



This Loving Feeling (Mirror Lake)

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Category: Romance

Description: Samantha Rushford's future looks bright: the high school art teacher is getting ready to leave Mirror Lake and move to Boston with her ambitious boyfriend, and she hopes a diamond ring is just around the corner. But her past still has a hold on her—especially the bittersweet memory of her rebellious ex, who kissed her passionately before he left town without a word.

Since then, Lukas Spikonos has parlayed his rebel ways into life as an up-and-coming recording artist. When he shows up for a surprise gig at the high school prom, Sam is more dumbstruck than starstruck—he used the words of a poem she wrote about their breakup to create a number one hit. But Lukas hasn't returned just to impress students; he's facing some real-life responsibilities and needs Sam's help. But she has her own unresolved issues about the life she wants to lead. Will the music—and the pull of true love and family—put their hearts back in harmony?

Total Pages (Source): 92

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CHAPTER 1

Samantha Rushford took one step out of the old gym and headed off the posse of lanky, slightly acne-prone teenage boys at the pass. “You know, Calvin,” she said, speaking to their leader, “if you bring anything into this gym that even remotely resembles an intoxicating substance, I’m going to have to report you, and you’re one of my best students. Being that graduation is just around the corner, I really don’t want to do that.”

Calvin nervously adjusted his tux tie and had the decency to look at least a little guilty as he contemplated his options.

“Listen to her, Cal,” a shorter, stockier boy to his right said. “Her brother’s the police chief.”

Smart boy, Leo. Sam stood straighter and crossed her arms in authoritative teacher fashion.

The tall boy in front gave her a wink. “Aw, c’mon, Ms. Rushford, haven’t you ever been eighteen?”

Oh, Lord, yes. Yes, she had been, and she didn’t want to remember it. “That’s why I’m giving you all a warning instead of blowing the whistle right now.” She turned her gaze back to Calvin. “So, I’m going to pretend I didn’t see that flask you just tucked into your tux jacket as long as you head up over the hill and get rid of it. Deal?”

For an instant, his expression turned defiant. Please, please listen, she pleaded silently. He'd come such a long way from an across-the-tracks kid to a talented artist who'd earned a scholarship to Rhode Island School of Design, one of the most prestigious art programs in the country. "Besides, don't you guys have real dates to keep you out of trouble?"

Calvin flashed a grin. "My date and all the other girls are inside waiting to see if Lukas Spikonos shows up—as if a big recording artist like him would actually come back to a place like Mirror Lake."

Sam placed a hand over her chest. That sudden twinge was probably reflux. Her body rebelling against the slice of pizza with everything that she'd eaten an hour ago. Her heart couldn't possibly have knocked loudly at the sound of that name. Not after all these years.

Lukas Spikonos. Greek god and recording artist who'd been compared at different points to John Mayer, Ed Sheeran, and "The Boss." The wildly popular hometown boy who left their sleepy little tourist town to become the newest breakout singing sensation.

Oh, yes, there had been a special buzz about the gym, fueled by rumors that someone had thought they'd seen a big black tour bus pull off the highway outside of town, but Sam knew better. Lukas Spikonos was through with Mirror Lake for good. Not to mention her. "There's a good chance everyone will be waiting a long time for a celebrity who's too busy to show. You guys will just have to make your dates extra happy to see you—without the happy sauce, right?"

The boy walked up the grassy hill behind the gym and emptied the booze into the bushes. "Better toss the flask, too," she called. She knew the cops would be making the rounds because her brother Tom, who was head of the Mirror Lake PD, wouldn't dare tolerate any shenanigans at the high school prom under his watch.

“Stay out of trouble, right, Cal?” she said as she held the gym door open.

“Right, Ms.Rushford,” he grumbled, holding up his hands in surrender. Once the boys all filed inside, she tugged the big metal door closed. She could only hope she’d shut out the trouble, too.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be so easy on those boys.” Her fellow teacher and best friend, Jess, had suddenly materialized at her elbow. “They’ll think they can get away with anything.”

“They’re good kids,” Sam said. She watched the guitar player in the student band on the stage at one end of the gym lean down and take a request from a pretty teenage girl in a red dress. It was a personal mission to convey to her students, especially the more troublesome ones, that someone cared.

She lowered her voice. “Besides, if it weren’t for my brother finding our stash of booze in my trunk on our prom night junior year we’d have gotten in even worse trouble.” Her oldest brother Brad, a successful restaurateur, had made them pour it out one bottle at a time while he stood and watched. Then she’d had to clean the restaurant toilets for the next month.

Jess shook her head. “We did push limits sometimes,” she said. “Some of which I regret.”

“We were teenagers. That’s what teenagers do. Although I am sorry about theBite Metattoo on my right butt cheek.” Which would be there forever. Sam had done a lot of limit pushing to irritate her controlling oldest brother who’d helped raise her after her parents had died, but it had been more to exert her independence than to rebel outright.

She’d also had the worst high school experience ever after being bullied senior year.

It was at that time, when she was angry and abandoned by nearly all her friends except for Jess, that she could have gone down a much darker path. Ironically, it was her attraction to a bad boy that had turned her around and saved her. That bad boy had been Lukas Spikonos.

There went that spasm in her chest again. An image appeared in her mind of a young Lukas staring at her, his face illuminated by the blue glow of dashboard lights, looking for all the world like he wanted her more than breathing or eating or living.

Which ultimately turned out not to be the case. There was too much water under the Lukas Spikonos bridge to take a dip in again. But suffice it to say, Sam understood the value of intervention at critical moments in life when you're young and stupid and one misstep can cause your life to take a very, very wrong turn.

"Hey, ladies," Evan Wolensky, the AP physics teacher, said as he joined them. He pushed up his glasses with his wrist as he balanced two punch cups, handing one to Sam.

"Thanks," she said.

He held the other one out as an offering. "Would you like some, Jessica?"

"Oh, thanks, Ev, hon," she said. "Well, guess I better go man my corner of the gym. Wouldn't want any bumping and grinding going on, now would we?" She beamed her usual friendly-but-striking smile, and as she reached for the punch, her gorgeous blonde hair shimmered, and her big blue eyes sparkled with humor.

Jess couldn't help being a knockout, but she was always careful to rein in her charisma around Evan, who had a big crush on her. Yet Sam could tell that even a simple smile had atomic impact on him.

Evan swallowed, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing. He looked at Jess as if he were imagining a completely different kind of bumping and grinding. One involving him and her.

“Teachers, to your stations, please,” Joe Malone, their principal, said as he swept the area. He shot Sam a kind smile. And a wink. “Remember to leave enough room for the Holy Spirit between these children. No dirty dancing at Mirror Lake High prom. We have a reputation to uphold.”

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“Right.” She knew Joe was only half kidding. But then, he always used humor to enforce the rules. That was one of the things she liked so much about her boss. He was kind and reasonable. She knew she was one of his favorites. Not in an icky way—with his bald head, tall frame, and slightly rounded middle, he gave off the air of a benevolent father—and he was a genuinely kind person.

She’d always been grateful for his help when she was a confused teen. He’d even pulled strings to get her a job at the town diner, Pie in the Sky, when she lost her job at the craft store after she’d gotten suspended her senior year. Somehow, he’d seen something in her that she hadn’t been able to see herself, and it had changed everything.

That was all part of her dark past, and life was so much better now. Any remaining rebel that remained in her had been quashed at nineteen when her brother Kevin had suddenly died, along with his beautiful wife, in a tragic car accident that had left their tiny baby girl orphaned. After that, she’d made peace with Brad and stopped pushing limits. In fact, Kevin’s death had turned her into a person who rarely took risks. Life was too short, family meant everything, and rocking the boat was something you did as a teen but not when you’d matured.

Her own experiences had taught her to dig beneath the surface of her students’ behavior. She, more than most, understood how one teacher could make a difference.

Joe put an arm around her shoulder and dropped his voice. “You sure I can’t convince you to renew that contract? I hate to start the job search if there’s some hope ...”

“True love calls,” Sam said with a shrug. It was calling her to Boston to be with her

almost-fiancé Harris.

“Can’t it call you closer to home?” Jess added.

“All right then,” Joe said. “C’mon, Evan. I’m feeling restless. Let’s stir up some excitement, maybe confiscate some weed or something.” He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

“Bye, ladies,” Evan said, leaving them with a little wave and a polite smile.

“He’s a nice guy, Jess,” Sam said a little mournfully. Okay, so he was tall and a little on the thin side. He was probably athletic—you simply couldn’t tell under his baggy clothes.

“Maybe he is nice. But I have no interest in physics.” She wrinkled up her nose as if she’d said Black Death instead of physics. “We have nothing in common.”

As they watched Joe and Evan disappear into the crowded gym, Jess said, “I wish you weren’t leaving. Who else is there to save me from Mrs. Higgins?” The grand dame of the English department, she’d been teaching there since Hawthorne walked the earth. Okay, maybe just since Hemingway. “Don’t go, dammit. Who will I complain about Mr. Malone to? And my students. My awful, awful students. You can’t go!”

“I’m only going to Boston,” Sam said. To a brand-new high school there, even though Harris had insisted she didn’t even have to work unless she wanted to. The same melancholy pricked her heart as always whenever she thought about leaving Mirror Lake for good. “Maloney Baloney is a cool boss. And deep down, you love your students.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “You probably won’t even miss me as you shuffle between your

new place and Harris's parents' beach house in Nantucket, while I stay here and slave away, struggling to teach teenagers to be literate."

"You know you can come up any weekend you want," Sam said. An edge of panic pierced her stomach. She knew she should be thrilled to be moving with her boyfriend to a dignified old row house with tons of character, with access to a gorgeous beach house to escape to any weekend. It was important for Harris to start his political career in the Boston area, where he was from, and she would be by his side. Love required some sacrifices, right?

Her new life would be perfect. Everything she'd always wanted so desperately was about to come true. She'd found an amazing guy with noble ambitions and big dreams. One day they'd be married with a real family, something she could barely remember since her parents had died when she was five, and Brad and her grandma Effie had taken over raising her and her brothers.

Her stomach flopped again. What was wrong with her, anyway?

She wasn't ungrateful. Harris was just so busy building his career. He had lots of stress, not to mention all the driving back and forth he and she both did on weekends. Things would calm down a lot after they were finally together in the same city—she knew it. They'd make love more often, because it had been a while. Yeah, actually quite a while. She'd make his life easier for him and he'd relax more, then she'd relax more, and be able to enjoy all this good fortune that had come her way.

Right?

The pulsing beat of a too-familiar song suddenly pumped through the gym, compliments of the student band, Wild. A group of girls in the front row started dancing, waving their arms, and singing along to the lyrics of Lukas's signature song, a serious earworm called "You Don't Know Me," which blasted around Sam's head

and made it throb.

She hated that song. No, she really Hated. That. Song.

Calm down, she reminded herself. There was no way in hell Lukas would show, and once the kids realized that, they'd stop talking about him and playing his obnoxious music.

Jess raised her voice over the noise of the band. "Those girls actually think Lukas Spikonos is going to show up here. I mean, you don't think he will, do you?" Her words held a hefty edge of doubt. Her tone suggested that Sam of all people might actually have a clue whether the elusive singer would ever have the guts to show up in his hometown again.

"There's no way. I hope they won't be too disappointed." Lukas Spikonos. The mere sound of his very Greek name evoked all the exotic sensuality of ancient, sun-kissed isles like Santorini or Mykonos, which rhymed with his name. Not to mention his very Greek looks, from his rich bronze skin, the color of sand in some exotic desert, his dark, haunting eyes, and his over-the-collar hair, as sinfully black and shiny as pitch.

Every molecule of his long, lean body was rebellious. Risky. Thank God Sam was so over him. She had enough maturity and distance from her naïve nineteen-year-old self to realize that no matter how attracted to him she'd been, their breakup, painful though it was, had been a blessing in disguise.

"When did you get so pessimistic?" Jess asked. "You're usually the fun teacher. Supporting dreams and all that."

Sam rolled her eyes. "Ever since the kids sent that video to The Ellen DeGeneres Show, they've been out of control. But his PR person said his schedule was too

booked. Plus, he hasn't been back here for six years."

"He has to show up sometime if he ever wants his car back."

Sam scowled. "You mean my car. I have all the repair and auto-body bills to prove it." She headed for the gym floor. "I'd better get out there and start ungluing a few kids from each other."

"He could come, you know," Jess called. "Mirror Lake's his hometown."

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“He has no family here. No friends. This town means nothing to him.”

“It has one thing no other town has.”

Sam stopped in her tracks. “What’s that?”

“You.”

Sam’s cheeks went hot. Good thing the lighting in the gym was dim. She rolled her eyes and shook her head at Jess’s hopeless romanticism. It didn’t help that at the same time, the chorus of that damn song rang out and the kids started chanting it over and over.

I thought I knew you, I thought I loved you, but I didn’t know you at all. Sam smiled at the kids having a great time when all she really wanted to do was cover her ears and run because hearing that cheesy chorus one more time was about to make her hurl.

Songs often transported people back to the past, reminding them of intense memories. The summer she was nineteen, she’d poured all her teenage angst into those three short phrases after Lukas Spikonos had dropped her like a hot gyro.

He’d taken more than her heart with him.

He took the poetry she’d written way back then in all her angst and turned it into the number one song in America, his breakout hit. She envisioned him holding the rumpled sheet she’d torn out of her college-ruled spiral notebook as he shamelessly

borrowed her words, her feelings.

The bastard.

Frankly, she didn't care about the stolen words. The day he finally left town for good, a year after their breakup, he'd kissed her. Really kissed her, passionately and with feeling. A knock-your-socks-off, seeing stars and twinkly lights and getting dizzy kind of kiss, which was full of the promise of lots of other kisses. She'd just broken up with Harris. She was free to make a different choice, and she'd chosen him.

And then he never called. He'd left—forever, she'd come to think—to find fame and fortune. He'd wanted success far more than he'd ever wanted her.

Suddenly the lights dimmed, making the disco ball spill a Milky Way of stars all across the old gym. The band stopped playing. It was as if the old building itself were holding its breath.

A giant spotlight rose up to follow a solitary figure carrying a guitar as he ran through an aisle of parted bodies and burst onto the stage.

She would recognize his lithe form anywhere. Oh, he had a wild presence, dressed all in black, golden muscles covered with elaborate swirls of ink, flexing as he fingered his guitar like a lover. He strode back and forth lifting his arms and encouraging the kids to sing along to the song they all knew by heart.

Lukas Spikonos had actually shown up. Surprise mingled with shock as Sam watched him from afar.

His coal-black eyes scanned the gym, waving and egging everyone into a frenzy. Then his gaze locked on to her.

The music faded. The beat of the song was replaced by a solitary heartbeat that thundered in her ears, loud and strong.

Sam shook her head. He couldn't have singled her out, not in the dense crowd. It was just her imagination. There was a time when she wouldn't have been able to look away, when she would have frozen in jaw-dropping attraction, but now she made herself turn her back. It was much easier knowing that those stolen words were hers. She even made it to the beverage table for a drink of punch.

His voice echoed through the gym on the squeaky old microphone. "Someone named Ellen sent me a video you kids made saying why you wanted me to show up at your prom."

Wild cheering. The principal stood, arms crossed, looking pleased as pie that his school would make headlines in the national news tomorrow. The chaperones whispered among themselves, as googly-eyed as the kids.

Lukas Spikonos flashed his million-dollar grin. Sam went back to pouring punch, angry with herself for looking again, and angry that she'd felt that grin deep down in places he had no business reaching.

That's all it was. Hormones. Maybe she couldn't help the attraction but that was simply part of his carefully orchestrated brand. Suddenly she was desperate for fresh air, but found it impossible to peel her eyes off of his magnetic presence.

He pulled a square of paper out of his pocket, carefully unfolded it. Put on reading glasses. What? The most popular recording artist in America wore geeky glasses? "I'd like to thank Joey, Christy, Shawna, Paul, and Katie for writing to me via my friend Ellen. And I'm thrilled to be back here at my alma mater to play for you."

Shouts and screams reverberated through the gym.

“So I’d like to have all of you and—where’s Katie Hubbard?—yeah, all of you, come on up here and sing my newest song with me.”

The kids helped Katie up on stage. She’d been in a car accident at the beginning of the school year and was still doing physical therapy for her injuries.

They sang together his latest release, “Not Over You.” He danced with Katie, who shone with happiness.

“He’s doing a good thing,” Jess said, taking a plastic cup of punch from the table. “Are you okay?”

Sam smiled and gave her friend an aggressive thumbs-up. Whatever. In a few minutes he’d be out of here with his entourage and the night would return to the normal prom stuff of stopping the kids from grinding and keeping an eye out for disruptions.

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Lukas was back at the mic. “Okay, that was fun.” The crowd cheered their agreement. “But I think an old friend of mine is here and I was wondering if she’d come up and join me.”

As Lukas squinted over the lights to scan the crowded gym, Sam’s heart dropped like the ball at Times Square. She looked around wildly. No eyes were on her. Good. It was just her imagination, which was on overdrive. Yet Lukas was always a loner. He hadn’t had a lot of friends. Except ... except ...

“Sam, will you come up here and sing with me? I mean Ms. Rushford, will you come up here and sing?” He turned immediately in her direction, as if he’d known where she was all along. Then he extended his hand and motioned for her to join him.

Up there.

On instinct, she shook her head. Frowned hard, the only way she could convey her distaste—no, her abject horror at being put on the spot. These were her students, and she was a respectable teacher. She was no longer the girl who fell for a bad boy who’d turned into a wild man whose antics were splashed all over the grocery-store tabloids.

“C’mon, Ms. Rushford,” his gravelly voice cajoled. “I bet you’re the coolest teacher in the school.” He looked over the crowd of cheering teens. “Am I right?”

The uproar was deafening.

His voice was a unique blend of the smoothness of velvet rubbing against the

roughness of stubble. She could still hear it whispering sweet, lovely phrases into her ear. Ones she'd actually believed at nineteen.

She was much less gullible now at twenty-six.

Shit. He could've picked any of fifty doe-eyed girls in sherbet-colored dresses, eager, expectant, and steeped in adoration. After all these years, whyher?

Sam was suddenly swept away by her own students, the traitors. "Oh my God, Ms.Rushford, youknowhim?" one of her students asked. She only had time to shrug as they collectively pushed her forward, everyone shouting and cheering. She managed to catch Jess's gaze from her place near the drinks, full of concern and worry. As the crowd began chanting "Ms.Rushford, Ms.Rushford," and "Sing one song, Sing one song," she knew she was doomed. She couldn't disappoint her kids, seeing how excited they were at the amazing turn of events, so she allowed herself to be drawn up onto the stage.

Under the spotlight and the disco ball, she found herself next to Lukas Spikonos. The splinter under her thumbnail. The water seeping into her shoes on a rainy day. The prickle in the bouquet of roses. And every other awful metaphor she could think of.

She could force herself to make nice, for the sake of her kids. She had no choice. She would never spoil this for them, no matter how much she disliked him.

"Hello, Samantha," Lukas said, tossing his head a little to flick a lock of gypsy black hair out of his eyes. He played a little strum on his guitar, the spotlight bouncing off its spit-shined wood, as he casually hooked one long leg around the rung of a stool and gestured for her to take a seat on another one nearby. There went that smile again, still slightly crooked even though he could surely afford to throw millions at some dental work.

She deflected the smile by glancing at the guitar. Some fancy acoustic model she knew nothing about. He had one arm draped around it, his hand hanging casually over the body. Those hands. Each long, elegant finger adorned with a hammered silver ring she knew he'd made himself. On his wrists, he wore bands of leather cords.

Reluctantly, she looked up. Met his deep, searching gaze, being careful not to look too long lest it suck her in and turn her to dust. "Hi, Spike," she said, deliberately avoiding his God-given name. "Long time no see."

"You as well, Samantha Rushford," he said as he swept her slowly up and down, taking in every inch. "Long time no see." Then he started the riff, that same damn one again. He crooned into the mic, his butter-soft voice spreading smoothly through the gym and trying to work its way into her heart.

But failing. Gritting her teeth, she forced a frozen smile. For the kids, for the kids, she repeated to herself as every impulse begged her to reach out and strangle his beautiful neck with one of those shiny guitar strings. She crossed her arms to hide her clenched fists.

For the next three minutes, life imitated art in the weirdest way as she joined him in a song about love gone bad. Their love gone bad. The pure, resonant tones of his voice seemed to vibrate clear through to her soul. Her own voice was adequate but didn't hold a candle to the angelic quality of his. She simply carried the familiar melody as he harmonized and blended their voices together until they sounded ... beautiful. The anguish she had written about long ago was the anguish he now sang about, carried on his face, and the very intimacy of it shook her deeply.

At last the music ended. Panic swelled inside her chest. It was only a song. To believe more would be as unrealistic as believing in a child's fairy tale. She shook her head to dissipate the spell that seemed to envelop her like the cacophony of applause and

cheers sounding all around them. When the final whoops and hollers went up at the end, she took her chance and hopped off the stool.

Out of the spotlight, he grabbed her by the elbow. She spun to face him.

“I thought you’d want the chance to finally sing that to my face,” he said, his coffee-black eyes flashing.

“Gee, thanks. I’ve been waiting six years for that. I feel so much better now.”

He tugged her back under the spotlight and spoke into the microphone, “Hey kids, give your teach a hand. Her voice is so sweet it makes your heart break, doesn’t it?”

Suddenly he leaned over and she realized with horror that he was going to kiss her. She politely offered her cheek while clenching her teeth but he ignored her civilized gesture. He pushed his guitar aside, wrapped one hand around her neck, then pulled her in and kissed her directly on the mouth.

His lips were pliant and soft. His kiss was gentle but thorough, bold, and cocksure. He tasted like peppermint and his own unique, seductive flavor that brought unwanted memories hurling back. He pulled away and looked at her with a blank expression, as if he were actually startled by his own brash behavior. Then the wicked sparkle returned, and a wide bad-boy grin spread slowly over his face.

“You arrogant bastard,” she hissed in his ear, still smiling, above the deafening uproar of the gym.

She turned to go, but he reached out yet again. For a moment, they were in the shadows. His grip on her arm felt hot and tingly, probably from all the outrage coursing through her body. In the dim light she saw something raw in his eyes. She used to be attracted to precisely this exact kind of danger, this risk. That was before

she'd lost a brother seven years ago. She'd learned the hard way that stable and steady was far better than a wild roller coaster ride that gave you an adrenaline rush and a headache.

“Let me see you later,” he said off mic. On the stage, a handler took away the stools. The gym went black except for a lone spotlight, beckoning him for his next song.

He had to go, as always. But this time, Sam wasn't going to be the one he left behind.

She shrugged out of his warm grasp, shaking her head. Then she took advantage of the darkness and slipped away.

CHAPTER 2

“Be there in a sec,” Lukas Spikonos said to his bodyguards as he exited the gym and stood beneath an old beech tree. Charles and James—not everChuckorJim—were the most tight-assed guys he knew, and from the looks they were giving him, they were not happy he was standing alone in plain sight and not locked up in his tour bus across the parking lot safe and sound. Sure, it had taken a while to clear away all the kids, but they were just being kids and he’d been happy to spend time with them.

It wasn’t like midnight in the Mirror Lake High School parking lot was a dangerous place. He snorted, thinking it might be if Samantha ever came out. He tugged a cigarette out of his jacket pocket and flicked his wrist at the guys to at least get them to stop standing ten feet away staring at him while he snuck a smoke. He took a long pull and closed his eyes, trying to conjure the image that he was a normal person standing by himself under a tree. When he opened his eyes, the guys were still there, with their backs to him but standing sentinel nevertheless. “Hey, guys,” he called. “No one’s here. Okay to leave.”

They exchanged worried glances.

“Seriously. This isMirror Lake.” The two men stepped into the shadows of the trees between him and the bus. At least he couldn’t see them anymore. Even if he still felt their presence.

Privacy was nonexistent in this business, one of the things Lukas disliked the most about it. Not that it didn’t have its moments—he often experienced a freedom when he sang that he’d never felt doing anything else. Music spoke to him in a language

that he felt down to his soul. Lately, though, he'd felt restless. Lonely. Confined by the fact that since his fame had skyrocketed, he could no longer walk around in public without a disguise and a lot of planning. He was grateful to take a few more minutes in the fresh air before he could bring himself to retire for the evening inside that claustrophobic bus.

What the hell had he been thinking, dragging Sam up on stage? That was audacious and impulsive, a side effect of his passionate Greek nature. Judging by the number of cell phone camera flashes, he'd pay for it tomorrow.

He'd needed to know so many things. What she looked like after six years—still just as beautiful in that all-American-girl way, with her coppery spiral curls springing everywhere, her vibrant green eyes warm and wide. They didn't hold even a trace of welcome, at least not for him, and who could blame her? But man oh man, the woman still stirred him and set his blood on fire. If calling her up there had been a test, he'd gotten an F. For completely effed up. If he'd thought that six years could dim the feelings he'd buried down deep for so long, he was completely, completely wrong.

He didn't blame her for being angry. He'd left without explanation. Actually, he'd ripped himself away. She'd never know what leaving her had cost him. Later, when he'd combined his music with her words on a lark, he'd had no idea the resulting song would hit big and make him into a star. No wonder she hated him. What she didn't know was that every song he'd written since had a piece of her in it.

Not that he was coming back to be with her. From what he knew, she was practically engaged. He just wanted ... he wasn't sure what. Forgiveness? Friendship? Maybe the freedom from being tormented by her memory all these years. All he knew was that if he could see her, talk to her, make some kind of amends ...

Oh, hell. Who was he kidding? The moment he'd seen her, he'd lost all control. He'd

kissed her like it was his last act on earth. He'd been simply ... overcome. Overwhelmed. Another reason for her to be furious at him. What the hell had he been thinking, coming back here?

He didn't really have a choice, did he? Mirror Lake was as close to home as he'd ever come. And right now he desperately needed a home.

Before anyone had noticed his entrance, when his men were still staking out the place for safety, he'd spied her talking to students, laughing and gesturing with her hands in that big way of hers. When she talked, her whole body talked, too—her eyes danced, her arms waved. As a girl of nineteen, she'd barely been able to rein in that exuberant nature.

He'd wanted her badly back then, when he was a low-on-the-totem-pole car mechanic with no family and no money. No parents to help him get to college. Or anyone to give him any kind of help or advice. A target for the more well-off kids to mock.

Then a miracle had happened. In a few years, he'd sung his way out of obscurity and become unconscionably rich. His face was a front-and-center staple on the grocery store tabloids. As his fame grew, his privacy shrunk. He'd never realized how much he'd valued solitude and privacy—until they'd vanished.

Tonight he'd hung around the gym for a long time after his performance, talking with the kids. Dancing with any and all of them. Trying to deflect the words of admiration and praise that made him so uncomfortable. Lukas didn't want to be worshipped. He wanted—no, he needed—a place where he could have a bit of privacy and recharge before he faced the crowds. And Mirror Lake would be perfect for that.

His roadies carried his guitar and props back to the bus. From his spot under the tree, he watched the last of the kids trickle out of the gym. Finally, she walked out. He took

one last drag on his cigarette, pulled it from his lips, and crushed it beneath his foot.

Samantha said good-bye to the fellow teacher she'd walked out with and headed to her car, which was parked close to his tree.

He waited until she put the key into the lock to speak. "Nice night to put the top down."

She startled. Dropped the keys. Bent slowly to pick them up and when she straightened, her face was calm. Too calm. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Waiting for you." It was the truth. He was no good at lying, although he'd done his share of it to her in the past. A frown creased her brow. The wind had blown her curls into her face and she pushed them back with her hand.

"It was nice of you to come back for the kids, Spike," she said warily. Despite her fury, she'd found something nice to say. That was just like her.

He laughed.

"What is it?" She sounded offended.

"No one's called me that in a long time." He stopped himself from pacing, a nervous habit, and took a good look at her. Same fresh face, same big, stunning eyes that were giving him a look.

He hated that look. Like he was a spider that had climbed the wall near her bed and she was about to bolt. Or squash him into a tiny, juicy streak on the wall.

"Don't be angry with me," he said. It came out sounding more like pleading. God, what mistake wouldn't he make tonight? He should just pack it up now. Except he

needed to talk to her.

“Angry?” She snorted. “Just because you left with barely a word and used my poem without permission to make yourself famous. Why should I be angry?”

“So you did miss me.” He couldn’t help smiling. She was still so full of all that fabulous passion. He wanted to tell her how often he’d thought of her—every single time he sang that godforsaken song, for starters—but that would make her run screaming for sure.

He reached forward and pulled the keys out of her hand. She allowed it but stabbed him with a glare. He examined the key chain he’d made for her years ago. A pair of hammered silver wings. Had she taken flight, as he’d wished her to those fateful years ago? Had she spread her wings so she could really fly? From the information he’d gathered on her, he didn’t think so.

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“Give my keys back,” she said. “I’ve got to go before someone takes more photos of us. My boyfriend isn’t going to like that.”

It was Lukas’s turn to snort.

She put her hands on her hips. “What was that for?”

“I thought you broke up with him once upon a time.” She’d ended up with that blowhard preppy lawyer who even back then was determined to mold her into the perfect political wife clone. She could do so much better. Deserved so much better.

“We—got back together.”

Only a few months after Lukas had left, but he pretended not to know that. Still, the memory stung. He decided to change the subject. “How’s my car running?”

“Is that why you waited for me? Because you want it back?”

“How is it that you’re so feisty in some matters, yet you can’t seem to untangle yourself from that Ivy League idiot?”

She stiffened. Looked like she was about to draw blood. He really should calm down. She was going to figure out she had the equivalent of a stalker in about minute. What was it about her that made him lose his famous cool?

Sam threw the car door open a little too forcefully. “Good-bye, Spike. Nice to see you again. Congratulations on finding success. I hope you—I hope you’ve found

happiness, too.”

Before Sam could fold herself into the car, a ragamuffin little boy with wild curly hair wearing Superman pajamas and mismatched socks and carrying a ratty blue blanket came running out of the tour bus. It didn’t take long for Lukas’s guards to suddenly reappear from the inky blackness of the woods. The boy flung himself around Lukas’s legs and looked up with an impish grin. “The guys were teaching me how to play blackjack ’cause I’m smart and I can count to twenty-one. And I won Cheerios and guess what? I ate all of ’em.”

Lukas bent down and lifted the boy into his arms. The child handed him a bottle of beer then rubbed his eyes sleepily with his fists. “Carl said you need a beer. Wanna come see how I can bet?” he asked expectantly.

“Sure, buddy,” Lukas said, biting his lip to avoid saying out loud, Why aren’t you in bed? Why are those guys teaching you that stuff? Stevie had experienced enough negativity in his life. Besides, it was Lukas’s job to make sure his road crew didn’t corrupt an innocent child. Another area where he was epically failing as far as this kid was concerned. Instinctively, he tousled the jet-black mop of hair, stroked the child’s back where he was still horrified to feel the hard contours of his bones through his shirt.

Stevie sized up Sam. “You’re pretty,” he said unabashedly.

“And you’re up too late,” she said with a sweet smile.

“I’m Stavros Spikonos,” he said. “But you can call me Stevie.”

“I’m Sam.”

Stevie smiled widely. “That’s a boy’s name and you’re not a boy.”

No, she most certainly was not. If Lukas was not mistaken, he was witnessing a five-year-old flirt.

Must be a trait embedded deep in the Spikonos genes.

“It’s short for Samantha, but my friends call me Sam.”

“Can I be your friend?”

“Of course.” She smoothed the untamed hair, badly in need of a cut, back from his forehead. “Nice to meet you, Stevie.”

Lukas caught her gaze over Stevie’s head. She was casting him a judgmental look. The situation couldn’t appear much worse—an unkempt ragamuffin up at midnight, toting a longneck bottle and learning how to bet on blackjack. Some father he was turning out to be.

“He looks just like you,” she murmured.

The little boy yawned, propping the tattered blanket on Lukas’s shoulder and then snuggling in against him. How he could be so trusting after everything he’d been through was beyond Lukas.

“Stavros, go with Charles and James, okay? I’ll be in in a minute and we’ll get you ready for bed.”

“And read me a story?”

“Sure.” Lukas set Stevie down. The boy immediately ran over to the guards, took both their hands and walked with them, the big guys swinging him up in the air between them until he giggled with glee. Lukas smiled a little, too, watching them

cross the lot. It was a relief every time the kid laughed.

Sam let out a harshtsk. “You think that’s hilarious, don’t you?” She paced in front of him, throwing up her hands. “You haven’t grown up at all. You’re the same irresponsible, self-centered person you were when you left. And now you’re trying to raise yourchildin the middle of all this chaos?”

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Lukas sighed. The words stung more than he thought they would. After all, he'd cultivated her disdain and it was no surprise to him how she felt. "I'm back in Mirror Lake for good, Sam. I'm in over my head, and I really need your help."

The elephant compressing Sam's chest refused to budge. At least, that's what the dull heaviness preventing her from breathing properly felt like. The little boy just feet away had olive skin and big, wide eyes with lashes long enough to put mascara companies to shame. He was adorable. And he looked just like Lukas.

She should be happy to see Lukas with a child, even if she couldn't imagine what taking one on the road would entail. A child was a symbol that people had matured ... and moved on. In most cases, anyway.

Her stomach squeezed like a wrung-out dishrag. It alarmed her that she was—what, upset? Alarmed? Or, God forbid, jealous? Surely she didn't expect him to still want her, this vagabond artist who'd never had a real family or roots ... who was nothing but a pain in the ass, a thorn in her side, a ... a ... Well. She had no words.

She'd loved him once, a long time ago. She was a grown woman now, too old and too smart to deal with men who wanted her and then dumped her and then wanted her again. She was officially off that roller coaster ride. Besides, she'd found a man who truly loved her, who wasn't afraid to show it, and who didn't play games. A mature man with a fine, upstanding family. So she squelched those untamed feelings and forced herself to focus.

"You—you kissed me. In front of all my students. You don't act like someone who desperately needs help." She hadn't expected that to come out of her mouth. Maybe it

was the shock of discovering he was a father. The old murky feelings that had been dredged up. Oh, hell, the feelings that had stirred up.

As if that meant anything to him. He was just showing off. He was known for being over-the-top and outrageous. His love life was comprised of serial dating one Hollywood starlet after another. He mesmerized females by the dozens and then left them in the dirt.

No, she would not play that game anymore. The one where, if asked, she could name his last five girlfriends, or the spots where he vacationed (Cabo, where she'd never been but had always wanted to go), and where he'd built his latest mansion (Sun Valley, Idaho, away from the hustle and bustle, which she admired). But who really paid attention, anyway?

He rubbed his neck. Like Lukas Spikonos could ever feel embarrassment. "It was the passion of the moment. Sorry about that."

"I'm nearly engaged."

"Nearly?" His ebony brows rose. "After six years?"

"Oh, come on, Lukas. At least I've been in a relationship for six years."

He leveled those deep brown eyes at her, for so long it almost seemed like a game of chicken. But she refused to cave. "You look pretty, Sam. Really pretty."

Pu-lease. He hadn't lost his snake-charmer ways. She bit her lip, reminding herself that he was all flirt and no real form, all smirk and no substance. She was immune to his baloney and her life was none of his business. "How can I help you?"

"Stavros is my brother's kid. But he's—mine now. For good."

“Your ... brother?” She blinked in disbelief. She’d known he had brothers, that they’d been separated young, when Lukas was around ten or so. A strange, silly relief flowed through her. It’s not his kid. He doesn’t have a kid. Not a father. Nada. She worked hard to wipe the doctor did you just say it’s not terminal look off her face.

He snorted. “My oldest brother, Nico. He didn’t do a very good job being a father.”

“He—left his little boy with you?”

“A social worker found me three weeks ago. The child and family services agency was about to put Stevie in foster care. It seems my brother has a longstanding drug problem ... among other vices. Stevie’s mother is deceased. She had cervical cancer that wasn’t picked up until too late.”

Sam opened her mouth to say something, but what? It was too terrible.

“Stevie’s mom has no family,” Lukas continued. “She was living alone in California, doing her best to scrape by and raise him. After she died, a friend of hers located Nico in a trailer park. From what the social worker told me, during the month Stevie spent with Nico, he watched a ton of TV and ate a lot of frozen dinners, but at least Nico didn’t lay a hand on him.”

“How did the social worker find Stevie?”

“Nico got pinched by an undercover cop when he tried to buy drugs. Trust me, it was the best thing that could have happened.”

“Does Stevie—does he—miss his mother?”

Lukas clenched and unclenched his fists as he spoke, not seeming to be aware he was doing it. “He has nightmares. Never lets go of his blanket. His appetite isn’t that

great. He stays packed up all the time, like he's expecting someone else to take him away. At times he gets quiet and he doesn't laugh much. I don't know much about kids but despite everything, he's got a really sweet disposition. I just want—" His voice cracked. He cleared his throat to cover his emotion. "I just want to do right by him. He's been through enough."

Sam felt a mixture of horror and sadness for Stevie and something else—compassion and admiration for Lukas, dammit, even though she fought it. He seemed one-hundred-percent committed to his nephew. Determined to give him a better life. She couldn't help but be impressed.

Lukas patted his pockets, clearly looking for a cigarette. Somehow, that imperfection, that nervous tic, made her feel more in control. The man she'd worshipped as a teenager was just ... a man, dealing with problems. A smoking hot, dangerous-looking man, granted but with a nasty habit. He had his own demons to slay just like everybody else.

There she went again. Allowing a tiny imperfection to make her soften towards him. Once she cracked that door open, the tiny trickle of water that meandered through would become a floodgate, an avalanche of messy feelings best kept shut away for good. As for that adorable little boy who seemed full of life and sunshine despite all he'd been through... well, he'd get her affection by the bucket. By the truckload.

"I don't know many people in town," Lucas said.

An understatement. Lone wolf did not begin to describe the man.

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“I just need time to sort a few things out,” he said. “I could use some help finding a babysitter while I get things in order. I don’t start touring again until August.”

Wow, August. He was in town with a little kid for three months. That knowledge made her want to run screaming for the hills.

“Look, Sam, I’ve bought my foster parents’ place on the lake and I’m fixing it up. I need a home base somewhere and Mirror Lake is as close as I’ve ever come to having that. I wondered if we could put the past behind us and try to be friends.”

Sam closed her eyes as his words washed over her. He’d broken her heart and she’d waited for him but he never came back. She harbored years of unanswered questions and many things left unsaid. Now suddenly, he wanted to be friends? Well, she wasn’t twenty anymore and she was going to say exactly what was on her mind. “You dumped me right after I’d lost my brother and the next summer, I still was stupid enough to sit by your bedside for days after your motorcycle accident until you were out of danger. Then you left with barely a word. And now you’re back, after six years, kissing me in front of all my students like we were—like we were—”

“Like we were what?” His gaze roved up and down her body. He still possessed that hungry, uncivilized look that made certain parts of her light up like a pinball machine. She stepped back until she accidentally bumped into her car. “Like we were lovers?”

She stared at him. Her face burned, a telltale sign that she remembered another time. A sweeter time. She cleared those memories off her mental desk. Her life was different now. She’d started over, and she’d left the past behind for good.

She would never understand him or his behavior. He kept secrets, and he didn't talk. The list of why he had been a terrible boyfriend could go on for an entire book. No, a series.

As she opened her door and got in, his gaze glided over the even, polished surface of her beautiful car. "You did a nice job with it." He had a way of keeping her off balance. She never knew what he was going to say or do next.

When he'd left town, the last thing he did was hand her the keys. The '84 Camaro had been a rusting, paint-peeling, gas-guzzling mess, and needed just about every part replaced. Which she'd done, bit by bit, until it was a now a very sexy car, candy-apple red and gleaming to a spit shine. She'd lived for this day, to show him what she'd done to the rusty rat trap she'd been given. So there, buster. Take that.

His eyes were so large and so expressive, the fault of his Greek heritage. There were too many feelings flashing in them, ones that she could not possibly fathom. So she avoided his gaze. She needed to keep thinking of him as an asshole.

Which he was. Truly.

He leaned over just a little and touched her arm. Startled, her gaze veered from his long, talented fingers, which looked so dark resting against her own pale skin, to his face.

"I want to be a good father to Stevie, but I don't know where to start."

Yes, how could he know? He'd suffered abuse at the hands of his alcoholic parents. He'd roamed from foster home to foster home for years. His smart mouth and brazen attitude had made him unadoptable. Which said a lot because in the looks department, he was King Cotton. His last set of foster parents had been kind but elderly, Mr. Ellis dying before he was eighteen and Mrs. Ellis passing a few years later. He wasn't

kidding that he'd had few examples of what a real family was like.

"Will you help me?"

Lukas represented everything in her life she had fought to get away from. Danger. Instability. Chaos. Not to mention his ability to string her along by dangling a carrot in front of her eyes and then yanking it away without explanation—twice. Harris, on the other hand, had come along right when she'd needed him, and had been her rock. A stabilizing force. One she was so, so grateful for.

She would help Lukas as a friend, but that's as far as it would go. No matter how hard he kicked her hormones into overdrive.

"I'll ask around about the sitter." She cast him a quick, businesslike glance, forcing her gaze not to linger on his too-handsome face. Then she turned the key, put the car in reverse, and drove away.

CHAPTER 3

Eight years ago, Lukas Spikonos had burst into Sam's life at a time when it really couldn't get to sucking much more. Yet from the very first time she'd ever laid eyes on him, she knew he was big trouble.

Senior year, she'd been in love with Reggie Reid, the quarterback, like every other girl in the class, but her first love was Johnny Depp, (which proved she probably had a thing for bad boys all along). Maybe that was why she first noticed the handsome mechanic who'd fixed the fender on her Grandma Effie's car that she scraped when she pulled in a little too close to the garage. When she'd gone into the shop to pick it up, she didn't hear a single word he said about the car because she was too busy blushing and having a heart attack.

Even from the brief glances she'd allowed herself out of the corner of her eye, she saw he was a remarkable boy, with pitch-black hair worn a tad too long (although he was kind of going for a tough, Goth look, and it was probably dyed), skin that looked tanned even though summer was long past, a black T-shirt, and skinny jeans that showed off his lean form. He was older, twenty-one she'd guessed, and although he was thin, he was filled out in a way that made him look more like a man than a boy.

But the thing that got her was his eyes, which were big and brown, the color of strong rich coffee. And the way he looked at her! Lordie, no one had ever looked at her that way, with unabashed, unhidden desire. He noticed her, in a way that was totally different from any of the boys her own age.

"There you go," he said, handing her back Effie's credit card and oh, wow, their

fingers grazed. He had such fine hands, with well-trimmed nails. Each finger displayed a different hammered silver ring with some sort of symbols she'd never seen before. As if all that wasn't enough, his smile sealed the deal. When this guy smiled, she swore, the angels held their breath. It was beautiful, the slightest bit imperfect, and a little bit wicked. And it sent tingles scattering like fairy dust all over her body.

After that, Sam tended to notice him on her evening walks home from the craft store, where she worked until it closed at seven. Under the cover of darkness, she would see him leaning up against Clinker's bright red garage doors, one sneakered foot braced up against the brick, watching. Always watching.

She felt his eyeballs searing into her as she passed, but he never waved, never called out. Just stood there with his glowing cigarette or with his hands buried in his pockets.

This perplexed her. Had she imagined the smoldering stares? Why wouldn't he talk to her? She'd gotten enough attention from boys to know she was pretty enough and thanks to all her brothers, she had a fairly good window into how the male mind worked.

Still, he was everything she'd been warned against from the time she was a baby. Ane'er do wellis what Effie would call him. A slacker, most likely. A blue-collar kid with a penchant for trouble. Not for her.

"Walk home with me tonight," she'd begged Jess one winter evening.

"Yes, he is staring at you," Jess confirmed. Then shot her own hand into the air and waved.

Mortification flooded through Sam. "Jess, I swear," she hissed through clenched

teeth.

“Oh, chill,” Jess said. “Look.” She tilted her head toward Clinker’s.

Mystery Man was waving back. And smiling. And oh, that smile was like kindling, igniting Sam’s body into flames.

“He’s hot,” Jess said. “You have to talk to him.”

Yes, he was, and she wanted to. If only she could figure out how.

Weeks had gone by and nothing. He hadn’t sought her out, or called her. In fact, she rarely saw him standing outside anymore when she walked past Clinker’s. But she still got goose bumps, as if he were watching her from somewhere deep inside the shop, and she did subtly check out all the windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of him working.

Once when she went to see an old movie at the Palace, he was there, sitting by himself in the back. He’d stared at her so hard that one of her girlfriends poked her in the ribs on the way down the aisle. Their gazes locked, and she slowed enough that her friend bumped into her from behind. She waved as she passed—of course she did! Because by this time she was dying to see him. Wanted to sit with him and talk with him and know who he was. All he did was nod casually in her direction, nothing more.

Then The Incident happened, and all her teenage worries and dreams—small and large—disintegrated, blown away like wisps of smoke on the wind.

“Don’t do it,” Sam said to her friend Amy Chan over lunch one day in the cafeteria.

“What, are you kidding, Sam?” Jess chimed in. “She has no choice.”

The CCs, The Country Clubbers, as they called themselves, the most popular, beautiful kids—and also the cruelest—were causing trouble. Monique Martin, the head of the pack, was all long, gorgeous hair and thick lashes and a pretty smile—attributes wasted on a mean girl. She asked Amy to a) do their calculus homework and b) let them cheat off of her on the upcoming test. Or else.

“Or else what?” Sam asked.

“Or else they’ll get to my sister in Special Ed,” Amy said. “They can make her life hell. I don’t know what else to do.”

“Turn them in,” Sam said.

Amy shook her head, no doubt remembering that another one of their friends, Pete Rosenblum, had found his dad’s pickup keyed all down the side and his tires slashed last month after he refused a similar demand about physics. “I’m just going to do it.” Amy was terrified to tell Mr.Malone, their principal, for fear of the repercussions if she turned them in. It was the perfect bullying scenario, and Sam had no clue how to help.

Sam worried about Amy, but she had her own problems. It was fall of senior year, and she was applying to art schools, working at the craft store, and polishing her portfolio. She was putting the final touches on a portrait project she’d been working on for weeks, which she’d planned to enter as part of a scholarship competition to help her get into her dream school, RISD. She had a great shot. Her art teacher, Mrs.Kissinger, said she did.

She’d applied for every art scholarship she could find, because on the wild chance she got in someplace fancy like that, her family wouldn’t have the money to send her. She hadn’t even told them she was applying to art school. Her brother Brad didn’t want her to be an artist. There was no money in it, he said. She had to be practical.

Get a business or teaching degree, something useful. He'd always thought health care was a great profession.

After all, Effie was a nurse and her Grandpa Rushford had been a beloved town doc. But ever since Sam had passed out after seeing her brother Ben get hit in the head with a soccer ball (so that both of them landed in the hospital at the same time), she'd crossed that off her list.

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As fate would have it, Monique was in her advanced art class. Not because she was any good at art but because she said she needed a “relaxation course” to help offset all the pressure she felt from applying to Ivy League schools. One day, Monique passed by the art table where Sam was working on her portrait project.

“Wow, he’s hot,” she said. “Who is that guy?”

The grays and blacks of a solitary figure emerging from the shadows were offset by a bright red background. There, captured on the canvas, was the sexy, leaning silhouette, one Converse shoe propped carelessly against the bright door.

Sam had been obsessed with capturing his face. Not so much its beautiful oval shape, or the curve of his cheekbones, or the thickly curved brows, but she’d somehow managed to capture a certain ... moment.

It was the way the Clinker’s boy looked at her. Or how she imagined he did. Those mysterious eyes, full of secrets, his gaze turned on her as if he’d just been surprised, just turned his head, maybe because she’d called out his name. And upon discovering her there, he liked what he saw. A lot.

It was her best work, and it was turning out well. She could feel it. This painting was speaking to her in a way unlike all her other pieces had, and she knew it was good. Really good.

“You’re anamazingartist,” Monique said. Sam’s gaze flicked up briefly, then she went back to work, praying Monique would go away. She wanted nothing to do with the Clubbers. Even Reggie, her quarterback crush, was starting to hang out with

them, and they were turning him to the dark side. Monique cleared her throat. She was still staring at the portrait, and it was making Sam nervous. “Your friend Amy’s really good at calculus,” she said at last.

Sam bit her lip. Don’t engage, she told herself. She didn’t need trouble right now, and she was no fool.

Sam grabbed a few brushes and left her seat to wash them out, anything to get away. But Monique followed. “Maybe you can help me get a couple projects done. Like how Amy’s helping us. Because, you know, it would be a shame for me to ruin a 4.0 GPA with a stupid art class.”

“Um, I’ll pass. Thanks anyway.” Sam headed for the sink.

Monique blocked her path. “Um, I don’t think you have a choice.” She dropped her voice to a sharp whisper. “Bow down and worship, bitch.”

Heat flooded to Sam’s face. Had she heard wrong? Had Monique really said that? Of course she did, because she was mean. But Sam wasn’t a cowering flower. Growing up with all those brothers had made certain of that. She set down her paintbrush. “I don’t bow down and worship anyone in this high school. Especially not you. And leave Amy alone because I have no problem telling Mr. Malone what you’re up to.”

Something flashed in Monique’s eyes. It might have been fear, and for the first time, Sam felt she’d done something positive to stop these cruel, vindictive people who preyed on the weak. She would take a stand. She’d be brave and fight for what was right. She’d get Amy, and together they would march into Malone’s office and set the record straight. The good guys (and girls) would win. Evil would be defeated.

Sam had to paint sets for the play after school that day, and Amy had band practice, so they made a plan to visit the principal after the next morning’s study hall.

Bad move, because the next morning, Sam's portfolio was gone.

The art closet had been locked all night, Mrs. Kissinger said. There was no sign of anyone breaking in. It had simply disappeared.

That day, Sam approached Monique's table in the art room. She and three of her cronies were painting pep rally posters. Pint-sized cans of orange and black acrylic paint, Mirror Lake High colors, lay strewn about the table. "Give it back," she said simply.

"Hey, Sam, did you find your art?" Monique asked, shooting a knowing smile at Reggie. "We feel so bad it was lost." She punched a few buttons on her phone and held it up to Sam's face. "Did it look like this?"

The blur of a photo came into focus. It was her precious painting. The Clinker's boy one. It was lying on asphalt—she could tell by the scattered leaves surrounding it. From off to the side, an arced stream of water was hitting it.

No, it wasn't water. It was urine, because at the source of the stream was ... oh, God.

Sam squeezed her eyes shut to block out the vile image. No, no, not her painting, her best work ever. And all her other work, the work that would ensure her a future.

Shock hardened to fury. In one quick movement, Sam grabbed a can of paint and flung the contents at Monique. Bright orange blobs landed in her hair, her face. Dripped down her brand-new blouse and onto the art room floor. "You're scum," Sam said.

"At least I'm not a pathetic loser whose family can't even afford art school."

Sam lunged, taking her down. She'd never fought anyone before, but she knew how

to get into it with her brothers. Hands flew, hair was pulled, and none of it was pretty. Mrs.Kissinger and five other students had to pull Sam off the vile, vile girl.

Sam struggled to pull out of the grasp of the students who held her, her friends who wore looks of shock and concern at the formerly mild-mannered girl who'd gone postal. "She stole my portfolio," Sam heard herself say in a high-pitched, almost hysterical voice. "Check her phone. There's a photo of my painting on it."

Mrs.Kissinger picked up Monique's phone. Principal Malone came running in. He was usually pretty laid back, but the look on his face was one of pure shock to see her—Samantha Rushford!—at the center of such a disaster.

He'd always seemed like a reasonable man. Surely he'd see what they'd done and take her side. She wouldn't need to say anything about it. The picture would tell the entire story. She was counting on it.

"I'm not seeing it," he said, flipping through the photos.

"It's hard to miss a picture of someone's dick urinating on my painting!" Sam said. Who could make that up? She was crying. The smell of acrylic paint stung her nostrils. Her shirt and jeans were ruined. Monique's eyeliner was running and between that and the orange color, her face looked like a Halloween nightmare.

"I'm sorry," Mrs.Kissinger said. "There aren't any photos of—ahem—anyone's genitalia in here."

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“Let’s continue this in the office,” Principal Malone said.

What had happened to the photo?

She was left to wait side by side with Monique in the two Chairs of Judgment in front of Mr.Malone’s desk. Sam imagined Principal Malone calling Brad at that very moment, and the look on his face when he would walk in and see her like this.

“Don’t say anything and you’ll get the portfolio back,” Monique whispered. “I’d really hate for someone innocent and powerless like Amy’s sister to suffer.”

Sam pretended she didn’t hear. Yet the awful truth dawned. If her parents’ dying when she was just five hadn’t already taught Sam that life wasn’t fair, this moment drove that hard lesson home. There would be no justice for the crime. At least not now, and not for her.

The rest of what happened was a blur. Brad showed up, and his concern soon faded to an uneasy disappointment that lingered for months.

When Mr.Malone asked why she did it, she refused to answer. Monique said Sam was jealous about Reggie Reid not wanting to date her, and Sam didn’t bother correcting her.

“I’m sorry, Sam,” Principal Malone said, “but the rules are very clear about physical altercations. I’m going to have to suspend you.” He looked over at Monique, who wore a smug grin. “Both of you.”

“What the hell were you thinking?” Brad asked as he drove her home. As predicted, he’d waited until they were in the car to lose his cool. She could tell all through the painful meeting, he looked like he was about to pop a gasket. He’d been called away from one of his three jobs to get her at school and he was royally pissed. “I thought I taught you better.”

Sam had tried her best not to cry, but now she couldn’t seem to stop.

The crying probably made Brad calm down a bit, because his voice took on a gentle edge. “Is there something else going on that you’re not telling me? Does this girl have it out for you? Why would she want your artwork?”

What could she say? Brad would take the truth right back to the principal, and he had no idea how dangerous these people were, that they would stop at nothing to get what they wanted. Better to let him think it was a catfight for now until she could figure out what to do.

One late fall evening, about a month after she’d served her two-day suspension, Sam hadn’t wanted to leave her house. It was cold and cloudy and they were predicting an early November snow, but it had been weeks since she’d gone anywhere and Jess had insisted they meet for ice cream before the Dairy Flip closed for the season. Don’t let them see you defeated, she’d said. Hold your chin high. It had been hard, but she’d gone.

She’d even made it out of the house without Brad seeing her heavy black eyeliner, her big, mean, black ankle boots, and her newly dyed black hair. The new you, Sam had told herself without an inkling of joy, just of irony. She was on her own now, in every way. Even her oldest brother and her grandmother treated her like she was one step away from delinquency, and that hurt more than anything. So she’d reinvented herself. It was either that or be bullied to death, and she would not give the people who enjoyed tormenting her the satisfaction.

Samantha, Badass Version, approached the block that housed the Dairy Flip. She saw a group of kids gathered around the picnic tables. Jess must have invited some of the so-called indie kids—the few people who’d been nice to her since The Incident. They were mostly students in Sam’s advanced art class, all rejects for one reason or another like herself. Kids who wore eccentric clothing, did weird stuff like pierce their noses, and read Keats on their lunch breaks. Melvin Boyd wrote plays. Tonya Simpson and Bette Arnold wrote vampire fiction. And Tommy Alder played the ukulele.

As she got closer, she saw that Jess was nowhere in sight, and the kids were not their friends but the Clubbers. Sam halted at the corner. She would just turn around and head home. Jess must have gotten sidetracked, and there was no way she was going anywhere near them by herself. She might have adopted a brave new persona, but she wasn’t crazy.

“You’re looking very badass, Samantha,” a voice from behind her said. She turned to see the face of her tormentor, who really would be beautiful if she wasn’t the devil incarnate.

“Nice dye job, too,” Monique said, flipping her lustrous hair back in that way she had. A million years ago, Sam had wanted to imitate that, like all the other girls. It seemed the ultimate phony gesture now.

Samantha pretended to be preoccupied with something on her phone, but frankly she only saw her terrified expression reflecting on the surface. Her heart was beating so loud she didn’t even hear what Monique had just said.

Monique was joined by her best friend Loraine, and three big guys. Football players, Reggie leading the pack. Shit. She scanned the city street for her friend. Where was Jess? It was getting late and it wasn’t like her to bail.

A text lit up her phone. From Jess. Relief doused her fear, knowing she wouldn’t be

alone much longer.

My dad's pissed and says I can't go anywhere until I clean my room.

Oh, fire truck.

Sam looked around the Dairy Flip. The last customer left with ice cream and the server yanked down the metal roller blind with a train-on-the-tracks clickety-clack. The rest of the shops on Main Street were dim, shut down for the night. A minute later the giant ice cream cone sign out front flickered off, making the immediate area fade into shadow.

They were all looking at her, inching closer. Reggie was conferring with his shorter, stockier friend, Rod Stevens. They were both giving her the eye, looking her up and down like they liked what they saw. Assholes. The prickle at the back of her neck migrated forward to become a throbbing pulse.

Calm down, she told herself. What could they possibly do to her now? They'd taken away everything that had meant anything to her. All she had left was ... her personal safety.

At least she still had her cell. Surely she'd get a hold of one of her brothers, who could be here in a minute to walk her home. She'd just call ...

She started to punch in a number, but Rod walked quickly toward her and clipped her shoulder. She fell onto the gravel, her phone clattering into the street, tiny stones piercing the flesh of her palm. The posse moved closer.

Monique walked into the street and kicked her phone further away. "It cost my dad a lot of money to get that suspension erased from my record. Imagine what that would have done for my career. My life," she said.

Sam stood up. Brushed off her jeans. She had nothing left. They'd taken everything. Still, she wouldn't let them see her flinch.

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Reggie stepped forward. "I changed my mind. You can go out with me after all. How about now?"

"You're disgusting," Sam said without thinking. A mistake, because rage lit his too-perfect face, bringing to it an ugliness she'd never seen before. He reached forward and grabbed her purse strap from her shoulder, giving it a strong tug that made her fight to steady herself.

"I don't think she's learned her lesson at all, Monique," Reggie said. "She needs another one."

He gave the purse strap a harsh yank, catapulting her forward, and planted his slimy lips on hers. She pushed at him with all her might and kneed him in the balls.

Reggie doubled over, letting out a howl. She stared for a moment, stunned at what she'd done. Bad idea, because the two other boys quickly moved forward and grabbed her by the arms.

"Let me go!" she cried. She wriggled her shoulders, but they were big, meaty guys. As she struggled, one of them twisted her arm until she cried out in pain.

"You heard her," an unfamiliar voice said, deep and low and confident.

She looked up and saw a figure emerge from the shadows. The guy from Clinker's. He looked twice as tall as he had from across the street.

Relief flooded her system, and she knew at that instant she was safe. He had this

...presence, and it made the others huddled in their stupid little group visibly cower.

His calm, steady gaze rolled over her. She tried to stand straight and not act frightened but her legs were shaking. Her hands, too. She bit her lip because she refused to break down and cry in front of these idiots. He might have asked her if she was okay, but she was too busy thanking Jesus and all the saints for the intervention.

“Spike. You know her?” Reggie asked.

Spike? That was his name? In all the hours she’d spent imagining it, never had that particular one occurred to her. “Spike” looked calm enough to do neurosurgery as he addressed the crowd. “She’s my girlfriend,” he said. “I want you to leave her—and her friends—alone.” He aimed a spearing glance at Monique and the girls. “That means you, Monique. Time to find somebody else to pick on.”

“Look,” Monique said with her signature head toss. “She’s got it coming to her. My dad grounded me until graduation. I almost lost my Dartmouth admission. She needs to be put in her place.”

“Everything stops now,” Spike said. “You hear?”

Sam’s head was whirling. This commanding, foreboding guy had saved her. Claimed her by stamping her with the wordmine. Just like that, her fear broke apart, an ice floe getting crunched by an icebreaker.

Reggie was the first to back off. “Come on, Monique. Let’s go get a burger and forget this. Who needs her anyway?”

Monique’s gaze still tossed daggers, but she focused it on Reggie, who had taken her hand and was tugging at it. “Come on, babe,” he said. “We have better things to do.”

“She’s no good, Spike,” Monique said. “You’ll see.”

But Spike, as they called him, wasn’t even looking at Monique. Or Reggie or Rod or any of the thugs. He was looking at her, with those dangerous eyes. He tilted his head almost imperceptibly, giving her the slightest nod. As if he was asking her permission to intervene.

In spite of her churning stomach, her tremulousness from being pulled from the brink of disaster, and her relief at being whole and intact, she smiled back.

Then he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and walked off.

Sam focused on breathing as the boy from Clinker’s led her down the street. She struggled to put one step before the other. Because he was holding her in a way that was too possessive, one she never would have tolerated from a guy she barely knew. He smelled good, like Dial soap and the cool night air. And he was warm. She liked it all—him—way too much.

He didn’t say anything for several blocks. They’d wandered away from the square, and she realized they were near the auto repair shop. She could see the bright red doors shining in the glow from a fluorescent streetlight. He slowed to a stop and looked behind them, checking to make sure they weren’t being followed.

Maybe she should have been afraid that she was alone with him in the semi-seedy part of town, but she wasn’t. She felt safe for the first time in months.

They stood a couple feet apart under the streetlight. She’d gotten a sense of how tall he was as they’d walked, but straight on she realized his height was somewhere between Brad’s, who was six feet, and Ben’s, who was six four. Nice.

He angled his head in the direction of the shop. “Do you want to come up a minute?”

he asked.

He reached out and touched a curl, one of many that had gone AWOL all over her head. She should have stepped back, or run, or done something, but she was frozen in place, mesmerized by his gentleness and the look in his eyes that made her heart beat runaway-train fast.

“You act so tough,” he said, his voice low and a little rough, like gravel. “But you aren’t, are you?”

She stiffened. “I am tough. Look, I didn’t need you to come along and—”

He held up his hands in defense. “You did knee Reggie in the balls.”

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“Yes.” She looked at him assessing her and let out a heavy sigh. It felt like she’d been holding her breath for an hour. “Okay, fine. I was barbecued chicken. They were getting ready to feast.”

“Sure looked like it.”

“Wh ... why did you help me?”

“I don’t like watching people turn into roadkill?”

She laughed, but it came out like more of a very unsexy snort. And that made him laugh. Which was a wonderful thing, because she’d never in all those months heard him laugh. It made his eyes dance and lifted that invisible weight he seemed to always carry with him.

She followed him up a set of concrete stairs to a studio apartment, the door of which was red, just like the infamous outside doors. “Mr.Clinker owns it,” he said. “I rent from him.” He opened the door and she followed him inside.

She wondered how long he’d been on his own. Everyone knew he’d been a foster kid who’d aged out of the system, but she had no idea if he had any family at all, and what would that feel like, to be all alone? In a way, she sort of knew, not having parents herself, what it was like to feel that constant lonely ache. But her family loved her. She’d never felt alone until recently.

He pulled two mugs down from a cupboard above the sink. One was black with the Clinker’s logo and the other was white with a rainbow and said “Best Day Ever.” He

poured some water into a measuring cup and set it in the microwave, then dumped packets of powdered hot chocolate into the cups.

He owned one chair, a beat-up La-Z-Boy with the stuffing ripped out of one corner, and a small television. There was a stack of library books next to the chair. Music Theory for Guitarists, Songwriting for Beginners. She noticed a guitar case in the corner.

They sat on the floor and leaned against the back of the chair so they could look out the window. He turned off his lone floor lamp and they watched the snow fall, swirling crazily around the streetlight, clinging to the rooftops and covering the grass. He sat close to her, their shoulders touching.

“So you want to tell me what happened, Princess?” he asked softly.

She set down her hot chocolate and faced him. Why had he called her that? Almost like he was trying to create a barrier between them. “My name’s Samantha,” she said.

“Samantha,” he said softly. Hearing him speak her name sent a shiver clear through her. His gaze dropped to her lips. He took up her hands in his big ones. It made her feel—protected, which was weird because he was an unknown, the most dangerous-looking person she knew.

“You’re beautiful, Princess, but you’d better drink your hot chocolate and go.” He dropped her hands and stood up and flicked the light back on. “Your family is probably worried about you.”

She stood up right along with him. “Don’t,” she said.

He looked puzzled. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t do this. Don’t save me and be nice to me and then push me away. Are you a bad person? Like, should I be worried?”

His lips curved up in a half-smile. “Maybe. I’m a lot different than you. And a lot older.”

“I’m eighteen. Except right now I feel like I’m eighty. I could really use a friend. I don’t have many of those left, especially after—”

In the middle of her rambling, he kissed her. His lips were soft and warm and he pressed them against hers so gently, yet so expertly, she thought she was going to die. She’d been kissed before, but not this way. The boys who had given her tentative good-night kisses were awkward, bumping noses. One stuck his tongue in her mouth and the first thing she did when she got home was gargle with Listerine.

He reached a hand around her neck and tugged her closer. Rested his other hand lightly around her waist. This time when he kissed her, he teased her lips apart with his tongue. He explored and played, until their kisses grew more frantic and urgent. She clung to him, fearing she might sink into a boneless blob of jelly on the floor.

“What’s your real name?” she asked breathlessly.

“Lukas,” he said. He was out of breath, too, and that pleased her. “My name is Lukas.”

Now there was a name she could wrap her fantasies around. Brief but exotic, with that hard “k” sound in the middle. No doubt about it, it was the sexiest name she’d ever heard.

For everything that was wrong in Sam’s life, those kisses were just about perfect. This strange boy, who seemed to want to pull away even as he couldn’t help kissing

her, had saved her from a horrible fate. But he'd done something else. He'd given her hope.

CHAPTER 4

“Uncle Lukas, I’m hungry,” Stevie said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes bright and early the morning after the prom. Lukas felt a nudge, heard the smack smack smack of Stevie’s palm hitting his biceps. The kid was more accurate than an alarm clock about rising with the sun. “We’re out of Cheerios.”

Lukas’s gut seized, and not just because of the ungodly hour. As a kid, he’d done as Stevie had. Scavenged around various kitchens to survive. That had meant eating anything from chips and Cheetos to dry cereal, whatever he could get his hands on. Until Mom and Pop Ellis, he couldn’t ever remember having anything that required cooking for breakfast except in his dreams.

“C’mon, sleepyhead, get out of bed.” The child tugged mercilessly on his arm. Lukas cracked open an eye, suddenly remembering he was sleeping buck naked.

“Hey, who is that?” he asked, groping around with his hands until he lit upon the child’s sleep-tousled hair and warm skin. “Oh, it’s a little rug rat. Get over here.” In one swoop, he snatched up Stevie, tickling him and tossing him up in the air and on top of his bed, where he landed, giggling, with a bounce. “Hi, little rug rat. What do you want for breakfast?”

“Pancakes. With blueberries and lots and lots of syrup.”

Since all that was in sight on the bus was an empty bag of Doritos and a beer can, he decided on the next best option, Pie in the Sky, or PITS as the town diner was affectionately called. “Then pancakes it is. With blueberries and whipped cream and

syrup and a big glass of milk.”

Stevie wrinkled up his nose. “I don’t like milk.”

“I know you don’t like milk.” Lukas sighed. He hadn’t forgotten, he was just trying to suggest the right thing. Didn’t most kids like milk? And if they didn’t, weren’t they supposed to drink it anyway? Lukas didn’t want to hardline the kid so soon, so he said, “I’m sure they’ve got other stuff to drink. Let’s go get ready.”

“What kind of jammies do you have on, Uncle Lukas?”

Oh, oh. Busted. “Um, birthday suit jammies. Now go find some clothes.”

“Can I see ’em?” Stevie started to lift the sheets but Lukas distracted him by tossing him up again and flipping him in the air until he landed on his feet on the floor. He pointed him in the direction of the door and gave him a little push. “Now scoot!”

Crisis averted. Parenting was a tough job, one he needed to learn by the seat of his pants. He just had to remember to keep his on at all times.

As soon as Lukas opened the glass door to the old diner an hour later, he felt the blast from the past. Actually, he smelled it. Most diner coffee smelled burnt but not here. It smelled fresh roasted, strong and bold. He couldn’t wait for an IV infusion.

The denser aroma of bacon and the sweeter one of fresh-off-the-griddle pancakes blended with chinks of silverware and chatter that told him the restaurant was full of people who clearly enjoyed rising early and, God forbid, eating. He remembered coming here years ago with Sam, having long conversations over milkshakes or coffee or midnight pancakes. Conversations that often went on for hours, where they lost all track of time.

The clock on the wall read seven thirty. He scrubbed a hand over his face and resisted the urge to slap himself awake. His usual late-night routine had him sleeping until noon and eating his first meal around two. He'd been lucky to sneak a smoke outside of his bus, after he got dressed, to satisfy his nicotine craving. Now if he could get some caffeine, he might be able to function.

"My tummy's growling," Stevie said, looking around. "It smells good in here." There went that uncomfortable pang again in Lukas's own stomach. It tended to hit him when Stevie spoke. Lukas didn't want Stevie to be hungry. Ever. He might not know much about being a father, but he knew how to order food. And order away they would.

"I'm starving," Stevie said, eagerly popping into an orange vinyl-covered booth that faced the park. Nothing much had changed in the past six years. Or sixty.

"Hi there, what can I help you—" The waitress was middle-aged, with blonde hair pulled back in a bun. "Oh, wow, hi." Her face flushed as she realized who she was talking to. "I, um, can I take your autograph—I mean your order." She cleared her throat and tried again. "Can I take your order?"

"Leave the guy alone, Darlene," Buzz, the owner, called from the kitchen, over the sounds of sizzling food and the scrape of a metal spatula against the grill.

"Sorry. Sure. It's just that social media is going crazy about you today."

Of course. The prom visit. A feel-good story. Not too big of a deal.

"TMZ's been snooping around trying to find out about that pretty girl you kissed. It was Samantha Rushford, right? Didn't you two have a thing a while back?"

Dammit. He should never have lost control like that. Now the press would go after

Samantha, all because of his impulsiveness. He'd wanted to show this town he'd matured. That he wasn't the pissed-off-at-the-world auto mechanic who'd left here six years ago with fifty bucks in his pocket.

He wanted to show her he'd matured.

"Take his order, Darlene," Buzz called.

He smiled, hoping that would deflect the waitress from asking more questions. "Coffee for me, please, and pancakes with blueberries for him, thanks." He turned to Stevie, who was blowing bubbles in his water with his straw. "What do you want to drink with your pancakes?"

"I'll have coffee, too."

"Nonsense. He'll have milk." The proclamation came like a decree, in a loud, take-no-prisoners voice. Lukas and Stevie turned together in time to see a foreboding woman with a bold, flowery dress and hair blacker than Coca-Cola waste no time plunking her large pocketbook onto the tabletop. She squeezed her rather ample form next to Stevie, who quickly scooped over because it was either that or be mowed over.

Darlene made a break for the kitchen. Even Lukas found himself sitting up straighter and smoothing out his shirt. "Mrs. Panagakos," he said.

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The woman reached across the table and grabbed his chin in her hand and shook back and forth. “Lukas Achilles Spikonos. You finally had the sense to come back home. It’s about time.” Her brown eyes, heavily made up with eyeliner and eye shadow, got misty behind her big jeweled glasses. “And who, may I ask, is this?”

She released Lukas’s chin from her death grip to eyeball Stevie, who immediately shrank back into his seat.

Lukas smiled. “This is my nephew, Stevie.”

“Hello, Stavros. What a fine, handsome boy. I am Alethea Panagakos. Sit up straight when I speak to you.”

Stevie looked to Lukas for guidance. All he did was nod a little. Because it was fruitless to fight a tsunami. Fortunately Stevie’s pancakes came just then, and he happily dug in.

Mrs.Panagakos turned to Lukas. “Samantha told me you need a babysitter.”

“Yes. But I thought you were moving back to Greece?” Alethea had kept an eye on Lukas after his accident a few years ago. More than an eye. She’d cooked fabulous Greek food for him for weeks while his arm was broken and he couldn’t work. She might look foreboding on the outside but her insides were allrizogalo—Greek rice pudding.

She sighed heavily. “I was so lonely after I divorced. I wanted to return to Mikonos where I would be surrounded by all my relatives. But then my mother came here to

live with me, so I decided to stay. So do you need me?"

He leveled his gaze to hers, knowing there was no point in icing over the truth. "I need you."

"Great," she said, clapping her hands together in glee. "Then I start tomorrow. But I have conditions."

He was afraid of that. "Okay, whatever you say, it's fine."

She held up a warning finger. "I must tell you what they are. First of all, Stavros, you need a haircut and let me see your teeth."

Stevie automatically clamped his mouth shut. "Let me see them, paidi mou," Alethea said. Stevie crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh, I see you are stubborn, like your uncle, yes? Stubborn Greek boys. Well, you must brush your teeth. And your socks don't match."

"We'll do our best to be more tidy tomorrow," Lukas said. "Right, Stevie?" He winked at the boy, just to make sure he knew that Alethea's bark was worse than her bite.

She turned to Lukas. "And don't get me started on you. How come you're still single? You need a nice girl to settle down with, now that you have a family to raise. Stavros needs more brothers and sisters to grow up with."

"Mrs. Panagakos, I—"

"Don't you Mrs. Panagakos me, young man. You're a father now. You have responsibilities. You've officially left your salad days behind you."

He had no idea what salad days were, but she made it sound like it was a good thing they were in the rearview mirror. “Here comes my committee now,” she said. “Stavros, Lukas, I’ll see you boys tomorrow.”

Crazy relief tore through him. The woman was an organizational whirlwind. She was desperate to give love. And she cooked like a Greek Paula Deen. Lukas grabbed a napkin to write on. “I’m renovating one of the houses on the west side of the lake. The Ellises’. You know it?”

“Let me get a pen.”

She rummaged through her enormous bag. Out came a full-sized bottle of hairspray, a packet of wet wipes, a travel-sized can of Lysol, and a kitty shank. She finally produced a pen, which said, Vote for George Gianopoulos for Councilman. He scrawled the address and handed her the napkin and pen.

“Wonderful. I’ll see you boys at eight o’clock tomorrow.” She got up and ran to a group of women who’d just come through the door.

“That old lady scares me,” Stevie said, blowing out a big sigh.

“She scares me, too, buddy.” He lowered his voice. “And you’d better call her Mrs. Panagakos or who knows what might happen.” Lukas made the slit-throat sign with his finger across his neck. Stevie gulped. Until he suddenly began jumping up and down on the vinyl seat and waving frantically at something in the distance. Lukas turned. Samantha Rushford stood at the entrance, being engulfed in an Alethea-hug and surrounded by two other old ladies who made their way down the aisle.

“Sam. Samantha!” The little boy unashamedly flagged her down until she couldn’t help but stop at their table. This time, he scootched over of his own accord.

“Hi, Stevie,” she said with a wide smile, taking the time to sit down next to him.

She wore a yellow printed sundress, her hair swept up in a thick ponytail, and when she breezed by, Lukas caught a whiff of grapefruity body wash. Pretty. He couldn't resist letting his gaze drift down the line of her lovely neck and settle on her fabulous breasts. When he forced his gaze upward, she was frowning. Busted. Samantha eyeballed him like he'd just crawled up from the local sewer. “Lukas.”

“Hey,” he said, rubbing his neck to cover the fact that his face suddenly felt hot. Real smooth. Before he could come up with something more intelligent, Stevie moved in.

“I'll share my pancakes with you.” Stevie was clearly bartering his precious pancakes for her attention, which she gave in spades, tousling his hair and hugging him. Lukas watched the interaction with what he hoped was disinterest, but truth was, it amazed him how instantly and without hesitation she gave the boy her affection.

Just as she had him, once upon a time.

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Sam pushed the plate of pancakes back toward Stevie. “Oh, thanks, but I’m here for a meeting. You go ahead and enjoy.”

“Will you come over later and see our house?”

Sam looked a little incredulous, as if the idea of Lukas in a real house was too great a stretch of the imagination.

Stevie shook his head. He had a blueberry smudge on his chin that made him look even sweeter. “Uncle Lukas got us arealhouse. And I’m going to have a whole bedroom to myself. Right, Uncle Lukas?”

Samantha shot Lukas a dubious look. It saddened him to think she thought so little of him, something he’d actually encouraged in the past. Something he still needed to do, because God knew a woman so full of sunshine and light would have no business getting mixed up with him. But dammit, he was trying his best with Stevie. Somehow he wanted her to know that. “Right,” he said. “And you get to pick what color you want it painted.”

“I told you, Uncle Lukas, I want black with flames.”

“Well, that might be a little complicated, but we’ll see what we can do.”

“Flames?” Sam said, her pretty mouth turning up in a half smile. She had a wholesome, fresh look, so unlike the mascara-lined, tatted-up groupies that waited so eagerly for him and his entourage after every show, in every city. The same screaming, worshipping women, hoping for a chance to say they fucked an up-and-

comer. He couldn't do it. Not that he didn't ever sleep with women but nevertheless. Not the adoring, desperate ones who wanted to do it for bragging rights.

"Yeah, you know," Stevie said. "Like big, huge, giant flames, all orange and red and purple."

"Why do you want flames?" Sam asked. Lukas was amused by the conversation, but his mind had wandered. Specifically to Samantha's amazing rack. Not that the sundress was slutty at all but he couldn't help noticing she'd filled out some in the past six years. Her breasts weren't large by any means but they were ... amazing. Each one would be ... a perfect handful.

"Because they're really cool," Stevie said. "And they look like *The Fast and the Furious*."

Sam stabbed Lukas with a glare, forcing his thoughts back. "He's been watching R-rated movies?"

Lukas felt his face heat again. She didn't know the half of it, but now wasn't the time to discuss that. So he deflected the question. "Tell you what, Steven, how about a nice shade of blue? All guys like blue, right? It's a manly color."

Stevie's brows knit together in a frown. "Uncle Lukas, you promised. Black with flames."

Sam rubbed the kid's shoulder. Lukas could tell from the way her eyes went all mushy that she, too, was appalled by his boniness. "Tell you what," she said. "I'm an art teacher. I actually know how to paint flames. Maybe I can come over and help when the time comes, okay?"

Stevie nodded, very pleased, the little flirt. Great, just what Lukas didn't want. Her at

his house. A visual flitted through his mind of Sam pushing the paint roller along the plain white walls, moving that gorgeous little ass of hers as she reached up and down, up and down. He forced himself to shake off the thought.

“Well, I’ve got to go,” Sam said. “I’ve got a breakfast meeting for the Mirror Lake Historical Society. See you guys later.” She was off with a wave and a smile.

Sunshine had left the table. He couldn’t help noticing how that yellow dress brought out the natural red highlights in her auburn hair. And how her hips sashayed so softly in that dress. It took a minute for Lukas to realize both he and Stevie were staring after her.

Saying that he’d always been attracted to Samantha was an understatement. She still drove him wild, maybe because she was so unlike all the other women he’d known. In the past, his common sense had prevailed. Breaking up with her had saved her and him from what would have been a disastrous match, a combustible scorcher of an affair that would have taken both of them down in flames, like Stevie’s imaginary paint job.

She was from a different world than he was. She deserved someone who knew how to love, not a damaged man whose entire personality had been forged while being shuttled between one foster home and the next. That sentiment had made him leave six years ago. He just had to make sure he didn’t forget it now.

Problem was, impulsiveness had always gotten him into trouble. And the intoxication of seeing her beautiful face again made him want to break all the rules.

He couldn’t forget the reasons he was back—to try to make a home for Stevie in the closest place to a home he’d ever had himself. To find a place where they could escape when they weren’t on the road. To find Stevie—and himself—some normalcy. Not to obsess about an old love who was already spoken for.

She's not married yet, a voice taunted from inside his head. Why hadn't that idiot married her after six years?

Lukas reached over to sneak a bite of pancake from Stevie's plate. It tasted like sweet nostalgia. He had to stop this foolishness and focus on his goals. Stevie watched him silently, then reached over and grabbed Lukas's coffee and took a big gulp. He set it down and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Don't like milk," he said with a big grin.

He was a charmer, all right, with those big long lashes and that angelic smile. Lukas slid back his mug and took his own sip. "Whatever you do, don't tell that to Mrs. Panagakos."

Samantha plopped down on the orange vinyl seat next to her sweet little grandmother, Effie, and gave her a quick side hug. She said hi to Effie's best friend, Gloria, and Mrs. Panagakos, who were seated across the table. Gloria wore a regal-looking Queen Elizabethesque red suit and matching hat overlain with red netting. Alethea patted her own poof of hairsprayed hair and adjusted her big glasses to see the menu. Effie, in a fuzzy pink sweater and matching orthopedic sneakers, eyeballed Sam up and down in her no-nonsense way that made Sam know it was only a matter of time before the interrogation began.

Jess slipped into the booth next to Sam. "Are you all right?" she whispered as the older ladies talked loudly among themselves as always.

"Of course I'm all right," Sam said, sounding a little too passionate. She was not all right. Her heart was pumping crazily, knocking hard against her chest the way it always did whenever she came within twenty feet of Lukas Spikonos. Her body always seemed to react to him like it hadn't gotten the memo that Lukas Spikonos was out of bounds, off limits, and, in general, really bad for her.

“Oh, my God, you haven’t seen it, have you?” Jess said.

In response to Sam’s confused look, Jess slid her phone across the table. There, recorded for posterity, was the evidence of her indiscretion. No, just to be clear, of Lukas’ indiscretion. It was a stunning photo, a sensuous lip lock of a couple bathed in a spotlight and surrounded by darkness. The photographer had captured the kiss in such a way that a beam of light shone between their two faces, as if the sun were between them. Lukas’s hand was reaching behind her neck, pulling her close. It was romantic and ethereal and sent goose bumps pinpricking up and down her spine.

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Good thing she hadn't eaten breakfast yet because she suddenly felt queasy. It was a scandalous shot. A shame, because her hair looked really good in that picture and in an alternate universe, she would have been proud to show it around. She blinked as she looked at the bottom of the screen. It had been retweeted a thousand times.

A thousand?

Before she could process that, her phone rang. Harris's name lit up on the screen. The old ladies stopped their chatter, no doubt sensing some big, juicy conversation.

Sam watched the phone buzz in her hand. She didn't ask for Lukas to kiss her in front of the entire school, and now, apparently, most of the world. She'd been an innocent bystander. Harris would understand that, right?

Of course he would. He was the love of her life and he of all people would understand. She would tell him it was all a mistake, a silly stunt, and he would offer wisdom in that soothing tone of his.

"My God, Samantha, what is going on there?" Harris's voice was higher pitched than usual and irritated. Okay, so he didn't sound very happy. Or forgiving. Or in the mood to soothe. The ladies stared like they'd heard every word. Which they probably had, because Harris was practically shouting.

She wanted to tell him she had nothing to do with it. That she'd had to go up there, and she couldn't possibly have predicted that Lukas would kiss her. For longer than was appropriate. In front of the entire student body. Who had happily tweeted and Facebooked and Instagrammed it into the wild.

But she couldn't say that. Not only because it sounded weak, but because another emotion besides embarrassment over the ridiculous picture was engulfing her. Guilt, which had settled in her stomach like a lump of sodden oatmeal. She might not have been able to predict that audacious kiss, but dammit, it had been one hell of a kiss. She knew it was wrong, but she couldn't stop replaying it over and over in her mind. And she was so, so afraid she'd actually enjoyed it.

Sam got up and walked through the aisle of the diner and out onto Main Street. She stepped into an alley between two brick buildings and took a deep breath. "It's not what it seems."

"What do you mean?"

"The kids were chanting to get me up there, so I went, and Lukas thought he was being funny. I never thought it would go that far."

She heard a heavy sigh that made her cringe a little. "I was hoping to get engaged soon, Sam, but I'm afraid to say that this sets us back. I can't possibly ask you to marry me with this bad publicity. A man like me with a big political career in front of him has got to be very, very careful. And so do you."

Sam rubbed her forehead. "I'm so sorry." She would never want to derail his career. Yet his words galled. He was basing when he popped the question on bad press? On how she presented herself publicly? That hurt. She tried to understand. This was the man she loved. His career was stressful and important. His life was a clean slate, and he wanted to marry someone who had one, too. And up until yesterday, except for that old trouble in high school, she did.

Harris cleared his throat, a habit he had when he was all business. "It's just that I don't like him being back here, Sam. The last time he came back I almost lost you."

Aww. His words touched her and deflated her anger. He did love her. He was worried about losing her. She opened her mouth to say he didn't have to worry about that when he spoke again. "I don't want you near him, okay? That guy's bad news."

For a town the size of a football field, that was pretty near impossible, unless Lukas was a recluse. Which, if she was lucky, he just might just be, because he'd always been a loner. "I'll do my best. Are you still coming next weekend?" She wished Harris didn't have to be in Boston, working on a court case. She needed to see him now, to be with him. He would put this all in perspective and those rogue thoughts of a certain tattooed rocker would be driven right out of her mind.

"I'll be there Sunday morning and we'll spend the whole day together. I can't wait to see you, sweetheart."

"Me, too." Harris would come, and everything would be all right. Wouldn't it?

When Sam reentered the diner and took her seat, Jess shot her a concerned look. "I'd get you a drink if they sold liquor here," she said in a low voice, then louder, "How about a shot of espresso?"

Gloria didn't give her a chance to answer. "Your boyfriend is jealous about that kiss."

"A little jealousy is good," Alethea said. "It makes a man realize what he's got, if you know what I mean." This was accompanied by a knowing nod, to which the other women solemnly bobbed their heads in return.

Effie, her lovely, white-haired grandma, eagerly piped in. "Maybe this little incident will help Harris see how special you are."

"If he thought you were special," Gloria said, "he'd buy you a tiara. All the princesses get one. The man you love should treat you like royalty."

“This isn’t England, Gloria,” Alethea said. “American men don’t even know what tiaras are.”

“Well, maybe they should,” Gloria said. “Does he know what an engagement ring is?”

Not even five minutes, and this was getting out of control. “Gran, Harris does think I’m special,” Sam said. “Just because he tells me in private doesn’t make it any less meaningful.” It troubled Sam that Grandma Effie, who loved everyone and who never had a bad word to say, disliked Harris. Maybe because she’d always distrusted wealth. Effie didn’t understand that Harris had picked her, plain old unremarkable her, who’d been raised by her grandma and her crazy band of brothers, who’d never been anything special.

After she’d been bullied in high school, she never thought she’d find someone who wouldn’t judge her, who wanted her for who she was, much less find a decent, respectable man who met everyone in her family’s approval ... well, except Effie’s, that is. Or at least, Effie was the only vocal one about her feelings. Sometimes her sisters-in-law cast each other worried looks when they thought she wasn’t looking. It was just their way of wanting to make sure she was happy and being treated well, and she was. She really was.

“I don’t blame him for being upset,” Sam said. “What Lukas did was outrageous. It was completely inappropriate. I mean, I’d be angry, too.”

Alethea spoke next. “I like men who are brazen and bold. Besides, who can resist a handsome Greek man like that? Even if he does have tattoos everywhere.”

“I certainly wouldn’t even try to resist him,” Jess said, after which Sam elbowed her in the ribs. Whose side was she on, anyway?

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“I can’t help it,” Jess said, rubbing her side. “The tattoos are hot.”

Sam couldn’t deny Lukas’s heavily tattooed arms added just the right touch of danger to his dark chocolate eyes, his gypsy black hair, and his Mediterranean skin. No wonder why, in her misguided youth, he’d appealed to her so intensely. She’d been begging for escape from the short cords of her brothers’ scrutiny and he’d been the perfect foil.

That was in the past. Perhaps Effie should spend her time counseling Jess on choosing the right man instead of chastising Sam for choosing someone who was reliable, upstanding, and steadfast.

“Maybe you should live a little,” Effie said, looking right at her. Oh, God, this was coming from her grandmother? Really? “I just don’t want you to be stuck in an unhappy marriage.” Effie patted her hand. As if that would take away the sting of her comment.

Gloria nodded. “There’s nothing worse. Look at Charles and Diana. A tragedy all around.”

“Okay, ladies,” Sam said, “thanks very much, but I think we need to get down to business.” She opened her purse and pulled out a folder. “The donor dinner for the Palace Theater restoration is just two weeks away. And the big benefit concert is a week after that.”

Mirror Lake was home to one of only a handful of atmospheric theaters left in the United States, former movie palaces built in the 1920s and made to look like exotic

places. Theirs was a Moorish palace adorned with alabaster sculptures, elaborate carvings, and, the crowning glory, the dome of a night sky complete with twinkling stars and passing wisps of clouds. The theater was one of her favorite places in the world, and she was head of the committee in charge of raising money for its restoration.

“We’re still a million dollars short to get matching funds from the state grant that expires this year,” Alethea said. “We could use a high-profile star to perform at the benefit to bring in the bucks.”

“Wait,” Sam said. “What do you mean we need a star? I thought we were going with that actor who had a little run on Broadway.”

“The one that sings in that lounge off Route 95?” Jess asked.

“He had a wedding to sing at,” Alethea said.

Effie sighed. “And John Mayer said no.”

What? Did they actually think John Mayer would come to Mirror Lake?

“Maybe we should try Barbra Streisand,” Gloria said. “She’d look so regal standing there in our beautiful theater, with the exotic palace setting and the twinkling stars and her glorious voice ...”

“I can’t deny Babs is like buttah, Gloria,” Jess said, “but she hardly ever does live appearances. Ed Sheeran’s in New York that weekend. Maybe he could stop over for a couple hours.”

John Mayer? Ed Sheeran? Barbra? They were shooting for the stars with no time left to spare. She could understand the old ladies being too far out to reel back in but Jess

too? “Jess, do you really think—”

“Oh, I love that young man,” Gloria clapped her hands together. “He’s got that lovely red hair like Prince Harry.”

Something caught Sam’s eye. Stevie was waving both his arms wildly, trying to attract her attention. “Sam. Sammy. Watch this!” He’d wound his blanket around his head to look like a mummy (with all the holes and shreds it came very close to looking exactly like that), and he’d flung his arms out stiffly in front of him and swayed back and forth.

“Now there’s a cute boyfriend for you,” Effie said. “That child is adorable.”

At that moment Lukas turned around, maybe sensing that all five women were staring his way. His gaze suddenly locked with Sam’s. She immediately looked down and studied the contents of her folder.

“I think someone else has an eye out for you, too,” Effie said in a singsong voice.

“Speaking of the devil, maybe you should ask Lukas if he’d sing at the benefit,” Jess said in a dead-serious voice. “Time is getting short.”

Sam sent her now-former best friend the Glare of Death.

Jess held her hands up in defense. “Just an idea. We need a commitment on paper or this theater project is going to flop, right when we’re down to the last stretch.”

Sam bit her lip, lest she remind them that procuring the entertainment hadn’t been her job. It was their job. Which they’d failed to do.

“After all this hard work,” Effie said solemnly. Her compadres nodded.

“Besides,” Jess said, “you two go way back and with him being the hometown son and all, he’d certainly attract a crowd.”

“Um, no. I’m not asking him.” Sam looked down at her stupid folder then back up at everyone. She’d never seen so many I’m-so-disappointed-in-you looks in her life.

“There’s always Victor Irving,” Effie said.

Oh, God. Never!

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“Isn’t he, like, ninety?” Jess said exactly what Sam was thinking, but Sam shot her a poignant look that signaled senior alert until she got the hint. “I mean, um, not that there’s anything wrong with being ninety or anything, but—”

“He’s not ninety. May I remind you, young lady,” Alethea said, “Tony Bennett did that CD with Lady Gaga, who positively worships him. Age has nothing to do with talent.”

In this case, it definitely did. Victor was a one-hit wonder from the seventies who never turned down an opportunity to perform.

Sam pinched her nose. “Okay, I’ll ask.”

“Bravo!” Alethea said.

“Brilliant!” Gloria chimed in.

“Okay. Are there any other orders of business?”

Jess slid another folder in front of Sam. “We have one homeowner who bought a lakefront bungalow. The architectural review committee vetoed his addition because it violates the roofline restrictions. It’s your turn to deliver the bad news.”

Every month, the committee reviewed the plans of all the new builds and remodels on the hundred-year-old-plus houses around the lake and turned in the violations to the Historical Society. They were all committed to preserving the historic community, and the guidelines on remodeling were strict.

“Here’s the file, the address, and the contact information.”

The table suddenly became very quiet. Sam looked around. Alethea was drinking coffee, Effie was drumming her fingers on the table, and Gloria was humming “God Save the Queen.”

“What is it?” Sam asked. No answer. She looked down at the file. Lukas’s name was printed on the little tab.

“You all are out for blood today, aren’t you?” Sam said. “I’m not doing it.”

“But you’re on this month,” Alethea said.

“Trade me. Please.” She stared at Jess, her ex-former-way-in-the-past best friend.

“I’ve got a date this afternoon. Sorry.”

Sam eyeballed the three other women, who suddenly got very busy rummaging through their purses for tips. “Ladies? Please.” She didn’t want to beg, but she was desperate. After the lip-lock photo, there was no way in hell she wanted another run-in with Lukas. Especially alone.

“Just do your job, Samantha, dear,” Effie said in her pragmatic tone.

“My doctor says I should avoid uneven surfaces in construction areas because of my bunions,” Alethea said.

“I’m terribly sorry, dear,” Gloria said, “but there’s a Downton Abbey marathon on TV this afternoon and Maurice and I have invited friends over to watch with us.”

“Fine.” How hard could it be? Knock on the door, explain the violations, and tell the

rock star he's got thirty days to comply or he's in big trouble.

Too bad she had the sinking feeling that she was the one in big trouble.

CHAPTER 5

Lukas should never have sent his road crew away for the weekend. The house he'd bought without seeing it for the past eight years was an epic disaster, despite the professionals he'd hired to make it livable by the time he brought Stevie here.

"We've found accommodations, sir," Charles said, slipping his phone into his suit pocket, "but they're a full hour out of town. The SUV you ordered just arrived so we're ready anytime."

"Great. Thanks." Lukas saw the vehicle parked in the gravel driveway. James was standing talking to the driver.

In theory, taking Mom and Pop Ellis's old Craftsman-style bungalow, with its breathtaking lakefront view, and turning it into the home it was always meant to be sounded romantic and comforting. After all, it was the only place that had ever felt like home.

The fact was, all the workmen had up and left a half hour ago in a haze of saw- and drywall dust. Lukas was sneezing and his nose was running but Stevie was doing all that plus coughing like crazy. Lukas had finally brought both of them out on the back porch for some fresh air and a regroup for Plan B.

But Plan B, finding a nearby hotel, also failed on all levels. It was Boat Festival weekend and every B and B in a twenty-mile radius and every room in the Grand Victorian Hotel were booked solid.

He didn't want to take Stevie out of Mirror Lake. When the world found out Lukas had a kid with him, the paparazzi would swarm like a horde of angry bees. That kiss caught on film last night would be nothing compared to the speculation a child would bring. Here in the boonies, at least for now, there was some protection. Being on his own property meant he could control his borders. He needed to keep Stevie private for at least a little while anyway.

Oh, hell. Even Charles and James looked miserable, with drywall dust scattered like a coating of powdered sugar on their nice black suits.

Lukas signaled to Charles that he was going to walk around to the back of the house and sneak a smoke. He tried hard not to smoke in front of the boy, but in the past hour he'd held in every curse word he knew, forced himself not to raise his voice, and signed autographs for all the construction crew's wives.

Funny that he could summon any kind of help at the crook of a finger yet he felt very alone. But then, he always had. Lukas didn't lean on people because there was no one he could trust. No one before the Ellises and no one since.

He could have trusted Sam, a voice inside his head chided. She'd begged him to, but he'd pushed her away.

With a pang, he remembered feeling this same helplessness, and Martha Ellis leading him into this very house by the shoulders, sitting him down at the kitchen table, and feeding him homemade chicken soup and apple pie. She'd filled his belly and overfilled his heart. For a brief time, he'd had a family, and it was taken away from him all too soon. He ached for her kind reassurance now. Everything's going to be just fine, son, was her go-to phrase.

The Ellises had made him feel like he was somebody, not a label—not the persona of a no-good, sassy kid with bad attitude that he'd slid into so well, because it was what

everyone had expected. Somehow, they taught him that he could be somebody. Too bad they hadn't lived to see him now.

They'd made him go to church and they taught him to pray. He didn't do that so often anymore, but he found that lately he'd been trying it for Stevie's sake. Please, God, help me to take care of this kid. He didn't want Stevie to ever sense his fear and unease, and okay, his complete terror at being the one in charge—the one to give comfort, to reassure, when he didn't have a clue what the hell he was doing.

Suddenly he heard the crunch of tires up the winding gravel drive, past the apple trees and up to the front of the old bungalow.

Then she got out. The sun hit the red-gold highlights in her hair, and her pale skin looked perfect in the midday light. If he were a painter he'd stop everything and paint her, get every peachy-creamy detail down on canvas for posterity. The white gauzy sweater she'd put on over her dress flapped in the breeze like angel wings. That's when he knew he'd about lost it. She was no angel, just a beautiful woman who'd always made his mouth go dry.

He squashed his cigarette under his heel. For some reason she made him wish he was better and stronger, and being caught with a cigarette was a sign of weakness he didn't want her to see. That and the fact he was standing outside of his own damn home with Stevie coloring with sidewalk chalk on the patio bricks, oblivious that they were essentially homeless.

Sam carried a manila folder. "Hi again, Spike."

He winced at the stupid nickname. He wanted to tell her to stop calling him that but he had more important things on his mind. Like where he and Stevie were going to spend the night.

“Nice place,” she said, looking at the old house with the peeling paint and the dilapidated red barn in the distance.

While she studied the house, Lukas flicked his gaze over her. Untamable hair pulled back in a ponytail. Shapely legs. She smelled fresh as the breeze off the lake. Lord, but she was breathtaking, yet she was still the kind of woman who had no idea how gorgeous she was.

What he couldn't or wouldn't express, Stevie did instead. “Sam! You're here!” Stevie dropped his chalk and came up to her, coughing. “Come see my dragons I drew.”

Sam didn't just walk over and praise the child. She stooped and picked up a piece of chalk and asked if she could add flames coming out of the dragon's mouth and steam out of his nostrils, which she sketched in quickly.

“I have to talk to your uncle for a little while, then I'll come back, okay?” Sam said. Then she stood and leveled those jade-green eyes on Lukas. “I'm here on business. Can we talk for a few minutes?”

He guided her over into an area of lawn between the house and the detached garage, which was next to the barn, and they stood in the shade of an old oak tree. He couldn't help noticing how the dapples of light filtering through the branches caught her hair, turning it to strands of flame.

“You're doing a lot of work to the place,” Sam said, eyeing the Dumpster full of construction debris, the roof half shingled and partly covered with plastic.

“Do me a favor,” he said. “Just tell me why you're here. You're with the Historical Society, right? My crew already told me the gist of it before they left for the weekend. I'm violating some rule or something.”

“Your addition doesn’t meet the architectural review board’s guidelines. You can’t make the roofline that high in a house over a hundred years old. It blocks the surrounding view.”

“The back room is perfect for a studio. I just need more natural light. Can I appeal?”

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“You need more natural light for a recording studio?”

“No. For an art studio.”

Her eyes widened. Ha, she was surprised he was still doing his art. Well, since he'd taken to the road he hadn't, but that was going to change. Stevie might have been his reason for picking a permanent place to settle but doing art relaxed him and he'd always dreamed of having a studio.

Stevie coughed again, on and on. Charles went into the house to get him some water.

“What's going on with Stevie?” Sam asked.

Lukas shook his head. “He's been doing that since we walked into the house. There's dust everywhere.”

“You can't stay here.”

He leveled his gaze at her.

“Oh, sorry. You already know that.”

“I've made other arrangements. Down Route Nine a ways. The whole town's booked.”

Charles left the patio and began walking toward them. “Excuse me, sir, but the boy is having some trouble catching his breath.”

Lukas ran toward Stevie before he even registered the panic that tightened his own chest. Or Sam's own gasp of surprise. Stevie was sitting forward on the patio stone, his chest heaving with the effort of breathing. Not normal.

Lukas turned to Sam, who was right behind him. "I'm taking him to the ER." He was usually calm by nature, but now he felt completely helpless.

"I'll drive, sir," Charles said.

"I'm coming with you." Sam was already heading toward the car and thrusting open the doors.

He gave a quick nod of thanks and bent to scoop up his child.

Lukas carried Stevie into the too-familiar ER. The boy's shoulders were lifting unnaturally with every breath. It made Lukas feel short of breath too, which was why he could barely talk to the triage nurse. Fortunately, Sam could. She'd placed a hand calmly on his arm and sent him a look that said *I got this*. She proceeded to tell the story—as much as she knew, anyway—and he managed to add a few more details. The nurse led them immediately into a room, slapped a breathing mask over Stevie's face, and started an aerosol.

Stevie shifted panic-filled eyes onto Lukas, making Lukas's stomach instantly slide down to his feet. Somehow he planted what he hoped was a reassuring expression on his face and forced his mouth upward into a semblance of a smile. Sort of like he did after he'd signed his hundredth autograph of the day for somebody's Aunt Edith back in Kalamazoo. "Hey, buddy, it's like you're an astronaut," Lukas said. "Just breathe deep and get ready for takeoff, okay?"

Stevie wasn't buying it. "Don't—like—needles," came out in muffled sobs from behind the plastic of the mask and above the hiss of the oxygen. Tears leaked down

the kid's face. He'd held up so well despite everything that had happened to him the last couple of months—maybe too well. Hadn't he suffered enough?

Sam stood on the other side of the gurney, clutching Stevie's hand and gently stroking his back. The kid practically had a death grip on her. Relief washed through Lukas that she was here—that she'd insisted on staying with Stevie. Yet it stung that Stevie so obviously preferred her over him, confirming what Lukas already knew: that he was clueless about being a parent.

“Is there going to be a needle—oops, I mean an IV?” Lukas asked the nurse who listened to Stevie's lungs and began to pull things out of her pocket—a roll of tape, a few syringes, and rectangular plastic-wrapped packages of what looked to be IV needles.

The nurse patted Stevie on the hand and began to rip pieces of tape. “Dr. Rushford will be right in but he told me to start one so we can give you medicine right into your veins,” she said.

Stevie pulled off the mask. “My veins don't want medicine. My mouth does.”

Before Stevie could make another comment, the door opened and a tall, good-looking guy in green scrubs with a close-shaved beard walked in.

Ben Rushford. Samantha's brother.

To Ben's credit, he took in the scene pretty quickly. His sister fumbling to replace Stevie's askew mask. Lukas, who hoped he didn't look as panicked as he felt. The child, still breathing heavily. He went right to Stevie and told him in a calm, soothing voice who he was and that he was going to have a listen. That everything was going to be okay, that his lungs didn't like the dust in the house and were having a reaction but the medicine was going to make it all better.

Lukas had to admit, the guy could relate to children. He felt his own anxiety unwind a notch.

“Let’s get another albuterol going, Tracey,” Ben instructed the nurse.

Then came the questions, all rapid-fire and professional. What happened, did Stevie have a history of asthma? Lukas felt clueless. He had to ask Stevie himself if he’d had any trouble like this before.

Allergic reaction, he heard dimly. From something in the house, the drywall dust or some old stuff that got stirred up from all the mucking around that was being done.

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This was all his fault. He hadn't had Stevie a whole month yet and look where he'd ended up. It reminded him of the last time he'd run into Ben Rushford in this same ER—Lukas himself lay on a gurney, strapped to a backboard and angry at the whole world. Without a single person to care for him.

Except Samantha. She'd stepped up to the plate despite the cruel way he'd cut her out of his life the summer before.

"Does he have any allergies?" Ben asked.

"I—I don't think so. But I'm allergic to penicillin. Does that matter?"

Ben spoke kindly and professionally. Lukas had to give the man credit. Whatever personal feelings he harbored toward Lukas (and Lukas felt pretty confident they were not warm and fuzzy ones), he managed to disguise them pretty well. Lukas had to remind himself he wasn't that same lost kid, with the piercings and the bad haircut and the awful attitude. He'd come a long way since then. Had made something of himself that he was proud of. Not that Ben would be impressed. It was likely he still wanted him to stay the hell away from his sister.

Ben left, promising to check back in. It wasn't until after the third aerosol, when Stevie had begun to breathe normally again, that Lukas felt the tightness in his own chest ease up a little. Stevie sat sleeping on his lap, IV snaking from his arm, skinny legs with Minion tennies dangling against Lukas's calves. There was something about the boy, the sleeping weight of him, warm and smelling of sunshine and sweat and having cherry Popsicle drips on his shirt, that tugged at some raw place in Lukas's chest. He'd put this child in danger without even knowing it. The hiss of the aerosol

machine seemed to incriminate him.

That thought superseded everything else. His fault. He should have known better. Like the countless things he'd done wrong that had earned him the belt when he was younger. Unpredictable things that a young child couldn't possibly know, like how to iron a man's shirt perfectly or how to make coffee when your father was rip-roaring drunk and ready to beat the shit out of your mother.

"We've got to stop meeting in hospitals like this," Sam said, breaking into his morose thoughts.

He looked up and saw her smiling, her bright yellow dress a warm contrast to the sterile-looking room. Had she sensed his struggle and was trying to pull him out of that dark place? Nah, he doubted it.

Or maybe so. She'd always sensed his moods in an uncanny way.

"Yeah, the bright fluorescent lighting and all this white tile really sets my blood to pumping," he said. Actually, she was the one who set his blood to pumping. Like someone humming a song quietly in the background, his awareness of her was always present, even amid his worry over Stevie. This hospital—hell, any hospital—only brought back bad memories but frankly, he could be in the middle of a snowstorm in Antarctica and still want her.

"Remember the first time?" she asked. He could swear she'd said it teasingly, like she was remembering an entirely other kind of first time.

That brought back images of his tiny one-room apartment over the garage, the two of them tangled up together on his futon, doing things to one another in the glow of the solitary streetlamp as darkness wrapped around them like a soft warm blanket.

Even then she'd been water slipping through his fingers. She would always be impossible to hold on to. There had never been a right time for them, and there never would be.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Spikonos," Sam said, snapping him back to reality. "Did I ever tell you I saw you when they first brought you into this very same ER? You were strapped on to that backboard, and that pretty face of yours was all messed up."

He'd suffered a concussion and a broken arm from being thrown off his motorcycle over the inlet bridge and was lucky as hell he didn't drown in the lake because some astute fisherman had fished his sorry ass out of the water.

"Not sure I ever thanked you for that," he said.

She raised an elegant brow. "You're welcome. You are lucky to be alive. Not everyone who nearly slams into a chicken truck and then careens off the bridge survives."

Maybe it was the simple act of holding this helpless child that made his brain go mushy, that made him confess, "Martha Ellis had just died the week before. I jumped on my bike and took off. I was careless."

"You never told me that. I mean, I knew she'd died, but I didn't realize ..." She looked surprised. Why had he said that? He didn't want her pity.

He shrugged. "It was still a stupid-ass thing to do." Yet she'd sat by his side even so, when he didn't have a single soul to claim as friend or family.

"Why wouldn't you tell me that? I mean, I sat with you for a week."

“I didn’t want to get you involved.”

“That’s what friends are for, Lukas.”

“I was lucky to have you there. You ... took care of me.” She’d done more than that. She didn’t leave his side for the entire time he was in the hospital.

She flapped a hand dismissively. “You would’ve done fine without me.”

Their gazes locked. Her eyes looked a little glassy. His heart pumped strongly in his chest, and words formed in his throat, compelling him to tell her she had no idea how her sitting there night and day had urged on his recovery, had made him want to heal. Her presence had given him a reason to go on even when the only two people who’d ever loved him were both gone too soon. He opened his mouth, but the words tangled in his throat. His time to say that had expired by about six years. No point in starting now, when she was practically engaged.

The door opened, and Ben walked back in.

Sam sat upright and greeted the tall doctor. “It’s about time you came back.”

He sent her a brotherly glare, then set about listening to Stevie’s lungs through his stethoscope. “He’s a lot more comfortable now.” Yes, Lukas could see it. Stevie was still sleeping, breathing calmly. Ben sat back on a nearby stool and unhooked his stethoscope.

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“I had no idea,” Lukas said. “I didn’t know he had allergies.”

Ben crossed his arms and eyed him solemnly. Here was the part when he told him how badly he’d effed up. Lukas could feel it coming. “You couldn’t have known. You said you don’t have any medical history on him?”

“Just a couple pages of records from about two years ago. He hasn’t had regular care and he’s behind on his shots.”

Ben just sat there and nodded. Like he was expecting more.

“His mother did her best but she was young and poor and then she got sick. I was planning to get him a regular doctor once we got settled in.” He paused. “I should have known better than to let him run through that dusty house.”

Ben glanced from his sister to Lukas. Lukas knew that expression. It was a worried-big-brother expression that signaled just how badly he wanted his sister the hell away from Lukas and his trouble. He’d gotten that vibe from Brad six years ago, and right now it was coming through loud and clear. Who could blame him? His “family” was the exact opposite of the Rushfords—he and his four brothers scattered across the winds after their family imploded, none of whom he’d seen in years.

Surprisingly, Ben laughed. “Welcome to parenthood. I’d say, Lukas, you just passed your first test, which is feeling guilt for things that aren’t even your fault. But you did the right thing, getting Stevie here as soon as possible. And of course you can’t take him back there now.”

Lukas pulled his phone out of his pocket to make some calls. “I found another place for us to stay.”

“Don’t bother,” Samantha said gently. “I’m house-sitting for a couple who are traveling in Europe for the summer and they have a guesthouse. It has a nice kitchen and a yard with a play set and even a pool. Stevie will be comfortable there. You two are coming back with me.”

“Can I talk to you, Sam?” Ben didn’t wait for her answer. “Excuse us for a minute.” He nodded briefly at Lukas, then steered Sam into the hall, through a set of double doors into a large white-tiled corridor. “What are you doing with this guy again? He’s been trouble from the beginning.”

Sam couldn’t help but roll her eyes. Her usually easygoing brother had cut right to the chase. “Please don’t treat me like I’m nineteen or twenty again,” she said. “I had no choice but to help out. It’s late and my place is five minutes away. It’s a lot better for Stevie.” She was aware that she was hiding behind the excuse of helping an innocent child when in reality things were far more complicated. But she didn’t owe her brother explanations. She was an adult now, something her older brothers tended to forget. “Make that I wanted to help out. Regardless of the past, when people need help, people need help.”

“Don’t pull an Effie on me.”

She couldn’t help smiling. Their grandmother had the softest heart in Mirror Lake. Or all of Connecticut, for that matter. “Oh, come on, Benjamin. You’re one to talk. Meg’s adopted more seniors from assisted living than anyone in town. And stray cats. And of course she saved you.”

It was his turn to eye roll. “Don’t bring my wife into this.” Then he grasped her by the shoulders and gave her a long, hard stare, drilling into her with his deep brown

eyes. Empathic eyes. Perfect for doctoring. “You’ve always had a savior complex with this guy. But he’s more than capable of being on his own. Why do you insist on helping him when he’s brought you nothing but heartache?”

Sam didn’t miss the passion in his voice. Or his grip for that matter, which felt like he wished he could shake some sense into her. His concern almost made her tear up. Except it also made her angry. Did he not trust her judgment at all? “The entire town’s booked,” she said. “What am I supposed to do, tell him to go find a place in Hartford?”

“It’s only an hour away,” Ben said. “And the answer is yes. What the hell is Harris going to do when he finds out this guy is staying in your guesthouse?”

Um, yeah, that had crossed her mind. “It’s only for a few days, until Lukas can make other arrangements.”

“Sam, don’t ruin a good thing. Harris is a good guy, but there’s only so much a good guy can take, you know what I mean? Lukas has already hurt you twice. Rushford brothers don’t treat repeat offenders very kindly.”

“I remember how angry Brad was the last time,” Sam said.

“And he doesn’t know the half of it, does he? Strike Three could unleash nuclear Armageddon.”

Sam winced, on the inside at least. When she was nineteen, her breakup with Lukas had come at a very bad time. Their brother Kevin had just died, and Brad and his now-wife Olivia were working out their own relationship and taking care of Kevin’s baby daughter.

Brad had always disliked Lukas. Even in Sam’s distress over their breakup, she

hadn't told Brad the complete truth about their relationship, that she and Lukas were a lot more intimate than she'd admitted. He would've had a cow, and things were already bad enough.

Sam shook her head. "Thanks, Brad." His face showed her he didn't miss the reference to their oldest brother, who surely must have done a happy dance the day Lukas left town for good. "I know what I'm doing." No she didn't, but it was too late. The offer stood and she wasn't going to take it back.

Ben raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Okay, fine. Just trying to save you some heartache. Excuse me for being a concerned big brother." He paused. "What do you want me to tell Brad?"

"Don't tell him, Ben. It's none of his business. Or yours. I'm an adult now, in case you've forgotten."

"Then make sure you act like one."

Sam watched him as he did a little fingers-to-forehead salute before he turned down the corridor. It was a curse being the youngest girl in a family of brothers. She wondered how old she would have to be before those guys would treat her like an equal. She was so tired of being the baby sister. Every part of her life was a field day, open to their speculation and scrutiny. And of course they always felt obligated to voice their opinions—rather loudly, in fact.

She always respected her brother's standing as a physician in their community. That's why she carefully looked around, making sure no one was in the corridor. "Ben," she called. When he turned, she flipped him the bird and grinned before she pressed the metal handicapped wall button to open the double doors and make her way back to Lukas and Stevie.

CHAPTER 6

Sam told herself to drop the groceries off on top of the little counter of the guesthouse kitchen and leave. After all, she did not want to run into Lukas again. In fact, she'd gone out extra early to Gertie's for groceries to avoid that. This was a simple act of kindness. For Stevie. She'd wanted Stevie to have breakfast. That was all.

Yet, like a girl in a slasher movie, she felt stupidly compelled to walk past the kitchen. There's a monster loose and he's killed everyone but I'll be fine. She just wanted to reassure herself that Stevie was all right. She tiptoed past the comfy couches and the pretty stone fireplace in the little sitting room where brilliant shafts of sunlight streamed in, took in the fabulous clear blue view of Mirror Lake out all the front windows, and craned her neck around the doorway to the adjacent bedroom.

The door was ajar and she couldn't resist peeking in. Stevie was sprawled out like a starfish on the big bed, that omnipresent ratty blanket balled up against his angelic little cheek. Long lashes swept down over those cheeks that could've been more filled out, but he slept soundly with gentle, even breathing. She blew out her own pent-up breath of relief. Okay, mission accomplished, don't look around, don't pass Go, don't collect two hundred dollars ...

Sam's gaze dropped to the beige carpet, where Lukas lay stretched out on the floor. Wait—on the floor? One hand lay cradled behind his head, the other rested on his stomach. His sexy, shirtless stomach. Her gaze roamed from his muscular, lean torso and oh, wow—was that a soaring eagle tattoo?—down his long limbs, covered with navy pajama bottoms, to his bare feet. Man alive, the guy even had sexy feet. She'd just backtracked to admire his long, dark lashes—so like his nephew's—when

Lukas's eyes fluttered open.

Oh, fire truck.Busted.

She waved because—well, what else could she do? And backed away too quickly, ramming into the door before retracing her steps to the kitchen. She heard a door close and sure enough, Lukas was right behind her. She hoped that racket didn't wake Stevie up.

“Hey,” he said, stopping her in her tracks.

She had no choice but to turn around. “Sorry,” she whispered. “I—” She what? Was curious? Couldn't stop herself from sneaking around? She decided to focus on her good deed instead. “—brought a few groceries.”

Lukas stepped closer, filling up her personal space and all her senses with his tousled hair, his beard stubble, thick and dark, and that magnificent bare chest. For the first time she noticed a badass snake with its tongue out twining its way around his left biceps. She stepped backward. Away from him, where she could possibly have a logical thought instead of a completely short-circuiting nervous system.

Her eyes were drawn to the elaborate swirls of ink running down his right arm. Flowers, musical notes ... a delicate, intricate pattern of art that was mesmerizing. What did it all mean? Did it contain symbols for the special women in his life, events, places he'd seen, inspirational sayings? All of the ink on his chest and a lot of it on his arm was new since they'd been together. It saddened her in a way, thinking of how much life had happened to both of them since then. She forced her gaze away and started to unload the food.

She suddenly got really interested in grabbing a carton of orange juice from a grocery bag. “How was your night?” she asked in what she hoped was a casual tone. “You

slept on the floor?”

“I was checking on him every half hour and I couldn’t sleep anyway so I just ended up crashing near his bed.”

“I’m sorry I woke you.”

“That’s okay, Sunshine.” He stretched and began opening cabinets. “I’d never complain about a beautiful woman waking me up anytime of the day or night.”

“I’m sure you’ve got plenty of those lined up for the job.” Immediately she bit her lip, regretting her snarkiness. Not that she was jealous of all the women that were surely clamoring in every city to service his every need. Sam unloaded the orange juice, a carton of eggs. For Stevie, she reminded herself. The other Spikonos was just too ... distracting.

She felt his gaze boring down on her like the too-hot sun. When she looked up, his eyes were dancing and he was smiling, one dark brow raised.

“What?” she asked.

“You look a little flustered, Princess.”

That reminded her of why he was so annoying, and it was a relief to replace the raw sexual tension with anger. “Do not call me that. And pu-lease. Don’t flatter yourself.” After this morning there was only one thing left to do. Stay the hell away. Like that was going to be possible with him living in her backyard. Good one, Einstein. If she were alone, she would have smacked herself upside the head.

As she cradled a loaf of bread, she felt a hand on her arm. “Hey, sorry. I don’t mean to tease.” She turned to look at him, remembering when his calling her Princess was

half in jest, but mainly an endearment. Up close, the stubble on his cheeks was dark and sexy, and his big brown eyes held a touch of something she couldn't quite read, but it was bare and honest and so, so dangerous.

He sighed. "What I meant to say is, it's a pleasure and a surprise to have you here with us this morning. I also wanted to thank you for coming with me to the ER last night. I ... appreciated having you there. I owe you for that. You don't have to make breakfast." He tugged the bread out of her hands, and she quickly dug back into the bag because her hands were now shaking. "But thanks a lot for the groceries. Stevie needs all the regular meals he can get."

Sam wondered again if she should ask what happened. How exactly the hottest singing sensation since Ed Sheeran had wound up packing a kid into his bus at his last pit stop. But Lukas was working on filling the coffee pot and she turned to more practical matters, like finding a bowl to crack the eggs in and a pan to fry up bacon. Lukas surprised her again by cracking an egg with one hand and tossing the shell in the sink.

"Maybe my sympathy for you is misplaced. Maybe you can fend just fine for yourself."

"Honey, I've had an entire youth specializing in fending for myself. Cracking eggs is not a problem."

No, it wasn't, but cracking his shell would be much harder. Years ago, he'd offered little about his youth, and it didn't seem that time had changed that. She traded the bag of coffee for his Pyrex bowl, nodding toward an upper cabinet. "I think the filters are up there."

"I need to ask you a favor," she said suddenly, watching the hard planes of muscle in his back flex as he reached up for the filters.

“I’m yours for the asking.” There went that wicked grin again. “Seriously. I owe you for all you’ve done for us.”

“You may not feel that way after I ask.”

He gave an elegant shrug. More mesmerizing muscle action. “Try me,” he said.

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Oh, yes, she'd love to try him. A million different ways.No! Where were these thoughts coming from? She shook her head to stave them away. "My committee for the theater has botched the entertainment for the benefit, which is just under three weeks away, on June first. The lounge singer they asked can't come and the only other choice is Victor Irving." She was pleased when he winced at the name. "I hate to ask but ..."

"Consider it done."

"Really?" Her heart gave a foolish thump. She was more pleased that he seemed to want to do it for her rather than the fact that she'd just scored a major star for the benefit.

"Anything for you, babe."

"Thank you," she managed. What remarkable eyes he had, depths of rich brown with a fathomless intensity that made her breathless. His gaze raked slowly over her in a way that started a smolder in the pit of her stomach that spread out to flame her cheeks. And other areas. "I—appreciate it."

They whipped up breakfast in companionable silence. He worked efficiently, finishing the eggs, making toast, cutting strawberries, humming some catchy tune she'd never heard before. Probably his latest song. He'd surprised her—he didn't seem like the type to know his way around a kitchen. Harris certainly played the helpless male around unprepared food, but then, his mom and three sisters had made fending for himself unnecessary.

She, meanwhile, tried to focus on not burning the bacon in light of the fact that she'd accidentally bumped into him a few times and had come way too close to that snake tattoo that wove its way around his arm. She fought the impulse to trace it ... with her tongue.

Oops, he was saying something. She had to stop her mind from wandering. She found him looking at her expectantly. "Wh ... what did you say?"

He was holding two plates. "Stevie's still asleep. Let's take our plates outside and eat, want to?"

It shocked her how easy it was to fall back into their old ways together. To pretend to forget the old wounds—not that she hadn't forgiven, because Sam was a forgiving person, and she'd long ago accepted that they were done—

Well, it didn't matter, right? They'd both moved on. She was so confident in that that she decided why not. He was holding a steaming plate of eggs under her nose and a coveted cup of coffee. So she took both and headed outside.

They walked onto a stone patio, where there was a large round table covered with a big red umbrella. It skirted a large swimming pool where her nieces and nephews loved to swim on the weekends. Dr. Donaldson, the CEO of Mirror Lake Hospital, and his wife had been grateful that she was taking care of their house all summer. Sam didn't mind keeping an eye on things and the place did have its perks. Living here temporarily was a nice bridge between her apartment lease running out and moving to Boston to be with Harris.

Lukas had just sat down when he said, "Be right back," and ran into the house, returning a few seconds later with napkins.

"You went back for that?"

“And to make sure the other door is locked. I don’t want Stevie wandering out around the pool. I doubt he knows how to swim.”

“You can sign him up for lessons at the community pool. It’s where my nieces and nephews go. I don’t think lessons start till June.”

“Great idea.” They reached for their coffees at the same time. Sam stared out over the lake, watching early summer boaters cutting trails of white in the calm blue water. Felt the bright morning sun warm her skin. She loved summer here. Such a relief after the harsh winter, such a blessing.

They ate for a few minutes in silence, listening to the birdsong and the distant drone of boat engines putt-putting around the lake. She tried to focus on the lake and not his naked torso, which was very, very distracting.

Sam wasn’t very brave, but she realized that life only gave you a few rare opportunities to understand the past. Maybe because of all the confusion Lukas had stirred up in her, she truly wanted to understand. So she could sweep all those old tangled memories out of her brain. Lay them—and him—to rest.

She needed resolution. She owed that much to Harris. She wanted to bring a clean slate to their future. Not a nagging splinter in her finger that resurfaced every so often and drove her crazy.

“Why did you never call me, Lukas?”

He literally choked on his eggs, and she found herself patting his back—oh, God, she touched that warm, muscley skin, and why the hell could he not have put on a shirt?—until finally he took a swig of coffee and stopped.

She didn’t miss the flash of panic in his eyes. It gave her a little edge and made her sit

up a little straighter. “I want to know. Six years ago you handed me a car and some keys and a cryptic message and left forever.”

He had the decency to blush. Which was hard to detect with his olive skin, but she saw it, and it pleased her. “I was in love with you,” she said. “I kept hoping you’d come back. I even went to one of your concerts, about a year later, all the way to New York City, hoping to run into you.”

His eyes looked a little watery, but of course it was from the choking. He reached across the table and grasped her hand. She gasped from the shock of it—the strength of his grip, the warmth of his fingers, the coolness of all those silver rings. A sizzling sensation of electricity passed between them. Instinctively, she tried to pull away, but he held on tightly.

“I never meant to hurt you, Samantha.” He seemed like he meant it, meant every word. If only she could believe him.

“But you did. I...I’m just trying to understand.”

“I was a nothing and a nobody.” A bitter edge cut through his voice. “I had nothing to offer you.”

The idea that he ever would have thought of himself as nothing saddened her. Here eyes really did tear up, which was ridiculous, and she swiped at them with her free hand. “I never thought that. You—you saved me from making terrible mistakes. If you wouldn’t have come along when you did I don’t know what I—”

“You would’ve been fine without me,” he said gently, and his voice, that beautiful, amazing voice, low and deep and perfect—it just slayed her. Part of her felt like she was twenty again, sitting here, thrilled by his touch.

It was as if nothing had changed.

But everything had.

“I had fifty bucks in my pocket when I walked out of town that day. No family, no friends, and no job.”

“I always knew you were special.” She didn’t mean to whisper but the words came out that way. “That you’d become something special.”

“I’m not special. I just work hard.” He touched her face. With just his forefinger, wiping along the path of a tear, staring at her with those Johnny Depp eyes of his. The smooth, icy metal of his rings glanced her cheek. She swallowed hard.

“Hello, dearies! I’m here!” a voice called out from afar.

Mrs.Panagakos was huffing up the gravel drive, dragging her giant purse and another large quilted satchel that looked like she was planning to stay for a week or maybe a month. And carrying a plate of covered food. True Confessions would be over in a minute, thank the Baby Jesus for that.

Lukas glanced at his watch. “Right on time.” He still hadn’t released her hand. “Thanks for helping me, Sam. You didn’t need to do any of this. Especially in light of our ... history.”

Sam swallowed. The light pressure of his long fingers on the top of her hand was causing warm tingles to spread up her arm and to other places she’d rather not think

about. That should have made her pull away like he was fire, but she didn't. Couldn't.

"Well." She blew out a sigh. "That was a long time ago. In the past, I mean." Duh. Could she babble any worse? What did she expect him to say, anyway? Something wild and dramatic like he'd never stopped loving her? Pu-lease.

A little smile slid across his beautiful face, forcing her to remember things best left forgotten. But he didn't say anything. Maddening, this man was. How was she supposed to get any resolution here if he wouldn't talk?

"I mean, defining our history as anything besides crisscrossed signals and bad timing would be completely wrong, right?" She hated herself for asking. For wanting to know. But she had to. For her own sake.

Frown lines appeared between his dark brows. The kind that made a woman itch to smooth them out. Lukas cleared his throat. More frowning. "Sam, I—"

"Good morning, good morning, and a beautiful one it is, yes? So, this is how the rich live." Alethea was dressed in a bright red shift dress and a brimmed straw hat with a red ribbon. She looked toward the lake and squinted in the sun. "A beautiful spring day. Standing up here reminds me of standing on the hills of Santorini, looking out over the sparkling Aegean waiting for my Hercules to come home from the sea." She waved an arm over the landscape in front of them—hardly the iconic hills and white dotted houses of her dreams—just a sunny day with a pure blue sky, the lake sparking like diamonds and peppered with multicolored boats that from here looked like a child's Legos. "But he didn't return to me. My waiting was in vain."

"Oh, Alethea," Sam said. "Did he die at sea?"

"Of course not. He left me for another girl with bigger boobs and blonde hair. But it changed my life—made me come here, to America. May I sit down? I take it young

Stavros is still asleep? And are there any more eggs, dear?" She uncovered the plate she brought, exposing beautiful rows of perfectly formed spinach and cheese pies. "I brought tiropites and spanakopites. Have one."

Lukas jumped up to pull out a chair for Alethea, snagged a tiropita for himself, and jogged into the house to fetch her a plate.

Alethea patted Sam's hand, the same one Lukas had just touched, while she reached for a cheese pie. "How are you, my dear? You've done a kind thing for our Greek boys, but what will your Harris say?"

Sam took a swig of coffee. "I'm sure he'll be okay with it. It's only for a few days." Harris would hate it, hands down. He would kill Lukas. Maybe her, too.

Alethea cocked her head toward the guesthouse. "That man looks at you like Psyche looked at Cupid."

"Alethea, I swear, you should be teaching drama, not sitting on the committee to save the theater."

"I just don't want you to miss out on something."

Sam raised her brows. "Something, Alethea?" She'd said it like it was dinner. Or those fabulous little pies she'd brought. "I've found the guy I love. He's everything to me. Lukas is all ... smoke and mirrors."

"Smoking hot, you mean. Maybe he's changed, *glikia mou*. Grown up. He certainly cares for Stavros. Perhaps you should give him a chance."

Sam sighed. Alethea was a romantic, and that had gotten her in big trouble. Her Hercules was a real stinker, from what Effie had told Sam. "Lukas has had a chance,

Alethea. Two of them, actually. You do realize the last time I heard from him was six years ago. It's too late for more chances."

"It's not over till it's over," Alethea said, her painted black brows arching over her glasses.

Just then, Lukas came out of the house holding two plates and the door for Stevie, who was rubbing his eyes as he followed his uncle. Stevie's hair was a tousled replica of Lukas's. The little boy caught sight of Sam and a huge grin stole over his face.

"Hi Samantha," he said, coming right up to her and accepting her hug. He was warm and cute as pie. He cast a wary glance at Mrs. Panagakos, who was pouring milk in her coffee.

"Don't forget to say hi to Mrs. P.," Lukas said.

Stevie complied, but not with enthusiasm. All in all, Sam was amazed at how well behaved he was, considering all he must have been through—an ill and dying mother, and a father incapable of properly caring for him.

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“Stavros.Kalimera,” Mrs.Panagakos said. “Good morning. I brought you something.” She rummaged in her giant bag, pulled out a worn child’s book with curled edges, and placed it on the table in front of Stevie. “Greek myths. Do you know what those are?”

He shook his head.

“Ah, then, we’ll read all about them. They are stories from our Greek culture about brave heroes and heroines who slayed monsters and did impossible feats of bravery for the sake of love.”

“Are they fairy tales?” Stevie asked.

“Yes,paidi mou, they are.”

Stevie batted those irresistibly long lashes at Sam. “Will you read them with us?”

“I’ll have to take a rain check. My boyfriend Harris is coming over soon to give me a boating lesson.” She smiled at the little boy. “I’ll have to see about getting a life jacket so we can take you for a ride next time if that sounds like fun.”

Stevie looked more than eager but Lukas couldn’t help frowning. “He’s going to teach you how to drive a boat?”

“Yeah. His boat. He’ll be docking it right over there.” She pointed off in the distance to a wooden dock that ran from the edge of the grassy front lawn of the big house into the water.

“Fun way to spend a Sunday,” Lukas said. His eyes held hers again, and they seemed to ask a thousand questions.

Good. Let him have the questions for once. God knows, he certainly hadn’t provided much of an answer to hers.

Sam told herself it didn’t really matter. Her life was on a set course, and she knew better than to believe in fairy tales. No matter how handsome the Greek god sitting across from her was.

CHAPTER 7

Lukas had known from that very first evening, when he'd stood up for Samantha against those ridiculous bullies, that he was going to have a hell of a time keeping his hands off of her.

He was twenty-one. Old enough to know better than to start something with an innocent eighteen-year-old girl still in high school. Yet the spark between them was undeniable. He balanced on a very thin wire, thinking a couple of dates would be enough, that they were such opposites it could never work, that he would soon become bored and break it off as he should.

But every date left him breathless and wanting more. She was beautiful and fascinating, angry and hurt and fragile in some ways but in others, tough as nails yet really kind. To animals and old people and kids. And him. She didn't judge him, and she tended to see a version of him that was better than he was, which both pleased and frightened him. He was hopelessly hooked for the first time in his life and he didn't have a clue what to do about it.

"Are you gay?" Samantha asked, leaning over closer to him across the table at PITS where they were eating burgers and shakes one night.

"What? No! Lower your voice. Geez." He looked around the diner. It was ten o'clock on a January Friday, very cold, and it was pretty dead. But still.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of if you are." She drummed her fingers on the table. "Maybe it's low testosterone. Or maybe I'm just not attractive enough." She pushed

out her bottom lip, all pouty-like, which made her even more irresistible.

She was killing him. Completely killing him.

“You haven’t asked me back up to your place since we started hanging out,” she persisted.

Of course he hadn’t. Because the second she walked through his door, he would simultaneously peel both their clothes off and have their underwear circling their ankles, no questions asked. She deserved better.

He’d never felt this way about a girl before. He’d fallen hard. He wanted to take her out, but what was there to do in the dead of winter? He was three years older than she was, and that was another problem. She hung with high school kids; he hung with some of the other mechanics, or his buddies from his band. Their worlds couldn’t be farther apart.

She told him she didn’t care, that she loved just being with him. Sometimes they’d go to the library and look up weird books. Other times she took him with her when she worked as an usher at live events at the theater. He ushered, too, and got to see the shows for free. He took her to meet Mrs.Ellis, who’d loved her at first sight and often invited her for dinner. But Sam never suggested bringing him to her house. It went without saying that her oldest brother would never approve of her dating someone like him.

They’d seen several film festivals at the Palace, one featuring horror movies and another on classics from the 1930s. They always had coffee afterward or a burger. He always met her somewhere but never picked her up at her house. Never even brought up the idea, knowing she had four older brothers, all of whom were capable of—and likely to—beat him to a pulp.

He'd never really had a girlfriend before. Oh, there were girls, but going out with one had usually entailed as much sex as he could get and as little talking as he could get away with.

He'd never told any girl about his childhood but for some reason, Sam made him want to spill his guts about his abusive, alcoholic parents, how he'd done his best to take care of his three younger brothers but failed because they all got taken away and split up into different homes. She had this way of looking at him like she just ... got him, like she was interested and what he was feeling wasn't so weird or different. You were just a boy, she'd told him. It wasn't your fault. No one had ever told him that before and it brought him a kind of mercy he didn't even know he needed.

The thing was, he loved talking to her and he thought constantly about having sex with her, something that had never happened before.

One night it was blizzarding so he dropped her off in front of her house, something he'd usually avoided. Their good-night kiss lingered and turned into a deep-throat make-out session that steamed the windows and had him struggling to touch her through seven layers of scarves, coats, and sweaters, and trying not to show how much pain he was in from the pressure in his jeans. The porch light flickered, signaling somebody had caught on to what they were doing, making them break apart, panting. Sam's hair was tousled and her lips were swollen, her lip gloss smeared. She was the most gorgeous girl he'd ever seen and he couldn't help smiling from ear to ear.

He walked her to the door. He wasn't going to let her face whoever was in there by herself while he cowered in the shadows and besides, it was about time her family knew they were serious. To his chagrin, the door opened. Her oldest brother stood there, arms crossed across his big chest. Eyeballing him.

Lukas knew exactly what this guy saw. A kid with a nose piercing, earrings,

tattoos. Trouble. Still, he persevered. “Um, hi, Mr. Rushford.” Lukas cringed. Did he really just call a guy who wasn’t even out of his twenties Mister? But he didn’t dare call him Brad. “I’m ... Lukas.” He extended his hand. No gloves, even though it was practically below zero.

Brad barely nodded. He focused his attention on his sister. “You’re late. Curfew’s midnight.” Then he opened the screen for Sam and disappeared into the house. Sam looked back at Lukas, making a mimicking face that made him smile a little. Then she blew him a kiss and closed the door.

The brother hadn’t even given him a chance. Sam had acted like she didn’t care, but he knew better.

For Valentine’s Day he bought her a fine canary-yellow silk scarf and gave it to her in the car after they’d gone ice-skating at the ice rink a couple towns over.

“You should wear color,” he said.

She fingered the soft material between her thumbs. “You don’t wear color. You wear mostly black. I like black, too.” Her voice was teasing, and there was a glint of mischief in her eyes.

He tucked a silky lock of her hair behind her ear. The curls immediately sprang forward, doing as they willed. Like her.

“You weren’t meant to wear black. You weren’t meant to be an angry rebel.” She was still dressing all in black, still rimming her eyes with heavy liner. But at least she’d let her hair go back to its natural red color.

She rolled her eyes. “Who am I supposed to be then?”

“Just yourself. Which is pretty terrific.” He moved closer to her, to her warmth. She smelled like grapefruity shampoo and he inhaled the scent greedily. He felt on the edge of control. Things between them were barreling forward on an inevitable course, he could feel it. Decisions would have to be made that would change everything.

“Can I ask you something?” It had been on his mind for a long time. He worried that she wanted to have sex with him to get back at her brother, who’d kept an even tighter rein on her after the trouble at school.

He didn’t want their lovemaking to be about revenge. He wanted it to be about them. With a kind of terrible horror, he realized he wanted her to love him.

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“Do you hang around with me to piss your brother off?” he blurted.

She turned toward him in the car. The streetlight shone on her cheek, glinted in her eyes. She ran a hand through his hair and gave him a gentle smile that he felt clear through his bones. “When I met you, I was ready to give up on everything. My friends all left me and my own brother didn’t give me the benefit of the doubt. So to be honest, at the beginning, yeah, I was attracted to you being a badass. But Lukas, you’re really the worst badass I’ve ever met.”

He narrowed down his eyes. She was smiling. Smiling!

“I mean, you look the part, okay?” she said. “But you don’t drink, you don’t party, you don’t do drugs, and you don’t get into trouble. Really, from a rebel standpoint, you’re kind of a huge disappointment.”

Maybe so. But he’d seen firsthand how drinking could shatter a family, and he vowed never to be like his parents, who’d both been destroyed by alcohol. “Well,” he said, cupping her face in his hands, “since we’re being honest, you suck at being a rebel, too. So be who you are.” He wrapped the scarf around her neck and kissed her.

It went without saying she was a terrible rebel, and he often made fun of her for it. She volunteered at a nursing home, helped her grandmother with blood pressure screenings, and wherever they went, she said hi to everyone in town. She was simply too good-natured and loving to be disaffected for very long.

Her one sore point was college. They talked about art all the time but she refused to discuss applying to art school. She’d decided on business, she said. UConn, an hour

away. The plan was her brother's doing, he was sure of it.

Still he refused to bring her back to his apartment. He was too afraid, not so much of the temptation but for himself. Once he made love to her, their relationship would be different. His heart would break for sure when she left him, which he was certain would happen. She'd find someone better, smarter, a college guy.

He came home from work one afternoon in March on his birthday to find that she'd gotten the key from Mrs.Clinker and decorated his apartment with paper streamers. She'd cooked a pot of chili for him and even bought him a fancy cake from the bakery. Then she'd put a bow on her own head and begged him to take her to his bed. Samantha with a bow on. The perfect birthday gift. How could a hot-blooded male refuse that?

That night they'd gotten naked together for the first time and he'd made her cry out his name, just like all those times he'd dreamed it, and it was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard, but he would not have sex with her.

To get him back, she tortured him, grabbing his cock and demanding to know what he wanted her to do with it. She had this joyfulness for everything, a freshness he never tired of. Her touch was velvet, and what she lacked in experience, she made up for in enthusiasm, and he'd never felt so happy in his life.

A big part of him worried he was just a phase she was going through, that she'd be bored of him by the time college began.

In the spring, the Clubbers all got busted when Reggie turned in a recording of their latest cruel escapades in exchange for getting himself off the hook for some other trouble. Monique lost her Dartmouth admission. Sam seemed more than relieved to leave everything about high school behind in the rearview mirror.

In the fall, Lukas got promoted to head mechanic and Sam went off to school. He thought for sure she'd meet a college boy and forget about him forever. He tried to think of ways he could better himself. His garage band was getting more gigs, weddings, mostly, which was fine with him since Sam was gone most weekends now.

Over Christmas she brought him a skinny little tree and a box of ornaments from the dollar store. They tossed down a blanket and turned on the single string of lights and lay there in the dark in each other's arms, staring at the multicolored reflections.

"I bought you a present, too," he said, handing her a rectangular package he'd wrapped himself.

She didn't need any encouragement to open it. She tore into it, finding an art tablet and a fine set of charcoal pastels.

"Wh ... what's this for?" She was tearing up. He hadn't meant to upset her.

"Well, they're like crayons. You draw with it on paper. Like this, see?" He picked one up and held it to the paper.

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be funny."

"It's just that maybe it's been long enough, you know? I thought maybe you missed doing art." He shrugged. "If you give it up for them, they win."

There was a long pause, and he worried he'd been too presumptuous. She hated being told what to do and maybe he'd crossed a line. But a second later, she leapt into his arms and threw her own arms around him, hugging him tightly. He was immediately inundated by the smell of her shampoo, that clean citrusy scent she favored that he couldn't get enough of. "I love you, Lukas," she whispered. "Make love to me now. Real love. Please."

She looked at him with those big green eyes. They were full of excitement and happiness, a far cry from how she was months ago when he'd first met her. He threaded his hands through her hair, reveling in the abundance of thick silky curls. "Sam—" He started to talk, but she cut him off with a kiss. He'd never understood before what it was to be happy, but he was certain from how swollen and full his heart was and from the sheer pleasure of holding her in his arms that this was it.

He kissed her back with all he had, pressing his lips over hers. She wrapped herself around him, her hands roving through his hair and up and down his back. Their tongues tangled, their kisses grew deep and hungry. He wanted and needed her so badly and he simply couldn't get enough.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I started the pill," she said. "I've never been more sure."

They made love under that skinny little tree, but it may as well have been the tree at Rockefeller Center for how awed he felt. He used condoms because he wasn't taking any chances. He wanted to do right by her. He loved her.

The months that followed were happy ones. They were both busy with their own lives, but they made many trips back and forth to be together on weekends between where she went to school in Storrs and Mirror Lake.

Sam had lost her anger for good. Probably because she'd made a whole new set of friends, many of whom Lukas had met and liked. That spring he got another raise. They'd been dating for over a year. It was time he picked her up for a real date.

He bought flowers and a button-down shirt that was not black and showed up at her house. He even took out his nose stud. As he neared the door, he heard the sounds of two people arguing.

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“What do you mean he’s coming here? I thought you’d stopped seeing him a long time ago. Haven’t you met any nice guys in college? And what kind of name is ‘Spike’ anyway?” Definitely her older brother Brad.

“His name is Spikonos,” Sam said, “but you can call him Lukas.”

“I thought it was because of that stupid spiky hair of his.”

“I’m just asking you to be nice to him.”

“I can’t be nice to a guy who’s going nowhere, Sam. I honestly don’t know what you see in him. I thought we raised you better.”

She was crying. Because of him. He’d never be good enough, just as he hadn’t been good enough for every family looking to adopt who had passed him by. He was too old, too dark, too rebellious. And underneath it all, he was just too alone.

He tossed the flowers into the bushes and left. Her family was never going to accept him. She could do a lot better. He’d always known it was only a matter of time.

The next week, Mr. Clinker had a heart attack and decided to close the business. And Martha Ellis was diagnosed with cancer. Suddenly, his world was in a tailspin.

And then Sam’s brother died.

A cold, terrible idea came to him. If he broke up with her, she’d hate him, but she’d heal. She’d have her family. She needed them, and he was only creating tension there.

Someday he would leave town and figure out his life. Figure out how to become someone. But right now he would be there for Martha Ellis.

So he let Sam go. And he hadn't had a day of peace since.

The next summer, Martha died and he had the near miss with the chicken truck. Sam had sat by his side until he was out of danger. The year had done nothing to stop his longing for her, but by then she'd met Harris. There was no way Lukas could compete with a guy like that, who was educated and rich—everything he wasn't. He became consumed with the feeling that he had to get out, had to find his own life. Become something better than what his parents had become. In his heart, he knew that doing that in Mirror Lake was impossible. So he did what he did best: he left Sam behind for good.

CHAPTER 8

If not cigarettes, then coffee. That was Lukas's motto for the day. He'd just downed his third cup and was sitting on the patio talking to his agent, Tony. Stevie and Mrs. Panagakos had gone for a walk down the road to the lakeside park.

"... a sold out venue in L.A. next month ... the last album's just gone platinum ... Rolling Stone wants an interview and GQ's offering a photo op for the cover and a feature article." Blah, blah, blah. Lukas drowned out the business talk. Bored, he watched the fine tremor in his hands with a strange sense of awe. He'd never been much for tripping out on too much caffeine and now he knew why. He punched nicotine patch into the reminder notes on his phone. Right next to more milk and Lucky Charms, which Stevie had just informed him was his favorite cereal. Turns out there was a way to get him to drink milk after all.

"This is a lot of attention for an up-and-coming artist, so we've got to take advantage of every opportunity ..." Tony was still rambling on. Lukas didn't mind working hard. In fact, he loved working hard. He loved writing songs and appreciated that he was lucky enough to be able to perform them. He just hated that he was a brand, a commodity that everyone seemed to want a piece of. At the risk of having no pieces left for himself, no privacy, and no life.

A boat approached the dock, a shiny twenty-five-foot white-and-blue speedboat with blue stripes and a cabin. The guy behind the wheel tossed two ropes to the dock, then jumped out and tied them to the dock cleats.

Lukas didn't have to guess who the guy was. Harris looked eerily the same as when

they'd met six years ago—the same thick head of wavy light brown hair, the same hawkish nose. He pushed his aviators high on his head and put his tanned hands on his hips, his pristine white shorts and white polo reflecting in the sunshine. “Samantha!” he called from the dock, looking around. “Sam! I’m here!”

Sam walked out of the main house’s front door, carrying a picnic basket and a towel, wearing a bright pink swim cover-up and flip-flops, clearly ready for a day on the water. She jogged down to the dock and flung her arms around him in that one-hundred-and-one-percent way of hers, making Lukas’s gut twist a little. He shouldn’t watch, but he simply couldn’t turn away. Harris kissed her but then backed himself up to arm’s length, smoothing his mussed hair carefully back into place.

A strange feeling churned in the pit of Lukas’s stomach. Acidic distaste, mixed with dislike and a big stab of jealousy. He added Tumsto to his grocery list.

This thing with Sam was all his own fault. She’d turned into an obsession because he’d picked the wrong damn time to develop a conscience. Or to be stupid. He’d let thoughts of being a nobody consume him. He’d been desperate not to end up like his parents.

That nauseous feeling was back that told him he’d screwed up, bad. The thought of Harris with her ... he couldn’t even go there, because every cell in his body believed back then that Harris was a complete idiot and she could do a lot better. Maybe Harris had changed, but people usually didn’t.

Ironic. That Lukas had stepped away because he thought he wasn’t good enough. Only to have him get her. It was wrong. Bone-marrow-deep wrong.

Lukas squeezed his eyes shut. Dammit to hell anyway, he should’ve handled things so much differently. All these years of messed-up feelings, ones that had poured over into his very best songs. This inability to move on would never have happened if he

hadn't pushed her away. That was why she'd stuck to the corners in his brain like spiderwebs that wouldn't wipe away for all these years.

Oh, Samantha.

She'd dated Harris for the past six years. Why hadn't she married him?

Thank God she hadn't.

Wait. There'd been no vows, no church ceremony, no noisy Rushford family celebration with all the big, burly brothers rallying around their little sis, all the town old ladies and the cousins and ...

She wasn't married.

Not that Lukas thought he still had a chance with her.

Did he?

Out in the water, Harris pulled the front rope onto the boat and took the wheel, Sam settling in behind him, stretching out her lovely legs on one of the side seats. Harris kicked the boat into reverse and moved away from the dock.

Except the putt-putt of the motor suddenly sputtered out. From the patio, Lukas saw Harris's startled expression as his steering became ineffective and the boat began to drift. Sam walked to the back of the boat and pointed, and Harris got up and followed her.

A normal guy would have realized he'd forgotten to pull the rear rope in, which had gotten wrapped around the propeller and seized up the engine. A normal guy would've also jumped overboard and pulled the hell out of the front rope to get the

boat back to the dock. Guess Harris didn't want to risk ruining that bright white outfit.

Lukas found himself running down the grassy yard to the dock before he could think his decision through. The opportunity to watch Harris flounder a bit more was too good to pass up. And, oh yeah, he was not going to miss a chance to save the day. Show Sam his special skills. For a guy who'd spent years making engines work, a seized propeller was not a big deal.

As Lukas approached the dock, Harris said, "Gosh darn it, Sam, get out of my way. I can get it." He didn't push her, but his tone was prickly and condescending enough, making the hair on the back of Lukas's neck stand up. Once an idiot, always an idiot.

"Hey, there, Harris," Lukas called from the dock. "Why don't you pass me that rope and we'll see if we can't pull you back to the dock?"

"The prop seized. Pulling me back in isn't going to help that."

Lukas suppressed an eye roll. "Um, you're right, but it will help me to be able to help you." Lukas grinned at Sam, who tossed the rope to him. It landed with a soft splash about six feet from the dock. Lukas jumped into the water from the dock with his pajama pants on and grabbed the rope.

"You didn't have to do that, you know," Harris said as Lukas used the rope to haul the boat back to the dock. Then he pulled himself up and out of the water and tied the boat back to the dock cleats.

"I just wasn't thinking," Harris said, a bit flustered. "Sam was chattering on about the weather or something and I was a little distracted."

What did she see in this guy, a guy who treated her like an abused employee instead

of a girlfriend? Sam's face had turned red. She bent her head low to examine the problem with the engine, but Lukas could sense her embarrassment.

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“I’d be a little distracted, too,” Lukas said, “if I had a beautiful woman on my boat.” He winked at Sam, who did roll her eyes—but there may have been just a trace of a smile turning up her pretty lips. Any guy who didn’t own up to his own mistakes was no man at all in his book.

Lukas jumped back into the water and swam to the rear of the boat near where Sam sat. “Tell your boyfriend not to have any funny ideas about starting the engine until I’m done with this.” He reached underwater to unwrap the rope, which had coiled around the propeller at least twenty times. When he was done, he brought the end of the rope back to the dock.

“Lukas, thanks so much,” Sam said. Lukas sat on the dock, wiping the wet hair out of his eyes.

Harris reached over the boat and shook his hand. “I appreciate your help. Nice to see you again, buddy.” Lukas knew Harris well enough to know he was only being nice for Sam’s sake. He wondered what hereallythought, especially after Lukas had kissed her at the kids’ prom. Harris draped an arm around Sam and kissed her on the forehead. “Okay, honey, let’s try to get our day started again, shall we?”

“Well, thanks again.” Sam smiled and glanced at Lukas, but a sense of awkwardness came with the gaze. She quickly looked away as Harris started the motor.

Lukas gave a wave as they puttered away from the dock, and he headed back up to the house.

He hoped they had a nice day. He also hoped Harris figured out that Lukas was

staying in the guesthouse and that it made him jealous as hell. Lukas wasn't a man with a normal job, a house with a white picket fence, and tons of experience with a loving family that left him capable of sustaining a real relationship. But he knew how to treat a woman with respect, to never demean or condescend or embarrass her in front of others.

Maybe Lukas wasn't the kind of guy Sam deserved. No, he would never be that traditional, upstanding type. But he'd be damned if dickbrain Harris was either.

The fiery remnants of a salmon-and-pink sunset streaked across the sky as Sam dragged a picnic basket back up the hill. "Look, we haven't got much time to seal the deal," Harris said into his cell phone, trailing behind her. "I'll meet you first thing in the morning and we can go over things, okay?" He'd seemed to spend half the day on his phone, always multitasking, often distracted by business or staring out into the distance at the pristine blue of the lake, lost in his own thoughts.

Harris loved her. She was sure of it. She just had to give him space, understand the demands of his job and his career. Understand his stress. That's what love did.

Now more than ever, Sam needed to feel that special connection that—well, that seemed to be missing lately. She'd hoped that a peaceful day on the lake would bring it back, especially now when she needed reassurance that all was well in her world, that she was on the right track to the life she'd always dreamed of.

She was on the right track. She wasn't about to let the sudden reappearance of an old flame derail her perfectly planned future. Getting involved with Lukas again would be like jumping from twenty thousand feet with a chute you weren't fully sure would open. Too risky, too foolish.

Harris walked up the stairs to the porch, still talking on the phone, but before he could reach the door, she slid in front of him, setting the picnic basket down on the porch.

She pressed her back against the door and waited for him to approach.

“Harris.”

He tossed her a nod and held up a finger.

She sighed. “Harris,” she said again.

On impulse, she snatched his phone, pressed “End” and pitched it onto the porch swing.

“What was that for?” She finally had his full attention, even if he was just the teensiest bit pissed. “That was a very important call!”

Okay, maybe a lot pissed.

“This is also very important. You’ve been on the phone all day and I want to know what’s bothering you.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he hedged.

“Oh, come on. You’ve been distracted for weeks.”

“Everything I’ve got is riding on this court case. Surely you can understand that.”

“I’m trying to understand. I know how stressed you’ve been lately. I know this case has been trial by fire but I’m so proud of you.”

Harris touched her arm. Rubbed it up and down, more in a friendly than a romantic way. “It has been a difficult case, Sam. I haven’t had much downtime.”

She took hold of his shirt and tugged him closer to her. “I can help you with that. I was thinking we could take a bottle of wine and a blanket and go out on the hill under the pine trees and ...”

“And be attacked by mosquitoes? I don’t think so.” He glanced at his watch. “Besides, it’s getting late and I haven’t even had a chance to pack yet. My meetings in New York start at noon tomorrow and my flight’s at 6:00 a.m. I’ve got to get back to my place.”

“It’s just that I’m worried about you. You need a break from all this stress.” And I need you to tell me you want me. That you love me.

She wanted him to hold her, whisper sweet things in her ear, and tell her he simply couldn’t live without her. Because she needed to forget about a certain Greek rock star who reminded her of a time when she’d been more willing to take chances. When she’d been determined to hold out for true love regardless of the consequences.

Well, there was no perfect love. Everyone was imperfect, right? Love was hard to find, and you had to be forgiving and learn to adapt and compromise.

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Harris stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her. Yet for some reason, she resisted relaxing into him.

“I’m really beat. And yeah, the stress has been pretty bad. I hope you can forgive me for this but I’m really exhausted. I promise you, Sam, everything will be back to normal in a couple of weeks when this case is over. I’ll see you next weekend, okay?” He pecked her on the cheek and left.

Sam felt a little stunned. The moodiness and the irritability she could understand, but was it normal to go so long without sex? She felt pretty sure two months was so not right, even with the stress he was under.

Harris would never cheat on her. He was too upstanding for that.

He loved old people. And dogs. He was honest.

If she was totally honest, she had to admit she was secretly a little relieved he was gone. Who was she to criticize, when she kept replaying in her mind that hot smoking kiss that had tasted of danger and felt like a cavalcade of shooting stars that Lukas had planted on her lips the other night in front of half the school?

Sam had not told Harris about Lukas and Stevie staying in the guesthouse. Well, he’d be on his trip and then in Boston working on his case and by then Lukas and Stevie would be gone. No need to stress him out any further, right?

She walked in and flicked on the kitchen lights and headed straight for the freezer. Maybe she couldn’t drive these awful thoughts from her mind alone, but surely Ben

and Jerry could help.

What kind of man would leave his woman for a week without making love to her first? Especially if that woman was Sam. Lukas had been so busy trying not to move, wedged as he was between two boxwoods near the guesthouse, that he'd forgotten to light his cigarette.

He'd come out to sneak a smoke and instead he'd heard everything Sam and Harris had said. Way more than he'd wanted to hear, but it only confirmed what he already knew. Harris was out for himself. Lukas knew men enough to worry that unless the guy was a eunuch, he was probably getting some on the side. No normal guy with a girlfriend would go two months without sex. No way.

Lukas lit up but didn't have time to put the cigarette to his lips because at that moment, Sam opened the sliding doors to the house and walked onto the deck. He quickly tossed his cigarette down and snuffed it out with his shoe.

"Who's there?" Sam said in a panicked voice.

Busted. She must've smelled the smoke. Not wanting to frighten her further, he said, "It's just me—Lukas," and emerged from the shadows.

"God, Lukas, you scared the crap out of me," Sam said, collapsing onto a cushioned chair at the wrought iron table. The pool was lit up, its blue shimmering glow reflecting off Sam's face on the perfect late spring night. Crickets chirped in the woods. The air was hot and humid, the perfect kind of night to lie on a blanket and stare at the stars and make love on one of the low, gentle hills by the lake under the pine trees.

Just sayin'.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just came out to grab a cigarette.”

“How long have you been out here?” She stared at him with no-bullshit eyes.

He raised his hands up in surrender. “Okay. Long enough. I’m sorry.”

A long sigh was her answer. She opened the ice cream and chipped away with her spoon at the frozen top.

He pulled out a chair. “Mind if I join you?”

She looked like she didn’t want him to. But she also looked miserable and he didn’t want to leave things that way.

“Harris is a great guy,” Sam said. “He’s just under a lot of stress right now.”

He could have disputed that but then she’d make him leave. So instead he said, “You don’t have to explain anything to me.”

“He’s trying a big Wall Street fraud case. It’s really stressful but he feels like he’s got to do his time in the prosecutor’s office so he can be known as someone who fights corruption.”

“That’s honorable,” Lukas said. He mentally patted himself on the back because he’d somehow managed to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“And I’m not bingeing out on ice cream because I’m miserable or confused. I’m just really hungry.”

“Great,” he said. “Ice cream is the perfect food. Lots of calcium and vitamin D and all that.”

“Exactly. I think my body’s craving calcium.”

His body was craving something else that he didn’t dare show. So he rubbed his hands around the tub of ice cream to thaw it out quicker.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said.

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“Like what?” Was he looking at her all lusty-like? Like he wanted to ravish her? Because that’s what he felt like doing. And he wasn’t sorry, either. But he tried to be a gentleman. “Like I’m judging you? I’m not. Relationships are complicated.” That sounded smart, but what did he know? He avoided them as fastidiously as he did expired cans of food.

“No, like—wolfish. Like you’re thinking of sex.”

Busted again. “I nearly always think of sex.” And how it would be with her. How it was, a very long time ago. Until he ended it. Stupid, stupid him.

Even in the wash from the pale bluish pool lights, he saw her blush. He said hurriedly, “But don’t take it personally. I’m a guy, that’s what we do.” He’d just insulted his entire sex as Neanderthals to cover up the fact that he was thinking of her. Only her.

He was startled to realize he wanted to comfort her. Make her smile. Take her beautiful face in his hands and feel the softness of her skin, run his thumb along the soft pillow of her lower lip. Then kiss her. She would taste sweet and cold like the ice cream with a trace of chocolate. Perfect.

“Trust me, Samantha. I’m not looking for a relationship.”

“That look is more like you want a fling.”

Was the Pope Catholic? He shrugged his shoulders. “You’re not a fling kind of woman.” He flicked his eyes up, catching her off guard. “Are you?” He considered

the end results of a quick, lusty affair. Getting her out of his system for good. Finally killing the holdover from his youthful fantasy. Reality couldn't possibly be as good as how he'd built her up in his mind.

"No." She dropped the spoon into the ice cream and he picked it up and took a bite.

Dammit. "Then we're clear on that," he said. "But that doesn't make you any safer from me." Whoa, where had that come from? Maybe Harris's idiocy had made him bold. Or his own. Or maybe just sitting across from her had stirred him. After all, the heart wants what it wants. His had always wanted her and he expected it always would.

She snorted. Snorted. Good thing his ego was healthily overinflated. "Oh, come on, Lukas. I'm not nineteen any more. Don't flatter yourself with having that much power over me."

He put down the spoon and looked at her. "It's not a matter of power. I've always thought you were beautiful, Samantha. I've always wanted you. That hasn't changed."

"You certainly had a funny way of showing that. You broke up with me right after my brother died."

"Sam." His voice cracked a little. Shit. No, couldn't allow these old feelings he'd swept under the doormat for so many years to rear up and mess with both their lives again. "I didn't have much going for me back then, and everyone knew it. Your family knew, if you didn't. I took the opportunity to cut it off between us permanently so you wouldn't try and get back together. It was the perfect opportunity to get you to hate me."

"That is completely effed up and I do not understand." Her eyes filled with tears. "I

never hated you, Lukas. I hated what you did to us.” He saw her swallow. “Are you telling me after all this time that you didn’t want to break up with me?”

Of course he hadn’t. But he’d become obsessed with the fact that he was following down the same path as his parents. His greatest fear. Being a nothing, like his father had told him so many times. He had no money, no schooling, and he was out of a job. The only thing he had left was drive, and he swore he would use every drop of that to get himself out. At that time, he couldn’t see any way of doing that with her.

What if he came clean? Told her everything—that she was the one woman he wasn’t able to keep his feelings from tangling with. Pulling away from her had been the hardest thing he’d done, and he’d paid the price.

His angst had led to a thousand songs. Fueled all his creative energy. But that was a bitch of a muse to have, and he’d already said way too much.

“I ... I’m just saying that I felt I had nothing to offer you. You were out of my league.”

Things had changed. He’d become something. He’d grown up, become a man, knew who he was. But his career demanded him to be on the road. Even with the house he’d bought, how much time would he really be able to spend there? His plan was to take Stevie with him on tour at summer’s end. He was still trying to figure out how to be what Stevie needed; that was his priority. His life was on the road, while she fit in as snugly to Mirror Lake as Stevie’s omnipresent blanket.

He’d experienced the fluke of success. But deep down, he was still a man who wasn’t sure he had the capability to love anyone. He didn’t know how to love such a woman and a fling ... well, he wasn’t about to start that with her boyfriend in the picture. That would just muck up the waters even worse, wouldn’t it? And Stevie didn’t need anything more mucking up his life either.

Still, the temptation to touch her was strong. He wanted to reach up and smooth those tiny lines between her eyes. Hell, he wanted to drag his hands through all those thick curls and plant his mouth over hers and kiss her and claim her and make love to her right on the concrete, tell her he'd never gotten over her. That he probably never would.

Lukas forced his facial expression into neutral. He'd always prided himself on being a master of his own emotions. For so many years he'd hidden his feelings. Every time he didn't get adopted. Every time he had to say good-bye to another family who might have been The Ones. He'd learned to hide his loneliness, his hurt. No reason to stop now, especially since there was still no way for them to be together.

"By the way," he said, standing. "The remodelers and I came to a compromise on my art studio. It's going to have two walls of windows instead of skylights. And the kitchen is almost done. We should be out of the guesthouse by the weekend."

"No worries. You're welcome here for as long as you need."

"Thanks. And thanks for the ice cream." He sucked at deep conversation, but he decided to give it a whirl. "Sam, I hope we can become friends one day. Let the past be the past."

"Sure, Lukas. Of course," she said. But she sounded tired and sad.

He was just about to walk into the house when a child's cry pierced the air. Panicked, he slid the glass door open and ran into Stevie's room, Sam trailing right behind him.

Stevie was standing by the bed rubbing his eyes and crying. Instinctively, Lukas knelt down beside him and held him by the shoulders. "Hey, buddy. What's wrong?"

Stevie looked up. His eyes were wet with tears and full of fear. He catapulted into

Lukas's arms and wrapped his hands in a death grip around his neck.

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Startled, Lukas was at a loss. Was he sick? Afraid of the dark? Or something else he had no clue about anticipating?

He stroked the little boy's back. Wrapped his arms around him tightly so he'd know he was safe. "It's okay, buddy. It's okay," he said softly.

"I—I couldn't find you," Stevie said between gasping sobs. "It was dark and you—you weren't in your room."

He was still holding him in a vice grip. "I went out by the pool for a—for some air. I'm sorry I scared you."

It took Lukas a minute to realize Sam was kneeling beside him at Stevie's bedside, brushing the little boy's sweaty hair out of his eyes. Stevie looked up at her. "I had a bad dream."

"Oh, honey," Sam said. Lukas didn't know how Stevie felt but her voice turned his insides to maple syrup. She was soft and kind. The type of woman who would be a great mother one day.

"What was your dream about?" Sam asked gently. Lukas looked over at her in a panic, as if to say, do you really think we should go there? But she seemed unconcerned. "Sometimes it helps to talk about it so you can scare it away for good."

"I was in Daddy's room. It was smoky, and there were lots of people there playing cards. And the smoke got thicker and thicker and I couldn't see anybody and it was just me and I was lost."

Oh shit, oh shit. The kid was probably describing some kind of poker party with drugs and alcohol or God only knows what Nico had been up to.

Lukas had no clue what to do. The kid was still clinging to him for dear life. Sam wiped his tears with her fingers and smoothed her hand down his cheek. "I'm sorry you had a scary dream, sweetie. But we'd never leave you. How about I get you a drink of water and Uncle Lukas will lay down with you until you fall asleep again?"

Stevie nodded. "Want both of you to lay down with me."

God, no. He could not be in a bed horizontal next to Sam with only a five-year-old between them for a buffer. That was too much. Smoking all the cigarettes in the world would not take that tension away. "Tell you what, bud," he said, standing and lifting Stevie onto the bed, "I'll get you a drink of water. You lie back down in bed, okay?"

"Where's Bobby?" Stevie asked, looking around in a panic.

Lukas did a quick scan around the room before exchanging a puzzled glance with Sam. "Bobby?" he asked.

"Oh, there you are." Stevie climbed off the bed and grabbed his blanket from the floor, pressing it to his nose and giving it a good long inhale. "Bobby. I thought I lost you."

Great, the dust rag had a name. "Um, why is your blanket named Bobby?"

"My mom said when I was a baby I called himbaba, then one day I just started saying Bobby."

Lukas would have called it garbage, but what did he know? At least the kid had

calmed down.

When Lukas came back with the water, Stevie was lying down with ... um, Bobby. Sam had kicked off her flip-flops and was lying on her side, facing Stevie, smoothing his forehead. Stevie took a few gulps of water and lay back down. “Uncle Lukas, will you sing me a song?” Lukas set the glass of water down and stretched out on the kid’s other side, resting his head against the headboard.

His catalogue of children’s songs was ... nonexistent. He could have messed around and made some shit up but he was a little self-conscious doing that in front of Sam. So he sang the first song that popped into his head.

As soon as he sang the first few bars, Sam’s expression changed from one of concern for Stevie to disbelief. One delicate brow rose and she shot him a you’ve-got-to-be-kidding look.

““Edelweiss,”” she whispered. A la Christopher Plummer, when he sings it for the kids in *The Sound of Music*. Lukas couldn’t help grinning. He’d surprised her, all right. Well, maybe it was more like he’d shocked the hell out of her. He loved this song—it was sweet and sad and nostalgic and beautiful. All the things he felt about Sam and couldn’t tell her. He couldn’t help meeting her eyes as he sang the full, soft notes. He could tell she was feeling the music, too—and maybe something a whole lot more.

Well, he always tended to think music swept everyone away. It certainly worked its magic with him.

Halfway through, Stevie leaned his forehead against Lukas’s shoulder and curled up and was fast asleep before the end of the song. Even Sam was starting to drift off.

He nudged Sam’s arm. “Hey, I know I have the voice of an angel, but falling asleep

in my bed ... I mean come on, a guy's got an ego, you know?"

She lifted her head and propped up on her elbow. "I wasn't falling asleep. I was enjoying it, Captain von Trapp."

She smiled, and oh, boy, there was something in that sweet smile of hers that signaled serious danger. She got up and so did he, taking care to cover Stevie with a light blanket before tiptoeing out of the room behind her.

"You do have the voice of an angel," she said quietly once they'd reached the kitchen, which was lit only by the dim light above the stovetop. "But how does a tough guy like you know the soundtrack to *The Sound of Music*?"

"It was one of only two G-rated songs that came to mind."

"Is that right?"

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“The other one was ‘Old MacDonald’ but that’s totally not as sexy.”

She laughed softly. After a minute, she said, “You know, I had nightmares after my parents died. Does he do that a lot?”

He shrugged. “A couple times a week. Stevie tosses and turns and talks in his sleep, but this is the first time he screamed.” Lukas rubbed his neck. “He’s got this thing with his backpack, too.”

“The one with the toothbrush on top and the shoes lined up in a row against the wall? I couldn’t help noticing it was very tidy for a five year old.”

“He won’t unpack anything. He takes his clothes right from the dryer and stuffs them back into the backpack. Keeps his toothbrush and toothpaste packed. And he’s been hoarding change, too. It’s like he’s worried I’m going to kick him out or something.”

“Or he thinks his dad is coming back for him.” That made Lukas’s blood turn to ice water.

“His father’s in no shape. I mean—” Lukas sighed. “I need to talk to someone about legal protections. I don’t want my brother thinking that he can come back anytime he wants and—”

No. He couldn’t go there. Stevie wasn’t going back to Nico. He would make sure of it.

Lukas leaned against the kitchen counter. “The first time I saw Stevie, he was

grabbing on to that blanket so tight his knuckles were white. I took one look into his eyes and do you know what I saw?"

Sam shook her head very slightly. She was staring at him with those big green eyes of hers, listening intently. Somehow he needed to tell her this. He needed her to listen.

"Myself. I saw myself as a kid, scared, alone, not having anything or anyone to count on. I knew in that one instant that I'd do everything in my power to prevent him from having the childhood that I had. It's the least I can do for Stevie—and for Nico."

He saw her puzzled expression. "He was the oldest. The one who stayed in that house with our parents the longest. He never had a chance."

"Oh, Lukas." Sam smiled kindly. Her eyes were soft and warm and just looking at her made him feel a little better. "Maybe someday you can help Nico. And you're doing a great job. Just don't be afraid to ask for guidance. For Stevie's sake. Anyone in his position would need some help dealing with all the frightening changes in his life."

Lukas cracked a small grin. "Not the least frightening being that I'm the one in charge of him."

It was never Lukas's forte to ask for help. No one had done him any favors as a kid. He'd had no real friends. Anything he'd accomplished he'd done on his own. But maybe it was time for him to get over being a loner. He'd do whatever it took for Stevie to be happy. Anything. "I'll ask the pediatrician. I have an appointment with her on Wednesday."

"Well, I should be going. Thanks for saving me from eating all the ice cream alone."

"Thanks for the crisis management help."

“You didn’t really need me. You have great instincts.”

There went that smile again. The one that made other instincts of his chomp at the bit, ones that made him want to kiss the bejesus out of her and forget all this crazy stuff between them and just get lost in the feel of her lips, her velvety skin. He had to get out of her guest cottage as soon as possible. Because those same instincts were telling him that playing house with her was starting to feel a little too real.

CHAPTER 9

“I wish I could change my reputation,” Effie said from her perch on the red velvet settee that was tucked into an alcove on the second level of the massive old theater. Sam sat just feet away, poised with a paintbrush, eyeing her grandmother as she sat up straight in a blue tailored dress and string of pearls, surrounded by elaborate plaster carvings painted in softly washed shades of red, terra cotta, and green.

She was glad to be painting Effie’s portrait on Monday after school instead of thinking about her disturbingly handsome houseguest and how he’d sung so beautifully to calm his frightened little nephew. Not to mention what he’d said about their breakup—that he’d felt he had nothing to offer her. That was so far from the truth she almost cried.

Plus she was beginning to wonder if he was ... lonely. Like maybe his life wasn’t all it was cut out to be, either. Could it be he actually regretted letting her go all those years ago?

Sam turned her full attention on her subject. “You’re the sweetest granny alive. Why would you ever want to change?”

“See?” Effie pointed an accusatory finger at her granddaughter. “I’ve had it with sweet and nice. It gets you nowhere, I tell you. Nowhere.”

“Do you want to talk about this?” Sam couldn’t have Effie being distressed. First off, she was fidgeting worse than a toddler in church. Which was not conducive to painting her portrait, the one she’d been begging for years to sit for. This was

supposed to be a happy time, a bonding time, where they could have girl talk and relive happy memories.

“I’m fine. Why are you painting me anyway? Do you think I’m about to die?”

Sam rolled her eyes. “No, I don’t think you’re about to die.” But I just might kill you if you don’t slap a smile on your face and sit still. “You’ve done a ton of work for this theater. I just think you should be recognized for that. Besides, I love doing portraits and I want to do yours. Is that so wrong?”

“I’m old and wrinkled. And I do not want my portrait hanging next to Lillian Donaldson’s. She saved this big old elephant in the eighties and hasn’t let anyone forget it since.”

“You’re different than Lillian, Gran.” Lillian was the wife of the CEO of the hospital, Dr. Donaldson, who had hired Ben a few years back. The same Donaldsons who owned the lake house where she was staying this summer. “You’ve never gone around tooting your own horn. I promise we’ll get you your own space to hang, okay?”

“Probably near the concession stand,” she grumbled. “God knows I’ve spent enough time working it over the years.”

“True. Remember how you used to bring us home popcorn?” No other popcorn could come close to that freshly popped, buttery, salty goodness. “I’m not going to let them hang you near the concession stand.”

“Hang me in front of the ladies’ washroom. Everyone goes there and chats. That’s a good place to be.”

“Okay, deal. Washroom it is. What’s got you so ... troubled?” The word agitated came

to mind but Sam knew using that word would just make her madder.

Effie took a breath and sat up straighter. “Nothing. It’s all right. Just that I’m tired of being Pushover Granny. Sometimes things need to be done for everyone’s good and I’ve never been one to rock the boat, you know? But I really think I’m going to start.”

“Are you upset at us?” Us, meaning Sam and her brothers Brad, Ben, and Tom.

“Of course not.” Effie rubbed her hands together nervously in her lap.

“Your girlfriends? Anyone at Assisted Living being mean to you?” She couldn’t imagine it. Her grandmother never held grudges and in general got along with everybody.

“Samantha, I’ve never interfered with your life, have I?”

That was a loaded question. She scanned her grandmother’s clear blue eyes and detected ... worry. “Well, I think you did your share of disciplining me back when I needed it.” She didn’t want to go there, to talk about her last year of high school and what a sad disaster it had become. That was in the past, she’d gotten over it, and her life was so much better now.

“And I never would interfere, would I, unless it was for the best, right?”

She set the brush down for good. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

“No,” she said too quickly, and flicked her eyes back and forth, which was very suspicious. “I just wondered how you’re doing now that Spike’s back in town.”

“Lukas,” Sam said.

“Oh, so now he’s Lukas, is he?” A smile broke through the crotchiness.

Why did Sam ever think painting her portrait was a good idea? And this was only the first day.

“Alethea tells me he’s got his eye on you.”

“I doubt that but I certainly don’t have an eye on him, if that’s what you’re getting at. Harris and I are practically engaged.”

“Practicallyengaged. What does that mean? I was an OB nurse for forty years and I never saw anyonepracticallypregnant.” She lifted her shoulders and hands in a shrug. “I don’t understand couples who date for years and years without a thought of marriage.”

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“We think of marriage a lot, Ef. It’s just Harris is building his career and—”

“Blah blah blah.”

Oh, my, she was saucy today.

Effie swept a hand through the air. “In my day, a man knew what he wanted. Anyone who wishy-washes around for six years without asking a girl to marry him ... well. It’s just not right. Why should he buy the cow if he gets all the sex he wants?”

There she went, mixing metaphors as she was prone to do, but worse, she’d just said the wordsex. This conversation was completely out of control. “How did my mom know she wanted to marry my dad?” There. A change of subject, one she was dying to know more about, but she had to be careful. Effie sometimes got sad talking about her mom. Maybe today wasn’t the day to bring it up after all.

“Oh, Daniel was a charmer. A lot like Lukas, actually. He was irresistible. We all fell in love with him. Your mother was a free spirit. Just like you.”

“I left my free-spirit days behind me a long time ago.”

“Samantha, my goodness, you’re too young to talk like that. Those high school bullies were cruel, but even they didn’t break your spirit. It seems that ever since Kevin died, you seem to want to ... I don’t know, please everyone. You stopped taking risks, and love is a risk. Just remember you’ve got to please yourself. It’s your life and you’ve only got one.”

Sam set down her brush on her palette. Wow, and she thought she'd had an agenda. She hadn't expected to get mowed over by her little white-haired grandmother. "I'm not a people pleaser," she said defensively.

"Dating Harris pleases everyone but me. You took on the Historical Restoration to please Harris's mother. And you banned sugar from your diet like Harris because he pressured you to lose weight, although God knows why, you have a beautiful shape."

"Dating Harris pleases me. Maybe volunteering for the theater was partially because of Camilla Buckhorn but I fell in love with this place. You know I'm passionate about it. And being sugar conscious is healthy. Harris loves me the way I am." Minus five or ten pounds, that is.

Effie dismissed all of Sam's arguments with a flick of her wrist. "Your mother was lucky. She met her true love early in life. Her life was too short but she was very, very happy. It's the one thing I take comfort in. That's all a parent or grandparent wants. For their children and grandchildren to have a happy life."

"I plan to have a happy life, too. No need to worry."

Effie surprised her by standing up and walking over to her. "Are you really happy, dear?"

Oh, no. She'd wanted to have girl talk with Effie but not this. Not now, when her life seemed so upended.

Effie rested her veined hand on top of Sam's wrist. That hand had done a lot of comforting. A lot of soothing and tear wiping. Suddenly, Sam felt herself getting weepy. "Oh, Gran, of course I am." But her voice sounded weak. Cowardly almost.

"I may not seem like I've experienced much, being widowed at thirty and having

those heart valve problems for all those years until I finally got my surgery. But I know when a person is happy. Maybe you're confusing what you think you want with what you really want."

"Lots of girls go through a bad-boy phase, and Lukas was mine. He'll never settle down, Effie. It's not in him. Harris is everything I've always wanted—stability, a real family, roots. He's ambitious and our kids will have every opportunity. His family sailed on the Mayflower, for God's sakes."

"Remember, sometimes mutts make better pets than pedigrees."

"Effie!"

"Harris may look the best on paper, dear, but is he the man of your heart? Just like our family may not look very traditional on paper, but we've love you with everything we have. Even Brad—"

"I know, Effie. I love our family. It's just even if Lukas were capable of sticking around, I don't want to live a celebrity life. I'm a simple person. I love teaching and I want a family."

"Lukas and you are adults now. Maybe it's time to stop seeing each other in black-and-white terms. Let the past go, and start getting to know each other in the present."

Voices from the grand lobby below interrupted them, thank God. Effie, the world's worst portrait sitter, turned and looked. Of course. "Oh, it's Jess," Effie said. "Is that big hunka-hunka her new boyfriend?"

Sam stood and looked over Effie's shoulder. A very large man in a tank top and shorts, whose biceps looked inflated even from this distance, trailed behind Jess, carrying several large boxes. "Oh, my. That must be Hugo, her new boyfriend. She

said he was going to help her carry stuff for the benefit.” Sam waved out the carved opening that overlooked the lobby like a Juliet window. “Up here, Jess!” she yelled.

It was good to see one of her boyfriends helping out. Maybe Jess had finally done what Sam had recommended, found a guy who was kind and hardworking and not into himself. Ever since her broken engagement to a college football player named Trevor five years ago, Jess had dated a slew of good-looking idiots. But maybe Hugo was different.

Jess breezed by with her own load and beckoned for Hugo to go ahead into the office wing. “Everybody, this is Hugo. Sorry we’re late. We had to stop and eat a snack and grab a protein shake.”

“A snack?” Sam asked. What was a snack for him? A small calf?

“Tuna and almond butter,” Jess said, beaming at Hugo. “It was very ... proteinalicious.”

Oh, man, Jess starting to take on the habits of her boyfriends was always a sign of trouble. Especially since Jess was a carb woman through and through.

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“Hugo’s a bodybuilder,” Jess whispered. “And he’s huge.”

“We can see that,” Effie said.

“He made me breakfast this morning,” Jess said. “It was green and came in a glass, but hey, it’s the thought that counts, right?”

Hugo made his way back from the office, his nylon shorts making swishing noises as his massive thighs rubbed together.

“Er—Hugo,” Effie said in that sweet, deceptively innocent voice of hers, “your muscles are certainly very ... large. Your veins, too. You’d be a great example for our nursing students who rotate through the hospital.”

“Oh, yeah, Grannie. Give it here.” He did a fist pump with Effie. “I’d love to come model for some nursing students. My muscles always get me noticed by a lot of females, if you know what I mean.”

Effie joyously eyed the bulging cords of his veins as only a former nurse could. “Well, actually I was thinking they could use someone like you to help teach them to start IVs. You aren’t squeamish of needles, are you?”

The big guy actually startled. Sam shot Effie a look, which she pretended not to see.

“Hugo’s coming to the fundraiser on Saturday,” Jess said quickly. “He’s going to help us wash cars.”

He did a little biceps flex. “Put all this muscle to use for a good cause.”

“Great,” Sam said, finding herself the recipient of another fist pump.

“People think bodybuilders are vain and narcissists,” Hugo said. “But I’m not.”

“Glad to hear it, dear,” Effie said.

“It’s not the muscle—it’s the confidence that comes with it that counts.”

“Hugo’s a motivational speaker, too,” Jess said.

“Wonderful,” Sam said. “Are you two going out tonight?”

“Maybe after my tanning booth appointment,” Hugo said. “Or is it my waxing. I’ve got to check.” Hugo consulted his phone while Jess stood there looking a little uncomfortable.

“Well, we’ve got to get going,” she said. “See you all at the car wash, yeah?”

“Yeah. For sure.” Sam hugged her friend, maybe a little too hard. Dammit, Jess deserved better. Why didn’t she see that?

Effie waited until Jess and Hugo were out of earshot before she started in. “You girls don’t expect enough of the men you date. I knew after a few dates your grandfather was The One. We were married by the end of the year. All this fooling around before marriage. And you, coming up with a million excuses to delay getting married. You people make everything so complicated.”

“Love isn’t complicated?” Sam asked, happy to finally be cleaning up her brushes and calling it a day.

“No, dear,” she said, suddenly reaching forward and grasping her arm. “Love isn’t complicated. It’s very simple. You know it in your heart, and you never have to convince yourself to love someone. You simply ... do.”

“Great. Thanks, Effie.” And maybe in a hundred years I’ll have your portrait done.

“You can make me younger in this portrait, right?” she asked.

“No. Why do you ask?”

She shot her granddaughter an obstinate look. “It must be like airbrushing,” she insisted. “You can do whatever you want. So make me look younger.”

“I’ll tell you what. Let me finish it and I’ll let you have the last word, okay?”

“Younger. And maybe blonde.”

On so many levels, this was a very bad idea.

“Quit clowning around before you knock Liz into the street,” Sam warned a group of her students who were standing at the roadside in front of the gas station parking lot just past the downtown shops. They were holding up fluorescent posters advertising their fundraiser. It was a brilliantly sunny Saturday. The girls wore bikini tops and cutoff shorts, and the guys wore swim trunks and T-shirts. They were laughing and fooling around and even though they hadn’t yet washed a car, they were all wet.

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Someone had brought a beat-up boom box and it was cranked up to the Top 40 radio station and happy Saturday music was rolling out of it. It was eighty degrees already—at eleven—and the late May sun was beating down strong and bright and full of promise for a fabulous day.

“It’s okay, Ms.R.,” Calvin said, holding Liz by the waist and swinging her around—away from the street, mercifully. “Liz is expendable. Right, Liz?”

Liz beat on Calvin’s shoulders and playfully screamed for him to put her down.

Ah, young love. Jess had brought Hugo and they’d been a big help hooking up hoses and organizing the kids to be ready when the cars arrived. Which they hadn’t yet, but it was still early. The energy level was high, judging by the whooping and hollering and the general excitement of being outside on a gorgeous spring day with summer right around the corner.

Hopefully the weather would bring them a lot of business and they’d make a nice sum of money to help fund the food for the upcoming donor dinner. Jess had somehow convinced Hugo to wear a regular T-shirt and for now, he was keeping it on. Life was good.

Except Sam felt a little old. She remembered herself at that age. She would have been out there with a bikini top, too, flirting with boys. Yet by the end of senior year, she wouldn’t have bothered to show up at an event like this at all.

Not that she minded being the authority figure or even having to be a hard-ass teacher sometimes—she loved her kids, shaping young minds, mentoring them. It was just

that she looked at all the fun they were having and felt like some of it—well, a lot of it—had passed her by.

She missed being spontaneous and crazy and a little bit wicked. Yeah, yeah, she understood that being an adult meant you had to leave that behind. But sometimes she just wanted to let loose and ... live a little. She thought about what Effie had said, about acting too old for her age, about not taking any risks.

That made her think about Lukas. That crazy, impulsive kiss. That had been the wildest thing that had happened to her in ... well, six years. Being with him had always seemed to be a roller coaster ride of risk and excitement. How could any relationship sustain that artificial high for any length of time? It just wasn't natural.

It was fairy dust, and she supposed she had stars in her eyes just like everyone else in this town. Best to stick to steady and tangible reality.

She shook her head. She had to tuck the past away, where it belonged. Her future was set, and once Harris and she navigated this rough patch, all would be well. Once Lukas Spikonos moved on—as he soon would—her life would finally get back to normal.

Just then a fire-engine red Maserati streaked down the street and pulled into the car wash lot. Harris stopped on a dime and revved the engine, instantly causing a gaggle of teenage boys to stand at attention.

She smiled. He'd come here—all the way from Boston—to support her and give her a proper good-bye. To make up for last weekend when nothing had gone well. To say he'd missed her and he'd been thinking of her and—

“Hey, babe.” Harris winked. She loved that wink. Suddenly her mood lifted.

The boys surrounded the gleaming sports car faster than if it were a hot girl standing in the middle of the parking lot. “Hey, sweet car,” Leo said. Several guys ran their hands along its smooth-as-ice surface. Admired the gleaming silver spokes on the hubcaps.

“Just pull up to the hoses and we’ll get it washed for you,” Calvin said.

Harris pushed his aviators to the top of his head. “Does this car look like it needs to be washed?”

Sam turned from where she was making change for a twenty that Mr. Marks in his hardware store truck had just handed over.

“Isn’t that why you’re here?” Calvin looked puzzled. “To support the theater project?”

“My parents have donated more than what you’d make from ten years’ worth of car washes to this theater project, kid,” Harris said. “I’m here to talk to my girlfriend.” He got out of the car and walked over to Sam.

Sam felt her face heat. She overheard Leo say, “Who is that guy?” and Calvin say, “He was kidding, wasn’t he?”

“I don’t think so, man,” one of the other boys said. “What a jerk.”

At that moment, a bus drove into the car wash lot, loudly honking its horn. The kids all turned to see a giant black tour bus pulling in with “Lukas Live!” in scrolly yellow letters across its side. Someone waved out the driver’s-side window. Someone with midnight-black hair and a wicked smile he was aiming right at her. The kids swarmed the bus. At that moment, Sam couldn’t have been more grateful that everyone’s attention had been diverted away from her.

“Look, Sam,” Harris said, “I don’t like the way we left things last weekend.”

Sam studied his handsome face. His expensive clothes. He had a commanding air about him that would serve him well as he made his way up the political stepladder.

The initial relief she’d felt on his surprise appearance had dissolved to irritation. For the sake of her students, she wasn’t going to leash it in. “No talking until your car gets washed.”

“What, are you kidding me? Let teenage boys rub some dirty dollar-store sponges over that perfect paint job? They’ll scratch it.” A you-couldn’t-possibly-ask-this-of-me look passed across his face, liked she’d just asked him to surrender his aspirations of one day becoming president.

She folded her arms obstinately. “That would be teenage boys and girls. And they’ll do a nice job. Now that you’re here, I’d like you to support our project.”

From the corner of her vision, she saw Lukas drop his lithe body down from the driver’s side of the bus. Oh, no, he was walking toward them across the lot, the kids close behind, some of them oohing and aahing over the bus, others gathering around him, wanting to be close. He walked up to where Sam and Harris stood. “C’mon, Harold,” Lukas said, a lazy grin spreading over his face. “I always thought you were one to support a good cause.”

Harris had the decency to look sheepish. “I was just teasing. Of course they can wash it.”

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But the kids were all about the bus, asking Lukas if they could go inside, admiring the elaborate artwork on the outside.

Lukas sent her a concerned look. One that seemed to ask if she was okay.

She felt a blush creep into her cheeks. She didn't like that look. It was possessive. Territorial. Like he would have risked getting into it with Harris if need be.

Sam didn't need anyone to defend her. It wasn't his business and she'd been fine without him. Still, he'd come to her aid. He was trying to make the situation better. And, God help her, that made her ridiculously happy.

Lukas got pulled away by the kids. Harris was telegraphing her his I'm-sorry-please-forgive-me face that usually won her over but she just wasn't feeling it.

"Want to stay and help out for a while?" Sam asked, giving him a chance to redeem himself.

"You know I've got that plane to catch. And I've been driving all morning to make things right between us. I'll see you next week, okay? I'll be back before the big donor dinner. We'll spend some quality time together." He kissed her, but she felt no comfort. She looked over to see Lukas watching her and frowning before he turned back to the kids.

Harris squeezed her hand. "Next week, everything will get back to normal, okay, Sammy?"

Sam hated when he called her that. It made her feel like she was ten. Somehow she managed a civil good-bye. As he drove away from her only to pull up to the pumps for gas, she realized he'd managed to escape without subjecting his car to a wash.

She looked over to see the tour bus full of soap and Lukas holding his Gibson under the shade of the gas pumps, looking around for a place to plug in his amp cord. Stevie ran out of the bus, dressed in too-big swim trunks with bright fluorescent fish, waving wildly at her with the hand not holding his blankie.

She waved back just as wildly. She would survive this. Although she seriously doubted things would ever get back to normal as Harris had promised. But there was fun to be had, and this time she wasn't going to miss it.

"What's up, buddy?" Lukas asked Harris as he got out of his car and inserted the gas nozzle into his tank. From the expression on Harris's face, Lukas could tell he wasn't stopping by to ask for an autograph.

"Stay away from my girlfriend, roughneck," Harris said, lowering his voice so Sam couldn't hear.

Lukas almost smiled. What kind of man pulls up to a kids' fundraiser and refuses to have his car washed? A first-class jerk, that's what kind. For the thousandth time he wondered what the hell Sam saw in this guy.

Lukas plucked out a little riff, to make sure the amp was working. A few twangy notes spilled forth and reverberated out into the parking lot. Harris's hands curled into fists, and his face turned angry-emoji red. It was too easy to push this guy's buttons. He really should refrain. Hold back. Be the gentleman he strived so hard to be.

But holding back was not in Lukas Spikonos's nature.

“I walked away once, Harrison old buddy, and I won’t be making that mistake again.”

He was now convinced Harris Buckhorn, the-Whatever-Number-He-Was, was not good for Sam at all. There was no way he could stand by and watch him ruin her life.

Lukas squeezed his guitar a little tighter. Otherwise he held the same relaxed posture, kept the same lazy grin on his face. But his hands were trembling a little. Because he’d meant it, every single blessed word.

Harris’s laughter held a diabolical edge. “We’ve been dating for six years. Do you actually think you have a chance of breaking us up?”

“Funny, but I don’t see that you’ve put a ring on it. No ring, no promises.” He punctuated that with a strum.

“You’re a scumbag.”

“I love when you talk dirty to me.” Lukas took great pleasure watching a brand-new wave of flush start at the collar of Harris’s Ralph Lauren polo and race up his face. He might be handsome now, but Lukas detected a bit of puffiness around the eyes. A hint of softness around the middle. Good thing Lukas had stopped smoking, as of six days ago, anyway. No premature crow’s-feet for him, no siree. Or flab, for that matter.

“Go ahead, rock star. Insult me. Try to steal her. See what happens.” Then he revved his car. Lukas almost said, big car, small penis but he didn’t want to get a war started in front of the kids.

Lukas was relieved when Harris finally peeled off. He picked up his guitar but discovered the amp wasn’t working. He’d just walked over to the outlet and

unplugged the cord when a guy wearing long pants and a T-shirt with a blown-up view of Michelangelo's God and Adam that said "Adam Was Made of Atoms ... so Study Physics!" walked up to him. He bent down and pushed a little button in the middle of the socket. "Now try," he said.

The couple of notes he played sounded out loud and clear. "Thanks for the help." He extended his hand toward the stranger.

"Evan Wolensky. I teach physics at the high school." A bunch of kids wearing "Physics is Phun" shirts had gone to mingle with the other students. There still weren't any cars in line.

"I couldn't help but notice how you told that guy off," Evan said. "Impressive. I have the same problem." He sighed and nodded toward a woman Lukas recognized as Sam's best friend Jess, who was watching a very built guy do a front-double-biceps pose for a group of kids. With his shirt off. "Except I haven't got the muscles, and couldn't carry a tune if someone threatened to cut off my family jewels."

Lukas laughed. "Everyone's got their own special talents going, you know, man? Why wish for somebody else's?"

"Because those kind get the chicks. Maybe I can get a job at the nuclear plant over in Waterford and hope for a radiation exposure."

What the hell?“Why would you want to do that?”

“The Hulk, man. Don’t you read comic books?”

“There are other ways, dude. It’s not all about muscle.”

“Yeah, right. Tell that to Jessica.”

“You’re a bright guy. I mean, you just saved me from looking like a fool. Use your talents to find her love language.”

“Her love language,” he repeated, before a couple of his students called his name. “I’ve got to go. But nice meeting you. Thanks.” He gave a parting nod before making his way back across the lot.

“You, too. And dude,” Lukas waited for him to turn around. “A haircut wouldn’t hurt.”

Evan shook his head and laughed. Lukas had just gotten back to focusing on his guitar again when a familiar voice said, “You’re not gearing up to do another Christopher Plummer imitation, are you?” And there Sam was, looking magnificent in a powder-blue T-shirt and cutoffs, not too short for the kids’ sakes but enough to hug her fine ass and kick his imagination into high gear. He took in her bright green eyes, her pale skin that was already a little flushed from the sun.

Maybe she’d sensed trouble between him and Harris. So be it. He’d just decided his primary goal today would be to make her forget that Harris ever existed.

He shot her a mischievous look. Caressing the guitar, he strummed a few bars with ease and grace. Then he strummed and sang, very sweetly and slowly, “How do you solve a problem like Samantha?”

She rolled her eyes. But her lips lifted in a little smile.

“Hey, Lukas, play ‘You Don’t Know Me,’” one of the kids yelled. Lukas stiffened. He wasn’t about to ruin the fact that he’d finally made her smile.

“You know, that song’s getting sort of old,” Lukas said, winking at Sam, pleased when she blushed prettily. “How about we sing something a little fresher?” He started the riff to one of his hits from last year, “That Girl Is Trouble.” “You all help me sing it now, all right?”

Stevie ran over, surrounded by Sam’s students who were laughing and joking with him. Someone had given him a pair of round sunglasses that made him look like the adorable little kid from Jerry Maguire. The kids started to dance while Calvin stood in the middle and sprayed the hose straight up in the air so water rained down on everyone. One of the guys lifted Stevie up on his shoulders. His sunglasses were falling down his nose and he was clapping his hands and belly laughing so hard he hiccupped.

Suddenly Sam joined the circle of kids. She danced. She swung Stevie around. The water fell down in drops and made rainbows shoot over their heads. The sun was hot, the smell of spring and water hitting the hot pavement thick in the air. Lukas crooned a wicked love song that worked its magic and filled everyone with pure joy. He tried not to look at Sam but every time he gave into the urge, he found himself catching her eye across the lot, and it felt in more ways than one as if he was singing to her. As if she was the girl who was trouble.

When the song was through, she was breathing hard and completely soaked.

The music ended. There was a long line of cars that stretched out of the parking lot and up the nearest side street. As the kids got to work, Sam caught Lukas's eye as she put Stevie down so the boy could go help a group of kids with the washing.

This time, he stared for an entirely different reason. Directly at her boobs, which were covered with a hot pink bra that was outlined perfectly through her wet pale blue shirt. He saw the second she realized the problem. And he couldn't help the grin that surely must have spread across his face from ear to ear.

Sam hurriedly crossed her arms and jogged to the abandoned side of the tour bus, which was now gleaming cleanly in the sun, but Lukas was quicker. He got to the bus first and pulled the door open for her. As she slipped past him, he couldn't resist saying, "The real question is if the panties match the bra."

He let his gaze trace a slow, lazy path from her flip-flops, up her pretty toned legs, and lingering on the aforementioned bra before he met her eyes. There was a fine mix of horror and panic there. He told himself he really shouldn't capitalize on her discomfort but it was too fun not to.

He was about to make another smartass comment but at that moment their eyes locked and for a second he was unable to breathe. A jolt of electricity passed silently between them that walloped him like a thunderclap.

Lukas was not one to be thrown off balance by a woman. Rather, he was usually the one to do the unbalancing. So he was pleased when she turned as bright pink as her underwear. Just when he'd thought he'd regained control, she leaned toward him and said in the softest whisper that brushed his cheek, "You'll never know," and punctuated the comment with a simple lift of her brow.

He laughed out loud. Shook his head. Fisted his hands to prevent himself from scooping her into his arms and kissing her senseless.

“So can I borrow another shirt before I lose my teaching job or what?”

He somehow managed to rip himself away and walk to the back of the bus, where he disappeared around a corner and snagged a black T-shirt. “Here you go,” he said, tossing it at her.

The shirt said “Lukas Live!” in white lettering, similar to what was on the side of the bus. “Thanks,” she said, looking for a place to take off her sopping wet shirt. He motioned toward the bathroom, which she quickly ducked into.

She came out wearing the shirt and with her wet hair smoothed back in a ponytail. “Thanks for helping me. I should have worn a bathing suit but all I have are bikinis and I didn’t think that was appropriate. I should have known better not to act like one of the kids.”

Oh my God. Bikinis. His favorite. “You were just having fun. Nothing wrong with that, and I don’t think anyone even noticed.” Except for him. He’d noticed, all right. So had certain parts of his anatomy.

She gave her wet ponytail a squeeze. “Thanks for showing up today,” she said. “The kids loved it and from the looks of it, we’ll be washing cars for hours.”

He shrugged. “Always good to drum up some business. Stevie’s having a ball, too. I want him meeting people.”

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“The kids love him.” She was looking around the bus, the leather seats, the bar, the big-screen TV. “Well, I should get back. I appreciate your using your celebrity to help us.”

“It’s a good cause.”

Sam tugged down the shirt and self-consciously crossed her arms, covering up the “Lukas Live.” With the way she made him feel, maybe it should say “Lukas Alive.”

“What was it like after you left here?” she asked, studying a few posters up on the walls from events his band had played.

He leaned against a tabletop and crossed his arms. Her gaze traveled up his arm, checking out his sleeve tattoo. He put the left arm over the right so she couldn’t see it too closely. “Lonely, especially at first. I took any gig I could find. Slept anywhere. I played backup for any band that would have me, any gig I could get. Made friends, connections. Worked my way up.”

“You always were a hard worker.”

He quirked up his mouth in an ironic smile. “That’s one thing I can thank my old man for. I promised myself from an early age to do whatever it took not to be like him.”

Suddenly she reached out and grasped his right arm, catching him by surprise. She examined the elaborate scrolls of artwork, the musical notes inked so intricately there. He let her flip his arm so she could see the underside and trace the pattern near his wrist. Her touch was butterfly-light, and invoked a wave of warmth that spread from

his arm to someplace deep in his belly.

“Oh, Lukas,” she said. Her brilliant green eyes were full of pity.

“Don’t feel sorry for me.”

“You did it to cover up the scars.”

Her touch was too gentle to make him wince, but he did anyway. “I didn’t want to spend every day of my life reminded of how I got those cigarette burns, and I didn’t want anyone else to either. Problem solved.”

Lukas withdrew his arm from her touch and stepped across the narrow aisle. He stood very close, so close he could make out the vibrant green of her eyes, the soft sheen of her silky thick hair. Reflexively, she stepped back.

He advanced another step forward.

She was backed up against the banquette now, her arms holding on to the tabletop. He picked up a random curl. Twirled it slowly between his fingers. She simply stared at him.

“Like I said, don’t waste your time feeling sorry for me. You may think I’m nice but I’m not.” He dropped the curl and stared at her. “I’m a wolf. I’m not going to pretend I have nice intentions toward you. Assuming you are wearing the hot pink panties that match the bra, if that guy wasn’t in the picture, I’d have them off you in the next heartbeat, and you’d be on that bed back there writhing and crying out my name. You’ve been warned.”

She gasped. He’d been audacious. Crazy bold. And entirely socially unacceptable. But he had no regrets.

He reached over and pulled a ball cap off a shelf above her and tugged it onto her head. “Don’t get sunburnt,” he said as he walked past her toward the door, lightly grazing her shoulder on purpose. The fact that he shouldn’t want her was irrelevant now. He did, and this time, he wasn’t going to let anything or anyone stand in his way.

CHAPTER 10

Any honorable man would have had the decency to leave after making those outrageous remarks, but when did Lukas Spikonos ever follow any rules? No, he hung around, singing until he'd attracted a huge crowd, on foot and in cars. He helped wash cars and then ordered everyone pizza, even though Sam insisted it was in the school's budget to buy it. Teddy Lawrence, the owner of Mona's Bakery, even brought over a ton of cookies for everyone.

For the rest of the afternoon, Sam kept away from Lukas. Or at least she tried to. The annoying thing was, his shirt smelled just like him. It was infused with the spicy, rich scent of his soap or cologne, the same one he used all those years ago, which evoked all kinds of wild, unwanted memories. Surprising that he hadn't upgraded to a more elite brand.

Stevie, on the other hand, was another matter. He devoted himself to being her personal assistant, helping to wash out rags, handing her fresh ones, and lugging buckets of fresh water for the kids. Even bringing her a Coke. He was a precious child. Tying Bobby around his head like a bandana, he was happy and sweet.

Sam wondered if the hardships in his life made him like that—almost too perfect. Like he knew he had to please or he feared he'd be out on his butt. All her other nieces and nephews would have been protesting mutinously at this stage. She made sure he had plenty of sunblock on and when he got tired, she asked two of the senior girls to take him to the bus and read stories to him until he nodded off for a nap.

“Hey, babe,” her sister-in-law Meg said to Sam as she pulled up in a red van around

midafternoon with James, who was five, and Sophie, eighteen months. “How are you doing?” she asked. “You look a little tense.”

Sam said hi and blew kisses to her niece and nephew. Tense? Ha! Meg had no idea.

Sometimes people had attractions to other people, but they didn’t allow that—sex, chemistry, hormones, whatever you wanted to call it—to ruin their lives with the people they loved. True love was always stronger, right?

Harris had everything she wanted. He was smart and handsome and he treasured her. Why else would he bring her flowers for no reason or surprise her with reservations at a beautiful outdoor winery an hour away? Or an overnight at a quaint bed and breakfast when she was stressed? Then there was his century-old family compound, not to mention his intact, traditional family. And his aspirations to be the best he could be. So he was a little edgy lately. She might be, too, with all that stress.

Then why, oh why, was her body so traitorous? She’d always had a thing for bad boys. Well, that bad boy in particular. But she’d worked hard to flush all that out of her system. Hadn’t she learned anything from life? From heartbreak?

This grown-up Lukas seemed ... a whole lot more complicated. Trying so hard for Stevie, kind to her students ... he was so much more than the sexy swagger, the low, sensual voice, and those warm brown eyes that showed every feeling. Not to mention all that thick black John Stamos hair (circa 1993), and oh, God, that body. Lean and muscular with all those badass tattoos ...

“Oh, Meg,” she said, feeling a little desperate.

They both watched Lukas cross to the next car in line in front of them. “Wow, Sam,” Meg said, “he’s a lot hotter than he was six years ago.”

“Meg!”

“Just saying. I’ve always liked Lukas. I always thought of him as a diamond in the rough. I’m proud of him for achieving so much with the hard start he had in life.”

“Even though he left six years ago. Gone with nothing left behind but a rusty Camaro and a key chain.” And me.

Meg gave her that worried big-sister look. It was one of the reasons Sam loved her so much. They were sisters-in-law but Meg from the beginning had always felt like the sister she’d never had. “Look, come over later. The kiddos are in bed by eight thirty. We’ll have a glass of wine and talk, okay?”

“Well, I’ll try, but—” Just then Sam felt a bump on her shoulder. Lukas grinned and said a quick “excuse me” and put his arm around her to steady her as he came up next to her at the car window. His skin was wet and warm from the sun, and he smelled like summer. Sam tried for nonchalance, but it was just so hard when he was touching her.

“Hey, Meg,” Lukas said with a grin. Meg immediately reached over her door to hug him.

“Mommy, is he a real rock star?” James asked.

Lukas scanned the back seat. “Wow, Meg, you and Dr. Ben have been busy.”

“Lukas, it’s so nice to see you,” Meg said. “Meet James and Sophie.”

“Are you a real rock star?” James asked, his eyes wide.

“I’m a rock musician,” Lukas said. “Are you Batman?” he asked, clearly noticing the

shirt and cape James wore.

“Me Batman,” Sophie said evilly.

“She’s not Batman,” James said a little forcefully.

“Okay, it’s nap time,” Meg said pleasantly. She turned toward Lukas. “We’re having a big family birthday party for James tomorrow. Why don’t you come and bring your little guy, too?”

Lukas looked reluctant.

“There will be a lot of little kids there—he’ll meet friends.” And Rushford brothers. Lots and lots of them. That would be a minefield for Lukas. Especially Brad.

“Mommy,” James said in a singsongy voice. “It stinks in here.”

“Honey, we’ll be home in just ...”

“Sophie pooped.”

“No poop,” said Sophie, looking alarmed.

“Aha. You pooped,” James said. Then he got in her face. “Poop, poop, poop!”

Sophie started to cry.

“Well, time to go!” Meg said cheerily. “Call me crazy, but I’m determined to get through this car wash. Great to see you, Lukas,” she said, pulling the van forward.

Lukas straightened. He tapped his hands on the car door. “Hey, great to see you. Maybe I will. Bye, kids!” He gave the kids a goofy grin and a wave, then went back to tend to the cars.

Sam watched Lukas tirelessly sign autographs on baseball caps, T-shirts, a child’s teddy bear, and even a reusable shopping bag in lieu of paper. Her kids were having the time of their lives and so was Stevie, who was going to crash hard tonight judging by all the excitement and laughing going on.

No, this grown-up Lukas was nothing like who she thought he was. He’d claimed he left her back then because he’d had nothing to offer. He’d sounded genuinely remorseful about it, yet he’d made a bunch of teenagers very happy today, and saved their car wash. She had to remind herself that this was the same man who’d stolen her words and left without a trace. But somehow she found it impossible to hate him. Far

from it.

And that was the scariest thought of all.

The next day, Sam answered Meg and Ben's front door, pushing aside a batch of bobbing helium-filled balloons to a shocking sight. Lukas was on the front step, grabbing Stevie by the back of his button-down shirt to prevent him from bolting into the house. Lukas had a look on his face like he was pining for a smoke and wished he were, oh, just about anywhere else but here. Stevie was red-faced and just plain mad. How Lukas had managed to get cute little shorts and dress shoes on the little boy was beyond comprehension. "Hold up a second, there, bud," Lukas reprimanded in a firm voice.

Wow. In a parental voice. Stevie obeyed but not happily, crossing his arms and pulling out his lower lip, his omnipresent blanket wedged in between his arms and his hip. She couldn't help smiling. They both seemed so ... irritated.

"Aren't you boys handsome. But did Vineyard Vines go out of business?"

Lukas scowled, but she couldn't help but enjoy the torment. He appeared to be as uncomfortable as Stevie. His baby-blue oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled up a little, covering most of his sleeve tattoo, looked great with his coloring, and the sight of his sexy arm muscles peeking out from under the cuffs was positively Sexiest Man Alive.

But he had on these ... shorts. They were seersucker, with blue and white stripes, with whales interspersed throughout the stripes. Yes, whales. Spouting whales. Her rebel rocker had gone ... preppy on her. What the ...

Stevie tugged on Lukas's shorts. "I want to see the kids, Uncle Lukas. I seen 'em all in the backyard. Sam, let me go, okay?"

He pleaded with her, making full use of those big brown eyes that made her heart melt and want to tell this adorable child who'd had it so tough sure, honey, whatever you want. But she'd had lots of practice watching her brothers and sisters-in-law with their kids. She knew you didn't interfere with discipline.

"If it's okay with your uncle, I can walk you back there and introduce you to everyone." She looked up at Lukas. "Would that be okay?"

Stevie wiggled out of Lukas's grasp. "He's making me wear this stupid tie. I want it off." He gave a vicious tug.

Lukas shifted his weight back and forth. He raked an impatient hand through his hair. "Mrs. Panagakos dressed him. Meg invited her, too, but she has an event at church today."

Sam swept her gaze up and down Lukas's lean body, trying hard not to smile. "Did she dress you, too?"

He shot her a murderous glare that promised retaliation, but she didn't care. This was far too much fun to stop.

"She doesn't know how to dress boys," Stevie said, stomping his feet on the front stoop. "Everyone's gonna laugh at me."

Sam bent down and wrapped an arm around him. "She just wanted you to put your best foot forward. Do you know what that means?"

His frown deepened, but he leaned into her a little. Sam wasn't unaware that Stevie had a soft spot for her almost as big as the one she had for him. "Well, it means that it's kind of fun to dress up and look your best when you're about to meet new friends."

He stuck his fingers between the collar of his shirt and his neck. “I’m choking. Todeath!” Oh, the rebellion to conformity. Must be genetic.

Lukas did not look amused. In fact, he looked downright uncomfortable, glancing about and fiddling with his sleeves. Sam stood up and got right to the point. “Okay, Lukas, can he lose the tie?”

“Fine.” Lukas bent and unpinned it. “There, can you breathe now?”

Stevie frowned in response.

“Here,” Lukas said to Stevie, handing him a wrapped rectangular package. “Take the present with you.”

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Stevie slung the brightly colored package under his arm and took hold of Sam's hand. She glanced at Lukas. "Why don't you come with us? We can say hi to my brothers."

"Can't wait," he said under his breath, but he followed her into the house. He made a funny clearing-his-throat noise that made her turn around.

"Don't worry," she said. "They only hated you seven years ago when you dumped me. I'm sure they're over it by now."

Was Lukas going pale? Sam blinked to be sure. Yep, there was definitely a gray cast to that dark olive skin. Throwing him to the Rushford brothers was going to be so much fun.

She felt a tug on her hand and glanced downward.

"Remember," Stevie said. "I'm Stevie today. Not Stavros. Got it?"

"Got it." Smiling, she relented a little and put her other hand on Lukas's arm. A mistake, because it felt warm from the sun and so ... muscular, not like Hugo's oversized muscles, yet covered with a soft masculine layer of hair. Startled by her touch, he looked up. She found herself gazing into his warm brown eyes, all irritation replaced by something much darker that suddenly gave her goose bumps. "Cheer up." Somehow she managed to keep her tone light. "Olivia made mimosas for the grown-ups. I'll get you one in a minute."

Actually, she could use one herself. Now that they had finally gotten through the door, the fun was about to begin.

Lukas had never seen such pandemonium. Not that he was a stranger to rock-world pandemonium. Stoned musicians, out of control fans, the inevitable groupies screaming and grabbing at them and trying to get to them backstage ... all that he could handle, but here—parents, presents, strewn toys, lots of little kids milling around everywhere—he was completely out of his element. Lukas started to go with Stevie, to make sure he was okay and that the other kids didn't beat up on him, but Stevie took off with Sam, and judging by the evil look the kid just tossed him, he was not keen on Lukas following him. And that made him realize what he'd already guessed: that parenthood was indeed a thankless job.

He walked through a grand old house that he knew Meg and Ben had saved from the wrecking ball. A bright white kitchen occupied by the Rushford women opened up onto a smallish backyard that was currently overrun with kids, many of them Rushford progeny. (These people reproduced like bunnies.) Effie and Meg's grandma, Gloria, sat on the patio chatting with Gloria's husband, Maurice.

Then the Rushford Mafia was eyeballing him from across the yard. Three strapping guys, each drinking a beer and watching over the kids running circles around the big backyard. God, he could use one of those beers. And a cigarette. Make that a shot of Jack. And a cigarette. He fingered his upper arm, where his nicotine patch was doing nothing at all as far as he could discern.

From the kitchen, two of the sisters-in-law, Alex and Olivia, just sort of stared, and he could swear Alex scowled. Meg was the only one who smiled. Before he could pick which particular hell he'd like to expose himself to first, two moms who had just dropped off kids saw him standing in a doorway. They began to squeal and giggle and point to him.

Shit. In some ways the cougar moms were worse than the screaming teens.

He started to make a break for the brothers but too late—he was mobbed.

“Oh my God,” one of the women said. She was blonde and very tanned and wore a silky orange halter top overflowing with—um, her breasts. She immediately grabbed his arm and started feeling up his muscles. He gritted his teeth, forced a smile and tried not to pull away. “You are a hundred times more handsome than you are on YouTube. I read that you got your sleeve tattoo because of a love affair gone sour that you never wanted to forget. Is that true?”

“I never kiss and tell,” he said. He’d do the usual shtick he did for fans and get himself the hell out of Dodge.

The second mom, who also looked as though she were dressed for an adult party instead of a child’s—judging by her low-cut silk jumpsuit, high heels, and enough makeup to whip up a batch of pancakes—said, “Heard you sang at Channing Tatum’s kid’s birthday party. Are you singing today?”

“Just a guest,” he said.

“Would you autograph my boobs?” asked the first mom.

Jeez. What the ... The R-rated cleavage wasn’t very sexy. Just ... fleshy. Very, very fleshy. He made sure to look anywhere else because God forbid they’d think he was interested. “I’d love to stay and chat but um, if you’ll excuse me, ladies, I’ve got to go. Take care, now.” He walked toward the Rushford brothers, praying they wouldn’t throw him under the bus. Even if they did, anything was better than Boob Sister Stalker Moms.

The three men were leaning against a play set, watching various children run around them. Brad was pushing a little girl, no doubt one of his three daughters, on a swing. Ben immediately reached out a hand in greeting and smiled, averting his eyes from the whale shorts. “Nice to see you here, Lukas.”

Oh, thank God. Maybe bygones were going to be bygones.

He caught Brad's scowl from the corner of his eye. Brad offered a barely civil nod.

Tom, the cop, offered him a beer. He took it and nodded back at Brad, who looked away. Well, two out of three wasn't bad.

"I see you've got fans after you," Tom said. "Must be hard to live a normal life when you aren't on tour."

"Those aren't fans. They're rabid Mommy Groupies." He mumbled a thanks for the beer. The first sip went down ice cold and smooth. The best thing that had happened to him today. Except for seeing Sam.

"So you don't have your usual security with you?" Tom asked.

He shook his head. "I gave them today off. Plus I feel pretty safe in Mirror Lake, actually."

"That might be a cavalier attitude considering you've got Stevie," Brad said. "And especially since you're staying with Sam."

"I'm staying on Sam's property, yes," he said, making sure to emphasize property. To make it clear it wouldn't be substituted for a bedroom. "But I do have my security guys on site, in my tour bus. I'd never allow anything to happen to Sam or Stevie."

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Brad stared him down. Whatever. Lukas stared right back. He wasn't a poor kid anymore with a bad job and no prospects, and he would never again allow anyone to make him feel like he was. Brad seemed to have taken up right where they'd left off six years ago. He was the dog chomping on the rope toy for dear life and not about to let go.

Well, too bad. Sam was a big girl, capable of making her own choices. And maybe it was time her family saw it. Were they all really so in love with that Harris guy? How could such an obvious phony have pulled the wool so completely over everyone's eyes?

"Hey you all," Alex called from the back deck. "Less beer drinking and more kid watching, okay?" Two of the kids were getting into it with each other and little Sophie had fallen in the grass and was crying. Chagrined, the men did as told. Lukas wandered over to the swing set, in earshot of where Stevie was sitting on a railroad tie talking to a boy around his age. They were both eating red Popsicles. Lukas stayed back far enough that he could listen but not be seen.

"Where's your mommy and daddy?" the boy asked. Lukas thought he might be one of Alex's six-year-old twins. Popsicle juice dripped down Stevie's chin and all over the front of his good shirt. And onto his balled-up blanket, which was between his feet. The GQ for Cuties look had lasted all of five minutes.

Stevie kept sucking on the Popsicle.

"Don't you have any?" the boy persisted. Definitely one of Alex's.

A cute little red-haired girl, older than Stevie by a year or two, in a green dotted dress and pigtails walked up to the two kids. “Back off, Daniel,” she said to the boy. “It’s okay,” she said, taking Stevie’s hand. “I’m ’dopted too.”

“What’s ’dopted?” Stevie asked.

“My mommy says it’s something that when kids don’t have their regular parents, some other people want them so bad they get them adopted.”

“Where are your parents?” Stevie asked.

“They had to go to heaven early. How about yours?”

Stevie shrugged. “My mom died and my dad couldn’t take care of me so he left me with my Uncle Lukas for a little while.”

“Is he going to adopt you?”

Lukas stepped forward ready to say, yeah, of course he was. As fast as yesterday, if he had his way.

“He can’t ’cause my dad’s coming back for me,” Stevie said.

Oh, shit. Lukas’s blood ran North Pole cold. He’d had no idea Stevie was waiting. Of course he was! It explained the backpack, all ready to go. The toothbrush that always got tucked back in. The clothes that never made it into drawers.

Lukas himself had said nothing to Stevie about their arrangement—Stevie hadn’t asked and he’d assumed ...

Well, he’d assumed nothing. Because he hadn’t had the slightest idea how to even

bring up the discussion. Hey, kid, your dad's too effed up to take care of you, so you're stuck with me now, like, forever. That okay?

Lukas didn't know how to talk to a five year old about life-shattering events. But he did know one thing. He wanted to give him everything. A home, cool toys, friends. The world. Because he loved him. He didn't want anything to hurt him, especially the news that his dad was in all likelihood never coming back.

Lukas felt a sudden hand on his arm. "The clown is drunk," Sam said, a knife blade of urgency cutting her voice.

Lukas laughed. "Oh, this is going to be good."

"Bring on the show," Tom said, rubbing his hands together.

"Now things are getting interesting," Brad said.

Sam's voice rose an octave. "You guys don't understand. He showed up drunk and right now Alex and Olivia are trying to sober him up with coffee."

"That's urban legend," Ben said. "Coffee can't really sober you up. The alcohol has to be metabolized out of the system."

"Thanks, like I didn't know that." Sam rolled her eyes. "The point is we need a replacement. Now which one of you is going to step up?"

"I'm too tall for the clown suit," Ben said, holding his hands up in defense. "Besides, I'm on call today."

"Great excuse," Brad said, holding his hand up for a high-five.

Tom's way of getting out of it was to start walking away. "I've got to go make sure he's not harassing the women. And other things like cite the guy for showing up drunk and make sure he doesn't drive himself home. Excuse me."

Sam crossed her arms. "Okay. I really need someone to juggle, do magic, paint faces, and make balloon animals."

"Sorry, sweetheart," Brad said, holding up his hands in defense. "Not in my skill set."

"I'll do it." The words were out of Lukas's mouth before he could stop them. Which he totally should have if he had any sense at all. "If Sam agrees to be my assistant," he added. He might as well get something good out of it for all the humiliation.

Sam gasped.

"You can juggle?" Tom asked. The bros eyeballed Lukas incredulously.

He shrugged, keeping it cool. "I can do those things." Because that's the kind of stuff you learn when you were basically forced to do any job you can grab from age thirteen on to avoid starvation. You got skilled in weird shit.

Sam smiled and, for a second, he was super glad he'd spoken up to save the day. Until she grabbed his arm and started dragging him across the yard to the kitchen. There, next to the giant island covered with food, the three sisters-in-law were gathered around a bald guy with a white face and smeary red lips. He was sitting slumped on a wooden chair snoring. Olivia held an oversized horn, Meg a giant red shoe, and Alex a purple wig. On seeing him, Alex seized his arm and grinned broadly. "Right this way, Lukas. Right this way."

CHAPTER 11

Who knew offering yourself up as a human sacrifice had its advantages? Even though the baggy costume was hot as hell and smelled a little—okay, a lot—and the clown shoes were gross and sweaty. But sitting on the toilet seat in Brad and Olivia's bathroom while Sam put white makeup on Lukas's face was ... interesting.

Her touch was deliberate and professional as she dabbed and swiped with a makeup sponge, treating his face like a canvas. He closed his eyes and concentrated on each stroke, the feel of her touching him that wasn't meant to be sensual but was. Smelling her light, citrus-and-grapefruit scent reminded him of long, lazy summer days. Not that he'd ever had any of those, but it made him wonder what it would be like to spend one with her. To imagine a completely different scenario where he would simply reach out and tug her until she fell into his lap, circle his arms around her, and kiss her on those beautiful full lips of hers. Stamp her ass.

A few years ago, he would have accepted that he didn't have a chance with her. He was from another world. His entire experience of life did not include what it was like to be part of a loving family, a safe place where people had your back. In his world, if you turned your back for just a second you got stabbed. Taken advantage of. Trust was a luxury that couldn't be afforded.

Yet now that he'd experienced the freakish and serendipitous world of success, he'd learned more about himself. He'd always been tenacious and scrappy, but now he had proof that he wasn't a quitter. Not quitting had gotten him places.

He might be the wrong guy for her. A bad gamble. He was as far off from the

stability she craved as Maine from Hawaii. Unknowing of how to love or be loved and clueless about raising a child.

But he knew one thing. Harris was worse. Harris, with all his education and all his wealth, didn't treat her with the respect she deserved.

Lukas wasn't going to back down. That included showing all her big, dumb brothers what he was made of, clown or no clown.

He opened his eyes to find her staring at him. She flushed as red as the face paint she was about to apply around his mouth.

"What are you looking at?" he asked, unabashedly admiring her. Up close, her green eyes held golden flecks in a fascinating pattern he'd never noticed before. Her cheeks were more rounded, not the carved ones of models on the brink of starvation, or some rockers he knew who subsisted more on pot and booze than food, giving her a fresh look so different from everyone in his world. And she had a smattering of tiny freckles over the bridge of her nose. Sun kissed.

It pleased him that her hands were shaking a little. "Tell me, Princess, how did you know you wanted to be an artist?"

"Quit calling me that. It's demeaning."

He'd started calling her that long ago as a warning to himself. Princesses don't belong with bad boys. "Okay, fair enough, Samantha. I never thought business was the proper career for you. I'm glad you ended up doing art."

She laughed as she continued to dab his face. "I'm just an art teacher. But I love using my hands."

“I like to use my hands, too.” He let that sink in. Judging by the way her eyes widened, it hit the mark. “And you are an artist—who teaches.”

“If you’re asking if I regret not going to art school, the answer is no. I love my job.”

“I’m glad you found what makes you happy.”

“What about you—are you happy?” she asked.

“I love writing songs, performing. I mean, who’d’ve thought all this craziness would happen to me, a foster kid with nothing?”

“I hear a ‘but’ in there.”

“Oh, just that things are kind of consuming. I’m going to have to make some changes now that I have Stevie.”

“Changes?” she asked, her elegant brows arching.

“I’m going to hire a tutor for Stevie. And a chef. And someone to clean the bus on a regular basis.”

“Oh, okay,” she said, still skeptical. “What about a relationship? Do you have time for those?”

“Too focused on my career.” Actually, it was hard to have a relationship when you only wanted one person. “Besides, I don’t do relationships. Too complicated. You, however, deserve someone who thinks you’re special. Who treats you right.”

“More advice from the relationship expert.” She rolled her eyes, but her blush deepened. “Do you want a sad face or a happy face?”

“Let’s go with happy.”

She traced a big line around his mouth with red face crayon.

Sunlight filtered into the window from a large oak tree, the dappled rays bringing out the golden-red highlights and the May-grass green of her pretty eyes.

“Doyouhave to keep staring at me?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, you’re making me uncomfortable,” she said.

“Good.”

She stood back to look at her handiwork. She flicked a wary glance at him. Then she handed him a mirror. “Here, take a look.”

“Very ... clownish.” He looked up at her. “Thank you.” He stood up and looked in the bigger mirror over the pedestal sink. Before he put on his red nose, he turned. “There’s something between us, Sam. I feel it and you feel it. Maybe we should both get it out of our systems.”

“You’re not in my system. I’m in love with Harris.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“What you have with him is not love.” He hadn’t seen it before when he was younger, but he saw it now. And he couldn’t be silent.

“Spoken by the guy who’s just admitted he’s never had a relationship. When did you become an expert on love?”

“I know enough. You don’t light up when you talk about him—instead, you

apologize for him. You tiptoe around him like he's a sleeping giant you don't want to awaken. You seem embarrassed by the way he treats you. And my own personal opinion—any man who doesn't make love to his girlfriend before he leaves town for any length of time is a fool. The thing I don't understand is why you take it all, why you stay with him.”

“How dare you.” Anger flashed from those spectacular eyes. He fisted his hands so he wouldn't grab her and pull her close and kiss some sense into her. Good thing his face was covered in greasepaint.

“I may not be the one for you, but Harris sure as hell isn't either.” A graceful and quick exit was supposed to punctuate that statement. But Lukas's giant clown shoes knocked against the bathroom cabinet and the door and prevented that, and he stumbled a little in the small space. “Now if you'll excuse me, I have a job to do.” He had to lift his big cloppy feet up and over the threshold. He might have detected a trace of amusement in her eyes. On top of being really pissed.

He turned back once he reached the doorway of the spare bedroom. “And if you're inclined to help with the face painting, I'd appreciate it.”

“Fine, Ronald McDonald, I'll help you on one condition.”

“What's that?”

“Stop critiquing me and mind your own business.”

“Never,” he said, waggling his clown brows. Then he tooted his clown horn and left.

“If you call me your lovely assistant again, I'm going to bean you over the head with one of these,” Sam whispered to Lukas as she handed him three plastic bowling pin-shaped things that she thought were for juggling, even as she maintained a sweet

smile for all the kids sitting in a semicircle in front of them.

Irritation made her snarky. How could Lukas waltz back into her life after six years and judge her relationship with Harris?

Yet the accuracy with which he pinpointed her feelings toward Harris was alarming. It was embarrassing that Harris condescended to her in front of her friends and sometimes even her family. She was filled with doubt and a foreboding sense of unease. She avoided confronting Harris directly about anything because he turned moody and sullen for days afterward. And he was so wrapped up in his own problems that he left her—their relationship—hanging for months.

She kept hoping his irritable temperament was temporary, but in her heart she knew his true nature. She was beginning to worry that maybe she was more in love with what he represented—stability, security, normalcy—than Harris himself.

She broke out of her worried thoughts to find Lukas grinning at her, which was a tad creepy, what with his clown smile and all. “You are my lovely assistant, dammit.” He took the juggling pins from her, his hands brushing hers. Purposefully. “Maybe I should introduce you as my hot lovely assistant.” He winked, which did something to her insides. Dissolved them completely, despite her anger.

How could she get turned on by a guy in full clown makeup? Was that unnatural? She’d never flirted with a clown before. Come to think of it, she never wanted to again. Because it was kind of creepy.

“Okay, kids. Gather round,” Lukas said, honking his clown horn. For right now, they were a rapt audience. And they would be, for as long as their attention spans held. Which, in her experience, was about ten seconds.

“Okay, hot assistant, get ready,” he said in a low voice.

She shot him the stink eye.

“For this next part, mybrainyassistant will lie down on this bench,” he said out loud to the kids. He dragged a wooden picnic bench over from Meg and Ben’s lawn table.

She cocked a brow. “Are you going to saw me in half?”

“Sweetheart,” he said, his face very near, his voice rumble and soft, “there’s a lot of things I could think of doing with you all stretched out in front of me, but sawing you in half isn’t one of them.” He reached out a hand to help her into position. She lay down on the bench, her feet hanging over the edge, making sure her dress was tucked in.

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“How are you feeling today, Samantha?” He bent over and stuck his big clown nose close to her face. She squeezed it. The kids laughed.

“I feel great,” she said warily. “And I’d like to stay that way.”

“Open your mouth.”

“You aren’t going to try something, are you?”

“Oh, please,” he said in a low voice. “If I try something, it isn’t going to be in front of a yard of screaming five year olds.”

He reached down near her ear and began to pull ribbon out of somewhere—multicolored, red, green, yellow, blue, on and on it flowed.

“What did you eat for breakfast?” he exclaimed loudly.

The kids thought that was hysterical.

“Um, a rainbow?” she answered. The kids roared. Apparently that was also funny. Score one for the brainy assistant.

He helped her up until she stood next to him.

“Thank you for being so clever, Vanna White.”

“Go to hell,” she said between her teeth, still smiling.

“Close your eyes.”

“Bite me.”

“I should have cut you in half,” he mumbled. “Aw, come on. Close your eyes and hold out your hands.”

She did. And an enormous pouf of vividly colored fake silk flowers showed up. Then he really did kiss her—on the cheek.

“Thank you, Spike the Clown. What’s your next trick?”

“Um—I’m at a little loss right now. Any suggestions?”

“Can you spin plates? Balance a long stick on your chin? Ride a unicycle?”

“No, no, andno.”

“What kind of clown are you?”

“Um, a pathetic one? But I’m the only one they’ve got, so I’ll be right back.”

Even as he spoke, he was running toward the house. Which left her thinking she’d be doing something horrible to him in his sleep tonight if he wasn’t coming right back. While he was gone, she had the kids play a quick game of duck, duck, goose.

He returned with his guitar. His Gibson. Just in time, because one of the little girls fell chasing one of the other kids and was now crying.

He walked around the kids, playing “Old MacDonald,” getting them to make all the animal noises. He did a soulful version of “On Top of Spaghetti” and ended with

“You Are My Sunshine.” By the end, all the adults were gathered around, unable to resist. It was so unfair that the package of sexy hot man also had the voice of an angel.

Next he blew up balloon animals, one for each kid—dogs, swords, flowers, even a poodle. Not bad for a minute’s notice. Finally, the show was over and Meg called all the kids over to a long table set with a bright yellow tablecloth for hot dogs and cake.

“You can carry a tune,” Sam said as she helped Lukas clean up the clown props. “You’re like the Pied Piper of rock-star clowns. You had everyone mesmerized, mommies and kiddies alike.”

“I’d like to have a chance at mesmerizing you,” he said, waggling those big clown eyebrows again and looking unabashed.

“Stop flirting with me.” But she couldn’t muster up enough steam to really mean it. Plus she was struggling not to smile.

He looked up from stuffing all the leftover balloons into a bag. His dark, soulful eyes, even surrounded in clown makeup, flared with something. Mischief? Or something darker. He shrugged. “Quit eyeing me like I’m nothing more than a piece of meat. It’s shameful.”

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Her face heated. “I am not looking at you like that. I mean, come on, clowns are not hot.” But this one sure was.

He got up in her grill. The ridiculousness of that damn clown nose and the streaky white makeup made her want to laugh crazily at the madness of it all. But his eyes anchored her and she could not look away.

“Have you not heard of personal space?” Sam asked weakly. “Back up, Clown.”

“I try but I just can’t seem to stop myself,” he whispered in a velvety voice that sent shivers up her arms.

“Well, try harder,” she said, steeling her voice. Except it did crack a little at the end. “It’s irritating.”

“All clowning aside, Samantha,” he said, taking off his clown nose and sticking it on her nose. “No can do.” Then he walked away, chuckling at his joke.

Nonsense aside, a list was building in her brain. Funny. Kind to Stevie, even when irritated. Great with kids. Hot as hell. She couldn’t reconcile this adult version of him with the carefree rock star who wanted a fling. And she couldn’t help feeling the joke was on her.

Lukas carried a sleeping Stevie to his Acura MDX rental car and bent to lower him into his booster seat. The boy’s shirt was untucked and stained, he had chocolate ice cream smeared on his chin, and his feet were bare and dirty. On his cheek were the remnants of a half-scratched-off green snake Sam had painted. It had been a great

day. And not just for Stevie.

“We won’t show Mrs. Panagakos the after pictures,” Sam said, standing near the car door.

“I’m sure his shoes will turn up somewhere.” Meg, who had followed them out of the house, kissed Sam on the cheek, and pressed two covered paper plates into her hands.

“Thanks for inviting us,” Lukas said, straightening up. “Stevie had a great time.”

Meg pecked him on the cheek. “I hope you did too, Lukas.”

He didn’t have a chance to answer, because Sam was thanking her for the food and getting in the rental car. She’d driven to the party with Brad and his family but Lukas was happy she accepted a ride home with him.

“The girls are going to MacNamara’s for a drink while the boys watch the kids,” Meg said, sticking her head into the car a little to see Sam. “You should join us.”

“Thanks for the invite,” Sam said, “but I’ll take a rain check. I’m beat.”

They drove off into the night, a not-unpleasant silence settling over the car.

After the clown performance, the brothers backed off, giving Lukas a break for the rest of the night at least. They’d barbecued, played hide-and-seek with the kids, and sat and talked while the kids ran around catching fireflies and playing flashlight tag. Very ... family.

It was a little too tempting to get caught up in it. Or caught up in the pretty-smelling woman at his side in the cute little sundress and those shapely, silky legs. At least he was certain they’d be silky if he ever had the good fortune of touching them.

“She gave us enough cake for a week,” Sam said from the passenger seat. “And she threw in some of those cheesy potatoes you couldn’t stop talking about.”

“I loved those,” he said. “That was really nice of her.”

That was the problem. Everyone and everything about this place was too nice. Nice like he’d never known before, except for the Ellises. Too good to be true. Or to last.

The quiet seemed more weighty now, full of things left unsaid. The moon was out, the night was balmy, and in another universe, he could imagine that this life would continue. That there’d be plenty of family gatherings like this one, followed by quiet drives home and the rest of the evening spent making love with Sam. Under the stars, in bed, everywhere possible.

He wanted her. But he wanted her to want him. He wanted Harris out of the picture for good.

Yet he was too smart to deny the truth of their situation. Tony, his agent, was already pushing him to schedule more tour dates. Come August, there would be time in the recording studio in L.A. and photo shoots and interviews and ... yeah. His life was on the road, and hers was here. Even if she broke up with that guy, what kind of future could they have? Would she pack up her life and come with him?

That was his mistake. Thinking about her as more than a woman he simply needed to get out of his system. If they could only act on their attraction, she’d lose her hold on him. Then he’d stop thinking about complicated futures and how their lives simply didn’t mesh.

“What are you thinking about?” Sam asked.

They were stopped at a red light downtown. Quaint old-fashioned streetlights hung

with blooming flower baskets dotted the road. The shops were softly lit and quiet, and the park was empty. A sleepy almost-summer night.

“I was thinking that today was ... fun.” He looked at her. Her face was shadowed in the soft glow of the dashboard lights, and judging from the look in her eyes, she seemed to be thinking the same gut-wrenching thoughts as he was. “Thank you for today.” He meant it. Because no matter what happened, days like this were numbered.

“Thankyou,” she whispered.

He hadn’t realized he’d leaned over toward her until he heard the beep of a horn behind him. The light had changed too soon.

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At the guesthouse, he and Sam tag teamed putting Stevie to bed. She turned down the covers and fished out a pair of pajamas, and they managed to change him out of his uncomfortable clothes and tuck him into bed.

Sam had already left the room when Stevie's eyes suddenly flickered open and focused on Lukas. "Are you going to send me away 'cause I caused trouble?" He reached for his blanket, which Sam had wisely tucked next to his pillow.

"Trouble?" Lukas frowned. "You didn't cause any trouble."

"Yes I did. When we first got there. I was mad."

Lukas knelt down next to Stevie and held his still-chubby little-boy hand. "You didn't cause any more trouble than any kids cause every day. Everyone gets cranky. I don't stop loving you just because you're having a bad day."

"So I get to stay?"

Lukas placed his hand on the little boy's shoulder. "Stevie, my boy, there's a saying in Greek."

"What's that?"

"Mi casa es tu casa. Do you know what that means?"

He shook his head.

“It means we’re family, and wherever I go, you go, too. Dig?”

“Dig.”

Lukas did a fist bump with him.

“I love you, Uncle Lukas,” he said, pulling his blanket close and tucking it under his chin.

Those three little words caught Lukas off guard. Something in his chest grew very heavy. His throat became clogged. He was not a crying man, but by God, tears burned in his eyes. He smoothed the hair back from Stevie’s forehead. “You too, buddy. I love you, too.” His voice sounded muted and choked, but Stevie didn’t seem to notice. He just smiled innocently and turned on his side. Lukas kissed him on the cheek and pulled up the covers.

As Lukas turned to leave, he noticed a flash of Sam’s leg turning the corner. When he shut Stevie’s door, Sam was halfway across the main room. Until she stubbed her baby toe on the coffee table and let out a fisherman’s curse.

In a flash, Lukas was next to her. “You okay?” he asked.

“Of course. I was just ...”

“Eavesdropping?” he said with a grin.

She took off her flip-flop and rubbed her toe. “You do know themi casathing is Spanish, right?”

“Yeah, well, since I only know cuss words in Greek, it’ll have to do.”

“You’re a good father, Lukas.”

His kid had just said I love you, and that meant everything. “Considering I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, thanks. I’ll take that as a compliment.” He moved a step closer. “Want me to look at your toe?”

“No, thanks.” She backed up a step. “You were an excellent clown today, too.”

He edged closer. She backed up another step.

“Look,” she said, “I want you to know that my family is finally getting to know you, and they like you. You charmed the kids, everybody. I just thought you should hear that.”

“Did I charm you, too?”

She couldn’t walk backwards anymore, because she was about to run into the couch. He put an arm on her waist to let her know what was behind her. And because he wanted to.

That one touch was lethal. Her gaze flickered upward and settled on his. He detected worry and conflict, the same emotions coursing through him. Any sensible man would back off now, but when had he ever been sensible? He wanted her too damn badly.

In one smooth move, he pulled her to him and held her, reveling in the feel of her in his arms at last. Her heady scent, the flowery smell of her hair, the softness of her breasts pushing against his chest, he took it all in like a drug. His breath was coming harder now. With one heavy sigh, he heaved all of his inhibitions—and his common sense—away and lowered his lips to hers.

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He cupped her cheeks in his hands, tangled his fingers in her hair, and pulled her closer, tighter, and kissed her like this was the last kiss on earth, a one-shot-at-this kiss and he completely went for broke.

It started with purposeful, subtle pressure, but once he tasted her soft lips, he lost all control. When she parted them on a sigh he devoured her, their tongues meeting and searching, soft and urgent, and their bodies pressing against one another like there was no tomorrow. Because maybe for them, there wasn't.

Lukas had kissed many women, but none of them had made him breathless and dizzy. He pulled away briefly, disoriented. That gave her enough time to think, and in one swift move, she pushed off and stepped away, wiping the last traces of him off her mouth.

"This was a mistake." Her voice sounded whisper-weak, and she was trembling. "I... I've got to go."

He followed her across the room. "Sam, wait," he called, but it was too late. She'd grabbed her purse off the little eating table and headed to the sliding doors.

"Please don't follow me," she said, then left out the door.

That had been some kiss. Funny, but kissing her hadn't had the effect he'd intended. Instead of getting her out of his system, she appeared to be working her way in. The more he got to know her again, the more he found that the reality didn't match the fantasy. It was better.

CHAPTER 12

Sam merged into the crowd at MacNamara's, which was bustling on a Sunday night. A couple blocks off the main drag, it tended to be more of a hangout spot for locals than tourists. She pasted on a smile and nodded to a few acquaintances, trying to slow her breathing and her heart rate that had accelerated to panic proportions.

She'd tried to leave town. She'd gotten into her car and even turned on the ignition, ready to drive to Boston and surprise Harris. Being in his tidy apartment would reassure her that the life she'd worked so hard to build wasn't really imploding before her eyes. Seeing the photographs of them that Harris kept scattered about—yes, he was sentimental that way—would remind her of her priorities. Therightones, not the rogue ones.

And those priorities werenothaving a rock-star one-night stand. Oh my God, she was not that kind of person. How did she ever allow herself to get so confused?

That kiss was so ... satanic. Yes, it was pure evil. Seductive, soft, devouring. He'd kissed her like there might never be another kiss, like his whole heart and soul, his entire being, was in that kiss. He'd kissed her like the earth was on fire and they were seconds away from complete annihilation. And the feel of his mouth on hers—oh, saints in heaven, that mouth. Warm and soft and utterly in control. She'd practically come right there.

She could not bring herself to drive to Harris's, and not because her head was still spinning. It just felt somehow—wrong. Plus she felt guilty and confused. Finally she'd left her car and walked. Through the ritzy neighborhood with lakefront homes,

past the Congregational Church and the B and B and into downtown. It was a perfect night, still warm and not a cloud in a star-filled sky. A night meant for lovers. But she barely noticed. She just knew she needed to get somewhere safe. Safe from herself.

The bar was cool and dark and noisy, and the absolute familiarity of it gave her a little bit of relief. A local band made up of a few college kids was playing classic Boss and for a moment she closed her eyes and got caught up in the notes of “Dancing in the Dark.” Sam remembered the days when Lukas used to play here with his garage band. In fact, a glossy eight by ten of him hung on the wall, framed and autographed. He was wearing a leather jacket that probably cost thousands and his hair was artfully messy, not the way it was back in the day when his look was more unrefined and he didn’t have an army of stylists and handlers and image consultants.

She suddenly missed those days.

In the crowded bar, someone was calling her name. Her sister-in-law, Olivia, got up from a booth and waved. Next thing she knew, she was being dragged over to her other two sisters-in-law, who were sitting, drinking bright crimson margaritas with lime slices and salted rims.

Meg held up her empty glass as Scott MacNamara, the owner, passed by. “Sammy, honey, want one, too?”

Sam nodded. She didn’t ever order much besides beer but the drinks looked pretty and tonight she didn’t give a fig what form her alcohol took. Sam loved her sisters-in-law and she was grateful tonight of all nights for their kind invitation. But she was younger than they were and the three of them were best friends. They were always kind but she worried a little that she was interfering. Or that they’d perceive the drama of her life to be juvenile compared to their own. After all, they were all married and had kids. Between the three of them,lotsof kids.

“You look like someone ran over your dog,” Alex, her brother Tom’s wife, said.

“I don’t have a dog, Alex.”

“Maybe you need one, then.” She giggled a little and took a sip of her drink, which from her very happy demeanor was probably not her first. She lowered it a little too carefully and looked at Sam. “What’s wrong, sugar?”

She didn’t want to go all Debbie Downer on them. For one thing, this was their time to unwind. She knew getting together like this was something they tried to do once every few weeks, but the time often got preempted by one of the kids’ activities or a sudden earache or fever or any of the bunch of other stuff they had going on. Plus they were all married to her brothers. No information would be sacred. Her brothers would know all the intel by midnight. So she tried to tell herself it was just nice having company when she felt so ... lost.

“Nothing. I had a great time at James’s party today. I just stopped by to say hey.”

“I’m so glad you came,” Meg said, patting her hand as Olivia slid over to make room for Sam.

“Me, too,” Alex said. “And thanks for bringing Mr.Hottie Rocker to the party today. There was some serious chemistry going on between you two during the clown show.”

Sam’s face flooded with heat. She should have gone to Gertie’s before it closed and gotten a pint of Cherry Garcia to wallow in by herself. Why, oh why, had she come here instead? “Oh, no chemistry,” she said, waving a hand in dismissal. “We were just joking around for the kids.”

“But you looked like you wanted to befoolingaround,” Alex said, wagging her

eyebrows.

“Time to cut you off, dear,” Olivia said, pushing the pitcher out of Alex’s reach and sliding up a plate of loaded nachos.

“Lukas’s little nephew is adorable,” Meg said. “He and James really hit it off.”

“And Annabelle,” Olivia said. “She would not stop talking about Stevie after he left.”

“Seriously, Sammy, we like the guy,” Alex said. “Besides his hotness, he was great with the kids.”

Meg took a sip of her drink. “Lukas saved the day. Ben told me even Brad was impressed.”

“Oh, Brad’s bark is worse than his bite.” Olivia flicked her wrist dismissively. “His being tough like that is just his way of showing love for you, Sam. He still feels a need to protect you. Please don’t take it personally.”

She tried not to, but still, Brad was Brad. Sam took a deep breath. Something was niggling at her and now would be the perfect time to bring it up, if only her courage didn’t fail her. “You three are all married.”

“Yes, we are,” Alex said, making a loud sucking noise with her straw as she hit the bottom of the glass. “To your brothers.” Then she giggled.

“Right. Anyway, I was just wondering something. “Does the—” She cleared her throat and stared again. “Does the romance get tired after a while?”

Sam swallowed hard. She was setting herself up as a butt for all sorts of jokes, but she had to know. Because everything new faded with time, right? She’d had so little

experience with seeing couples go the distance. Her own parents had died young, and she'd never known her grandparents except for Effie.

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“Sounds like your question really is, is the sex still good?” Alex set down her glass with a thud on the surface of the wooden table. “Damn right it still is.”

God bless Alex, whose bluntness didn’t disappear with her tipsiness. “Even after twelve years of marriage and four kids?” Sam asked. “I mean, doesn’t it get ... boring?” Oh, she needed a drink. Where the hell was her margarita?

“Girls, is that Effie?” Olivia asked.

Everyone turned to see Sam’s grandma scooting down the single bar aisle holding a beer, joining a table of Assisted Living friends. She wore a brightly flowered shift dress with her orthopedic tennies, not her usual ensembles of jogging suits or colorful cardigans and dark pants.

Sam closed her eyes and prayed. Please, God, don’t let her see us. Just for tonight. Just for one—

“Yoo-hoo,” Effie called, wagging her fingers. “Hi, girls!” Sam cracked a smile and waved back halfheartedly, hoping not to encourage her to join them.

“Since when does Effie drink?” Meg asked in a whisper.

“Since she’s been going through some kind of crisis,” Olivia said. “Does anyone know what it is?”

“She told me she’s sick of being the nice grandma, whatever that means,” Sam said.

“Effie not wanting to be nice is like Santa barhopping instead of delivering presents on Christmas Eve.” Alex pulled a nacho off the pile, the melted cheese stretching all the way to her appetizer plate. “Completely out of character.” She took a bite and turned to Sam.

“To answer your question as honestly as I can after three drinks,” Alex continued, “when you get married you find there’s a lot of different kinds of sex. Makeup sex, haven’t-had-sex-in-a-while sex, blow-off-steam sex, I-really-love-you-and-I’m-so-into-you sex, or I-don’t-really-feel-like-it-but-you’re-into-it-so-that’s-okay-too sex. It’s all good. Marriage is hard but sex can really help to get a couple back on the same page. When we’re not totally exhausted and falling asleep, that is.”

“We always try to have date night once a week,” Olivia said. “It’s easy to get caught up in all the kids’ activities all the time and forget about time with one another.”

Everyone looked expectantly at Meg, who blushed deeply. “Oh, come on you all. I’m not going to lower myself by talking about my sex life.”

Olivia nudged her. “We already know all about that, Meg.” She looked around the table and smiled. “She’s Hot for Doctor.”

Judging by the way she blushed, Sam knew it was true. These women were totally in love with her crazy brothers. Ew.

“Is there a problem with Harris?” Meg asked gently. Maybe Meg didn’t want to talk about her own sex life, but it appeared she had no trouble asking about Sam’s.

“No! Of course not. Absolutely not.” Finally, finally, her drink arrived and Sam took a big gulp. The slushy coldness slid easily down her dry throat. But that didn’t make it easier to talk. What could she say? That in bed Harris was sweet, so sweet, accommodating to her needs, but she often ended up ... faking it? A lot. So she took

another sip.

“You know,” Olivia said gently. “It’s not just about the sex. It’s stuff like when you’ve had a really rough day and he rubs your feet as you sit there and watch *Dancing with the Stars* together.”

“With Tom it’s *Naked and Afraid*,” Alex said. “He tapes it every week so we can watch it after the kids are asleep. He needs to be prepared for survival after nuclear Armageddon. Kind of endearing, you know?”

“Sounds like he’s been doing too many disaster drills with the other first responders in town,” Olivia said.

“I think it’s touching,” Meg said. “How about when you’re exhausted and a kid is crying in the middle of the night and he gets up instead?”

“Sometimes things get off track and you have to work to get them back on,” Alex said. “Like, when the kids were little and we were dog tired, super exhausted all the time. One night we left them with a sitter and walked down the street to the B and B and checked in and fooled around until we had to go home. We ordered pizza and ate it in bed. It was so fun.”

“We could have watched the kids all night for you,” Olivia said. “Or all weekend. Why didn’t you ask?” That was the great thing about having a ton of family in town. Instasitters and Instacousins.

“It was spontaneous. We just did it on impulse. We walked three blocks but you would’ve thought we’d flown to Vegas for the night.”

Sam mulled over Alex’s Vegas comment. She’d used words like *spontaneous* and *fun*. Those two traits were not exactly a big part of Harris’s gene code. Plus, he’d think it

was a waste to spend money like that for just a few hours. He was great and thoughtful about bringing her gifts ... but when was the last time they'd spent an evening together and just vegged out on the couch? Hung out and ate ice cream? She'd been chalking all of his recent behavior up to his being overworked and stressed. She'd cut him slack because of the pressure he was under. But what if this was the norm? Life was stressful. The stress wasn't going to stop after the case was over.

From across the table, Meg was staring at her. Sam knew that look. She was reading her emotions in that empathic way Meg had. "It's all about how he treats you, Samantha," she said.

"Harris treats me very well," Sam said and flashed her biggest smile. He did. Look at all the surprises—tickets to shows, flowers for no reason. He loved her. So why was she obsessed about sex? Besides, Harris was well-liked and really good-looking. Maybeshewas the problem. And there was no way she was bringing that up.

The table grew quiet. "Look, I just asked a question, okay?" Sam said. "Don't go reading all kinds of stuff into it. I mean, I've been dating him for six years. I—I think he's going to ask me to marry him soon."

"That's great Sam," Olivia said, squeezing her hand. "We're happy for you." But she sounded kind of lukewarm. Guarded.

Meg sighed. "Forgive me for this in advance. But a marriage proposal isn't something you earn. It's not a prize to be dangled in front of you that you win if you're good enough."

The table went silent.

“You’ve got a lot of common sense, honey,” Olivia said. “We trust your judgment.”

“Exactly,” Alex agreed. “But you should know it’s okay if it doesn’t work out, right?”

“Of course.” Sam dug some money out of her purse and put it on the table. “Thanks for the company. I’ve got to be going.”

She’d made it almost to the door when someone grabbed her elbow. It was Meg.

“Where are you going now?” she asked.

Sam closed her eyes. Driving to Boston was out of the question. She was tired and upset and she’d just downed a giant drink. Going back home ... dangerous because Lukas would be one hundred feet away in the guesthouse. She really didn’t have any clue what to do.

“We all love you, Sam. We want you to be happy. And you don’t look happy right now.”

Tears suddenly sprung up behind her eyes. It was that damn kind tone. That caring that got her. In another minute she’d be bawling in the aisle. She had to toughen up. “Look, Meg, you’re not my mom. I can make my own decisions.”

Meg frowned. Sam immediately felt bad for being edgy with her, but Meg seemed

unabashed. “I’m not trying to mother you.” She paused. “Well, yes I am. I care about you. We all do. Did ... did something happen between you and Lukas?”

“He kissed me,” she blurted.

“On the lips?”

Sam swiped at her eyes. “Of course on the lips. Several times in a row and I—I didn’t stop him. I stood there and ...”

One of Meg’s fine dark brows raised. “Enjoyed it?”

Sam shook her head. “Everything in my life has become a mess since he’s come to town. How could I have let this happen? I’ve learned nothing. I’m still the stupid infatuated girl, going after the gorgeous but irresponsible guy. And this time it’s going to ruin my life.”

Meg pulled her into a hug. “Stay at our place tonight, okay? Come home with me.”

Sam nodded and promised she’d wait until Meg settled up her part of the bill. In the little alcove near the exit, there was a large antique mirror mounted to the wall. Sam knew she shouldn’t have looked, but she did. The woman staring back looked sad and stressed. Diminished somehow. The glass was wavy and there was some distortion, but even so, Sam didn’t recognize her reflection. She wasn’t sure who she was anymore. Nothing in her life seemed to fit. Her entire life view had been disrupted by Lukas’s arrival.

Which was a shame. Because he had come and gone too many times, pulling her in with tidal-wave force and causing a tsunami’s worth of wreckage everywhere. You’d think she’d have learned her lesson. This time, she was fairly certain her heart simply couldn’t sustain any more breaks.

Why would she ever want someone who made her feel like nothing in her life fit anymore?

She'd clung to Harris for so long as her anchor of stability. He was cute, Ivy League educated, and going places. That had pleased her family and given her a respectable standing far from the lonely, on-the-fringes one she'd had in high school.

But maybe she'd clung to him like a crutch. Maybe she loved the idea of him more than she loved him for himself. She'd poked fun at Jess for relying on guys too much. Maybe she was just as guilty, but in a different way. And maybe it was time she started relying on herself.

Monday-morning sun streamed into the art room, lifting Sam's mood a little. The familiar smell of paint and paper soothed her, too. Art always calmed her, even though she was still upset about Lukas and that kiss, and she still had no idea what she was going to do about Harris. And she'd had to share a bed last night with Meg's one-hundred-fifty-pound Saint Bernard.

As she set up her paints and prepared a place for Effie to sit, Effie wandered around, looking at all the students' projects Sam had hung up all over the room.

Joe Malone popped his head in. "Good morning, Sam. Morning, Effie. Glad to see so many of you teachers here closing their rooms up for the summer."

Or forever, Sam thought, looking dismally around her beloved classroom. Maybe it had been a bad idea to bring Effie here today to try and finish up her portrait. Sam was feeling too emotional. And confused.

As if sensing her thoughts, Joe gave a knowing little smile. "You know, your job's still open. But it'll be posted within the week. So if you're having second thoughts, let me know soon."

“Right. I will.” She managed a smile back.

“Well, got to be moving along. There’s a pot of coffee in the office if you want any.”
With a wave, he was gone.

She just wanted to survive the day. That damn kiss had changed everything. Lukas couldn’t stay in her guesthouse. Or she couldn’t stay. He shouldn’t have done it. She shouldn’t have let him. But man, was it amazing. Oh, she was a terrible person. Maybe she should—

Effie called her name, thank God, breaking her stream of panic. She was standing in front of an iconic charcoal drawing of Bruce Springsteen, done by Calvin, in fact. “My goodness, Samantha. The talent your students have. Except what’s this one?” She pointed to an abstract painting hanging next to Bruce. “It looks like a boob.” She tilted her head sideways to view it from a different angle.

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“It is a boob.” She steered her grandmother to the chair she had set up. “Please come and sit down now. I need to finish your portrait before the big benefit.”

“You looked a little upset last night talking to Meg in the bar.”

“I’m fine.”

“And you have dark circles under your eyes this morning. Surprising, because you and Lukas seemed to be having so much fun yesterday at the party.”

Pry, pry, pry. That’s what Effie did, but you hardly knew it because she always did it in the gentlest way possible.

Jess walked in then with three steaming coffee cups. From Mona’s, not Joe’s dank coffee from the office. “He kissed her. On the lips. And she liked it.”

Sam made sure to secure a coffee before she shot Jess an icy stare. “I haven’t even told you that yet.”

“Meg was getting coffee this morning, too. She needed to vent.”

Vent my ass. There were times Sam wished she lived in New York or San Francisco, someplace where you didn’t always run into people you knew. Or at least a place where the people you did know knew how to keep their mouths shut.

“I didn’t like it.” She squirted out some paint onto her palette. Except she squeezed too hard and it spurted across the desk.

“That’s not what Meg said,” Jess said in a singsongy voice.

“Jess, I know you’ve got a lot of end-of-the-year cleaning to do.” Sam stood and escorted her friend to the door. “So why don’t you get right to it and come back later—much later—when it’s time for a break?”

Sam sat again. “I’m starting to worry we’re never going to finish this.”

The fact that Effie was actually in place for once signaled the end of their discussion. For now. But Sam had no sooner painted a couple of strokes when there was a knock on the door.

“Can I come in?” a male voice asked.

Effie turned—of course. “Oh, come in, Evan dear,” she said. “My, you’re looking handsome.”

Sam stopped her work—again—to look up. Then did a double take and holy moly, Evan had vanished. And in his place was another man who vaguely resembled him except that he didn’t.

This person was not wearing smudgy glasses. His hair was cut. He was wearing a navy polo shirt!

“I was on my way out and I thought I’d stop and say hi.”

Jess popped her head in the door of the art room and nearly fell over. “Hey, I heard voices and wow—Evan? Is that you?”

“Hello, Jessica,” he said.

Jess immediately walked over and began stalking him in a circle. “You got your hair cut. Are those contacts? Nice shirt! And what’s this?” She picked up the book he’d set down on one of the long countertops. “This isn’t a physics book,” Jess said. “This is ... French poetry.”

“Yeah, so what?”

Her eyes narrowed, as in Who are you and what happened to the real Evan Wolensky? “Why are you reading French poetry?”

“Because I like it. It relaxes me.” He tugged his book gently from her hands. “Besides, I’ve always read French poetry. You just never noticed.” He gave a wave from the door. “See you all at the donor dinner Saturday. Have a nice day, Jessica.” If he saw that her mouth was hanging open, he was too polite to say anything.

CHAPTER 13

“It’s too hot to hike,” Stevie whined as Lukas pulled into the MetroParks parking lot the following Friday afternoon. “I wanna go home.” In the rearview mirror, Lukas saw him swipe his forehead with his blanket. Lukas rolled his eyes, unable to decide whether or not to ignore Stevie or tell him to suck it up until he felt a tap on his knee. Mrs.Panagakos was eyeing him solemnly from the passenger seat.

“I’ve got this, Obi-Wan,” he said, then pointed out the window. “Oh, look, Stevie, James and his dad are here already. But if you’re too hot, we can always turn around and go home. But that would be a shame, huh, since they invited us.”

“I wanna go play with James!” Stevie said, releasing the latch on his booster seat and grabbing for the door handle.

Lukas met him as he jumped out. “Sunblock first.” Lukas managed a few quick slathers while Stevie gave him a disdainful glare and wiggled out of reach to go find his friend.

“How am I doing, Teach?” Lukas snapped the cap shut on the suntan lotion. “Am I getting this dad stuff down?”

Mrs.P., who had left the car and was now tying her sneaker, smiled. “You’re doing very well, my dear. Bit by bit, he’s learning and you’re learning. Oh, except I have to ask you if it’s okay to sign him up for swim lessons? He won’t swim with the Rushford kids. I’m afraid he’s going to miss out on a lot of fun if he doesn’t get over his fear.”

“I’ll try to work on that some in Samantha’s pool.” Actually, after that kiss last weekend, he wasn’t sure she’d talk to him again, let alone allow him back on her property, since he’d just moved their things out of her guesthouse today.

“Very well.” She pinched his cheek, kind of hard, but Lukas tried not to wince out of politeness. “I am proud of you. Just keep diverting him when he gets feisty—and using the force, Luke.” She chuckled at her own joke—that is, until she straightened up and glanced across the parking lot. “Oh, dear. Looks like you might need it.”

He looked up to see Samantha standing next to her grandmother and Ben. What was she doing here? Certain as stink on a skunk, if she knew he’d be here, she wouldn’t have come. He caught Effie’s eye and she immediately glanced away. Well, that explained that.

Sam never returned that night after the kiss, leaving him to toss and turn, awakening to every stray creak and groan that might have been her car motoring up the road, or the garage door opening.

She’d been in school every day, and in the evenings she came over to the guesthouse to see Stevie but avoided talking to Lukas as much as possible.

Every night since, he lay awake, giving himself plenty of time to think about that kiss. That fabulous, inevitable kiss he’d felt right down to his bones. He knew, no matter how much logic kept them apart, he couldn’t deny it any longer: he wanted her, and it was time they talked about it. Resolved, he tucked the sunblock into his backpack, slung it over his shoulder, and followed after Mrs.P.

“Love your fanny pack,” Sam was saying to Effie, whose pink sneakers matched her ball cap. Love your fanny, too, Lukas thought, and other assets as he checked out Sam’s dark green shorts and red tank top, her hair piled atop her head in that artsy way that was meant to look messy and was sexy as hell. Just seeing her released a

sweet flood of yearning everywhere. It was going to be a long afternoon. Especially if she refused to talk to him.

“It’s got my crocheting,” Effie said.

Ben shared a look with Sam. “You brought your crocheting on a hike, Ef?”

“I figured if I got tired I could stop for a while and not be bored.” Effie turned at the sound of crunching gravel. “Hello, Lukas dear, and Alethea.”

Sam saw Lukas and stiffened. The look she aimed at him practically drew blood, but if he could handle Stevie, he could stay cool through this, too. “Samantha,” he said, smiling pleasantly.

“I—didn’t know you were coming,” she said with a smile as fake as Alethea’s hair color. Her gaze drifted to Effie.

“Oh, I’m sorry, dear. I must have forgotten to mention it. Getting old’s a bitch, you know?” She tapped her temple with an index finger. “The memory’s the first to go.”

“That’s not going to be the only thing that will be going,” Sam mumbled.

“Lukas,” Effie said, pointing to his bottom half. “I love those—what do you call them?—cargo shorts.”

Sam gave him the once over. Her gaze told him she liked what she saw despite herself. Which made him feel better about that kiss. Like, it might be possible, despite her involvement with he-who-shall-not-be-named, that she might just want to kiss him again.

He had to stop himself from getting too close to her for fear that he might just run his

hand along the soft skin of her inner arm, or press his lips against the warmth of her beautiful neck, which he'd have perfect access to with her hair swept up like that.

Anyway. "I need the pockets for all this stuff I have to carry."

"What stuff?" Sam asked.

He pulled out keys, a juice box, a purse-size bottle of hand sanitizer, and a penknife. Stevie's inhaler and travel-size suntan lotion followed.

Sam eyed Lukas's pockets. "There's something else in there," she said.

"It's nothing," he said.

"No, it's round and hard." She touched it through his pocket. "What is it—a compass?"

“Don’t get fresh.”

“I’d like to get fresh,” Alethea said. “Not with you, specifically, Lukas, even though you are hot stuff, but in general.”

“Mrs.P.!” Sam said, a little appalled. She pried out a compact mirror.

“Why would you bring that with you?” Ben asked, chuckling. “For zit cover-up on the trail?”

“If you must know, it’s to signal the plane in case we get lost.”

“Why not just bring a cell phone?” Ben asked.

“I have that too,” Lukas said. “But just in case there’s no reception in the woods.”

“You’re such a girl,” Ben said jokingly.

“Shut up, Ben,” Sam said. “You might be good at doctor emergencies but what did you show up with today, huh?”

Ben shot her an older-brother look and tapped his temple. “I’m resourceful, babe. Like Survivorman.”

“Now, dear, don’t be cocky,” Effie said, turning to Lukas. “I like the camo backpack, too,” she said with a wink. “Very stylish.”

“What’s in there, hot stuff?” Sam asked, pointing to his backpack.

“Bug spray, more juice boxes, fish crackers, a first aid kit, and an extra pair of Batman undies.”

“Wow. Prepared for every emergency. I like that,” Sam said.

“My middle name is prepared.” He was glad she was impressed. Little did she know that’s what you tended to do when all you remembered of your childhood was chaos.

“Nice camera, too,” she said, checking out his eighty-to-two-hundred zoom lens.

He shrugged. “I want Stevie to have lots of great memories to replace the bad ones.”

His comment seemed to strike her. Her eyes softened, and she gave him a look like she really didn’t hate him at all. He sure didn’t hate her, either. There he went again, staring at her too long, so long she blushed. It was just how cute she looked in those hiking boots and those little shorts, and how great her rack looked in that tank top. If they slept together, all of this longing would go away. Wouldn’t it?

As they set off on the path, the boys scrambled up a rock and Lukas took pics of them posing at the top, biceps flexed. They ran around and pretended to shoot each other and blow things up, just like a million boys did every day. Only for him, every burst of mischievous laughter was a revelation. That Stevie had a buddy to run around and play with. That the sadness that was so much a part of him when he first came to be with Lukas had lifted. He had Sam to thank for a lot of that.

As they walked, he pretended to take pics of everyone and everything, like the trees and the play of light in the woods, but every chance he got, he snuck shots of Sam as she joked with the boys or helped her grandma or talked thoughtfully with Ben.

“So, dear,” Effie said, suddenly beside him. Alethea miraculously appeared on his other side. “Tell me about your family. Alethea tells us you’re planning to reunite your brothers.”

Lukas frowned at Alethea, but she was suddenly very busy examining the ground. “My brothers and I haven’t been together since I was ten.”

“Stevie’s father is addicted to drugs,” Alethea whispered.

So much for keeping that a secret.

“Oh, dear. I’m so sorry,” Effie said. Lukas was, too—especially knowing how quickly that news would fly around to Brad and the brothers. Another piece of ammo to use against him.

“What about your other brothers?” Alethea asked innocently.

He shook his head. “Last I heard, Roman was in New York working for a craft beer company. I don’t know where my two younger brothers are.”

“So are you going to find them?” Alethea asked.

“Well, with our history—”

“The bonds of family can’t ever be broken,” Alethea said. “Maybe you were meant to use your success to bring your family back together.”

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Lukas almost snorted. He could barely remember when they were a family. And that was probably a good thing. Not many pleasant memories on that front, at least as far as his parents were concerned.

Except he had loved his brothers. He'd made a big effort to stay in contact at the beginning. Nico never had himself together enough to be an oldest brother, so Lukas had stepped into that role, doing his best to care for his younger brothers, but circumstances made it impossible.

Some elemental pang of nostalgia hit him ... building snow forts. Playing catch. Trying to help Roman with homework and having Drew, who must've been all of six at the time, correct him. All of them scraping money together one Christmas to make sure their youngest brother, Jared, got a bike from Santa. Lukas had tried to shield his brothers from the drunken wrath of their parents, but it wasn't good enough. He should have done better. Maybe that was why he often avoided thinking about what became of everyone. He'd failed to keep them all together, and now they were scattered far and wide like dandelion seeds.

The boys suddenly ran toward them from up ahead. "Come see this cool lizard we just found!" The ladies and Ben went ahead, but Sam surprisingly hung back with Lukas. He took a picture of her as she walked at his side, protesting for him not to take it. He wanted to capture every quirk of a smile, every frown, every expression on her face. So he could remember. Okay, that was a little stalkerish. But still, he couldn't help it.

Her hand pressed lightly on his arm, and he realized she was touching his nicotine patch. "How's kicking the habit going?"

“Haven’t touched a cigarette for twelve days. But who’s counting.”

“Nice.”

Effie called back from the front of the group, “When my friend Gloria stopped smoking, she gained thirty pounds. Did quitting give you a sweet tooth, dear?”

“Can’t say it has,” he said to Effie. Then he lowered his voice so only Sam could hear. “I crave another kind of sweet.”

“Like what?” Sam asked innocently. “Candy, cake ... ice cream?”

He stared at her long and hard. “Just one woman I can’t stop thinking about.”

She stopped and let the others go ahead of them. “I thought we weren’t going there again.”

“I never made any promises.”

“Look, I want you to ... I want you to stop flirting with me.”

He got in her face. “No, Samantha. I can’t do that. I’m not sorry I kissed you and I don’t think you are either.”

Sam kept walking, but they were falling behind everybody else. “Iamsorry, Lukas. I never meant for things to start up between us again. You seem like you want me but let’s be honest, I’m just your girl-of-the-moment. Like when we first dated, you weren’t all that interested in having sex with me. But eventually you did because I was ... convenient. And you thought what the hell.”

He froze in his tracks. Turned slowly around to face her. Snorted loudly. “Um,

pardon me, but that's not how I remember it."

"Well, how do you remember it?"

He cleared his throat. "Let's talk about this later."

"No. Let's talk about it now."

"Sammy, you all right?" Ben called from up ahead.

"We'll catch up in a sec," she yelled back.

"It's no secret you were out for trouble back then," Lukas said.

Her eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"You know. The dyed hair, the black wardrobe."

"You had plenty of rebel in you, too."

"I did, but you were angry at the world. That never leads to good things."

She frowned, and it seemed like she understood what he was getting at. "Okay, you're right. Now's not the time to talk about this."

"Whoa. Hold up." He grabbed her arm. "You brought it up, so hear me out. You wanted to have sex. You couldn't wait to have it. You wanted to do everything possible to get rid of your good-girl image." And he'd been such a fool not to help her with that—at first, anyway.

She turned red, and he knew he'd hit the mark. "I know I was foolish back then."

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“Don’t think I didn’t want you.” He snorted. “You’re all I thought about day and night. But you were so young—and innocent. I didn’t want to be the one to ruin that—ruinyou. I didn’t want to have sex with you because you were hurt over everything that happened. I always knew you were a good girl. You deserved more.”

Tears sprung up in her eyes. She shook her head as if she didn’t believe him. “You didn’t have sex with me because of some effed-up code of honor? I know I was angry at first but I—I fell in love with you, Lukas. I loved you.”

Her words fractured his heart into a million pieces. All aching. “I held out as long as I could. Until so help me God, I couldn’t hold out any longer.” He’d loved her from the moment he’d set eyes on her. He’d tried so desperately not to get involved with her. But the volcanic force between them was too explosive.

She lowered herself to a rock. “You say it like it was something you finally did to humor me.”

He squatted down and gripped her by the shoulders. “You know how it was between us.”

She looked him dead center in the eyes. “How was it, Lukas? Tell me.”

“I just knew when you came back from college that first Christmas, you weren’t mad at the world any more. I was certain you wanted ... me. I needed you to wantme.” She’d gone off to college and finally escaped the torment of her high school experience. Made friends. Had fun.

“Lukas, I always wanted you. From the first day I saw you standing outside at Clinker’s. I loved you. Until you pushed me away.”

“If it helps, I’ve regretted that decision every day of my life.”

“You had another chance. The next summer, you kissed me. I broke up with Harris. But you left. You left forever. You never came back for me. Never called, never texted, never emailed.”

The silence was shattering. His heartbeat reminded him of the tick-tock of a clock in a cold, dark room, and it seemed to go on forever.

“Yes, I did.” His voice cracked. “I came back at Christmas.” He saw her shock, but he was done playing games. She wanted to hear it, and he was going to tell her. All of it. Face-to-face.

He watched her do the mental math. “Four months after you left?”

“I’d spent that time doing gigs in all kinds of places. Sleeping in bad hotels, eating in truck-stop diners. But I was making a name for myself, building my brand. Little by little I was getting noticed, and that kept me going.”

She shook her head. “You were too busy to call or even send an e-mail?”

“I was determined not to come back until I’d had some success, or what was the point? What could I offer you? Right before Christmas I played in Hartford, and there was an agent in the audience. I got him to look at my music. That was the beginning of it.”

“Lukas, you were never a failure to me. Only to yourself.” She was crying. Over him. On instinct, he caught the tear with his thumb.

“I hitchhiked from Hartford with a trucker. All I could think of was sharing my good news with someone—with you. He dropped me off at the town square. There was a group of carolers there.”

Sam closed her eyes. She must have known what he was about to say. “Oh, don’t, Lukas. Please.”

“You were singing and laughing and shivering in the cold. Harris was standing next to you, rubbing your arms, whispering things in your ear. And when the music was over, he kissed you.”

She leveled her solemn green eyes on him. “I’d just agreed to give him another chance. He was persistent, and I was lonely. I’d given up thinking you wanted me.”

“Yeah, well. I didn’t give up on you. I just let my pride stop me from coming back sooner.” He’d waited too long, waited for success, and lost everything. Lost her. He scanned her eyes, knowing this was his final chance to get it right with her. He clenched her arm so suddenly her breath caught. “Break up with him.”

“What!” she said too loudly. Then she lowered her voice. “Why—so we can sleep together and you can leave again?”

“What we have between us is about more than just sex and you know it. You don’t belong with him.” Oh, hell, it was, wasn’t it? About so much more than just sex. He was so, so screwed.

“Who do I belong with, Lukas?”

Me. You belong with me, a voice practically screamed in his head. He wanted to say it, but fear stopped him.

“Your career is just taking off. You’ll be on the road constantly.”

“Come with me.” The words spilled out of his mouth before he could rein them in. It startled him to realize he meant them. He didn’t just want to sleep with her to relive an old fantasy. She was much, much more than that; she’d worked so far into his system there was no turning back.

“Come with me,” he repeated. “On the road. Give us a chance to work.”

She was full-out crying now. He wanted to wipe her tears, tell her he’d never make her cry again if she’d only give him a chance. “You broke my heart, Lukas. Not once but twice. I’d be a fool to ever trust you again.” She glanced at the curvy dirt trail. “We’d better catch up.”

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“You’re wrong about me,” he said. “You feel something with me that you don’t with him. Admit it.”

“Chemistry’s great, but your life isn’t here and mine is. There’s no solution for that.”

“Samantha, dear, are you coming?” Effie’s voice carried from somewhere up ahead.

“Coming, Effie,” she called, swiping at her eyes. “Good-bye, Lukas.” Then she tugged her arm free and ran ahead.

Fifty feet later, Samantha face-planted. Upset, running too fast, trying her best to run from something she simply couldn’t run from. She’d no sooner sat up and brushed the gravel off her hands than Lukas was at her side, feeling her arms and legs, making sure she was okay, and acting like she’d just passed out instead of tripped over a fricking branch. His touch was firm and massaging, and for just a second, it made her forget the blinding flash of pain in her ankle.

“Did you hit your head? Does anything hurt?” He was unzipping his backpack, dumping out all the stuff until he seized on a first aid kit.

“My ankle.” She started to stand but he gently pushed her back down. Next thing she knew he’d untied her boot and tore off her sock. (Good thing she’d recently painted her toenails.) They both saw the horrific sight at the same time—her right ankle was the size of an orange.

Then Lukas was touching her, gently fingering her foot everywhere like she was his Gibson or something, and lordie, it was so damn good to be felt up by him, even if it

was just her extremity, she almost cried.

“Don’t—touch me,” she managed. But she didn’t mean it, not a single word.

He gazed up at her, an irritated look on his beautiful face. Should she be getting turned on during a foot crisis? She couldn’t seem to help it. The man had eyelashes longer than Kim Kardashian. And his were real. “Sam, I’m examining your foot.”

She scowled. “What do rock stars know about that?”

He ignored her and ran his hand along the curve of her arch, placing her foot on his thigh.

Then he made the mistake of touching the orange, which was now actually edging up to grapefruit size. “Ow,” she cried out, unable to hide her wince. “You can stop now.”

“Sorry.” He removed his fingers, but her foot still lay on his thigh. “Pretty feet.”

She frowned. “That’s your diagnosis? Do you always flirt with injured people?”

“Nope. Only screaming fans.”

“Well, I’m not screamingora fan right now. But touch it again and I can probably manage to belt out a good one.”

He ignored that, too. His gaze assessed her from head to toe. “You don’t tan at all, do you? Let’s drag your butt over to the shade before you get burned.”

“Well, compared to you, who changes races when he tans, no. I do not tan. It’s my dad’s half, the Irish half.” She knew she was rambling and she really had to stop. “You don’t have to act so ... concerned,” she said as he helped her into the shade.

“I’m not acting.”

He looked up at her, and suddenly she was flushing, and not from the sun, and the heat was working its way down into other places she didn’t want to think about. Just when she was catching her breath, he reached up and touched a curl. “Irish eyes. Irish hair. A bonny lass you are.” It would have been funny, except it wasn’t. He said it soft and slow, his hand grazing her cheek. She had to fight not to lean into it. Into him. He smelled wonderful, too, like summer day and dammit, the way he used to smell long, long ago, when she was just a girl and they used to sit huddled together on the park bench at the beginning of this very trail, and watch the stream course by and talk for hours.

Except she wasn’t a girl anymore and she had perspective. Trouble was it was blurring fast.

Next thing she knew, they were surrounded by the two boys, who’d come running down the trail. Stevie stood near, looking stricken and clutching his blanket.

She gave him a wink and a smile. “I just twisted my ankle, honey. No big deal.”

James offered her a water bottle. “My dad says don’t drink it. Use it like ice on your ankle.”

“Well, thanks, Doctor James. Where is your dad, anyway?”

“Grandma Effie’s yarn got tangled around a tree and he’s helping her get it off.”

Finally, Ben showed up with the two ladies and took a look and said it was probably just a bad sprain. “Lukas and I can carry you back.”

“How about I stay here till after your hike?” Sam said. “Effie can wait with me. That

way the boys can still have their fun.”

“I’ll wait too,” Alethea said. “We can eat some spanakopites.”

“I’ll take her back,” Lukas said quickly.

Effie clutched her heart, and a sly smile lit up Alethea’s face. Sam shot both of them a scowl. They should be home watching romantic comedies instead of pretending life was one.

“You can’t carry her all the way back,” Ben said.

Lukas tucked Sam’s sock into her hiking boot and placed the boot into his backpack.

Then he bent down, his dark, shiny hair catching rays of sun, tugged her up to her good foot, and slung her over his back, fireman-style. “Does she need an X-ray?” he asked Ben.

“Yeah. And an Aircast.”

“Will do,” Lukas said.

“You can’t carry me for a mile,” Sam said, pounding on his upper arm, which was very, very solid. “Put me down. Are you crazy?” But her words didn’t come out clearly, being as she was wrapped around his upper back like a mink stole.

“Probably. But if it gets me some alone time with you, I’ll take it.”

“Wait!” Stevie said. He ran up to them. Sam couldn’t see him well, slung over Lukas like a potato sack and all, but she was able to tousle his hair. Big, worried eyes looked up at her.

“What is it, babe?”

He pressed his blanket into her hand. “Take Bobby.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Tears pooled in her eyes. She smoothed his cheek and blew him a kiss with her free hand. “Thank you, hon. It will help me so much.” Then she managed a quick wave to everyone as Lukas carried her off into the sunset. Or into the woods, anyway.

“Blood is rushing to my head. We may have to change positions after a while,” she said.

“I’d love to change positions anytime,” he said with a laugh. “And blood’s rushing to certain parts of my anatomy too.”

“Don’t try to be cheeky. Your head’s in the sewer.”

“Yeah, well, you have that effect on me.” He reached an arm around and wrapped it gently over the backs of her thighs, his fingers loosely holding on above her left knee. His hands were warm. And strong. She could feel the callouses on the pads of his fingers from his guitar playing.

“And don’t think about getting fresh, either, Mr.Caveman.”

He remained a gentleman. Until he unceremoniously plopped her into her car. And on the way down he took full advantage of the situation to cop a feel of her ass.

“I didn’t have a choice about that, in case you’re wondering,” he said, hitching up a corner of his mouth in a grin.

His face was very near as he reached over her to buckle her seatbelt. She examined

the contour of his lips. They were nice lips, full but manly. His nose was Greek and a little large, but it suited him. He hadn't shaved this morning, and a light shadow of stubble graced his swarthy cheeks. When he smiled, his teeth were white and oh my, that smile would have knocked her on her butt if she weren't already sitting.

He gazed at her long and hard with those fathomless brown eyes, so Greek and so warm. But he didn't kiss her.

Then he got behind the wheel of her car, started it, and drove them out of the MetroParks parking lot.

Samantha squeezed Stevie's ripped, tattered blanket and wished she was five again and could be easily reassured that everything was going to be fine, just fine. Because what a mess everything had become in a few short weeks. All those rogue feelings she'd felt for Lukas at nineteen had returned. Tenfold. No matter how hard she tried to convince herself otherwise.

CHAPTER 14

“So I broke up with Hugo,” Jess said while she and Sam sat in the Donaldsons’ family room that evening sharing a glass of wine. Sam was rummaging through her sewing basket with her leg in an Aircast propped up with three pillows. She stopped and looked at her friend.

“Oh, Jess. I’m sorry.”

“He was okay until he asked me to help him shave his back. I mean, I have enough beauty maintenance of my own without having to help a guy with his, too.”

“So you’re okay with that?”

Jess put down her wine on the coffee table and shrugged. “You know I haven’t been in real love for a long time. I don’t think it’s in the cards for me.” Suddenly she frowned. “What is that gnarled ball of cat hair you’re sewing?”

“Stevie’s blanket.”

“Does he know you’re doing surgery on it?”

Sam smiled. “He gave me permission.”

“Impressive.” Jess stood up and came over to look at the train wreck. The blue satin border was frayed. The soft middle was in shreds. And it was more gray than blue from dirt. “That’s the grossest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Can’t argue with that. But it’s well-worn and well loved, that’s for sure.”

“I’d say it’s time for Bobby to retire and start hanging around with the other blankies and take up golf or something.”

Sam laughed and shook her head. “We’ve suggested that, but Stevie’s not having it.”

“Weas in you and Lukas?”

“Don’t give me grief, okay?”

Jess raised a brow. “I won’t say anything. Just observing that you’re sounding an awful lot like a couple. Anyway, from a teacher perspective, it would be nice to have Stevie give it up before school starts. The kids will only give him grief.”

“He’s had so many changes. This is probably the most constant thing in his life.” She wound her needle in and out of the threads, trying to make a stable lattice to hold the blanket together. “Besides, I don’t know if he’ll be here when school starts. Lukas is planning to take him on the road.” She paused while she focused on a tricky part. “And just for the record, there is no ‘we.’”

“Oh, okay, right. How is Mr.Heartbreak, by the way?”

“They’ve moved back to Lukas’s place. Most of the remodeling is done.” And that was that.

Jess didn’t say anything.

Sam glanced up from the blanket. “Harris is coming back tomorrow.”

“And how do you feel aboutthat?”

“Great. Everything’s just as it should be.” Actually, the house was dead silent. It felt like a lifeless void. Samantha missed Lukas and Stevie already.

Worse, she didn’t want Harris to come back.

“Aw, c’mon Sam. This is me. Your best, oldest, and dearest friend. Not to mention most attractive.”

Sam focused intently on weaving the thread in and out. “Okay, I’m having second thoughts. Harris isn’t ... who I thought he was.”

“If you ask me—which you haven’t—you’re in love with the little boy for sure. And maybe part of you has always been in love with Lukas. Not maybe. Probably.”

“The foolish part of me.” Oh, the blanket was getting fuzzier than usual and her stitches were blurring into even more of a mess.

“Let me ask you a question. If you had one more hour to live, which guy would you sleep with?”

“Jess!”

“No, it’s an exercise. It helps you examine your priorities.”

“I don’t make decisions based on one hour of great sex.”

“Well, maybe you should.”

“And maybe you shouldn’t.” Jess’s face fell a little. Oh, nuts. “I’m sorry,” Sam said. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Fine, maybe I deserved that. I never said I wasn’t screwed up.”

“I just see you keep searching for a guy like Trevor—beefy, good-looking, super athletic—and for the most part, you find guys exactly like him. Including the asshole factor. Maybe it’s time to pick someone a little different for a change.”

“When Trevor broke up with me, I was devastated. But guess what, I didn’t break. I didn’t die. I survived and I’ll never stop taking the chance. I keep hoping I’m going to find a guy who’s the whole package, you know? Someone smart and kind and good-looking who worries more about me than himself. And I know he’s out there, Sam. I just know it because I’m not a quitter. I’d rather take the chance and fail than settle for someone who doesn’t fit. And so should you.”

“It’s too risky to want a man whose day job involves being surrounded by beautiful screaming women. Come August, he’ll be off to travel the world and become an even huger success.” He was also a man who carried her a mile through the woods because she couldn’t walk. Who promised to stop by this afternoon to check on her.

“You used to take risks, remember?”

“That was when I was young and stupid.”

“No, that was before you got hurt by the bullying. And before Kevin died and you decided to never rock the boat again. But Sam, you get a second chance to get it right—how many people get that? You deserve more than a lukewarm life. No pun intended.”

Just then there was a knock on the glass doors that led out to the deck. Lukas and Stevie stood on the other side waving. Lukas opened the door and Stevie bolted into the room, carrying something behind his back.

“Hi Stevie,” Jess said as Stevie tore by. “And Studly. Oops, I mean Spike.”

“It’s Lukas,” he said, deadpan-seriously.

Stevie ran to Sam and hurled himself down next to her on the couch. He smelled like a warm spring day plus a coating of dirt.

“Hi, babe,” Sam said, scooching over as much as she could with the Aircast and giving him a kiss on top of his head.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, wide-eyed, pointing at her foot.

“Just a little. It’s going to be fine in a couple of weeks. It’s not broken or anything.”

He shoved a bouquet of cornflowers and dandelions at her. “We went and picked these for you.”

She glanced up at Lukas, who turned a peculiar shade of red.

“Well, Stevie did,” he mumbled.

“No, Uncle Lukas, you’re the one who drove us to Effie’s old garden and helped me pick ’em. Aunt Alex told us they were weeds but they’re pretty anyway.”

“Busted,” Jess said with a grin. “Well, little family, I’ve got to be going. See you around, Lukas. Bye, Stavros baby.” She hugged Stevie and as she passed behind Lukas, she waggled her eyebrows from behind his broad shoulders. “Bye, Sam.”

“Thanks for the wine,” Sam said. She turned to the boys. Funny, she almost thought of them as her boys. That was scary. “Thank you for the flowers. I love them,” she said, hugging Stevie. She tried to catch Lukas’s eye but he was very busy studying his feet. Or something. “So, did you take all your stuff to your new house?”

“Yep. Can I tell you a secret?” Stevie asked with a covert grin.

He stood up and walked around to the end of the couch and leaned over so he could whisper in Sam’s ear. “I wish we could stay here with you.”

Something cracked in her chest. Oh heck, it must’ve been her heart. She drew Stevie close and patted his back. “Hey, you’re going to love your new place. And I get to do your room, remember? Black with flames?”

“Okay, Bud, we’d better head out,” Lukas said. “Sam, can I get you anything before we go?”

“You know, I’d love a glass of water. Thanks, Lukas.”

“So how’s Bobby doing,” Stevie said, copping a feel of the satiny corners of his blanket between his thumb and forefinger.

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“He’s coming through it okay,” Sam said, holding Bobby up so Stevie could see and approve of the patched parts. “Do you want to take him tonight or have me work on him some more?”

This time Sam caught Lukas’s eye from across the room. He was staring at her kind of funny. Probably just grateful at what she was doing for Stevie. Yep, that was all. Nothing else far mushier than that, like, you are making this little boy so happy.

Stevie considered his decision as he leaned on the sofa arm, one hand under his chin, which was quite possibly the cutest thing she’d ever seen. Her heart twisted again.

Stevie fingered his beloved. “How about surgery’s done for today and we can do more tomorrow?” he asked. “Bobby says he wants to come home with me tonight.”

“Almost bedtime, Stevie.” Lukas gave her a lingering look, one that said maybe he was wishing for a whole other kind of bedtime. Sam felt a blush start at her neck and work its way up “Guess we’ll be heading out. Thank Sam for the work she’s done on Bobby.”

Stevie did thank her, and took Bobby. Lukas brought her a glass of water so she wouldn’t have to get up for a while. “I’ll check in with you in the morning. Is that okay?”

“Really, I’m fine. That’s not necessary,” she said, avoiding his eyes. “But thanks, guys, for the pretty flowers.” She waved and blew kisses (to Stevie) until the door closed and she was left alone in the darkening house.

Sam shivered. It suddenly felt colder in the room with Lukas and Stevie gone. A crazy part of her wanted to push herself off the couch and run after them. Cry out, Don't go! I belong with you, both of you. Even though she'd made it clear to Lukas that the opposite was true.

She looked around at the framed photographs she'd brought with her and set up on the shelves of the Donaldsons' big bookcases. There was a photo from long ago of all of her siblings with their mom and dad at the beach. All the boys were wearing swim trunks and were grinning widely into the camera. Her mom was on one side, smiling at her father, who held Sam, a three year old, in his big strong arms. She had on a ruffly bathing suit and a sun hat and she was waving a plastic sand shovel. Her dad was looking at her mom, a joyful smile on his face.

Effie had said love was simple. It certainly looked simple in that photograph. A moment of joy, a family moment, a glimpse of the love between two people. Why did her own life seem so complicated in comparison?

She picked up Lukas's camera, which he'd left on the coffee table, and pushed some buttons until she figured out how to flip through today's pictures. There was Stevie hamming it up with James, happy smiles on their sweet faces. Effie and Alethea. Ben with the boys. And photo after photo of her.

She always looked terrible in photos, always grinning uncomfortably, never photogenic like her beautiful mother or like Jess, who'd never met a camera that didn't caress her loveliness. But creative soul that he was, Lukas had captured her image—her spirit—with amazing artistry. The light, the angles, and okay, the many shots, had captured her laughing, frowning, joking, flirting. No cut-and-dry poses here. These were like a love letter. Before she knew it, she was crying again.

A knock on the door made her set down the camera. The tiny ball of turmoil that was ping-ponging all over her insides dissipated for a moment and she nearly jumped up

in anticipation. All she could think was he came back.

The door opened. “Surprise!” Harris said with a huge smile, striding across the room to give her an enormous bouquet of red roses and a kiss. “Brad called and told me about your ankle, so I left early to be with you.”

She plastered on a grin that she didn’t really feel and kissed him back. Reminded herself harshly that Lukas was a fantasy, like Jess and all her athlete guys. Harris was the tried-and-true choice, and he’d clearly come back early because he was worried about her.

Then why was she so miserable? And what was she going to do about sleeping with him tonight?

The next morning, Lukas dropped Stevie off at Meg and Ben’s for a day trip to the zoo, with all the cousins, that they’d kindly invited Stevie to. Then Meg’s grandmother Gloria and her husband Maurice were going to watch the kids during tonight’s big donor dinner.

Lukas chatted with Meg and Ben for a few minutes, thanked them, then headed over to check on Sam. He hadn’t slept well—again—and he was anxious to talk with her. Being without her in his own place felt ... wrong. He wanted to tell her that, and other things too. On impulse, he stopped at Mona’s and picked up a couple of giant cinnamon rolls and coffee. Maybe they could sit outside again and enjoy the lake and have breakfast together.

The looks she gave him, the smiles, the warm, wonderful feeling he got in the pit of his stomach when he was around her—he couldn’t be imagining them. All he had to do was find the words to tell her how much she meant to him. Tell her they could work it out. There had to be a way.

At the top of the Donaldsons' drive, a red beacon gleamed in the sun like a huge stop sign. As he approached, he saw it was Harris's Maserati.

His heart full-on screeched to a halt. Calm down, calm down, he told himself. Don't jump to conclusions.

But come on, what other conclusion was there? It wasn't even 9:00 yet.

He sat there for a few minutes, blinking in the bright sunshine. Willing the car away. But it was not a mirage, and the god-awful thing didn't budge.

He'd lost her. Harris had clearly driven in from some-fucking-where and had stayed the night. With Sam.

It was like six years ago, when he'd seen them Christmas caroling together. Kissing. Only this was so much worse.

Lukas squeezed the bridge of his nose but it didn't help the pain that was bursting through his head, his chest, his heart. He opened his glove box. Nothing but the car manual. Shit, where was a cigarette when he really needed one?

Funny, but he realized in that moment that he'd always expected her to leave Harris. Some part of him had expected her to choose him.

That was foolish, because he'd offered her nothing. He was leaving town. They would have had a brief fling at best.

He knew now she was so much more than a fling. And he'd just blown his last chance with her.

Pulling up next to the Maserati, he turned his car around, preparing to return down

the long, winding driveway. Six years ago, he'd run away. Decided he wasn't good enough and tossed in the flag. Let Harris have her.

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He stopped the car and cut the ignition. Things were different now—he was different. He wasn't going to turn tail and leave without talking to Sam. And he would do everything in his power not to let Harris have her again.

Harris opened the door before he could knock.

“Great to sleep in and have a lazy morning, isn't it?” Harris said, slapping Lukas a little too hard on the back and giving a big stretch and a yawn. “Of course you probably got up early with the little guy, huh?”

“I need to speak to Sam,” Lukas said.

“She's asleep. I think you'd better leave, Spikonos. I have no idea how long you plan to stick around here, but I want your promise that you'll leave her be. Because after today, she'll be mine—for good.”

“What, are you planning to elope?” Lukas asked. “I'm surprised Mom and Pop Buckhorn would approve of that plan.”

Harris patted down his right pants pocket, revealing a square bulge. “I'm going to ask her to marry me at the donor party tonight. In front of all the good citizens of Mirror Lake.” He pulled out a small box and cracked it open.

A giant solitaire sat in the middle of flowing swirls of white gold. Chic and ultramodern, and he'd definitely spent the bucks, but Sam would hate it. She loved tradition. Valued the past. Lukas's vision for her ring would be completely different. He closed his eyes, not wanting to look at the gaudy thing anymore.

“After today,” Harris continued, “I won’t tolerate any more of your interference. I want you out of town. In fact, I’ve even found a buyer for that shambles of a lakefront property of yours. He’ll offer quadruple the price you paid.”

Lukas snorted. He’d die on that property before he’d sell it. Especially to anyone remotely connected to Harris Buckhorn. The Third.

Harris’s face had turned bully red and his breath was coming fast. Oops, Lukas must have said that out loud.

“She’s mine,” Harris said. “She always has been. And not to be crude, but last night sealed the deal, if you know what I mean. So sure hope you’ve got places to go and people to see, because if you don’t get out of Mirror Lake and stay out, I’ll take your entire career down so fast no one will remember even one of your tweenie pop singles.”

Lukas honestly didn’t give a fuck about the tweenie remark. What got him was the she’s mine.

“Have a great day,” Harris said, slapping him again too hard on the back.

Slowly, Lukas walked to his car, got in, and drove down the driveway. He stopped at the pharmacy and bought a carton. Mentholated, the worst kind. Booze would have been nice but he didn’t want anyone to see him buying that, or next week all the tabloids would all be saying he was an alcoholic on a binge. He went home and tried to smoke one but his hands were shaking too hard to hold on. He picked up his guitar, but there was no inspiration. He even tried to do some metalwork but he ended up tossing everything—sheets of silver, tools, magnifying glasses—to the ground. Then he ripped off his nicotine patch and threw that on the pile, too.

He ran his hands through his hair. Who could he call? Ben came to mind, but he was

at the zoo with the kids, and who else was there? When was there ever someone? Not that people in Mirror Lake weren't friendly. Just that, like so many other times in his life, he felt completely alone.

"I ordered a shot of Jack, not a cheeseburger," Lukas said as Scott MacNamara put a plate heaped with a burger and fries in front of him on the bar late that afternoon. By then, he didn't care who saw him, he just needed a drink. Fortunately, the few other stragglers didn't seem to notice him or care who he was.

"You've already had a few of those," Scott said. "Now it's time for food."

Lukas scowled. "I must look desperate if you're cutting me off."

"That and hungry." Scott leaned his elbows on the bar in front of Lukas. "Can I ask you something? What's wrong?"

Lukas shrugged. Desperation loosened his tongue. And the shots. "I messed everything up with a woman and she's gone back to her old boyfriend. I don't know what she sees in him."

"This is Mirror Lake, where everyone knows everyone. Are you talking about Sam?"

Lukas shot him a glare. "Harris spent last night with her. Told me to my face."

Scott snorted. "He's a smack talker."

Lukas narrowed down his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I delivered a pizza to Jess's place last night. On my way home. The last order of the night."

“I really don’t want to hear about your exploits, Scott.”

Scott rolled his eyes. “She was with Samantha, Lukas,” he said gently. “At midnight. They were both in their PJs. I think our boy Harris might be lying.”

Through his buzzed haze, Lukas eyed the bartender. Scott had backed up a little, had crossed his arms, and was calmly stroking his too-bushy beard, all contemplative philosopher. Looking pleased as a mother duck after her babies’ first dive into the pond.

Crazy, insane hope tore through Lukas. She’d spent the night with Jess, not Harris. She hadn’t picked Harris after all.

He stood and grabbed Scott by the front of his MacNamara’s “Best Damn Bar in Mirror Lake” T-shirt. Few people he’d met in the past couple of years weren’t after him for some benefit of his fame and fortune. Making friends had never come easy, and after the fame thing, he’d grown doubly untrusting.

“I love you, man.” Lukas planted a big kiss on Scott’s cheek, not his lips—he wasn’t that drunk.

Scott tried to pull away. “Where are you going? You’re not driving anywhere, are you?”

“A long time ago, I ran away and let things happen that shouldn’t have happened. But I’m not going to run anymore. I’m going to pull out all the stops. I’m going to tell her how I really feel.”

“Just go get the girl,” Scott said, prying Lukas’s fingers off his shirt. “And I don’t care how famous you are—don’t ever kiss me again.”

CHAPTER 15

Sam looked around nervously at the sprawling stone terrace of the Mirror Lake Art Museum, all set for tonight's donor dinner. Long tables were set with crisp white cloths, and tall floral arrangements dramatically dotted each one with exotic orange blooms. Twinkle lights flickered in the trees and a mild breeze made the balmy night just cool enough. The band was setting up beyond the terrace, under a tent near a wooden dance floor that had been laid down on the grass. Everything was perfect.

Only nothing felt perfect.

It had nothing to do with the fact that she was hobbling around in her Aircast, which looked ridiculous with her sparkly dress, but oh, well. The pain was almost gone now. Or the fact that ominous clouds were slowly moving in from the west, threatening to rain out her event. The weather app on her phone warned of showers after eleven. Hopefully it would hold off until then.

She'd tried to talk to Harris last night. Really tried. But the Red Sox were playing. And he kept getting texts. Finally they'd gotten to talking and he'd told her how proud he was of all she'd done for the theater, and she'd appreciated that, she really had.

Until he'd said, "So thank God this project is almost done and you can take a break from the philanthropy for now. At least, until my mother comes up with another high-profile project for you to get involved with."

"You know," she'd said, "it might have started out with your mom urging me to get

involved, but it's become personal. I'm not giving up until we get the renovation funds raised."

Harris had sighed heavily. "I admire a good cause but personally, I'd abandon that ship before it sinks. Frankly, you may save the theater from the wrecking ball for now but that thing is going to be a money sink for generations to come. I think Mike McGuinness was right. Condos would look great in that location, with the waterfalls in the back. And young people are into downtown living now. If the money doesn't go through, maybe we should pursue that."

"If you really believe that, why did you tell that Live at Five reporter the other week that the Palace was a great jewel that should be preserved at all cost?"

He shrugged his handsome shoulders. Except at the moment, his perfectly chiseled features seemed hardened. Jaded, somehow. Were they always that way, or had she just noticed? "I'm a politician, Sam. I have to build public trust by talking the talk. My parents are supporting this project because of my future political career and because of you. Even they've said this is a plain case of pouring money down the drain."

"Your parents don't believe in what we're doing either?"

"Honey, it's kept you busy and they love that they can help you. But they realize just like I do that you've got to do a certain amount of schmoozing to get people on your side. I'm building my name, and for that reason it's been a good thing. A great thing."

"I—I love that theater," she whispered.

"You've always been an idealist, honey, and that's what I love about you. Good thing this project's almost over and we'll be moving soon. You're getting way too emotionally attached. Let someone else take this over from now on."

“Harris, I have to tell you something.”

“Oh, will you cut that out?”

She startled until she realized he was exclaiming about the game.

“They walked another one. Unbelievable.” He took a pull on his beer and glanced at her. “Sure, babe, what is it?”

Suddenly there, in the bottom of the seventh, amid the resounding crack of a bat in the background, she realized the truth. She didn’t love Harris. No matter how desperately she wanted a stable, traditional guy with whom she could create the kind of family she always dreamed of having. She deserved more than his inattention, his impatience, his taking for granted she would always be there waiting without question while he traveled and did whatever else he wanted. “I can’t—”

“Oh my God, can you believe that call?” Harris jumped out of his seat, waving his arms at the TV. “Come on ump, he was out. Is there no justice in the world?”

The words wedged in her throat. Tears stung her eyes as the truth hit her full force between the eyes.

Harris was worked up about the game. Showing more passion, it seemed, than he’d ever be able to muster with her. Not for the first time, Sam suspected that Harris was with her for the same reasons she was with him—they looked great on paper together. The rising political star and the docile, conformist art teacher who would enable him to reach his dreams without letting too many of her own get in the way. She quietly left the room, threw her toothbrush into her purse, and told Harris she was going to Jess’s. A man crisis, she’d said. She needed a friend. It was true, only not for Jess.

Now, across the Art Museum lawn, Harris strolled to greet her. He looked dapper and

swoon-worthy in a black tux, making his brilliant blue eyes stand out even more, but he failed to make her heart race. One of the black-and-white uniformed wait staff eyed him appreciatively as she passed by with a tray of champagne. Harris winked at the girl and took two glasses, handing one to Sam.

“I sure hope Jess’s man problems are resolved, because I’m looking forward to seeing you later.”

“Harris, we have to talk.” There, she’d said it. It might be unfair to dump everything on him now, before the event, but he was finally front and center and listening. She had to at least warn him of what was coming.

He kissed her cheek. “Okay, sweetie, anything you say. I’ve missed you.”

A pang went through her. She hated hurting him. She hated being the one to hurt anybody. No matter what happened, he’d been a major part of her life for six years.

“Maybe we can leave a little early,” she said. “It’s important.”

“Okay.” Two vertical lines creased his perfect forehead but she didn’t hurry to soothe him, tell him Nothing to worry about or I can’t wait to see you later, either. As if sensing something was up, he reached out to squeeze her hand. Ironical that she finally had his attention. Too bad it was too late. He looked at her intently. “I love you, babe,” he said as he left to take his seat.

Oh, stab my heart. Breaking up with him was going to suck, but it felt right. For the first time in a long time, she felt more peaceful. Resolved. And she couldn’t wait to tell Lukas. She was ready to take a risk. Ready to approach Lukas with an open heart. If their feelings for each other were real, they would find a way, wouldn’t they?

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:54 am

She pushed all these thoughts to the back of her mind and took her place at the podium. All around her the guests were seated, all snazzy and dressed up, here because they'd donated a thousand or more dollars to save the theater.

She knew nearly all of them. Her entire family sat at a long table off to her right. Effie and Alethea were finger waving and smiling broadly. She blew them a kiss. Surrounding her were the mayor, business owners, hospital staff, lawyers, teachers. Many small bunches of people had banded together to make a group donation to hit the thousand mark so they could be here tonight. Not all of them were rich, but all of them believed in their town, and in saving this gem of a landmark for their children and generations to come. Suddenly she had tears in her eyes.

The crowd quieted and all eyes fell on her. "Hi, Everyone," she said into the microphone. "If you don't know, I'm Samantha Rushford, head of the Palace Theater Restoration Committee. Thank you all for coming tonight. I look around and I see all my friends and family—our community—and I couldn't be prouder to be a citizen of Mirror Lake. The way everyone has rallied together to save our beautiful theater is truly overwhelming.

"Long ago, our theater was dubbed The Jewel on Main Street. A handful of us took that phrase to heart and started the ball rolling to shine her up and restore her to her former beauty. So I'd like to thank the committee, who has worked tirelessly for the past year and a half to pursue donations." Everyone clapped politely. "This special appreciation dinner was funded by the Buckhorn family, to thank all of you for your contributions. Let's give a round of applause to our hosts, Mr. and Mrs. Camilla and Harris Buckhorn, the Second." Harris's parents stood up and waved, Camilla's wave looking an awful lot like the queen's, but whatever. "Through county bonds, private

donations, and grants, we've managed to raise over twenty million dollars." There was a collective oohing and aahing. As there should be. Raising and rallying all that money hadn't been an easy task.

"You should all have a glass of champagne in front of you." She picked up her own glass and held it out. "I'd like us all to raise our glasses now in a toast of thanks, and a hopeful wish that we successfully achieve our goal in the weeks to come. So enjoy your amazing meal, and the amazing cake in the shape of a Wurlitzer organ, compliments of Ted Lawrence of Mona's Bakery—thanks, Teddy." She waved to Ted, who was sitting near the back. "And let's say cheers to saving our beautiful Jewel on Main—"

Sam stopped midsentence. Past the patio, on the lawn, a man made his way around the tables. He had longish dark hair and a lean, tall form. Was it ... no, it couldn't be. But then she saw people turning their heads. It was like watching a wave. First a few, then others. The crowd began to buzz. Lukas Spikonos was here.

Lukas strode across the grassy art museum lawn to the area near the stone patio where people were eating dinner. A few people turned to stare at him, more because it was unusual for a solitary figure to be walking alone than because they recognized him. The band was set up under a tent on the lawn, on an elevated platform that functioned as a small stage. Nearby a wooden dance floor had been laid down on the lawn just for tonight.

"Hey, man," Lukas said to the guitar player.

"Holy shit," the guy said, his eyes bugging out a little when he recognized him. He turned to his band mates. "Adam! Bruce! Hey guys, look who's here." Lukas flashed them a wry smile. "How about we cut the Lawrence Welk and get into the twenty-first century?" They'd just finished playing something that had made his skin crawl. Elevator music. Who was ever going to get on the dance floor with those outdated

tunes and that slow, sluggish beat?

“Can’t help it, man,” Guitar Guy said. “The Buckhorn lady’s calling all the shots tonight.”

A familiar voice sounded out from the podium on the terrace. Sam was making a speech, thanking everyone for coming. Her hair was down, soft and wavy around her face, and even from where he stood beyond the crowd he could make out her lipstick-red lips and a sparkly silver dress. He was always stunned by her everyday beauty but to see her dressed up like this—well, she was a vision. He noted her command of the microphone, her confident delivery, how she made everyone laugh. He was so proud of her and what she’d accomplished.

No one had ever made him feel like she did. He’d screwed things up in the past but he had to show her he’d changed. He’d do anything to have a chance with her.

Then that bastard Harris walked up to the podium with his parents. His father started saying something about the theater. It would be just like Harris to make a public spectacle of asking Sam to marry him. Lukas was not going to let that happen. He just had to figure out how.

A young wide-eyed waitress handed him a glass of champagne. And her phone number. He gave her a quick, not-too-encouraging smile and passed on both.

Suddenly an idea bloomed in his brain. A brilliant, once-in-a-lifetime idea.

He’d come here to let Sam know how he felt, but he sucked at talking about his emotions. Yet he was in his element singing about them.

He turned to the band. “When I say go, can you guys give me a cadence in D, moderate tempo. Upbeat. I’ll lead, you follow.” The guys were in, and excited, too.

Just as Lukas stepped onto the stage and took hold of an acoustic guitar, a voice boomed out from the main podium.

“Let’s hear it for Samantha Rushford, my beautiful girlfriend and a very special woman,” Harris said, stepping to the side and making a big sweeping gesture toward Sam. “I’m one lucky guy. Very, very lucky. In fact, I have a special announcement I’d like to share with all of you.”

Lukas adjusted his guitar and quickly grabbed the mic. “Harris, you’re right.” Harris right? About what? My God, what was he saying? He ignored the gasps from the crowd and kept talking so that Harris couldn’t. “You’re right that we—um—all want to thank you and the Buckhorn family for everything you’ve done. And Sam is a wonderful woman.” He looked directly at her as she sat, looking a little stunned, at the head table near the podium. “In honor of our beautiful jewel of a theater, I want to sing you all my brand-new single that hasn’t been released yet.” Oohs and aahs emanated from the crowd. “I have to tell you the song is for Samantha Rushford. I wrote it myself, Sam. Not just the music. The words, too. It’s called ‘The Girl I Can’t Forget.’ Would you all like to hear it?”

Before Harris could respond, Lukas turned to the band. “One, two, one, two, three, four ...,” and he sang, loud and steady and clear.

Long ago I made you mine

Then our love was lost in time

Now I’m asking for one more chance

To have forever a great romance

Please don’t leave it up to fate

You've got to tell me it's not too late

'Cause you're the girl I can't forget

You're the girl I can't forget—I got to have you

The girl I can't forget—Girl, I need you

The girl I can't forget

People all across the lawn stood up and headed out to the dance floor to move to the catchy beat. In the grass, women kicked off their shoes and men shed their jackets. He saw the Rushfords, even Brad and Effie and the ladies, and nearly everyone he knew from town ...

Suddenly Harris ran from the podium across the grass and scrambled onto the stage, furious and enraged. Lukas managed to weave in and out around the musicians and somehow finish the last verse. As the music finally ended Harris latched onto the mic and pulled hard.

Lukas gripped it with both hands as if he were hanging on to the last lifeboat on the Titanic and spoke. "And I'll tell you who else is a jewel. You're a jewel, Sam. You're my jewel on Main Street. Hell, on any street. Don't marry him, Sam. Don't ..."

He heard Sam yell his name into the podium mic and looked up. Too late. Harris threw a punch that slammed Lukas into and over the drum set. Drums clattered and cymbals crashed. A blinding pain sliced into the back of Lukas's head and the world went black.

When he came to he was sprawled on the ground. Something warm and coppery trickled onto his lip. Harris's enraged face hovered above him. Lightning lit up the sky and in the distance, thunder rumbled.

"You son of a bitch," Harris said.

Then Sam was there, pushing through the crowd of people who'd rushed the stage, and through the haze, Lukas saw nothing else. Just her lovely face, full of concern and worry, and those ruby red, kissable lips. She was the only thing that mattered in all this craziness. He gestured to her, opened his mouth to say something, but Harris spoke instead.

"I'll take care of him, Sam," he barked. "He's probably drunk. Go back and sit down."

"No, Harris," she said. "You've taken care of enough." Two local security guys bent down and gripped Lukas beneath the arms. "Don't move him," Sam said. "EMS is coming." Sensing the command in her voice, the guys backed off.

"Sam, it's best to leave," Harris said. "We're going to get bad publicity for this."

Sam shook her head. "I'm sorry, Harris."

"I know. I'm sorry, too. I never meant for this to get so out of hand ..."

"I'm not talking about this,"—she waved to Lukas on the ground, people with cameras drawing closer, the crowd in a tizzy—"I'm talking about us." She faced him straight on. "I want to break up."

"Sam, no," Harris said. "This isn't a good time ..."

"There's never a good time, is there? Not to talk and not to actually listen."

"I was about to ask you to marry me. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"It's too little too late," she said quietly. "We've been over for a long time, but neither of us has been able to let go for whatever reason. I saw strengths in you that I

wanted, but was content to watch you instead of develop them in myself. But that's cheating. I want a full life, regardless of how untraditional it is."

"Sam, I told you. The past month has been hell. Let me make it up to you. Don't let him"—he tossed his head toward Lukas lying on the ground—"come between us. Let me show you—"

He took a step toward her, but she held up a hand to keep him back. "You're controlling and condescending and you care way too much about what people think of everything you do. I'm tired of making excuses for your behavior. I—I don't love you like a woman should love a man she's going to spend the rest of her life with. I'm sorry."

Lukas wondered if he was hallucinating. Because she was finally giving someone else hell besides him. And because she'd finally, finally said the words he'd longed to hear. Harris stood there, his mouth hanging open, speechless for once. Sam stepped over cords and Lukas's sprawled-out legs and knelt beside him. Well, sort of knelt because the Aircast on her leg was pretty bulky. Her warm palm swiped gently across his forehead and it felt so good he shivered. Sirens wailed in the distance.

"You should go," Lukas managed. "This will be all over the news."

"I'm not leaving," Sam said, her voice shaky.

"I'm glad," Lukas said, reaching up to take her hand. He brought it to his lips and kissed it. She had tears in her eyes, maybe because she just broken up with Harris but maybe because of him. Because they were finally starting.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Much better," she said with a little smile. Then she bent down and kissed him on the

lips. Maybe he had died and gone to heaven, or else this was the best damn dream he'd ever had. Minus the concussion, that is.

Her brother Tom finally managed to escort Harris away, thank God, although Harris did manage to flip Lukas the bird before he left.

Ben knelt on the other side of Lukas and gave him that assessing-doctor look. "The back of your head is bleeding a little." Then Ben poked him in the lower legs and in a line up his thigh. "Where am I touching you?"

"In inappropriate places," Lukas said.

"He's fine," Ben pronounced.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am

“Great, then help me up,” Lukas said.

“You hit your head and blacked out.” Ben laid a hand firmly on his chest. “Stay put.”

Just then, two paramedics set down a stretcher and some equipment next to his head. Ben moved aside to let them do their job.

“Send them away,” Lukas said to Ben. “You said I’m fine.”

“I said you’re fine, but I didn’t say you’re not going to the hospital. Strap him to the backboard,” Ben said to the paramedics.

“Some compassionate doctor you are,” Lukas said.

Lukas motioned with his hand for Sam to come closer. She knelt down on the grass beside him and bent her head low. Her silky hair brushed his face, its sweet fragrance enveloping him.

“Did you like the song?” he whispered.

Her eyes were soft and teary and full of feeling. “Yes.” He wanted so badly to touch her, to wipe her tears away, to kiss her, dammit, but they were slapping on a neck brace and strapping him down to the backboard and he couldn’t even reach for her.

“Our song.” He was having a difficult time talking. He might have been mumbling but he wasn’t sure. He must’ve really whacked his head on that drum set. But he really wanted her to understand. Needed her to understand. “I thought I lost you. I

thought you spent the night with him.”

He felt something touch his hand. Her fingers, closing over his. He shut his eyes for just a second, lavishing in her warmth. Her softness. Her presence.

“Be with me,” he whispered.

“You stupid fool,” she said, crying openly now. “You had me when you said you wrote a song for me.” She paused and wiped a few tears from her cheeks.

“I wrote every song for you.”

“Okay, lovebirds,” a gray-haired paramedic said. “You’re not the only citizens of Mirror Lake who need help. Plus it’s about to pour. This bus is leaving.”

“I’m riding with him,” Sam said to Carol Abrams, one of the paramedics who’d been on the squad for about twenty years. Except she wasn’t sure Carol heard because she was busy humming a tune. It sounded a lot like the one Lukas had just sung.

“How do you know that song?” Sam asked. “It hasn’t been released yet.”

“Howie Zambrosky from the precinct recorded it on his phone and sent it to us. He may have uploaded it to YouTube too. Great song.”

The song he’d sung for her. She was the girl he couldn’t forget. He’d come here to fight for her. Nothing else mattered but being with him, making up for lost years. Having the chance of a lifetime to start fresh.

Her heart knew this was right. More right than anything she’d ever felt. She didn’t know where this would lead her but she had to take the chance or she’d regret it the rest of her life.

Tom helped her into the EMS vehicle next to Lukas and handed over her purse. Sure enough, Brad was there, standing next to Tom, a big scowl on his face. “Are you okay?” he asked, looking at her with concern and tenderness that made her even more emotional.

She nodded. She tried to communicate to Brad with her eyes. Please don’t judge me. He looked worried, and he looked skeptical—the typical Brad look. He was sure to be disappointed in her for her rash choice.

But she just couldn’t muster up guilt. She wasn’t nineteen anymore. Her decisions were her own. She wanted to reassure him, tell him everything was going to be all right, but who knew? She was leaping into this without a clue as to what their future would hold. And of course Brad sensed that too.

On impulse, she reached out her hand to Tom, who kissed it and flashed his dimpled smile. Then she reached for Brad. He met her gaze, and she met his. Slowly, he nodded and gave her hand a warm squeeze. It seemed to say that he might not agree with her choices, but he loved her anyway. All right then. Good enough.

A strange sense of exhilaration overcame her as she climbed in beside Lukas for the ride. She was conscious that she’d made a choice, one that had severed a big chunk of her past—Harris—in exchange for a walk through uncharted territory. She’d never been one for uncertainty, but for the first time in a long time she felt—free.

“At the very least he’ll need a few stitches,” Carol said, examining the back of Lukas’s head. “And can I take a selfie with you?”

“Only if you get my good side,” Lukas said, shifting his eyes toward her since he couldn’t move his head, which Carol thought was hysterical. “What’s the verymost I’ll need?” he asked Ben.

“Brain surgery to help you write better lyrics about my sister.”

Lukas’s mouth turned up in a half smile.

Carol laughed and took a picture. “Hey!” Lukas said. “I was kidding. That better not end up on TMZ.”

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“Of course not, sweetie,” Carol said. “I’m just going to show a few of my friends before I frame it and put it next to my pillow.”

The EMS vehicle slowed nearer to the hospital. The rain was washing down in buckets now, the wipers snapping back and forth in overtime. Red and blue police lights flashed in the distance.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked.

“I’m sorry guys,” the driver, Charlie Pollick, said, “but it’s a zoo out there. TV cameras, news trucks. They’re actually blocking the entrance to the ER.”

Ben gave a curse. “Shit, Spikonos. Really?”

“Told you you shouldn’t have gone and gotten all high and mighty like that, Dr.Ben,” Lukas said. “I’ve been banged up worse in bar brawls.”

Ben levered him a look. “Trust me, Lukas, if my sister didn’t like you so much I’d be tempted to open the doors and let you slide out.” He spoke to Sam. “I want you to go home.”

“What? No way,” Sam said. “I’m staying with him.” She scootched a little closer to Lukas, just to get her point across.

“He’s fine,” Ben said. “There’s no way we can get you into the hospital without fifty people taking your picture. Is that what you really want?” But he was looking at Lukas when he said it.

Lukas tightened his grip on her hand. “He’s right, Sam.”

“I don’t care about that. Let them say whatever. Let them take my picture. I want to stay with you, Lukas.”

“You’ll be on every social media outlet in minutes,” Lukas said. “Not to mention the cover of every supermarket rag for weeks. If we wait to be seen together, we can at least control things. Besides, Stevie’s still at Ben’s. He needs to be picked up.”

“The kids are with Gloria and Maurice,” Ben said, “and all the adults just left the dinner to head home. Let him stay the night with us.”

Lukas squeezed her hand. “I’ll be fine. Maybe you should listen to your brother.”

How Sam hated that phrase, but Lukas looked genuinely worried. Then he flashed that perfect lopsided grin that could stun a hundred charging groupies. “It’s going to be okay,” he said. “We’re going to be okay.”

She believed him. God, she believed him. Finally they were on the right path together... if only they could actually be together.

“Look,” Sam said, “I don’t want the media to tell us how to live our lives. I’d like to come with you. I don’t care if I get photographed.”

He couldn’t move his head but his eyes conveyed a sense of worry. “I’d just as soon have you go home where you’ll be safe.”

“We can probably drive you around to another entrance,” Ben said. “It’s your decision.”

“My decision.” She grinned. “I’m staying.”

CHAPTER 16

Lukas drummed his fingers against the aluminum guardrail of the gurney.

He'd memorized every grain of the ugly white ceiling tiles that looked like someone had poked a hundred holes in each one, and decided the watermark in the corner looked like South America. He'd even caught a nap for a few minutes. But now he wanted one thing, besides out of this backboard contraption.

Sam. She'd stayed through his X-rays and CT scan and to hear the good news that everything was negative. But they were both worried about Stevie, so he'd had Charles and James drive Sam to Meg's so she could check on him and bring him home. Lukas couldn't wait to get out of here and finally be with her. If someone would only unstrap him from this god-awful backboard.

The door opened, and a balding, paunchy man squeezed through and hovered over his bedside. Dammit, it was Tony, his agent, not a nurse with discharge papers. And Tony was guaranteed not to be as pleasant.

"Well, I see you've had a busy day," Tony said with a heavy sigh. "You crashed a charity event and started a brawl. The record company's furious you sang that song before it's released. Someone's already put it on YouTube. Complete with slow-motion footage of you diving into the drum set."

"How many hits did it get?" Lukas asked, but Tony just glared. "All right, never mind. Hi to you, too, Tony. And by the way, I didn't start anything. And I'm fine, thanks for asking."

“Well, I’m not fine. I have ulcers.” He put his hand over his stomach. “Good thing I was on the way to see you anyway. This guy you got into it with—he’s a Buckhorn, for Christ’s sakes.”

“He’s an asshole.”

“Yeah, a powerful one. Look, Lukas. We built you a brand, and you did your best to trash it tonight. We’re going to be dealing with this headache for weeks.”

“I’m not the impulsive kid I was when we started this.”

Tony snorted. “Your brand doesn’t involve being smitten over an old hometown honey. Love is the kiss of death for an up-and-coming music sensation like you.”

“I don’t live my life for my brand.”

“I can deal with the occasional angry female who curses you for breaking it off. I can even deal with you telling Simon Cowell to kiss your ass after he insulted you on Twitter. But this ...”

Lukas took a deep breath. “This is different. This woman matters.”

“The hell she does. Was it worth it for a piece of ass?”

“Tony, so help me God, if I weren’t tied down I’d come over there and kickyourass...” Lukas flexed and unflexed his fists, trying to remember why he put up with this guy. Oh, yeah, because he was the best in the business. Because he’d brought him up from nothing and turned him into a superstar. That made him calm down a little. “Look, just do damage control. That’s why I pay you.”

“Just do damage control,” Tony mimicked in a mocking voice. “As if that’s easy.”

“Got any good news? How’s the wife, the kids? And why are you here in the first place?”

Tony rolled his eyes and finally sat down on a stool in the middle of the room. “Actually, I do have some good news. Mick heard the song.”

“Mick who?” Lukas asked.

Tony raised a bushy brow. “There’s only one Mick who counts. He says it’s different from your other ones. More passionate, more feeling, and he thinks it’s going to be a huge hit. He wants you to open for the Stones at Madison Square Garden in two weeks and then finish out their summer tour with them.”

Whoa.Lukas closed his eyes. Mick Jagger? The Stones?Two weeks?Opening for them was the opportunity of a lifetime. It would secure his future and identify him as a heavy hitter in the industry.

That couldn’t help but be a good thing for Stevie and for Sam, right? Even if he had to go back on the road sooner than he’d thought.

“I have to think about it,” Lukas said. He’d talk it over with Sam, but she’d probably be thrilled.

“Think?” Tony looked at him like he’d grown a couple extra heads. “What’s there to think?”

Lukas shrugged, or at least tried to.

“This woman is really doing a number on you, isn’t she?” Tony asked. “Fine. You go ahead and think. But the contract’s going to have to be signed in a couple of days. Now, I’ve got to go outside and make sure all the media have moved. In the future,

I'd appreciate better behavior."

"Lighten up, Tony. That was great news. Quit acting like someone died."

"Which they might," Ben said, suddenly standing at the door, "if you don't get those camera crews to move away from the ambulance drop-off area. Now, please."

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am

Tony left and Ben finally unstrapped Lukas from the backboard. He sat up, rubbing the back of his head and cracking his neck.

“So your head and neck scans were fine. How does your head feel?” Ben asked.

“Hurts like the band used my head for their drum set.”

He chuckled. “You’ll have to take it easy for a few days.”

“Look, Ben.” Sam’s brother stood propped against the counter, his arms folded, quietly assessing him. He had had the same big eyes as Sam, although Sam’s were green and Ben’s were brown. “I’m sorry about what happened. I didn’t mean to ruin the donor event. I couldn’t sit around and let Harris propose to Sam. He’s not right for her.”

“And you are?”

Lukas paused long and hard. He’d never thought so before. But he was different from six years ago. Better. Grown up. He knew how to make her smile. Did that have anything to do with being good for someone? It seemed a paltry offering. “I care about her a lot. I’ll do everything in my power to make her happy. I want to do things right this time.”

Ben heaved a sigh. “I don’t suppose Sam’s ever gotten over you, either. But if you break her heart again, I won’t hesitate to strap you to that backboard again and perform some surgery on your man parts.”

A sharp rap sounded on the door. A woman wearing multicolored scrubs popped her head in. “Dr. Rushford, security just pulled a cameraman out of our linen closet trying to make his way back here. The police from Deep River had to be called in to help control the traffic. And Millie thought she just saw Ryan Seacrest. Things are getting crazy.”

“All righty then,” Ben said, slapping Lukas on the arm. “I guess you’re discharged.”

“Look, you’ve got to help me get to Sam. Please.”

“Funny, I was just planning on throwing you to the lions.”

“Please, Ben.”

“Oh, fine. Who am I to stand in the way of young love?” Ben scratched his beard thoughtfully. “We may have to put you in a plaster body cast and haul you out on a stretcher to get past the media. Or maybe we can toss you in a hearse with a couple of the stiffies from the morgue.”

“Whatever it takes,” Lukas said with a grin.

“Well, for the record, I was kidding, but that’s the right answer. You’re all right, Lukas.”

Finally.

“Yes, Effie, I’m fine,” Sam said into her phone from her seat in the balcony section of the old theater. “Lukas’s bodyguards took me to get my car from the art museum but photographers were everywhere, so I let myself into the back entrance of the theater. Ben told me a bunch of them are still camped out in front of the Donaldsons’ driveway. He’s keeping Stevie with him and Meg tonight. But I’ll be okay sleeping in

the office. I have some snacks in my desk.”

So much for spending the night with Lukas.

“Well,” Effie answered, “I hate to see you alone there in that big, dark theater with the town half run over with paparazzi. Let me send someone over to stay with you.”

“Too risky. I’ll be fine by myself.” She’d fallen asleep in the office plenty of times over the past few months. It even had a little couch. Being here didn’t scare her—how could it, when it was one of her favorite places?

The phone suddenly got muffled. There was rustling. She heard Effie’s voice in the background saying, “What was that, Ben?” More rustling, then Effie was back. “Oh, we ordered you a pizza. Witheverything. Side door, ten minutes. Enjoy!”

The line went dead.

This was the weirdest night ever. Yet Sam felt a strange sense of peace, despite the dinner being upended in the worst way. She hadn’t even stayed to do any damage control, so God knew how many of the donors would actually donate after tonight’s fiasco.

She did know Harris’s parents were not happy. Meg told her they’d left immediately after Harris punched Lukas, not wanting any association with the ruckus that ensued. They hadn’t even stayed to help their distraught son. That made her sad, but it also supported everything she’d expected, that the Buckhorns valued appearances more than anything.

Well, after tonight, she’d certainly blown any chance of ever ingratiating herself into that family. For some reason, that made her chuckle, the sound echoing across the vast rows of red velvet seats. She was sitting in her favorite spot, the front row of the

balcony. The Moorish castle façade on either side of the stage basked in a beautiful golden glow, and she'd gone backstage and turned on the sky of twinkling stars overhead. One of the perks of knowing this place inside and out.

Funny, but she wasn't sitting there doing what she would have typically done, obsessing about ways to soothe things over for Harris's pragmatic parents or even for Harris himself, who had seemed a little brokenhearted. The semblance of security and safety and family values had brought her back to him after they'd broken up the first time, so long ago, but it wasn't enough now to keep them together. Maybe she'd finally figured out those things were only an illusion with him.

While she was being brutally honest with herself, she also admitted she didn't have to work at herself so much when Harris had made it so easy for her to dissolve into his big personality, his mission, his causes.

She'd given up her job for him, and she'd been willing to do whatever it took to help him get his career off the ground. Why hadn't she seen the fact that he'd actually encouraged her not to get another job in Boston as a red flag? He was fine with advancing himself at her expense. She wondered if it was too late to get her job back, and made a mental note to talk to Joe Malone as soon as possible to find out.

Being safe, not risking anything, hadn't got her what she wanted for her own life.

Be with me, Lukas had said.

She was ready to take the chance. It felt right, in the sweetest, worst way. She couldn't wait for them to be together, and she refused to think of anything beyond right now. Just then, her phone buzzed. Lukas.

The shot of adrenaline that coursed through her made her fumble the phone and she nearly dropped it off the balcony. "Hello?" She looked around, half expecting him to somehow magically appear.

"Pizza's here. But it got a little wet."

"What ...?" She turned around. There he was, walking down the side aisle from the top of the balcony section, making his way toward her, a pizza box in one hand and a big bundle slung over his shoulder. She thought she recognized Tom's old thermal silver minus-twenty sleeping bag, compliments of Effie, no doubt. As he emerged from the darkness, she saw a bottle of wine in his other hand. He was wearing green Mirror Lake Hospital scrubs. And he was completely soaked.

He handed her the pizza. A slow, steady grin spread over his face.

She couldn't help smiling back. "It's pouring out there," Lukas said. "But the good news is, I don't think anyone followed me."

"Great." He was great. They stood there for a moment, just looking at one another, grinning dumbly, until finally she said, "There better not be peppers on there or I'm totally making you return it."

Effie knew damn well she liked her pizza plain. Clearly Lukas was the everything Effie was talking about. Here everything.

She started to tear up, so she made a big show of checking out his face. His nose was swollen and bruised, and he had another bluish swelling on his forehead. All she wanted to do was dive into his arms and kiss him all over, tell him how glad she was that things had happened as they did and now they could finally, finally be together. But suddenly she felt nervous and shy. “How did you ... how did you get in? If you got in, someone will just ...”

“Ben gave me scrubs and a surgical hat and got some off-duty paramedics to bring me here. And Effie gave me a key.”

Effie. Of course.

He touched her cheek. “You okay?”

“I am now that you’re here.” To her embarrassment, more tears welled up. Before she could brush them away, he set down all the stuff he was carrying and wrapped his big, strong, inked-up arms around her. Like she hadn’t felt them in six long years.

His fingers tangled through her hair and suddenly his mouth was on hers, and oh, the feel of that mouth, kissing her like they’d never been apart and like there was no tomorrow, and not a second could be wasted.

For now, that was all the security she needed.

“I have to tell you something.” Lukas was brushing back her hair, caressing her face, and it was so hard to focus on what he was saying.

“What is it?” she asked, reveling in his presence, his heat, the freshly showered,

soapy, delicious smell of him.

“I’m sorry I ruined your event tonight. I wasn’t thinking, I was feeling. I was afraid I would lose you forever if I didn’t do something.”

“I’m glad you came for me, Lukas. It was Harris who did the ruining.”

He gathered up her hands in his big ones. “Sam, I’ve never felt this way about anyone.”

That made her bawl more. She rested her hands on his forearms. Felt the hardness of his muscle, the softness of his skin, the light grazing of hair. “Oh, I have,” she said.

“Who was he?” he growled. “I might have to go after him.”

“It was a long time ago. A lonely boy named Spike. Used to work at Clinker’s.”

“That boy has wanted you for a long time. He’s never stopped wanting you, Sam. And he’s so happy to be here with you.”

He released her hands and walked over to where he’d left the sleeping bag, unbound and unzipped it, and spread it over the fantastical red carpet that covered the floor under the seats—a pattern of green and gold parrot feathers and exotically swirled designs. Then he peeled off his scrub top in one swoop. And holy theater ghosts, all thought ceased at the sight of that amazing, perfect chest. “Dr.Lukas is here to make it all better, sweetheart.”

She would’ve laughed at his shenanigans but his eyes weren’t joking. They were dark and intense and serious and oh, lordie, they meant business. She slid out of her one shoe, which was just a low-heeled pump because of the Aircast on her other foot. “You’ve never been short on confidence, that’s for sure.”

He shrugged out of the wet bottoms and tossed them over a chair. Guess he was a boxer-briefs guy, who knew. Black, of course. What else? “I had no confidence six years ago. I was just so desperate to make it in some way that I managed to fake it.” He walked over to her and took her into his arms.

Sam closed her eyes. She must have stiffened because he pulled back. “What did I say?”

She suddenly felt awkward. Really awkward.

“Sam, what is it?”

“It’s just—it’s been a long time since we’ve been together.”

“Come here.” He helped her maneuver herself and her cast down on the sleeping bag. She laid her head on his chest, and frankly, touching that sculpted masterpiece of a chest practically had her coming right there. “We’ll go super slow. We’ll just lie here and look up at the stars, okay?”

His smile turned wolfish, and she thought she detected a twinkle in his eyes.

“Are you serious?”

“No, but I thought you wanted to hear that.”

She rested her head on him, tucked it right between his neck and shoulder, inhaling his clean scent, the scent that was him and only him, as he stroked his hand slowly up and down her arm. It wasn’t cold in the theater but his touch made goose bumps rise up everywhere. Then she tipped her head back and looked up at her beloved stars.

“Tell me about the stars,” he said, nodding toward the ceiling.

“Well, they’re fiber-optic.”

“No, I mean, they look like constellations.”

“They are—the ones you’d see in Africa. It’s the southern hemisphere. So there’s the

Big Dipper.”

He started nuzzling her neck as she pointed up at the sky, his soft lips a contrast to the coarseness of his unshaven cheek scraping against her sensitive skin.

Until he winced and she realized she’d touched his bruise as she’d worked her fingers through his hair.

“Oh my God, I’m sorry,” she said, tracing around the sore spot. “Does it hurt?”

“Yeah. Really hurts,” he said solemnly. “You’d better kiss it.”

And so she did. As she was leaning forward, she heard apfffas the zipper on her dress ran down her back. In a flash he helped her shrug out of the dress, and gently slid it off of her, taking extra care not to snag it on the Velcro of her ankle contraption. The exclamation he made when he saw her had her lifting up a prayer. Thank you, Victoria, for your secrets. She was so, so glad for her lacy black bra and panties. And judging by the look on his face, he was, too.

Then the bra straps were down and her left breast was exposed to the cool air and his mouth was on it, kissing and tickling it with his tongue. She arched a little, because she couldn’t help it, which had the effect of giving him more to have his way with. “But”—she gasped a little—“our constellation lesson isn’t over.”

“It is for tonight,” he said, and she felt his smile against her sensitive skin. He cupped her other breast in his hand, and it felt so damn good she let out a whimper.

“Sam,” he whispered.

She swallowed hard. He reached up and tucked her hair behind her ears. “You know I’d never do anything you didn’t like. And if I did, you’d tell me, right? We’ve come

too far not to be one-hundred-percent honest with each other.”

“I promise. But I have to ask you something.”

“What is it, sweetheart? Ask me anything.”

“Could you—could you please do that again?”

“Do what?”

“Everything.”

And he did.

“Um,” she said, struggling a little, because talking was getting very difficult. “You’ve got a bruise on the other side of your forehead, too.”

“Kiss it.”

She obliged. “And your nose. Your nose is really bruised right—here.” She traced a line across the bridge.

“Kiss me there. Kiss me everywhere.”

“Everywhere?”

“Yeah. Because full disclosure here, Samantha, I’m not leaving a single inch of you unkissed tonight.”

Good thing she was lying down, because his words made her stomach drop and her legs turn to jelly. He traced a finger along the edge of her lacy panties, a move that made her quiver. Again, that smile. The smile of a man who knew exactly what he was doing and couldn’t wait to continue. One that promised much, much more. He whispered in her ear as his long, beautiful fingers began to wander, along the waistband, tracing the sensitive skin below her waist. Dropping featherlight kisses along her neck, then along her ear, finally whispering, “You are so beautiful, Sam. You have no idea what you’re doing to me. Take a look up there at that sky. Take a good look, and then close your eyes. Because I’m going to make you see a whole different kind of stars.”

Then he swept the thin lacy scrap of her panties aside and touched her, slowly tracing the sensitive flesh, the silky folds.

“Are you ready to make beautiful music together?” he murmured against her mouth.

“Quit talking like a rock star,” she said, grabbing his amazing ass. Running her hands up his spectacular back, feeling the elegant planes of muscle. Kissing him deep, their tongues wet and tangling.

He drew his face back from her a little so she could see his eyes. Suddenly there was no trace of a joke, no smirk, no dance of amusement. Just naked, raw feeling. Tears

blurred her eyes.

“Don’t cry, sweetheart,” he said in a raw whisper. “Just enjoy it.”

“Lukas,” she said, surrendering her body to him. He dropped his head to her breast, circling her nipple with his tongue. The sky above her blurred, and she let go, crying out his name. He was still kissing her, dropping tiny kisses all over, and then suddenly he was standing up and tossing off his briefs and helping to slide her panties off—and oh! stars in heaven, that body!—and rummaging somewhere in the scrub pockets for his wallet and sheathing himself with a condom. Then he was back, his delicious weight over her, his chest with that proud eagle and fearsome snake flexing in unison with his taut, hard muscles.

“Do you always cry like this when you make love?”

She couldn’t speak. Could only shake her head. How could she tell him she was simply overcome? That everything he’d done to her, every tender touch, every gesture, and God, that killer smile—it all just slayed her. She’d never felt anything so right, so perfect. She couldn’t look back at the past or dare to imagine the future. She was just so grateful for him, for now, for this moment. She pulled him over her, slid her fingers through the coal-black silk of his hair.

Words formed on her tongue, but she did not say them, for fear they would ruin everything. But they made her cry even more.

She felt them down to her marrow. Never had anything felt so right, so complete. It was all suddenly so clear. Sam knew now what she’d really known all along. She loved Lukas Spikonos. She’d fallen in love with him when she was nineteen and she’d never really stopped.

He expelled a hard breath as he entered her, rested his forehead against hers as their

bodies joined. Looked at her with a tenderness in his eyes like she'd never seen. Then he was kissing her and loving her, and she wrapped her legs and arms around him and loved him back with every last piece of her soul until they both cried out, their voices floating down the rows of the exotic proud old theater.

And much, much later they both realized that the pizza had gotten cold.

Good thing Lukas had caught that nap in the ER. Considering the day he'd had (anguish, head trauma, and lots of lovemaking), it had served him well. At 3:00 a.m. they got dressed and ate the pizza, and Lukas finally began to feel the effects of the long day. His head was throbbing and his stitches were sore. So was his neck and back, but it was all worth it, and really, he had nothing to complain about. Because he had Sam, and any other little ache or pain was meaningless. Lukas half zipped the sleeping bag and crawled in. "You get in, too." He patted the silver-quilted material invitingly.

"It's going to be hot in there."

"It sure is," he said. "But come in anyway."

"What about my cast?"

"Plenty of room for that."

Sam unzipped her dress, letting it fall in a puddle of sparkles to the floor, and slowly slid in, until they were very close, their bodies lined up in the halfway-zipped bag. "Snug as two bugs in a rug," he said. He pulled the rest of the zipper up, which brought her soft, lovely breasts against his chest, and her hips resting lightly against his. He might as well have died and gone to heaven, because this was every fantasy he'd ever had come true, every inch of her luscious body aligned with his.

“Squishedas two bugs is more like it,” Sam said. “Except that a certain part of you is not very squishy at all.” Her hand groped deep down under in the bag, and found her target, and he loved it. “Nope,” she said. “Hard as a rock.”

“Is that a complaint? Because if that’s a complaint, I’m going to have to get frisky.”

He kissed her forehead, the bridge of her nose, her cheeks. Then he just lay there, resting on his crooked arm, staring at her in the soft glow. Memorizing the arch of her brow, and the way her full lips tilted up when she smiled. “Samantha,” he whispered, tracing her cheek, “I could stare at you all night.”

“Well, you just go ahead because I’m going to sleep.” She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep. But her hands wandered gently over his back, his chest, his legs in a very unsleepy fashion.

“Tell me a story,” she said after a minute, her soft lips curving up in a grin.

“About what?”

“About how much you want me.”

“I couldsingyou a story. Would you like that?”

He sang her a few bars, sexy and low, of a song he’d written about a year before when he’d imagined a moment like this, with her eyes full of tenderness, her hair softly mussed. A moment of peace and awe where they could lie tangled up with one another with all the time in the world. Funny how he never in his wildest dreams believed it would come true.

“That’s beautiful,” she whispered, and edged a little closer. Now her velvety legs grazed his, and he couldn’t resist reaching a hand around to cup her sweet ass. He let

his hand wander, up the curve of her butt, over the valley of her back. Every inch of her skin was soft and sweetly fragrant, and he reveled in every touch. She leaned into him a bit more.

“I thought you said you were tired,” he said.

“Maybe not so tired.”

“So then singing’s my secret weapon. I’ll have to remember that.”

“It’s always been your secret weapon as far as I’m concerned,” she said. Then she kissed him. And he really did think he’d died and gone to heaven.

CHAPTER 17

Preparations for a big celebrity wedding on the coast this upcoming weekend must have been more tempting to the paparazzi than the antics of a fledgling rocker, because by morning, most of the media had left Mirror Lake. Lukas hired a security detail to surround his property and Sam's just to be safe. The "home" they chose to go to was hers, being that there was just something about that cozy little guesthouse that seemed perfect: insular, sweet, and tucked away from the world.

Turned out Stevie was as worn-out from his sleepover as Sam was from hers and Lukas's. That afternoon, Sam sat in the shade by the Donaldsons' pool, reading Stevie a book while Lukas drifted around the pool on a rectangular floatie, wearing blue reflective sunglasses that made him look mysterious and hot, his beautiful olive skin glistening in the sun. His nose was still swollen, but they'd told Stevie he'd bumped into a door and left it at that.

Every once in a while she would look up from the book, Stevie and his ratty blanket wedged in next to her on the chaise lounge, and catch Lukas's gaze (or what she thought was his gaze, it was hard to tell with the glasses). He'd lift them to his forehead and send her a steamy, hot look that seared her down to her toes and back and made her grateful she was sitting in the shade.

In fact, she was smiling at everything, from the sultry way Lukas couldn't seem to help but look at her, to the hot cup of coffee he'd handed her as soon as they got settled in that morning, to Stevie's excitement as he chattered on and on about everything he'd done with James at the sleepover.

She couldn't remember when she'd ever felt this way, not grilling herself with a million worried questions. The first time she'd made love with Lukas, long ago, she remembered a similar sense of contentment, but she was too young to really understand it for what it was. With Harris, she'd been constantly second-guessing everything, almost like she was always convincing herself to be in love with him. Or at least blaming herself for not having more of a response to him.

But with Lukas ... well. He'd overwhelmed her in every way. Just thinking about what they'd done together made her tingle all over. No, make that set her on fire.

The book ended. It was a classic, one of Sam's old books, *The Little House* by Virginia Lee Burton, about, yes, a little house in the country that over the years becomes surrounded by the city until one day a descendant of the original owners brings it back to where it belongs.

She felt back where she belonged. And she refused to look ahead of the joy of the moment.

"Read it again," Stevie said, sporting that devilish Spikonos grin.

"Later," she said, laughing. "How about a little swim before dinner?"

Lukas picked up a ball that was bobbing nearby and sat up on the float. "Oh, no!" he cried out in a mock-serious voice. "I think a shark is coming. Steven boy, I need your help."

"There's no sharks in the pool, Uncle Lukas."

Lukas pointed at a shark floatie, splashed, and tossed the ball at it. "It's coming to get me. Help!"

Lukas paddled over to the edge of the pool, biceps wet and working in the sun. Holy Saints, the man was Hotness Embodied. The muscle. The wicked smile. The fun he was clearly having fooling around with Stevie.

She helped Stevie slide his swim vest on. He jumped into Lukas's arms and the two of them swam after sharks, Lukas diving and tossing Stevie in the air and splashing and both of them laughing. A lot.

Then Lukas took Stevie to the shallow end of the pool.

"You know what it's time for," Lukas said matter-of-factly.

"I'm afraid, Uncle Lukas."

Lukas stood up in the pool. "It's okay to be a little afraid of new things. But you can't let being afraid stop you from getting what you want. You want to learn to swim?"

Stevie nodded—sort of. Sam was worried he might ask for his blanket, because that thing would never survive the pool chlorine. On the other hand, the chlorine just might sterilize it, which could be a good thing.

Stevie hung in there as Lukas demonstrated holding his breath, helped him float on his stomach, and showed him how to move his arms. Lukas seemed to know just how to gently prod him without pushing. Another surprise in the amazing Lukas armamentarium.

"Are you ready to try it?" Lukas asked.

Sam held her breath as Stevie dunked his head under and did a few duck paddles to Lukas. As soon as he was in arm's length, Lukas grabbed him, tossed him up onto his shoulders, and ran with him all around the shallow end of the pool. "I did it! I did it!"

Stevie yelled. Sam ran to the edge of the pool, clapping and exclaiming and blowing kisses and taking a million pictures. Stevie sat on Lukas's shoulders, beaming from ear to ear.

That night they both tucked Stevie in. After Lukas turned on the nightlight and left the room, Sam sat at Stevie's bedside. "I'm so proud of you, swimming today," she said, combing his hair over his forehead. And he'd eaten almost his entire cheeseburger tonight, which Lukas had put on the grill. He was starting to fill out, looking so much more hale and healthy than just a few weeks ago.

Just a few weeks ago. When everything was different. That led her to wonder what the next few weeks would bring. Summer would breeze by, and soon there would be curled-up leaves on the ground and a bit of a slant to the sun, and the slightest chill to the evenings. Then what would happen with her borrowed family and her fantasy of happily ever after?

Maybe Stevie sensed the direction of her thoughts, because he asked, "Do you love me and Lukas?"

She tousled his hair, kissed him on the cheek, and hugged him hard. He smelled like Dove soap and clean pajamas. She wanted to bottle that smell to hold in her heart forever. "Very much. I love you and I love your Uncle Lukas. Now go to bed." She made a show of pulling up the sheet and a light blanket, of saying a little prayer and tucking him in.

She heard a soft noise from behind her, a subtle shifting of weight. Lukas had been standing behind her—for how long?

"Night Uncle Lukas," Stevie said. "It was a fun day. Especially the shark fight."

“Night, buddy,” Lukas said, giving a thumbs-up from the doorway.

Sam walked out of the room and let Lukas close the door. Her eyes were stinging and she was overcome with a desperate need to hold on to this amazing man who was everything she’d ever wanted but who wasn’t at all. The least safe, the most unexpected, the one who had nothing from his past to recommend him as being the kind, loving person he was. Yet she felt freer and safer with him than she ever had before.

If Lukas asked her to go with him on the road, what would she do? She’d made the mistake of giving up her life for a man before, and had vowed never to do it again. She loved her job, she loved Mirror Lake. The thought of being transient, unsettled, of moving from city to city, without family, without friends ... it made her shudder. Yet if he left without her, he would take everything with him. Her heart, her soul. All of her.

She hadn’t even realized she’d been standing stock-still, staring out the sliding door. Lukas came up behind her and began nuzzling her neck in that special spot just above her collarbone, sending waves of heat radiating everywhere. She flicked off the pool lights, pretending some semblance of purpose. “Stay with me,” he whispered. “In my bed. All night.”

“That’s really funny,” she managed, “considering this is my place.” She tried to say more but it was so hard with him kissing her like that.

“But Stevie ...,” she said weakly. She wouldn’t want him to wake up and see them together. It would give him hope for a real family. She of all people understood that,

having spent her entire childhood longing for one.

She turned in his arms so she could face Lukas. His gaze was solemn, heavy, like he was weighted down by similar thoughts like those she was having. She traced a finger along his dark brow, down the angle of his cheek. He hadn't shaved today, and his stubble was a little rough and very, very sexy. She'd done such a good job so far of staying in the moment, but whispers of worry were clawing their way in, like tangled vines of ivy up brick. Memorize this face, a voice said. Every blessed, beautiful curve. Because how long would it be before he was gone?

He belonged to another world, one she couldn't fit into, no matter how perfect their little scene of domestic bliss looked right now. The clock was ticking, each tiny movement eating away another second of their time together.

"Hey," he said, cupping her cheek, a move that made her swallow hard to avoid tears. "We had a great day."

It was great. Fantastic. She'd never had such a happy day, not since she was seven and her parents took her to Crash and Splash, until she'd eaten a hot dog and cotton candy before she went on the kiddie coaster and then threw up.

Too much happiness could do that to you. It was dangerous.

She hooked her arms around his lean waist. Felt the wonderful warmth of him next to her. "It was the best day," she said determinedly.

"It's not over yet," he said with a soft smile. Then he kissed her, in that intense way of his she was coming to love. She threw herself into kissing him, determined to let passion take over and keep reality at bay.

As he took her hand and led her to bed, she noticed something wedged into the corner

of the couch. She picked up the threadbare dusty blue ball.

“Well, I’ll be,” Lukas said.

Stevie hadn’t needed Bobby tonight.

Oh, heck. Leave it to that tangled ball of a mess to stir her emotions up all over again.

“Samantha.”

She was spreading the tattered thing out on the back of the couch as if it were five-hundred-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheet, smoothing it and folding and fretting with it.

He gathered up her hands and made her stop. “Samantha.”

She blinked back tears. “No, Lukas. I don’t want to talk about it. I want to focus on here and now. I don’t want to look down the road.”

“Samantha.”

She looked up. God, couldn’t she just have one happy day, one unmarred by thoughts she didn’t want to be thinking?

He kissed her knuckles, every blessed one. Then he murmured sweet words to her, telling her how much she meant to him, how happy she made him, how he’d missed her, how he’d always missed her.

But he didn’t use the L word. She wondered if he was avoiding it for the same reason she was. Because once you said it, it meant something. It meant they would have to face up to the impossible.

“We can work this out,” he said, shaking her a little until she was forced to look at him. His eyes slayed her. They told her he meant what he was saying. “I’m not letting you go.”

She surrendered. “Okay, Rock Star. Shut up and take me to your bed.”

He picked her up and carried her there, and did wonderful things to her until those pesky nagging voices really did shut up.

“Oh, hi Lukas,” Olivia said, greeting him at the door of her remodeled Victorian on the square as he came to pick up Stevie from a playdate. A week had passed since the donor dinner. A fabulous week where he and Sam had spent every possible minute together while not talking about the inevitable time when he would have to return to his work.

“Thanks for having Stevie over,” Lukas said.

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“Anytime. He’s a sweet child. The kids are playing in the yard. Want a Coke or something while I round them up?”

“I’m good, thanks.” Stevie was a sweet child. And Lukas had to do everything in his power to protect him from being hurt ever again.

“Sam told me you’ve started adoption proceedings. How’s that going?”

Lukas shook his head. He’d had his lawyers working on drawing up the paperwork. Only he hadn’t discussed it yet with Stevie. He wanted to make sure Nico was out of the picture for good so there was no chance of him coming back. “Trouble is I have PIs looking for my brother so he can sign it.”

“Well, we all love Stevie. Hope it gets settled soon.”

“Lukas,” a voice called from behind them. He turned to see Brad wearing the scowl he usually wore when Lukas was around. “Do you have a minute to talk?” Talk? With Brad?

Olivia frowned at her husband. “Brad, no. Come on, give the guy a break.”

Brad flashed his wife a whose-side-are-you-on look.

“Hey, it’s all right. I’d love to chat,” Lukas said, more because Olivia looked worried. Besides, a stubborn part of him wanted to show Brad that he’d changed, that he wasn’t the same guy from years ago who left town because he had nothing to offer. So he followed Brad down a wood-floored hall, sidestepping a couple of Barbie shoes

and a Barbie camper—which was parked halfway into a bathroom that appeared to be the vacation destination, judging by the dolls, furniture, and other stuff corralled there—into a wood-lined library.

The room was tidy and elegant except for an explosion of papers on the desk, with even more fanned out on the floor behind it. Brad sat down in the desk chair, leaving Lukas to sit in one of two eggplant-colored leather easy chairs in front of it. An interrogation setup if he ever did see one. In a Godfather movie.

“Olivia’s got a book deadline so I’ll be quick,” Brad said.

“Maybe I can save you the trouble. I care a lot about Sam. I’ve matured. I’m not going to up and leave like I did six years ago.” Lukas shifted his weight in the chair. Folded his hand loosely in front of his body. Made sure to keep his posture easy and relaxed although his stomach felt like it was lined with a bed of nails. Brad had intimidated him once, a long time ago, when he was little more than a kid. But that kid had grown up to be a man.

“If you knew what was best for my sister, you would.”

“That line worked on me six years ago, but come on already.” Lukas kept his voice calm and level. He was no longer the impulsive rebel, the magnet for trouble, but rather a businessman, a recording industry entrepreneur who’d achieved success through hard work and persistence.

“Look, Lukas, it’s a little shocking to have Sam call it off with Harris and take up with you and, as her brother, I want to be clear we both understand each other.”

Lukas thought of Harris, with his vanity and his untouchable car and his Supreme Court Justice pedigree. There’d been a time when Lukas believed a guy like Harris was better for Sam, but that had cost him precious years away from her and now

he knew better. He'd seen what was underneath the status and class and it hadn't impressed him. He knew that Sam was no longer in love with Harris. But it appeared maybe Brad still was.

"What's your plan with my sister?"

"I was hoping she'd join me and Stevie on the road." Even as he said it, a weird feeling churned his stomach. It seemed wrong, as it had every single time he'd thought about it over the past few weeks. He'd hated that Harris had asked Sam to give up her job and move for his benefit. Wasn't this the exact same thing?

Brad snorted. "Forgive me, but I just don't see how living on a tour bus with a handful of sweaty guys and trying to somehow build a stable lifestyle for a five-year-old boy is much of a life. In fact, it strikes me that taking Sam on the road is like asking her to trade in her life for yours. She loses her job and her family. What does she gain? And don't you dare say you."

Brad was close now, out of his chair and in Lukas's face, and he was looking down his strong nose, glaring into Lukas's eyes. Lukas didn't fold. "I'm not even going to mention the fact that you've got a child in this equation," Brad said.

Brad's words hit their mark. Made his stomach sicken. He'd avoided thinking about the truth, but there it was. How long would Sam stay happy in a world where shows ran late and the bus left early for destination after destination, where meals and schedules were hit-and-miss and there wasn't time for much of anything but practicing, playing, working on new music, and getting up and doing it all again the next day?

Still, the decision was his and Sam's. Brad was worse than a buttinski mother-in-law. "I'm surprised you're one to be so judgmental about unconventional ways of raising a family," Lukas said.

“I didn’t have a choice. I played the hand that was dealt to me.”

“Maybe you’re forgetting that Sam does have a choice. And it’s hers to make, not yours.”

“I’m her oldest brother. I care about her welfare. Nice that you’re playing house but who’s the one that’s going to get hurt here? I care about my sister. I can’t sit by and pretend that I don’t.”

And Lukas didn’t? He would always be that across-the-tracks kind of guy and Brad would always assume the worst no matter what he did.

“Okay, hey, guys.” Sam popped her head into the room wearing a baseball cap with her ponytail threaded through the back, looking fresh and sweet and happy. Like she clearly hadn’t heard what they were just saying. “Is the Inquisition over yet, big bro? Because I’d really like to talk to Lukas. Meg and I just found out T-ball sign-ups are tonight and now that the blankie’s gotten ditched, I thought it would be a great idea to sign Stevie up so he could meet more boys.” She made a double-biceps flex and looked at Lukas. “What do you say?”

“Sounds great,” Lukas said, rising from the chair and forcing a smile for Sam’s sake. “Nice chatting with you,” he said to Brad.

As they walked out and gathered the boys, Lukas realized that no matter how much he’d matured over the years, there would be no winning Brad over. And no matter how happy he was with Sam, pretending to be a regular guy with the possibility of a regular life in Mirror Lake, his time here was drawing to a close.

He had to make a decision soon about the Stones. If he said yes, the tour would take him away the rest of the summer.

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He watched Sam joke around with the kids, laugh and chat with Olivia about her day, and he felt like he couldn't breathe. He told Sam he had a massive headache, and would it be okay if he skipped the T-ball sign-ups? Normally he would never miss something like that, but right now he just didn't have the heart. It wasn't so much that Brad had gotten in his head. More like he'd said things that had been echoing around in there for weeks.

He headed to the town square and sat on a bench. It was 5:00 p.m. on a bright spring evening. The little park was pretty dead, a few dog walkers, a couple groups of kids playing softball on the green space, some workers heading home for dinner. Suddenly a thin, gangly man with scraggly long gray hair surrounding a crown of baldness approached him.

"I know you," he said, wagging a finger.

Lukas extended a hand. "Lukas Spikonos."

"Victor Irving."

Of course. The town's resident ex-rocker. His one hit song had gone platinum, way back in the seventies.

"I've been following your career. Makes me remember my own rise to fame."

"It's been a crazy ride," Lukas said.

"I started out like you, many years ago. After my big hit, I thought the fame was

going to last forever. I loved it, all of it—the fans, the applause, the beautiful women. Everyone wanted a piece of me. It’s like a drug, man.”

Lukas could relate. He loved the writing. The performing. But he never was one to believe he was something special. It was hard work and luck that had brought him to where he was. It wasn’t so much that he loved the fame but the validation it had brought him. It had made him somebody. Frankly, he wasn’t sure who he was without it.

“Yep, you never know how long it’s going to last.” Victor rambled on about how he’d been discovered, how he’d come up with the music and lyrics to his song. He’d been telling that same story for years. A little sad, to see that his one moment in the spotlight had defined his entire life.

Out of the blue, a nicotine craving hit Lukas. The first in a while. What Brad had said about Sam going on the road seemed right to him—she’d hate it. She wanted a home and a settled life, family, friends, community. He understood—he knew deep down—that Mirror Lake was a big part of her. If he settled here, would he have what it took to make a real family? To make Sam happy?

What would happen if he slowed down, cut way back on the touring? Slowing down had never been part of his nature. He’d be washed up within a year, replaced by any one of the younger, brighter talents trying to pound the door down, looking for a crack to break in. Then what would he replace his fame with?

He loved Samantha, he was certain of it. But he sure could use a guidebook on being a father and taking Stevie on the road and keeping up his career and doing what was best for her life, too.

But like so much of life, there were simply no instructions.

CHAPTER 18

Sam shoved a bottle of wine and the pizza she'd picked up on the way home into Lukas's brand-new fridge, and paced back and forth on the newly varnished wood floor. Lukas had asked if she'd minded him skipping the T-ball sign-ups, saying he needed to go for a run. It wasn't like Lukas to beg off from an activity, and he'd looked so ... unsettled. She hoped he hadn't let Brad get to him. She'd have to tell her brother to cool it, enough already.

She was so on edge these last few days, it was like she was holding her breath waiting for a good strong wind to knock down their fragile house of cards and blow it away for good.

Oh, being with him was wonderful. He was wonderful. But she knew he planned to take Stevie with him on the road. She couldn't see herself living that life, not that he'd asked, but if he did, what would she do? Would she abandon her life here for him, just as she'd done for Harris? Joe Malone had said her job was still open, and if she wanted it back, but she would have to tell him soon.

She just couldn't get over the fear that Lukas would leave again. His career would beckon, and he would have to go. And this time, when he left, he would take everything.

From the way her gut was roiling, she knew Lukas and she would have to have a talk. They'd delayed it for as long as possible. One more day, she'd tell herself. Please, God, let us have one more fantastic day together. But she saw it in his eyes, felt it in the desperate way he kissed her, in the way he held her after their frenzied, frantic

lovemaking. The sand in the hourglass was running out. Like the last day of vacation, like Sunday night before the workweek. Things would have to be said, decisions made.

Suddenly she saw a face staring at her through the back door.

“May I help you?” Sam asked the balding, portly man who was standing there as she opened it.

“I need to speak with Lukas.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” Sam said.

“Are you the nanny?”

Sam crossed her arms. “No, Lukas is old enough to take care of himself now. Are you by chance Tony? Lukas has told me about you.”

The man laughed and offered a hand. “Tony Marinetti. You must be the girlfriend.”

The girlfriend. She did like the sound of that, as opposed to girlfriend or one of the girlfriends, but this guy was still a Neanderthal. “I’m Sam. Have you tried his phone?”

“Look,” he said, waving a file folder and his cigar. “He texted me but he’s not answering his phone. I really need him to sign this contract tonight or the Stones are going to sign somebody else.”

“The Rolling Stones?”

He must have seen the look on her face because he said, “Oh my God, you don’t

know, do you? Lukas is opening for the Rolling Stones next Saturday, and then he's going on tour with them for the rest of the summer."

Sam's head swam a little. She almost had to clutch onto one of the brand-new bar stools. That would be impossible, because the theater benefit was next Saturday. And he was the main attraction. "Next Saturday, the first of June?" she asked.

"The first of June," Tony said loud and slow, like she was hearing impaired. He set some papers down on the counter. "He needs to sign these and call me immediately."

Just then, Lukas walked in, car keys in hand. She hadn't even heard him pull up.

"Tony?" he asked. "What are you doing here?" He looked from Sam to Tony, and in the flash of a second it took to meet her eyes, Sam knew—just knew, in the tiny flicker of something: worry, concern, guilt, whatever she saw there—that he was aware of everything. A tour with the Stones versus a small-town benefit for an old dusty theater. Was there any comparison?

"I'll tell you what," she said, forcing what must have been the phoniest smile ever on her face. "You two talk and I ... I'll finish helping Stevie get ready for bed." As she climbed the stairs to the second floor, she couldn't breathe well. Her chest hurt. Her knees were shaking and she had no idea how she was going to keep it together for that little boy.

Why hadn't Lukas told her he was going back on tour so soon? And why had he not told her he wasn't singing at the benefit? In the dim hall, she leaned against the wall to collect herself. Tears welled up but she wiped them with the back of her hands and took in big gulps of air. She would finish this off with a smile on her face for Stevie if it killed her.

She'd just drawn Stevie's bath when Lukas found her in the bathroom. Stevie was

leaning over the tub, fists full of mismatched action figures, plopping them one at a time into the water, something she would normally find entertaining. The fact that he was chattering about Wolverine and Batman saving the earth and all the Power Rangers coming to the rescue (with sound effects) was endearing and so bittersweet she could barely keep it together.

Lukas took one look at her and read her I'm-losing-my-shit look immediately. "I'll take over," he said. "I'll put Stevie to bed then we'll talk, okay?"

Sam took comfort that they didn't have to say out loud the fact that they would never involve Stevie in their disagreements. It went without saying, like so many other things they just knew without having to communicate. They'd only been together a few days, hardly enough to establish a routine, yet he'd handed her a freshly poured cup of coffee as soon as she came down in the mornings. (Once, he'd even brought it to her in bed. Who could complain it had gotten cold before she'd had a chance to drink it?) Or how he always made room for her to prop herself against him on the couch when they both sat there reading. Or how he just naturally pulled her into the curve of his body at night before they went to sleep, making her feel safe and loved and ...

It was all a mirage. There was no safety in this relationship. She'd known it from day one. Hell, she'd known it six years ago, but somehow she'd believed this time would be different.

By the time Lukas joined her on the big wraparound porch, she'd opened the wine and had already downed a full glass. There wasn't any furniture yet, so she sat down and leaned against the wall. Ahead was a perfect view of the sun setting over the lake. A big beautiful ball of red going, going ...

Lukas slid down the wall and settled next to her. "Tony told me about the Stones opportunity while I was in the hospital. I didn't even put two and two together at first

that it was the same day as the theater benefit.”

“I believe you, Lukas.” She did believe him. By saying that, she wanted to let him know she trusted him. That she believed they could work things out. They could, couldn’t they? God, where the hell was the wine?

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He looked so worried. She wanted to reach over and smooth the frown lines on his beautiful forehead. Kiss them away. But that would only distract them both from the truth.

“But you want to go. Of course you want to go.” She waved her hands in the air a little wildly. She felt wild and out of control. And she couldn’t seem to stop rambling. “I mean, it’s the Stones, right? How can you pass up that opportunity?”

“Sam, this tour will secure my place as a serious player in the industry. I hope you understand. It’s impossible to pass up.”

She felt like she had a llama on her chest. Or a camel or an alpaca or some giant humped creature that was preventing her from sucking in air. She had to clear her throat so she could get the words out. “Sounds like you’ve already decided.” Without me. “When were you going to tell me?”

“Tonight. Please understand. It’s once in a lifetime.”

And I’m clearly not. Oh, she didn’t say it. How could she make him feel guilty for pursuing his dream, right?

He looked at her intently. She had to give the man credit, turning those melty dark chocolate eyes on her dulled the pain—for a second. “I want you to know I’ve already secured Ed Sheeran to replace me,” he said. “You’ll at least have a headliner that will draw a huge crowd.”

Dammit, tears were stinging her nose and she was getting that closed-up-airway

feeling again. “Okay, so when will you be back?” she asked. Maybe this wasn’t all bad. Maybe she was making a big deal of nothing. “So maybe you’ll go and do your thing for a couple weeks, and maybe Stevie could stay here while you’re gone, and when you come back we could make some real plans, like enrolling him in school. I have to make a decision about a place to live after the Donaldsons get back from Europe, and I was thinking maybe I could move in ... here ...”

His face stopped her. Oh, God, there was not going to be a “we,” was there? They were not going to settle here in this big beautiful, refurbished farmhouse with the killer view and have a flock of dark-eyed, olive-skinned children and live to see old age, rocking in big old chairs on this beautiful porch. “Lukas, talk to me. Please.” Because my throat is closing up and I might be having a heart attack. And a stroke.

“The Stones thing is for eight weeks, but I’ve got an offer for a new contract. They want me back in LA working on a new album as soon as the tour is done.”

“Oh.” More bad news. More time apart. She wanted to hear him say something reassuring. I love you might be nice, or we can work this out. She’d take either. But he was silent. He was not jumping to compromise or to fight for what they had.

It struck her that she’d been through this before, with Harris. Always waiting for him to tell her that he loved her, that he wanted her, that he couldn’t live life without her. It was always, well, we’re awfully close to making some big decisions, or after this summer, we’ll reevaluate, like their relationship was a business plan or something. But with Lukas ... well, she’d had such hopes. She’d felt that he was The One, that they’d found each other after all this time, and nothing would stop them from being together.

Oh, it was just that artsy, emotional side of her. Going and falling in love when she knew he was bound to leave again. She should have done as Brad wanted long ago

and gotten that logical, practical business degree. Maybe it would have given her more sense in dealing with relationships.

“So where does that leave us?” she finally said because he was saying ... nothing. Her words sounded weak and far, far away.

“I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

“When will that be?”

“Probably September. Or October. Of course, you can fly out any weekend you want to be with us, too.”

She let his words settle into the beautiful spring evening. Birds were swooping low over the lake and a riot of them were chirping and tweeting in the brush. Glorious, but not for her.

The old Sam would have let that go. Would have accepted what he could give and not demanded any more.

But she’d changed. Maybe she’d spent too many years trading her voice for the security she craved. But now that she’d shot security all to hell, what was left? Not a damn thing.

She turned to Lukas and looked him in the eye. “Is that all you have to say?”

He frowned. Like he was genuinely perplexed at what to do next. “Sam, I have to do this to secure my future—our future. I can’t just settle in here without a job, without a plan. That would be a disaster for everyone.”

“I’m not asking you to give up your career or even this opportunity. I’m asking if you

love me.”

God, she hated herself for asking him that. Just like she’d made a fool of herself for suggesting she move into this house with him. She should just stop talking, but her mouth was a runaway locomotive and she could not put on the brakes.

He looked a little stunned. And he still hadn’t said a thing. “Love means promises,” she said. “It means compromise. It means working together to find a solution.”

“Why don’t you come with us until school starts?” he asked. “Then we can reassess things in the fall.”

Reassess? There was that business-plan language again. She stood a little too quickly, her glass tipping and dark wine spilling across the old porch boards.

“I’m not leaving Mirror Lake, Lukas. I gave up almost everything about who I was for Harris, and I’ll never do that again.” There, she could be stubborn, too. Maybe she could have done it, gone on the road. But he sounded so—so lukewarm about everything. Like he didn’t really want her there at all.

“So you want me to make all the compromises.”

There it was. “You know what, Lukas? I would never keep you from your dream but I actually see something else going on here entirely. More than a man just trying to work as hard as he can to be as successful as possible.”

“It’s what I’ve always done.”

“It’s what you’ve always done to avoid commitment. You think I would have learned that about you by now, but obviously I didn’t. But I know you, Lukas. You’ve done everything you could to be successful and you’ve made it, you really have. But you’re never going to stop craving that success. You’ll get one contract, but it won’t be enough. You’ll have to try for an even bigger one. You still see yourself as that nobody-kid and you’ll be proving that you’re not to yourself and to everyone else for the rest of your life.”

She smiled sadly. “I’m not something to reassess. Either you love me or you don’t. I can’t tell you how to live your life but I can decide how to live mine, and it’s not going to be to please you or my family or anyone. I wish you the best. I hope you slay your demons. Good-bye, Lukas.”

Somehow she left him, ran into the kitchen for her purse and walked down the driveway to her car. Oh, he’d tried to stop her but she just hightailed it out of there as fast as she could. She’d just exited the driveway when her phone rang. It was Alethea, and she pulled off the road to answer. “The Buckhorns have withdrawn their million-dollar pledge,” she said, “and they’ve chosen not to cover any of the expenses for tomorrow night—the caterers, the appetizers, the wine, the decorations. What shall I do?”

“Oh, Alethea.” Sam rested her head against the steering wheel, trying to absorb its coolness. Trying to think clearly through the aching sadness that burrowed clear down to her marrow. Desperately struggling to come up with something comforting or brave to say, but no words came. Of course the Buckhorns would withdraw their

support. They'd never really cared about the theater, just about keeping her occupied with a "little project." Now that her connection with Harris was broken, there was no reason for them to continue pretending they cared.

Taking on the theater restoration had been risky but it had become a passion, and she'd never really thought about not succeeding. She'd loved it so much, the idea that the project could fail had never seriously occurred to her. The idea that they could fail when they were this close was even more of a shock.

Lukas, on the other hand, had always been a risk. But there again, she thought love would be enough to see them through. She knew better than to get involved with him. But she had anyway and he'd broken her heart again.

Sam's grandma answered the door of her apartment at Assisted Living with pink sponge rollers in her hair and wearing a pink fuzzy zip-up robe and orthopedic slippers.

"Why, hello, dear," Effie said, immediately taking in the look on her face. "What is it? Did somebody die?"

"I know it's late but can I come in and talk?" Sam took a big breath. "Lukas is leaving, Effie. He's taking Stevie with him."

"Oh." Effie grabbed her arm and pulled her inside, shutting the door. Then she led Sam to the couch and sat her down, taking a seat beside her.

It didn't take long for Sam to spill tears and her story, just as she had so many times before when she was much younger and her problems weren't nearly so tangled. Effie listened with the same endless patience she'd always had, rubbing her back and holding her hand like she was ten again. "He's booked for months with a tour and a record contract and ... I told him I wasn't going to quit my job and follow him. I came

this close to doing that for Harris. I can't give up my identity for someone else. Even if it's Lukas."

Effie squeezed her hand. "I'm so sorry, dear."

"I love him, Ef. But I don't think he's capable of committing. And maybe I'm not capable of compromising."

Effie frowned. "Do you love Lukas?"

"Yes! Of course I do. But he hasn't said it. He can't. It's just not in him." Well, she was right to expect nothing short of love, and he should want to say it, right?

"Life's a game of chance and sometimes you've got to risk it all. I wish I had."

"What do you mean?" What was she telling her? That she hadn't given Lukas everything? Because she had. Hadn't she?

"Samantha, I'm not as sweet as I seem. I've had my trials like everyone else. You know I was only thirty when your grandfather died. I was young and lonely and ... eventually there was a man."

"A nice man?"

"A very nice man." She smiled a bit wistfully. "He worked at the bank and we dated. Secretly. I was so afraid not to expose your mother to any more trauma after your grandfather died. I didn't want her to get attached to someone who might not be around."

"I worry about that with Stevie all the time," Sam said.

“Well, things happened as they did, seeing as Lukas and Stevie entered your life at practically the same time. But in my case, I went to great lengths to hide my relationship. My mother encouraged me to. Of course, she flaunted her own widowhood like a banner her entire life after my own father died when I was nineteen. She never was able to move forward.

“One day my friend got a promotion. He asked me to pick up and move with him to another city. I was terrified. Everything I knew was here. I was worried about uprooting your mother, of leaving my family and my support system.”

“Did he ask you to marry him?”

“No, but I bet he would have if I had compromised. He wanted to meet your mother, be a part of her life. He waited for me for a long time after he moved. But I always had some excuse or another. I was so afraid, and so guilty, as if loving somebody else would have desecrated your grandfather’s memory. Anyway, I was a fool.” She made a dismissive gesture.

“The point is, Samantha, sometimes you have to have the courage to go out of your comfort zone. I must admit, getting rid of that Harris was a good start. But don’t stop there, if you really love this man.”

“What happened to—er—your friend?”

“He married someone else and had a handful of children.”

“I’m sorry, Effie.”

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“That’s okay.” She patted Sam’s hand in that gentle way of hers. “Just be braver than I was.”

“I think you’ve been plenty brave, raising us, working as a nurse for all those years.” Effie just shrugged in that humble way of hers, always hating to call attention to herself. She knew it had taken her a lot to tell that story. “The Buckhorns withdrew their donation. We’re two million short now, and if we don’t match the state funds we don’t get the grant. The caterer and the party planner Mrs. Buckhorn hired pulled out. The benefit tomorrow’s going to be a disaster.”

Effie shot her a look.

Tears welled up fresh. “Don’t give me that look.”

“What look?” Effie asked in her innocent voice.

“Your I-didn’t-teach-you-to-ever-give-up look.”

This time, Effie’s eyes welled up. “You know me too well. You see, I don’t even have to speak anymore.”

Samantha wrapped her arms around her grandmother and squeezed. “I love you. You were a good mother to me.”

Effie hugged her back, her warm arms surrounding her tightly, the smell of Chantilly strong and old fashioned and familiar. “You’ve always been a sweet girl, and I love you with all my heart.” She patted her cheek. “But right now you have to find the

strength to go save our theater. And as far as Lukas is concerned, remember, there's no such thing as perfect anything. You make your own future out of the chaos life hands you. Life is a giant slot machine, and honey, God only gives you so many pulls."

CHAPTER 19

“I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!” Stevie stomped his feet and planted them in the middle of the front aisle of the grocery store. Thank God it was Friday afternoon before rush hour and not too many people were around.

“Stavros! Geez, cut that out!” Lukas said. They’d just walked in. Actually, it was not really walking. It was more like something out of a cartoon, with Lukas trying to tug Stevie into the grocery store and Stevie putting the brakes on, and they were getting a thousand dirty looks.

“I’m not going. I wanna stay here.” Here was the entrance to the store, but Lukas knew what he meant. He wanted to stay in Mirror Lake. How the hell was he supposed to tell this kid that everything he’d come to love would now be taken away? He’d screwed up everything in a big way. More proof that he wasn’t cut out for relationships of any kind.

Yet who else did Stevie have? No one. Just Lukas. So Lukas released him and dropped down to Stevie’s level. “I know you do.”

Stevie turned big watery eyes on him, making him feel even more like shit. “Then why can’t we stay? I miss Sammy. Why didn’t she come over last night, Uncle Lukas?”

They hadn’t seen her for two days, but it felt like two years. “She’s just ... very busy. She said for us to stop by the theater before we leave.” The big theater benefit was tomorrow. The bus was already packed. They were about to head out today for the

Stones' concert tomorrow.

"I miss Sammy."

Yeah, kid, tell me about it. "Look, Stevie ..."

"Are you going to leave me?"

Lukas pulled him into a hug that was probably a little too tight. "Never, Stevie. Never. I love you and love is forever. It's just that I have this job, and the job is telling me we've got to go back on the road."

Love is forever. Geez, did he just say that? He couldn't even take his own advice.

"Tell the job no."

"I wish it were that easy."

"I have friends. And Sam's like my mom and you're like my dad."

"Look, we'll be able to come back after the tour. Besides, you like the bus, don't you? We'll see fun places and get McDonald's and you get to have a top bunk."

He could tell from Stevie's expression that he wasn't buying it. And he just couldn't tell him the whole truth, that Sam and he had broken up and that they weren't coming back to Mirror Lake for a long time. "Right now we just need to go into the store and grab a couple groceries. Okay?"

Just then, a nicotine craving hit him like a ton of bricks. He'd reached the end of his rope. He had to have a cigarette. One or two or twenty, if he could just survive this.

At least no one was hounding him for a picture, or taking one of Stevie tantruming. As if reading his mind, Gertie, the owner, who was manning the central register, pulled out her iPhone and pointed it his way.

“Don’t you dare,” Lukas said. “Or I’ll tell everyone that you and Hank Masterson used to get it on after hours behind the vegetable displays.”

“Sorry, Lukas, old news.” She waggled her left hand so he could see her diamond ring. “We’ve been married for three years.”

“Come on, Gertie. Give me a break. I’ve just got to get a couple things for dinner.”

She put down her phone and sighed. “Oh, all right. Being as you were a decent bag boy way back when, I’ll have mercy on you.” She walked over to Stevie, putting on her glasses, which dangled from a bejeweled neck strap.

“Hey, Stavros,” the buxom gray-haired woman said, stooping down and looking at Stevie through her bifocals.

Stevie stood sullen and red faced, with arms crossed. Royally pissed.

“This grocery store always brings out the worst in babies and children. How about we get some ice cream while your Uncle Lukas gets what he needs.”

“No.” He gave Gertie, who wore a brightly colored flowered smock, a look likewho the heck is this lady?

“A chip off the old block, huh, Lukas.” Gertie chuckled. “Rebel Mini-Me. Okay, I hate to pull out the big guns, but I’ve got ice-cream cake. Chocolate and vanilla, with a chocolate cake layer in between. What do you say?”

Stevie's eyes softened even if his posture didn't. Gertie must have seen it, too, because she winked at Lukas. Steering Stevie by the shoulders to her office in front of the store, she tossed Lukas a wave. "Take your time. See you after checkout."

Lukas mouthed thank you and wiped his forehead. God, this parent stuff was tough. Stevie would probably eat no dinner at all after being bribed with the slice of ice-cream cake but he didn't even care. He was grateful for the breather to get some sanity back. At the entrance, he grabbed a shopping basket from the stack but on impulse, got in the twelve-items-or-less line and bought a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Then he headed to the back of the store and out the storeroom entrance, which he knew well from his bag-boy days. In the alley behind the store, he sat on an old metal folding chair—probably the same one from years ago—and lit up. He watched in fascination as the cigarette ignited and started to burn. Watched the gray ash form and build and flare as if he'd never seen it before. But for some reason, he didn't put it to his lips.

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Of course he loved Sam. She was the only woman he'd ever loved but he was so, so afraid. What did he know about love? About caring for another person? About sticking with that person through thick and thin? Everyone from his youth had let him down. He'd been rejected over and over by family after family, the kid no one wanted.

Maybe Sam was right. A part of him still saw himself as that unlovable, unadoptable kid. Too flawed to be loved. So he kept driving himself and driving himself. No matter how much success he found, it would never be enough.

He flicked the ash off the cigarette. Finally, in a gesture borne more of despair than of triumph, he tossed the cigarette on the ground and crushed it beneath his heel.

"Excellent choice, paidi mou. You don't need those filthy things anyway."

"Jesus!" He turned to see Mrs. Panagakos standing in the storeroom doorway, dressed all in black—black hose, black dress, and a little black veil.

"You need a shave," she said. "No foul language in front of the boy."

"What boy?"

Stevie peeked out from behind Mrs. P. He had chocolate all over his face. And his mood looked considerably improved, thank the Lord. Gertie was there, too. Did anyone in this town mind their own business?

"Stevie has something to tell you," Mrs. Panagakos said, "so we came and found

you.”

“How did you even know we were here?” Lukas asked. “And why are you dressed like that?”

“It’s hard to miss that big bus of yours in the parking lot. I wear black when I’m depressed. I’m very saddened by the recent turn of events with you and Samantha. And I will miss you and Stavros terribly.” She started to choke up. “But right now, Stevie wants to tell you something. Go ahead, my precious.” She nudged Stevie forward. “Tell him what you just told me.”

“Uncle Lukas, I love you because you taught me to swim. And you tuck me in at night. And you sing to me and do cool magic tricks. But I love Sammy, too.”

Lukas looked down at his boy. He touched his soft smeared little-boy cheek. Everything he’d done for Stevie from the moment he’d eyeballed him sitting by himself on the steps of Lukas’s bus while the social worker told his story had been to prevent that little child from experiencing even an ounce more of pain. Not for any reason other than he loved him.

And Stevie loved Lukas ... just because he did simple things for him. Not because he was famous or successful. Stevie didn’t care about his recording contracts or who the Rolling Stones were (although one day he probably would). And maybe that was enough.

Maybe he wasn’t a typical guy in a lot of ways—he’d grown up without a family or a fancy education, and his job was atypical. But he was sick without Sam and so was Stevie. Maybe chasing after success twenty-four seven was not the only way to ensure that he had a good life.

He loved her and maybe that would be enough to get him through all the things he

didn't know, that he had no clue or experience about.

He looked up and saw Mrs. Panagakos clutching her heart. Gertie was right behind her.

"Did you feed him that script?" Lukas raised a brow.

"I swear on my mother's Bible that those words came out of his very own mouth."

"Sure did," seconded Gertie.

Lukas often thought he was alone in the world but maybe he wasn't. The people here helped him for a reason—not because they wanted something from him but because they were good people who were trying to prevent him from screwing up. Whether they were scheming and conniving or not.

"What time is it, anyway?" Lukas asked, scrubbing a hand through his hair.

"Four o'clock," Mrs. P. said.

"Think we can get to the tux shop before it closes?"

"Oh, thank the Lord," Mrs. P. said, sighing heavily. "Now I can change out of this black. It's not flattering on me at all."

"What's a tux?" Stevie asked.

Lukas grinned. "Something Sammy's going to love."

"Hey, Ms. Rushford," Cal said, making his way through the massive theater lobby, which was teeming with people on one very busy Saturday night. Cal wore black

pants and a white dress shirt with a black bow tie and carried a bottle of wine. At his elbow, Leo appeared holding a tray over one shoulder loaded with clear plastic drink cups half-full of wine.

“I know the wine glasses never made it but we sent Denise and Katie to Sam’s Club and found these. Not bad, huh?” Cal picked up one of the fat little drink cups and examined it.

She was about to tell them she wasn’t sure if eighteen year olds were allowed to serve wine. And warn them not to get plastered. And ten other admonitions that wavered on the tip of her tongue. But something held her back. It was the look in their eyes. They looked... proud. Concerned—for her. And they were smiling. Cal cleared his throat.

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“We want you to know everything’s under control, see? Mr.Rushford brought in all the hors d’oeuvres and showed us how to carry them and the student band is setting up in the corner and ... and everything’s going to be just great.”

She didn’t usually touch students but she grasped each one by the arm. “Thank you. Thank you so, so much.”

“We’re going to make this work,” Leo said.

“Wearemaking it work,” Teddy Lawrence said, carrying a tray of cake balls. He gave Sam a side hug and lightly smacked Cal’s wrist for sneaking one. “Hey, no eating the cake balls, you hear? I swear, these kids don’t realize they’re handling artwork.” He shot Cal a look.

“Just two, okay?” Cal said. “They were delicious. I couldn’t help it.”

“Teddy,” Sam said. “Thank you.” She looked around the lobby, which was built to look like a grand palatial entrance, with soaring ceilings and ornate walls decorated with intricate plaster designs painted blue, clay-colored, green, and yellow. Her students had draped lengths of silver tulle over the bannister of the grand staircase, hung shimmering cardboard stars on the walls, and had even hung them around the necks of some of the fancy marble statues.

The finishing touch was a giant hanging mobile of stars and planets suspended from the ceiling. “How did you—”

“Mr.Wolensky did it,” Cal said.

“Wow. It’s fabulous.” She waved to more of her students, who were serving the hors d’oeuvres from Brad’s restaurant, and a large crowd was milling about enjoying the grand lobby and having a great time.

“We sold every ticket,” Effie said proudly. “All thirty-five hundred seats are filled.”

“Impressive,” Sam said. Of course, they were still short the last two million bucks to get the matching state funds. She could only pray that some wealthy donors would come forward tonight to make up the difference. But if not, she would find some way to get that money—write grants, politick, send letters, go door-to-door. They’d come this far, and she was not going to let her town down. Everyone she knew was here, helping out. Giving her their all. Her wonderful students, family, and friends. No matter how broken her heart was, she would smile until her jaw was numb and give them her all.

“Have you been to the restroom yet?” Effie asked.

“No, wh—oh. You saw your portrait. How’s it look?”

“Well, you didn’t make me look younger but I must say, it’s quite lovely. I’ve been standing by it telling everyone how talented my granddaughter is. I’m very proud of you, Samantha.”

Sam hugged her grandmother. “I learned from the best.”

Jess cruised by. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I am. How can I not be when everyone’s been so wonderful?”

“I’m sorry about Lukas.” Jess gave her a squeeze.

“Me too.”

“Maybe you two can still work it out.”

Sam shrugged. “He left. But thanks.”

Evan, who was wearing—my gosh—a tux, joined them. His hair was cut and tamed. Jess smoothed it and his lapels. “Did you see the planetary mobile suspended from the ceiling?” she asked proudly. “Evan and his students made that.”

“It’s to scale,” he said, looking very pleased.

Sam smiled. “It’s incredible. How did you suspend it? I mean, this ceiling’s higher than the cathedral’s.”

“The magic of physics,” he said proudly.

“Magical,” Jess said, looking starry-eyed. “Completely magical.”

“Would you ladies like some wine?” Evan asked.

“We’d love some,” Jess said. As soon as he was out of earshot, she grabbed Sam by the elbow. “We’re dating,” she whispered. “I didn’t want to upset you, but I’m so excited. He’s nice, Sam. I really, really like him. And to think I never would have given him a second look. Thank goodness he gave me a second chance.”

“I love Evan ... But Jess, tell me you’re not taking up French poetry or studying physics or something like that.”

“Nope. But I did take him shopping to get a few things at the Gap. And he’s a runner like me, and you would not believe the bod he was hiding under those ugly clothes.

He just needed a little style help to bring out the sexy.”

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Sam smiled. "I'm really happy for you." It wasn't a lie. Someone should be happy around here, right?

"What about your second chance? With Lukas?"

"Didn't work out," she said. "But it's okay." She'd survive. With the help of her wonderful friends and family.

The overhead lights blinked a few times, signaling the crowd to take their seats. Sam started up the grand staircase, waving and chatting to everyone she knew before walking down the aisle to take her seat in the front row next to Brad. She could do this. For the next couple of hours she could smile and be social and brave. Yes, she could, even though it was exhausting, and as long as she blocked out every single thought of Lukas, because every time she let her thoughts drift in that direction, she got teary. Her speech faltered. And she fought the urge to run screaming down the aisle.

Yes, she might be borderline crazy. She just had to hold off tipping over the edge for another couple of hours.

As soon as she sat down, Olivia gave her a little wave from her seat on Brad's other side, and Brad took her hand and gripped it tightly. "You look lovely tonight. I'm so proud of you."

She shrugged, unable to speak.

She wanted to tell him so many things. Thank him for being here. For supplying all

this food on a few days' notice.

"Looks like you were right about Lukas after all," she managed. "For all I fought you on it."

He squeezed her hand. "Maybe I was, maybe I wasn't. But I'm done interfering, Sam. Only you know what's best for your own life."

"Yeah, well, I did a great job of that, didn't I?" The pull of success had taken Lukas away again, and it always would. He wasn't the kind to settle down. She'd known it all along. She'd just hoped for a different ending.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Brad said.

The lights dimmed. Her beloved stars shone on the dome overhead, the wisps of clouds threaded through the softly twinkling lights. She couldn't help but remember Lukas kissing her neck while she looked up at those stars, whispering sweet words to her ...

"May I have your attention," Mayor Kline was saying. He welcomed everyone, told them how important the theater was to the community, and asked everyone to give generously to such a great cause. Sam had asked him to make the final plea for donations and not to recognize her. It wasn't necessary, she'd said. But truthfully, she just didn't have the heart.

Sam tilted up her chin and braced for the curtain to open. She realized her fists were clenched and she was holding her breath. Some stupid, naive part of her was still holding out hope that the curtain would open and there Lukas would be, his thick black hair shiny in the spotlight, his dark eyes and satiny voice telling her that he'd come back for her, that he'd do anything for her ...

The curtain rose. There, center stage, was a red-haired man with a guitar. The crowd screamed and applauded. She clapped and smiled, but disappointment crushed her. Not that she didn't love Ed but he simply wasn't Lukas. Well, of course he wasn't! Lukas was in New York opening for the Stones. Far, far away from this ancient relic of a theater that wouldn't ever have state-of-the-art sound and lighting unless the renovation got funded. Which was dubious at best, even with this benefit.

She turned to Brad. "I'm going to the bathroom."

"Are you okay? Let me come with you." Brad immediately started to get up, until he must've realized he really couldn't accompany her to the bathroom. He turned to his wife. "Olivia, will you go with Sam to the bathroom?"

Sam held out a hand to stop them. "I just need some air. Do not follow me. I promise I'll be all right." She didn't wait for his answer, instead she began gingerly climbing over people's legs and purses. "Excuse me. Sorry, Mrs.Christopolous. Hi, Mr.Marks, Jeannie. Good to see you. Thanks for coming." Then she was bolting down the long aisle. If she could just not cry long enough to hang a left into the hallway past the restrooms and out the back parking lot door into the fresh, cool night, she'd be all right. But she never made it to the back of the theater.

A lovely British voice rang through the theater loud and clear. "Is Samantha Rushford here?"

She froze in the middle of the gaudy carpet. Turned slowly toward the stage.Why was Ed Sheeran asking for her?

"I understand that Samantha is the head of the Palace Theater Restoration Committee, and if it weren't for her, this event would never have happened. Let's give Samantha a round of applause."

A spotlight sought and found her. She had only seconds to wipe away what she could of the ghoulish mess that was her makeup. Plastering on a smile even as she felt her heart in her chest, heavy and full as a wet sponge, she waved to the packed crowd. Applause thundered around her. Whistles and whoops. Then suddenly everyone was standing, and the clapping kept going on and on and on.

“Would you come on up here, Samantha, and say a few words to your community, who clearly loves you so much.”

Sam looked at the faces of so many people she’d known most of her life. Even in her heartbreak, she was overwhelmed. They wanted the theater. They were glad she’d tried so hard to save it. They’d given their all to help her pull this off tonight. How would she have the heart to tell them she hadn’t succeeded? At least she could tell them how much she loved them all. For them she could be strong. Even without Lukas.

She’d been so frightened to let go of Harris. So afraid to be cut loose, adrift without him and the safety net he represented. But she knew the safety net was more like a fishnet she’d become bound by, and knew now that she hadn’t loved him, not the way you were supposed to. Not in a way that made your heart ache and your lungs hurt just from breathing when you thought of your entire life alone without the man you loved. Real love sucked in a way, didn’t it? Because it ripped your heart out without mercy and let it bleed all over the floor.

She saw her brothers looking at her, frowning, their dark brows knit low. Tom was already halfway down the aisle, and Ben was out of his seat. But she forced a smile and waved them back. She didn’t need their help. She could do this alone.

She walked onto her beloved stage. The Moorish castle façade was bathed in a soft glow on each side, the night sky peeking out between the columns and walls, and fake flower vines wrapped around the intricately carved columns. It was so realistic,

she half expected to hear crickets chirping. She smiled widely and gave Ed a big hug. Someone handed her a microphone.

“I wanted to thank everyone for coming. The restoration committee has worked hard over these past two years to raise a lot of money to maintain our magnificent theater as a historic landmark that will be preserved for generations to come. My students made all the decorations tonight and served. Brad Rushford, the owner of Reflections, provided the appetizers, and Ted Lawrence, owner of Mona’s Bakery, provided the sweets. Ed, I wanted to thank you for coming to our little town and attracting such a large crowd tonight.”

She paused. She’d hoped to quietly fade into the background and go home as soon as the concert was over, and pray that other people felt the beauty of the theater and donated and that somehow they’d make the cut.

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But that was a fairy tale. No matter what was going on in her personal life, she had a responsibility to her town. Her community. She would tell them the truth.

She held the mic carefully and looked out into the crowd. Over three thousand seats, all filled. “We were counting on the matching funds from the state grant that expires this year but despite all our efforts, we’re still two million dollars short.”

“Actually, we’re not,” someone from behind her said.

The crowd gasped. Behind her, a man in a tux that hugged every smoking hot muscle on his tall lean frame walked onto the stage. His thickly layered hair shone in the spotlights and his wicked smile gleamed. Tiny diamonds flashed from his ears. He was the sexiest man she had ever seen. And he’d come back.

She blinked, unable to believe it. The crowd went crazy, whistling and whooping. Lukas man-hugged Ed and nodded to Sam a little tentatively, like he wasn’t sure how she would react.

She was stunned. Speechless. Shaking. And tearing up. Again. Lord, she’d cried more in the past week than she had her entire life.

“Hi, everybody,” Lukas said to the packed house, “I’m Lukas Spikonos. Ed and I are going to sing together.” That made everyone roar even louder, but he signaled for quiet. “But right now I’d like to say a few words.

“As you know, I’m from Mirror Lake. But I wasn’t from the nice part of town. I didn’t come from a nice family. In fact, I could pretty much say it was a miracle that

one day I met someone nice who made me want to be a better man. And that someone is standing next to me.

“Samantha,” he took her hand in his warm, callused one, “you’re everything to me. More than the stars and the sun and the moon—and the Stones. And I have something for you.”

He had something for her? It was enough that he was here. She didn’t need anything else, ever.

Murmurs of surprise drifted up from the crowd, but Lukas kept talking. “A long time ago, I wrote some music, but I didn’t have any words for it. In fact, I’d never written words to a song before. But Samantha wrote me a poem and as I read the poem, I realized it fit perfectly to the music. So I used her words without asking, never thinking the song would ever be anything more than a little tune I’d sing as part of a late-night set in some smoky bar.

“Sam, ever since ‘You Don’t Know Me’ came out, I’ve put all the proceeds from it into an account.”

You could drop a Q-tip on the floor and hear it.

“Stevie, come on out here.”

The little boy ran onto the stage holding an enormous cardboard check that was almost as big as he was. His hair was slicked back and he wore a tux with a black bow tie that matched Lukas’s. He was absolutely adorable. The check had “The Palace Theater” written on it and the words “two million dollars.”

“This is half the money from the song—my half for writing the music, and I’d like to give it as a gift to the theater. I’m sorry about not giving you credit, Sam. The other

half is yours to use however you'd like."

Sam was stunned. She was having a hard time processing. Lukas had saved the theater. He'd come back for her.

Lukas took the cardboard from Stevie, and Sam bent to kiss and hug him. "We're back, Sam," Stevie said. "And now you can be my mom and Uncle Lukas can be my dad. Say you will, okay?"

"I have to ask her to marry me first," Lukas whispered to Stevie.

Lukas's gaze fixed on her, and she saw everything in his eyes. Love. And a little bit of mischief. Sam backed up a bit. I mean, there were a ton of people out there. She was never one to envision a marriage proposal that was shared by three thousand people. But Lukas grabbed her waist, halting her escape. And dropped down on one knee, handing the mic to Stevie so only Sam would hear.

"You don't have to—" she said.

"Yeah, I do." He held fast to her hand.

"Lukas, before you go any further, I have to tell you something. I was always afraid of having a risky life. But I'm willing to do what it takes to be together. If that means going out on the road, I'll do it." She paused. "Thank you for saving our theater. But I don't want the extra money. All I ever wanted was you."

Lukas looked into her eyes. "I was afraid I couldn't love you or anybody. But you taught me about love, Sam, and Stevie taught me that maybe just loving someone with all your heart is enough. I want to give us a chance, Sam, and I'll do anything for it. I'll cut down on the touring. I'll build a recording studio in the house. I'll write songs for other artists. Whatever I do, I'll do better this time if you give me a chance.

I want to build a life here with you and Stevie. I want to put him in school here, have a real home base, and I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen. I've loved you from the moment I caught your eye walking down that street by Clinker's, and I was a stupid fool to ever let you get away. Will you marry me?"

She was crying now. "I love you, too, Lukas. I always have. I was thinking Stevie and I could come with you sometimes—in summers, on vacations. We can work it out."

"Yeah," he said, pressing his forehead against hers, "we can work it out." And there, on the old stage, in front of over three thousand people, with Ed Sheeran crooning a love song behind them, and the crowd going wild, Lukas kissed her.

Lukas lifted Stevie up in his arms and all three of them hugged.

Then Stevie ran off stage, and Lukas kissed her until she really did see stars.

EPILOGUE

“I’m glad you’re engaged but when are you two going to get married?” Effie asked from her seat in the wicker rocker on Lukas’s front porch where she sat with many of the Rushford family and friends. It was nearly sunset, and the kids were running around on the lawn playing freeze tag while Ben and Tom were getting the fire pit started to roast marshmallows for s’mores. Everyone was relaxing, enjoying the good company and the fine summer evening. And celebrating Lukas’s and Sam’s engagement.

Lukas couldn’t believe the changes the past few months had brought. Or that the old house he’d bought would be brimming with people, kids’ laughter echoing though the yard. Mom and Pop Ellis would be really happy about that.

“I know you don’t approve of us living together before we’re married but at least we’re engaged,” Sam said, gently rotating her new engagement ring in the waning light.

“Wish you two were as old-fashioned as that beautiful ring,” Effie grumbled.

It was an antique European-cut stone with a filigreed setting Lukas had worked with a jeweler to create. But of course it didn’t nearly do Sam justice.

“I’m so glad you’re back to being sweet,” Sam said with a wink at Lukas.

Effie leaned over and tilted Sam’s hand so it caught the last rays of the sun. “It is a sparkler. And it’s vintage, like me.”

Lukas grinned at his beautiful fiancée. Once they'd decided to be together, they just couldn't stay apart, and they hadn't wasted a single minute. They had too much time to make up for. Sam had moved in and they'd set to making the house a home.

Despite not touring this summer, Lukas found that his new single was still skyrocketing. He'd managed to be creative about traveling, and had insisted on plenty of home time, take it or leave it, and they'd taken it. He hadn't regretted a single second.

Neither, it seemed, did Stevie. He'd finally unpacked his backpack. Maybe it was because he loved having his own room. That was painted dark gray—not black—with flames. A compromise.

"I'd marry her tomorrow," Lukas said, "but we're waiting for Stevie's adoption papers to be finalized. Then we can really celebrate."

"And once we get married I'll officially adopt Stevie, too," Sam said.

"They found your brother yet?" Meg asked Lukas.

"Actually, the PI called me yesterday. Nico's in Philadelphia. It's a matter of getting him to go to a notary and sign. I'm flying there tomorrow. And I'm hoping maybe I can get my brother into rehab this time."

"That's great news," Ben said, walking up to the porch with a plate of s'mores.

"Not until I hold the papers in my hand," Lukas said, rubbing his palms together a little nervously. They were so close, and he was holding his breath until the feat was accomplished. What if Nico said no? What if he wanted Stevie back? Anything could happen.

“Stevie seems really happy,” Olivia said. “I thought it was so cute that Stevie bought Annabelle that little necklace.”

Lukas laughed. “He made me take him to Target to pick it out.”

Brad rolled his eyes.

“It’s okay, brother,” Sam said, patting Brad on the back. “Now that you don’t have me to worry about anymore, you can focus on your own children.”

“But until then,” Brad said, “I hope you’ll let me walk you down the aisle.”

Sam hesitated just a little before she answered. “You’ve been the only father I knew growing up,” she said. “And I’d be honored.”

“You know, Sam,” Joe Malone said, “I’m officially volunteering to be Stevie’s new grandfather. If that’s okay with you two.”

“As long as that doesn’t conflict with you being my boss,” Sam said. “Thanks for giving me my job back, by the way.”

“I’m thrilled my best art teacher’s coming back,” Joe said.

“I’m your only art teacher,” she said, giving him a hug.

“And thank you for giving the gift of an art endowment to the school,” Joe said.

“You know she gave the rest of that money to the theater,” Effie said. “Since our family donated so much, I think I want a bigger portrait.”

“No way, Effie,” Sam said. “It was hard enough to get you to sit for the first one.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am

“I hope Stevie needs an honorary aunt,” Jess said, just joining the crowd.

“And uncle,” Evan added, circling his arm around Jess, who actually blushed.

“Hold on a minute,” Alethea interrupted. “I’m officially the new Ya Ya. And I’ve always felt that Lukas is the son I’ve never had.” She beamed a maternal look at Lukas. “If you want, Joseph,” she said to Joe, “you can be Papou.”

“Um, thanks, Alethea,” he said, clearing his throat, “but being Irish and all, I’ll probably just stick with Granddad.”

“Well, it’s settled, then,” Sam said, linking her arms through theirs.

Lukas got up and put his arm around Alethea. “I’m lucky to have you, Alethea.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, you’re just saying that because I bring you baklava.”

“I do love your baklava but I love you more.” He gave her a kiss on the cheek. She really was a good woman. Determined that Stevie learn all about Greek culture, too.

“Now just go and find your long-lost brothers,” she said, patting his arm. “So you can get your family back.”

“I’m actually working on that, Alethea. You’ve inspired me.”

She clasped her hands together as if in prayer. “Oh, more Greek boys. More family.

That would be a miracle!”

“Hey,” Brad said, sounding just a tad sensitive. “Don’t forget about me, Ya Yas and Granddads. I had a big influence here. I taught Sam a lot.”

“Sure did,” Sam said with a wink. “Like how to stay away from bad boys.”

“Good thing you didn’t listen,” Lukas said. Then he turned to Brad. “And may your daughters never listen either.”

“Spikonos, are you cursing me? Because if you are, I’ll wish you more daughters than you can count on one hand.”

Actually, daughters sounded good. And sons. Brothers and sisters for Stevie to grow up with.

“Now that everyone’s here, I have an announcement,” Sam said. Lukas looked over at her, startled.

“Oh my God, you’re pregnant!” Alex said.

“Nope.” Sam reached under a wicker seat cushion and pulled out a folder. “I have an update for you, Lukas. Your PI didn’t exactly find Nico, but he found your brother Roman. Roman knew where Nico was and got him to sign the papers. Congratulations. You’re officially a father.”

Lukas blinked a couple of times. It was nearly dark, and he thought he might be seeing things. He took the folder when she handed it to him, but he couldn’t speak.

Suddenly Sam was at his side, in his arms. “You did it,” she said. “Stevie’s ours now.”

“Yeah,” he said, a little dazed. “Stevie’s ours.” There was wine for everyone and congratulations all around. Lukas held Samantha tight. “Marry me tomorrow.”

She laughed. “I would, except that Meg’s ordered me this gorgeous dress and it won’t be in for six months.”

“Find another dress.” That was probably a dumb thing to say, but he was a little overwhelmed. About how he got a son and a wife—and hell, an entire big extended family. How his life was complete in ways he never would have dreamed possible. How he got another chance with the woman he never forgot.

“I love you, Sam. I’m so glad you gave me another chance. I promise I’ll do right by you this time.”

“Okay ...,” she said softly.

“Okay what?” he asked, still not letting go.

“I’ll get another dress. The sooner we’re married, the sooner I can get my name on those adoption papers.” She smiled. “Oh yeah, and I can’t wait to be your wife. I love you, too.”

“Shall we go tell our son the news?” Lukas asked Sam.

“You see? Love isn’t complicated,” Effie said to no one in particular. “It’s simple. Sometimes you just have to take a risk.”

Sam beamed at Lukas and said very quietly, “And sometimes the riskiest love turns out to be the safest one of all.”

And sometimes someone like him, who didn’t think he could ever learn to love, can hit the jackpot. “But not too safe,” he said. “I mean, safe might sound just a little

boring.”

“Somehow, I don’t think we’re going to have that problem,” Sam said.

Lukas whispered, “Well, I’m glad you took a risk on me.” He stopped to kiss her softly on the lips, and whisper something else about a promise for later meant only for her ears. Then he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and they set off into the yard to find their son.