Cove High.

The school wasn't as big as some of the inner-city high schools I'd worked in before, so there weren't really a lot of names and faces to remember. Still, my brain automatically deleted two-thirds of my new coworkers' names the moment they introduced themselves. But no matter, I planned on sticking around MC High for a long, long while.

After the staff meeting, Principal Hawthorne gave me a tour of the school while enlightening me on its long and extensive history. "We try to cater to all our students' needs and talents—be they academic, athletic, or creative. Having fewer than five hundred students allows us not to let anyone slip through the cracks. Almost all our students go on to pursue higher education after getting their diplomas, although we do have a handful that fall by the wayside." Hawthorne led me up to the second floor to show me where my classroom would be located.

"You must have a stellar art teacher. Some of these pieces are absolutely breathtaking," I commented, admiring a landscape piece depicting the beach cove that gave Mystic Cove its name during a particularly stormy night. I could almost taste the saltwater splashing against my face as the waves crashed on the shore. I could feel the electricity charging the air as I studied the forked jolts of lightning, some of them hitting the waves and making the image glow like a Thomas Kinkaid painting. The painter had captured the scene perfectly and managed to evoke the restless and frenetic energy that accompanied a storm. I wondered if they had painted this from memory or if they'd watched the scene unfold live.

I'd seen the beach from a distance when I drove into town early this morning and couldn't wait to explore it up close and personal. I was meeting with a real estate agent once I was done with Principal Hawthorne to look over a few houses. One of my requests, besides wanting a house small enough for one person and affordable on a teacher's salary, was that I wanted to be as close to the beach as possible. The rural

area was going to be a welcome change from living in the middle of a never-resting city with all its bright lights and blaring noises.

“Indeed, we do,” Hawthorne beamed, replying to my comment and jolting me out of daydream. “When you have time, you should browse through some of the decor stores. You’ll find more than one art piece from our students on sale. Tourists love buying souvenirs from their time vacationing here, so we encourage the students to take advantage of that. Not only do the store owners give them a share of the profits from the sale of their works, but every so often we get a hotshot art dealer or collector passing through and discovering new talent. Ah, here we are.” She stopped in front of a closed classroom door. Retrieving a set of keys from the chain on her belt, Hawthorne unlocked the door and gestured that I precede her into the room.

My chest swelled to about ten times its size as I took in the empty classroom. The students’ tables and chairs were arranged into three rows with two students per table. The smartboard and blackboard were side by side at the front of the room and the teacher’s desk was by the windows. The walls were bare, but I planned to remedy that. I had a bunch of charts that I’d never gotten to use during my days as a substitute teacher. Before school started next week, the walls would be decked with said charts and teaching aids and maybe a bookshelf for some interesting historical reads.

I was itching to start drafting up lesson plans, and I couldn’t wait to meet my students. When I was in high school, my two favorite subjects were world history and English literature because of all the heated debates that took place in those classes. I’d actually been tempted to get a literature degree but ended up choosing history because there was something fascinating and thrilling about studying the people who came before us and how they—and certain events—shaped the world into what it was today.

* * *

Nearly two hours later, I was walking toward my car with my heart in a gloom. My mood had taken a complete swan dive and my fantasy of owning a quaint little beach house was falling apart faster than a house of cards.

Shayla, my estate agent, had tried her best to find a place that fit all my prerequisites, but what I'd failed to realize in my excitement was that properties close to the beach were prime real estate. I had to admit it: Mom was right. A third of the town's beach was private property belonging to a select few families, the moneyed kind who lived in the city and only came down to Mystic Cove every few months for vacations. The town made most of its revenue from the tourists who flooded the town during the winter and again during summer.

Nestled between the sea and a mountain range, there was a rotation of visitors all year round, and a certain business mogul was taking advantage of that with his lucrative resorts and a golfing estate. During the colder winter months, the skiing and snowboarding enthusiasts flooded the resorts; some still came during the summer since the mountains remained snowcapped nearly all year round, but this time the summer crowds were mixed in. The same real estate bazillionaire happened to also own a bunch of beach rentals around town, and most of them were currently occupied.

So far, all the houses Shayla had shown me were not as close to the beach as I would have liked, and some of them were way out of my price range and way too big for one woman to live in by herself. I wanted two bedrooms at most, one to sleep in and one to use as my home office. I didn't want to give my family any excuses to think they could come and stay over anytime they wanted. Just this morning I had to beat Mom off with a bat—not literally, of course—to keep her from coming house hunting with me. She would have made this more painful than it already was.

"Alright, the next listing is our last," Shayla told me as we walked away from one of the houses she'd had me look through. She sounded, and looked, as exhausted as I

felt, which made me feel guilty for being so nitpicky about everything.

“It’s got three bedrooms instead of two, open plan living room and kitchen, fully furnished, that is including a dishwasher and a washing machine. The bathroom and toilet are separate, and the beach is only a fifteen-minute walk. It’s located in a quiet neighborhood. I know most of the residents and can vouch that they are some of the nicest people you’ll ever meet,” she explained, clicking on the car fob before opening the door to the driver’s side. I paused on the way down to my own car, parked across the street from hers.

“That sounds promising, but why do I feel like there’s a catch?” At my question, Shayla chuckled, but it sounded off, a little brittle, and it reminded me of the guilty laugh I was known to let out when I was caught in a lie.

“It’s not a catch, per se. The house is not for sale. The owners moved out of town for work, but they didn’t want to sell. They’ve been renting it out to tourists and the like. They wouldn’t mind renting it out long term to you until you find a more suitable place to live.”

I made a nonsensical noise deep in my throat, mulling over whether it was worth going to see this last house. After what happened with my previous landlord, I was leery of living in a house I did not own. After practically selling my soul to him, Bas was willing to co-sign for a loan so I could buy a house in Mystic Cove.

“Show me the way.” Since I hadn’t been able to find a place to buy—and I needed to move down as soon as possible to start my job—I guessed I could rent for a few months while looking for a place to buy.

The house was perfect. It was everything I wanted in a home, although some of the decor was a bit questionable and not all to my taste. The sixties had exploded throughout the living room. I half expected to see Austin Powers sliding down the

banister in nothing but his boxers and holding a martini. The owners had quite the love affair with floral patterned wallpaper, sofa upholstering, and shag carpeting. It was odd seeing so many flowers everywhere but not smelling anything. The kitchen appliances were not the latest models, but they were in good shape and would not need to be replaced.

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“Can I bring in my own furniture? Maybe do some minor renovations?” I asked, brushing my hand over the top of the sofa and glancing out the glass patio windows that led out to the backyard. The lawn needed mowing and there was a huge tree; I couldn’t tell what it was from where I was standing, but its branches needed pruning and I was thinking of starting a little vegetable patch.

“I’ll have to discuss it with the Robertsons, but I don’t think they’d mind. Shall we head up the stairs?” Shayla noted some things down on her tablet before she led me up to the second floor. “Here we have the master bedroom,” she told me.

The bedroom was bigger than my childhood bedroom at my parents’ house. I smiled in delight when I spotted the walk-in closet that would fit all my clothes and my embarrassingly extensive collection of shoes—mostly knock-offs of name brands. For someone who lived from paycheck to paycheck, I had no self-control whatsoever when it came to a pair of killer heels. Not only did they make my legs and butt look great, but I was greedy for the extra height it gave me. Standing at 5’2”, it was frustrating, not to mention exhausting, having to look up at everyone, especially the students who towered over me. There was nothing weirder than having to crane my neck up to scold a six-foot-tall, fourteen-year-old ninth-grader.

I examined the closet first and was satisfied that there was enough space for my babies, none of whom would remain crammed up in the storage boxes they were currently in back home. The walls of the bedroom were done up in a pastel pink paint that I didn’t mind, and the wood-paneled floors were polished to within an inch of their lives.

Shayla received a call and walked out into the hallway to answer it while I continued

to examine every nook and cranny of the room. I hadn't realized that the house was on a hill until I walked up to the window and saw the faint sheen of water in the distance. There were a few people milling about the beach, enjoying the last days of summer before the real world intruded. I cracked the window open and breathed in the briny air coming in from the sea and drew it deep into my lungs. I was going to love it here, I just knew it. There was a sense of freedom about Mystic Cove, and there was something ethereal about it as well. I couldn't wait to discover all the hidden secrets waiting to be uncovered, meet new people, and be myself away from the suffocating, albeit loving, influence of my family.

CHAPTER 5

After agreeing on the lease for the house with Shayla and the Robertsons, things moved pretty quickly. A weekend before Mystic Cove High opened its doors for a new semester, my brothers helped me move into my new home and all it cost me was a couple of beers, pizzas, and burgers. I'd switched out the floral wallpapers for a more solid color, and some of the Robertson's furniture was now in storage, so the living room—at least—was firmly in the twenty-first century with the leather couches I'd brought in. One of my brothers had mounted my flat-screen TV, and next week the internet guy was coming in to hook me up with Wi-Fi. I'd kept most of the kitchen appliances, and my bedroom was all set up. I just had to unpack my clothes and hang them in the closet, and my home office was almost done as well. That still left the third bedroom—the guest room—but there was no rush on getting that set up. The longer I put off cleaning and organizing it, the longer I could put off certain unwanted houseguests.

"I must admit, Jules, I'm kind of jealous. What I wouldn't do to live like I'm on vacation 365 days a year and get paid for it," Bas mused from where he was seated on the plush rug I'd bought secondhand at a flea market for way less than it would have cost me if I'd gotten it new.

“I get paid to teach, Bas. If anyone gets paid to slack off, it’s you,” I shot back, kicking Bennett’s legs off my glass-topped coffee table and plopping down on the couch next to him and passing him the bottle of beer he’d requested.

“You need to get a security system installed. That flimsy chain lock won’t keep anyone out,” Charlie commented without taking his eyes off the football game playing on TV. “I know a guy who could set you up with a state-of-the-art security system who owes me a favor. I can get him to install it dirt cheap.” Charlie was a former Marine turned police detective and always knew a guy for everything. I assumed he was referring to a former army buddy of his who now ran a private security firm.

“What exactly do I have to be afraid of? The old lady from across the street?” I asked with a roll of my eyes and took a huge bite out of my veggie burger. I caught the disgusted looks Bas and Bennett gave me. They’d both threatened to disown me when I told them that I was switching to a vegetarian diet and always made backhanded remarks whenever I ate anything with ‘pseudo meat,’ as they called it. I ignored them and turned my attention back to Charlie, who was now scowling at me.

“Just because Mystic Cove looks like a sleepy little town doesn’t mean you should take your safety for granted. Predators always strike where you feel the safest. You’re getting that security system whether you like it or not.”

“Sir, yes, sir.” I gave him a mock salute, laughing at the bemused scowl on his face. When it looked like they were going to overstay their welcome, I had to forcibly push them out of the house before they drove me crazy.

The house was depressingly quiet after my brothers left. I’d never actually lived alone before. I had roommates in college, then moved in with Toby. With the last vestiges of sunlight flowing in through the windows and patio doors, I stood at the kitchen island feeling like I’d been set adrift at sea.

What are you getting all down in the dumps about, Julia? This is what you've always wanted, I murmured to myself. With only me for company, I didn't know what else to do. I could take a stroll out to the beach, or go out into the town to see what the nightlife had to offer, but I was too exhausted. In the end, I settled on making microwave popcorn and taking a bottle of the red wine Bennett's wife Sarah had bought as a housewarming gift up to my bedroom and watching *Pride and Prejudice* on my laptop—but not before checking that all my doors were locked and the windows tightly secured. Charlie had gotten to me after all.

* * *

I must have dozed off at some point because the next time I opened my eyes, it was late Sunday morning and sunlight was spilling in through the gauzy curtains. A dull throb at the base of my spine reminded me that I'd drunk more than half of the bottle of wine. My laptop battery was dead and needed charging and the bowl of popcorn was upended on the bed, covering the blankets in kernels and salt.

I grumbled at the mess. I did not feel like washing my blankets at that moment. How had I managed to fall asleep with this mess?

Dragging myself from bed, even though my eyes were still heavy and my body begged for more sleep, I lugged the duvet down to the washer and then took a steaming hot shower. After breakfast, I spent half the day unpacking my clothes and attempted to start working on a lesson plan for my first class tomorrow. Unfortunately, my brain refused to cooperate. I was struggling to focus on anything that required brainwork and was feeling restless.

I thought that a bit of fresh air might do me good, so I changed out of my sweats and into a knee-length sundress and sandals and grabbed my car keys. I might as well get to know the locals, and visiting a local restaurant was one way to do that. Exploring the stores that lined Main Street was a good idea too. Like I really needed an excuse

to go shopping.

CHAPTER 6

I drove around the neighborhood to familiarize myself with the layout before driving into the town proper, passing by the empty high school on my way. I was surprised to find that the main street, which was essentially the business hub of Mystic Cove, was teeming with people. Logically, I knew that Mystic Cove had an estimated population of four thousand—and that was not counting the seasonal tourists—but I didn't think it would be this busy. I was expecting to see four or five people walking down the sidewalks and maybe another car or two besides mine driving down the streets. Granted, it was still far less than the crush of the city sidewalks and bumper-to-bumper traffic, but I clearly needed to readjust my perception of small towns.

One thing I did like seeing, though, was how everyone seemed to know each other. I drove past a group of teenagers walking out of an ice cream store, laughing and joking with one another. A mother with two toddlers and a baby stroller stopped to let an elderly couple fawn over the baby. No one was keeping to themselves or rushing to get to the next meeting.

It was probably just my imagination, but the sun shined brighter and the sky looked bluer. And despite my nascent headache, the suffocating weight that had been sitting on my chest for the last year was slowly easing off and I could breathe again. I drove to the grocery store to pick up some essentials before I headed over to a family restaurant for a late lunch. I was aware of all the eyes on me as I perused the aisles. Five minutes in, one resident finally gave in to their curiosity and approached me as I was mulling over whether to get the chocolate-flavored Cheerios or be a responsible adult and go with the healthier but less tasty alternative of Bran Flakes.

“You must be the new history teacher Catherine told me about. She wasn't exaggerating when she said you were a looker. What I wouldn't give to have a

flaming mane of hair like yours,” the woman gushed, curling a loose strand of my hair around her finger.

I couldn’t tell her age just from looking at her. Like Principal Hawthorne, she barely had any wrinkles, but there was a sparkle in her eye that said she’d seen a lot in her life. If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say that she was anywhere between her forties to mid-fifties. She stood a head taller than me—except this time around I was wearing flip flops and she was in a pair of wedged heels, which meant that she was even taller.

Her platinum blonde hair was pulled into her high ponytail and she was wearing a light sundress and siren-red lipstick that made her pouty lips pop. She kind of reminded me of Scarlett Johansson. She even had the curves to put Scar-Jo to shame.

“Excuse me?” I squeaked, surreptitiously putting some distance between us before I got high off her alluring perfume. It smelled expensive and like she’d doused herself in the entire bottle before stepping out of her home.

Her dark brown eyes sparked with laughter as she looked me up and down in one glance that had me feeling as if I’d just been stripped bare in the middle of the supermarket. Heat crept up my neck and spread across my cheeks all the way to the tips of my ears. I bet I was the same shade as my red hair.

“Oh, how delightful,” the woman chortled.

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“Dawn, you’re making the poor girl uncomfortable. How about you just introduce yourself and let her get on with her shopping?” A second woman had approached us, and I had to do a double-take because she looked exactly like the strange woman I was already talking to, only the biker chick version. Her hair was cropped short into a spiky pixie cut and she had a thick rim of eyeliner around her eyes and dark purple lipstick. She was wearing skintight ripped jeans, a tank top, and biker boots. “Excuse my sister. Sometimes she forgets the meaning of boundaries and that not everyone can read minds. I’m Destiny, by the way. Destiny Rhodes. And this head case over here is my younger twin, Dawn.”

I automatically returned Destiny’s handshake while my brain worked furiously to unpack what Destiny meant when she said not everyone could read minds. “Julia Bryant, and yes, I am the new history teacher,” I introduced myself, a stiff smile plastered across my face. “Are you friends with Principal Hawthorne?”

“We belong to the same...club, I guess you could say. It’s made up of the two of us, Catherine, another friend of ours, Beverly, and a few more people. Bev owns a bookstore. You should check it out. I get the feeling she would love to meet you,” Dawn suggested with a sly twinkle in her eyes.

“You think?” Destiny exclaimed, her eyes going slightly wide. She stepped back as if to assess me from a distance and hummed to herself in approval.

“Oh, I don’t think—I know. Red, you’re in for quite a ride, but I guarantee that it will all be worth it.” Dawn grabbed my hand and gave it a short squeeze as she peered down into my eyes. I suddenly felt like I was the butt of a joke I wasn’t in on. Destiny and Dawn were by far the weirdest set of twins I’d ever met. I’ve been friends with a

couple of twins before, both identical and fraternal, and I knew that there was some weird voodoo stuff that happened between them. But with these two...I couldn't put my finger on it, but something about them made the hairs at the back of my neck stand on edge.

“Uh...I'll...I'll definitely visit the bookstore. Thanks for the recommendation?” It was meant to be a statement but ended up sounding like a question instead. “It was a pleasure to meet you two, and I hope to see you around town, but if you'll excuse me, I have to...” I trailed off, jabbing my finger behind me and awkwardly pointing down the empty aisle. Before they said anything else, I pushed my cart away, completely forgetting that I had been in the middle of deciding which cereal to buy. Getting my groceries took way longer than anticipated. After Destiny and Dawn approached me, other customers in the store grew bolder and introduced themselves, peppering me with all sorts of questions—some way too personal for my liking. I even got asked on dates by two guys, both of whom I'd turned down. I was all for getting back in the saddle after the disaster of my last relationship...eventually. I definitely wasn't going to go out with the first random guy I met.

I found a cute little bistro about a block from the grocery store. I huffed out a quiet laugh when I saw that the owners didn't bother stressing out over a name, simply calling the bistro The Eat. The outdoor sitting area was already full, and although I would have loved to do some people watching as I had lunch, I wasn't that disappointed when I walked inside and was met with a mouthwatering meld of spicy scents and the cheerful chatter of people over a Bruno Mars song playing from speakers mounted on the wall over the bar. The walls were painted in a warm amber color reminiscent of bourbon, and the floor, ceiling, tables, and chairs were all manufactured from dark wood of varying shades from ebony to cherry red. Strung over a lattice framework on the ceiling were fairy lights. They were switched off since it was still daytime, but I pictured how the open room would look come sundown. The fairy lights would lend an ethereal golden glow to the bistro, enhancing the rustic atmosphere. I made a mental note to visit again sometime after

dark as I looked for a waiter or hostess to show me to a table.

There were empty stools by the bar, as well as a few empty tables by the window. I briefly debated where to sit myself when I caught the bartender's eye. She waved me over to the bar and paused in the middle of her wipe down of the granite top counter, placing a laminated menu in front of an empty spot.

"Hey there, welcome to The Eat. Name's Rachel. What can I get you?" she smiled openly, her nose ring winking at me. I sat down and placed my bag on the counter in front of me, my gaze swinging from Rachel to the array of bottles on display on the shelf behind her and the painting mounted over the shelf of the same main street I'd just driven down. I didn't know if it was the same person who did the one I saw at school, but the artist was just as talented. The painting was of a festival of some kind and showed a parade procession through the street with The Eat standing out in the background decked in fairy lights.

"Hi, Rachel. I'm Julia." I found myself responding to the openness of her friendly smile and reached out my hand, which she shook with a firm grip. "Could I have a mimosa while I look over the menu?"

"I've never seen you around before and it's too late in the season for you to be a tourist. You the new teacher, Red?" she asked as she mixed up my drink. My left eye twitched. She was the second person to call me Red and know what I did for a living. I was well aware of the small-town gossip grapevine trope, but this was getting ridiculous. And as for the nickname, it's not that I minded being called Red, but it was unoriginal to the point of annoying. It was up there with Raggedy Ann and Chucky.

"It's Julia, or Jules if you prefer, and yes, I am the new teacher. Was there an announcement in the local newspaper or something?"

Rachel snorted, placing a coaster and champagne glass in front of me. I took a small sip and hummed in pleasure when the taste of orange juice mixed with sparkling wine hit my taste buds. “I wouldn’t be surprised if there was. You’ll find that everyone here has the tendency to get excited—or riled up—over the weirdest things. It’s been a while since we had someone new blow into town that wasn’t just passing through, so I guess you’re the shiny new toy. Don’t look now, but Buck from the hardware store and Brett Thorne are totally checking you out,” she whispered conspiratorially.

Anytime someone said things like “don’t laugh, but,” or “don’t look, but,” I was guaranteed to do the exact opposite. Naturally, when Rachel told me not to look, I took a peek over my shoulder, using my hair to shield part of my face and saw the men she was referring to.

“Let me guess, the one in the pressed suit is Brett Thorne?” I drawled in a dry tone, giving the guys a bland smile when they raised their beer bottles in greeting.

“I promise he’s not as pretentious as he looks, unless you’re facing him in the courtroom. I hear he can be a devil to go up against. So, are you interested?”

What was with the people in this town? “I am quite done with all the lawyer types, thank you very much. Been there, done that, not keen on a repeat performance.” I sneered at the image of Toby’s face that popped into my head.

I hadn’t thought about him and my ex-BFF for a few days, but now that they’d intruded into my little slice of paradise, I sent out a silent prayer to the universe that they both got sunburned on their honeymoon.

“Oh, I sense a story behind that. Want to share? Quite frankly, I think it’s unfair I get paid peanuts compared to a shrink when I do their job way better,” she joked.

“I came here to grab a bite to eat. If I start talking about my garbage ex-fiancé and

trash can ex-best friend, my appetite will go down the drain,” I groused, taking a hefty sip of my mimosa.

“Oh, honey, just you wait until you get a taste of Miriam’s cooking. You’ll never want to eat anything else again.” Rachel winked at me. “So, tell me about this ex of yours. It might help if you get it all off your chest. If you feel that burying his dead corpse is the only way you can get over what happened between you two, I know a couple of spots that are great for burying bodies.”

Somehow she managed to charm me into spilling my guts. When I was done and nibbling on the last of my fries, we spent around ten minutes brainstorming creative ways to end Toby and then made a date to have drinks later in the week.

My stomach full and my spirit lighter now that I had unburdened myself to my first friend in Mystic Cove, I took a stroll around the shops. I wasn’t ready to be alone in the quiet of my home yet, and although I was by myself right now, being in the presence other people staved off the loneliness just a little bit.

Mom called me as I walked out of an antique store with some throw pillows for my couches and an antique clock that I bought just because it reminded me of Cogsworth from *Beauty and the Beast*. She was calling to check in on me and I assured her that everything was well and quickly cut off the call before she went on a tangent about one thing or another and continued browsing through some boutiques. I saw a pair of leopard print Jimmy Choo heeled sandals that called out to me, but I resisted the urge to nab them. They were slightly used, but I would have to wait for my paycheck because I knew if I bought one pair, I’d go down a rabbit hole and leave the store with at least three pairs.

The sky was awash in shades of red and orange as the sun hung low over the horizon when I made my way back to the car, but a store sign caught my attention and I remembered Dawn and Destiny’s suggestion from earlier.

“The Book Coven, huh?” I remembered Destiny saying that she and a few other ladies were in a club or something and a coven was like a group of witches. Maybe they were part of a book club and they met in the bookstore? Biting down on my lip, I wondered if I should go in. A few of my favorite authors had published new titles recently, but I usually got e-book versions. My bookshelf was already cluttered, and e-books didn’t take up any space. I was about to walk away when the door to the bookstore opened, the sound of wind chimes tinkling loudly, and a rose-pink-haired woman poked her head out, her lips downturned and eyes narrowed in a fierce scowl.

“Are you going to come in or just stare through the window like a numbskull?” She didn’t give me the chance to answer, grabbing my hand and pulling me into the store.

CHAPTER 7

“You must be Beverly. I met some friends of yours earlier; they recommended your store to me,” I said into the silence when Beverly let go of my hand and stepped behind the counter and switched on an electric kettle.

“And yet you were going to walk on by without stopping in to say hello.” She arched her eyebrows at me. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those tree huggers who’d rather go blind staring at a bright screen than reading a nice, thick hardback.” She stared at me over the rim of her bright red cat-eye glasses.

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My lips twitched of their own volition. That was almost the same argument my mother made whenever she caught me or one of my sisters-in-law reading a novel on an iPad. “Minimalism is all the rage these days, Beverly. Besides, you can carry a countless number of books with you anywhere and everywhere if you use an e-reader instead of lugging about all those heavy hardbacks,” I shot back, my tone light and teasing.

Beverly made a sound of disgust low in her throat and waved me away. “Why don’t you browse through the shelves while I make us some peppermint tea.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I just ate.” I rubbed my stomach awkwardly but stopped when I realized that it looked like I was caressing a food baby and let my hands hang awkwardly by my sides.

“Nonsense. The store’s been rather empty today and I could use a bit of company for a little while. You wouldn’t deny an old woman this small favor, would you, dear?” And with that, I was out for the count. I browsed through the historical romance section, looking for something interesting.

The bookshelves were arranged in a way that didn’t make the open-plan arrangement of the store feel cluttered and let the dying embers of sunlight spilling through the floor-to-ceiling windows bathe everything in a warm glow. Beverly was burning incense next to the cash register, and I spotted another incense stick holder on the coffee table by the reading area near the front door. The scent of lavender and something earthier wafted through the air. Ambient sounds were playing from a hidden speaker, and as I drifted from one shelf to another, I noticed various crystals were placed on shelves and mini landscape paintings of various places in Mystic

Cove hung on the walls. The Book Coven felt more like a day spa than a bookshop, but I supposed there were people who thought of a bookstore in that way.

The public library was my refuge when I was younger; there was no feeling like losing yourself in a story and experiencing the wild ride of events with the characters. And, of course, adding more members to my harem of book boyfriends.

“Tea’s ready, love,” Beverly called out. I went back to the counter and put my selection of books down—two Regency romances and a Gothic novel. My love life sucked, but at least I could live vicariously through the heroines of my romance reads.

Beverly was sitting on one of the wicker chairs in the reading nook near the large windows by the front door. A silver tray sat on the coffee table, which laden with a glass teapot full of peppermint tea, two porcelain teacups, and a plate of biscuits.

“I don’t think I got your name, sweetheart. Are you just passing through, or did you come to stay?” Beverly asked, pouring tea for both of us. She was a willowy woman, dressed in a flowing, sleeveless bohemian style dress. Bracelets were wrapped around both her wrists and they clinked against each other any time she moved her hands. Her rose-pink-dyed hair was tied back by a bandana and flowed down her back, almost all the way to her butt in loose waves. I had no idea how she maintained it all. My curls were shoulder-length, a few inches longer when I straightened it, and it was a heck of a job whenever I had to go through a wash and conditioning cycle.

I thought Beverly might have been around my mother’s age, give or take a few years, but she still looked as youthful as the twins. The only signs of aging were the pronounced laugh lines around her eyes and mouth.

“Julia Bryant.” The last time I had to say my name so many times in the span of a few hours was when my professors had everyone introduce themselves during the first

semester of my freshman year.

“Oh, yes. Catherine mentioned you. So, you’re the one she brought in to shape the minds of our young ones. I don’t envy the task ahead of you, dear. The youth in this town, spawns of the devil himself.” She shook her head in exasperation rather than frustration. “A beautiful girl with curves like yours and that gorgeous red hair—you don’t really strike me as the scholarly type. What made you go into teaching?”

I nibbled on a biscuit as I thought of an answer and my lips twisted in a sardonic smile when I remembered something one of my brothers said when I announced that I wanted to be a teacher. “Bas—that’s my brother—says it’s because I love to hear the sound of my own voice and love being right.”

“And what’s the real reason?” Beverly prodded. I had to break our eye contact when I started feeling self-conscious due to her intense stare. Beverly had bright hazel eyes and a direct stare that made you think she’d see right through any crap you threw at her.

I shrugged when I couldn’t come up with an answer that would make me sound like a mature adult. “I liked history in school and didn’t want to stop studying it. I considered getting a degree in archaeology, but then I thought how much I used to enjoy my classes and how Mr. Fitzpatrick always appeared to be having so much fun even though there were only, like, three of us actually paying attention. So, why not? I’m great with kids, but I didn’t want to have to deal with a bunch of middle schoolers day in and day out. I’d rather deal with a bunch of sullen teenagers.”

“Is that so?” Beverly hummed, raising her teacup up to her lips. She took a delicate sip and then asked, “You mentioned a brother. Are you close with him and the rest of your family?”

“We are close, even though they put me in a killing frame of mind most of the time.

I'm the youngest of four children, the only girl. I guess you could say I'm the runt of the litter. Growing up with three older brothers was a test of patience. Sometimes I'm shocked that I'm still sane after growing up in the same house as them," I mumbled ruefully, glancing over Beverly's shoulder to a painting that hung behind the counter of a cute cottage-style home, complete with garden gnomes and everything.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not bitter or anything. I really love my brothers to bits, but they have this knack of getting on my last nerve and it's all under the guise of brotherly affection. And then there's excessive overprotection, as if I am some delicate flower that will wilt if I'm not coddled within a glass dome."

"I bet you had a terrible dating life in high school." Beverly smirked, and I let out an inelegant snort.

"That is an understatement if I ever heard one. If there was any boy brave enough to ask me out, you could count on Charlie, Bennett, and Sebastian to make the poor boy run through a gauntlet. It got to the point where I just gave up on dating until I went to college. They once put an ex of mine in the hospital... I mean, the guy deserved it for trying to assault me, but still..."

They almost put my ex-fiancé in hospital too, but I kept that to myself. Toby was still a sore spot for me. One day I would be able to think about him without my heart feeling like it was being crushed under the weight of a hydraulic compress. I didn't even want to confront my feelings regarding Jess. The two of us had been best friends since we were in middle school. Heck, Jessica was the one who set Toby and me up in the first place. The image of finding them intertwined on the bed Toby and I shared was forever burned into my eyelids.

A feather-light touch on my hand startled me from the depressing thoughts and I looked away from the cottage painting. I hadn't been aware that I was still staring at it.

“Where did you go? You were telling me about your family and then you suddenly went quiet and got this pained look on your face. Is everything all right, dear?”

“I’m fine.” I cleared my throat and blinked away the burning sensation in my eyes. Thank goodness they remained dry. How embarrassing would it have been to start bawling in the middle of a bookshop in front of a stranger?

“So, Beverly—”

“Please, call me Bev. All my friends do, and I have a feeling you and I are going to get along famously.” I smiled at that. First Rachel and now Beverly. They were both a far cry from the friends I used to have before I lost them all to Jess, but these women felt a lot more genuine than those traitors.

“Okay, Bev,” I corrected myself. “I heard from Destiny and Dawn that the three of you and Principal Hawthorne are in a book club. I was wondering if maybe you’re open to more members? Or is it a closed club?” Heat crept up my cheeks as I asked the question and my face only burned hotter when Bev started cackling and doubled over clutching at her stomach.

“B-book club? Is that what they told you?” She wheezed, dabbing at the tears trickling down the sides of her eyes. “Unfortunately, it’s nothing as remotely interesting as that, Julia honey. But now that you mention it, it’s almost criminal that I own a successful bookshop and know almost all the locals and I’ve never once thought of starting a book club. But you and I can rectify that, I think.” She winked at me and got up to start clearing the table. “It would also be a good way to meet the rest of the folks living around here. We’ve got more than a few oddballs, to be sure, but you’ll find there’s never a dull moment in Mystic Cove. How long have you been in town? Have you been to any of the local haunts or visited the Drinking Hole? I’m told that’s where all the young folks go to let their hair down. Personally, I prefer a quiet night at home with a nice glass of pinot noir.”

“I’ve only been here two days, but don’t worry, I plan to take full advantage of having the sea only a few minutes from my home, and I already made plans with Rachel from The Eat to grab a drink at the Drinking Hole before the end of the week,” I chirped. I was falling for the charm of Mystic Cove fast, especially the quirky names of their stores and establishments like The Eat and the Drinking Hole. And I found the Victorian architecture of most of the buildings quite fascinating. I’d driven past the museum on the way into town and planned on visiting it in the near future.

“And here I thought I was the first friend you made. But you couldn’t have made a better choice than Rachel Holland. Girl has a wild streak in her, but she’s as loyal as a wolf when she welcomes you into her pack,” Beverly commented dryly with a wry twist of her mouth. She walked behind the counter and deposited the tray by the small kitchenette area and came up to the register to ring up my books.

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“Not to mention,” she continued in a melodious tone as she studied the books I’d chosen before swiping the scanner across the barcodes, “she has one hell of a good-looking brother. He’s a bit of a dog when it comes to the ladies, but I’m sure once he meets the right woman he’ll come to heel. You should ask Rachel to bring him along for drinks. Maybe you’ll be the one to tame the rascal...” She looked up at me again, her gaze assessing, and I wondered what was going on in her head. “On second thought, you’re too good for him, and I think Rachel would concur.”

“What makes you think I don’t have a man waiting for me at home?” I cocked my head to the side and crossed my arms across my chest. Should I be flattered that Beverly was trying to set me up within an hour of us meeting, or offended that I was obviously giving off pathetic, single-girl vibes?

“It’s a hunch, and you’ll soon find out, Julia dear, that at least half of the happy couples of Mystic Cove are the way they are because I am a meddlesome old lady. I’m still getting a feel for you, but mark my words, before the year is over, you’ll be firmly ensconced within the arms of Prince Charming and singing my praises.” She told me the total cost for the books and I dug out my credit card and handed it over.

“Thanks, but no thanks, Bev. I’ve had enough Prince Charming wannabes to last a lifetime, and it turns out that Disney has been selling us dreams all along. But when I’m ready to put myself back out there, I promise you’ll be the first to know.”

Beverly tutted and gave me a distinctly maternal look. “Love does not wait for you to prepare yourself. It springs up whether you are searching for it or not, and it’s up to you to grasp tightly onto it with both arms or sit back and watch it pass by. And trust me, little one, you don’t want to wake up alone twenty years from now with a whole

mountain of regrets weighing you down.” Her hazel eyes flickered with a deep and ancient sadness that made me wonder if she was speaking from experience.

I said nothing in reply to Beverly’s statement and quietly accepted my card and the paper bag with my novels. I opened my eyes to bid her a good evening when the painting of the cottage snagged my attention again.

“I could have sworn that that painting showed the cottage during the day.” I frowned, leaning across the counter to get a closer look, and I could hardly believe my eyes. Thinking that it was perhaps a trick of the light since the sun had set while Beverly and I had tea and biscuits, I rapidly blinked in an attempt to adjust to the waning light, but I was not hallucinating.

While the sun was setting outside, the same thing was happening in the painting. The garden gnomes were slightly illuminated by a group of fireflies floating around the front garden, and there was a warm light shining through the closed drapes on the front window of the cottage.

“Wow. How...how is that possible?” My fingers curled into the palm of my hands. I resisted the urge to jump over the counter and grab the painting from its perched position to study it more closely.

“They call them illusionary paintings. Not sure exactly how they do it. Who knows, it might be magic. Do you like it?” Beverly asked me, and I nodded, unable to say anything else. I was too riveted by the new discoveries I made the longer I stared at the painting, like the pair of yellowish amber eyes peering out of the forest in the background. If I squinted my eyes, I could almost make out what looked like the muzzle of a beast and a flash of sharp teeth.

“I’ve seen a lot of these paintings around town. Are they all from the same artist?” Did all the other paintings have these secret and hidden facets as well? Now I wanted

to go back to The Eat and see for myself, or hunt down the artist and ask how they were able to create something like that. I certainly wouldn't mind getting my hands on a few pieces to hang around the house, and maybe some for Mom as well.

"Not really, but they are all students at the same art school. I could put you in touch with—" Beverly came to an abrupt stop, her eyes going comically wide and a Joker-esque smirk twisting her elegant features. "Landon Grayson! Why didn't I think of him sooner?"

Without saying a word to me, she picked up the store's phone and dialed a number, humming quietly to herself until the person on the other end picked up. "I found her!" she exclaimed without warning or greeting.

Before she could say anything else, the person on the other end of the line started talking. The words were indistinct, but the voice was clearly male, and whatever he said made Beverly light up.

"I am doing fabulous, Landon dear, but I wasn't calling to catch up. Actually, I have a young lady with the most gorgeous red hair standing in front of me that I really think you need to meet."

My jaw dropped to the floor and my stomach sunk when I finally caught on to what Beverly was trying to do. I scurried to grab the phone away from her, but Beverly gracefully evaded my attempts and ignored all the panicked signs I was giving her. "Don't be like that. I know I may have been off the mark a few times in the past, but believe me when I say I have found the one this time."

"Oh, for the love of— Bev, stop what you're doing this instant!" I hissed, walking behind the counter and stopping in front of her, my hands on my hips. She gave me a conspiratorial wink and kept talking as if I wasn't standing right there.

“And besides, she wants to buy some Mystic Cove originals, and who better than you to show her the best your students have to offer. Are you back in town yet?”

There was more indistinct chatter from the other end of the phone call, and I could tell from the clipped tones that this Landon was just as happy as I was about being set up out of the blue.

“That’s a shame. I suppose I will have to make the reservation for tomorrow evening then, say seven-thirty-ish. I’ll text you Julia’s address. Tootles.” She cut the call off and turned to face me with a wide grin on her face. “I know you’re mad at me right now, but remember what I said. I know what I’m doing. Landon will pick you up tomorrow. Clair de Lune is a four-star French restaurant, so do doll up and prepare to knock the socks off that grump.”

CHAPTER 8

The grand entrance I had planned for my first day at work was ruined by a terrible night of sleep. Granted, I didn’t have a flashy entrance planned or anything, except to put my best foot forward, literally.

After coming home from Beverly’s, my face redder than the lobsters from grandma’s clambake, I’d tried to soothe my frayed nerves by picking out a killer outfit to match the secondhand Louboutin black pumps that I’d bought as a pick me up post-breakup but hadn’t gotten the chance to wear yet. And I really loved the ensemble I’d picked out, but my impending blinding date with whomever Landon Grayson was hung precariously over my head like a guillotine blade.

Any excitement I had over my new job was eclipsed by the nervous anxiety bubbling in my gut. I’d done blind dates before, and tried dating apps, but from what I saw today, gossip spread through Mystic Cove faster than wildfire, and I just knew that Beverly was on the hotline telling everyone that I was going out with this guy

tomorrow. A part of me was tempted to stand him up, but I was wary of ruining the budding friendship between Bev and me. I didn't know her well yet, but I had a feeling she was a force of nature in this small town. If I wanted to make friends and be successful here, I was pretty sure I needed to stand on the good side of Beverly Barnes. And how bad could the guy be? Bev seemed to instantly like me, so she must have good taste...right?

I might have known her for less than two hours, but there was an air about Beverly that made you want to trust her, and who knew? Maybe she was an extraordinary matchmaker and Landon was my soulmate. At the very least, this could be the first step to getting back into the dating game like I had promised everyone I would do eventually. I just hadn't planned to get back in there so quickly.

Before I went to bed, I logged onto my laptop and did a Google search. The only thing that popped up on Landon was that he owned a few galleries, one of which was right here in Mystic Cove, and that he ran an art school above the gallery in town. There were no pictures or background information on him, but Beverly wouldn't let me down...right?

* * *

Come Monday morning, I was more exhausted than when I'd gone to sleep. Getting any sleep was virtually impossible. I would jolt awake as soon as I started dozing off, my emotions swinging wildly from jittery excitement about my first day at work to a stomachache inducing unease over the blind date. I think I managed around two hours of sleep.

Flash forward to seven a.m. on Monday and I was trying to hide the dark shadows under my eyes and failing miserably to administer eye drops onto my bloodshot eyes. My eyes were so dry and crusty that I couldn't put in my contact lenses, so I had to dig out my glasses from where they were stashed in my nightstand.

Two cups of coffee and a couple of nibbles of my toasted bagel were all I could swallow down before setting off. I felt like—and the irony was not lost on me at all—a small town girl visiting the big city for the first time as I walked down the halls toward the staff room. It was as if I was seeing the school through different eyes now that there were students milling about. The excited chatter and laughter from the students, lockers being slammed shut, the squeaking of shoes on the floor, and the scents of polish and chemical detergents mixed in with a myriad of deodorants were nostalgic in more ways than one.

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Plenty of my new colleagues were already gathered in the staff room. Some were seated at their desks and typing away on their laptops, but most were grouped in small clusters and catching up from the summer break. The largest groups were gathered around the coffee machine and water cooler. I hesitated in the doorway, taking everything in from the layout of the desks to the bulletin boards cluttered with schedules and memorandums even though the semester had barely begun.

An uncomfortable sensation coiled in my stomach. Being the new girl was never fun. As a substitute teacher, I was always on the fringe of the teaching staff. I was friendly with the other teachers but never friends. My time at the schools I taught in was never long enough to form any lasting attachments. And if there was one thing I knew, it was that life itself was one giant classroom. Even though some people mature past high school, we tend to carry the mentality we developed during high school into our adult lives. Fingers crossed, I took a deep breath, pasted a cheery smile on my face, and sashayed into the room only to trip over my own feet when all the eyes immediately turned to me and the chatter ceased.

“Oh my God,” I mumbled under my breath and scrunched my eyes shut when my ankle twisted and my feet gave out on me, preparing to kiss the tiles. This was so not the first impression I wanted to make. Although I’d met most of the teachers last week, this was my first time walking into the room as one of them.

The bone-jarring impact I expected never came. Instead, I fell into a wall of muscle and a set of strong arms banded around my waist. There was a ringing sound in my ears and my heart was pounding so loud that the faint and tangy taste of blood bloomed on my tongue.

“Are you okay? It looked like you twisted your ankle pretty bad. Maybe we should head over to the nurse’s office and have it checked out.”

I could feel the vibrations of the husky voice through the material of my dress and nearly swallowed my tongue when I looked up into a pair of warm, honey brown eyes frowning down at me from behind thick-rimmed glasses.

“Uh...” I answered like an idiot, blinking up at him and wishing that the ground would open up and swallow me whole where I stood. I was keenly aware of all the attention on us even though the man in front of me was taking up most of the view with his broad vest. I pushed away from his embrace, stumbling back a few steps. There was a slight twinge in my ankle, but it was otherwise uninjured.

“I’m fine. No harm done,” I stuttered, hugging my laptop bag close to my chest like a shield. “I appreciate the concern, though...and for saving me from paying a ton of money to get dental implants,” I joked, and someone broke out laughing. And just like that, the ice was broken and a few staff members approached us.

“As far as first meetings go, that’s one for the books. The name’s West, from the chemistry department. We didn’t have the opportunity to meet last week, but you’re all anyone can talk about, so I feel as if I know you already. I can see why, though. After nearly six years of staring at the same old boring faces, it feels nice to get some new blood.” West winked at me, and I almost swallowed my tongue when two idents appeared on either side of his cheeks. Dimples were a particular weakness of mine. I almost embarrassed myself further by swooning right then and there.

“Oh, please. As if your ugly mug is any fun to look at. You could at least let the woman settle in before you break out the charm, man,” another teacher commented. I met him last week but had forgotten his name—It might have been Jerry or Gerald. He was a math teacher, and I think his wife was the school librarian or someone from the administration office.

“It’s nice to meet you, West. Is that a first or last name?” I asked, trying not to make it obvious that I was checking him out. Despite what Jerry/Gerald said, West was attractive in a nerdy kind of way. Beneath the starched shirt and sweater vest was a body any hot-blooded woman would salivate over. It wasn’t even eight in the morning and he already had his tie loosened and the sleeves of his shirt rolled up his forearms to reveal ropey muscles and veins running down the length of his arms. His sandy blond hair was disheveled like he’d just rolled out of bed, finger-combed the wavy strands, and left it at that.

“Last, but I just go by West. My first name is kind of pretentious, not to mention so ancient I can feel my bones withering to dust when someone calls me by it.” West scratched the shell of his ear, looking like a sheepish schoolboy.

“Color me intrigued. Any chance I could get you to tell me what it is?” I asked, pushing my glasses up the bridge of my nose. The bell rang just as he opened his mouth to answer. A regretful look flashed in his eyes. “I have a first-period lesson to get to, but to answer your question—” He leaned down to whisper in my ear so that no one else could hear what he said. “—that’s third or fourth date material.” He winked at me before walking to his desk to gather his lesson materials and then walked out of the staff room, smirking like the cat that ate the canary.

CHAPTER 9

The school day passed by in a flash; I only had two lessons to teach on Monday, so I spent most of my time either in the staff room or in the library. I enjoyed both the classes I had; I didn’t get much teaching done since the first lessons were more to build a rapport with the students and getting to know each other. I spent my lunch hour with West and a few other people in the teacher’s lounge. I was pleasantly surprised by how friendly everyone was, even if they hadn’t embraced me into their circles just yet. There were still a few staff members who looked at me with some distrust and were colder in their interactions, but no one was outright rude to me. It

helped that I had West by my side to smooth things over and bring me into the fold. I appreciated him going out of his way to make me feel welcome and as comfortable as possible, and yet, I was unsure how to deal with his overt flirting.

I would not deny that there was some attraction during our initial meeting, but as the day wore on, I quickly realized that any attraction on my part was purely superficial. Besides, workplace romances were a big no-no for me. I'd witnessed the kind of havoc that working together with your partner could wreak on a romantic relationship and I did not want to put myself through any of that. Besides, I was pretty sure the librarian had the hots for West. I caught her glaring daggers at me during lunch while West regaled me about the semester he spent abroad in Rome during his college years. No way I was getting myself involved in workplace drama during the first few weeks of my new job. And, lest I forgot, I had a date with my supposed soulmate to look forward to. No need to sabotage that before I'd even given it a chance.

By the time I knocked off work, I was on a euphoric high. The song "Walking on Sunshine" by Katrina and the Waves was stuck in my head and I hummed it out loud as I walked to my car, enjoying the little jolts of pure joy that shot through me when a few students called out to me and wished me a good evening.

Still humming to myself, I unlocked my car and put my handbag and laptop carrier in the back seat, bending down to push them both under the passenger and driver's seats so that they wouldn't be visible targets in case I got carjacked or something; it was a habit I learned from my mother. I did not expect to find West waiting by the passenger side door when I popped my head back up.

I yelped, my heart giving a violent kick to my ribcage, and I bumped my head against the doorframe. I cried out, rubbing at the sore spot and messing up my hair.

"Oh, jeez! Are you okay? I didn't mean to scare you like that." West jogged around the car and tried to check for bumps, but I waved him away.

Between the slight pounding on the top of my head and the arrhythmia, I was kind of annoyed at him since it was his fault, but I didn't bite his head off like I would have if it were one of my brothers. "I didn't hit my head that hard. I'll be okay. Did you need something from me?" I grimaced.

West's outstretched hand hovered awkwardly in the air and his expression was twisted as if he were the one in pain. "Uh..." He cleared his throat, averting his gaze and staring down at the pavement in an uncharacteristically bashful move. "A few of us are heading down to the Drinking Hole to celebrate the first day of school. Or maybe it's to congratulate ourselves for surviving the first day. I'm not really sure, but it's sort of a tradition, and I wondered if you'd like to join us?" He could not have looked more hopeful, so I desperately wanted to say yes. This was an opportunity to get to know everyone outside of work and sink my roots a little deeper into the community. Beverly and her meddlesome matchmaking were ruining my life already!

"I already have plans for tonight, and I can't bail at the last minute. Next time?" I hoped that West and the others wouldn't take the rejection the wrong way. People had accused me of being stuck-up for way less in the past, and alienating myself from the people I was going to be spending a lot of time with day in and day out was the last thing I wanted.

"Sure. I should get out of your hair now and join the others before they put all their orders on my tab. I'll see you tomorrow. Hope you have a good evening." His words were kind, but there was a hardness to his eyes that wasn't there before. Clearly, he'd made his own assumptions about what my plans were, and I knew right there and then that I had to nip this little crush of his in the bud soon. For now, I had a date to prepare for.

* * *

"Dang it!" I yelled in frustration when I poked my eye with the mascara wand for the

second time, blinking rapidly when my eyes started tearing up. I had this weird fear of having anything too close to my eyes. When I was younger, it was a battle for my parents to administer eye drops when I needed them. As a matter of fact, it was a three-person job. Usually, Dad would hold me down and either Bennett or Charlie would pry my eyes open and keep them that way so that I didn't close them while Mom squeezed a few drops of the medicine in my eyes. Frankly, it was a miracle, and my own sense of vanity, that allowed me to wear contact lenses on a daily basis, but applying mascara was a pain in the butt since my eyelids refused to cooperate and fluttered closed on their own accord.

I grabbed a wet wipe from the bathroom countertop, removed the layer I'd just applied, and started all over again. I had about fifteen, maybe twenty minutes left before Landon showed up at my door, and I was still in a towel and struggling with my makeup. At least my hair was still straight, if not slightly wavy, from when I flat ironed it on Saturday.

I don't know why Beverly insisted that Landon come pick me up from my house. Now I was working under pressure. I could have just driven myself to the restaurant. It would have saved us a drive filled with awkward silence and tension. I wasn't exactly comfortable with this dude knowing where I lived either; I had seen way too many episodes of *Dateline* and had a dozen scenarios swimming in my mind of how this date could go horribly wrong. On that note, I made sure to throw a taser into my purse before squeezing myself into the dress I'd picked out for the night.

I agonized over whether the dress I'd picked was the right choice for almost an hour when I got home from work. On one hand, I didn't want to give Landon the wrong idea by wearing a revealing dress, but I didn't want to show up looking like a scrub either, especially when we were going to a classy restaurant.

I ended up choosing the sexier dress and admiring the way it hugged my curves in front of the bathroom mirror. It was a champagne-gold mini-dress with a deep V

neckline, baring a generous amount of cleavage. There was a time when I would have shied away from wearing something like that before I learned to love the freckles sprinkled across my chest, but I loved the way the color of the dress accentuated my red hair and sea-green eyes. The puffiness around my eyes had gone down considerably, and I was willing to endure some mild eye irritation and opted for contact lenses. I'd kept my makeup as natural as possible except for my lips, which were coated in bold, red lipstick.

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A knock came at my door just as I was walking down the stairs—three hard raps that seemed to echo throughout the house and resonate deep within my chest. A swarm of butterflies went wild in my stomach as I paused on the last stair, trying to psych myself up for this date.

It wasn't too late for me to go back upstairs and pretend I wasn't home, even though my car was parked in the driveway. "Remember the paintings, Jules. He may not turn out to be the love of your life, but he might give you a sweet deal on one of those beautiful paintings," I mumbled as I forced myself to put one foot in front of the other, which was harder than it sounded seeing as my legs had decided they had no strength or coordination whatsoever tonight.

Sending out a silent prayer to the universe for this night to not be a dud, I pulled the door open and came face to face with the most beautiful pair of amethyst eyes I'd ever seen.

CHAPTER 10

I have no idea how long Landon and I just stared at each other at my front door. Like me, Landon had gone slack-jawed when I opened the door as he slowly looked at me from head to toe, and the sexiest lopsided smirk I'd ever seen spread across his face.

That smile on top of the innate sensuality he exuded just by standing there in his bespoke black suit just about fried my brain.

Wow! Just...wow! Beverly could have at least warned me that I was going out on a date with the incarnation of Adonis or Hades. Landon looked more like a dark god

than the classic beauty of Aphrodite's lover.

Most notable of his many attractive features were, of course, those amethyst eyes, which were framed by thick lashes and the arrogant slash of his thick eyebrows. I'd heard of people with amethyst eyes before. Elizabeth Taylor was famous for her violet gaze. But seeing them up close was something else. At first glance, they looked blue, but the longer I stared at them, I realized that there was indeed some blue mixed in with the amethyst, with a dark ring around the iris.

Landon had a sharp jawline and angular cheekbones that invited a woman to touch, and so did the thick strands of his pitch-black hair, which was parted to frame either side of his face and brushed against the collar of his shirt.

"Julia Bryant?" His voice was husky and there was a hint of a British accent in his voice, faint enough to let me know that he'd either lived in the U.K. for a brief period or he'd been staying in Mystic Cove for so long that the accent was starting to fade.

"That would be me," I replied in a breathy tone, leaning heavily against the door to keep from melting into a puddle at his feet when he took my hand and placed a searing kiss right where my pulse pounded wildly at my wrist.

The feather-light contact of his surprisingly cool and soft lips sent a jolt of electricity from my wrist that arched directly to my core and left me breathless. My entire body felt as if it were on fire.

Landon brushed the rough pad of his thumb over the spot where he'd just kissed me in slow circles, and every stroke of his thumb seemed to have a direct line straight to my heart. What was wrong with me? I'd never had such a visceral reaction to a man before. I'd never experienced this feverish kind of arousal even with Toby, and I'd been convinced that my ex-fiancé was the love of my life.

Landon's nostrils flared, his eyes widened slightly in shock, and his grip tightened around my wrist. His hands were so big, it wouldn't have taken much for him to snap my wrist if he'd squeezed just a little harder.

I let out a small noise that sounded somewhere between a whimper and a gasp when I saw what was happening to his eyes. His pupils were blown out and an inky blackness was bleeding out from the pupils and eclipsing the amethyst of his irises. "Y-your eyes!"

Landon immediately dropped my hand like it had scorched him, and between one blink and the next, his eyes were back to normal. It happened so fast, I almost thought I'd imagined it.

"We should head out now if we want to keep our reservation." His voice came out deeper and huskier than it was earlier, and he averted his gaze and stood off to the side, allowing me to precede him. After locking the front door, I walked down to the driveway, my back ramrod straight. Landon was walking behind me and I could feel the weight of his attention all focused on me. It was a wonder that I didn't trip over myself as we made our way to the sleek sports car parked behind my sedan.

I was no car aficionado, but even I recognized the golden charging bull logo on the hood of the low-slung, pitch-black car.

"Nice car. It suits the tall, dark, and dangerous vibe you've got going on," I teased, tossing my hair over my shoulder. Landon's chuckle was a low, deep rumble that made me think of silk sheets and whispered sweet nothings exchanged in the anonymity of the dark.

"Tall, dark, and dangerous? I like the sound of that. I was afraid you might find the choice of car too pretentious for a first date," he commented, clicking the fob on his keychain and the doors swinging up on both sides.

With his hand on my lower back, Landon helped me into the passenger seat and leaned across my seat to help me with the seat belt. I swallowed a garbled whimper when his arm glanced across my chest.

“I can assure you, there isn’t a woman alive who’d object to being picked up in a Lamborghini.”

Landon clicked the seatbelt into place. He leaned in even closer and took a whiff of my scent from the crook of my neck and hummed in approval. “You smell quite delectable, Julia Bryant.”

With that parting statement, he closed the door and I used the few seconds it took him to run around the car to calm my racing heart and fan my face to cool off. I did not want to spend the entire night with my face matching my hair. I tried yoga breathing exercises, but it didn’t help; the car smelled of leather and Landon. It was a crisp, clean scent that reminded me of pine and frost or the scent of fresh snow.

I sucked in a lungful and held it in as Landon opened the door and took his seat. The Lamborghini purred to life quietly like a black panther, slowly waking up before shooting off in a burst of speed.

It felt like I had been holding my breath for hours when it was actually a few minutes. I slowly exhaled as Landon cruised down the street and began to relax, the tension seeping from my shoulders as I watched him maneuver the car down the road.

CHAPTER 11

I’d expected us to go to one of the nicer restaurants in Mystic Cove, but Landon drove us out of town and headed toward the city. I debated whether I should ask where we were going and make small talk or just revel in the comfortable silence enveloping us save for the soothing jazz music playing at a low volume from the car

radio. In the end, I decided to let myself be surprised and passed the time watching Landon's huge hands steer the wheel and the way his thighs bunched and relaxed underneath his slacks as he switched gears. All the while I imagined what those hands would feel like on my body or how firm his thighs would feel under my touch.

It felt strange to be back in the city even though I'd been away only a little more than a week. Mystic Cove was already feeling like "home." It's where my bed was, my job was, and where I was making friends. I was already growing used to the serene and scenic feel of Mystic Cove, the fresh air without all the pollution. I didn't miss the suffocating crush of the people I saw walking along the sidewalks as Landon drove us uptown. At least I knew there was no chance that anyone from my family would see us. They preferred ordering in or visiting family restaurants unless we had something special to celebrate. If they saw me with Landon, I was sure to get the third-degree with my phone blowing up every few seconds.

I was a veritable mess by the time Landon handed his car keys to the valet forty-five minutes later.

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“Are you feeling okay?” Landon asked, a playful smile teasing at the edges of his full lips. He was backlit by the soft glow of light coming from the entrance of the French restaurant, but his amethyst gaze seemed to glow preternaturally from within.

“Of course. Why do you ask?” I hooked my arm through the one he held out for me, and before leading us to the waiting maître d’, he brushed his knuckles down my flaming cheeks, feeling my temperature with the back of his hand on my forehead. “You look feverish, and your body’s running a little warm. Of course, it could just be the late summer heat.” He winked.

“So...” I began after the waitress left us to look over the menu while she brought our drink orders. Landon had asked for a glass of scotch, and even though I knew it was a bad idea to drink when I had to wake up early for school, I ordered a glass of rosé. One glass wouldn’t hurt; I’d just have to make it last the entire night.

“Yes?” Landon prompted when I said nothing more and just stared expectantly at him. Feeling self-conscious, I toyed with the edge of the laminated menu, jabbing the fleshy pad of my index finger against the sharp corner to get myself to focus.

I skimmed over the menu, frowning when my mind wouldn’t focus long enough to actually make sense of what was written. “Sorry if I seem a little on edge. I haven’t been on a date for so long, not since— Well, never mind that. What I am trying to say is that I’m a little rusty. The fact that this is a blind date doesn’t help either; I don’t want to inadvertently offend one of Beverly’s friends,” I confessed.

“You know that old adage about bicycles and getting back on them? Bev obviously thinks you and I are compatible, so why don’t we just enjoy each other’s company

without forming any expectations of what's to come at the end of the night and beyond that, hmm?" Landon asked softly, tapping a finger on the table and showing off a custom Rolex watch.

"Sounds easy enough. So, how about you tell me about yourself. Beverly didn't really tell me anything about you except to say that you run an art school and own a bunch of galleries."

"That is all true. I have a deep appreciation for the arts. But sadly, I haven't been blessed with any artistic talent, so I chose to help those with magic hands and imaginations nurture those gifts so they can grow as artists."

I loved the low timbre of his voice and the tinge of nostalgia that crept through as he spoke. It was in the way his eyes took on a faraway look, as if he were a thousand miles away. The fond smile that softened his otherwise harsh features made me wonder what he was remembering that could put such a look on his face.

I wanted to keep him talking, but the waitress came back with our drinks and appetizers and asked if we were ready to order. "Uh..." I snatched up my menu and looked over their vegan and vegetarian options and ordered the first thing I saw. Landon ordered a steak, rare, and he caught the expression on my face before I could hide my wince of disgust.

"Don't tell me you're one of those vegetarians who think all meat-eaters belong in the last circle of hell. If that's the case, then I think Beverly might have been wrong about us after all," Landon joked with a swig of his scotch. Though the glint in his eyes as he looked at me over the rim of his glass was full of mirth, there was something dark and sinister slithering just beneath the surface.

"It's not that," I explained, taking a small bite of my appetizer and dabbing the side of my mouth with a napkin. "I have nothing against eating meat. In fact, I used to enjoy

a good steak, and my breakfast was not complete without bacon until I decided to become a vegetarian over a year ago,” I explained, toying with the stem of my wine glass, debating how to explain my distaste in a way that didn’t sound rude to not only Landon but to all world-class chefs. I chose to go with a more diplomatic answer. “I just prefer my meat well-done, you know? Just the thought of eating raw meat or fish makes me nauseous. And what if you get salmonella or something? We’re not wild beasts; we know how to use fire.” I gave him a one-shoulder shrug.

“I believe that you just called me a wild beast, Miss Bryant. Not that you’re wrong to think of me that way. So, what made you switch to the dark side after a lifetime of enjoying the wonders of bacon? I confess, I still fail to understand how some humans are content on living off leaves and herbs as if they were goats.”

That startled a laugh out of me—a loud and inelegant sound that ended in a snort that had me slapping a hand over my mouth and sliding down my seat in a bid to hide from all the eyes looking our way. “Why do all non-vegetarians think all we eat are lettuce leaves and nibble on carrot sticks? There is a whole other world of gourmet dining you’re missing out on. Meat is not the be-all and end-all of fine dining.”

“I’ll take your word for it. So, will you tell me what prompted the lifestyle change? Or is that too personal a question for a first date?”

I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth. It was a question that had a personal answer and not something I wanted to tell him right now because who brought up their ex on a first date with someone?

“I wish I could say I did for something reasonable like health reasons or because I wanted to save the animals or something like that, but it was more for my own vanity than anything else. I went through a really tough break-up a while back. My ex left me for my best friend...my tall, thin best friend. Somehow, the knock to my already bruised ego put one and one together and got eleven because for the first few months

after Toby left me, I got it into my head that it was because I was too curvy for his taste. I went on a rather crazy health kick—joined the gym instead of sticking to my usual Pilates and yoga classes, started cutting back on fast food and the like. I tried cutting out coffee, but that didn't take. I can't function without a dose of caffeine to wake me up in the morning," I blabbered on with a rueful twist of my lips.

"Jess, my best—my former best friend, was a vegan, so I decided to give it a try. I snapped out of the slump I found myself in eventually, but I really do prefer being a vegetarian to eating meat."

"I see. I've never met your ex-fiancé or your former best friend, nor do I ever want to, but I can say with the utmost confidence that he traded down," Landon declared, reaching his hand across the table and giving mine a gentle squeeze. I was swallowed up by the sincere intensity in his eyes and didn't realize that I'd pulled my hand from beneath his to lace our fingers together until I felt him squeeze my hand once more. For the second time that night, inky blackness bled from the center of his pupils and spread to the rest of his eyes.

"Landon—" I gasped just as the waitress returned with our main courses and briefly disrupted my line of view when she placed our dishes on the table. By the time she left to get Landon a refill on his scotch, his eyes were back to their normal color.

The chatter of all the people surrounding us, as well as the waitstaff and utensils clinking against each other, faded into the background as I tried to make sense of what I just saw. If it happened twice in the same night, I couldn't have imagined it, right?

"Julia, you look pale all of a sudden. Are you sure you're feeling well? If you want to cut this short so that we can get you to a doctor, just say the word." The entire time Landon was talking, I waited for his eyes to turn dark again. The furrow between his eyebrows deepened when I remained silent and continued staring at him like a creep

caught in a trance. Landon shifted uneasily in his seat and swallowed down hard, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. Realizing that I was making him uncomfortable, I shook myself out of my mystified stupor.

"It's probably nothing, but I thought I saw your eyes go black for a second there. It might have just been a trick of the light, though." I laughed it off and tucked into my meal.

"Yeah, it must have." Landon's mutter was barely audible, and he gave me a strained smile before looking down at his plate as if the food now disgusted him.

CHAPTER 12

The relaxed atmosphere we'd settled into a few moments ago was now eclipsed by an awkward tension that sat between us like a huge pink elephant. After my comment about the weird color change of his eyes, Landon retreated into his own little world. Our conversation became stilted and one-sided as he answered all of my questions with one-word replies until I gave up trying.

I couldn't even enjoy my food, every bite landing like a block of cement in my gut. I hoped I had some antacid tablets in my medicine cabinet because I had a feeling I was going to have a bad case of indigestion when this was over. Landon was having the same problem; by my count, he'd taken two bites of his steak before pushing his food around his plate and downing his second glass of scotch. I was going to have to keep an eye on that. I didn't know if driving a Lamborghini was any different from driving a non-luxury sports car, but if he decided that he was too drunk to drive us home, I would have to give it my best shot or fork out some cash for a cab ride. Ugh, that was going to be expensive! Why couldn't he have just taken us to a restaurant in Mystic Cove?

Clearing my throat, I tried once more to save this date before calling it quits and

heading home by myself. We hadn't talked about much, but before the date went south, I was enjoying Landon's company. Even if nothing romantic happened between us, I thought we could be good friends.

"How did you and Beverly come to be friends?" I asked him, laying my fork down and uncrossing my legs. Landon finally looked up from playing with his food, his expression a mask of confusion and another emotion I couldn't quite describe. He looked like something was torturing him.

"Beg your pardon?"

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I buried my annoyance deep and reminded myself that this guy was my ride home. I really did not want to pay a hefty fee for a cab, and we still hadn't talked about me wanting to buy some artwork from whoever did the painting in Beverly's shop.

"Beverly. It sounded like the two of you know each other quite well. I was wondering if it was just a small-town thing or if your ties went deeper than that since she's so determined to see you matched up with someone." I added the last bit as a joke and was rewarded with a sheepish smile.

"I guess you can say that she's a godmother of sorts. Our families go way back. She and my grandmother were close friends. Bev can be nosy at the best of times, but it's only because she truly has the gentlest and sweetest heart of anyone I know."

"Hold up! Bev doesn't look a day over fifty and you want to tell me that she's actually, what? In her seventies? Dang, I gotta get her to share her skincare routine," I blurted, trying to wrap my head around the fact that the woman I thought was maybe around the same age as my mother was way older than I'd expected.

"So, I take it that she sets you up on blind dates quite often? It's a wonder you aren't married with half a dozen kids running you ragged already." Something akin to sorrow and regret flashed in his eyes but was gone just as quickly when I mentioned having kids.

"This is only the third date that she's set up for me. Beverly's usually on the nose when it comes to helping people find their significant others, but she's had trouble finding a mate for me for a while now. I'd resigned myself to a life of bachelorhood, but the woman is determined to see me paired off. Says that she refuses to have me be

the only black mark on her otherwise spotless matchmaking record.” He sighed.

I cocked my head to the side and raised my eyebrows. “That’s a peculiar and archaic choice of wording. A mate, as in fated mates? I can see Bev believing in something like that, but you don’t strike me as the kind of man who buys into something like that. No offense, but you look like the type of guy who would try and explain love scientifically by using clinical and logical rationales instead of flowery declarations. But then again, you admitted that you have a profound love of the arts, so I guess my initial assessment could be wrong. Maybe you’ve written odes and ballads to your former lovers,” I mused out loud, crossing my arms on the table and leaning forward and mirroring the way Landon sat.

He mulled over his response. I could see the gears turning in his mind, and I was curious to hear what he had to say about my assessment.

“I suppose I am all of those things. I’ve seen friends and acquaintances of mine fall in love with people who seemed as if they were created specifically for each other—one soul shared by two bodies. And I have also seen and experienced all manner of despicable and questionable acts committed in the name of love. Things that made me think that if this is what love does to people, I’d rather be alone. And I’ll bet you’re just like me. That you were a firm believer in the mighty power of love until you experienced firsthand what the other side of that coin is like.”

I could feel my cheeks go hot at that. Landon was completely right, but I had no wish to delve deep into the psyche that made me stay with Toby so long and ignore the many red flags.

I went for a change in topic and brought up my interest in buying some paintings from him. Landon told me about his galleries and his art school over dessert—a decadent mille-feuille and black coffee—as the clock ticked on. I knew the date was cutting into my sleeping time and that I was going to be a living zombie the next day,

but I didn't care. In fact, I never wanted this night to end. Landon was a great conversationalist, and I was enthralled by the tales of all the places he'd visited across the world. The man may not have had any talent with paintbrushes or charcoal, but he could paint the most vivid scenes with his words.

I told him a little about my family, and my heart went out to him when he confessed that he was the last living member of his family. He did not go into details, but he did reveal that he'd lived in England for almost a decade after his parents and siblings were killed. Another tidbit he revealed reminded me of the research study I'd wanted to conduct when I applied for the teaching job. According to Landon, he and Beverly were descended from the founding families of Mystic Cove.

CHAPTER 13

We would have gone on for hours if our waitress had not informed us that they were closing up. I was so immersed in the conversation that I did not notice all the other patrons clearing out.

Similar to our drive into the city, a comfortable silence reigned on the way back. With a full stomach and the day's exhaustion catching up with me, as well as some measure of relief that the date went better than I could have ever expected, I started to get drowsy. I did not feel myself doze off, but the next thing I knew, I was blinking my heavy eyelids awake as Landon was carrying me up the driveway to my house.

"Wha— Why didn't you wake me? I can walk on my own!" I flailed in his arms, trying to get him to settle me down on my feet, nearly hitting him across his face with my outstretched hand.

"Easy there, tiger. You looked so peaceful that I wanted to let you get in a few more seconds of sleep," he said, his breath stirring the baby hairs at my temple. He lowered me onto the cobblestone walkway, keeping his arms around my waist so I wouldn't

stumble and sprain an ankle.

A shiver worked its way up my spine, but I couldn't tell whether it was from the chilly breeze coming in from the ocean signaling that fall was well on its way, or if it was the consuming intensity of Landon's stare.

"I really enjoyed myself tonight," he whispered, taking his hands from my waist and rubbing them up and down the sides of my arms to ward off the chill. His rich and deep timbre sounded even sexier in the quiet of the night, surrounded by the ambient sounds of nature.

"Same here." I stepped closer to him so that we were standing chest to chest. With my six-inch heels on, I didn't have to crane my head back very far to look up at him—Landon was a tall guy standing at what I estimated to be at least 6'2 compared to my measly height of 5'2. With most of the neighborhood likely fast asleep and only the warm glow of the porchlight illuminating our immediate surroundings, it felt as if we were cocooned in our own little world as Landon tucked loose strands of my hair behind my ear. Another shiver wracked my body when his fingers brushed against the shell of my ear and my eyes fluttered close to their own accord.

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to take you out again. I'm going out of town for a few days to meet with an artist I'm trying to get to sign up for an upcoming exhibition, but maybe this weekend I can take you to my gallery so that you can pick out a few paintings and then we could do lunch or something?"

I could barely concentrate on a word he was saying, not with how close his face was to mine. So close that I could almost feel his lips against mine as he spoke. All I needed to do was close that small gap and touch his lips to mine.

Landon wet his lips with a quick flick of his tongue, and I thought I saw a flash of his teeth, but something about them did not look right. That thought was thrown to the

wayside, however, as his eyes flashed with determination. Landon's arms snaked around my waist and he crushed me so tightly to his chest he could probably feel my heart furiously trying to pound its way out of my ribcage. My fingers curled into his shirt and clutched on for dear life as he demolished me with a single kiss, swallowing up the moan that crept up my throat.

I was being burned alive, all the blood rushing from my head and arrowing straight down to my core as Landon tipped my head back to get better access. The velvet sensation of tongue flicking against mine, his firm lips pressed against my soft mouth was indescribable. At some point, I wrapped my arms around his neck, tugging at the strands of hair on the nape of his neck. Landon tasted like the scotch he drank during dinner, and it was a heady experience; that and knowing he was just as helpless to the sizzling attraction as I was.

For a split second, I considered breaking my no sex on the first date rule and inviting him up to my room. It had been a while since I was intimate with anyone, and my body was aching and begging for release. But as much as I wanted this man, I also felt a real attraction to him. I wanted—needed—to know if there was more to our relationship than animal attractions, so I eased back on the kiss when my lungs started burning with the need for fresh air.

Not even my parents' adorable Labrador retriever panted so much. I was gasping for breath, my heart galloping as if I'd just run a marathon. In contrast, Landon looked cool and collected, his breathing coming in measured breaths. I would have taken offense and assumed that he was unaffected by the kiss were it not for his mussed hair and the banked heat in his hooded eyes. His gaze was concentrated solely on my swollen lips. The sheer sensuality rolling off him had me curling my toes and gulping down saliva in anticipation.

He looked as if he wanted to go in for another kiss, and I was prepared for another barrage of lust to overwhelm my senses. But instead of another bone-meltingly wet

kiss, Landon gave me a chaste peck on my lips and the tip of my nose and chuckled when I made a sound of disappointment. My bottom lip jutted out in a pout without me realizing I was doing it and Landon caressed it with the pad of his thumb.

“You’re cute.” He smirked. “As much as I’d love to drag you up to your bed and lick every inch of you, I’ll have to press pause on that for now. We both have an early start tomorrow, so I must bid you goodnight, my lady. Dream of me tonight, for I will most assuredly be thinking of nothing else but the sweet taste of your lips for the rest of the week.”

And dream of him I did, each and every night as I counted down the days until our next date on Saturday.

CHAPTER 14

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It didn't take long for me to fall into a routine. After getting off work, I'd pass by The Eat to pick up my takeout dinner—I hadn't cooked a single meal since school started on Monday, too lazy to prepare anything after spending the day on my feet. Rachel and I would talk while I waited on my meal, though it was mostly her filling me in on all the town gossip: who was feuding with who, who to steer clear off, who to call if I had a burst pipe.

“Why are there so many feuds?” I laughed, nursing a glass of ice water while Rachel passed drink orders to the waitstaff and wiped down the counter. So far, she'd told me of three families who had long-standing animosity and no less than five personal grudges among some people who were, funnily enough, considered to be pillars of the community. The most interesting one was the supposed cold war between the local Catholic priest and Beverly's group, which included Dawn, Destiny, and Principal Hawthorne. I tried to get Rachel to spill on what the feud was about, but she hedged on the details and told me it was simply a difference of opinions and that it was better to get the answer straight from the horse's mouth.

“Beverly's a little kooky, and I guess Father Granger finds it hard to reason with her most times. He's banned Beverly from ever setting foot in the church after she brought weed brownies to the church's annual bake sale. She claimed that Father Granger and his sheep need to remove the sticks from up their butts and enjoy life the way it was meant to be enjoyed.”

I gaped at her, imagining a Catholic priest and his parishioners high on weed and making fools of themselves, laughter bubbling up in my throat. If this Father Granger was anything like the pastor from my childhood back when grandma used to force us to attend Sunday services, it was a miracle Beverly had not been run out of town yet.

“That’s one feud explained, but what about the rest? I heard the sheriff was called in to diffuse a situation between Kate Ridley and Anna Hawthorne at the pizza place after school yesterday.” I was referring to Principal Hawthorne’s youngest daughter, who was in the senior class I was teaching, and another one of my students. Both girls were sweet as pie from what I’d observed in class—unless they were dealing with each other. At first, I thought it was a typical teenage squabble between two girls trying to cement their position at the very top of the high school hierarchy, but I was quickly learning that their dislike for each other extended to their parents as well.

Rachel slung the dishcloth over her shoulder and leaned across the counter in front of me. She had switched out her nose ring for a flower-shaped stud with a pink crystal in the center and, as usual, she looked as if she’d be more at home behind the counter at a biker bar than a swanky place like The Eat. She had a bemused expression as she explained the reasoning behind all the conflict.

“I heard about that. I’m told there was hair pulling and an epic food fight.” She paused to ring up a bill for one of the tables before coming back to where I was seated. “Most of the family feuds are generational. Someone’s great-great-grandfather wronged the other family’s great-great-grandfather and the feud picked up from there, with each generation taking it up a notch. Take the Hawthornes and the Ridleys for example. The only reason the women in both families can’t stand each other is because they are always trying to one-up each other by stealing the other’s man, and that’s only because Mary Hawthorne stole Priscilla Ridley’s bridegroom a hundred and fifty years ago or something,” Rachel said in a dry tone, rolling her eyes at the ridiculousness of it all.

“I wonder if Principal Hawthorne ever stole someone’s man,” I thought out loud. The woman was a knockout. I could easily picture her in my head as a twenty-something-year-old with all the young men of Mystic Cove eating from the palm of her hand.

“You can call her Catherine, you know. Only the students refer to her as Principal

Hawthorne.” Rachel flicked my forehead. One of the waiters came from the kitchen with my takeout bag and I dug out some cash to pay for the food plus a tip for the waiter. “I like calling her Principal Hawthorne. It just flows better. See you tomorrow night?”

“Seven p.m.,” she reminded me. “And come prepared with a fly swatter cause the men of Mystic Cove have been chomping at the bit to put the moves on you. If I had a dollar for every question that’s been thrown at me about you and whether you’re available, I could probably afford to pay for the bistro’s kitchen renovations.” She smirked at me.

Landon’s face immediately popped into my head. I almost told Rachel that I was, in fact, not single, but we’d only been on one date with plans for the second. And even though we’d been texting and talking on the phone almost every night since Monday, we were still yet to define our relationship. I didn’t want to jump the gun, so I kept my date with Landon to myself.

“Duly noted,” I told Rachel.

* * *

Friday felt like it was dragging on. The students were not paying attention to a word I said. Like me, they were raring to get out and enjoy those last remaining days of summer before the leaves turned red and brown.

As for me, I couldn’t wait to get a couple of drinks and see what Mystic Cove had to offer on a Friday night. Plus, with each hour that passed, it was an hour closer to my date with Landon. He was getting back in town in a few hours, and I was tempted to ditch my standing plans with Rachel to spend some time with him, but I didn’t want to be that kind of girl. Though, I did invite Landon to join us, and it looked like he’d been willing until he heard that it was Rachel Holland I was going out with. His

reluctance and demeanor set off alarm bells in my mind. The ghost of Toby and Jess's betrayal came back to haunt me and a whole bunch of questions started swarming in my mind. Like, what if he and Rachel had dated in the past? Was she one of the women Beverly had set him up with who didn't work out? What if it was only a matter of time before they realized they really were soulmates and that Beverly had been right all along? Ugh, I was spiraling already.

I thought about bringing Landon up to Rachel, so Friday after school, instead of heading straight home and squeezing in a thirty-minute nap like I wanted to before going out for the night, I decided to stop by The Eat again. I drove past The Book Coven and decided on a whim that maybe Bev would be more forthcoming if I asked her instead of possibly offending and alienating the woman who was quickly becoming my new best friend.

There were no parking spaces near the bookshop, so I had to drive around the block and park my car in the grocery store parking lot.

Beverly was helping some customers when I walked in, but she spotted me the moment I walked through the door, the wind chimes alerting her to my presence. I finger waved at her and walked over to the bookshelves to see if there were any other books I might want to buy while she conducted her business. Like the last time I was here, the store smelled of incense—frankincense if I wasn't mistaken—and German folk music was playing in the background.

I picked out a book on the history of Mystic Cove and a tourist guide. I'd still yet to explore it fully, but I did have an interest in at least checking out the hiking trails and maybe talking Bennett and Sarah into bringing the twins up for skiing lessons during the Christmas holiday.

"And here I thought I was going to have to seek you out myself and pry the details out of you. Landon has his lips sealed tighter than Fort Knox, but I'll go out on a limb

and assume things went well,” she said with a smug smile and an “I told you so” ring to her tone.

“Hi, Beverly. How are you doing on this fine day? I’m fine, thanks for asking. Love the hair color, by the way,” I drawled, placing the books on the counter and admiring her new midnight blue hair tied back in a loose braid that fell over her shoulder. To think that she was supposedly a friend of Landon’s grandmother when she had more vitality in her pinky finger than I’d ever had in twenty-nine years.

“Oh, pooh! Do not make me ask again, girl, or you won’t like how I go about extracting the information I need.” She scowled at me, sounding like a cranky old bat.

I huffed out an exasperated breath. “The date went better than expected, and we’re meeting up again tomorrow.”

You’d think I just told her she won the lotto or something the way she smiled and went on to give herself a pat on the back.

“That’s actually why I’m here. Landon told me that you tried to set him up in the past but nothing panned out. This is a small town, and I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes...”

“Goddess, grant me patience. If you want to know if Landon had any ex-lovers who’d want to claw your eyes out, the answer is no. The stubborn boy hasn’t been with anyone in years. Most of the women he’s been with were flings he bedded for no longer than a few weeks at most before moving on. That’s the most I can tell you. Anything else you want to know, ask the boy directly. It seems the both of you have a long way to go before you well and truly commit to each other.” Beverly harrumphed and shook her head impatiently.

“Insta-love only works in movies and romance novels, Bev. What did you expect?

That we'd take one look at each other, get on the first plane to Vegas, and get hitched right there and then?"

"Do not take that tone of voice with me, young lady. A word of advice from a wizened old hag? Stop looking for reasons why things could go wrong in your relationship with the boy and just go with the flow. I'm not saying it will be smooth sailing from here on out—goddess knows there's still a lot you've yet to learn about each other—but it will all be worth the joy and happiness you find."

CHAPTER 15

Beverly's words were still circling around in my head as I pulled into The Drinking Hole's parking lot that evening. Right around the same time, Rachel made quite the spectacular entrance when she rolled in on her impressive Yamaha motorcycle. Wolf whistles and cheers sounded behind me from the patrons who were lingering in the parking lot, knocking back drinks in the back of a truck.

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She took off her helmet, hung it on the handlebar of her bike, and shook out her dark waves. All that was missing was a dreamy filter, a slow-motion effect, and some swoon-worthy music.

“I think I just fell for you, that was so badass.” I chuckled as I walked over to her bike and admired the electric blue paint job. Rachel winked at me, her face flushed and eyes bright in a way that could only be brought on by an adrenaline rush. “Well, it’s a good thing I don’t discriminate. All suitors and suitresses are welcome to try. And you, Julia Bryant, might just be my type,” she joked, making an exaggerated show of checking me out in my cargo pants, light sweater, and sneakers. I’d decided to go for a comfortable outfit rather than something suited for a night out. Not that Rachel had gone all out either, dressed in ripped jeans, biker boots, a tight-fitting tank top, and the requisite leather jacket.

“If I ever decide to give up on men permanently, you’ll be my first port of call,” I shot back, and Rachel doubled over cackling.

We were hit with a warm blast of stuffy air that smelled of cigarettes and peanuts when we walked into the crowded bar. There were so many things going on I didn’t know where to look. A live band was playing a cover of INXS’s “Need You Tonight” on the stage, and there was some kind of tournament going on at the pool tables. Waitresses in cropped, tight-fitting shirts and short-shorts and sassy heels weaved between tables, balancing trays full of beer bottles and glasses. There was a TV screen mounted on the wall behind the bar turned to ESPN and playing highlights of a hockey game with the volume turned down low.

“First round’s on me,” Rachel called out, her voice raised to be heard over the music.

She grabbed my waist and dragged me over to the counter. We were lucky enough to snatch up two empty stools, and Rachel called over the bartender who'd been too busy flirting with a customer to notice us.

Rachel started us off strong with a round of shots that turned into a competition to see who could down the most. Spoiler—Rachel was not kidding when she said she could drink anyone under the table.

“Oh my god, it sucks to be you! You look like a tomato!” She laughed at me when I tapped out after the third shot and took my sweater off and asked for a glass of water.

“Unlike you, I value my liver.” I scowled at her as she knocked back her fifth shot. I opened my mouth to comment on how great the band was; they were now covering Bon Jovi's “You Give Love a Bad Name,” and the bar patrons were singing along when a heavy arm landed on my shoulder.

Brows furrowed, I turned around to tell the guy off when I saw a familiar face smiling down at me, looking like he was a few drinks shy of tipsy. “West?” I smiled at his goofy appearance. Did he come to the bar straight from work? He was still dressed in his work clothes with his tie loose. Standing next to him was a dark-haired man who looked familiar but I'd never met before.

“Why didn't you tell me you were coming here tonight? If I'd known you were coming I would have ditched this sorry dude to chill with you instead,” he slurred, jabbing his thumb at his companion, who was staring at me intently, as if trying to place me. “I've been trying to get you to go out with me all week, but you kept blowing me off. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you didn't like me. How can you not love this face? It's unimaginable... Ladies love me! Don't they, Logan?”

Rachel and Logan snorted, and I grimaced. It looked like West was way beyond tipsy, and he probably had no idea what he was saying.

“Hey, Corny, you might want to shut your trap before you embarrass yourself even more,” Rachel piped up, grabbing my bottled water and passing it to West.

“Corny? Is that a nickname or something?” I asked, not wanting to address West directly. At my question, Logan and Rachel started laughing.

“I’m surprised that you haven’t learned his first name, considering that you guys work together. You look familiar... We haven’t slept together before, have we?” Logan asked, leaning on the counter and studying my features. I shrank back in my seat, almost falling off my stool.

“Knock it off, Logan. You wish you could bag a woman like Julia. Too bad she has more class than that,” Rachel snapped at him before turning to face me with an unreadable expression on her face. “Julia, this is my brother, Logan. As much as I love him, I will warn you not to dip your feet into that pond. He collects venereal diseases like Ash collects Pokémon. And, of course, you know our cousin, Cornelius West.” She tried and failed to choke back a laugh when she told me West’s ridiculous name, and I couldn’t help but join in when West groaned and hurled a few choice insults at Rachel.

“I’ll have you know I’m healthy as a horse and have the medical reports to back it up,” an affronted Logan said, defending himself. He then snapped his fingers, an expression of understanding dawning on in his dark eyes. Knowing now that he was Rachel’s brother, I understood why he looked so familiar—they were basically the gender-bent versions of each other. “I remember why you look so familiar. Aren’t you the chick I saw having dinner with Landon Grayson at Clair de Lune last Friday?”

CHAPTER 16

Logan’s statement landed like a bomb, and at the most awkward moment too. The

band had just stopped performing to take a short break, so his voice carried across the room. Not that anyone paid any attention except for a few curious people who quickly went about their business.

Music from the bar's speakers soon took over for the band, but the atmosphere around our small group had tanked quickly. Rachel and West both wore tight expressions. Rachel stared at me like I'd grown two heads, and West as if I'd kicked his sick puppy.

"You're dating that leech? Is that why you've been blowing me off, for Landon freakin' Grayson?" West accused. I was taken aback by the venom in his voice, but the condescending way he talked down to me and referred to Landon as a leech had my back up.

"West, knock it off," Logan warned. "She isn't your woman, so there's no need to get on her case. And the two of you need to get over yourselves. Grayson is a great guy who's done nothing but good things for this community. It's not like he can do anything about who and what he is."

Who and what he is? Logan's statement set off alarm bells in my head. Nothing about Landon had suggested that he was a bad person, and Beverly spoke affectionately about him. Even though I called him tall, dark, and dangerous, I only meant it in a sexy James Bond type of way. I didn't think he was actually a dangerous person. But then...I'd been wrong about men before...

"Is there something I should know about Landon?" I asked Rachel.

"Screw this!" West yelled as he pushed off the counter and walked away.

"I'll go take care of that. It was nice meeting you, Julia, and sorry for outing you and Landon before you were ready," Logan apologized and ran off after his cousin.

“What was that all about?” I demanded. Ever since I’d arrived in Mystic Cove, I’d had the distinct feeling that there was something more simmering beneath the surface. There were certain things people said, nuances and complexities to interactions between people that made me feel that as much as everyone had welcomed me with open smiles, I was still very much on the outside looking in.

Rachel sighed and signaled for a beer. I followed suit but asked for a virgin cocktail, not wanting to overdo it.

“You and Landon, huh? I thought you weren’t interested in dating. How did that happen?”

“Beverly.”

That seemed to be all the answer Rachel needed because some of the tension seeped from her shoulders, but the guarded look in her eyes remained.

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“That old hag never gives up. I don’t know why she doesn’t start charging for her services. She’d be as rich as Midas if she did.” Rachel gave me a probing look before asking, “This thing between the two of you, is it serious?”

I shrugged, trying to be as nonchalant as possible, but the movement came off as jerky. A small part of me was still feeling defensive. I’d already lived through my family disapproving of Toby, and my subconscious was already drawing up conclusions of its own. If Rachel didn’t like him, there was a chance my family wouldn’t either. Was my taste in men really so deplorable?

“We’ve only been on one date so far, so I wouldn’t say that we’re getting serious, and I’m certainly in no rush to pick out a wedding dress yet.”

“But you like him more than you’re letting on, which means that you want him to stick around long enough to start entertaining thoughts of picking out a wedding dress,” Rachel pointed out, tipping the neck of her beer bottle in my direction.

“Cards on the table? Yes, I like the dude, and my feelings are quickly tipping beyond just mere affection and lust. But I also love having you as a friend, so I want to know if I’ll have to pick between you and Landon because it doesn’t seem like you’re as unconcerned about me dating him as you’d like me to believe.”

Rachel scrubbed a hand over her face to hide her grimace. “You don’t have to pick sides, Jules,” she said after a long pause. “Landon Grayson and my family haven’t always been cool with each other. He might rub my fur the wrong way, but we’ve learned to co-exist with each other over the years. It’s been a while since I’ve had a close gal pal, and I guess I’ll have to share you with the dang leech.”

She sighed and placed a finger over my mouth when I opened it to tell her to stop with the name-calling. “You’ll have to get over the insults, sweetheart. I’m sure Grayson has a few choice names for us as well. There’s no changing it, but I do promise to be on my best behavior if we’re ever around each other.”

Scowling, I spoke with her finger still on my lips. “Any chance you’ll tell me why you hate him so much?”

“Hmm. Maybe, if you manage to ply me with enough drinks to loosen my tongue.” She snickered and proceeded to drink the night away as if prohibition was coming back in the morning. I was afraid that I would have to drag her drunken self home at the end of the night, but she must have had the metabolism of Dionysus himself because she somehow remained as sober as a monk, even challenging the bikers by the pool table with me as her unwilling sidekick. Not only was I terrible at pool, but every time Rachel made her shot and then rubbed it in their faces, I was terrified that we would end up in the hospital. Lucky for me, the bikers were too busy checking us out to mind that Rachel was cleaning out their pockets.

I called it quits around ten-thirty, not wanting to be too tired for my date with Landon the next day. When I offered her a ride, Rachel declined. She and one of the bikers had been making eyes at each other all night, and she whispered to me with a naughty twist of her bright red lips that she was going with him for the night.

CHAPTER 17

Saturday morning, I was up with the birds despite crawling into bed a little after midnight the night before. Part of it was because my internal alarm clock was already used to waking up early for work, but it was mostly because I was so excited to finally see Landon again. I breezed through the house chores—loading my dirty laundry into the washing machine and distractedly picking up my bedroom, the kitchen, and living room. There really wasn’t much to clean since I lived alone, and

by nine, I was impatiently checking my watch even though I knew Landon said he'd pick me up at ten.

While I waited, I skimmed through the book I'd bought at The Book Coven on Mystic Cove's history. Sadly, there wasn't much written about the supposed witches who came to live in the town after fleeing from the witch trials in Salem and other towns.

I jumped out of my seat when I heard a car pull into my driveway, butterflies exploding in my stomach. "It's open," I called out when Landon knocked at my door a short while later as I buckled up my sandals.

I sensed his presence before I even saw him walk in. The air in the living room became charged as if it were directly affected by Landon's magnetism and charisma. I felt like a schoolgirl experiencing her first crush all over again, but I tried to play off my reaction with cool indifference instead of jumping into his arms the moment he came into view dressed in a black shirt—the first two buttons undone—and grey slacks. Mirrored aviators hid his eyes from view, but I could feel his gaze swallowing me up, just as his presence seemed to suck up all the space and air in the room—or perhaps that was me just forgetting to breathe again.

"Hey, you!" I chirped, walking around the couch to stand in front of him. Landon wasted no time pulling me in for a kiss that left me breathless and seeing spots in my vision when he was done. I lay my head on his broad chest and breathed in his crisp scent to center myself. How his heart was not pounding as hard as mine was a mystery.

"I've thought of nothing else but doing that since I left you at your front door on Monday." His chest vibrated with each word he said, leaving the palms of my hands feeling all tingly.

“A girl could get used to these kinds of greetings,” I murmured into his chest and raised my head to look up at him. He looked so sexy with his unshaven scruff. I loved the rough texture under my palm as I caressed his sharp jawline. And as much as he looked like a GQ model with his shades on, I did not want to see my own face reflected at me when I looked into his eyes. I snatched the glasses away and threw them on the couch.

“Hey,” I said in greeting again, wrapping my hands around his shoulders and rising to my tiptoes.

“Morning, beautiful.” Landon’s voice was a low growl, his hands a hot brand on my waist that permeated through the fabric of my satin blouse. In the back of my mind, I knew that if we kissed again, it was likely that we’d wind up naked on the couch and missing out on the trip to Landon’s gallery, but I didn’t care all of a sudden.

As if he could read my mind, Landon hoisted me up and claimed my lips in one seamless move. I wrapped my legs around his waist and moaned into his mouth. He laid me down on the couch, settling between my legs and kissing me like a starved man. There was a frantic rustling of clothes as we both worked to get rid of each other’s tops without stopping the kiss. I’d have no way of knowing, but I was pretty sure that ambrosia tasted like Landon Grayson’s kisses.

He trailed wet kisses along my jawline and down my neck until he found my sweet spot in the crook of my neck, right where it curved into my shoulder. He sucked and licked at the spot while I cried out in pleasure and grew more and more aroused.

I felt the scrape of his teeth on my neck and drew in a sharp breath at the pleasurable pain that rocked through me. Before I knew what was happening, a cool blast of air hit my naked torso. The sudden loss of Landon’s body heat was the least confusing thing, however, because within the space of a second, Landon was across the room, his back turned to me as he buttoned up his shirt.

“Wha—” Something warm trickled down the side of my neck, and when I touched it, there was a slight sting and my fingers came away stained with blood. “What the heck?” My head was swimming with a myriad of emotions, mostly confusion warring with lust.

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to bite you, but I lost control for a moment.” I flinched when Landon wiped away the blood trailing down my neck with his thumb. I did not hear him approach and take a seat next to me. His glasses were back on, but his face was scrunched up in a tortured expression.

Wanting to put him at ease, I smiled and squeezed his thigh in reassurance. “It’s fine, no harm done. Anyway, it’s not like I don’t bite during sex either, although I’ve never drawn blood before.”

“It’s not fine,” he insisted. “What if I’d pierced your carotid artery and—” He cut himself off abruptly, his nostrils flaring and Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. “This was a mistake. I don’t think I’m strong enough to do this. I’m sorry, Julia, but I have to go before I hurt you more than I already have.”

My heart sank when he got to his feet. “Landon, wait!” I grabbed onto his wrist and tugged him back, not that I was actually strong enough to keep him from leaving if he really wanted to. Thankfully, he remained rooted to the spot, but he kept his back to me. “Don’t you think you’re being a little overdramatic about this? It’s just one tiny bite that will hardly leave a mark behind. It was an accident and you apologized for it. Are you really going to throw away this thing between us without giving us a chance to explore it? Or are you just using this as an excuse to break things off? If you’re not interested, or if you realized that maybe I am not what you want, have the guts and decency to say so.” My voice broke and caught on a sob. I wrapped my arms around myself, missing my blouse, but Landon must have thrown it somewhere across the room.

“Julia, it’s nothing like that. I swear. It’s just that...” He trailed off, running his fingers through his hair in an impatient gesture. While he fought to find the words he wanted to say to me, I put my blouse on and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. I almost dropped the glass when I turned away from the sink and found him standing right in front of me.

“Jeez, what are you? A cat?” I exclaimed, holding the glass of water to my chest in a white-knuckled grip.

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“I didn’t mean to scare you, and I didn’t mean to make you cry either,” Landon began. I interrupted him, mumbling under my breath like a petulant child and telling him that I wasn’t crying.

His mouth twitched as if he wanted to smile, but his frown remained in place along with the tortured look in his violet eyes. I felt my eyes start to sting, which was a rather extreme reaction on my part as I had known him for only a week and I’d seen him once out of those seven days, excluding today, and yet I couldn’t help but feel like we were already tethered to each other.

It might just have been a case of me falling headfirst and setting myself up for more pain, but I was already knee-deep in this and there was nothing I could do about my feelings.

“I don’t want us to break this off, Julia, but I fear that it may be inevitable. It might not be today, but somewhere down the line you are going to want to get as far away from me as possible. There are things about me you don’t know, things I should probably tell you right now, but I’m too much of a coward to do so.”

“That’s the whole point behind dating, is it not?” I put the glass down on the counter and cupped his cheek, smiling when Landon leaned into the touch and placed his hand on top of mine. “The reason why we go out on dates and spend time with each other is so that we get to know each other inside and out. We do it so that we get comfortable enough with each other that we can bare our souls to one another without fear of rejection and judgment. We all have a past, Landon; I’ve done things in my past I’m embarrassed about. I didn’t go into this expecting you to be as pure as the driven snow, and I’m not going to force you to tell me anything until you’re ready

and trust me enough to tell me your secrets. But we'll never get to that point if you cut and run now before our relationship blossoms into something more."

I was rambling, but that didn't mean what I was saying was wrong. I just hoped that Landon would see sense behind my nonsensical word salad and change his mind. By the looks of him, Landon didn't know what to believe either, and I felt my heart shrivel up in my chest.

"Honestly, I think it will hurt more if we let ourselves get too attached and then you decide to walk away later down the line—"

Snatching my hand away from his face, I readied myself for his rejection. Mentally, I was already out the door and on my way to buy the biggest carton of mint chocolate ice cream they had in the store.

"But I don't want to lose you either way, so until I am ready to divulge the uglier sides of myself, I will make sure to give you the best of me so that when the time comes, you'll at least think twice before dumping me." His wry statement startled a teary laugh from me. "I might have brought down the mood, but will you still do me the honor of spending the day with me? I really want to give you a tour of my gallery. While I own a few around the country, the one in Mystic Cove is near and dear to my heart." He outstretched his hand to me.

And like a fool, I took it.

CHAPTER 18

High Tide was the name of Landon's gallery, which was fitting considering that the sea was a hop, skip, and jump from the converted warehouse. It was actually two converted warehouses, as Landon pointed out when he parked his car in front of High Tide.

“The second building serves as the art school. If things go well, the funds from the auction will help us get started on building a better-equipped art school,” he explained.

The exterior of both buildings was nothing impressive, just a reddish-brown metal siding with tinted windows. Without the gallery’s name hanging above the front entrance, one could have assumed that it was a decommissioned factory or abandoned warehouse.

“Why is it so empty? I expected to see a couple of kids coming in for their lessons or tourists looking to buy souvenirs,” I commented when I noticed how deserted the adjacent parking spaces looked, as well as the padlocked doors and closed windows.

“We’re closed for the day,” came Landon’s distracted reply as he patted the pockets of his slacks.

“You didn’t have to close it down just for me,” I objected when Landon fished out the keys and unlocked the front door. I’d observed the gallery from afar when I came in for my interview with Principal Hawthorne, and again when I was moving into the town. I knew that it was open every day of the week, but it closed a little after midday during the weekend, and the art classes took place every week from Wednesday to Saturday—after school hours during the week and from morning until four-thirty on Saturday—but today it looked like it was just the two of us.

“As much as I’d like to take the credit and claim that I was doing it to be romantic, the fact of the matter is that my staff and I are actually prepping for a fundraising auction. We’re expecting some shipments and setting up the exhibits and we’ll likely be closed until Wednesday, the night of the auction.” Landon smiled down at me, his hand at my back as he ushered me into the gallery.

“Oh.” I flushed, hiding my face behind my hair and pretending to admire the

gleaming black onyx tiles. They were so clean and polished that I could make out my reflection clearly. It was a good thing that I'd worn flat shoes because I would have been slipping and sliding all over the place and probably breaking something—like the expensive porcelain jade vase on display.

The foyer of the gallery was not just the reception desk—which was a work of art in its own right—but it was a showroom as well. The walls were painted a soft, dove gray color, and the pedestals were all white, with some of the pottery pieces protected by glass enclosures and some just out in the open. The exposed ceiling beams made the gallery feel modern with a rustic charm.

“These are gorgeous. Did your students make all of these?” I asked over my shoulder before stepping up to take a closer look at the jade vase. It was behind a glass enclosure with a tag on the glass with some basic information on the art piece and its artist.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the vase, which definitely drew inspiration from Chinese pottery, was not a single solid green color, but a myriad of shades of green swirling effortlessly together.

“The ones behind glass enclosures are from professional artists who've already made their debut in the art world while the rest are from my students or local artists who are not yet famous. Artists tend to have huge egos that are more often than not very fragile. Who knows what they'd do to me if something happened to their work?” Landon called out, his voice bouncing off the walls of the foyer as he walked behind the reception desk and started clicking away on the computer.

“And your students won't care if someone knocks their work over? I'm sure they worked equally hard on their pieces. It seems kind of discriminatory that their pieces are given—and pardon me for saying so—subpar protective measures even though they are on display and up for sale.”

“Not to sound harsh, but that’s just the way it is. The bigger and better known the name, the more respect everyone gives you, and those are the artists who’ll be bringing in the big bucks on the night of the auction. But if it puts your mind at ease, I’ll have you know that my assistant has eyes in the back of his head, and there’ll be a visible security presence on the night of the fundraiser. It’s a swanky black-tie affair, though, so no one will want to make an idiot of themselves.”

I walked over to the next pottery piece. Although I wasn’t sure how to describe it, it was quite exquisite, and I was shocked to find that Destiny had created it. When I asked Landon if it was the same Destiny who I’d met at the grocery store—she was easy to describe—he told me that it was. Apparently, she and her sister were women of many talents, including—but not limited to—designing and crafting jewelry and making facial scrubs, scented candles, and the like.

“Their home serves as their store, and they have an online shop as well. Beverly and I have tried to convince them to just set up an actual, physical boutique, but they’re being stubborn about it.”

“It sounds like you’re close to them as well. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were into older women.” He spoke so fondly of them, I found it endearing.

“We might not be related by blood, but they are the only family I have. They helped me through a really dark time in my life. They were the guiding lights I needed when I was going through a life-altering transition, and at one point, they became something akin to my voice of reason... The conscience I needed when all I could think about was...” He stopped, eyes going wide. I guess he realized that he was about to tell me something he wasn’t ready to talk about—whatever it was that made him panic and try to break up with me only half an hour before.

I was dying of curiosity. I wanted to peel back each layer of Landon Grayson until I knew him better than he knew himself, but I promised him that I would not push or

pry until he was ready, so I bit back my tongue and waited for him to speak.

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His jaw was clenched so tightly, it gave me a headache just to look at him. His eyes darkened with disgust, but whether it was aimed at himself or whatever haunted his memories, I did not know. When it became apparent that he was losing himself to whatever was troubling him, I hooked my arm through his and dragged him back to the present.

“What is this supposed to be anyway?” I injected as much enthusiasm and cheer into my voice as possible, though I really was curious about what Destiny was going for when she made...whatever her pottery piece was supposed to be.

It was a weird blend; the label said that it was a vase, but it was shaped like the love child of a conch shell and a flute and was painted with all the colors of the rainbow. I couldn't really see how it was supposed to hold a bouquet of flowers.

“It's...art,” Landon said with a mock air of superiority. And just like that, he was back with me.

CHAPTER 19

From the foyer, the gallery opened into three wide, separate spaces and another exhibit on the mezzanine floor. There was no clear theme being followed for the auction, just great art pieces set up for sale, from sculptures that took up a moderate amount of the open floor space to paintings and photographs on the wall.

“So, how does this work exactly? The artists are getting a cut of the sales profits, so will you really be able to raise enough money for your school?” I asked while he gave me a grand tour of the gallery, walking with me hand in hand.

I'd been surprised when he laced our hands together—a rather sweet gesture that I would never have imagined Landon to initiate on his own, and it made me stupidly happy.

“We’ve sent out invites to some art enthusiasts and collectors with deep pockets. Unless they live in Westview, most of the locals will not be able to afford anything that has not been crafted by the students or the artists trying to break into the scene,” he explained, referring to the affluent part of town where all the moneyed residents stayed in their gated community with their private and sprawling golf estates and even a mini shopping mall. “The artists I managed to bring in have all signed contracts that guarantee them sixty percent of their sales, with the rest going toward the gallery. I’m thinking of hosting another one in a different gallery in a few weeks, depending on how this one goes. So, have you seen anything you’d like to pick out for your home yet? This one, perhaps?” He gestured to a painting I’d been eyeing as we walked around the room.

We came to a stop in front of the abstract painting, Landon wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his chin on the crown of my head. I melted into his broad chest, marveling at how we fit so perfectly with each other. “This is eye-catching, but I haven’t seen anything from the artist who did the painting at The Book Coven. I was interested in their work specifically. Even if I could afford this, I’ve never been a fan of abstract paintings. They don’t evoke any feelings in me. This one reminds me of the time my nephews had one too many candy canes and threw up on my favorite cashmere sweater.” I shuddered, remembering the pungent smell of the puke and the chunks dripping off me and down onto the carpet. That was the last time I ever gave in to the kids’ weakness for sweets when I babysat them, especially after Toby ripped me a new one because Brandon had thrown up all over the agora carpet in our living room. He’d firmly insisted that if my brother and Sarah wanted me to babysit the boys, then I was to do it at their house and not our apartment.

“Ah, but it does evoke an emotion out of you,” Landon began in a teasing tone,

dropping a kiss on my forehead when I tipped my chin up to look at him. His eyes were laughing at me, or rather my analogy comparing the painting to toddler vomit. “Disgust,” he laughingly said. I was going to reply when I heard the sound of a door opening somewhere and a male voice coming from above on the mezzanine floor.

“I thought I heard voices.” A golden-haired man—or boy?—appeared. I couldn’t tell whether he was a teenager or in his early to mid-twenties. He reminded me of Ryan Evans from High School Musical. “Boss, you have the best timing. I just got off the phone with Cosmo and he’s threatening to pull his work from the auction. I told him you’d get in touch with him ASAP. I know I’m cutting into your date, but would you mind talking him off the ledge?” The assistant winked at me before giving Landon a puppy-eyed look.

Landon huffed out an irritated sigh, grumbling something that sounded like “bloody witch” under his breath. “I’m sorry, Julia, but could you give me a few minutes to sort this out? Then we can head over to my place. I was planning on making you lunch.”

“No problem. I’ll just keep looking around here,” I told him.

“I’ll keep her company. You’ll need more than a few minutes where Cosmo is concerned,” Ryan’s doppelganger offered, pushing off the mezzanine railing and jogging down the short flight of stairs.

“I don’t know if I want to leave the biggest gossip in Mystic Cove alone with my girlfriend for a prolonged amount of time,” Landon said in a dry tone. My body visibly jerked at the word “girlfriend,” my face heating up. When I looked up at Landon, he arched a brow as if daring me to challenge his assertion. I gave him a shy smile instead.

“Don’t be such a spoiled sport. You haven’t brought a girl around here since forever;

I wouldn't do or say anything to scare her off. Lord knows you need a feminine touch to soften that Grinch heart of yours. Hi, Julia. I'm Dane, Landon's assistant and sometimes babysitter." He greeted me with more enthusiasm than a puppy and pulled me into a hug instead of shaking the hand I held out for him. He was stronger than he looked. I had to catch my breath when I crashed into his slim yet muscular body.

I stared at Landon askance over Dane's shoulder and he shrugged—whatever that meant. "You already knew my name?" I asked him awkwardly.

"Oh, that's because the boss talks about you all the time. But he sure as heck downplayed how gorg—" Landon interrupted him with a knock to his head and a glare that would have had most men shrinking back in fear. "I'm kidding," Dane chortled, rubbing the spot Landon hit him. "I heard about you through the town grapevine—all good things, I assure you. As the two most important people in Landon's life, let's you and I get to know each other while the big guy deals with a certain diva."

"Oh please, you don't even make the top five," Landon scoffed. "If you scare her off, I'm firing you, and then we'll see how you fund your Gucci addiction," Landon threatened before heading up to the office.

* * *

Landon was gone for almost half an hour, and Dane was more than happy to be my chaperone. I wish I could have said the same thing. I was more drained after spending five minutes in his presence than after an entire week of dealing with students. Dane was a chatterbox and a supernova ball of energy. And while I normally don't mind being around outgoing people, I at least expected to get in a word edgewise that was more than grunting or chuckling in response to whatever he was saying.

I'd never met a person who was so eager to tell a relative stranger every single

personal detail about themselves. My brain was on the verge of bursting with the sudden influx of unwanted information and trying to make heads and tails of everything—particularly Dane’s age. He looked like he was in his early twenties, but some of the things he said made it sound as if he’d been alive longer than that, like the fact that he had seven degrees, including three masters and a Ph.D.

Landon returned just as Dane was rambling on and on about his enlightening journey and stay at a Tibetan monastery and the rigorous trek he took up the Himalayan Mountains. It was all I could do not to burst out crying in relief when I saw Landon’s hulking figure coming down the stairs.

Dane trailed off mid-sentence, noticing that I wasn’t paying attention to him anymore, and turned to face Landon, who was walking toward us, his brows furrowed and expression dark.

“You were in there for less time than I thought you’d be. Cosmo loves hearing the sound of his own voice almost as much as he loves looking in the mirror,” Dane chirped, looking at the non-existent watch on his wrist.

I rolled my eyes behind his back at the irony of him ragging on someone for talking too much. “So, did you sort things out with him?”

“Barely, I’m this close to just excluding him from the auction altogether. There are plenty of other artists who’d jump at the chance to be featured in this exhibition. Cosmo is skating on thin ice with his constant hissy fits. At this rate, no one will want to work with him anymore.” He sighed and then swung his gaze to me. “Sorry, that took longer than expected. You must be starving.”

I opened my mouth to tell him that I was okay, but my stupid stomach growled loud enough to wake the dead. Landon and Dane both chuckled, then Landon and I were pushed out of the gallery by Dane, who insisted that he would take care of locking up

after us.

CHAPTER 20

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:27 am

I don't know why I was so surprised that Landon's house—or mansion, rather—was located in Westview. His house was miles from all the other estates, though. His backyard opened to the woods, and he had a great view of the mountains from almost every window.

Toby had been well off as well, coming from a family chockfull of investment bankers and lawyers, so I'd been around snobs before, with his mother being the only person I actually liked. But never had I been intimidated by their wealth, not in the way I was awed when confronted by the sheer magnitude of Landon's fortune when I was confronted with the proof of it. In hindsight, I should have known he was stacked when he came to pick me up in a Lamborghini.

The house was a two-story architectural wonder. The ground floor was all tempered glass from the front, yet I could not see inside the house as Landon drove down the circular driveway and into the garage. "You weren't kidding about the car collection," I mused out loud, taking in the three other cars in the garage and two motorcycles. Landon gave me an amused look before ducking into the backseat of the car to retrieve a paper bag filled with the ingredients he needed to make our lunch.

"Bas would die if he saw your garage. Can I take a picture just to rub it in his face?" I was already fishing my phone out of my bag as I asked the question.

"Go right ahead." Landon laughed and stood off to the side as I snapped picture after picture of his sports cars and the bikes, but when it came to sending them, I hesitated. That would only open a can of worms I wasn't up to dealing with just yet. If Bas found out I was dating someone, the news would spread to the rest of the family before sunset, and before I knew it, my nosy mother and brothers would be barging

through my front door and there would go my peace of mind.

“You’re not going to send them?” Landon regarded me when I pocketed my phone. I shook my head and asked him to lead the way. Thankfully, he didn’t press me as to why.

“What can I get you to drink? I have a selection of wines to choose from and some stronger spirits if you prefer. I also picked up some organic juice from the store,” Landon offered once he got me settled in his TV-worthy chef’s kitchen. I could picture Mom drooling over the entire setup. Dark wood-paneled floors, gleaming granite countertops, a kitchen island that also served as a place to eat with seating for six, and all the latest appliances, each one gleaming with that newly bought sheen. In fact, except for the fridge and freezer, the kitchen looked and felt as if it had hardly been used. All the ingredients Landon was using to make the pasta dish were bought at a minimarket in Westview before we drove up to his house. I didn’t think he had any food in the house at all besides alcohol.

“Red wine, please. You look like a man who knows his way around a kitchen, yet I get the distinct feeling that you haven’t been in here for anything but a drink,” I pointed out when Landon opened what I now realized to be a wine fridge to pour me a glass. “Do you live off of takeout or something?”

“I am a bachelor.” He winked. “And the only reason I know my way around the kitchen is because I fancied myself a chef when I was younger. Even had a short stint working as a sous chef in France before I decided that slaving away in a kitchen was not for me.” He poured himself a different brand of red wine. Something about it looked off, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. The consistency? Or maybe the coloring? But then again, I was no sommelier and was used to cheaper brands and boxed wines.

Landon took a whiff of his wine and a hearty sip, sighing in pleasure as he did so. I

could have sworn I saw his eyes come alive and a rosy flush bloom across his sharp cheekbones. I wondered how much more potent his wine was than the scotch he'd been drinking on our last date because he'd had two drinks and there'd been no color riding high in his cheeks then.

"You and Dane sure do lead exciting lives. Where do you get the time to squeeze in all these feats? Do you have a time-turner or something?" I snickered, snoring like a pig at my lame joke.

"I'm sorry, a time what now?" Landon asked, drawing an outraged gasp from me, complete with an over-dramatic clutching of the chest.

"How is there someone who doesn't get a Harry Potter reference in this day and age? I might have to rethink our acquaintanceship, Mr. Grayson."

Landon groaned and moved to wash his hands before retrieving a kitchen knife and cutting board. "That's the wizard boy, right? I've done my absolute best to avoid anything to do with those movies. I've had enough dealings with witches to last me a lifetime," he grumbled. His statement was so matter of fact, for a moment, I thought he was dead serious.

I choked on my wine when it went down the wrong pipe, setting off a chain of hacking coughs that made me think I was going to hack up a piece of my lung. Tears streamed down my face, and I was afraid that I had a trail of snot running down my nose as well. Landon was by my side in the blink of an eye, rubbing soothing circles down my back and offering a napkin to wipe away the mess I'd made of myself when the coughs subsided.

"Did you mean that metaphorically or in the literal sense? I read that Mystic Cove was once a safe haven for witches. Are they still around?" I croaked once I calmed down. My throat was sore, and I hoped the tears had not messed up my mascara.

Landon's soothing rubs on my back stopped and he went as white as a sheet, panic flickering in his eyes before he came back to himself. "Of course, I was joking." He attempted a laugh, but it sounded robotic.

"I've actually been meaning to dig into the history of the town as a little side project of mine. Maybe write a book or a paper or something. I find it fascinating that witches all over the country migrated to this tiny town to escape the horrors of the witch trials. I'm sure there are some amazing tales that came out of that," I gushed, my inner history nerd making her appearance.

Landon surprised me by kissing me on the tip of my nose. "Are you that interested in witches and the supernatural?" he asked in a deceptively mild tone as he began to chop up garlic cloves and mushrooms.

"Can I help with anything? I feel bad just sitting around and watching you do all the work. I make a mean white pasta sauce."

Landon hesitated to put me to work. "I detect a challenge. If it's not as good as the one as I would have made for you, I'll have to punish you for the insolence." He smirked. The word "punishment" coming from him sparked an inferno low in my belly.

"In that case, challenge accepted. And to answer your earlier question, yes, I am that interested in witches. I was heartbroken when my eleventh birthday passed with no hint of my Hogwarts letter anywhere in sight. And, of course, the historian in me is itching to get her hands on some research material."

"It doesn't freak you out that there might be other beings out there far more powerful, more vicious, than human beings?" Landon eyed me from the corner of his eyes as we worked together side by side.

“What, like aliens or something? Yes and no, I suppose.” I one-shoulder shrugged. “I’ve always been of the mindset that the universe is just too vast for us humans to be the only beings inhabiting this tiny speck of an infinite whole. Not to mention, I always had these grand fantasies in which a fae prince would sweep me off my feet and whisk me off to faerie land to have his wicked way with me. And he would declare his undying love for me, of course.” I gave him a saucy look. “If I ever discovered that to be true, you can be sure I’d drop your butt in a hot minute for a chance at getting me some fae lovin’.”

Landon’s knife slipped and he let out a sharp hiss as a drop of scarlet red blood dripped down his finger.

“Oh, my God! Here, let me take a look at that.” I tore off a strip of paper towel and made to grab his injured finger, but Landon snatched his hand away and licked the blood off his finger.

“Landon, that’s not healthy. We need to clean it and maybe get a band-aid. That looks like a deep cut,” I pleaded with him, but he shook his head and walked over to the sink and placed his hand under the faucet.

“It’s not that deep. The amount of blood was misleading, but it was a tiny prick. You can barely make out where the knife cut me.”

I was unconvinced and grabbed his hand, wrapping my fingers tight around his wrist before he could snatch it away. To my amazement, there was no visible sign of a cut anywhere. The soft skin of his index finger looked unbroken to me. “You’re right...” I mumbled in a mystified tone, turning his hand this way and that to make sure I didn’t miss anything.

Before I could poke any further, Landon quickly changed the subject and asked me more about my family and childhood. Soon, the accident was at the back of my mind

as we laughed at some of the shenanigans and troubles my brothers got me into.

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After we had lunch, I convinced Landon to postpone the tour of his house in favor of watching the Harry Potter movies. He reluctantly agreed, complaining about anything and everything throughout the first half of *The Sorcerer's Stone*. When he realized that he could not annoy me into turning the movie off, he switched tactics and started nibbling and kissing my neck. The movie was soon forgotten as we continued making out fervently, our moans and sighs drowning out the sounds of Harry duking it out with Voldemort on TV.

"My bed is more comfortable than the couch, and has more space too," Landon groaned into my ear, his hand toying with the waistband of my pants.

"Lead the way," I whispered, letting out a startled yelp when he picked me up like a sack of potatoes and jogged up the stairs like it was nothing.

CHAPTER 21

The weekend passed by in a blur, probably because Landon and I spent most of it in bed or outside exploring the woods in his backyard. Landon even took me on a ride around the quiet, highbrow neighborhood on his Harley. The entire time we were speeding down the empty roads, I was expecting a guard or the police to stop us in our tracks and charge us for making a nuisance of ourselves. That's how quiet Westview was, but I didn't spot a single soul out on the streets.

Landon explained that half of the properties were holiday homes, so most of their owners had gone back to their main homes, which struck me as odd because why build a mini-mall when people were only going to be around a month, maybe three months out of the year tops?

By the time Landon drove me back home late Sunday evening, my own home felt alien to me. The time Landon and I spent together, we were ensconced in our own little magical bubble, and it burst when reality intruded. Sometimes, adulthood sucked. Scratch that, it sucked all the time, but somehow the world looked and felt more dull than usual and I missed Landon something fierce even though we'd made plans for dinner after I got off work the next day.

* * *

Things were finally looking up. My tragic heartbreak was firmly in the rear-view mirror. As much as I was stupidly happy, I was terrified as well, because what I felt for Landon was all-consuming and on a different level from what I'd felt for Toby. Landon had wormed his way into my heart and lodged himself firmly and precariously like a glass shard. If it were to be pulled out, I would bleed out within minutes. I tried to push away the nagging thought that everything was too perfect. I had a job that I loved—despite relations between West and I having frosted over to below freezing temperatures. I nearly got frostbite from the cold shoulder he gave me Monday morning in the staffroom.

I was making friends that I was coming to adore. Gentle, kind—or brash, in Rachel's case—and dependable people whom I knew would grow to be as fiercely loyal to me as I would be to them the more we got to know each other. My house was feeling more like a home. I was steadily growing my roots in Mystic Cove, but I did not wholeheartedly believe in this happiness quite yet. I was waiting for the other shoe to drop and for me to come crashing back down to earth.

I'd expressed these niggling feelings to Beverly when I crossed paths with her at the drugstore, but she helped put my mind at ease.

"If you think that way, you'll spend all your energy converting those negative thoughts into a self-fulfilling prophecy. So, keep your chin up, girly, and be grateful

for all the good you've been blessed with. Stop twisting yourself up in knots thinking about what could go wrong and work on keeping everything going right. Get out of that pretty little head of yours and live in the moment, dear."

With Beverly's advice still ringing loud in my ears, Wednesday evening found me primping and preparing myself to make my official debut as Landon's plus one in front of what Dane had told me was going to be at least half the town.

He'd arrived at my house a few minutes after I got home from work to deliver a gift Landon had bought for me—an emerald-green evening gown that probably cost what I made in a month or more.

It had taken a great amount of begging on Dane's part to get me to accept such an extravagant gift, especially since I already had a dress picked out—though it was not as fancy as the Dolce and Gabbana Landon had picked out. When he'd had time to go shopping, I had no idea. Maybe he had a personal shopper. Evidently, he had an eye for women's fashion and for judging what look would work for me. The gown made my fiery locks and sea-green eyes stand out. It was backless, with thin straps crisscrossing at the back, a plunging neckline, as well as a thigh-high slit. I thought it was too daring and revealing for a classy event like an auction fundraiser, but I loved how it made me look like a forest nymph or something equally as majestic and alluring.

Normally, I would have covered the freckles on my face and chest with a heavy-duty foundation, but I decided to go with a dewy, fresh-faced look, and I left my curls untamed in a half-up, half-down style.

Landon's heated look could have incinerated me on the spot when I opened the door. He looked at me from head to toe from beneath hooded lashes. When his pink tongue darted out between his beautifully kissable lips, I almost did the same, stopping only because I did not want to reapply my lipstick. The man looked delectable in a tuxedo,

his bowtie hanging loosely around his neck. His hair had been gelled back, save for a single rogue strand that hung over his eye.

“If I’d known this was how you’d look in this dress, I would have reconsidered. Who’s going to want to ogle paintings on the walls when the very personification of Botticelli’s Venus is walking among them? Perhaps we should just stay in for the night and let Dane handle everything,” he rasped, his voice low and husky. Each sweep of his gaze on my body felt as if he’d touched me directly and branded me. The invisible tug between us was pulsing incessantly, making it difficult to think of anything else but how much I wanted Landon.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, but I dare not compare myself to such an esteemed work of art. Perhaps I should strut around in nothing but my birthday suit if I am to compare with Venus. That would certainly draw in the big bucks, don’t you think?” I’d scarcely completed my sentence before Landon started growling like a feral beast.

“I would tear open the throats of any other men who’d dare to look upon you if you did. You are mine and mine alone. Anyone who so much as looks at you the wrong way deserves what he has coming to him.”

My mouth stretched in a wide smile as I tugged at the ends of his bowtie and knotted it for him. “Reel it in, caveman. Save all that pent-up frustration for tonight. I’ll probably regret it tomorrow, but I have plans to use your gorgeous body for my personal pleasure way into the wee hours of morning,” I whispered against his lips and gave him a teasing flick of the tongue, licking across the seam between his lips. Landon’s hand cradled the back of my head before I could pull away as he covered my mouth with his and deepened the kiss until we were both left breathless and wanting.

“Careful what you wish for, sweetheart, because I can’t guarantee that you’ll be in any condition to stand in front of a bunch of teeny boppers once I’m done with you.”

“Oh yeah? Is that a threat or a promise, Grayson?” I shot back. He hissed out a breath and attempted to push me back into the house, but I managed to dodge his sneaky hands and sashay my way to the waiting car, making sure to put in an extra sway to my hips as I strutted in my heels.

CHAPTER 22

Dane was not kidding when he said that more than half the town would be present for the auction. The gallery was packed with bodies, locals and out-of-towners alike. I’d even spotted a few students enjoying the event, some as guests, some as artists, and others as waiters serving the guests.

“Do you have your eye on any of the pieces?” I asked Landon, waving at a colleague of mine across the room and trying not to feel self-conscious about all the eyes that had zoomed in on us from the moment Landon stepped into the gallery hand in hand with me.

“I’m debating on getting one or two paintings; we’ll see how the night goes,” he murmured, looking over the top of my gaze and taking in all the patrons who had shown up. I hadn’t realized this beforehand, but the school next door had also been converted into a showroom to showcase more of the students’ works. I was yet to see them, but if I had any hope of snatching anything for myself, it would have to be one of the students’ works. I’d seen some of the bids on the bidding sheets provided for each piece on auction and I felt dizzy just thinking about all that money being spent on a single sculpture or painting. Besides, I wanted to support my students.

“Are you having fun?” Landon asked, leading me away from the crowded room and up to the mezzanine floor where there were fewer people. We hadn’t had much time to ourselves since the event started. Everyone and their mother wanted a word with Landon, or maybe the chance to ogle Landon’s new girl. His popularity came as a shock to me. After the way Rachel and West reacted to learning about me dating him,

I was worried that the whole town might not like him. He was kind of anti-social. The one date we went out on, we went to another town. When we stayed in Mystic Cove, we went to his house. The more I thought about it, it did seem a little odd. But everyone who came up to him praised him for the event and his endeavors with the art school or just to make a bit of small talk. They seemed genuine and not just giving lip service, but I noticed that except for Beverly and Dane, Landon treated everyone else with detached and cool politeness that could come across as rude if you didn't know him very well.

"I am, but my feet are killing me. If I don't sit down soon, I fear I might make a fool of myself and trip over my own feet. These heels were not meant to be worn for standing for long intervals." I sighed, kicking out my right foot to show him the molten gold strappy heels I was wearing and leaned on him for support.

"Should I carry you up the stairs? You and I can hide away in my office for the rest of the night and I'll have a waiter bring us some canapes and a bottle of champagne. It's a little loud down here, so if we were to have a little fun of our own on my couch, they'd be none the wiser," Landon suggested, lowering his head and nibbling on my ear lobe.

“I—”

“There you are, you SOB! You’ve been avoiding me all night like the coward you are!” someone bellowed from the floor below. Landon tensed up, muttering something under his breath. His fingers dug into my waist as he glared at the willowy, platinum blond man stalking toward us, his eyes two pitch-black coals burning with rage and distaste, all of it aimed at Landon.

“Cosmo, we talked about this, and you promised that you would not cause a scene.” Landon pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. He clenched his jaw so tight that a vein was protruding from his forehead, throbbing wildly.

So, this was the infamous Cosmo, the diva Landon and Dane were complaining about.

He was a beautiful man, tall with feminine features that took nothing away from his masculinity, with long, straight, platinum blond hair that went all the way down to his waist. Unlike everyone else, he’d completely ignored the black-tie dress code of the fundraiser and was dressed in an artfully ripped and baggy white sweater and flowing white pants. With his pale complexion, he looked like a washed-out ghost. Except for his pitch-black eyes, pink lips, and the angry splotches of red on his face, he was bleached of color.

One hand cocked on his waist, he looked down his nose at Landon, for he was a few inches taller than the man standing next to me. His dismissive gaze flickered to me for a millisecond, but I wasn’t even sure if he was aware that I was standing there since he looked right through me. “That was before I found out that you sold my

Insanity of Forever to Declan Rhys after I explicitly made it clear that I don't want that filthy cockroach anywhere near my work. And then I walk in here and who do I find placing a bid on not one, but all three of the works I so gracefully submitted for this stupid fundraiser? I told you that if you continued doing business with that man, you might as well cut ties with me!" For such a slip of a man, he had a powerful voice that boomed throughout the gallery.

Conversations stilled as everyone stopped what they were doing to behold the spectacle.

"I did not sell your bloody painting to Declan. Where did you hear such nonsense? When have I ever disrespected any of your wishes, Cosmo? You are a valued client of mine, but so is Declan. I won't cut off my nose to spite my face just because you have issues with the man. Your problems are not mine to deal with—"

"You made them yours when you invited the plagiarizer to a fundraiser where you intended to show off my latest works!" Cosmo hissed.

"Oh, please!" another gentleman drawled in a lazy brogue from behind Cosmo. I had to assume it was Declan Rhys. "If anyone is a copycat here, we all know that it's you, Cosmo. Insanity of Forever bears a striking resemblance to my Madness in Sunshine. The only reason I bought it was so that I'd have something to burn and keep me warm when winter rolls in.

"You are a disgrace to the art community. I knew you were suffering from artist block or whatever, but to copy another artist's work and claim the credit... I know that they say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but in your case, it proves nothing but the fact that you are a fraud. Why don't you retire while you still have your dignity as one of the greatest artists of our generation?" he goaded Cosmo.

At Declan's words, Landon's gaze grew even more alert. The weight of his arm

around my waist disappeared and in the blink of an eye, before my brain could even catch up to what was happening, he had Cosmo pinned to the railing of the staircase.

“You plagiarized another person’s work? Again, Cosmo? I told you what would happen if you pulled that again. Are you trying to flush your career down the drain?” Landon barked, one of his arms pressing into Cosmo’s neck.

Cosmo’s eyes went wide with panic, the flush across his cheeks getting darker as he clawed at Landon’s arm. My heart in my throat, I tried to tug Landon away before he did something he would regret or the police found him in such a compromising position.

“L-Landon, babe, you need to calm down—” I began only to be cut off by Cosmo’s shrill voice.

“Screw you and your threats, man! You think I’d care if you cut me off? Now you want to pretend you care about my career? I told you I was struggling, but what did you and that poodle of an assistant of yours do for me? Didley squat, that’s what!” His dark eyes snapped to me, narrowing in disgust. Like I’d seen—or thought I’d seen—Landon’s eyes do before, darkness crept across the whites of his eyes. And when his mouth twisted into an ugly sneer, I saw two elongated fangs.

“Is she the reason you’ve been so short with me lately and ignoring my calls, Landon? You finally found yourself a new piece of meat to amuse yourself with and sink your teeth into after all this time?” he taunted, cocking his head to the side in a morbidly curious gesture. “She smells sweet enough, but the stench of fear is rolling off her in waves. It’s making me nauseous. Has he told you what he is, Red?”

“Cosmo—” Landon growled in a warning tone. His hold on Cosmo slackened and in a move that was too quick for me to follow, the artist broke free and had me in a chokehold before I could utter a gasp of surprise.

Frozen in terror and confusion, I saw my emotions reflected back at me in Landon's face as he looked on helplessly.

"Cosmo Sage Crane, you unhand that young lady this very instant before I whoop your behind black and blue," Beverly commanded, tearing away from the crowd of bystanders and slowly approached us.

"Cosmo, don't do this!" Landon begged, but he might as well have been talking to a brick wall. Instead, Cosmo lowered his mouth to my ear while his nails elongated before my eyes and he slashed four lines down the length of my arm and whispered something that chilled my blood.

"Your boyfriend is a vampire, sweetheart."

I let out a whimper of pain as he squeezed my arm to draw more blood. Landon tried to get me away from Cosmo, but the latter covered his hand in my blood and moved at lightning speed to smear it across Landon's face.

"Landon?" My voice was barely above a whisper and time slowed down, each second punctuated by a panicked thud of my heart as Landon's canines elongated and his eyes went completely black, reminding me of the demons on Supernatural. Spots danced in my visions as I tried to make sense of what was going on. Cosmo's deranged laughter rang in my ears as the room spun around me. Someone called my name, but the voice sounded as if it were coming from far away.

"Julia...please, let me explain," Landon begged, reaching out for me, but I flinched back so violently, I twisted my ankle and fell to the ground. How was I the only one freaking out right now? None of the faces swimming in my vision looked scared out of their wits. Was I imagining things?

"Don't touch me!" I screamed when Landon tried to help me. The last thing I heard

before my vision went black was Beverly telling him that she would take care of me.

CHAPTER 23

They're going to kill me!

I startled awake, drenched in sweat and my heart throbbing visibly through my rib cage. A scream died on the tip of my tongue when the familiar view of my bedroom came into view. Letting out an audible breath, I slumped back into my pillows and closed my eyes against the glaring sunlight before snapping them awake when scenes of my nightmare danced across my eyelids.

I'd dreamed of demons tearing me apart and feasting on my heart and organs and drinking my blood. Demons with Landon's and Cosmo's faces. I pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes and tried to erase the images, to erase everything I'd seen and heard last night.

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Vampires! How was that even possible? Maybe someone laced my drink with LSD or something. Sitting up, I looked at my arm for where Cosmo had scratched me, hoping that it was all part of one long nightmare and that I was now fully awake and back in my normal, day-to-day, vampire-less reality. My stomach hollowed out when I saw the bandage wrapped around my arm. A sob caught in my throat as I tore it off and stared blankly at the pink lines running down my arm—somehow, the scratches were already healing. My skin was now unbroken but still bore the marks Cosmo had made, and they still stung when I prodded at them.

My phone rang, startling a scream out of me as the ringtone seemed to echo throughout the house. A gaping chasm opened up where my heart was supposed to be when I saw Landon's name pop up on the screen and I immediately cut off the call and blocked his number. My call log showed that he'd called almost twenty times since last night and left just as many messages. There were a few calls from the school and Rachel as well.

I cursed when I saw the time. I was beyond late and there was no use showing up halfway through the workday. They would have already called in a sub. Besides, I didn't think I would be going in anytime soon. This place was dangerous. I needed to get out of here.

When I called the admin secretary to call in sick, she patched me through to Principal Hawthorne. "I heard what happened last night. I can't even begin to imagine what a shock it was to you, my dear," she began, sounding sympathetic and understanding but not shocked or outraged or any of the myriad emotions swirling within me. "I'll give you the rest of the week to wrap your head around this and to get the answers you need, but I expect you back here bright and early next Monday."

“You knew,” I said breathlessly. “You knew that he was a vampire. And so did Beverly, and Dane... Does Rachel know?” I asked, thinking back to her reaction when she first learned about Landon and me.

Principal Hawthorne sighed but did not answer my questions. “I am not the one you need to be asking. Get the answers and closure you need, Julia, and come back to work,” she ordered, ending the call before I could protest further.

I glared at the dark screen of my phone before switching it off. I didn’t think that I was in any frame of mind to talk to anyone. A sticky note on my nightstand caught my eye. I’ll be waiting when you’re ready to talk —Bev.

Ready to talk, indeed! I thought bitterly, crumpling up the note and tossing it on the floor. She should have told me before setting me up on a date with a literal bloodsucker. Now I understood why West had called him a leech. Was Beverly a vampire too? Landon had said they were as close as family. Was it because they were both immortal, blood-sucking monsters? Exactly how old was he anyway? Had I been dating a contemporary of my grandfather this entire time. Or maybe he was older than that? Was he with me because he desired my blood?

I thought back to the night when he’d nicked my neck and the ravenous expression on his face. Bile burned its way up my throat, and I stumbled my way to the bathroom only to hurl all over the carpet beside my bed when I stood up too quickly.

My body and head both ached fiercely, and exhaustion weighed me down. My heart was bruised, my trust betrayed—again!—and my brain was bursting with so many questions I was scared to get the answers to. Instead of cleaning up the mess I’d made, I slumped back into bed and burrowed underneath my blankets and went back to sleep.

CHAPTER 24

LANDON

“This is a giant mess!” I growled, cradling my hand into my chest and watching the cuts on my knuckles and hand heal over. I was sure there were some glass shards stuck in a few of the cuts. If I were thinking straight, I would have removed them right then instead of letting my wounds heal over them, only to cut myself open later and remove them.

“You will replace that,” Beverly stated, looking unimpressed by my quick burst of anger that had resulted in me punching a hole through her glass coffee table. She snapped her fingers and the mess disappeared. Where she’d sent it off to, I had no idea. She shifted, leaning farther back into her high-backed chair and re-crossed her legs.

“I called you here so that we can work out a way to get your girl back, not to listen to your tales of woe. Looking at you, you’d think the world is coming to an end, but seeing as Julia is alive and breathing, I have no idea what you’re looking so glum about. We knew that she would react more or less like she did once she found out that you require blood for sustenance. But you are mates. You’ll work this out somehow. That is if you actually get off your butt and put in the work to get her back,” Beverly chastised, patting her hair and making sure that the huge rollers she used to curl her colorful strands were still in place.

She’d summoned me to her cottage three days after the debacle that went down at the gallery. After Cosmo had revealed not just to Julia but all the out-of-towners that I was a vampire, we’d all been working overtime to erase their memories. Or rather, Beverly and her coven did. Dane and I were just the hired muscle who rounded all the affected out-of-towners up.

That plus dealing with Cosmo had left me very little time to deal with the Julia situation. No, that was a bald-faced lie. I was dragging my feet because I was scared

that she would reject me. Yet what I felt for her grew stronger with each day. I'd felt the nascent bond snap into place between us the night we first made love. It was up to Julia to acknowledge and accept me as her mate, for I had done so the moment I realized that Beverly had been right about her.

“What is there to do? Short of breaking into her house and forcing a confrontation, traumatizing her more than she already is in the process, I have no idea what to do.” I slumped into my seat, feeling helpless and exhausted. I had not fed properly since the night of the fundraiser except for the blood-laced alcohol I kept in my house. One nice thing about living in Mystic Cove was that my...condition was an open secret. The locals know about my kind, the witches, and all the others. We had learned a long time ago to live peacefully alongside humans. In fact, the local vampire population all got their blood supply from the hospital, and there were some humans who craved the bloody kiss of a vampire and volunteered themselves for feedings.

Julia would have been told all about this down the line once the community knew she could be trusted. I was planning on telling her as well. I was going to explain my past and everything she needed to understand in a controlled environment where she felt safe. It was my mistake to wait until I felt like our connection was stronger before telling her.

Beverly rolled her eyes, the corners of her lips turning down as she glared at me. “You youngsters, always so dramatic and defeatist. What do you mean what is there left to do? You know how to romance women, don't you? You still have your tongue and wits. Talk to her, make her listen and understand who and what you are. Tell her how you feel. Promise her the moon if that's what it takes.” She huffed, getting up to let her dog out of the house when it started scratching and sniffing at the door.

“You know that I am older than you, right? I am not the youngster here,” I pointed out, my lips twitching in a smile I couldn't suppress.

“Your grandmother was one of my best friends, so that puts me on the same level as her. That is why you tell everyone that you think of me as your grandmother after all. Although, I don’t know how to feel about being a grandmother while I’m still so young.” She sighed in exasperation, ruffling my hair as she walked past me to take her seat.

I told everyone that she was my grandmother because she was the closest thing to family I had left. My grandmother was a long-lived witch who’d used her power to live long past her prime and had also served as a mentor to a young Beverly way back when. My mother had been a witch as well, but my father had been a normal human. My parents and my wife had all been killed by a vampire—the one who turned me instead of putting me out of my misery. That had been almost one hundred and fifty years ago. I was the only one to survive the ordeal, and for the longest time, I was lost under a cloud of grief and anger driven only by the need to feed and to hunt down the vampires who’d attacked my family.

It was my grandmother who hauled me back to Mystic Cove and taught me to get my bloodlust under control. That control shattered once more when I finally caught onto the trail of the vampires who’d killed my family, and like an idiot, I went after them with no regard for my own life. If it weren’t for Gran coming after me, I would have died at the hands of vampires who had decades, if not centuries, to hone their killer instincts. It was my own stupidity that cost me my grandmother. But then again, she had been just as thirsty for revenge as me, and when she came face to face with the men who killed her daughter, she thought nothing about sacrificing her life to take the vampires out.

It was a twenty-something-year-old Beverly who found me in the house the vampires had been using as their base, half-starved and half-mad. The injuries I’d gotten in the fight were so grievous, I needed copious amounts of blood to completely heal.

“Alright, lad, let’s get to planning. Word on the street is that our sweet Jules went to

visit her family, but Catherine is sure she'll be back in the classroom by Monday morning. You'll have to either corner her when she gets back on Sunday or after work on Monday and you will make her listen to you. I know you think that it's the vampire thing that's got her all twisted up, but I wager there are deeper issues beneath the surface. After what happened with her best friend and fiancé, I think she has a hard time letting people in through the walls she built around her heart. And just when she was starting to let her guard down, she was hit with all of this." She waved her hand in a vague gesture.

Julia did not talk all that much about her ex, but she'd said enough for me to figure out what had happened between them. If she felt that I'd betrayed her, then I had my work cut out for me. What if I lost her forever? I never thought I'd fall in love again after losing my wife. Even after learning about the concept of fated mates, I'd believed mine died all those years ago. None of the women I'd been with since then had sparked any feelings close to what I felt for my late wife until I met Julia, with her cute freckles and cupid's bow, kissable lips. Now that I found her, how would I live with myself if she decided that she wanted no part of this? What if she could not be with a freak of nature like me? I drank blood, for Pete's sake! Human blood!

"What do you suggest I do?" I needed to get her back no matter the cost because I refused to live through eternity with half a soul.

"First, let's take out those glass shards in your hand and discuss it over a nice stiff drink." Beverly winked and I followed her into the kitchen where she kept her first aid kit.

CHAPTER 25

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Going back home had been a bad idea. Mom took one good look at the shadows under my eyes and my greasy hair and assumed that I was finding my life in Mystic Cove more miserable than I'd imagined. Eventually, I caved and gave her an abridged version of what had happened between Landon and me, brushing over all the paranormal bits and telling her that I'd fallen head-first for him only to find out that he wasn't what he seemed and left the rest to her interpretation.

I'd thought spending some time among loved ones would help pick up my mood. I'd packed my bags Thursday afternoon after Rachel and Beverly both came knocking on my door—both of whom I'd ignored. I was still not up to talking to them yet. A part of me felt as if they'd taken me for a fool. That they'd all had a good laugh behind my back—the poor naive human who'd fallen for someone who could snap her neck without batting an eye or eat me alive. I didn't even know if Landon's feelings for me were genuine or if he was just passing the time. Maybe he'd agreed to that blind date just to get Beverly off his back. I mean, what did an immortal vampire want with a plain human like me? I'm sure there were vampire women out there who suited him better, women who understood him, who'd been alive almost as long as he had been, whose stomachs did not turn at the thought of drinking blood. How was our relationship going to work in the first place? Obviously, the secrets Landon had not been ready to tell me were about his vampirism, and I didn't blame him for that. You don't reveal something that huge and life-changing to just anyone.

But say our relationship did work out and he finally trusted me enough to let me in on the secret. What then? Did he expect to turn me into a vampire? Or was he going to stand idly by as I aged and he remained forever frozen in time? I wasn't sure if I was willing to give up my mortality for a lifetime of drinking blood, even if it was in the name of love. These headache-inducing thoughts ran in a loop in my mind without a

break and were driving me crazy!

Frustrated by my moping and unwillingness to talk, Mom dragged me along to shop for Kimberly's—Bas's fiancé's—wedding dress. My sister-in-law Sarah was also present, and all three women tried their best to lift my spirits while also making sure that Kimberly was the star of the day. As we tried the second wedding boutique, Mom finally lost her patience and dragged me outside, away from the excited bride-to-be and Sarah.

“Sweetheart, I know you are going through some stuff right now, and as your mother, it pains me to see you hurting like this, but there's nothing I can do for you unless you talk to me, let me help with whatever is troubling you,” she began, holding her palm up when I opened my mouth to tell her that I did not want to talk about it.

“I realize that you don't want to talk about it, and I want you to know I'll always be ready to lend an ear and a shoulder for you to cry on when you are. But I would also like to remind you that you are not the center of everyone's world. I am not telling you to pack your feelings away. Just...if you don't want to deal with your issues right now, then you could at least focus on someone else. Your brother is getting married to the sweetest girl ever and I haven't seen you make a move to really get to know Kimberly. I didn't bring you shopping with us just to get you out of the house. I wanted the two of you to bond over something special, but not once have you shown an interest in Kimberly or the wedding. So, I'm giving you a choice—you can either go home or you can get in there and help your future sister-in-law pick out a dress. One day, she'll hopefully return the favor to you,” Mom implored, her green eyes pleading with me to make an effort. I could see that she was worried about me and was trying not to pry and push me to open up like she usually did, so I relented.

She must have seen the capitulation in my face because the tension around her eyes melted away and she gave me a small smile before turning to go back into the shop. My hand involuntarily reached out and grabbed her by the wrist. “His name is

Landon. We've only known each other for about two weeks, but I already care more for him than any man who came before him. I thought that he could be the one, but now, I don't even know what to think," I confessed in a quiet whisper, my eyes trained to the SALE stickers on the boutique windows over her shoulder.

"Did something happen to change that?" she asked gently, threading her fingers through mine and walking us to an empty bench in the middle of the crowded mall.

"I found out something about him...a different side of him that is terrifying and possibly dangerous and I don't know how to feel about that."

Mom tensed up when I said that, wariness creeping into her eyes. "Baby, did this man hurt you? Is that why you came back home with that haunted look in your eyes?" she asked in an alarmed tone. My eyes went wide once I understood what she was talking about, and I was quick to reassure her.

"Landon would never hurt me, Mom. Not intentionally, at least. He is a gentleman through and through, and maybe I misspoke when I said he terrified me. It's more like...there's a side of him that I did not expect, and it's something that he can never change. If I want things to work out between us—" and God knew there was nothing I wanted more than that. "—I'll have to accept that side of him and learn to love him despite it."

"And you're not sure if you can accept and love him after what you've learned?" Mom completed my train of thought. I nodded and waited to hear what she had to say.

"My dear girl," she began, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. I shifted closer to her and laid my head on her shoulder as she played with my curls. "It sounds to me as if you're already all the way in love with him and it's just that your head has yet to catch up with your heart."

“But I will say this, love is all about compromises and sacrifices. Accept the things you can’t change, change the things you can’t accept, and have the wisdom to know the difference. My mother told me that when your father and I had a huge blowout that almost destroyed our marriage. It was about two years before we had you, and except for Charlies, your brothers are too young to remember, but we actually lived apart for three months. It was the most miserable time of my life, but we both realized that we loved each other too much to allow something that, in hindsight, turned out to be trivial in the grand scheme of things to separate us. You need to make that same decision now. Is this thing that caused you to run away from him so unforgiving that you would risk losing him?”

CHAPTER 26

I felt like everyone was staring at me on Monday, even the students. The pity and curiosity in their eyes made my skin itch. More than once a person tried to talk to me about what happened at the gallery, but I was not about to provide more fodder for the Mystic Cove gossip machine. When the last bell rang, I bolted out of my seat like I’d been sitting on hot coals, ignoring West calling out for me as I rushed out to my car.

I stopped dead in my tracks when I found Landon waiting in front of my car looking gaunt, unlike his usually put-together self. He was dressed casually in jeans and a tight-fitting T-shirt, his beautiful eyes hidden behind his mirrored sunglasses.

My steps faltered and I looked around the parking lot for a route of escape. My mother’s words echoed through my head, but I wasn’t ready to confront him or make a decision.

“Please don’t run. I just need you to listen to what I have to say and then I’ll be on my way,” Landon pleaded, taking a step toward me and freezing when I took one back. I realized too late what I’d done and how that single gesture came off to

Landon. It was a good thing his eyes were hidden behind his glasses because I don't think I would have been able to take the look in his eyes.

“Julia, I promise you that I will never hurt you. You don't need to be afraid of me. I just want to talk, that's all.”

I gulped down the lump of emotion lodged in my throat and forced myself to speak around it when it refused to go down. “I-I know you wouldn't, but...I need time to process things on my own before we talk. I'll hear you out eventually, but I just—” I trailed off as more people spilled out of the school building.

Landon's facial muscles went taut as he also looked around at our audience and he gave me a brisk nod. “You know where to find me when you're ready to talk,” he told me and walked away, taking a piece of my heart with him. Something inside me screamed at me to call him back, to let go of my stupid pride and insecurities and follow after him and be with him. I let out a soft gasp when I felt an actual physical pain somewhere in the vicinity of my chest. It was in no way incapacitating, but it did steal my breath away and continued to throb as I made my way home.

* * *

Two more weeks passed in which I avoided pretty much everyone. Every time I went to the store and locked eyes with someone, I couldn't help but wonder if they were a vampire or something else. I had dozens of messages from Landon that went unanswered, and I knew that I ran the risk of losing him forever if I kept ghosting him. I just needed to bite the bullet and go see him. As things turned out, it was Beverly I ended up having a confrontation with first. She was one of the people on my hit list and I had been actively avoiding going to The Book Coven for weeks. But when the third book in a series I loved came out, I had no choice go to the bookstore since the e-book and audiobook releases wouldn't be out for a couple more weeks and I did not want to be spoiled.

With Beverly the only one ever manning the counter, there was no way to sneak in and out with her being none the wiser. My face was a blank mask when I stepped up to pay and my lips were sewed shut.

“Is that how our relationship is going to be from now on, nothing more than strangers? If so, I pity you. This is a small town, so you’ll be seeing my face everywhere. I’d hate for you to waste so much energy being angry for nothing.” Her flippant tone made my blood boil.

“What do you mean angry for nothing? You knowingly set me up on a date with a vampire!” I yelled, catching the attention of the other customers in the store. Luckily, they were all locals, so they likely knew what I was going on about.

“So? Landon never did anything to make you feel unsafe, did he? He’s a gentleman through and through. Not to mention he’s loaded and handsome. What more could you ask for?” Beverly asked, stepping out from behind the counter. “Besides, I thought it was every young lady’s dream to be whisked off her feet by a handsome, brooding vampire.” She nonchalantly fingered a stack of vampire romances on the counter.

“This is not a joke, Bev!” I slapped my hand down on the surface of the counter. “How could you not tell me? That’s a huge secret to keep from me. What if the date had gone horribly wrong and Landon bit me or something?”

“Landon is not a novice who goes around attacking helpless young women, so do not insult him by making him out to be some mindless beast.” She frowned at me, fine lines flaring out from the sides of her mouth.

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“That’s not what I was doing,” I defended myself. “I just think that you could have made me aware of his condition. Given me a warning instead of letting me be blindsided the way I was,” I insisted.

“It’s not like finding out the love of your life prefers O-negative to drinking normal scotch has changed your feelings. I can see it in your eyes that you still love him. And while I am sorry for what Cosmo put you through, I will not apologize for what was not my secret to tell. You were going to find out soon anyway. That brat just expedited the process in a nasty way. We never meant any harm, Julia. We just needed to know you could be trusted to keep our secret before we could reveal ourselves to you.”

Trepidation pricked at my neck. “We? Does that mean you’re a vampire too?”

Beverly shook her head. Her smile was patient and kind. She held her palm out between us and a flame of fire ignited in the center of her hand. “No, my darling girl. I am a witch—the leader of the Mystic Cove Coven. There are more than just vampires living in this town. Witches, warlocks, shifters, and goddess knows what else. Oh dear, why don’t you have a seat before you faint on me?” she ordered when I swooned.

I waited for her to finish dealing with the last customers before she closed up the store earlier than usual and came to take a seat across from me in the reading nook.

“Witches are real,” I started in a monotone. “They are really real.” All those stories and articles about the witches that I’d read, they were based on true stories. But there were more than witches out there, and all of them were in this tiny seaside town.

“Yes, they are, darling. Mystic Cove is what we call a haven town. There are a few around the world. Towns and villages where folks like us can live freely and somewhat openly without fear of persecution or inciting mass hysteria amongst you mundane folk. We have a council that acts as a pseudo-government. As head of the witch coven, I sit on that council. Your friend Rachel’s father is the alpha of the only wolf pack in this region; he sits on the council. And then there is the town mayor—he represents the humans. And, of course, as the oldest and strongest vampire, your Landon is part of the council as well.”

“Rachel is a werewolf? Is that why she doesn’t like Landon?” I squeaked, trying and failing to not sound so freaked out. Beverly poured some chamomile tea and handed me a cup, but I was incapable of swallowing down anything at the moment.

“Yes, that is the reason. Lycans and vampires cannot stand each other and tend to stay out of each other’s way. Old family feuds. Of course, the council forbids any fights between the two as they can easily get out of control, but not everyone follows the letter of the law, I’m afraid.” Beverly put her teacup down and her expression turned unexpectedly grave.

“Julia, I want to make it explicitly clear that you were never in any danger. Landon would never hurt a human like that, especially his mate. He would rather cut off his own arm than hurt you.”

“Why are you so sure that I’m his mate?” I ask, cradling my teacup in my hands and absorbing the warmth.

“It’s what I do, and I am never wrong,” Beverly answered simply. “I was going to leave it to Landon to tell you all of this, but it seems to me like you need a kick to the keister so that you can finally stop dilly-dallying and go get your man. So, listen and listen to me well. I will tell you some about his past, what he has done for the people of this town, what kind of man he is, and then you can finally make your decision.”

I spent what felt like hours in Beverly's bookstore, learning more about the man I loved. By the time I left, my head felt once more like it was close to bursting and my heart broke for all the things he had gone through.

* * *

Sleep was elusive that night. I needed someone to talk to, and the only person I could think of was Landon. I didn't even think about the fact that it was two in the morning when I picked up my phone and called him. There was no point in delaying the inevitable. The shock of finding out that I lived in a town that was a hotbed for real paranormal activity was wearing off. As were the doubts that Landon only wanted me because he fed on human blood. The man was a hundred times stronger than me. He had no need to jump through hoops and court me just so that I could give him a nibble or two. If he wanted to hurt or kill me, he would have done so by now. Right?

"Julia? Is something wrong? Are you all right?"

My toes curled into the mattress at the sound of his gruff, sleepy voice.

"I'm finally ready to listen," I told him. The phone went deathly quiet, and for a moment, I thought the call had cut off. But then he spoke.

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

CHAPTER 27

Headlights illuminated my living room twenty minutes later as Landon pulled up in my driveway. Not long after, Landon gave three soft raps on the door. Hesitating on the other side, I undid the sash on my kimono style robe and re-tied it, undid the messy bun piled at the top of my head and fastened it into a loose ponytail. My abdomen felt hollow and my hands were shaking; not because I was afraid of Landon

but because I was ashamed of my own cowardice in avoiding Landon for so long.

“Julia? It’s me, Landon.” He called from the other side of the door. Taking a deep breath, I steeled my nerves, unlocked the door, and turned the knob. Something in my chest tightened as I got my first look at Landon in two, almost three weeks.

Gooseflesh pebbled on my exposed skin, but I was unsure whether it was from the chilly breeze wafting in through the open door behind him or if it was a reaction to Landon himself.

The intensity of his hypnotic gaze, the set of that lush mouth that had driven me to madness with heated kisses. He’d grown out his hair since I last saw him. It barely brushed his shoulders, the silken strands fluttering from the mild wind. He’d grown out his beard too, making him look like a dashing rogue from a historical romance novel.

“Hey.” He rocked back on his feet, his shirt stretching tighter across his broad chest when he placed his hands in the back pocket of his jeans.

Liquid warmth pooled at my core and a familiar heat ignited in my belly; my body still wanted and ached for him with a piercing intensity. I invited him in. “Hey, yourself. Why don’t you come in out of the cold? That is...do vampires feel cold?” I asked, curious about how his body worked since he was undead. Was he a Twilight kind of vampire, or a Vampire Diaries kind of vampire? He could walk in the sunlight, but I’d never seen him sparkle and he had body warmth too, though it ran cooler than mine, and I’d heard his heartbeat on multiple occasions.

Landon chuckled as he stepped in through the door, his arm grazing against mine. My heat leapt through the roof and my knees threatened to buckle over that featherlight touch.

“To a certain extent. This is nothing for me, but once the temperature drops or rises above a certain point then I do feel the effects of the temperature changes,” he explained before we fell quiet and just stared at each other. I flushed when Landon’s gaze traveled down my body, hunger darkening his eyes.

“Would you like anything to drink, or eat?” I asked. Landon declined my offer. “Well, I’m going to make myself a cup of tea. I have a feeling that this conversation is going to take all night.”

* * *

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“So...what do you want to know?” Landon asked once we were settled down. We were both sitting on opposite ends of the two-seater couch, Landon with one leg up on the seat and the other on the ground, his body half turned to face me. I’d curled up into the corner on my end, my knees raised up to my chest and balancing a gigantic coffee mug precariously on my knees.

“I have so many questions, I don’t know which one to ask first. How about you just tell me anything you feel I need to know, and then if there’s anything I think of, I’ll ask later,” I suggested. Beverly had already summed up Landon’s history for me, but there was a difference in hearing something secondhand and getting it straight from the source.

He gulped and breathed in through his nose, staring down at the carpet with a faraway look in his eyes. Once he collected his thoughts, he looked me in the eyes and told me everything. “I was thirty-three when I was changed. I had a beautiful wife, her name was Amelia,” he began, a bittersweet smile in his face.

I tried not to show any emotion, thankful that I already knew he’d been married before. Jealousy had burned through me when I found out about that until I told myself that I didn’t even exist when Landon had married his first wife and that people could have more than one great love in their lifetime—even in a single human lifetime. Still, it stung a little to see him have that look in his eyes when he spoke about another woman; I coveted it and wanted it all for myself.

“We married young, but we had been struggling to conceive for years, even with the help of my mother and her potions. Amelia had had two prior miscarriages, but the third pregnancy passed the three- and six-month marks with no incident, so we were

cautiously optimistic.”

“How come you’re not a witch or whatever? Sorry to interrupt, I’m just curious,” I cut in, lowering my legs and moving closer to him.

“It’s alright. The gift—that’s what they call it, tends to pass on from mother to daughter. Witch households were, and still are, matriarchal in nature, and it’s rare for the gift to pass from mother to son or from father to son; but it does happen once in a blue moon that a warlock is born. No one knows the reasoning behind it; perhaps it’s because the triple goddess is depicted as mother, maiden, and crone.” He shrugged. “Stranger still is that warlocks are twice as powerful as the average witch; anyway, I was an only child, so there was no Grayson daughter to inherit Mother’s gift.”

“I see,” I hummed, taking a sip of my coffee and scalding my tongue. Wincing, I put it aside on the coffee table, but now I had nothing to do with my hands, so I shoved them beneath my thighs. “I kinda feel like I should take notes. I’ve never written a book before, but all this talk of vampires, warlocks, and witches has my imagination revving,” I joked.

“If you need inspiration for a dashing hero, you know where to find me.” He winked, leaning forward, and I mirrored the action. Our faces were so close, I could make out the blue-grey flecks in his eyes.

“What happened next?” I asked him, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth to keep from kissing him. Like I thought it would, my question put a damper on the heat in his eyes. Leaning back and putting some space between us, Landon continued with his story.

“There was a small clan of vampires that had moved into our settlement. You see, witches are sort of mediators between humans and the supernatural; they also serve as guardians to humans who are too weak to defend against creatures of the dark like

myself. The older vampires in our community knew that to indiscriminately kill and drain our human friends and neighbors was anathema to the tenets that we all agreed to live by. These new vampires were arrogant and drunk on their power and trampled over those core values, killing without a thought, stealing people away and using them for their own pleasure. It fell upon my mother and the other witches to put them in their place.

“Earlier that day, before Amelia and I visited, mother and her friends wounded the clan leader grievously as a warning. They should have just killed them all in my opinion because no one knows how to bear a grudge like an immortal. That night, the homes of my mother’s coven members were attacked, not a single person was left alive.” His voice hitched and unshed tears shimmered in his eyes. “I was helpless to save any of them; they went for my mother first. I did not see them coming—snapped her neck like she was nothing more than a twig and dismembered her in front of my eyes.”

“Oh, Landon.” I stood up and knelt on the floor in front of him, covering his fisted hands in mine. A sob lodged in my throat, imagining everything he’d gone through. The helplessness he felt watching his family murdered in front of him and being unable to do anything.

“Before my mind processed what was happening, Amelia was already on the ground, her lifeless eyes looking up at me, frozen forever in terror and clutching at her stomach—at our baby as two vampires drained her of her lifeblood. I tried to get to her, but there was another one on me, tearing at my throat like a rabid wolf. I’ll never forget the sound of them greedily gorging themselves; or the smell of blood soaking the very air I breathed. My attacker must have thought that I was dead when he was done, but I was still holding on and had his venom inside me. I woke up five days later to the stench of rotting corpses; everyone in our village dead.”

“Oh, honey, I am so sorry you had to live through all of that. You don’t have to tell

me anymore.” I wiped away his tears.

“No. I want to tell you everything so that you know what kind of person I became back then and the man that I am now,” he said in a hoarse whisper. Getting down on his knees, he picked me up before sitting back on the couch and cradling me on his lap. “Will you listen?” he asked into the crook of my neck, breathing in my scent.

I nodded and laid my head against his shoulder, the palm of my hand resting over his heart as he told me of his past. From his feral days, seeking out those who hurt his family and killing innocent humans along the way, to his time spent with Beverly in Mystic Cove. He told me of his travels around the world, how he met Dane as a newborn vampire struggling to accept what he’d become and taking the young man under his wing. Landon spoke until his voice became rough from talking too much and the sky started to lighten up, pausing mid-sentence when I let out a huge yawn.

“I should go home and let you get some sleep,” he murmured into my hair, sounding like that was the last thing he wanted to do; in fact, his hands squeezed tighter around me.

Smiling, I shook my head and burrowed deeper into his embrace. “Stay. I still have so much to ask you, like if you really prefer O negative over other blood types and where you get your blood supply if you don’t drink straight from humans.”

“You’ve been talking to Beverly,” he huffed. “The hospital holds monthly blood drives and my clan buys some of the blood. There are those who prefer animal blood, but it’s not as sustaining as human blood, and there are some humans who are addicted to having a vampire drink straight from them, so there is never any shortage of food, so to speak.”

“Does it hurt to have a vampire drink from you?” I slurred, my eyes heavy with the need for sleep. I was jostled from the sleepy state when Landon got to his feet and

started walking up to my bedroom.

“We can make the bite as painful or as pleasurable as we wish.”

“Is that so? You’ll have to show me sometime.”

He paused when I said that and looked down at me, his expression unreadable. He said nothing as he picked me up and carried me into my bedroom, depositing me on the bed before taking off his shoes and clothes and joining me under the sheets.

* * *

“I understand why you didn’t tell me that you were a vampire, Landon; it’s not the kind of thing you bring up after one date,” I told him, caressing his bearded cheeks as we lay face to face, our legs intertwined. “I’m not even mad that you waited to tell me. I just had a very human reaction after hearing that something I thought only existed in fairytales was real, and even though it will take me some time to really wrap my head around all this, what you are changes nothing about how I feel about you. I love you, Landon, and I want to be with you for as long as you’ll have me,” I whispered.

“Then you’re stuck with me forever because I’ll never stop loving you. This is your last chance to run, Julia, because if you stay, I’m never letting you slip away ever again. Being without you these last few weeks was torture and I never want to go through that again.” He pulled me close so that we were lying chest to chest, his breath fanning against my face.

“I’m going nowhere. I am yours, mind, body, and soul,” I declared, brushing away the hair falling over his eyes and basking in the moment, the rightness of it. I was made for Landon and he for me; the moment that thought crossed my mind, I felt something snap into place.

Landon's fingers dug into my waist as we both gasped. A strange sensation burned within my chest and my heart swelled as an influx of emotions that were both mine and not mine flooded my system. Tears bloomed in my eyes and I had no idea why, just that I was tethered to Landon in a way I had not been a few minutes ago.

"What was that?" I asked when the sudden euphoria swirling within me ebbed.

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“The mating bond.” Landon sounded awed. “You and I are inextricably intertwined.”

I frowned, not sure I understood exactly what a mating bond was. Landon smoothed the wrinkles between my eyebrows with the pad of his thumb. “Sleep, Red. We’ll talk more when you wake up.”

I don’t remember falling asleep, but sometime later, I woke to Landon peppering me with kisses. I was still reeling from the effects of our bonding, but I wholeheartedly welcomed his advances, wanting nothing more than to make love to him over and over again. We still had a ton to talk about, but he was going nowhere and neither was I. So, for now, I put everything else on the backburner and decided to enjoy the moment.

EPILOGUE

LANDON

Ten months had passed since Julia and I had bonded, three since her thirtieth birthday, and a month since our wedding. Life could not get any more perfect than it already was, and yet, my wife would not stop brooding instead of enjoying the last days of our honeymoon exploring the Caribbean. One of the benefits of being ancient was all the accumulated wealth; I could afford to take my wife on an extended honeymoon and show her sights many would never see. And yet it felt like I was the only one having the time of my life.

I knew what was bothering her, of course; I was just looking for the right time to bring it up. I’d noticed the changes in Julia ever since her birthday passed—the issue

of her mortality was starting to bother her.

We'd talked about it in the days after our bonding, and she had told me at the time that she was not sure she wanted to be turned into a vampire just yet. While I respected her wishes, there was a part of me that had been apprehensive and feeling like I was holding a ticking time bomb in my hands—the thought of Julia getting older and eventually perishing from this world while I remained frozen in time had held my heart in a vice grip of anxiety and terror. But I didn't want to push her into doing something she'd come to regret in the future, so I'd never brought up turning her again after that one conversation. But lately, I'd noticed the way she had become self-conscious about things like aging or her health or anything to do with her mortality, so I thought it wouldn't hurt to bring it up again later tonight at dinner. As usual, my wife beat me to the punch.

"I want you to turn me," she announced once our private yacht had set sail off the coast of St. Lucia for a day out at sea. The two champagne flutes I held clattered to the floor and broke into sharp pieces. I managed to catch the bottle of champagne before it splashed all over the deck through pure reflexes because my brain had gone blank.

"Turn you into what?" I asked lamely, internally telling myself not to jump to conclusions as I stared dumbfounded at my beautiful wife. The sun shone down on her red curls, making them appear as if they were aflame, and her skin glistened from all the sunscreen she'd applied because she would fry out in the sun otherwise. She wore a bright blue bikini and a see-through wrap, her face clear of any makeup. Her freckles stood out against her pale skin and she looked like a sea goddess come to life.

"Into a vampire, dummy." She rolled her eyes. "I'm not totally down with the idea of drinking blood, but I'll get used to it eventually. What I can't get used to is the fact that I might suddenly die one day and leave you behind. Not even forever is long enough. I want to be with you longer than that. I want to love you beyond forever, so

I want you to make me your vampire. Make me your mate in all the ways that count... But we'll have to tell my family the truth somehow because I don't plan on faking my death or anything once they realize that I am not aging. So, what do you say?"

Walking toward her, I took her face in both my hands and tilted her head back. "I say, I'll see you on the other side of forever."

And then I kissed her.

THE END