



Small Town Prince Charming

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Category: Romance

Description: Can a high school romance that never happened have a second life in a small town?

Tracey Baker got out of Blakes Creek to find her purpose in life. She found it in the theatre scene in New York, but after ten years, she's ready for a change. Working for the community theatre in her hometown is just what she needs—until she sees Ryan Greene. Ryan Greene crushed on Tracey Baker in school, but he never thought she'd come back to Blakes Creek. When he sees her at the theatre, he's determined to win her heart. His daughter Maisey is just as determined. She likes Tracey and sets out to prove her dad is Tracey's Prince Charming. Love might conquer all, but with the eyes and ears of the town focused on their relationship, Ryan and Tracey will have to prove they can set the stage alight together.

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Chapter One

Tracey Baker stepped back and admired the display of batik blouses. “Not too shabby.” She’d chosen the colors according to her whim and rather liked the final intricate result. The colors shimmered. The blue, purple and red reminded her of a sunset.

She folded her arms. Of all the things she’d done in her life, opening the clothing shop and assisting in the costume department for the Blakes Creek Little Theatre were her crowning achievements. Leaving Blakes Creek allowed her to spread her wings and explore what she wanted from life, but it did little for her romantic prospects.

“Hey, I like those.” Eileen, her sales assistant, elbowed her. “Are those your latest creations?”

“Sure are. Like them?”

“I do.” Eileen touched the silky fabric. “The colors pop. By the way, the girls are over at the theatre and ready for their fitting today. Should be the final one. Cindy’s bringing Dave up to finish the sets. I guess they’ve got Dave and Ryan working overtime to get done under the deadline. I told them you’d be over in a few moments to work on those costumes, so Derek could see them under the lights.”

“Right.” She’d forgotten about the fittings. The girls of the dance troupe needed their costumes for the recital on Friday and the women in the chorus line needed the final fittings on theirs for the production of Cousins Kazam. If she didn’t get going, she’d

be late. “Will you add the prices to the garments? I’ve already created the stickers, and you could arrange the jewelry to go with the blouses. I haven’t gotten that far.”

“Sure.” Eileen picked up the sheet of tags. “How was your weekend?”

“Good?” She spent most of it working on the blouses. “Yours? How is Jim?” She collected her phone and sewing bag from behind the counter. “Did they figure out what’s wrong with his gall bladder?”

“Stones. He goes back to the Clinic in two days for a recheck. They gave him meds to dissolve the stones, but the doctor wants to monitor how well it’s going.” Eileen shook her head. “Then there was the funeral. My daughter’s dog passed on Saturday, so the grandkids wanted a funeral for him on the farm.”

Tracey hugged Eileen and listened to her stories. She loved hearing about the goings on in town and Eileen’s family. Everyone knew everyone else, and many of the people in town were related. Few details went unnoticed. “I hope Jim feels better, and I’m sorry to hear about the dog.”

“They’ll get another. They need a dog at the house, and my daughter doesn’t like not having a dog. She’s a pet person.” Eileen waved. “Get going. You don’t want to be late.”

“No, I don’t.” She waved, then left the shop in Eileen’s capable hands. She trusted her friend to keep the shop going. The store wasn’t large, but Blakes Creek folks seemed to like her clothes and jewelry. Prom time proved to be a boon for her. She loved outfitting the girls for the event and creating custom cufflinks for the boys. Her favorite jewelry had been for the lesbian couple who’d won prom royalty last spring. She loved the rainbow design the girls had chosen.

She tucked her phone into her back pocket and held onto her bag as she strode across

the alley to the rear of the theatre. Like Blakes Creek, the theatre building was ornate yet simple. The streets were orderly, and the buildings richly decorated with hundred-year-old facades. The owners of the buildings took great pride in keeping the homey, yet clean feel for the town. The marquee on the theatre had to be at least fifty years old but looked new. She loved to gaze at the pink and blue neon surrounding the sign. The colors glittered on the street when it rained.

When she strode along the hallway situated behind the stage, she nearly collided with Mary.

“Tracey.” Mary waved her arms. “The girls are ready, but it’s a mess. They’re lined up and in their costumes. You need to do the tucks and final adjustments, but Derek is on a tear. Dave and Cindy have the sets ready for his appraisal, and he’s running Ryan ragged.”

“Whoa.” She held up both hands. “I’m not in charge of the sets, so sadly, whatever Derek said is what goes.” She wasn’t a fan of the director. Derek Kraus believed he owned the theatre scene in Blakes Creek. He’d left town for a year after he graduated and worked in the Cleveland theatre scene, but he came back under a bit of suspicion. He claimed he had more acting credits than anyone could find performances for, and his directing style left a lot to be desired, but she refused to argue with him or the patrons who’d given him the contract to direct this year.

Besides, even if she argued with him, he’d never listen.

He hadn’t listened to her when they’d dated for that month in high school. He knew how she should perform and argued when she interpreted the character her own way. Once she and Derek split, he claimed she’d slept around on him. How could she? They’d only dated for a month and never slept together. Plus, they’d been sixteen!

Unfortunately, he was the director for the season, and she had no choice but to deal

with him.

“Derek says the chorus girls need more glitz.” Mary clasped her hands together. “Maybe a little more?”

“A little more might be fine,” she said, echoing Mary. “I need to see the dance troupe first. They will have fewer adjustments.”

“In the rehearsal room.” Mary tucked her blond curls behind her ears. “Don’t take too long. I’ve already been chewed out twice. My goodness, he’s in a mood.”

“When is Derek not in a mood?” She patted Mary’s shoulder. “If he has to wait a few minutes, he’ll live. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Thank you,” Mary said as Tracey left.

Tracey shook her head. This was the kind of action she liked—the hustle of the production and the excitement of the performance. She strode into the rehearsal room. The girls, ages seven to fourteen, lined up for the fittings. “Hi, ladies.”

Donnah, the troupe leader, clapped her hands. She’d been in charge of Donnah’s Dancers for thirty years. Tracey once tried out for the group, but quickly realized her twelve-year-old self wasn’t coordinated enough for dancing.

“Girls, I need you all to line up. This shouldn’t take long. Once you’re done and Miss Tracey says you can go, I want you on the other side of the room practicing for the recital. We’ve got lots of sloppiness that needs tightened up.” Donnah applauded again. “I want this show to sparkle.”

Tracey knelt in front of the first dancer and checked the fit of her costume. Most of the girls looked fine and wouldn’t need adjustments. A couple wouldn’t need

anything more than a pin or quick tuck.

Then there was Erin. “What happened here?” Tracey crinkled her nose. “I know I did your fitting. Why is your costume so tight? It’s two sizes too small. You can’t have grown that much in a week. Did you accidentally put on the wrong costume? Are you sure this is yours?”

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“No.” Erin lowered her gaze. “My friend Maisey and I switched. See...hers was too big, and so she took mine, and we switched.”

“Hmm.” She didn’t remember fitting anyone named Maisey. She scratched her chin. “Erin, honey, I need you to switch back so I can check Maisey’s fit, too.”

Erin inched closer to her and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Maisey can’t afford hers. I heard her dad say there wasn’t money, and she couldn’t dance.”

“Okay.” She frowned. “Is that why you’re wearing the wrong costume?” She wasn’t sure about the math, but Tracey hoped Erin would be honest.

Erin sighed and her shoulders stooped. “My mom already paid for mine, so I gave it to Maisey. Then I took the extra one, so she could have a costume, too,” she said. “My mom won’t know and will pay for mine again. Then Maisey and I can both dance.”

“Does Maisey know what you did? You should be honest with your mother.”

“Am I in trouble?” Erin’s eyes widened and her chin quivered. “I wanted to help her.”

“You’re not in trouble. You helped her, and that’s nice, but I want to get you both in the correctly sized costumes. Why don’t you and Maisey switch, so I can check the proper fit on hers, and I’ll make sure she can dance?” She winked and fluffed Erin’s tutu. “Thank you for telling me. We’ll get her a costume—costs don’t matter—and that way she can dance. Okay? You were brave to tell me.”

“I’m not in trouble?”

“Nope.”

“Phew.” Erin relaxed and tugged at her costume. “This doesn’t fit right.”

“I know. Switch back so I can make sure the one you’re supposed to have does fit, and I’ll talk to Maisey.” She waited for the girls to don the correct costumes.

“Thank you.” Erin bounced away to the changing room.

Another little girl followed her into the room. Her costume appeared too big, and Tracey assumed she must be Maisey.

Donnah glided over to Tracey. “I guess you found out about Maisey and Erin.”

“I did. I’m waiting for them to switch costumes. Erin’s should fit just fine, but Maisey’s might need some help.” She moved her bag aside. “You knew they’d switched?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll explain when we’re done, but yes.” Donnah shook her head. “It’s complicated.” She snapped her fingers. “Maisey?”

The little girl who’d followed Erin into the changing room, a short thin blond with big brown eyes, crept up to Tracey. Her costume was still too big on her tiny frame. She brushed her hair from her eyes as she fidgeted with her tutu.

“Maisey?” She didn’t remember fitting this girl. “Hi, honey. Let’s get your costume sorted out. It’s too big.”

“Dad doesn’t know I’m in the troupe.” Maisey’s eyes widened. “He told me to do my

homework while he helped Mr. Derek.”

“Well, then let’s get you fitted so you can dance. Won’t take long.” She worked on the straps, then gathered the elastic on the tutu to snug it up to Maisey’s body. “Do you like to dance?”

Maisey tucked into herself. “Don’t tell Daddy. He doesn’t want me to.”

“Why?” She added a safety pin to mark the tuck, then turned Maisey around.

“He said I should focus on school.”

“How old are you?” She couldn’t be more than seven.

“I’ll be seven in a month. I’m in Mrs. McKimson’s second grade.” Maisey smiled. “I have all As.”

“I bet you do.” She winked at her and adjusted the straps, then marked them with her chalk. “Does Miss Donnah know you want to dance?”

“She said I can if I stay out of the way. I have rhythm.” Maisey twirled for her. “See?”

“I do.” What a sweet little girl. She needed to talk to Donnah as well as Maisey’s father. Something could be worked out. If the girl wanted to dance and she could help her, then Tracey wanted to assist. “Do you have warm-ups?”

“No. Just my school clothes.” Maisey averted her gaze. “Dad told me not to get them dirty.”

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“Okay. Well, why don’t you change out of your costume and into your school clothes for me, then I’ll get you some warm-ups?” Tracey asked. “I’ll have your costume ready for you tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” Maisey skipped to the changing room.

Tracey admired her spunk. The girl did have enthusiasm and rhythm. Tracey turned her attention to Donnah. “I’ve got them all and a few notes. Erin’s fits perfectly now and Maisey’s will be adjusted tonight. It’s nothing drastic.”

“Erin Simec and Maisey are friends, and Erin’s mother is one of the troupe’s biggest benefactors.” Donnah sighed. “She’s also pushy as all get out.”

“And Maisey?”

“She’s here because her father needed somewhere for her to go while he worked. You know her father—Ryan Greene.” Donnah shook her head. “He tries, but he’s got his hands full.”

“Oh?” She remembered Ryan Greene very well. She’d crushed on him all through high school. “Does he need help?” The last she knew he’d married Carol. Was Maisey their daughter?

“With this, yes.” Donnah lowered her voice to a whisper. “Maisey is Jessica’s little girl. She lost custody when she went to jail this last time, but everything hit the fan when she died without a will. Thank God the courts allowed Maisey to be placed with Ryan. He’s all she’s got left. It’s a mess and sad, but he tries so hard, and his two jobs

aren't enough."

"What about Carol?"

"They split ten years ago. He works for Tom's Renovation Services and here at the theatre. He's the head of construction, but you'd think he's not much more than a worker the way Derek shouts at him. Derek knows Ryan's a good hard worker and dependable," Donnah said. "Tom runs him ragged, but so does Derek. Then he's raising Maisey because his sister was too busy sticking God knows what up her nose then overdosed."

"Ryan?" She couldn't wrap her mind around what she'd learned. Ryan wasn't with Carol, but he'd gained custody of his sister's daughter, and Jessica had died? It was too much to think about.

"Ryan tries to get Maisey into activities, but everything is so expensive. He can't afford the gear or doesn't have time to drive her to the practices. He's here, so she hangs out with me at the dance studio. I'd love to have her fulltime in the troupe, but if I let everyone dance for free, I wouldn't be able to pay my bills."

"I know." She tended to do too much for freebies, too. Still, she wanted to help out. "Do you have an extra warm-up outfit? Something that would fit her?" She owed Ryan that much. "I'll pay for it."

"You will?" Donnah rested her hands on her hips. "You'd better talk to Ryan, but I'll get her suited out. Thank you."

"Where is he?" Her heart fluttered at the thought of seeing him after all these years. "I'm assuming he's here."

"On the stage. His sets are fantastic, but Derek likes to find fault and make last-

minute changes. Are you going to work on the chorus girls next?"

"I am, and I'll touch base with Ryan afterward." If she could avoid Derek, she would.

"Leave Maisey's costume in the cabinet, and I'll get it before I leave."

"Sure, and good luck." Donnah waved, then turned her attention to the troupe, clapping her hands to get their attention. "Girls, one more time. I want to clean this up."

Tracey stole a glance at Maisey, who went through the routine while wearing jeans and a flower embellished T-shirt. She looked so out of place, but like a tiny version of Jessica. So thin and pixie-like. The poor kid. What a lot to have in life. At least she had Ryan for a father-figure.

Tracey made her way out to the stage. Thoughts of Ryan weren't far from her mind. They hadn't been while she'd gone off to college and while she'd worked in New York, either. She'd been friends with him in school and crushed on him since the eighth grade, but Ryan had been shy back then. He came alive on stage, though and she enjoyed acting opposite him. In high school, she and Ryan wanted to be on stage. She enjoyed the costumes, and he built the sets, but with the small number of students trying out to be in the plays back then, she and Ryan ended up in the production, too.

Was he still the strong, silent type? Still rugged? He'd stepped into the role of father and that seemed so sexy.

She spotted Derek and winced as he berated one of the dancers. Derek never had possessed good people skills. He pointed to the dancer and growled. The girl rushed from the stage in tears.

"Derek, you don't need to insult them." Ryan climbed down from the ladder. "She messed up. Big deal. You mess up and no one yells at you. Let her try again."

Tracey bit back a whoop. Derek deserved to be put in his place. Besides, now she could see Ryan before talking to him. He'd kept the muscle but remained lanky. From afar, he looked like he needed a haircut, but the unruly dark blond curls peeked around the edge of his ballcap and worked for him. The sound of his voice sent shivers down her spine.

He was a dad. A dad she'd like to... Oh boy. She couldn't admit she wanted to sleep with him. Not now. She didn't know him or the man he'd become. What if he didn't like her? What if he wouldn't talk to her? He might freeze her out.

"You are the builder," Derek said. "You have no sway here."

"No, but we're all people, and you're being excessive." Ryan removed his hat, raked his fingers through his hair, then donned the cap again. "Relax."

"Get back to painting. These sets are so dull. They should've been done and correct three days ago," Derek said. "You're the reason we're so behind."

She rolled her eyes. The productions were always behind and always managed to come together the week before the first show. One set painter or one builder wouldn't break the schedule. "Derek, stop." She strode out onto the stage. "Ryan's right. You're being a dick. Cut it out."

Ryan met her gaze and electricity shot through her. For a split-second, she felt like they were in school again and practicing for the spring musical.

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“Tracey.” Ryan inched backward. “Hi.”

“Hi.” She smiled to hide her nervousness. “The sets are great. I’m liking how they’ve come along.” If she’d known he was the one painting them, she would’ve spoken up before.

The muscle in his jaw tightened. “Thanks.”

She longed to run her fingers over his cheek. “I need to speak to you when practice concludes.”

“Yes, because this isn’t a social scene,” Derek said. “Now you get back to work. Tracey, what do you need? The girls have been waiting for an hour.”

She snorted. They hadn’t been waiting for an hour. “Ryan? Please?”

“I’ll find you,” Ryan said and returned to his ladder. At least he would talk to her.

She focused her attention on Derek. “When we were in school, Mr. Holsinger reminded us to work together with the stagehands, the designers, and the dancers. We’re a team. If you berate the dancers or anyone else, it makes working harder. Stop behaving like you’re the biggest man. You’re just as much part of the team as everyone else.”

“You think you’re special because you worked in New York.” Derek clicked his tongue. “Are you going to work with the chorus girls already?”

“Yes.” She hated when Derek behaved this way. “I’d like to do the final checks—even on the girl you dismissed.”

“She’s not getting the steps down.”

“This is community theatre, and she’s a high school student. Back off. Your attitude might be what convinces her to quit or puts her off participating in other projects,” Tracey said. “Did you ask her why she’s messing up? Did you find out if she’s okay? Maybe there’s something going on at home.”

He waved, disdain clear on his face. “Her personal life isn’t my problem.”

“But you’re my problem. I need to work with the girls, so go run lines or something.” She turned her back on him and went in search of the missing dancer. She found the girl in the lobby, sitting on the floor in the corner and crying.

“Hi.” Tracey sat beside her. “You’re still in the production. Trust me.”

“I am?” The girl sniffled. “I’m sorry. I’m not acting professional.”

“You’re how old? Seventeen?”

The girl nodded.

“You can have an emotional day because this isn’t professional theatre.” Tracey folded herself up next to the girl. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“Mr. Kraus saw the bruise on my arm and dismissed me because he said it was a tattoo. It’s not.” She lifted her sleeve. “My sister wrecked her car and I got hurt. I broke the window to get out of the car. That’s how I did this.”

“Ouch.” She wondered how the girl wasn’t hurt worse. “What happened?”

“She took the turn on Orchard Road wrong and swerved to miss a deer. We hit the embankment and she flipped the car. She broke her leg and phone, so I had to bust the window to get out and find help. It was in the paper, so he can’t say I lied.” She tugged her sleeve back down. “I’ll cover the bruise with makeup, but Mr. Kraus said I wasn’t keeping up. He told me to quit.”

“You’ve been through trauma. It’ll take time to get through that.” She hugged her. “Look, you survived an accident, and you can survive this. Use your determination to prove Mr. Kraus is wrong. You dance your heart out. I know you can.” She didn’t know the girl’s name, but she believed in her.

“You think so?”

“I do.” She stood. “Let’s go back in so you can return to practicing. I need to check the costumes, and this is my first time working with the chorus.”

“You’re Miss Baker?” The girl hopped to her feet. “Wow.”

“I am. Should I be worried?” She hoped her reputation wasn’t soiled.

“You’re a legend.” The girl beamed. “Did you really perform on Broadway?”

“In a very bit part. My friend needed an extra body on stage, and I was available. Mostly, I did the costumes for the productions,” Tracey said. “Now I’m doing the costumes for you.”

“Thanks.” The girl squared her shoulders. “Did it take guts to do that job?”

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“It took determination. I had to believe in my abilities, and it took time, mistakes and some hardship, too.” Tracey walked with her into the theatre. “But I celebrated my little victories and learned from the misfires. I knew I could do it—costuming—and I learned everything I could to sharpen my skills.”

“Then I will, too.” The girl walked off and disappeared backstage.

Derek thundered up to her. “Let me guess, you did your perfect magic stuff and bolstered her, right? You told her she could do this and to keep trying?”

“I did. Is that a problem?” Tracey pulled her phone from her pocket. “I have a job to do. If you don’t have input on the costumes, then leave.”

Derek growled as she walked away. She had work to do and didn’t need his annoyances. Plus, she wanted a chance to speak to Ryan. Something about Ryan made her want to do her best.

She’d come back to Blakes Creek to get away from the craziness of the city, but she could be persuaded to accept a little complication in the form of Ryan Greene.

Chapter Two

Ryan stood on the ladder and finished securing the last piece of the drop in place. He listened to Tracey give Derek hell and cheered her on. Someone had to stand up to Derek. Ryan’s acts of belligerence weren’t enough, and Derek needed to ease up on the cast. No one would want to be in the production if he kept running them off with his attitude.

He climbed down from the ladder and folded the equipment up before carrying the ladder from the stage. Tracey said she wanted to speak to him. Part of him wanted to chat with her. They'd been friends, and he missed her.

But the rest of him worried she'd give him hell, too.

He'd heard the arguments before. He didn't deserve to raise his niece. He wasn't father material. He needed to sort out his life before he cared for another. If she wanted to chew him out for trying to keep body and soul together for Maisey, then she could save her breath. He didn't have time for another lecture.

Derek marched up to Ryan. "Are you done? You took forever. Is the paint still wet?"

"First, no one painted anything today. Second, yes, I am done with the backdrop. It's in place and will pull just fine for the meadow scenes," Ryan said. "Third, we're ahead of schedule. Tracey's right. You need to ease up or you won't have a production, because no one will want to be in the musical."

"No? Because you're such a well-known director?" Derek snorted. "Or because you want her attention? Everyone knows you still have a thing for her."

"Shut up." He didn't want to dwell in the past. Tracey might be back and want to talk to him, but she wouldn't be single.

When he swept his gaze over Tracey, the old feelings rushed over him again. Derek was right—he'd never forgotten his crush on her. The attraction lingered. He wanted to hold her again, sing songs with her and listen to her laugh. Back when they'd performed together in high school, they'd connected.

He ignored Derek's verbal barrage and watched Tracey. She'd filled out a bit and still stole his breath. He liked women with curves, and she fit his bill. When she smiled,

she warmed him all over.

“Did you hear me?” Derek stepped in the way, blocking Ryan’s view. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t listening.” He glared at Derek. “What?”

“Focus on your job. You’re being paid to create the sets, not stare at my costume mistress. You’re dismissed for the evening.” Derek flicked his hand, then strode away.

The nerve... Ryan rubbed his forehead. A dull ache started behind his eyes. He needed to pick Maisey up from the rehearsal room. He couldn’t afford the lessons or costumes, but he wouldn’t deny her the chance to spend time with Miss Donnah. He didn’t have the heart to tell Maisey she couldn’t participate.

One day, things would work out, and he’d be able to give Maisey more opportunities. Not today. At the moment, he still had to pay off Jessica’s debts.

“Ryan?” Tracey held a clipboard and one of the glittery chorus girl dresses. “Do you have a second?”

“I do.” He’d rather run. “How are you?”

“I’m good. Busy. You seem busy, too.” She smiled. “You’re doing well with the sets. I can’t wait to see them in action.”

“Thanks.” Was he blushing? The tips of his ears burned. “The costumes looked good. I haven’t seen them all, but I bet they’re great.”

“Oh, they’re not done yet. I still have to get everyone fitted properly and figure out where to add more glitz like Derek wants.” She fiddled with the garment in her

hands. “I wanted to talk to you about Maisey.”

“What did she do?” He steeled himself for her answer. Maisey could tell tales and made things seem worse than reality. She craved attention, too.

“It’s not anything she did.” Tracey left the stage and strode out to the audience. “Here. This is less invasive. No, it’s what happened.”

“What happened? Did she try to set us up? She thinks I need another wife.” Shit. He shouldn’t have said that. “Sorry.”

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Tracey paled. “Another? How many have you had?”

“One. Carol. It didn’t work out.” He shook his head. “Honestly, I’m not looking to date anyone.” He could be convinced if the right woman asked him on a date—like Tracey.

“Uh...she didn’t say anything about a date or a wife.” Tracey fumbled with the dress and perched on one of the seatbacks. “No, she was wearing another girl’s costume because the other girl wanted Maisey to be able to dance in the performance.”

He wobbled onto the seatback one aisle behind hers. “Come again? Maisey did what?”

“Maisey wants to dance, and she’s in the class showing she can do it. One of the girls, a friend, gave her the wrong costume—the friend’s—so Maisey wouldn’t have to pay for it and could participate. I asked Maisey, and she said her dad couldn’t afford for her to dance.”

He had to be honest, but he hated the embarrassment. “I work two jobs, and I don’t have the time or money for dance. I barely keep us fed.” He tried to hide his shame. Tracey didn’t need to see him upset. If he hadn’t been saddled with Jessica’s debts, he’d be better off.

“Do you mind if she takes part in the recital?” Tracey asked. “I saw her practice with the other girls, and she’s good. She deserves to dance. She’ll have a costume, if you’ll let her, since I took her measurements. Actually, she’s already got one.”

“How much?” He’d have to shuffle a few things to find the money, but he had to give Maisey this.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” She had to be joking.

“I’d like to sponsor her.” Tracey smiled. “When we were in drama, my mom couldn’t afford for me to participate, and I was so embarrassed. I wanted to act and work, but there wasn’t any money. Jana, the woman who owned Big Mart, sponsored me. I never asked or begged, but she made it happen. I’d like to do that for Maisey.”

“I can’t pay you back.” He’d have to tell her that truth soon, too. Damn.

“Maybe not in cash, but you deserve some help. If I can do it, then I want to.” She grasped his hand. “She can help out at the store, if that makes you feel better. I can always use models for the clothes.”

“Women’s clothes?” Now she really did have to be joking, even if she’d proposed a great idea. Plus, when she held his hand, he felt sparks.

“No, the shawls or jewelry and hair accessories. She could model the children’s costumes for the theatre, too. I wouldn’t post her face,” Tracey said. “This way, too, she can hang out at the theatre or at my store. She’ll be safe, and you won’t have to worry.”

She made a lot of good points. “You’d be willing to help? She’s a handful.”

Her eyes sparkled with amusement. “I’m sure she is. She’s the spitting image of Jess.”

“I know.” Every day she seemed to look more like her mother. “She does love to dance, doesn’t she?”

“She does.”

Tracey’s smile warmed his blood and he longed to hold her again. He liked the way she’d fit into his arms back when they were younger. Would she still feel so good in his embrace? Flutters started in his stomach. Because of her? It sure felt that way.

“Do you think it’s doable?” Tracey asked. “May I sponsor her?”

He had nothing to lose and would get to see Tracey more often. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes.” He scrubbed his brow. “Sure. If it makes her happy, then why not?”

“You always were a softie.” She soft-punched his bicep. “Who has rocks for arms. Wow.”

“You don’t have to butter me up. I’ve already agreed.” But she could keep touching him and setting off those sparks, if she wanted.

“Sorry, but you do have some serious guns. I see why you’re working on those sets. You can move it all by yourself.” She stared at him a bit too long, but he didn’t care. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize.” He folded his arms. He liked the way she looked at him because it made him feel important.

“Well, I’ll make sure she’s set and can stay at the store until you pick her up each

night. In the meantime, I'll finish altering her costume." Tracey stood. "Tell her whatever you want about how she's getting to dance or why she's coming over. I don't care. You know she'll be thrilled."

"She will." And she'd love being able to dance. She needed an outlet for her energy.

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“Good.” She lingered another minute. “Don’t let Derek get to you. He’s still bitter about not making it in Cleveland. He’ll tear everyone else down to make himself feel better and push them all away in the process.” She shrugged. “Don’t let him do that to you.”

“I’m not bitter.” Not about Derek. He couldn’t stand him, but he’d deal.

“Good. I’ll see you later?”

“I’m working here until eight. Is that when you close?”

“I close at seven, but she’s welcome to come to the store—like I said.” Tracey quirked her mouth, then sighed. “You know what? I’ll come back over when the class finishes and walk her over to the store. They should be done in the next ten or so minutes. Yes?”

“That works.”

“See you.” She smiled and her eyes sparkled.

“You bet.” He watched her go and his heart skipped a beat. He still couldn’t believe she’d come back to Blakes Creek. He never thought he’d see her again, much less to be so close to her. He admired the sway of her hips and how she filled out those jeans. He’d been a fool to let her go all those years back, but he hadn’t possessed the confidence to properly ask her out. She’d been his fist love and first kiss—not that he’d ever told her.

Christ. He'd been so nervous around her.

Now? He didn't know what to think. She fried his brains—just like she had in high school.

“Are you done?” Derek marched up to him. “You have work to do.”

“You do realize you dismissed me? But you're right. I do have work to do. You're rotten, but correct, and I'm busy.” Ryan returned to the stage and surveyed the set. He didn't have much left to do, really. The backdrop was in place, scrims hung, and rotating pieces painted. The stage crew would have to work on the choreography of moving them, but he had faith it'd work out. Keelan needed to set the lights, but most of the work was completed.

Ryan hooked his fingers in his pockets and debated his next move. He could visit Miss Donnah and check on Maisey, then work on the backdrop for the recital. Or he could take a break and speak to Tracey again.

A squeal interrupted his thoughts. He didn't have to look to know who'd made the noise. “Maisey.”

She vaulted into his arms and hugged him. “Daddy, I'm going to do the dance. I'm in the dance.”

“You are?” He held her. “That's great.”

“Miss Donnah said I'm going to be in the big group. Daddy, I get to dance in front of everyone.” She squealed. “I don't have to wear Erin's costume because I get my own!”

“Wow.” So she had switched costumes with someone else.

“I gotta go. Miss Tracey says I can go to her shop because she needs my help. I’m going to be a fashion model.” Maisie beamed. “I like Miss Tracey. She smiles and hugs and doesn’t yell at me.”

“I don’t bet she does yell.” Tracey could be a charmer. “I’ll pick you up at eight at her store, okay? When do you go over there?”

“Soon. She’ll get me when it’s time.” She wriggled and he put her down. Maisie blew her stray hairs out of her eyes. “I’ll be good, Daddy. I won’t get into anything or spill stuff.” She giggled and a wide grin spread across her face. “We should keep her.”

“Who?”

“Miss Tracey. Duh, Daddy.” She rolled her eyes, then hugged him again. “Gotta go. Miss Tracey is here.”

“See you in an hour.” He walked with her across the stage to where Tracey stood in the wings.

“Hi.” Tracey met Ryan’s gaze. “I’ve got some buttons and beads for her to help me with.” She turned her attention to Maisie. “You have an important job. I’m designing skirts, so you will be my assistant.”

“No way.” Maisie squealed again. “Yes.”

Tracey held Maisie’s hand but spoke to Ryan. “She’ll be okay. The question is, are you?”

“I am.” He stuffed his hands into his pockets. “It’s—she’s getting older and independent...and after we’ve been through so much...I’m glad this is happening.”

“Do you feel like you’re failing?”

He stared into her eyes. She understood and hadn’t spoken down to him. “I do,” he said, lowering his voice. “I’m always busy because I’m trying to keep the bills paid. Feels like I’m never home, and no matter how hard I try, it doesn’t feel like it’s enough.”

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“She’s a resilient kid, and I know she doesn’t think you’re doing a bad job.” Tracey rubbed his bicep. “She’s also seven, and her world isn’t huge. As long as she’s warm, dry, fed and loved, she’ll be fine. She’s already fine. She loves you and wants you to be happy, too.” She moved her palm to his chest. “You have a big heart and are in a tough situation, but you’re not failing. You’ve got a good kid and you’re a good man, promise.”

Her touch seared him to his core again. He liked the way she spoke to him, too, despite the fact Maisey was right there and seemingly uninterested in the conversation. “Thanks.”

“Doesn’t mean this one won’t be a pill.” Tracey wriggled Maisey’s hand. “You’re seven, and you’re going to be silly.” She smiled and turned her attention back to Ryan and fixed the wrinkles in his shirt. “Get your work done and we’ll be next door.”

“Thanks.” He hesitated. He’d rather spend time with them than deal with Derek. Maybe when he picked Maisey up, he’d ask Tracey over for a date...coffee...something. Hell if he knew what. “See you.” He had to get back to his job.

“You bet.” Tracey waved, then left with Maisey beside her.

He hadn’t found anyone who wasn’t afraid of his family situation. When women found out he had a kid, some were still interested, but when they found out Maisey was Jessica’s, some lost interest. One woman told him Jessica was wild and Maisey would grow up to be just like her. Just because her biological mother had been

original, it didn't mean Maisey would follow in her footsteps. According to that person's math, Maisey would be dead at twenty-four, too. God, he hoped that was wrong.

Why did people assume things about other people and not see beyond their incorrect assumptions? Because it was too hard? Everyone in Blakes Creek knew his family and what he'd been through, but that didn't seem to matter to some. When he was younger, his parents had money, but they'd spent a lot on Jessica and getting her straightened out. Then the accident happened. Jessica lost herself in her addictions, and he had to support himself instead of attending college. He married Carol, but even that crashed and burned.

Would a future with Tracey be any better?

He stepped back onto the stage and shook his head. Once his life had fallen apart, he had to pick up the pieces. He didn't have his parents to help, didn't have anyone to give him direction on raising his sister's daughter, but he'd kept trying. His marriage ended and he felt rudderless, but Maisey needed him.

Now Tracey was back, and the dreams he'd hidden back then almost seemed possible.

Maybe this was his chance to have everything he'd ever wanted.

Maybe.

He left the stage and strode down the aisle to the light board. Keelan fiddled with the knobs and pointed to his spreadsheets.

"Hey." Keelan looked up from the papers. "Do you have the cues for the second act? I have nothing."

“I do.” He pulled the information up on his phone. “Derek emailed me the changes. I don’t have to do anything for them, but you’ll want to adjust the lighting. The chorus will be out longer, and he wants a search light, klieg lights sort of look.”

Keelan rolled his eyes and groaned. “Jesus. It doesn’t even fit. The girls are dancing in a meadow.”

“You haven’t heard about the costume changes. He wants them to be glitzier.” Ryan sank onto the chair beside him. “It doesn’t look right, but he won’t listen to anyone. You can’t make it glittery, unless there is a rain falling—which would fit—or make it a dream sequence. Neither of those things are in the script, but they could be shoehorned in, since this is a first run musical.”

“You should be directing this.” Keelan copied down the cues. “You’d be better than him.”

“I’ve never directed and doubt I’d be any good.” He’d never considered directing. He liked making the sets and bringing the world on stage to life.

“You can’t be any worse than him.” Keelan groaned. “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“What?” Ryan tucked his phone back into his pocket. “Everything okay?”

“No. Your friend is coming over.” Keelan ducked down in his seat.

“Tracey?”

“Katie Simec.” Keelan averted his gaze. “I’m here if you need help, but don’t engage.”

Ryan stiffened his spine. He’d gone on one date with Katie, but there hadn’t been the

spark. He liked her, but not enough to make it into a relationship. “She’s right behind me?” he murmured.

“Pretty close.” Keelan forced a smile. “Mrs. Simec.”

Katie touched Ryan’s shoulder and sidled up to him. “There you are. I hear you’re almost done with the sets. How are the costumes coming? I haven’t seen anything for the chorus girls, and Derek said they’d be done today.”

“They’re not done, but I’m also not in charge of them.” Ryan inched away from Katie. “You’ll have to ask Ms. Baker. Unfortunately, she’s gone home for the evening. Lots of alterations to make.”

“I haven’t met her,” Katie said with a frown. “I should, since she’s making Eva’s costume.”

“I’m sure she’ll touch base with you.” Ryan put more space between them. “I can let her know that you’ll be here tomorrow before practice, and she can meet with you then.”

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“I’d rather meet with you.” Katie clasped her hands together. “Are you done? We could get coffee.”

He had to put a stop to this. He couldn’t lead her on and didn’t want to hurt her. “Katie...” Shit. He had the words and lost them.

She smiled, then nodded to Keelan. “Do you mind giving us a minute?”

Keelan jumped up from his seat and vacated without a word. Ryan gritted his teeth. So much for being his backup.

“You said you wanted to go on a second date,” Katie said. “I thought it would happen before now.”

“I’m not looking to date anyone. I thought I was ready, but I’m not.” Ryan hooked his fingers in his jeans pockets. “I don’t have the time to devote to a date or relationship and that’s not fair to you or anyone else. I have to focus on Maisey.”

“Eva can watch her, and she can play with Erin. They’re besties.” Katie sighed. “Is it because I have two girls?”

“No.” He didn’t mind that she had children. He wouldn’t mind it if Tracey had kids, either. Then again, Katie wasn’t Tracey. “It’s really about time.”

“Uh-huh.” Katie swept her gaze over him. “There’s something different about you. I can’t tell what it is, but there’s something.” She tipped her head. “New haircut?”

“I’m wearing a hat.”

“Can’t be new glasses.” She frowned and tapped her chin with her index finger. “You’ve met Ms. Baker and you like her.”

“You got that from looking at me?” he asked. “That’s a bit of a stretch.”

“I heard you talking to her.” Katie shrugged. “Can’t blame a girl for being jealous. You’re smart, funny and single. I thought we had something.”

“We had one date.”

“It seemed like a lot.”

“I’m sorry.”

Katie tugged on the front of his shirt. “Don’t think I’m giving up. I’m not. I want you to have a choice, and I want a fighting chance to prove we’re good together.” She winked. “Choice is good.”

He didn’t know what to say. He’d tried to let her down gently, and she’d rebuked him, just like she had when he’d avoided the second date.

He watched her stroll away, but his heart didn’t flutter like it had with Tracey. Even the conversation with Katie felt wrong. He didn’t look forward to spending time with her and didn’t feel the spark. He did with Tracey.

He snorted and made his way back to the stage. Every second he’d wished his life would level off had been wasted. His life would never be normal or even. He had a kid and non-existent love life, but he wanted to date his high school crush.

Sticky situation, indeed.

Chapter Three

Tracey spent the next three nights after practice and fittings with Maisey in the store. Between the two of them, they'd sorted buttons and beads. She listened to Maisey's stories about school and accepted her input on bead placement on the navy fabric. Some of Maisey's suggestions for designs weren't great, but a few were spot-on. Mostly, Tracey enjoyed Maisey's chatter. Of all the things she missed in the city, the conversations were at the top. Granted, most of the people she chatted with were in the theatre, but they all felt like they were her family.

"Daddy says I'm a troublemaker," Maisey said. She kicked her feet as she sat on one of the stools behind the sales counter. "My mom used to say that, too, but I never heard it."

"I'm sure he means it in a nice way." Or he only said such things under duress. Ryan was a tender-hearted man. As for Jessica, Tracey could see her using that term for her daughter.

"I used to take my diaper off when I was a baby." Maisey collapsed into a fit of giggles. "He said it made me a heathen, but he loved me anyway."

"Silly girl." She turned the sign around on front door of her shop and locked up, then headed back to the sales counter.

"He says it when I don't pick up my room or don't do my homework." She grinned. "Are you making me do my homework?"

"Do you have some?" She hadn't thought to ask.

“Yes.”

“Is it done?”

“Yes.”

“Let me see.” She rested her hands on her hips. “If you do have homework, and it’s not done, and you’ve lied to me about it, then you’re working on it right now.” How much homework could a second grader have?

Maisey grabbed her backpack. “I do, but it’s done. See?” She handed over a purple folder. “I didn’t even rush.”

She checked the four pages of work—two math worksheets, a reading lesson and a music sheet. All appeared correct, and Maisey had even colored in the lines. “Okay, but I want to see your homework—and if it needs to be completed—each night. If you have some to do, then you’ll do it. Understand? Your daddy has plenty to worry about.”

“He says that a lot.” Maisey shook her head and put the folder back into her bag. “It’s crazy.”

For being seven, Maisey sure had some attitude. “What’s crazy?”

“Daddy works a bunch of the day, and he gets frustrated when Mrs. Simec yells. She does that a lot.” Maisey tucked her hair behind her ears. “But Daddy is nice. Why would she be mean to someone who is nice?”

Tracey fumbled for an answer. She’d stepped totally out of her comfort zone and her

radius of understanding. “Who is Mrs. Simec?” She sat on the other stool. “I don’t know her, do I?” She hadn’t been introduced to every one of the parents, despite asking Derek about such things.

“She’s our landlady and Erin’s mom. She comes over to the apartment a lot to talk to him, but she never brings Erin to play.” Maisey shrugged. “She came over one time without Erin and she wore this funny red dress. She told him to help her with her horizontal hold and he turned as red as her dress.”

Horizontal hold? Oh my. What a thing to say in front of a child. “I see. I should call your dad to find out what time he’s going to be done tonight and if it’s okay if I get you a snack.”

“I have it here.” Maisey produced a tag in her backpack. “I memorized it, too, but I keep the number here in case I get mixed up or scared.”

“Do you know what? I used to forget my lines when I got scared.” Which was why her career in the theatre took her in the direction of design. An actress wasn’t useful if she didn’t know her lines.

“You did?” Maisey’s eyes widened. “No way.”

“It’s true.” She typed out the text to Ryan’s number.

It’s Tracey. The shop is locked, so come to the alley door. Give me a heads up on time, and we’ll see you soon. Thanks.

She hit send and her heart skipped a beat. She never thought she’d see Ryan again and certainly not with him being single. Now she’d messaged him.

She swore she felt a spark when they touched, but she could be imagining things.

They'd been friends and kissed a few times, but he'd had Carol. He had his girl and Tracey had the unfortunate luck of being branded the good time girl. The whole label happened because of a rumor. She hadn't slept with those four basketball players—just hung out, but one girl and four guys had to equal monkey business. Only Ryan seemed to believe her when she told him the truth.

Her phone buzzed with a new text from Ryan.

Will be done in 45. Thanks. Derek is running everyone ragged and demanded I repaint one of the revolving boards. Ugh.

Derek could make life miserable when he wanted. She typed a reply.

Feel free to vent when you come over. I have coffee. Two cups and no waiting.

She hit send before she could take the invitation back. She wasn't great at flirting, and he might not see her invitation as a flirt. She tucked her phone into her pocket. If she'd learned anything in the city, it was if she wanted something, she had to make it happen.

"Is Daddy coming soon?" Maisey toyed with the display of bracelets.

"Do you want to go home?" She'd thought they were having fun, but she could be boring for a kid.

Maisey shrugged.

"Is it bad at home?" She hadn't gotten that feeling, but she wasn't sure how Maisey would react.

"No," Maisey said. "Daddy falls asleep too fast. We don't read books or watch

movies like we used to.”

“I’m sorry, kid.” She couldn’t fix all Maisie’s problems, but she wished she could. She’d bet Maisie tried to tell Ryan what she wanted, and Ryan probably wanted to give in to her, but didn’t every time.

“Do you read to your daughter?” Maisie asked.

“I don’t have one.”

“Oh.” Maisey frowned. “Erin’s mom said you had a kid tucked away, and I was hoping if you did, she could come out to play.”

Oh God. She wondered who Erin’s mother was and why she’d say such things. Maybe they’d known each other in school. “Sorry. I don’t have kids.” She couldn’t have them, either, but Maisey didn’t need to know that. “I had to work, so I didn’t have kids.”

Maisey giggled. “Have kids with my dad. I want a baby sister.”

Her heart sank. A guy like Ryan would eventually want kids of his own. He’d want a family home and the perfect Blakes Creek wife. She couldn’t give him all that—not that he’d asked her—but she should be upfront with him. She didn’t regret her choices or her past, but if he wanted more than she could give, then then they weren’t right for each other.

Thinking about losing her second chance with him before it even happened hurt.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. “Hold on. I think your Daddy might be here. I offered him coffee, so you don’t have to clean up yet, if it is him.”

“Yay!” Maisey abandoned the bracelets she’d rearranged and joined Tracey at the door. “Daddy.”

“Hi.” She opened the door for Ryan. “I should give you the swipe card and code, then

you can just come in when you come to get her.”

“If we make this a frequent thing, then I guess you could.” He picked up Maisey.
“Were you good?”

“Yes.” Maisey nodded.

“She was. No heathen-ing.” She closed the door and locked it behind him. “I’ve got some ideas for designs for clothes, inspired by Maisey. She’ll be getting credit for her work, too.”

Ryan stared at her while hugging his daughter. “She will?”

“Why not? Her design, her credit.” She refused to claim work she hadn’t done.

“She’s seven.”

“And she’s got a keen eye for color.”

He placed Maisey on her feet. “We should go.”

“I’ve got coffee upstairs in my apartment. Want some?” She smiled. She didn’t want him to leave so soon.

“I would like some and a few minutes off my feet. Maise, get your bag please.” Ryan gestured to her. His movements were jerky, his eyes a bit wild, and there was a terseness to his tone that hadn’t been there earlier. “Come on.”

“Ryan.” He needed to relax or tell her what had him concerned. She couldn’t fix what she didn’t know about. “Why don’t we go upstairs? I’ve got the television, coffee, and I’m buying dinner. Please?”

“You live upstairs?” he asked.

“It’s nice for the commute, but lousy on the exercise routine.” She smoothed her hands over her hips. “I should probably stop sneaking upstairs for snacks.”

“You don’t need to worry about your figure.” Ryan blushed. “Sorry, but you don’t.”

“Maybe not, but I do enjoy a good snack more often than I should.” She’d been told all her life how she needed to watch her weight. If she let it creep up, she’d never get it back down. Of course, the people criticizing her size were the same ones who could eat anything and not gain weight. They didn’t appreciate her curves. At least she did. Her curves were an asset, even if not everyone saw them that way.

“Stop.” Ryan grasped Maisey’s hand. “Let’s go upstairs. I’m hungry, tired, and I want to sit down.”

“Daddy, she has a TV. That’s a good reason to go up there.” Maisey ran away from her father and up the stairs.

“You have a television. She loves to watch TV.” Ryan crinkled his eyebrows. “We don’t have one.”

“Should I have kept my mouth shut?”

“No, but she’ll love coming here now, because she can watch television. I can’t afford the bill. We had internet TV for a while, but I had to cancel it, too. She watches DVDs on my laptop, which isn’t very much fun, but it’s the best I can do.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She reached for him. “We can talk in the kitchen, and she can watch cartoons or something.”

“She’s got perfect hearing.”

“She’s also smarter than you realize.”

He nodded. “It’s true.”

“Come on. It’s two old friends chatting. There’s nothing to hear, and you sure do look like you need a break.” She rubbed his back. “You’re tense.”

“I work two jobs, raise my sister’s kid because my sister couldn’t escape her addictions, barely keep myself straight, and I feel like I’m failing. God. Carol used to say I wasn’t good enough and this all seems to prove it.”

“Whoa.” She stopped him at the bottom of the steps. “Ryan.”

“It’s true. I’m tired. I work for Tom, which is decent money, but I don’t make much at the theatre. I’d quit or donate my time, but I have to take what I can get,” he said. “I’ve got debts my sister ran up, and I’m the only one to pay them back.”

“Okay.” She held his hand. Her skin sizzled, and when she looked into his eyes, she didn’t want to stop. “You’re done for the night, and we’re having coffee. Do you like Lorenzo’s? I’ll put in a to-go order.”

“I haven’t fed her, and I should make her take a bath, but you’re persuasive.” He held onto her wrist and massaged her bare skin. “I’m sorry. I get into these blue moods and sometimes it’s hard to get out of them.”

“I know.” She remembered his sensitive side and how he’d struggled in high school with depression. She’d fallen in love with him back then because of his ability to empathize with people. Did she still love him? Yes.

“Anyway, let’s get that coffee and order something to eat. I expect to help with the bill.” He smiled, although the sparkle didn’t quite light in his eyes. “I owe you big time.”

“I’m being a friend. That’s what friends do.” She’d like to be more than friends, but it wasn’t the time to admit such things. “Are you seeing someone?”

“No. Don’t have time.” He ascended the stairs with her. “I’d love to find someone to be a partner and help me.”

“To love you?”

“Let’s not get silly.” He snorted and held the door at the top of the stairs. “I know better than to try to find love. It’s not practical.”

“You’re selling yourself short.” She nudged him into the apartment. As he walked ahead of her, she admired the shape of his ass. She wondered what he’d be like as he aged a few times over the years. Now she knew, and she liked what she saw. “We should place the order and talk while it’s being delivered. What would Maisie like?”

“She’d love a hamburger. I don’t order out hardly at all, and she loves hamburgers.” Ryan hesitated in the doorway. “I’d love to remove my boots, but I can’t guarantee it won’t be...”

“Stinky?” She shrugged. “Keep them on. I don’t mind.” She slid her phone from her pocket. “Maisie? I’m ordering food from Lorenzo’s. Your dad said you’d like a hamburger. Yes? No?”

“Yes, with fries!” She danced around the living room. “Thank you.”

“And you?” She strode past him and headed into the kitchen. “I’m going to start the coffee. Want to see the menu?”

“You’re too good to be true.” He stood beside her at the counter. “I’ll have a hamburger, too.”

“No onions.” She held up her hand. “I do remember that.” She tapped through the site on her phone, placing the order and paying before she started the coffee. “Done. And I’m human. Nothing special but let me get the remote for Maisey.” She left him in the kitchen for a moment, then returned. “She picked Dance Girls.”

“She loves that show.” Ryan crossed his ankles and rested his hands on the counter. “Could watch it all day, if I’d let her.”

She’d never seen the show, but she trusted Maisey, and if Ryan wasn’t objecting, then it must be fine. She swept her gaze over Ryan and bit back a whimper. He looked so perfect in her kitchen and so sexy. She’d always been a sucker for rugged men, and he fit the bill.

He smiled and said nothing.

Shit. She should make that coffee, not stare at him.

“Want some help?” he asked.

“You need a break.” She grabbed the can of coffee grounds. “I only have the scoop kind, and my coffee pot is ancient.”

“That’s okay. You need a hand, and I’m giving one.” She missed that about her

hometown. In Blakes Creek, everyone helped their fellow citizens. There was a sense of familiarity, too. She hated the frantic movements of the big city. Nothing ever seemed to slow down. Blakes Creek moved at a slower pace. She'd grown tired of the big city energy and now she knew she hadn't missed much but leaving.

Plus, Ryan was still in Blakes Creek. Her heart squeezed. She'd never gotten over him and never forgotten the thrill of being in his arms. His kisses were electric.

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Coffee dripped into the pot and the scent filled the room. Coffee always reminded her of a hug or sweater, full of warmth and smelled like home.

“Hold on.” He walked away for a moment, then returned. “She’s happy as a clam. She loves that show and sometimes steals my phone to watch online.”

“I’ve never seen it.” When the coffee finished brewing, she filled two mugs.

“Will you let me help you, please? I feel like I’m doing nothing.” He sighed. “How much was dinner?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s my treat.” She handed him one of the mugs. “You’re tired, and you’ve shouldered this for a long time alone. I’ve got the means to help.”

He abandoned the cup and grasped her hips. He placed her on the counter. “Are you back from the great big city to whisk me out of my life?”

“I’m here because you need a friend, and I want to help. I’m here because I have extra and I can share, but mostly because I want to do this.” She wrapped her hands around her mug. “I missed you, too.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.” Why not tell him the truth?

“Tracey.”

“What?” She wasn’t a fan of tension, and it was too thick between them. She fiddled with her coffee cup. “I’m being honest. I never forgot you.”

“I’m not exciting.”

“You might not think you are, but I do.” She placed her cup on the counter and reached for him. “I don’t expect anything from you or in return for my helping.”

“Tracey.”

She sighed. “I’m pushing too hard, aren’t I?”

“No.” He scrubbed both hands over his face. “I’m not good for you.”

“Why?” She didn’t believe him. “What did you do?”

“It’s not what I did.” He shook his head. “It’s what I’m putting up with.”

She reached for him again and held onto his hands. “This is me. We were friends, and I told you everything. You were the only guy who saw me for me and didn’t just believe that stupid rumor. No one else—not even my own mother—believed I wasn’t sleeping with all of those guys.”

“I remember.” He inched closer and didn’t let go. “But you also told me you needed to get out of this town because it was too suffocating. Too small.”

“At the time I believed that, and I was naïve, but I don’t regret going.” She wanted him closer. “Ryan, I also said I wanted to sing on Broadway. We see how well that turned out. I’ll never be a showstopper, not with this voice.”

“You could’ve. You’re good.”

“I have a tiny range.” She squeezed his hands. “There is nothing you can say that would change my mind.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

She stared into his eyes and swore she saw forever. He was the one she’d been searching for. “Try me.”

He didn’t speak right away. Instead, he stared at her and the silence unnerved her. She clung to the hope he’d tell her his truths because she didn’t like the chasm between them.

“Ryan?” she murmured.

“Here goes nothing. I am legally Maisey’s father. When Jess died, she didn’t leave a will, so it took me a lot of money and maneuvering to get custody. I couldn’t imagine, nor did I want, Maisey to go into the system, so I fought like hell for her.”

“As you should’ve and I applaud you,” she said.

“You’re the only one. Carol thought I was nuts.” He sighed. “Right after we graduated, she told me she was pregnant. Jess was off doing whatever she did, and Maisey wasn’t even a thought yet, but I wanted to do right by Carol, so I married her. Dumbly, I paid for a kid that wasn’t mine. She didn’t tell me Sasha wasn’t mine until she was born, and the guy Carol had been sleeping with showed up to celebrate the birth of his daughter. I insisted on a DNA test, and sure enough, Will Nadler was her father. I would’ve taken care of her and Carol, no matter what, but the lies damn near killed me.”

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“The football captain?” The Will Nadler she remembered had been a jock, big jerk, and bully around campus.

“That’s him. I thought I loved Carol.” The muscle in his jaw twitched. “I got out of the relationship, but never got over the guilt. Sasha is loved, so there is that, but then the situation with Jessica happened. I bailed her out a few times, but then she got busted for selling, and before she went to trial, she overdosed.”

“Ryan.” She had no idea. “I’m sorry.”

“She wasn’t sorry.” He chuckled without mirth. “She couldn’t get out of the grip of her addiction. Her daughter, her family...none of it mattered. Then she overdosed. Maisey had no one but me.”

“Maisey got lucky.”

“Sometimes I wonder. People see her and remember Jess. They look at her like she’s Jess all over again and that’s not fair. The little comments about her being a Greene, and how that means she’ll be a hellion keep cropping up.” Ryan situated himself between her thighs. The worry lines at the corners of his eyes deepened and his shoulders slumped. “I found out how much money my sister owed to credit card companies, and I about shit myself. A hundred thousand dollars’ worth of debt. Then there were the legal bills. I’ll still be paying this stuff when I’m forty.”

Tracey shook her head sadly. “That’s not right.”

“I’m not a bad guy, but there are days when I feel like I’m not doing anything right.

Like I did let everyone down.”

She hugged him and held him tight. “You’re not alone, and you’re not a bad guy. Maisey loves you and I’m here. We’ll figure something out. We will.”

Ryan, all six feet of muscle and bone, melted into her embrace and sighed again. “I hope you’re right.”

He’d given her the truth, so she decided to share a bit herself. “I know I am. I didn’t come back to Blakes Creek to make a mark on the local theatre scene. I came back because I hated the energy and chaos of the city. I never belonged there.”

“And you belong here?” He opened his eyes. “Trace?”

“I do.”

He let go of her hands and cupped her jaw. Her skin sizzled under his palms. Yearning stirred within her, and she licked her lips. She’d waited for this chance for years.

“Daddy?”

Ryan let go and hopped backward. “Maisey.”

Tracey hadn’t heard the little girl come into the kitchen. “Hi.” Oh God. She had to say something to Maisey. “Uh...”

“Are you checking her for ticks, too?” Maisey shook her head. “We didn’t go to the park, Daddy.” She rolled her eyes. “Grown-ups.”

Ticks? There had to be a story here. Tracey checked her phone. “The food is here. I

should run down and pick it up, but I want to know about the ticks.”

Ryan scrubbed both hands over his face. “I’ll tell you—after we eat.”

“Deal.”

Chapter Four

Ticks...why did Maisey have to mention the ticks? Ryan swallowed his embarrassment, but not by much. His daughter knew how to interrupt a moment.

Tracey hopped off the counter and hurried from the room.

Maisey shrugged. “Is it time to eat?”

“Soon. Miss Tracey is getting our dinner.” Ryan knelt in front of his daughter. “I wasn’t checking her for ticks.”

“Good. I don’t like those gross things.” Maisey folded her arms. “I like Miss Tracey. She talks to me.”

“And she has TV, too.” He smoothed the wrinkles in her shirt. “She is a nice lady.”

“You like her.”

“We’re friends.” Tracey was a friend who made it hard to think straight. She fried his brain. Jesus. Between Maisey’s tick comment and seeing Tracey, then the almost kiss...he needed a second to breathe. His heart soared, despite his worry he wouldn’t be enough for Tracey.

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“Here’s dinner.” Tracey returned with two bags in hand. “I only have the breakfast table, but the three of us should fit.”

“Maisey, wash up.” Ryan helped Tracey with the food.

Once Maisey left the room, Tracey grinned. “You know I want to know about the ticks.”

He should’ve guessed she’d remember. “I took Maisey to the park and while playing, she managed to get a tick. It took me ten minutes and tweezers to get it off her neck, but I did get rid of it. I bagged it and took her to the ER to ensure she was okay. The moms at the park saw what happened and the next time we went there, the one lady told me she had something crawling on her and would I help get rid of it? She got right in my face and expected me to look down her cleavage for the wandering whatever. There wasn’t a tick, but she thought it’d be a good way to get my phone number. It didn’t work, and I had to explain to Maisey what happened.”

Tracey frowned. “Why didn’t she just ask for your number or try talking to you?”

“I don’t know, but when she stuffed her chest in my face, she tried to kiss me. When Maisey saw that, I had to explain that, too. Unfortunately, Maisey just remembers the tick.”

“So, every time you get close to someone like you did me...it could be a tick.” She opened the cardboard box. “Oh well.”

“I need to check on her, but yes. Bingo. It’s automatically a tick.”

“Ryan?”

He paused. “Yeah?”

“Would it be wrong if I admitted you could check me for ticks any time?”

“Tracey.” He wanted to say something witty, but nothing came to mind. “Don’t say what you don’t mean.”

Her brow arched. “Who says I don’t?”

“You could have better. Don’t you have a boyfriend?”

“No. I’m single.”

“But—”

“Ryan.”

“I need to check on Maisey, but this conversation isn’t over.” He left the kitchen and caught Maisey leaving the bathroom. “Did you wash your hands?”

“Yes,” Maisey said. “And I didn’t make a mess.”

“You didn’t?” He should look to be sure.

“I didn’t. This isn’t our house, and I should be respectful,” she said, parroting what he’d told her a hundred times.

“Thank you.” He bopped her on the nose. “Go eat.”

He followed her into the kitchen. Tracey had set out the food and a glass of water for Maisey. He admired Tracey's ability to connect with Maisey. She treated her with dignity and like a human being. No, she treated her like they were a family. Tracey had said she liked him. Could she really handle the complications in his life and love him, too?

He ate in silence and pondered his life. He'd done so much for other people, and it was time he did something for himself. He liked Tracey and wanted to keep her around. But he couldn't get ahead of the situation. A few hours were nice, but Tracey might not want to take these sweet times to the next level.

He'd worry about that later. At the moment, he had two girls who liked him and a nice dinner. Why not enjoy it?

After dinner, Maisey helped Tracey clear the table. "May I watch Dance Girls a little while longer?" Maisey asked. "I did my homework."

"For half an hour." He still needed to speak to Tracey. "Then we'll go home."

"Yay." Maisey zipped out of the room again.

Tracey threw the soiled boxes away. "We could do a lot with that half hour."

"We could." He suppressed the happy shiver along his spine. He had to focus and figure out what Tracey wanted from him. "You've been to the city. You've seen the world and must want something bigger than Blakes Creek." He'd wanted to get out, too, but life had other ideas.

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“I did, and I realized I wasn’t missing much.” She sat across from him again. “I like to think I’ve always known what I wanted and haven’t been afraid to go for it.”

“You’re a forthright person, yes.” He loved her free-spirited, fierce determination to go her own path.

“And I want you.”

Good thing he wasn’t drinking coffee when she said those words. He’d have spit the coffee all over. “One day helped you decide that? What if I’m not the man you remember? What if I’m not good enough for you?” God. He had to stop talking her out of this. He wanted her, so why not accept her affection?

“Because I don’t give up easily, and I’m a good judge of character. Plus, a guy who is taking on all the things you are can’t be all that bad. I do know you more than you think, and I see aspects of you that you try to hide.” She reached across the table and held his hand. “Give me a chance. Please?”

“You don’t realize what you’re getting into.” He stared into her eyes and every reason he’d held onto to run melted. “Trace.”

“We’ve got a busy couple of weeks ahead. Let’s give us a chance. You never know, right?”

He was fairly sure he did know. “I want to have that kiss we tried for.” He stood and tugged her to her feet. He needed the connection more than his next breath. When she tipped her head, he feathered his mouth over hers. His pulse increased and sparks shot

through his body. He swore he heard birds or music or something. Maybe it was his brain buzzing from the intensity of the kiss. He craved her and wanted a hundred thousand more of her kisses.

She threaded her arms around his neck and opened to him, deepening the kiss.

Maisey could come back into the room at any time and catch them, yet he didn't care. The naughtiness of the act thrilled him. Plus, he deserved to be happy. He liked the way Tracey felt in his arms and how she wasn't afraid to tell him what she wanted. He wasn't sure how he'd make the relationship work, but fuck. He deserved the chance to be with her.

Tracey whimpered and the sound nearly turned him inside out. He wanted to forget his responsibilities and keep this moment going.

She broke the connection first but remained close. "Whoa."

"Yes." He stroked her hair. "My head is in the clouds, and I don't care."

"Mine, too." She toyed with the hairs at the base of his skull. "She'll walk in on us."

"She will." His daughter had an uncanny ability to interrupt. Besides, it was getting late, and he still had to bathe Maisey before she went to bed. "The half an hour isn't up, but we should get moving."

"I know."

"I want to do this again."

"Yeah?"

“I do.” The gravelly tone of her voice slid over him, and he wished he could stay with her. “I’ll call you?”

“Yes.” She paused. “I hear footsteps.”

He loosened his grasp but didn’t fully release Tracey as Maisey ventured into the kitchen. “No ticks,” Ryan said. “I hugged her.”

“I know, Daddy.” Maisey held onto her backpack. “Can Miss Tracey come over to our apartment next time? I want to show her my dolls and my paintings.” She wriggled into her backpack. “Please?”

Tracey blushed. “I would love to—if I’m truly invited.”

“You would?” He wished he hadn’t blurted that. So much for his confidence. “I mean, would you?” That didn’t sound much better, but she knew he wasn’t great at smooth.

“I would.” She walked down the steps to the rear of the shop. “When you’re at the theatre, you can use my parking spot. My little car fits in the delivery bay, so I don’t need the space in the tenant lot. It’ll make leaving easier on the nights you pick her up. You won’t have to go so far.”

“Thanks.” He hesitated. “Text me?” He had to work on his sophistication.

“You bet.” She stood in the doorway and waved. “See you.”

“See you.” He walked Maisey across the staff lot to his truck. A piece of his heart remained with Tracey. He’d found a gem in her.

“So, can we keep Miss Tracey?” Maisey climbed into the truck. “She likes you,

Daddy.”

“She does? Did she tell you that?” He rounded the hood and settled behind the wheel.

“Home, here we come.”

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“She didn’t say it, but she looked at you the way Miss Peters looked at Mr. Peters before they got married.” Maisey held onto her backpack. “She’s better than Mrs. Simec.”

“I’ve always wondered, why don’t you like her? She’s Erin’s mom, and you like Erin. She’s your friend.” He pulled out of the lot and onto the main drag. Blakes Creek wasn’t busy during rush hour and certainly so late in the evening. The town seemed to roll up the sidewalks at five in the afternoon.

“But, Daddy...she’s Erin’s mom. I want a mom of my own,” Maisey said.

“You have one and your mother loved you very much.” At least she’d done so in the only way she knew how. “She misses you.”

“I want a real mom. One who isn’t dead.” Maisey tucked her knees to her chest. “I want a mom who wants to play with me.”

“I know.” He wanted to be able to play with Maisey, too.

“Erin’s mom just likes money.”

Damn. Maisey had hit the nail on the head with that one. She’d also unintentionally brought up a good point. He’d never be rich, so why did Katie Simec seem determined to chase him? Because he was the most eligible bachelor in Blakes Creek? She could have Derek.

“Did you get the tick off Miss Tracey?” Maisey asked. “Was it in her hair?”

“There wasn’t a tick,” he said. “Just a little bit of dirt.”

“Oh, good. I don’t like ticks.” Maisey shivered. “Miss Tracey is too nice to get a tick.”

“You’re nice yet you managed to have one climb on you. Besides, that’s not how you get a tick.” He should explain the situation to her, but he didn’t want to drag her into his problems just yet. He pulled into the gravel drive next to their apartment building and parked. “You need a bath.”

“I know.” Maisey left the truck. She waited for him to lock the vehicle and unlock the front door. “I did my homework.”

“Good girl.” He retrieved the mail. “Change and I’ll run the water.”

“I know, Daddy.”

Yet, every night she tried to get out of bath time. If he forgot, she conveniently forgot to remind him. He checked the pile of bills and opted to deal with them later. After he started the water and added the suds, he withdrew his phone from his pocket and texted Tracey.

You’re a hit. She’s smitten.

Within seconds, Tracey replied.

Ah, but are you?

Completely. He turned off the water, then replied.

I am, but you’re also hard to resist.

He put the phone on the sink while he bathed Maisy. Once he washed her hair, rinsed and dried her off, she dressed in her pajamas, then brushed her teeth. She picked out a story and, for the first time in two weeks, he read to her before she went to sleep.

“Daddy? Does true love exist? The princess wanted to be loved, but what if the prince didn’t show up on time? What if he was late? What if he had to go to the bathroom? Would she still be rescued?”

She really had gone for the deep thoughts tonight. “Things happen for a reason. If that’s her prince, then he’ll find her.”

“Okay.” Maisy settled under the covers. “I hope you find your princess, Daddy.”

“I have you. I don’t need a princess.” He kissed her forehead. “Night, kid.”

“Night Daddy.” She held onto her pink teddy bear. “I think Miss Tracey needs us. She’s lonely.”

“Maybe.” He switched on the nightlight and left her door open a crack. She’d wear him to a frazzle with her matchmaking. He’d just told Katie Simec he wasn’t looking for a date, yet he couldn’t get Tracey out of his mind and his daughter seemed to want him and Tracey together.

He picked up his phone and typed a message to Tracey.

We had fun tonight.

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He doubted she'd reply right away. She probably had things to do, and he didn't mind. He still hadn't wrapped his head around the events of the week. In the space of four days, Tracey had become an integral part of his life.

He stared at his phone. All the things he wanted to say over the years poured out of him.

When you left town, I missed you, but I was also jealous. You got out. I wanted to and that wasn't possible. I wanted to go with you and there wasn't room. But I never hated you. You were the reason I came to school, the reason I went to play practice and the one bright spot in my life until Maisey. I missed our friendship, and I'm happy you're back. Thrilled. I missed my chance to tell you how I felt back then, but I won't miss it now.

He hit send before he could change his mind. He'd always been better at expressing himself in written form versus speaking. His shyness tended to get in the way and mess up his thoughts before he could verbalize them.

His phone vibrated with an incoming call.

Tracey.

His heart raced. He couldn't ignore her. "Hi."

"Hi."

His hands trembled. "Did you get my text?" Why did he feel like he was sixteen

again and clumsy? Because he'd never lost his concern or fear of embarrassing himself.

"I did."

He wanted to say 'and' but didn't. Instead, he held his breath.

"Ryan?"

Shit. He should answer her. He exhaled. "I'm here."

"Ryan, that was the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me or said in a text," she replied. "I never hated you, either. In fact, if you hadn't been dating Carol, I would've asked you out. I wanted to ask you to the prom."

"You did?" he blurted. He never knew that—but then again, she hadn't said anything before. He settled on the couch and kicked out of his boots.

"Uh-huh. I had it all planned out when I heard you and Carol were through." She laughed, the sound so soft, he almost missed it. Her voice caught. "But you didn't split, so I never bothered."

"You went to prom, though." He remembered seeing her there. "I almost asked you to dance."

"Carol told me, if I even spoke to you, she'd kick my ass."

He should've guessed. "I'm sorry." He'd liked to have danced with her. It would've made prom much more memorable.

"Honestly, I'm not. I needed to leave town to realize my dream, but I also needed that

time to realize what I wanted. I was a kid and lost back then, but I'm not now."

He paused to work through what she'd said. "What do you want?"

"I want you."

His breath caught. "Tracey?"

"I want to be with you, to date you and try to have a relationship. I want the second chance at the first time for us," she said. "Maybe it's too bold for me to say that or too fast, but I'm tired of the city, tired of the unknown, and I want the man I've crushed on all this time. You."

"Trace." He wanted to go to her place and make love to her, but he had to be a dad first.

"Do you still want me? I'm not perfect. I'm too pushy and forthright for my own good. I might not even be good mother material. I can't give you kids—if that's what you want."

"You'll be a great mother." Maisey already loved him. "Having kids doesn't make you a mother."

"Someday."

He hadn't forgotten what she'd said about not being able to have children. He didn't care. Having her was enough. "Do you want to be a mother? Would you be willing to be Maisey's mother? That's important to me, and if you have doubts, then tell me now," he said. "I'll respect you more for your honesty, if you don't think you can do this and have doubts. Being a parent isn't easy and takes a lot of time. I need someone who wants to be my partner in love and parenting." Unfortunately, the

caveat was too big to ignore, even if he was moving too fast, too. “Everyone in town will know you’re with me and will talk about your past. They’ll rake us over the coals.” He’d been through it a hundred times already.

“I remember.”

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“I won’t fault you if you tell me this isn’t for you.”

“I won’t.”

“Tracey.” He wanted to believe she could be his and would love him forever, but he’d been burned before.

“I know what I’m doing and what I’m getting into. I want you, and I don’t care what people say. They’ve made stuff up about me before and I survived it.” She chuckled. “If it weren’t for you back in high school, I might have crumbled when those rumors started.”

He remembered. She’d been accused of sleeping around with anyone who offered. She hadn’t done anything of the sort, but everyone in school believed the rumors.

“I’m stronger than I was, and I’m determined to move on. I’d like to do that with you, and I’ll happily accept Maisey because I’m fond of her. No kidding.”

He’d never been able to turn her down before and the need for her hadn’t waned. “Will you be my girl?” No going back now. “Tracey?”

“I’d love to. You’ve gotten sexier with age.”

God damn, she turned him on. “May I visit you tomorrow?”

“You may,” she said. “Go to sleep, then it’ll be tomorrow faster. I can’t wait to see you again.”

He'd almost said 'I love you,' but it was way too soon. He'd loved her since they were teenagers and still cared for her more than almost anyone, but he couldn't say the words out loud yet. "Good night, beautiful lady."

"Good night, handsome." She hung up and left him to his thoughts. He couldn't wipe the grin from his face—not that he wanted to. This moment in his life mattered. He had a chance with the woman of his dreams. Now he could act on his desires for her.

Chapter Five

Friday, Tracey devoted her morning to the store. Having Eileen there gave her the freedom to dye a bolt of silk, but also get some beading done. Her thoughts never trailed far from Ryan. She longed to be in his arms again and surrounded by the calming scent of his cologne. The intensity in his eyes gave her happy shivers. She wanted to explore every inch of his body and all those tattoos on his arm—when they could be alone.

She hadn't realized how much of an intrusion Maisey could be—not that she minded. But he hadn't been kidding about how much time the parent gig took. So much time and energy. No wonder Ryan looked frazzled.

She finished beading the last bracelet and stood, then stretched. The steady flow of customers helped brighten her mood. She liked seeing the people at the shop and wearing her designs around town. It made her feel like she belonged in Blakes Creek.

The bell on the front door dinged, but she didn't look up until she placed the tray of loose beads in the drawer.

"Excuse me? I'd like to see the owner."

She met Ryan's gaze. "You've found her. How may I help you?"

“It so happens I want to get a present for my girlfriend, and I hear you’ve got some nice stuff as well as good taste,” he said. “Would you mind helping me?”

“I’d like that. What did you have in mind?” She rounded the desk. She hadn’t expected to see him until the dress rehearsal that night.

“First, I want a very special gift for my little girl. She’s in the recital tomorrow night and deserves a reward.” He pointed to one of the bracelets. “Like that one.”

Maisey had been eyeballing those pieces the last time she’d come into the store. “She’d like the purple one. It’s her favorite color.”

“It is, so I’ll take it.” He touched her elbow. “But my girlfriend deserves something fancy, yet unique and special.”

That could mean a lot of things. “Well...”

Before she could say anything else, he tugged her hand and led her to the rear of the store. “I asked Eileen to keep an eye on things while we had lunch. I’ve only got forty-five minutes,” he said and kept going until they were in the stairwell.

“You ordered food?” He continued to surprise her.

“Not exactly.” His eyes flashed. “I want you.”

She bit back the second of embarrassment. Geez. He’d brought her back here to have alone time, but she’d misinterpreted it. “Come on.” She led him up to her apartment. If they were going to do this, then they’d do it right—at least more right than fucking in the stairwell.

She tugged him to the privacy of her home, but once inside, he took over. He pinned

her between his body and the closed door as he kissed her. She whimpered at the force of the collision and the decadence of the act. She loved having sex and refused to miss this moment. She'd longed to make love to him when they were younger. Now, they could enjoy themselves. She fumbled with his jeans and unzipped him. In seconds, she'd withdrawn his cock and balls. She stroked him, craving the feel of his hot shaft in her hand. She'd fallen for him, and no other man would do.

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“Yes.” He groaned. “Oh God.” He grasped the sides of her skirt and hiked it over her hips, exposing her lower body. He kissed along her neck and kept her skirt around her waist. At the same time, he palmed her breast through the fabric of her blouse.

Heat engulfed her, and she writhed beneath his touch. She’d never done anything so risqué in her life and she loved it. He freed her and made her want everything with him.

“I need to be inside you,” he said between kisses. “Want you.”

“Take me.” She held on, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. She hooked her leg about his waist.

He shoved her panties aside. “Christ. So wet for me. Want me?”

“Yes.” She kissed him hard. “I crave you.”

“Mine.” He nudged the blunt head of his cock against her labia. His breath warmed her skin and passion burned in his eyes. He nibbled her bottom lip as he pushed into her.

The second he slid to the hilt into her body, she cried out. He’d stretched her and the burn encouraged her to lower her inhibitions. She loved the freedom in his arms. He fit her perfectly.

Ryan grasped her hips. “Fuck.”

Her skirt bunched and got in the way. Ryan grasped the fabric and tore it until the garment fell away from her body.

Chilly air rushed over her soaked pussy. She whimpered again. He held her and she bucked against him as best she could, meeting his thrust for thrust. Her nerve endings buzzed. Her thoughts blurred and the world centered on him. He made her feel loved and sexy as she stared into his eyes.

He said nothing, but she knew how he felt, too. She could read the love in his eyes and the desire in each thrust. A shiver ran the length of her spine. She groaned and undulated beneath him. The orgasm built within her, and she panted. The coil in her belly tightened. She needed release and this moment.

“Ryan.” She clawed at his shoulders. “Oh God.” She couldn’t hold on for much longer. Her restraint frayed with each push. She lost herself in the exquisite delight of making love to him.

He sucked on her neck and his thrusts turned feral. He groaned, the sound vibrating against her skin.

The coil in her snapped as the orgasm washed over her. She tensed, then slumped in his arms. The world seemed to slow to one-quarter time. Her head swam.

“Tracey.” He slammed into her once more and held her tight to the wall. “Fuck.”

He’d said it. She held onto him, thankful she could. She doubted her knees would hold her up right then.

He panted, his breath tickling against her neck. He continued to hold her, but he met her gaze. “God, you’re beautiful when you come.” He placed her on her feet and pulled out.

Tracey wobbled to the couch. “Wow.” She wanted to say something more eloquent, but the words wouldn’t come.

“Yes.” He tucked himself behind his zipper and fastened his jeans, then knelt in front of her. “You’re better than my fantasies.”

“I hope so.” She righted her underwear. “You tore my skirt.” It wasn’t her favorite and not a loss, but still.

“I owe you.” He parted her legs and settled between her knees. He palmed her thighs. “I’m not the kind of guy who welcomes people into my life easily. I have to think about my little girl.”

“You do.” She expected nothing less from him, even if this wasn’t the line of conversation she thought they’d share after sex.

“I’m careful about whom I share my bed with and you’re different. You’re damn special to me and to Maisie,” he said. “Not everyone makes the cut. Hell, I don’t sleep with my dates until at least the third—most of which don’t get that far. But you make me throw out my rules and want to blast ahead.”

“You fry my brain, too.” She hesitated. “I’ll always tell you what I want—no sugarcoating or lying. I know this is hard for you, because you’ve got to open up and accept me. I want to be your partner and to be with you. I know it’ll take time, and I don’t expect this to go fast, even if I’m ready to barrel forward, too.”

“I know.” He curled his fingers under her chin. Passion and something deeper sparkled in his eyes. “I want everyone to know we’re together and that you’re mine. That said, this won’t be easy.”

“I don’t need easy.” She could handle the tough as well as smooth parts of a

relationship.

“I mean there will be bumps, but if you’re willing to go with me, then I’ll do my best to make you happy.”

She trailed her fingers down his cheek. “I never doubted you.”

“Come to the recital.”

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“I’d planned on being there. I want to photograph the girls and my work in action.” She went to every event she’d created costumes for and photographed the garments.

“With me.” The low tone of his voice rolled over her and reignited her desire.

“I’d love to.” She couldn’t imagine accompanying anyone else. “I’ll be there later to watch the dual dress rehearsals tonight, too. Are you going to get a break? Or do you have to answer to Derek?”

“I should be free, but I’ll be with Keelan doing the last-minute light checks. We sit together and note anything that doesn’t look right or that’s wonky. You’re welcome to join us in the audience.” He kissed her. “I should go. I only had forty-five minutes.”

“You didn’t eat.” She stood when he did. “You’ll get light-headed. Let me make you a PB&J.”

“Nah. I packed something to eat, and I’ll have it on the way back to the site. Tom won’t mind that I’m late, because I don’t ask for time off very often, and I usually work late. Besides, once he finds out I’ve got a girlfriend, he’ll encourage me to do things like this—not that he’ll know, but he’ll encourage it.”

“I’m touched.” She also should put on some pants. She didn’t mind walking around in her underwear, but she couldn’t work downstairs without appropriate garments.

“Let me get dressed and I’ll walk you down to the shop.”

“I do want to get that bracelet for Maisey, too. Let me know what I owe you.” He

adjusted his jeans.

She ducked into the bedroom and slid her boots off. She changed into a fresh pair of panties, jeans and her sneakers. When she re-emerged in the living room, Ryan hooked his fingers in his belt loops.

“What?” she asked. “What’s wrong? You look concerned.”

“Not at all. I was trying to figure out how to make this happen more often.” He wriggled his eyebrows. “I was also thinking about something Maisy said last night. She told me she wanted you to be with me and asked if you would be her mother. She’s got her heart set on you.”

That was quick. “Do you?”

“Yes.” He crossed the room and enfolded her in his arms. “I wish I could give you everything you want.”

“Who says you can’t?” she asked. “What do you think I want or need that you can’t provide? Love? Respect? Partnership?”

“A nice house. A big car...” He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never had anything happen this fast and work out. You’ve seen my life. I get the bumps, bruises and nicks.”

“I know.” She slid her hand over his chest and his pulse fluttered under her palm. “I’m happy here at the shop and in my apartment. I don’t need a nice house or another car. But I have to be honest. Ryan, I can’t have kids.” She couldn’t withhold this any longer. “I made a choice in New York and the outcome wasn’t what I wanted. None of it happened like I wanted, but that’s life.”

He cupped her jaw. “I don’t need more kids. I just need Maisie and you. Do you trust me enough to tell me what happened?”

She might as well. She trusted him with her heart and her body. The truth was just words. “His name was Braxton. We dated for a year and had been sleeping together. We weren’t careful and I got pregnant. I wanted to keep the baby, but he didn’t.” Her voice cracked and she fought past the tears forming. In the ten years since the incident, the pain hadn’t receded. “I went to the clinic, because I had bleeding and found out it was an ectopic pregnancy. My doctor told me we had to end the pregnancy because I’d never be able to carry to term without endangering my own life. I had to have a procedure, but there were complications. I ended up having a hysterectomy because of those complications.” Her stomach roiled as she thought about the botched procedure. “I told Braxton before I had the surgery, but I didn’t hear from him until afterward when he said I had the whole nightmarish situation coming to me.”

“He was wrong.” He held her. “Sweetheart, you didn’t deserve that at all.”

She trembled. No one outside of her best friend, Chris, knew about her past and Braxton. “I don’t share these details with everyone.” She barely wanted to handle them as memories.

“I’m honored you trusted me enough to tell me.” He wiped tears from her cheeks and rubbed her back. “You were brave and strong. You are a hero to Maisie and one of my best friends. You’re my hero, too. I care about you, and I will do my best to make you happy.”

“You said you’re nicked. Do my worn edges and cracks bother you?” She hated to cry and show weakness, but she couldn’t contain herself.

“They make you more beautiful.” He brushed his nose along hers. “I’m honored to be

your man.”

“Thank you.” She stayed in his arms another minute, then gathered herself. “You should get back to work before you get into trouble for being late.”

“Nah. Tom’s a good guy. Like I said, he’ll understand.” Ryan kissed her again. “See you tonight?”

“You will.” She walked with him out of the apartment and down to the shop. “I’ll be there.”

He paused. “I’m falling for you.”

“Good. I’m falling for you, too.” She slid her hands along his chest as he pulled away. She watched him leave and her heart skipped a beat. Love was possible with Ryan. It certainly already lived in her heart.

She locked the side door to the alley and ascended the stairs long enough to lock her apartment door before returning to the shop. When she returned to the counter, Eileen stood at the register, ringing up a customer.

Tracey withdrew the purple bracelet from the case and boxed the jewelry in a special gift box with a bow.

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Once the customer left, Eileen turned to Tracey. “I got news on Jim for you. I forgot to mention it earlier, but he’s getting better every day. The meds are working, and he’s eager to get back to work.”

“That’s wonderful.” She tucked the gift box into a paper bag. “I hoped things would start working out for him.”

“I’m thrilled, too.” Eileen elbowed Tracey. “What about you? Ryan Greene is a handsome man. Did he bring you something tasty for lunch?”

“He did.” She fiddled with the bag. The tips of her ears burned, and she swore her cheeks did, too. Giddiness filled her heart. “He’s a nice man.”

“And handsome.”

“Very handsome.”

“Is his arm tattooed all the way up?”

She hadn’t checked. “I’m not sure.”

“Kathy Tucker and I have a bet it does, and that he’s pierced somewhere, too.”

“Eileen!” A bet? He hadn’t been kidding about being the object of conversation and rumor.

“What? I don’t know any men who have something besides their ear pierced, and he

looks like he would...you know, have a piercing.” Eileen arranged the display of earrings. “I bet he does, and his ink goes all the way up his arm.”

“When I find out, I’ll discretely let you know.” Eileen was the mother she wished she’d had growing up—a little feisty, involved, sweet but also nosy. She loved Eileen dearly.

“Anyway, I hear you’re dating. I hope so. He needs a good girl, and you need a family,” Eileen said. “Maisey needs a mother, too.”

“She has one.” She tucked the bag into her shoulder bag. “I’m taking that to Ryan to give to Maisey tomorrow after the recital.”

“That’s wonderful, but I didn’t know she was dancing. He has time to let her take part? He has so many responsibilities,” Eileen said. “He’s got a lot going.”

“I helped him and sponsored Maisey. I made sure, with his approval, that she got warm-ups, can take part in the classes, and I paid for her to be in the recital. She’ll be in the troupe for the remainder of the year.” She leaned on the counter. “I hoped she’d be happy with the lessons, and she is.”

“Good.” Eileen wiped down the other part of the counter. “We’ve had brisk sales. Lunch time was good for us—all of us.” She swept her gaze over Tracey. “What happened to your skirt?”

“I spilled ketchup on it.” She’d lied, but who was keeping score?

“Ketchup?” Eileen crooked her eyebrow. “Want to tell me the truth? You’re not clumsy, and I’ve never seen you spill.”

“It happens.” The blush and heat crept from her hairline to her chest. Her cheeks

burned, and she couldn't look Eileen in the eye.

"Ah. I thought so." Eileen pinched Tracey's arm in a motherly gesture. "Good. I hoped that was what you were doing."

"Eileen." She didn't want to think she'd been figured out.

"What? I've got three sons. You don't honestly think they were created on account of immaculate conception, do you? Jim and I were young and the fire in the oven never died." Eileen grinned. "If he stokes your embers, then go for it."

"Thanks." She checked her watch. She needed something to do with her hands. "I should head over to the theatre to meet with Donnah. The girls will have one last rehearsal tonight, and the musical has a run-through as well."

"Then go. I'll close up at five and stop by afterward to tell you I'm leaving," Eileen said. "I hope it all goes well, even if it's been terribly scheduled."

"Thanks. Wish me luck." This wasn't her opening night, but she felt a sense of ownership. She wanted the costumes to be correct and for the players to shine.

"Luck," Eileen called.

Tracey grabbed her bag, phone and keys, then jogged across the alley to the theatre. When she walked onto the stage, she spotted Donnah, who paced the length of the boards.

"Is everything okay?" she asked. Now that she'd taken the next step and slept with Ryan, she relaxed. "Can I help?"

"I'm just going over the routines." Donna joined her at the edge of the stage. "Keelan

is coming in early to go over the cues with us, and Ryan should be here when Maisiey gets out of school. We need all the help we can get, so if you want to run through the cues with us, then thanks.”

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“Sure.” She’d seen the practices and the girls looked good. “It’s all last-minute stuff? It should be almost ready.”

“It is, but this was supposed to be held a week before the musical, not opening on the same weekend. It’s too much,” Donnah said. She shook her head and rested her hands on her hips. “Our backdrop has to be taken down practically the moment the show ends.”

“Who did the scheduling?” She should pay more attention.

“Derek. The theatre board has been having issues, and he volunteered to schedule the events for the summer. He’s unqualified, but the board is in shambles.” She pointed to Tracey. “Why don’t you get the board back together and into shape?”

“I don’t know the first thing about running a theatre board.” She could learn, though. “But...I could be convinced after this weekend.”

Keelan ambled onto the stage. “Honestly, anyone would be better at running the board and scheduling than Derek. I’ll nominate you, if you want to run it.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Tracey nodded to Keelan. “I’ll help you tonight—as long as you don’t push me to helm the board.”

“Deal,” he said. “Donnah, I’ll be at the light board. Let me know when you’re ready. I’ve got the program, so just use the song titles, and I’ll know what to do.”

“Thanks,” Donnah said. “We will get through this.”

Tracey followed Keelan out to the audience to the sound board. “Who used to be on the board?”

“Donnah, me, Craig Needles, Jerusha Osborne, Derek and Ryan. Craig, Jerusha and Derek sort of took it over and pushed us out. Derek overran them, so he’s in charge alone.” Keelan settled at the board. “Here are my notes. Really, the recital is in good shape. The big changes will be who to spotlight, but I’ll know that when the girls get here. Ryan will be running the lights for this one.”

He should be watching Maisey with the other parents. “Why doesn’t Derek get help doing anything? He’s not knowledgeable. The theatre is a family. We all work together.”

“You know that, I know that, and so do most of the people in the various casts, but not him,” Keelan said.

The theatre, like Blakes Creek, was a family. Everyone might know what everyone else was doing, but they kept an eye on each other because of the mutual affection. There could be sneakiness and rumors, but the ultimate goal was to do whatever was best for the group at large.

When she looked up from her program, she spotted a woman at the bottom of stage and gesturing to Donnah and one of the girls.

“Who is that?” Tracey murmured. The woman looked familiar, but from behind, she could be anyone.

“That is Mrs. Katie Simec.” Keelan snorted. “She believes she knows just as much about dance as Donnah. She doesn’t, but you can’t convince her otherwise.”

“Wait. She’s the Mrs. Simec? She’s Erin’s mother.” She had no idea.

“Right. She’s also one of Ryan’s ex-girlfriends.” Keelan stared at her. “Yeah. I can’t tell you how serious it ever got, but she still comes around. He’s not enamored with her, but she hasn’t figured that out.”

“Oh.” She tensed. From behind, Katie Simec appeared to be a pretty woman. Pushy, but pretty.

“You should remember her. We went to school together,” Keelan said. “Katie Scott. She married Daniel Simec.”

“The lawyer?” she asked a bit too loud then lowered her voice. “He was my father’s age.”

“Correct.”

“I guess, if she loves him.” She paused. “When did they split? If she dated Ryan, then her marriage to him must’ve gone kerflooey.”

“Nope. He died. Heart attack.” Keelan twirled his pencil. “About four years ago. She got his money and property—including the house Ryan rents. He started living there before he knew her old man owned it, though.”

Tracey’s eyes widened. “Then she’s the Mrs. Simec that Maisie doesn’t like.”

“She’s pushy and likes to flash her money. That’s what she’s up there arguing with Donnah about. She thinks she should be in charge,” Keelan said. “And Erin should be at the front.”

Katie hopped onto the stage and pointed to the lights. She did a sort of soft-shoe dance before she stopped in the middle of the stage.

Seeing her in the spotlight jogged Tracey's memory. She remembered Katie Scott. Katie had the best voice in her graduating class and always got the lead in the musicals. She'd said she'd be famous and a recording star. She'd wanted to sing, but it appeared she'd never left Blakes Creek. "Did she ever make it big?"

Keelan shook his head. "Nope. She married Daniel pretty much right out of high school. I think she was pregnant with Paige already by then. Nora was born second, then Erin. Katie went from being a big shot at school to bursting with money, then became a widow and everyone catered to her. Ryan didn't, but I think he dated her because he was bored."

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Not a good way to run a relationship.

“His history is the least of your problems.” Keelan sank in his seat. “She’s coming over, and she knows about you and Ryan. Prepare to have your ass handed to you. She still thinks she’s got ownership. He rents his apartment from her, and she doesn’t let go easily.”

She braced herself for the barrage. Ryan meant too much to give up, and she didn’t want to without a fight.

Chapter Six

Ryan dropped Maisie off in the rehearsal room, and he couldn’t stop smiling. Things were starting to go his way. Yes, things with Tracey were moving fast, but he didn’t mind. He had a great girl in his heart and could see a future with her. Plus, meeting her at lunchtime lifted his spirits. Being with her was just as hot as he’d expected. She made him hard, sure, but also want to let down every last one of the barriers around his heart. He’d always said the pieces of his life fell into place in their own time, and he was just along for the ride.

He left Maisie with the other girls and headed out to the main portion of the theatre. He spotted Keelan at the sound board. Tracey sat with him, seemingly engrossed in conversation.

At one time, he would’ve been jealous of Keelan. He loved Keelan like a brother, but he was the better looking of the two men, and the guy women tended to gravitate toward. But he knew Tracey. He had her heart, so while she might be chatting with

Keelan, she was coming home with Ryan.

“Hey.” Katie stepped into his path. “We need to talk.”

“We do? I’m needed at the lights and sound board. I have a job to do.” He didn’t want to talk to her anyway.

“Oh, you have time for this.” She folded her arms. “Do you need to tell me something?”

“No.” He didn’t owe her anything.

“You’re seeing someone. It’s going all around town,” she said. “I look foolish.”

“You do?” he asked, echoing his earlier question. “Why?”

“You and I are supposed to be together. Everyone knows it. I thought we’d work this out.” She glared at him. “I have the keys to your apartment. Do you really think your rent stayed so low because I’m a nice person?”

He hadn’t thought about it.

“I kept it low because I knew you needed help. I’ve been here all along, so when are you going to see that I’m right here? I have been since high school.” Katie grasped his shoulders. “I care about you.”

Care...since high school...he didn’t believe her. Then again, he hadn’t believed he deserved love until Tracey came back into his life. Now he knew he’d have love, but not with Katie. “Do you love me?”

“What?” She let go of him. “Ryan?”

“Do you love me? Charity is great and help is wonderful, but you said you wanted financial security. You wanted a man who will keep you in the life you want to have and that’s not me,” he said. “Even in high school, you bragged you would be living the rich life.”

“You could’ve applied yourself more. You still can, but you don’t work hard enough,” she said. “You don’t try all that hard, either.”

Wow. What a way to cut down his masculinity. She had no idea how hard he worked to keep things together or what odds he worked against.

“Seriously, you could own Tom’s service if you wanted to and applied yourself.” Katie narrowed her eyes. “So, Tracey Baker, huh? You do know she’s seeing Keelan, too, right? She’s been over there since I got here and kissed him. Everyone saw.”

He’d bet. “I know.”

“You do?” Her eyes widened. “Ryan, are you going to let her do that to you? I never cheated on you.”

“No, you didn’t, but you’ve just managed to cut me to ribbons over my perceived slights,” he said. “You never had the chance to cheat on me because we weren’t together that long. A month doesn’t give anyone much time to cheat. You told me you didn’t want serious, and I accepted that. When you decided you wanted serious, it was too late. I’m sorry.”

Katie wasn’t deterred. “She’ll cheat on you like she cheated on Derek in high school.”

“She won’t.” He knew Tracey.

Katie splayed her hands on his chest. He expected her to shove him and braced for the assault. Instead, she grabbed his shirt and pulled him close.

“Bet she won’t like this.” Then she kissed him, right there in front of everyone.

He could’ve fallen over. He nudged her away and glared. “Why did you do that? I didn’t want that.”

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“I wanted to give you a fighting chance. You should be able to decide between us. I think you know who you want,” she said. “But it’s up to you.”

“Katie,” he began.

“Just think about it.” She smiled. “By the way, she looks like she’s ready to spit nails.”

“Stop. I’m with Tracey. The rumors are true, and she’s my girl, okay? You and I will never be anything.” He side-stepped her and braced himself for the discussion with Tracey. He had to fix this.

Tracey strode up to him but didn’t stop.

“I know... We have to talk.” He whipped around to follow her, but spotted Maisey in the aisle. Fuck. “Maisey.”

Tracey scooped Maisey into her arms. “It’s okay.” She carried Maisey up the aisle to the back of the theatre and away from the growing crowd.

The best he could do was keep up with them. He’d let so many people down, but never planned on doing it to Maisey or Tracey.

“Daddy, why did you kiss her?” Maisey wiped her tear-stained face. “I don’t want you to pick her. I asked for Tracey. She’s the one I want for my mom.”

“Wait, kid. I didn’t pick Mrs. Simec,” he said. “I know you don’t understand, but I

didn't pick her."

Maisey continued to cry.

Tracey placed Maisey on her feet and knelt in front of her. "Listen to me." She held Maisey's hands. "Sometimes adults do strange things, and they don't behave the way they should because they're scared. Your daddy loves you very much, and he wouldn't pick a new mom for you without your input. I know that. You are the most important person in his life."

Maisey continued to sob and held tight to Tracey's fingers, but she said nothing.

He had to say something and fix the problems. Christ. He hated to see Maisey upset. "Adults do things sometimes without knowing it'll hurt other people."

Maisey leaned into Tracey but stared at Ryan. "I lost my first mom. I don't want someone to take away Miss Tracey, too."

"No one will take her." Ryan knelt with them. "But I have a question for you." He switched his gaze between Maisey and Tracey. What happened in his life affected Maisey's and she deserved a say—like Tracey said. "I'd like to keep Miss Tracey in our life. Do you want to keep her?"

"Yes." Maisey hugged Tracey tighter. "Please?"

He reached for Tracey's hand. "We've talked about you like you're a thing and not a person. I'm sorry. That said, will you accept both of us?"

"As a package deal?" Tracey asked. She squeezed his fingers. "Yes, I do."

He could hear her say that a thousand times. One day, she'd utter those words when

he married her.

Maisey hugged her tight. “Will you watch my dance?”

“I will.” Tracey hugged Maisey. “I want to see you dance and be happy. You love to dance.”

Maisey hugged Tracey again. “We get to be a family.”

“We do.” His heart overflowed. True, things would get tough—Maisey hadn’t hit the preteen and teen years yet—and it was still new between him and Tracey, but he had what he wanted and needed. Somehow, things would work.

“You’d better join Miss Donnah and practice your dance,” Tracey said. “So you know you’ve got it memorized. I’ll be here with your dad and Keelan watching.”

“And be here tomorrow?” Maisey asked.

“You bet. I wouldn’t miss this,” Tracey said.

“Good.” Maisey wriggled away from her, then hugged Ryan. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“You’re welcome. Now go practice.” He patted her bottom. “You don’t want to be late.”

“I won’t.” Maisey skipped up the aisle and past Mrs. Simec. She stopped on the stage and joined the other girls. Miss Donnah looked out at the crowd, then applauded. The gesture signaled to the girls it was time to practice.

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Ryan stood, then hesitated. He held Tracey's hand again. "I didn't kiss her."

"Oh, I know." Tracey chuckled. "I saw exactly what she did. She didn't want to let go, and I don't even blame her. You're a great guy."

"She'd make my life hell."

Tracey frowned. "Because she believes you chose wrong?"

"In her mind, everything I do is wrong, but this is perfect for us. You've managed to step in, help me, and be the partner I need. I still feel like I'm bumbling along, but it's not so hard or awkward." He kissed her. "I want you."

"I feel for you all over again when I saw you." She squeezed his fingers. "We have time to feel our way along and it'll work." She leaned in close. "But it hasn't been that long, and I want to see where you're tattooed, and if you're pierced."

Her bold statement shocked and thrilled him. "You can explore to your heart's delight. I'm yours."

She swatted his ass. "Then let's get to work so we can play later."

He liked how she thought. Yes, things were happening at warp speed, but when the right pieces appeared, he had to let them fall into place. He cared about Tracey, and she'd proven to be the partner he desired. He could see them being a family and growing old together. Thinking about the future with her warmed his heart. This was the right decision for his family.

He joined Tracey and Keelan at the table and settled in to watch the performance. He knew the light cues, but he wanted to double-check he'd noted them correctly.

"Did you know you and Keelan are having an affair?" Ryan asked. "According to Katie, you are."

"Oh geez." Tracey shook her head. "It starts all over again."

"Ritchie might have something to say about it," Keelan said. "He doesn't like to share."

"He's a lucky guy," Tracey said. She elbowed him. "But so are you."

"Agreed." Ritchie was the reason Ryan knew Tracey and Keelan weren't going to do anything. He'd been jealous of the guys' relationship, but now that he had Tracey, he'd have something just as special.

He sat through the recital. Maisy did better than he expected and picked up the routines. She had to have been watching the other girls for the last four weeks, but to see her do so well among them amazed him.

He noted the moment to douse the spotlight for the last dance and jotted down when to focus on Donnah again.

"Incoming." Keelan groaned. "Get ready for battle."

Katie strode up to the table. "Maisy said she's got a new mom."

"She does." So to speak. There had to be some legal wrangling, and he needed to ask Tracey to marry him, but that'd happen.

“So you’ve made your choice?” Katie asked. She leaned past him and pointed to Tracey. “It won’t last. You’re just the flavor of the month. He’ll change his mind like he does all the time, and you’ll be left behind, so don’t get comfy.”

“I understand.” Tracey smiled. “Thank you for your concern.”

Katie stared at her, and Ryan couldn’t read her expression. Shock? Disgust? He wasn’t sure. “Well.” She notched her chin in the air and walked away.

Keelan snorted. “Wow.”

“What?” Tracey gathered her things. “By the way, I have your gift for Maisey.”

“Thanks.” She amazed Ryan with her ability to be so nonchalant about what had happened. She seemed to take Katie’s intrusion and actions in stride. He stared at Keelan. “Katie went away with little fight. Something’s odd about that.”

“Well, when you get Tracey’s epic response to your attitude, I mean, what else is there to say?” Keelan laughed. “Go, Tracey, go. Maybe we can get the theatre board wrangled free from the stranglehold next and sort out the problems.”

“That would be nice.” Ryan sighed. “Dinner anyone? I’m ready.”

Keelan pointed to him. “Ritchie’s bringing tacos. Why don’t I ask him to pick up enough for the five of us?”

“We can go upstairs to the roof of my building and eat. It’ll be a picnic,” Tracey said. “I’ll bet Maisey would love that.”

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“Sure, thank you.” Ryan held Tracey’s hand. “A picnic sounds wonderful.”

“I’ll get Maisey,” Tracey said. “Be right back.”

He watched her walk away and admired the slight jiggle of her ass. God, he was lucky to have her. Tracey made his motor run and his life better.

“You hit the jackpot,” Keelan said. “Hold tight to her. She’s a keeper.”

“You bet she is.” He’d found the one woman he’d been waiting for all along and the missing piece in his life. Tracey proved love was possible and his family could be complete. With Tracey, he had everything.

SIX MONTHS LATER...

Tracey carried the last box up to the apartment and placed the toys in the living room. She stretched out her back, needing the break. In the last six months, she’d put in triple the hours. Between running the shop, her art, the theatre and helping Ryan with Maisey, she realized just how tired one could be. Yet, she regretted nothing. Maisey flourished at dance and Ryan seemed more relaxed. She kicked out of her sneakers. She’d relaxed, too. Being with Ryan proved she’d made the right decision in coming back to Blakes Creek. The city was nice, but she needed the slower pace of her hometown. Mostly, she needed Ryan.

Once the theatre season ended, she made her case for reorganization of the board. Derek left to become the head of the Georgetown Theatre group in southern Ohio and Katie left to pursue other avenues. With Donnah and Keelan’s help, she and Ryan

managed to get the board back on track and the theatre season sorted out for the next year. They'd even increased the amount of planned performances, while giving the various groups time to perform each weekend. Life had evened out for the best.

Ryan closed the door and reached for her. "That should be the last of the toys. Maisiey doesn't have much when you look at her room, but too much when you have to help move it."

"It's all right." She collapsed on the couch and propped her feet on the coffee table. "I still can't believe Katie rented your apartment out from under you."

"She did say I'd pay." He shrugged. "At least we're all together. This is better anyway."

"I agree, but let's not move again for a while." She didn't want to drag stuff up and down the stairs again. "How long until you have to pick Maisiey up from school? I don't know where I put my watch, and I can't see the clock."

"Two hours. It's the longer day." Ryan strolled across the room to the couch. "Which means we have two hours for other things."

She shivered. She might be sweaty and a little dirty, but she couldn't wait to strip down and get dirtier with him.

He helped her to her feet. "We need a shower."

"We do." She followed him to the bathroom, by way of the bedroom. Once in the master bedroom, she shucked her dirty T-shirt and shorts, then removed her bra, panties and socks.

Ryan turned on the water. He kept his back to her as he wrestled free of his shirt. The

muscles in his back flexed as he moved, and she loved the sight. He unzipped and shoved his jeans, as well as his boxer briefs, down his legs.

“Did I ever tell you I like how you look with ink?” she asked and stepped into the shower. Now that she’d seen every one of his tattoos, she realized she liked him covered in the art.

He kicked his clothes aside. “I used to think the sleeve was too much, but now...you’ve got the ultimate verdict.”

“I love them.” She tugged him into the stall. The way the water sluiced over his body sent shivers through her. He reminded her of a model—all sinewy muscle and sexy perfection. She slid her hands over his chest. “I’m told there was a bet going around as to whether or not you had your nipples pierced.”

“I thought about it, but never made the final decision.” He threaded his arms around her waist. “Should I?”

“I like them either way.” She didn’t care. She stood under the spray with him, and the hot water soothed her tired muscles. “You’ve always been sexy to me.”

He let go of her and soaped the washcloth. “I used to wonder what it’d be like to be with you. I dreamed about you, holding you and feeling you in my arms.”

“I’m right here for you to love. It makes me shivery and hot when you touch me.” She whimpered as he caressed her body with the soapy cloth.

“I love you.” He stopped washing her.

She stared at him. “Ryan?” She must’ve heard him wrong. She knew he cared about her and living together was a huge step, but to say he loved her...damn.

“I do. I love you, Trace. I planned on telling you later tonight—Maisey was going to help—but the words tumbled out now.” He caressed her ass. “I regret nothing, but we’re going to have to act shocked when Maisey gives you the card.”

“I will.” Hell, he’d dumbfounded her. He’d been serious, and she wasn’t sure what to think.

“I know. It’s fast, and even though we’re living together, it doesn’t mean I’d have to fall in love with you, but I did.” He resumed washing her. “You don’t have to reply.”

“Ryan.” She stilled his hands. “We live together, like you said, and Maisey is integral to my life. She’s the most important thing in yours. You can’t say the word love and expect me not to reply.”

“I...”

She placed her finger over his mouth. “I love you, Ryan Greene. More than ever. I’m thrilled to live without you, to share our bed and to see Maisey grow up. Yes, I do love you.”

“Babe?”

“I do.” She pressed him against the wall of the shower and kissed him with every last ounce of her energy. She needed to show him just how much she loved him. She raked her fingers down his chest, and when he opened to her, she sucked on his tongue.

He moaned into the kiss. His cock hardened and she straddled him. She eased one hand between their bodies and wrapped her fingers around his shaft. She’d never get tired of touching him. The feel of his body, hot and muscled under her touch, pleased her.

He broke the connection. “I want to be inside you, but not in here.”

She rinsed off and left the stall. “Catch me.”

“Naughty.” He scrubbed himself while she dried off.

She escaped into the bedroom and stretched out on the bed. Their bed. No more having to sneak in private time. They could have time together whenever they wanted. No more rushing, either. She could hold him all night and wake up to Ryan

beside her in the morning.

Ryan emerged from the bathroom. “Damn.”

“What?” She met his gaze.

“I’m a lucky man.” He crawled on top of her on the bed. “I love you, you love me, and we have forever together.”

“We do.” She embraced him and grasped his ass. He nestled his dick between her legs and kissed her, drawing a groan from her. She arched into his touch, rubbing her breasts on his chest. The move sent sizzles through her body.

Ryan palmed her breast. “Love these.” His eyes sparkled.

She whimpered as he tweaked her nipple. “Do you?”

“Uh-huh.” He eased his cock between her pussy lips. “Wet for me?”

“Always.” She craved him. “Make love to me.”

Instead of answering her, he pushed into her body in one smooth stroke. He moaned. “Fits me like a glove.”

She was made for him. She arched her back and wound her arms around his neck. “More.”

He arranged her legs over his and built into a steady rhythm, in and out. Each thrust pushed her closer to coming apart. Flutters started in her belly. They intensified when he nibbled on her neck.

“Mine,” he said. “All mine.”

She did belong to him. She embraced the desire in her veins and lost herself in the way he touched her body. Every synapse crackled, and she focused on him. Her thoughts blurred with each push. She marveled as the way the way he brought her to climax so fast. One body and mind moving together.

He growled and raked his teeth against her skin. “Tracey.”

She wished she could answer him, but her brain fogged and nothing else mattered except him. She’d found her way home and into his arms. He held her heart and soul.

Another groan rumbled in him. “Tracey.” His thrusts increased in speed and intensity. When he plucked at her clit, she cried out.

“Oh, God.” She tensed and shuddered as the orgasm crashed within her. From her head to her toes, she swore she vibrated.

“Jesus, yes.” Ryan’s thrusts turned uneven and harder. He feathered his mouth over hers. His breath warmed her skin, and he added one more rough thrust before he stilled.

The world seemed to slow and melt around them. She had everything she wanted in his arms. She could stay there forever and be perfectly happy—well, at least until Maisey came home from school.

Ryan slumped on her and groaned. “I should move, but nothing wants to cooperate.” He pulled out, then collapsed beside her on the bed.

“I don’t mind.” She wasn’t sure she could move, either.

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He rolled onto his side and faced her. “Be honest. “Did you ever think this would happen? That we would be here?”

She mirrored his pose and sighed as she tangled up with him. “Honestly, I didn’t, but not because I didn’t want to. I went to the city, honed my skills, enjoyed myself, but something was always missing. I hated the race and the craziness,” she said. “There’s a certain charm to Blakes Creek that you can’t find anywhere else. It’s slower, but sweeter, too.”

“It is.”

“But I never expected to find you. I assumed you’d be married and have three or four kids by now. You’d have the perfect life and maybe we could be friends, but nothing more.” She laced her fingers with his. “Then I saw you, and it was like the pieces I’d been missing all appeared. This—you and Maisie—are what I came back home to find. I don’t think returning sooner would’ve made this go any better or faster. It had to happen when it did, because this was what we needed. We had to go on the journey to get to what we wanted. I can’t imagine being anywhere else, or with anyone else,” she confessed.

“I love you, Tracey Louise Baker. One of these days, I will marry you.” Ryan tugged her tight to his body. “A proper wedding with Maisie as the flower girl.”

She knew he’d propose. He wasn’t just a man of honor, but her perfect match. Marriage was the logical next step. “And I’ll say yes to all three. I love you, Ryan Anthony Greene. You and Maisie are my world.” She snuggled up to him. “Forever.”

“You have my heart,” he murmured. “Forever.”

She tucked into his arms and enjoyed the post-orgasmic glow, the thrill of finding her other half, and the excitement of looking toward the future.

“She’ll want us to have a princess-themed wedding,” Ryan said. He met her gaze. “She thinks you’re the princess I needed and I’m your prince.”

“You are,” she said. “A princess theme is fine. Maybe even at the theatre?” The theatre brought them together and would be the best place to make their pairing permanent. She’d found her heart in Blakes Creek. She needed to go to the city to find her way, but she had come home to find her place. Maisey and Ryan made her family and life complete.

Her fairy tale had come true.