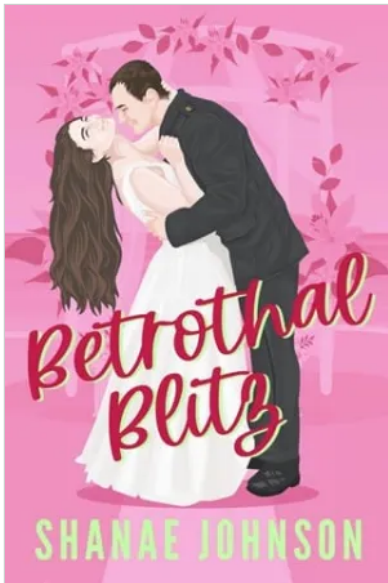




Betrothal Blitz (Marriage Mission #5)

Author: *Shanae Johnson*

Category: Romance

Description: When a high-powered attorney needs a husband to win a custody battle, a wounded warrior makes her an offer she can't refuse.

Birdy Chou doesn't believe in love. She believes in logic, case law, and five-year plans that I don't fit into.

We fell for each other once through a series of flirty, anonymous emails. She just didn't know it was me on the other end. And when we finally met face-to-face, I blew it. Badly.

Now we're on opposite sides of a custody battle, and the only way to keep a teen mom and her baby together is through a legal loophole: marriage.

I offer her a deal—marry me, win the case, walk away clean.

But I'm not pretending anymore.

This woman once trusted me with her words. Now I'm asking her to trust me with everything else. Because I'm not just trying to win a court case—I'm on a mission to make my wife fall in love with me.

Betrothal Blitz is a sizzling, sweet romance with no steam. The damsels agree to a marriage of convenience, but the heroes have no intentions of letting them out of the agreement—ever.

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CHAPTER ONE

The snow outside fell in thick, twirling flakes, soft as powdered sugar but with all the menace of an iced-over road.

Neighbors bustled past with hunched shoulders and red noses, stocking up on essentials like bread, milk, and enough hot cocoa to fuel a blizzard movie marathon.

At the corner gas station, cars lined up bumper to bumper, exhaust curling into the air like steam from a pressure cooker.

Even the most seasoned Midwesterners had that slight edge of panic in their step—the one that only came when a weather alert turned from advisory to warning.

Birdy Chou didn't even glance at the small television screen in her office or out the window at the scene playing in reality. The storm could bury the whole town under a drift the size of her ambition, and she still wouldn't budge from her desk.

She had a business to run, people depending on her, briefs that needed writing, and a deadline that had tiptoed past her like a thief.

"I'll see you in court!" Across the room, a parrot flapped its wings with a dramatic rustle and clacked its beak in warning.

When Birdy didn't look up, the parrot tilted its head, feathers puffing with indignation.

It hopped once along its wooden stand, then again, and let out a louder, “Objection, your honor!”

“Did you say something, boss?” called Trudy from her place outside Birdy's office.

“No, that was just Hearsay.”

“Do you want me to take him with me over the weekend?” Trudy's voice sounded closer to Birdy's office door.

“Motion sustained!” squawked Hearsay from his perch in the corner of her office.

Birdy finally looked up, blinking as if surfacing from the deep end of a contract clause.

Trudy stood in the doorway, bundled in a puffy maroon coat with a chunky knit scarf looped twice around her neck.

Her purse dangled from one arm, her gloves already on, and her eyes were gently expectant—the way someone looks at a boss who doesn't always know when to call it a day.

In the corner, Hearsay fluffed his vivid green and gold feathers, swiveling his head like a courtroom bailiff about to announce order. His glossy black eyes glinted with challenge as he tapped one clawed foot against the edge of his perch.

“Sign on the dotted line,” he muttered, then louder: “Your witness, prosecutor!”

Birdy sighed and leaned back in her chair, rolling the tension from her shoulders as she regarded her two most loyal officemates—one feathered, one fabulous. “Looks like you two are ready to clock out.”

Trudy smiled. “You’ve been at it since before sunrise. Even judges call recess.”

Birdy arched an eyebrow, but the tension behind it was already dissolving. She turned to Hearsay. “You want to go home with Trudy for the weekend?”

The parrot let out an enthusiastic whistle. “Sustained!”

“That’s a yes.” Trudy laughed, then took the handle of the birdcage in hand.

“Don’t bad-mouth me too much while you’re gone,” Birdy murmured.

The bird gave a contented chirp. “Objection overruled.”

“Traitor.”

Trudy adjusted her hold on the cage and gave Birdy a look—half affection, half concern. “Try to go home before the roads ice over, okay?”

“Go on, beat the storm.”

The door closed behind them. The silence in the office was immediate and absolute—except for the distant howl of wind and the muffled thrum of panic-driven foot traffic outside as the town braced for the snowstorm.

Birdy braced her hands on her desk, wishing her assistant and her bird had stayed and toughed it out with her. But not everyone was built like her.

That was something her ex-boyfriend—her only boyfriend—had told her point blank. Junior year of college, standing outside the library with a breakup latte in one hand and his “It’s not me, it’s you” speech in the other.

“You’re just... hard, Birdy. There’s no softness. No give. I need someone who’ll lean on me.”

She hadn’t understood the complaint then. Still didn’t. Why wait for someone to lean on when you could stand on your own?

Even as a kid, she’d rolled her eyes at fairy tales. Damsels tied to train tracks, locked in towers, curled up crying in pumpkin patches. There was always a sword nearby. Always a way out. She’d never understood why they didn’t ever pick it up themselves.

Birdy had neither the time nor the temperament for snow flurries or sappy feelings. She did, however, have an inbox full of government forms, a laptop that hummed like a tired librarian, and a very real problem.

She hadn’t missed a statute of limitations or flubbed a court motion—God forbid. No, she’d forgotten something far more insidious: the biennial statement.

A simple, no-frills filing the state required every other year to confirm that her PLLC was still alive and well. It didn’t even require legal finesse—just a click, a fee, and a calendar reminder she’d clearly ignored.

And now? There was a message on her desk on government letterhead. This form will not be processed until the following business cycle.

Translation: she’d missed the window, would have to wait another thirty days for her practice to be back in good standing, and in the meantime, her lease, her insurance, and her bank account could all be at risk.

Birdy hadn’t lost a case. But she might lose professional credibility. And possibly her mind.

She clicked through the state's business portal, trying to find a backdoor, a loophole, anything. The site loaded with all the charm of a DMV on a Monday.

Filing window closed. This entity is now listed as Delinquent – Not in Good Standing. Next eligible filing window: thirty days from now.

She stared at the screen like it had personally insulted her. Which, in a way, it had.

There was no phone number to call. No override button. Just a grayed-out "Submit" button and a chirpy message that read:

Need assistance? Our help desk is open Monday–Thursday, 10am–5pm.

It was Friday. At 4:47 p.m.

Birdy inhaled through her nose. The office smelled like burned coffee and lemon disinfectant. Not exactly inspiring—but then again, inspiration wasn't her priority. Legitimacy was.

She picked up her phone and dialed the number for the State Business Licensing Department. It rang. And rang. And rang.

"Seriously?" she muttered. She still had ten minutes left before 5 p.m. "Government workers are supposed to be essential."

A glance out the window showed the snow coming down in a white sheet.

She hung up and redialed. Same result. The little plastic snow globe on her desk—an ironic gift from her younger sister, depicting the town's gazebo in a dreamy, glitter-snow haze—mocked her with every shake of her leg under the desk.

She opened the department's website again and saw something new. It was a page that read: Need Help? Chat with an Agent 24/7.

Her fingers pounced on the keyboard like a tiger on a mouse.

User: I missed the deadline for filing my license application. I need to know if there's a workaround or an appeal process.

Sharp. Clipped. All business. That was Birdy Chou. Why waste words on small talk when she could get right to the point?

She rubbed the back of her neck and leaned back in her chair, which squeaked in protest. The heating vent above her head blasted hot air. Outside, the snow continued to fall in thick, earnest flakes. The kind that whispered of cocoa and long conversations.

But Birdy didn't do whispers. She did checkboxes.

As she waited for a reply, she felt the first tendrils of panic slide through her ribs like unwelcome houseguests.

This business—her firm, her clients—was the culmination of years of hard work, sacrifice, and putting her personal life on permanent pause.

She didn't do this for prestige. She did it for the women who came through her doors, needing someone who wouldn't flinch.

Divorce. Custody. Protective orders. Most of her clients were women looking for protection from men who swore they loved them—until they didn't.

Some had accused Birdy of having a bias against men, but Birdy didn't deal in

feelings. She dealt in facts. And the facts were: men were more often the aggressors, women more often the victims, and she had no patience for gaslighting.

Not in court. Not in life.

Not from the ex-boyfriend who once sulked because she tried to pay for dinner or pouted when she changed a tire faster than he could find the number for Triple A. And certainly not from the man who dumped her after she disarmed a mugger—while he stood frozen beside her on the sidewalk.

If she didn't get this license updated, she wouldn't just lose the office she'd leased or the website she'd built—she'd lose her ability to stand between her clients and the people who wanted to silence them.

She'd lose control. And Birdy Chou did not lose control.

The cursor on the chat window blinked.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

And then... a reply.

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CHAPTER TWO

The hum of the fluorescent lights overhead had long since blended into the rhythm of the State Business Department's closing song—a quiet, constant buzz that never quite disappeared.

The last printer down the hall had gone quiet twenty minutes ago.

Voices had thinned to whispers, then to nothing.

Desks sat abandoned in neat rows, chairs tucked in, inboxes emptied for the day.

Outside, the world was turning pale, soft grays and icy blues coating the edges of the government building as the snowstorm began to press down on the town.

A different kind of silence. Heavy, watchful. Still.

Paul Winters liked this time best.

All day, he dealt with other people's problems—families fractured, tempers flaring, tiny lives caught in the crosshairs of adult decisions.

He carried it willingly, gladly. That's what he'd signed up for.

But when five o'clock struck and the bullpen cleared out, the building exhaled, and Paul finally got a minute to breathe in his own air.

Not somebody else's grief. Not their mistakes.

Just the hum of the lights, the soft tick of the radiator, and the steady, unbothered beat of his own thoughts.

He liked fixing things. It's what made him good at his job.

Both his day job as a social worker and the times he did a little moonlighting as tech support.

But it was at this moment—right here—when he felt the return of something quieter, deeper.

Like a mechanic wiping the grease from his hands after rebuilding an engine, he could finally pause and think.

He took another sip of lukewarm coffee and leaned back in his chair, cracking his neck. The forecast was calling for a major snowstorm. When the chat message pinged in, he leaned forward to engage it.

User: I missed the deadline for filing my license application. I need to know if there's a workaround or an appeal process.

Sharp. Direct. The kind of tone that usually came from someone used to getting answers fast—and getting them right.

Though Paul didn't have a name, just User, he'd been in social work long enough to know the subtle patterns people left in their words. The cadence of control. The undercurrent of urgency beneath the confidence. This wasn't someone floundering—it was someone fighting to stay in control.

That drive to push through red tape, even when the rules were clearly posted? That could've been a man.

But it was also someone used to being the one with answers. The one who couldn't afford mistakes. That pointed to a woman. One who always sat in the front of the class. One who studied longer so she'd have the answers before the teacher asked the question. Because she was so desperate to be seen.

Paul could be wrong. It might be a man. But he'd bet his next cup of coffee it was a woman.

Not because she was panicking. Because she wasn't. Because she was powering through it, one clipped sentence at a time, like the whole thing was just another task to handle before lunch.

He could feel the tension in her typing. Not fragile. Not frantic. Just... fierce. It made him want to help her more.

Agent: No worries—this form has tripped up tougher folks than you. Other than this I hope you're having a fine day today.

Little bubbles popped up to show that she was typing.

Three bouncing dots in a pale blue chat box that glowed softly against the rest of the dark dashboard.

A timestamp ticked quietly in the corner.

Paul's inbox sat behind the chat window, half-obsured, with unopened messages waiting in dull, bureaucratic rows.

User: I really don't have time for small talk. Can I just send you the file and you take it from there?

Yup, definitely a woman. A high-powered career woman. His favorite kind.

Paul had been raised by a stay-at-home dad.

His mother was in the military. The captain's clipped orders and tight hugs had given Paul and his brothers security growing up while his father's home-cooked meals and coaching at every sport had given him order.

It should have been the other way around, but it wasn't. The fact that his mother carried a firearm somehow enhanced her maternal energy.

The notion that it was his father changing diapers and organizing playdates made his dad look like the toughest guy around to Paul and his brothers—his friends too.

As a retired military professional himself, Paul had dealt with too many soldiers fresh out of combat zones, too many teenagers in crisis to take a tone personally.

The truth was, panic never looked the way people expected it to.

It didn't always come with tears or trembling.

Sometimes, it came dressed up in perfection and precision and a string of carefully worded demands.

What calmed people down wasn't cold professionalism—it was connection. It was trust. His fingers moved quickly over the keyboard.

Agent: I'd love to help, but I can't take attachments through this system. That said, if

you've got all your documents ready and labeled correctly, I can temporarily reopen the submission portal so you can upload. Shouldn't take more than five minutes.

The typing bubble appeared instantly. The cursor blinked. The dots danced.

User: I have the documents ready. Should I backspace?

Backspace? Oh, she meant hit the return button.

Agent: No, do not hit the return button or you might lose me. Open another tab using this link. That way, I can keep walking you through it.

User: I still have that window open. What's next? Upload the document?

Agent: Just a second. I have to move a few mountains out of your way first.

She started typing again, ignoring the seconds he'd asked her to wait. The bubbles started and stopped on her end while he went into the system to reopen the pathway she needed. The waiting must be killing her.

Control freaks rarely asked for help. And when they did, it came out sharp and sideways. Like an edge hiding a tight coil of anxiety underneath. Paul could practically feel her fingers hovering over the keyboard, her jaw clenched as if sheer force of will could make technology bend for her.

Agent: Just a few more minutes while the system refreshes. We could sit here quietly, or you could tell me about your plans for this weekend.

User: My plans this weekend are to work.

Agent: Not a snow bunny?

Once again, she typed. Then the bubbles stopped. Then started again to indicate that she was typing.

Paul imagined her brain short-circuiting from his chattiness in the chat. No, this wasn't so much a chat anymore. He was flirting. Why was he flirting with her?

User: I find snow highly inefficient. It slows down everything. Everyone romanticizes it. And it usually ends in someone slipping on black ice.

Paul let out a soft laugh. She wasn't giving him warmth. But she wasn't keeping quiet, either. The typing bubble flickered back on.

User: Also, snow bunnies are fluffy and useless. I am neither.

His grin widened. Yeah. She was flirting back. Her version of flirting just came wrapped in snark and steel.

Paul leaned back in his chair, suddenly aware of how much he was enjoying this. The system finished updating. She could upload the document now.

User: I'm sure you want to get out of the office soon. You're working overtime now. It's after 5pm.

Agent: I'm being fairly compensated, and I love my work. You must love yours as well if you're working late and into an oncoming snowstorm.

User: I do love my work. Do

There were no ellipses after that last word. But there were more bubbles. Then she completed her sentence.

User: Do you like your work?

Agent: I like helping people, especially young people. I never know who I'm helping in this chat. Don't know if you're an old person or even a good person.

User: I'm an awesome person.

Agent: I bet. I'm awesome too. Or I will be. I'm up for a promotion and then I'll be helping even more people in need.

He watched the little dots blink. No response yet, but he pictured her—whoever she was—blinking back at the screen, maybe adjusting her posture in that way anxious people did, like they just remembered they have a spine.

A reply popped up. Still brusque, but there was a crack in the ice.

User: Didn't expect humor. Or help this late on a Friday. But I'll take them both.

He chuckled, despite himself. Ah, there she was. Her guard was down. Unfortunately, the window was up for her to resubmit her form.

Agent: I've got that window opened for you. Once you're in, click "Start New Submission" and choose Biennial Statement from the dropdown.

User: Found it. Shocking. The site actually did what it said it would.

Agent: We live to defy expectations.

User: Who designed this portal, by the way? Someone with a personal vendetta against logic?

Agent: Pretty sure it was the same guy who writes IKEA manuals. All hex keys and no instructions.

User: That tracks. At least IKEA gives you tiny cartoon men who look like they're trying.

Agent: True. Our site just gives you existential dread and a spinning wheel.

User: Look at that—progress and depression. What a combo.

Agent: Don't worry, you're almost through both.

User: That almost sounded like optimism.

Agent: Careful. I have that disease and I'm warned it's contagious.

There was something about her wit—sharp, fast, but with a weight behind it. Like she knew how to wield it for armor but didn't always want to.

Paul felt his chest loosen. His shoulders settle. He liked this woman. Whoever she was. He could've chatted with her for hours.

User: Okay... it's uploading. Finally.

Agent: Smooth as a freshly paved county road.

User: That was oddly specific.

Agent: I'm a man of oddly specific talents.

The typing bubble appeared again. Paul felt it linger, then disappear. Then come back

again.

User: I just wanted to say thank you. This probably looked like a routine panic over a missed form, but it's not. This filing keeps my firm in good standing. And the work I do matters. To the women I represent. To the families I fight for. So thank you for not brushing me off.

Something in Paul's chest gave an unexpected ache, like thawing ice. He'd pegged her as a control freak when the chat first opened, the kind of overachiever who needed everything perfect and everyone to move at her pace.

She'd let the mask slip. Just a little. Just enough to show him the fire under the polish.

Instead of recoiling, he found himself leaning in.

He wanted to tell her she didn't have to carry all that weight alone. That someone could hold that space with her—shoulder some of it, if she'd let them.

Agent: My mom used to say: The strong don't show up to be heroes. They show up because someone has to.

User: She sounds like someone worth listening to.

Agent: She is.

User: Thank you, again. Really.

Agent: Anytime. I mean that.

User: Maybe in another life you'd be the one needing the legal help.

Agent: I don't plan to break any laws anytime soon. But I'll take your number down in case I decide to get wild in the next chat room.

This might have been slightly inappropriate. Slightly. Entirely inappropriate would've been if he'd looked at the sheet she'd uploaded to determine who she was. He hadn't. That would have been a direct violation.

But asking for her number via chat? Gray area.

Back in the chat, the bubbles were bubbling. The cursor was blinking. And then—nothing.

The screen glitched. The spinning beach ball of death appeared as snow battered the window. The lights blinked out. Then the screen blinked out. A second later, the power came back on. The computer took a second to reboot. When it did, there was a message on the screen.

Connection Lost. Chat Session Ended.

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CHAPTER THREE

The lights flickered once, twice—then surrendered with a final, breathy hum. The overhead glow of Birdy's office vanished, plunging the space into shadow.

“Oh, no no no no—don’t you dare.” But her laptop screen blinked, sputtered, and went black.

Birdy sat frozen for a beat, staring at the blank screen like she could will it back to life.

The hum of the small, personal space heater she used to keep her toes warm inside her pumps died.

The old radiator, which was in charge of the upper atmosphere of the room, gave a half-hearted groan.

Outside, the snow, which had been a whisper against the window, raised its voice.

It sent its flakes against the windows in steady, sideways sheets.

The streetlamps had gone out. The bakery across the square was dark. So was the diner.

Street-wide power outage. Maybe even county-wide.

Birdy turned back to her desk. Her heart was thumping wildly. Not because of the

blackout but because of what she'd just lost: the chat.

She'd been having a good time in that online square box. Not just a polite-customer-service kind of good time but a real conversation. With someone who made her laugh. Someone who calmed her down without making her feel weak.

Birdy Chou did not make a habit of connecting with people. She connected with cases. Arguments. Strategy. But that chat had felt... easy.

And now it was gone.

She grabbed her phone. She still had a couple of bars. She opened a web browser to load the business department site. It lagged.

She hit refresh. It lagged again.

Her signal had dropped to one flickering bar. Useless.

She stood there in the dim office, the smell of cold air seeping in through the edges of the windowpanes, and finally let herself feel it.

Disappointment.

He was gone. Whoever he was. She didn't even have a name—just a screen alias and a few smart lines of text. And now he'd disappear like the rest of them. Like every man who'd ever backed away from her once he realized she didn't need him.

She'd heard it all over the years: Too opinionated. Too successful. Too sharp. Too much.

Men said they wanted a strong woman... until they met one.

Birdy had tried to find herself a partner outside of her business. Over the years, she'd given dating a shot. Every time, it ended the same. Intimidated , they said. Or overwhelmed . Like being good at her job, knowing her worth, and changing her own tires were somehow character flaws.

So she'd stopped trying. She didn't need a man. She had her practice, her family, her purpose.

Still... she'd liked chatting with that agent. She hadn't expected to, but she had.

Birdy glanced at the door. What could she do? Drive to the state office and demand to see every man who'd worked the chat line during the last half hour?

What if he was some eighty-year-old retiree with a tech-savvy streak and a fondness for witty banter?

She smirked at that thought. Dating older men wasn't new for Chou women.

Her dad had had ten years on her mother.

Even her baby sister had married an older man.

Not that he'd stuck around after the vows were spoken.

More likely? Her virtual agent was married. Or halfway across the state. Or never coming back online again.

Birdy sighed and let her shoulders drop. She had to forget him. He'd helped her save her business, and for that, she'd be eternally grateful. But anything beyond that? That belonged in fantasy.

He could be her onetime unicorn. Her magical little mystery with a keyboard and a perfectly timed sense of humor.

She closed her laptop out of habit, even though it was dark. Grabbed her coat. Slipped her phone into her pocket and headed out of the office.

She braced herself for the storm she'd find outside. It was time to move on. Back to the real world. Back to the world where Birdy Chou didn't believe in love stories. Just well-written contracts—with no loopholes.

Birdy tugged her coat tighter as she headed toward the lobby. Her boots echoed softly on the tile, the fluorescent lights above flickering in protest as if the building itself was ready to call it a night. She paused at the glass doors to the exit.

A girl stood just inside, framed by the swirling snow behind her. Young. Maybe seventeen or eighteen. Shoulders hunched, hoodie pulled up, jeans stiff from the cold. Her cheeks were red, raw from wind or nerves—it was hard to tell which.

Birdy's first instinct was that the girl was a runaway. Or homeless. But then her eyes dropped to the girl's shoes.

They were scuffed but solid, broken in but not broken down.

The soles showed wear, not neglect. The laces were intact, tied neatly.

These weren't the shoes of someone scamming for sympathy.

And they weren't the mismatched, threadbare footwear of someone who had to take what they could get from a shelter bin.

These shoes had a story but not one of drifting or deceit.

They belonged to someone who used to have a routine. Who'd walked to school. Maybe to a part-time job. Someone whose life had structure... until it didn't.

Maybe she'd gotten it wrong. Maybe the girl was waiting for someone. But everyone but Birdy had gone home to wait out the snowstorm.

"Sorry, hon. The office is closed. I'm locking up."

The girl didn't move. Just stood there, hands jammed into her pockets, as if bracing for more than the weather.

"Are you a lawyer?" Her voice was thin, wary. Like someone who'd practiced asking questions but gotten too many wrong answers.

Birdy gave a nod. "I am."

"I just have a question. It's for a class project."

The girl was a terrible liar, but Birdy would play along. "Shoot."

"It's about... if someone leaves a baby. Like, leaves them somewhere safe. But the authorities now have the kid. Can they... can they go back and get the baby?"

Birdy's lawyer brain clicked on. Safe Haven laws. Timelines. Custody statutes. But her gut was doing something else entirely. Turning. Tightening.

"Depends," Birdy said carefully. "There are rules. Deadlines. A lot depends on how it was done."

"Oh. Okay. Well, thanks. For the answer. For my project."

“Would you like to take my card? In case you have any more questions for your project?”

The business card was matte black with clean, minimalist lines—no glossy finish, no unnecessary embellishments.

Her name was embossed in elegant silver script across the top—professional but not fussy.

In the bottom right corner, a subtle watermark of a phoenix rising—her personal touch.

A quiet nod to the kind of law she practiced. Rebuilding lives from ashes.

The girl looked at the card. Then reached for it. Birdy saw the old bruises on her wrists. They could've been self-inflicted. Or they could be signs of abuse.

Her eyes lifted, meeting Birdy's. There was a confession there. Birdy waited patiently for the words to come out.

“I left my baby,” the girl said in a rush, like if she said it fast enough, it wouldn't stick to her. “But I want her back now.”

Birdy exhaled slowly, watching the way the girl's arms crossed tighter. “The baby's father, is he involved?”

The girl didn't answer. Didn't have to. Her silence was louder than anything.

“Did he hurt you?”

Still nothing. Just the tightening of her shoulders. The flicker in her eyes.

“I thought he loved me,” the girl whispered. “I thought... we were going to raise our baby together.”

This was why Birdy didn't believe in fairy tales. Love was just a story people tell themselves. A bedtime tale for adults who should know better.

“Come inside. You’re not going to get very far in this snowstorm, anyway.”

The girl’s head lifted slightly, unsure. She hesitated for half a second longer before stepping inside, out of the cold. Once they were inside, Birdy locked the door behind them and turned the lights back on.

CHAPTER FOUR

Connection Lost. Chat Session Ended.

The hum of the backup generator kicked on with a growl.

That was followed by the soft flick-flick-flick of the overhead lights struggling to reassert themselves.

Paul blinked and then shielded his eyes as the dim office came back to life in fluorescent hues, like someone had lit a hundred electric candles around the room.

With everything else coming back online, maybe he could get her back, too. He tapped the keyboard. The computer took a while to reboot. He tapped again, but it didn't go any faster. Finally, the glow of the monitor flickered back to life like a pulse returning. Reconnecting...

Session Expired Due to Inactivity.

Paul stared at the screen, willing it to undo itself. As if maybe if he just refreshed one more time, she'd still be there—waiting, typing, needing him. He opened the browser history, tried to retrace his steps the way he had with her form.

Nothing.

The state's system wasn't built for sentiment, just record-keeping. The chat was anonymous by design. Discreet. Secure. Impersonal.

Except it hadn't felt that way.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard, but there was nothing to type. No name. No face. Just the trace of her voice in his head and the way her last message had clung to him.

He clicked on the transcript. Read it again. The words meant something. She meant something.

He minimized the file but didn't close it. Just in case.

The lights flickered again, the storm outside reminding him it wasn't done. But here inside the government building, the generator hummed steadily, like an artificial heartbeat. He was lucky to still have power. She probably didn't.

He refreshed the chat again. Nothing.

Then he waited. And waited. A minute. Five. Ten.

The screen stayed empty. The box was silent.

She was gone.

And really, why would she come back? He'd fixed the issue. Answered her question. Solved her problem.

She'd been a little sharp around the edges. Not in a way that repelled him. If anything, he liked that she pushed back.

There was something about her—whoever she was—that stuck with him.

The way she tried so hard to stay in control, even while her anxiety hummed beneath every clipped message.

She reminded him of the clients he'd worked with, the soldiers he'd coached through panic attacks, the teenagers who said they were fine but couldn't stop bouncing their knees.

She reminded him of people who didn't need rescuing...

just a reason to believe someone would stand beside them.

She needed a steady hand. A little trust. Someone who could say I've got you and mean it.

His hand hovered over the mouse, considering. Her name would be on the forms when they came in. He could put a face to the fire in her words.

But no. That wasn't right. That wasn't fair. That wasn't him.

He wasn't a stalker. He was a show-up-when-it-counts kind of guy. If it was meant to be, they'd find each other again. Stranger things had happened.

He glanced at the clock. It was after midnight. His last shift in this building. On Monday, he'd be off to a new office, a new badge, a new set of lives to step into and try to help.

Paul leaned back in his chair, ran a hand through his hair, and took one last look at the blank chat window. Then he clicked the red "X" in the corner.

Goodbye, mystery woman.

He stood, stretched, and grabbed his coat from the back of the chair. The storm outside painted the windows white, but something inside him had settled. The kind of stillness that came after solving a puzzle. Except this one had a missing piece he couldn't stop thinking about.

By the time he made it back to his apartment, the snow had thickened into silence.

Streets were hushed, the city muted under a soft, relentless white.

He spent the weekend snowed in—no ringing phones, no office chaos, just him, the hum of the radiator, and a dozen cardboard boxes waiting to be filled.

Packing wasn't sentimental. He'd never stayed long enough anywhere for it to be.

Each file he tucked away, every plaque or coffee-stained notebook, marked the end of something familiar.

He was headed to a small town where he could make more of a difference.

Where kids slipped through the cracks less often.

Where every name on a folder meant more than just a caseload—it meant someone he might actually get to help in person.

From the driver's seat in his car, he looked out the window. The storm had lost its steam over the weekend. The streets were salted, the city slowly waking. And Paul Winters was starting over. He just hadn't expected to already miss someone he'd never even met.

The wipers struggled against the windshield, clearing away snow that fell like confetti from a sky determined to throw one last winter tantrum. Paul leaned forward

over the steering wheel, eyes squinting through the slush, jaw tight with concentration.

So much for a calm first day.

The roads into the small town were half-plowed at best, the kind that offered just enough traction to fool you before trying to spin you into a ditch.

His coffee had gone cold halfway through the drive, and his knuckles ached from clutching the wheel too long.

But when he finally saw the welcome sign, hand-painted and flanked by snowbanks, something inside him unclenched.

He parked behind the modest red-brick building with a hand-lettered Mayor's Office plaque over the door, then pulled his coat tighter as the wind bit at his ears. The air smelled like wood smoke and fresh snow—clean, bright, and a little bit like hope.

Inside, the warmth hit him in a rush—along with the unmistakable, high-pitched warble of a baby. A chubby-cheeked little girl with the kind of lungs that could file a complaint three counties over voiced her protest.

The mayor—broad-shouldered, easy grin—was bouncing the baby against his chest with the kind of practiced rhythm that came from instinct, not instruction.

Beside him stood a woman who looked like she was born to wear confidence and cozy sweaters.

She had a ringless hand tucked into the mayor's arm, but by the looks he kept sneaking her way, it wouldn't stay that way for long.

“Paul Winters?” the mayor asked with a smile. “We’re real glad to have you.”

“Thanks, Mayor Carter.”

“This is my fiancée, Bunny Chou.”

“I haven’t said yes yet,” said the woman by his side. But the way she grinned up at him told Paul all he needed to know about their impending nuptials.

“This the baby I heard about?” said Paul.

“Yep,” said the mayor. “Found her right before the snow hit. Just sitting on the front steps like someone special dropped her off with a prayer.”

The baby let out a satisfied gurgle, and Paul found himself smiling in return. “She’s beautiful. Any word about the parents?”

“Not a thing,” the mayor replied, gaze soft as he looked down at the baby girl. “Town’s buzzing, but no leads yet. Folks think she’s ours.”

Paul glanced between the two adults standing before him and the baby held between them.

It wasn’t just the fact that the child didn’t look like either of them—not the same race, not the same features.

It was the way they held her: fully, openly, like the little girl was a guest they wanted to stay.

But it was clear she hadn’t started her life here.

Paul stepped closer, brushing a finger against the baby's fist. She grasped it, tiny and determined. "She couldn't land in better arms."

How could a mother just walk away from this? Then again, maybe she hadn't wanted to. Maybe she'd had no choice. Maybe the father didn't even know.

Paul's own childhood had been a quilt of warm dinners and backyard soccer games, his father's voice the sound of steady encouragement. He couldn't imagine growing up without that. He wouldn't let this little girl start her life feeling disposable.

"I don't know how you got here, sweetheart, but I promise I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you end up right where you're meant to be."

CHAPTER FIVE

The storm had passed, leaving behind a glittering crust of snow that clung to rooftops and softened the edges of the town.

Birdy's boots crunched over the walkway as she made her way up the front steps of her grandmother's house.

Meiying Chou's three-story was the kind of creaky old bungalow that always smelled like ginger, black tea, and freshly laundered curtains.

Inside, the warmth was immediate and welcoming.

A kettle hissed on the stove. Faint strains of a radio drama played from the kitchen.

The actors spoke in N?inai's native tongue.

Birdy had learned Chinese, like all her siblings and cousins.

But they'd fallen out of practice over the years. Birdy especially.

Her K-drama obsession hadn't helped—too much swooning in Hangul, not enough Mandarin or Cantonese. She furrowed her brow, trying to follow along with the radio drama, but the words twisted in her brain. Was the heroine proclaiming her undying love or announcing she'd poisoned someone's soup?

Birdy winced as the actors started shouting. Probably the soup.

“Birdy, close the door. You’ll let the cold in with your opinions.”

Birdy smiled in spite of herself. She pulled the door shut and slipped off her coat, draping it over the back of a chair as she stepped into the kitchen.

Her grandmother came into the room, all five feet of her wrapped in a quilted vest over a thick floral blouse. Her silver hair was twisted into its usual bun, and her bright eyes crinkled as she reached for a steaming pot of tea.

“I brought your will,” Birdy said, tapping the folder she’d tucked under her arm.

“I brought almond cookies,” N?inai replied. “One of us has our priorities straight.”

They sat at the little table by the window, the world outside cast in morning light and snowdrifts. Birdy flipped open the folder and began explaining a few updates, pointing out the necessary initials, the phrasing around estate transfer.

“I’ve left space here,” she said, tapping a clause, “if you want to put in one of those legacy conditions, like Yéyé did. You know—about your grandchildren getting married before they can inherit.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” N?inai snorted softly into her cup. “All my granddaughters are either engaged or married. Except you.”

“That’s right. I’m the last holdout.” And she had every intention of staying that way. Birdy’s life was exactly as she liked it.

Her law practice was thriving. Her name was spoken with a mixture of respect and wariness around town.

She had her sisters, her cases, her sense of justice.

Her bed stayed made. Her fridge stayed organized.

She didn't have to negotiate her schedule or share her pillows or make space for someone else's toothpaste in her medicine cabinet.

Marriage? That was chaos. A man would come in with all his needs—emotional, physical, psychological—and expect her to bend. To pour energy into bolstering his ego, supporting his dreams, softening her edges.

No, thank you.

She'd worked too hard to become the woman she was. Letting someone in would mean dimming her light just to survive the strain of compromise. And for what? For date nights she didn't have time for or arguments over who left dishes in the sink?

No, her peace came from being alone. Her power came from never having to explain herself.

Uninvited thoughts drifted to the guy on the chat. He'd been a voice behind a screen. A government employee with a dry humor and a patient keyboard. He hadn't asked her to bend. He'd met her energy, word for word.

Birdy shook her head and reached for her teacup. It had just been a conversation. A flicker of connection in the cold. Nothing worth rewriting her entire worldview over.

So how come she hadn't closed the now defunct chat tab?

"You've always been the strongest," her grandmother was saying. "But strong girls still need love."

"I have love," Birdy said. "I have my sisters. I have my cousins. I have you."

N?inai gave her a look—one of those wise, not-buying-it looks that only grandmothers and Buddhist monks could master. “You need a man in your life.”

Birdy rolled her eyes. “I am financially secure. I can take out my own trash and change my own oil. What do I need a man for?”

Her grandmother waved a hand. “Not for the money. Not for the chores. For the emotions. You’ve always been too hard around the edges. You need someone you can be soft with.”

Birdy opened her mouth to argue, then stopped. Because she had been soft with the government agent. She’d let herself be vulnerable. But that didn’t count, right? It was anonymous. Safe. He couldn’t see her, didn’t know what she looked like, how tall she stood, how quick she was to speak her mind.

He didn’t know how many men had flinched from her brightness—how many had told her she was “too much” when all she’d done was be herself. He wouldn’t like her in real life. He’d back off. Just like all the others. She sipped her tea to chase the thought away.

N?inai, clearly sensing her mood, leaned back in her chair and said casually, “Did you hear Bunny and the mayor have a baby now?”

Birdy blinked. “What?”

“Someone left a baby on the doorstep of the mayor’s office during the storm. Whole town is talking about it. Of course, people think it’s theirs. You know how people are.”

Birdy sat straighter. Her legal instincts sharpened instantly. A baby. Abandoned. During the storm.

Could it be...?

Out the window, the world was still and quiet, like the snow had hushed the town into holding its breath. If it was her client's baby, things were about to get a lot more complicated.

CHAPTER SIX

Paul turned the wheel of his SUV with one hand.

The heater blasted against the cold, creeping in through the windows.

He passed the firehouse, the post office, and the hardware store, where someone had already shoveled a path to the front door.

This town was the kind of place that knew how to handle snow—and hopefully everything else.

The morning had been a blur of paperwork and conflicting emotions.

On one desk sat the file for the abandoned baby—healthy, thriving, with no known parent stepping forward.

On the other was a father begging to see his daughter, blocked at every turn by a mother who'd weaponized the system against her ex.

So many people still believed mothers had all the rights, all the say. Paul had seen too many good men pushed aside. Too many children caught in the middle.

Kids didn't need perfect parents. They needed present ones. Stable ones. The ones who showed up.

Placing both hands on the wheel, he pulled into the lot behind the mayor's office. His

tires crunched over packed snow as he came to a stop. The SUV rocked slightly as he shifted into park and killed the engine.

For now, his focus was the abandoned baby. The one left in a blanket on the mayor's front steps, tucked into a bassinet like someone couldn't bear to look as they walked away.

Paul exhaled through his nose, the air fogging briefly in the cold. He wondered—not for the first time—what kind of mother could leave her child behind. And also, what kind of father didn't even know they had one out there?

Maybe the baby's mother had been scared. Alone. Maybe she thought she was doing the right thing.

Paul looked up at the City Hall building. Warm light glowed through the windows. If they couldn't locate the parents and no placement came through, he hoped the mayor and Bunny would agree to temporary custody. The baby would be safe with the couple. Loved. It would be a good home. A good life.

Paul couldn't shake the feeling that somewhere out there, a man had no idea a tiny person existed—someone with his eyes or his smile or his laugh. And that? That felt wrong.

He reached for the file beside him on the passenger seat and stepped out into the cold. The wind nipped at the back of his neck as he made his way toward the building. He glanced down at the file again, at the name they'd assigned the baby for now. Baby Jane Doe. Not for long, he hoped.

As he reached the steps, he ran one hand down his coat, brushed the snow from his shoulders, and squared himself for the conversation ahead. This wasn't just about checkboxes or court orders. This was about beginnings. About who showed up—and

who chose to stay.

Paul pushed open the door to the mayor's office. The front desk staff greeted him with polite nods, but their eyes darted quickly to the closed office door at the end of the hallway. The mayor's door was shut but not closed. Voices leaked through—one calm, one sharp. Definitely an argument.

The heat of the conversation hit him first—followed closely by the blast of actual warmth.

The mayor's office was toasty, a little too toasty, as if someone had cranked the radiator out of pure spite.

Inside, the mayor stood behind his desk, face calm but tight.

Bunny, his fiancée and no doubt the real reason this place ran like clockwork, stood beside him with her arms crossed and her chin tilted defiantly.

Opposite them stood a woman. Her tone was brisk, her hair was tightly twisted into a sleek bun, and her blazer had sharper lines than a legal summons.

"I understand you've become attached, but that doesn't give you the legal right to keep someone else's child."

Paul's first instinct was irritation. His second was curiosity. His third—somewhere between his chest and gut—was wariness.

Could this be the baby's mother? Upon second glance, he shot that idea down.

There was nothing matronly about this woman.

She was all hard lines, precise language, and professional detachment.

It didn't track. Then she tossed out a phrase: "parental relinquishment without formal termination of rights."

She's a lawyer . Even worse—she was the mother's lawyer. The one who'd abandoned this baby.

Paul's hackles went up. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to stop you there."

The woman turned, one eyebrow raised in icy challenge. Up close, she was striking—high cheekbones, sharp eyes, lips pursed like she had no time for pleasantries. Beautiful, yes—but about as warm as a courthouse hallway in January.

"And you are?" she asked.

"Paul Winters. I'm the caseworker assigned to this child."

"Perfect," she said, folding her arms. "Then you can help facilitate the baby's return to her mother."

"Actually, no. I can't. Until the state determines if this was a legal Safe Haven drop or abandonment, custody remains with the state. That's me."

The lawyer narrowed her eyes. "The baby was left somewhere safe."

"Not registered, not documented, no contact info provided. That's abandonment by legal definition until proven otherwise."

"The mother is remorseful and wants her child back. That should matter."

“And the father?” Paul asked coolly. “Has he been notified?”

Her nostrils flared. Paul's gaze tracked the movement.

“Can I get his contact information?”

She pursed her lips. Was she withholding the information? But then she answered in a clipped tone. “That’s privileged.”

“It’s also required,” Paul said evenly. “Parental rights don’t just vanish. If the father’s identity is known, we’ll need his consent. Otherwise, the court could consider this kidnapping.”

“I’m not giving you his name.”

“Then you’re obstructing the process that could reunite this child with her actual family.”

Outside the slightly ajar office door, Paul caught movement. A few heads bobbed around the frosted glass panels of the door. The entire office was pretending to work while clearly tuning in. Phones lifted to ears as cover for listening. Someone dropped a pen and never picked it back up.

Paul shifted his stance and lowered his voice slightly. “With all due respect, you can’t bully your way through this process. This child has rights. So does the father, whether you care to acknowledge that or not.”

Her eyes snapped to his, full of fire. “I’m not bullying. I’m advocating. There’s a difference.”

“And you crossed that line the second you walked in here demanding custody without

the paperwork to back it up.”

The lawyer squared her shoulders, chin tilted up. “Don't play with me. I'll build a case that's going to bury you in motions, objections, and hearings until you choke on your own red tape.”

The air in the mayor's office felt charged, like a thunderclap had just struck indoors and the static hadn't settled yet.

Paul stood tall, steadying his breath even as the lawyer spun on her heel and stormed toward the door.

But something in him—something tight and twisted—snapped.

Whatever it was, it made him speak. Sharper than he meant to. Louder than he should have.

“You know,” he called after her, “this whole act might work in the courtroom—but out here? In the real world? No one's looking for a hero who swings like a hammer and expects people to thank you for the bruises.”

She stopped. The entire hallway outside the office fell deathly silent. She turned her head slightly, just enough for him to see the stillness in her posture. Not rage. Not indignation. Just still.

His words had landed. Hard.

“People like you don't intimidate me,” he added, his voice low and cold. “You just make everything harder than it needs to be.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The air in the mayor's office was stifling, thick with tension and far too much heat for a building that old on a day in this weather.

The radiator clanked in the corner like it was taking a step back from the heat being produced by the human bodies at odds.

Birdy stood in the center of it all, spine straight, jaw locked, eyes narrowed at the broad-shouldered man in the state-issued parka.

Paul Winters. Social worker. Self-appointed gatekeeper. And, apparently, licensed mansplainer.

He was calling her a bully? She was advocating. Protecting.

That baby had a name. And a mother. And rights. And he was acting like Birdy was the problem.

Her fingers curled into fists at her sides.

Her palms itched with the familiar heat of fury—the kind that started in her chest and spread down her arms whenever she whiffed the scent of injustice.

She ignored the stares from the staff outside the glass door, the warning tilt of Bunny's head as Paul Winters kept going.

“You don’t intimidate me,” he said coldly. “You just make everything harder than it needs to be.”

And there it was. The knife in her gut. Birdy blinked once. Just once.

The heat dropped. A different kind of ache settled beneath her collarbone. Her ribs constricted. Not because he was wrong. But because he’d said exactly what so many others had only implied.

You’re too much. Too smart. Too strong. Too sharp-tongued and steel-backed. Too successful to be soft. Too loud to be loved.

She felt the eyes on her. Some sympathetic, some smug. Some already dialing this up for the next round of town gossip.

Bunny winced, just slightly. Her sister's reaction to this scene somehow made it worse. Or maybe it was the sight of Teddy Carter standing behind her, ready to be the support Bunny needed. Birdy knew her sister would come to her aid if she needed it. She didn't need it.

Birdy lifted her chin. This wasn’t about her. This was about her client. A frightened young girl with faded bruises on her wrists. Her head ducked. That jumpy flinch. The fact that she hadn’t named the father. Not out of shame—but fear.

So no. Birdy wasn’t going to let this puffed-up, emotionally restrained, law-by-the-letter social worker derail her. Not when she could smell the storm still clinging to her coat. Not when her voice was one of the few weapons she knew how to use to protect the defenseless.

She stepped in closer, going toe to toe with this Mr. Winters.

“You file your motion, and I’ll file mine.

Let the court decide who's protecting this child and who's just pretending to. But make no mistake, Mr. Winters—my client may not have walked into this system the right way, but she’s here now. And I won’t let her be silenced just because she didn’t ask permission. ”

Mr. Winter's jaw worked, like he was chewing on what to say next. Then he said it. “The strong don’t show up to be heroes. They show up because someone has to.”

Her breath caught. Everything in her body stilled. The noise of the hallway fell away. The thudding pulse in her ears quieted.

That line. She knew that line. The words curled like smoke through her memory, warm and familiar and painfully unexpected.

He had said that. Chat guy. The agent from the business office. The one who made her laugh. The one who made her feel seen.

She stared at Paul Winters. Really looked—past the glare and the square jaw and the tightly wound disapproval. Past the frown. Could it be...?

“Chat agent?”

“What?” Paul looked shocked. Then rattled. He stepped back.

There was something there. In his eyes. A flicker. Recognition.

“It’s you,” she said, a little stronger now. “Isn’t it?”

He didn't say something stupid like ‘Who?’ He stepped back but not in denial. Not

yet.

She saw it. The dawning realization. The puzzle pieces sliding into place. He looked at her like she was a memory coming into focus. His mouth opened, then closed again.

For the first time in her life, Birdy kept quiet. She wanted his words. While she waited for them, she took him in anew.

His dark hair was a little tousled, like he'd run a frustrated hand through it more than once today.

His jaw was strong, shadowed with the kind of scruff that should've looked unkempt but somehow made him maddeningly handsome.

His shoulders were broad, the kind that filled out a button-down in a way that made a woman forget her entire vocabulary.

There were faint lines at the corners of his mouth.

Crinkles etched there not from scowling but from smiling. A lot.

He was frowning now. At her. But those lines told the truth. He was the kind of man who laughed often. Who smiled easily. He hadn't smiled at her once since he'd walked into this office.

But he had smiled at her in the chat. She was sure of it.

And just like that—Birdy let herself hope.

Maybe... maybe she wasn't the last lonely Chou. Maybe she wasn't too much, too

sharp, too strong. Maybe she was just enough—for someone. For him.

She could see it in the softness that flashed across his face, just for a moment. Like he remembered her laugh even though they hadn't spoken face to face. Like he remembered the feeling of that night, that chat. She watched his eyes shift. Not cold now, but curious. Warm.

And then, like a light switch flipped—Gone.

Paul shook his head slowly, retreating back into the lines he'd drawn in the sand. "No," he said. "No. You can't be her."

Birdy's stomach dropped. The words hit like an open palm to the chest. He looked away, then back again. There was nothing gentle in his gaze now. Just walls.

"Even if you are, it doesn't matter. I could never..."

He let the sentence trail off. Birdy didn't need to hear him finish it. She knew where it would've gone.

She felt the room tilt. Not literally. The balance shifted like she was on a Tilt-a-Whirl or on a not-quite-frozen lake when the ground underneath turns out to be thinner than you thought. A fragile shell over a deeper hurt.

Outside the mayor's office, someone sucked in a breath. The crowd, pretending to work, had caught every word. Bunny took a step forward, but at a glance from her sister, she halted.

Birdy didn't move. She couldn't. Everything inside her wanted to vanish. To crumple. But she didn't get that luxury.

Instead, she straightened her shoulders. Pulled her armor back on and prepared to fire. If he couldn't handle her—all of her—then she wasn't going to dim herself to be more palatable.

“This is about a young mother trying to get her child back. And I won't let you use your personal bias to keep them apart.”

Paul gave her a look—one she'd seen before. From dates. From men who liked her until they thought she made them feel small. It was a look that said dim down or get out.

Birdy was done dimming. “I'll file everything I can. I'll bury you in motions if I have to.”

He sighed. The sigh was a confirmation, like she'd done exactly what he'd expected of someone like her.

“Do your worst,” he said, walking toward the door. “But I'm not handing that baby over until I know she's going somewhere safe.”

Then he was gone. Just like that. No warmth. No apology. No second look.

Birdy stood there, chest burning but her face cool and unreadable. She wouldn't cry. Not here. Not ever again over a man who couldn't see her shine without squinting.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The baby in Paul's arms was content, gumming the edge of his badge lanyard and making soft, hiccupping sounds that felt louder than they were in the otherwise quiet space.

Paul bounced her gently, shifting his weight from foot to foot as the pediatrician scrolled through his notes on a tablet with one hand and palpated the baby's belly with the other.

Dr. Mensah was all jawline and arrogance with a white coat as crisp as his opinions.

His stethoscope dangled around his neck like a badge of superiority, catching the light each time he moved.

He lifted the baby's onesie, pressed the cold diaphragm of the scope to her chest, and listened with exaggerated patience.

"Good lungs," he muttered, like it surprised him.

Then, casually—too casually—he added, "It figures the Chous would be involved in this mess somehow."

Paul blinked. "I'm sorry?"

Mensah glanced up, smirking like he was letting Paul in on a town secret. He moved to check the baby's reflexes, tapping gently along her knees. She kicked reflexively,

and he gave a satisfied nod before returning to his tablet.

“Birdy Chou. She’s the lawyer for the girl who abandoned this baby, right?”

Paul didn’t answer.

“Of course she is. She’s always playing the savior, especially when there’s drama involved. Whole family’s like that—think they run this town.”

Paul’s jaw ticked. He wasn’t about to disagree with the doctor’s assessment of Birdy Chou. He’d learned the lawyer’s name after returning to his office to find the beginnings of the paperwork she’d promised. But Paul had seen nothing but kindness from Bunny Chou.

He shifted the baby in his arms, using the adjustment to keep his tone calm. “You know them personally?”

Dr. Mensah gave a dry chuckle, peeling off his gloves with a dramatic snap. “Dated Jules Chou for two years. Until she dumped me for a soldier, of all people.”

“I’m a vet,” Paul said coolly.

That shut the doctor up for a beat.

The baby cooed softly, nuzzling against Paul’s chest as if choosing sides. From the corner, the nurse— Maya , her badge read—gave Paul a quick glance, her expression somewhere between oh no and here we go again .

Then she smiled sweetly and said, “Well, the Chous sure keep busy helping people. Jules’ bakery donates to the food pantry every week. Jacqui’s the spicy chef behind Chow Town, and she’s constantly sponsoring the Little League. Plus, half her staff

are kids from the high school votech program.”

Two of Paul's brothers had opted to go to the alternative vocational-technical high school. His brother Pete got his mechanical skills in the program, while his brother Phil had mastered carpentry there.

Mensah snorted. “Yeah, and Birdy bullies people in court like it’s a competitive sport.”

The nurse didn’t miss a beat. “She’s done a lot of pro bono work for the women’s shelter.

Helped that one mom get her kids back from a bad situation last fall.

And she teaches those free legal workshops every spring.

My cousin went to one. Birdy Chou can be intimidating, but she makes this town safer. ”

Paul shifted his gaze to the nurse, then back to the baby in his arms. The infant blinked up at him, all big eyes and trust. Her little fingers curled around his thumb with complete faith that he had her.

Birdy. Pro bono work. After-school programs. Women’s shelters. That wasn’t the woman he’d seen in the mayor’s office—was it?

His shoulders tensed. Had he gotten it wrong?

He looked down at the baby again. She was still holding his thumb, like she didn’t care about court documents or accusations or messy misunderstandings. She just wanted to feel safe.

And Birdy—despite all her steel and sharp edges—had clearly built her career doing just that: making people safe.

Paul swallowed hard, the weight of his earlier words pressing hot behind his ribs. You can't be her, he'd said. And yet...

By the time Paul stepped out of the hospital, the sun had dipped behind the trees, and the sky was the color of ash. The cold nipped at his cheeks. His breath puffed in front of him as he secured the baby in the carrier and began the slow walk toward his car.

"Well, I'll be damned. Winters?"

Paul turned at the familiar voice. A tall man in a Carhartt jacket and a knit beanie stood grinning at him like he'd won the lottery.

"Fish?" Paul blinked. "Fish Pike?"

"Last I checked," the man said with a laugh, coming forward to clap Paul on the shoulder. "I heard we had a new social worker in town, but I didn't think it was you. What's with the plus one?"

Paul smiled wryly and jiggled the baby carrier. "Long story."

Fish squinted into the carrier. "That's a baby."

"She came with the job."

Fish nodded knowingly. "Come on. You look like you could use a drink. We'll head to the Grub. It's just around the block."

"I have a baby. I can't take a baby into a bar."

“Nobody’ll mind.”

The Grub was warm the second they stepped inside. It was like walking into a hug that smelled like barbecue sauce, cedarwood, and slow-roasted heaven. The baby dozed peacefully in the carrier as Fish led him through a crowd of cheerful regulars and toward the bar.

“Jed!” Fish called. “Got a soldier here in need of brisket.”

Behind the counter, a burly man with forearms like tree trunks and a sly grin looked up from garnishing a plate with something green and artistic.

“Welcome to Grits & Grub.”

“Paul Winters, meet Jed Winchester,” Fish said. “World-famous chef. Also known as Jami Chou’s other half.”

Paul’s eyes widened. “Jami Chou? As in the food critic?”

Jed smirked. “Was. Now she’s the boss around here. I just make what she tells me.”

“I’ve read her stuff for years,” Paul said, a little stunned. “She’s brilliant.”

“That’s why I married her. Want to taste her food?”

Paul nodded, settling into a seat.

Fish leaned closer with a grin. “You might have noticed this town has a few Chous in it, and most of them cook. Jami cooks here at Jed’s. Jules, my wife, runs the sugar free bakery. I know that sounds like an oxymoron.”

“The sugar free bakery? Or the your wife part?”

Fish smirked and went on. “Jacqui is head chef at Chow Town. I worked there for a couple of years before managing to get a ring on Jules' finger.”

“Is that all?” Paul asked hesitantly. “That all the Chou women who cook?”

“Bunny Chou makes a mean tea. Her baby sister Kitten is a painter. And then there's Birdy who...”

Paul stiffened slightly. Fish didn't miss it.

“You met Birdy, huh?”

“We had a... conversation,” Paul said carefully.

Fish let out a low whistle. “Man, I hope you were wearing protective gear.”

“Not exactly. “

Fish chuckled and took a sip of the beer the bartender set in front of him. “She's tough, yeah, but she's solid. Has to be. Half the women in town owe her their peace of mind.”

“You talking about Birdy?” Jed walked past again, balancing a tray. “That woman would take a bat to your front door if it meant protecting a client. She's scary—but the good kind.”

Paul looked around the room. Everyone seemed to be smiling. At ease. The kind of small-town comfort that wrapped around your shoulders like a blanket. And it would appear the Chous had a lot to do with that. Including Birdy.

CHAPTER NINE

Outside the frosted window, the snow had slowed to a gentle drift, flakes settling softly like secrets too heavy to stay in the sky. Inside, the silence buzzed like static in her ears.

Birdy sat behind her desk, her back straight, shoulders locked into the kind of posture that said, *You will not break me*. But the screen in front of her was doing its best to try. Her laptop still sat open to the chat window.

The strong don't show up to be heroes. They show up because someone has to.

She hadn't closed the browser. She couldn't. It was like some part of her still clung to the idea that he might reappear, that the words on the screen could overwrite what he'd said—what he really thought of her.

You can't be her.

The words echoed like footsteps down a long, empty hallway in her chest. She'd heard variations of that her whole life, hadn't she? Too much. Too blunt. Too smart. Too sharp.

Too everything.

"Objection," Hearsay insisted.

"Thanks, buddy."

The bird ducked his head a couple of times, ruffled his feathers like he was still stewing about being ignored, then grabbed a sunflower seed shell in his beak and flung it with precision into the corner of his cage.

He fluffed up, muttered something unintelligible, and stabbed his beak into the bottom of his seed bowl like he meant to break through it.

Birdy watched the little tantrum with narrowed eyes. “Yeah, I feel that.”

A fresh surge of heat bloomed behind her ribs.

Revenge. She could bury him in filings. Drown him in legal briefs and procedures so thick he’d never crawl out.

She could cite every clause, every loophole, every precedent that would make him choke on his smug assumptions.

She could show him exactly how dangerous a woman like her could be when she was underestimated.

With one final breath through her nose, she clicked the little X in the corner of the chat window and watched the screen go blank.

A knock came at the door. It creaked open behind her.

“What was that?” came Bunny’s voice, soft but laced with big-sister bite.

“What was what?”

Bunny stepped into the office, pulling the door shut behind her. She crossed the room and leaned against the bookshelf, arms folded.

“At the mayor’s office. You and the social worker. You two looked like you were in a Telenovela.”

Birdy gave a dry huff. “I hardly know him.”

Bunny did the annoying older sister thing where she simply crossed her arms and waited.

“He helped me fill out a form.”

Bunny raised an eyebrow. “Must’ve been a very important form.”

Birdy did the annoying middle sister thing and didn’t answer. Instead, she moved toward the electric kettle and poured hot water into a mug like it gave her something else to feel besides humiliated.

But Birdy wasn't good at this game, the one where she kept secrets from her sisters. “We met online.”

“Like on a dating app?”

“No. On a government forms app.”

“Well... that's a new way to date.”

“We're not dating.”

But I'll take your number down in case I decide to get wild in the next chat room.

“He called me difficult. Intimidating. Said I wasn’t who he thought I was. He got a glimpse behind the armor and ran the other way. So... lesson learned.”

There was a beat of silence behind her.

“He didn’t run,” Bunny said softly. “He flinched. And that’s different.”

Birdy turned back, mug in hand, steam rising between them like a fog. “Same result either way. I’m done hoping people will like me better once they get to know me. They never do.”

Bunny stepped forward like she might say more—but then stopped. Her big sister knew Birdy inside and out. Knew her looks, her huffs. She knew that tone. Knew when Birdy’s defenses had locked into place like a vault door.

Bunny gave a small nod, reached out, and squeezed her sister’s hand. “Okay. But just so you know—he didn’t look like someone who hated what he saw. He looked like someone who saw something real and didn’t know what to do with it.”

Birdy didn’t reply. What more could she say? The evidence was right there in front of her. Or rather, the lack of it was. Paul hadn’t come to apologize or explain or... anything.

After a few more hand squeezes and hugs and ‘his losses’ from Bunny, her sister let herself out. Birdy stood alone in the quiet again, the mug warm in her palms, the silence loud with the words she couldn’t say. She wasn’t going to let herself fall again. Not for anyone.

Just as she was about to settle back in her chair, she heard another knock on the door. Where was Trudi? Looked like her first line of defense was taking a long lunch.

The knock came again. It was too light to be anything but a teenager’s. The client. The reason this mattered.

“Come in,” Birdy said gently.

They sat across from each other, the distance between them smaller than before but still edged with silence. Birdy inhaled slowly, then let it out. Beverly did the same, except she held her breath a moment too long.

“If I’m going to help you,” Birdy said, her voice quieter than usual, “I need the truth. About the father. About why you’re really doing this.”

Beverly stared at her hands. Her fingers twisted the zipper pull of her coat. The silence stretched. Birdy softened her voice even more, dropping all pretense of courtroom steel.

“You’re not the only one who thought love was supposed to mean something.”

At that, Beverly’s chin trembled. Her breath hitched once before the tears spilled over. No sound, just tears. Silent and endless.

Birdy didn’t move. She didn’t reach across the desk.

Didn’t offer a hug or tissues or a ‘his loss.’ What she did was stayed present.

And waited. Because Paul Winters was right about one thing: Birdy didn’t have to show up.

But she did because she was strong when other people were not.

If Birdy couldn’t have a hero of her own, she wasn’t going to let anything or anyone stop her from being this girl and her baby’s savior.

CHAPTER TEN

The baby was asleep again, her little head resting against Paul's chest, one fist curled up near her chin like she'd passed out mid-argument. Her breath was warm against his collarbone, rhythmic and soft. For the first time that day, the world felt... quiet.

The mayor's house came into view. It was a modest two-story brick place with a porch swing and warm light glowing behind the curtains. Smoke puffed gently from the chimney. The scent of burning wood hit Paul just as he reached the front steps.

He knocked lightly, mindful of the baby's sleep. The door opened almost immediately.

"Back already? I figured they'd have you at the bar until late." Teddy Carter stepped aside and gestured Paul inside.

"The bar was educational," Paul said as he stepped in. "Small towns know everything about everyone."

The warmth of the house wrapped around him—cinnamon, fireplace, and something faintly citrusy. Probably Bunny's doing. She had the vibe of someone who ran both a household and a calendar with color-coded labels.

"She do okay?" the mayor asked, nodding toward the baby.

"She's good," Paul said, adjusting the carrier as they moved toward the living room. "Out cold after the car ride. Must be a future road tripper."

The mayor chuckled and led him toward the playpen in the corner of the room. Paul gently laid the baby inside, tucking the tiny blanket around her as she gave a half-hearted sigh in her sleep.

They both stood for a long moment, watching her.

“What happens next?” Teddy asked.

Paul didn’t answer right away. He rubbed the back of his neck, jaw tight.

“I investigate,” he said eventually. “Figure out if the mother’s fit to have her back. If this was abandonment or a desperate mistake.”

The mayor gave him a sidelong glance. “And what if it’s the second?”

Paul crossed his arms. “Then we reunite them. If it’s the first... we don’t.”

“But what’s best for the baby?” the mayor asked quietly.

Paul exhaled, long and tired. “That’s the part I’m trying to figure out.”

He looked down at the sleeping infant, tiny and unaware of the chaos swirling around her.

“Right now,” he added, “the best place for her is here. With you and your girlfriend.”

“Fiancée,” Teddy corrected proudly. “Bunny Chou is my fiancée now.”

Paul raised a brow. “That was fast.”

“Not really,” the mayor said, shrugging like it was the most obvious thing in the

world. “Everyone knows if you manage to nab one of the Chou women, you lock it down before they get away. They’re quick. And they don’t come back around twice.”

Paul let out a half-laugh, but it caught in his throat. His mind flicked to Birdy. To the way her voice had trembled just slightly before she turned it into steel. To the way she’d looked at him like she might’ve let him in—right before he slammed the door to his heart in her face.

He cleared his throat. “Well, I’ll have the first interview with the mother scheduled soon. We’ll go from there.”

The mayor gave a nod, not pushing further. Just steady. Paul started for the door. He stepped out into the cold, heart heavier than when he’d walked in—and yet somehow lighter too.

The night had settled soft and quiet over the town, wrapping the streets in a hush broken only by the occasional crunch of salt under his tires.

Paul drove slowly, more from thought than caution.

His headlights cut a pale yellow beam through the darkness as he replayed the conversation with the mayor over and over in his head.

Lock them down before they get away.

He hadn’t even touched the idea of locking Birdy down. He’d practically pushed her off the cliff. And now? Now he couldn’t stop thinking about her.

He pulled into the driveway of the small rental house he was staying in. The porch lights turned on at his approach. They glowed like a distant campfire. Inside, the house was quiet except for the ticking clock in the kitchen and the slow whir of the

heater kicking on.

Paul dropped his keys into the bowl by the door, kicked off his boots, and padded across the creaky hardwood to his desk. He sank into the chair. And sat.

The only light came from the small desk lamp—warm and gold—and the faint glow of his laptop screen as it hummed to life. He hadn't meant to open it. Not really. But here he was.

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the card that had come with the first batch of paperwork. Birdy Chou, Esq.

What kind of name was Birdy? And for that matter, her sister Bunny? Did they have a brother Bat?

The font on her card was simple. Elegant. Embossed in clean silver ink that practically dared you to underestimate her.

His thumb brushed over her name, the paper soft beneath his callused fingers. The corner was slightly bent—he must've worried it between his fingers more times than he realized.

Paul set it beside the keyboard and stared at the screen. Opened a blank message. His fingers hovered over the keys.

What would he even say?

Sorry I humiliated you in front of half the town?

He thought back to the online chat. To how open she'd been. The dry wit, the intelligence, the way she'd thanked him for helping her. He remembered how her

tone had shifted when she talked about the work she did, about what it meant to her firm. The weight in her words. The hope.

He remembered the way she'd looked at him in the mayor's office—hurt flashing across her face before she locked it down behind all that courtroom steel.

She hadn't come in swinging. He'd made her raise her hackles. Because he'd assumed the worst.

He leaned back in his chair, exhaling hard through his nose, guilt settling into the hollows of his chest like a cold wind creeping under the door. The cursor blinked on the screen, patient and pulsing.

He typed:

Birdy,

Then stopped. Deleted.

Typed again:

Ms. Chou,

Deleted that, too.

This wasn't about professionalism. And it wasn't about formality. This was about humility. And maybe—just maybe—a first step. His fingers hovered again.

Then he typed:

I owe you an apology.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kitty stood at her easel, brush moving in slow, delicate strokes, her head tilted just slightly as she studied the canvas like it had whispered a secret to her.

Birdy sat on the old corduroy loveseat. Her legs were curled under her.

She half-watched her sister. The other half of her was lost in thought.

Her sister's town house was warm from the old radiator humming in the corner.

The only other sound was the occasional swish of brush on canvas and the distant tick of a kitchen clock.

She and Kitty had been relatively quiet children, Birdy lost in a book while Kitty scratch-scratching in a sketchbook. They could sit in companionable silence all day long without exchanging words and call it a good day.

“You’re painting foxes again,” Birdy said, taking a sip of her now-lukewarm tea.

“I like foxes. They’re clever. Observant.”

Birdy stood and walked closer, the mug cradled in her hands.

The painting was nearly complete—a snowy forest scene, hushed and dreamy, with two foxes in the center.

The vixen was vivid: reddish brown, alert, watching something just beyond the frame.

The silver fox beside her was already moving, his head turned slightly away, as if he hadn't noticed her waiting there.

Kitty's brush moved gently over the canvas, adding a soft shimmer of white at the silver fox's paws, like snow disturbed by motion.

Her face was calm, but there was a tenderness in her expression, something wistful in the way she lingered over each stroke.

No, that wasn't wistfulness. It was longing.

Birdy didn't say anything. She just watched her sister—watched how Kitty's hand slowed when it passed over the silver fox's form. Watched how her eyes softened as if she were memorizing him with every line.

The vixen wasn't chasing. She was just there. Waiting. Hoping. Holding her place in the snow while the one she loved wandered away from her again.

That was Kitty and her husband. They'd married soon after Kitty had graduated high school, and then he'd been deployed.

Then another deployment. Birdy didn't think he'd come back even once.

She wasn't sure if he ever would. But Kitty kept sitting here by the window painting him in flowers and foxes.

Birdy knew she could never endure what her sister was going through. Waiting like that? Staying soft like that? It required a faith she no longer possessed.

“So you and the social worker?” Kitty let the question hang in the air.

Birdy wasn't about to answer, but she wanted to set the record straight. “Are going to war—yes.”

“Hmmm? Sounds like you were at some kind of peace accords before that.”

“He helped me with an IT problem is all.” Birdy shrugged, downing the last of her tea.

“Did he untangle your wires or something?”

“Grow up, kitten.”

Kitty turned around to face her sister. The smirk she'd been wearing before melted from her face as she looked at Birdy seriously. “When was your last date?”

“Define date.”

“Someone who makes your stomach flutter and your guard slip.”

Birdy rolled her eyes. “That's never happened.”

Except it had happened. But not on a date. In an online chatroom.

Kitty set down her brush and came close to her sister. “You keep pretending you don't want companionship, but you do. You always have, Bird Brain.”

Kitty had never even dated. She'd married straight out of high school. Her only kiss, so far as Birdy knew, had been at the wedding ceremony. She and her new husband hadn't even spent their wedding night together.

“You’re still waiting for him,” Birdy said, her voice a little quieter. “Even now.”

“That’s not the same as being alone.”

Birdy opened her mouth to argue, but her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out, not expecting anything important. But there it was.

From: Paul Winters

Subject: I owe you an apology.

Birdy stared at the screen. The world didn’t tilt or freeze or spin—it just paused. Like even time held its breath, eager to know what she was going to do next.

“Who’s that?”

Birdy held the phone away from her sister. She wasn’t ready to open it or open up about her relationship with Paul Winters. Not yet.

“It’s just work.”

Birdy sat back down on the corduroy loveseat. Her phone’s interface was dark in her palm. The snow picked up again outside Kitty’s studio window. It swirled in delicate eddies past the glass, making a pretty picture. Neither sister noticed.

Birdy’s thumb pressed the HOME button to bring the phone back to light. Her index finger hovered over the email from Paul. She didn’t want to read it. She really didn’t want to care what it said.

But she tapped it open anyway.

Birdy,

I want to acknowledge my tone earlier. It was unprofessional, and for that I apologize. I hope we can move forward constructively—for the good of the case. Let's focus on what matters.

– Paul Winters

That was it? That was all? No joke? No philosophical bent?

She read it again. Slower this time.

His words were the same. No warmth. No sincerity. Not even a you were right, I was wrong. Just a chilly little nugget of courtesy wrapped in legalese. A classic non-apology, the kind designed to absolve the sender without actually admitting any guilt.

Her stomach twisted—not from heartbreak but from heat. From the sting of irritation creeping up her spine. She'd wanted him to apologize. But she'd wanted it to be real. She'd wanted his words to matter, like they had in the chat. She'd wanted his words to fix what was broken.

He'd treated her like a courtroom opponent instead of a human being. And now he wanted to play nice? No, thank you.

She exhaled sharply through her nose and locked the phone with a snap.

“Was it him?” Kitty asked, peeking over from the easel.

Birdy stood and smoothed her hands down her sweater. “It was.”

Kitty wiped her paintbrush clean, eyes twinkling with curiosity. “And?”

“It was nothing.” Birdy grabbed her coat from the peg. “Just a weak excuse for an apology. All professionalism and no substance.”

“And yet you look like a woman about to make a rash decision.”

Birdy grabbed her purse. “I am. I’m going on a date.”

Kitty blinked. “You’re going on that date?” Then she squealed—an actual full-body squeal—as she dropped her paint rag and bounded over. “Oh my gosh! Okay—okay—you pull up the dating app and I’ll find you something to wear!”

“I have clothes in my own closet.”

“Clothes that scream you’re a shark. You’ll wear something of mine. Something that says confident but soft. Smart but fun. Should we go jewel tones? You look great in jewel tones.”

Birdy let her sister drag her toward the tiny spare closet Kitty used for canvas storage—now apparently a makeshift wardrobe. She wasn’t smiling, not exactly, but she wasn’t frowning anymore either.

Paul Winters could keep his cold, careful apology. Birdy had better things to do than wait around for a man who couldn’t handle her shine. Tonight, she was going to remind herself that she still could turn heads—even if it was just to prove a point.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:21 am

CHAPTER TWELVE

Paul tapped his pen against his desk in a slow rhythm as he stared at the screen in front of him. The inbox hadn't changed in the last two hours. He refreshed it again.

Nothing.

His gaze lingered on the top of the thread labeled RE: Apology.

It was still unacknowledged. He should've sent her a text message.

Then at least he could tell if she'd opened and read it.

But he'd debated texting Birdy for a full hour before deciding that email was the best course.

He doubted that decision now. Just like he was doubting the snap judgment he'd made when he met her face to face.

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his thumb along his jaw. Maybe she hadn't seen the email. Maybe she'd seen it and deleted it. Maybe?—

A knock on the door interrupted the spiral. One of the assistants poked her head in.

“You've got a walk-in. Said it's urgent.”

“Give me a sec.” Paul stood, stretching the kink from his back.

He walked into the lobby just as a woman in a tailored coat was ushering a teenage boy down the hall.

The boy's shoulders were hunched, his hands shoved into the pockets of his hoodie.

He didn't look up. The woman, who Paul assumed was his mother as their features favored, had a jaw that could slice through granite.

"Mr. Winters?" she asked briskly. "We need a private space to talk."

"This way." Paul gestured toward the nearest conference room.

As they moved down the corridor, Paul watched the boy out of the corner of his eye.

Perhaps the kid was using, and the mom wanted help?

No signs of twitchy withdrawal. No discoloration in the eyes.

His gait wasn't unsteady. Shoes were clean.

Nails weren't bitten to the quick or chewed ragged.

Not the typical look of a kid using—but looks could be deceiving.

Still... no, that wasn't it.

The boy flinched—barely—but enough for Paul to notice when his mother placed a hand on his shoulder to guide him through the door. It was subtle. Almost nothing. But Paul had been trained to catch almost nothing.

Could be signs of abuse. Or just regular teenage broodiness. Hard to say. He'd have

to listen first. Watch. Ask questions. Let the pieces come together on their own.

He pulled the door shut behind them and turned with a practiced, reassuring smile. Inside, he motioned for them to sit, but the mother stayed standing, practically vibrating with nerves—or fury. Hard to tell with this kind.

The boy slumped into the chair without a word.

“I want to know,” the mother said, setting her purse on the table like a weapon, “if my son’s name has come up in the situation with the baby left at the mayor’s office.”

Paul blinked, his heart giving a slow thud. “Excuse me?”

“You know what I’m talking about. If that girl is saying my son is the father, she’s lying. And I will sue her, and anyone else involved, for defamation if that gets out.”

Paul turned to the boy. The kid still hadn’t said a word. He was staring at the grain of the table like it might open and swallow him whole.

“And your son's name is?”

The mother opened her mouth. Then thought better of it. “You tell me what names have been mentioned.”

“No names have been shared with anyone,” Paul said carefully. “And even if they had, I couldn’t confirm or deny any involvement. That’s protected information. Confidential.”

The mother huffed, pacing once along the window. “So she hasn’t said anything?”

Paul folded his hands together. “As I said, no information can be released. Especially

without a formal process.”

That seemed to settle her. A little. She spun on her heel and reached for her son’s arm. “Come on. We’re done here.”

The boy stood slowly, still not speaking, still not meeting Paul’s eyes. But there was something there. In the slump of his shoulders. In the way he let himself be led instead of pushing back.

Guilt? Fear?

The door clicked closed behind them. Paul wanted to follow but for what? He couldn't force them to give them information. Couldn't force them to talk.

He returned to his office. At his desk, he opened his inbox and hit refresh again. Still nothing from Birdy.

But now there was something else. A knot tightening in his gut that he had found the baby's father. That kid was the father. He knew it. Not because the teen's mother had said it—because the kid hadn’t. Sometimes silence screamed the loudest.

Paul stood quickly, the chair legs scraping against the linoleum. He snatched up his coat and keys and moved through the front doors of Social Services without a word to anyone.

The cold slapped him in the face the moment he stepped outside. It was crisp and biting, the kind that stung your nostrils and left snowflakes melting in your lashes. His boots crunched across the salted sidewalk as he scanned the lot.

There they were. The boy and his mother were at her car—arguing now, hands flying, voices too low to carry but sharp enough in tone to cut through the air. Paul slowed

his steps, staying just far enough away not to be seen.

The kid turned, shoulders stiff with frustration. He stalked down the sidewalk, head down, fists jammed into his hoodie pockets. The mother climbed into the driver's seat and pulled away in a huff.

Paul hesitated only a second, then headed after the boy. The kid walked fast. Not like he knew he was being followed. More like he was trying to avoid his mother in the car. He took paths that wound into a park and then emerged onto a side street.

Paul warred between keeping his distance and approaching the kid.

He saw his chance when they rounded a corner where the street dipped into the cozy little café strip downtown.

Snow-dusted sidewalks, glowing streetlamps, and storefront lights flickered with warmth behind foggy glass.

Paul was almost in reaching distance of the kid.

And that's when he saw her.

She was seated at a bistro table just inside Brew & Biscuit. Her cheeks were pink from the cold. Her hair was down around her shoulders in soft, wind-kissed waves. She was smiling. Not her courtroom smile. A real one. Soft. Maybe a little shy.

Across from her sat a man. He was tall. Clean-cut. Button-down shirt under a pea coat. The kind of guy who probably knew the best wine pairings for pasta and whose mother still mailed him socks at Christmas.

Paul stopped walking. The boy kept going, disappearing around another corner. Paul

didn't follow.

He couldn't. His feet were frozen. But not from the cold.

Birdy was leaning forward now, listening, laughing at something the guy said. Her eyes were bright. Her posture relaxed.

She looked... happy.

His fingers flexed at his sides. The ten digits felt useless without something to hold on to. Without something to do.

Was this why she hadn't answered his email?

Was she moving on?

Had she already moved on?

He hadn't been prepared for this.

He hadn't realized, not until right now, just how much he wanted her to look at him like that—with happiness in her eyes.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Birdy's cheeks hurt from holding on to the fake smile.

She was miserable, and it had only been fifteen minutes.

She shifted in the small wrought-iron chair, pressing her palms into the soft wool of her coat where it pooled in her lap.

She took another sip of her lavender latte, hoping the warm, floral taste would soothe her nerves.

It didn't.

Across from her, David—no, Daniel—was recounting his latest business deal. Or maybe it was his real estate portfolio. Something with numbers and very little heart.

“You went to Yale, huh?” he said, pausing to adjust his sleeve like he wanted her to notice his watch. “That’s impressive. Surprised you ended up back here. Seems like a woman like you would have gone big city, big firm.”

Birdy gave a tight smile. “I did. Then I realized I wanted to help people. Not just shuffle money between the already rich.”

He blinked, then gave a little laugh, like she'd told a joke he didn't quite get. “Right. That whole ‘purpose-driven’ thing. Still, must be tough, running a practice on your own.”

“Actually, I have three paralegals and a waitlist for another hire later this year.”

He blinked again. There it was—that flicker. The moment when her accomplishments stopped being admirable and started being threatening. She’d seen it a hundred times.

“You must really love being the boss,” he said with a tight smile.

Birdy tilted her head. “I do.”

Silence stretched between them like a frayed wire. She looked past him, toward the street, willing the check to appear—or lightning to strike. Either would be fine.

Instead, she saw Paul.

He stood just outside the window, half-shadowed under the glow of a hanging café lamp, snow clinging to his jacket collar, his hair mussed from the wind.

His eyes were on her. And for a second—just a second—everything slowed.

The sounds of clinking cups, low conversation, even Daniel droning on about his CrossFit schedule faded.

Paul Winters was a big guy. Broad through the shoulders, tall enough to cast a long shadow, solid enough to make a woman feel like nothing could touch her if she stood behind him.

He had the kind of chest that looked like it had absorbed a fair share of sobs and secrets.

Biceps that hinted at protection but also gave the impression they’d make an excellent pillow if a woman just needed to rest her head and breathe for a while.

There were crinkles at the corners of his eyes, just like the ones at the edges of his mouth. Proof that when he smiled, it was with his whole face. That was rare. That was dangerous.

Her gaze drifted to his hands, where his long fingers were curled loosely into his palms. Those fingers had typed the most beautiful, funny, maddeningly soothing words to her in that anonymous chat box. Words that had calmed her chaos and made her feel seen.

And now here he was. Real. Tangible. Looking at her like maybe he already knew who she was.

She held Paul's gaze. His expression was unreadable. But his eyes... they weren't cold. Not this time. They were quiet. Soft.

Then he blinked. Turned. And walked away.

Birdy's heart lurched—so fast and unexpected she wasn't sure she hadn't had a heart attack. She had to blink herself back into the moment.

“Anyway,” Daniel was saying, clearly unaware that she hadn't heard a word, “I just think a woman with your résumé must be really intense in a relationship.”

Birdy turned back to him, her voice steady but laced with cool steel. “Only for men who can't handle it.”

He laughed again, nervously this time. “Guess I walked into that one.”

Birdy was stirring the foam of her latte with a bamboo stick, wondering how to extricate herself from this disaster of a date.

She was in a dress of Kitty's that was too tight.

She was wearing makeup that was irritating her eyes.

She was thinking that she just wanted to go home and read her book when she heard his voice.

“You look stunning.” Paul Winters stood at the edge of her table, snow still dusting his shoulders, his coat slightly unzipped like he’d left wherever he was in a rush.

She set down her mug with surgical precision and tilted her head. “Surprised I clean up well?”

He didn’t rise to the bait. Instead, he glanced toward her open tote bag on the bench beside her. “You’re reading *The Justice Paradox* ?”

Birdy blinked. “I am.”

“I finished it last week. I had... issues with it.”

“Because it had a heroine who didn’t cry on command?”

“No. Because it pretended to ask tough questions and then ran from the hard answers. That monologue in Chapter Twelve was a cop-out.”

“That monologue is the emotional crux of the entire case. It’s about the cost of telling the truth.”

Paul leaned in, resting one hand on the edge of her table. “It’s about fear disguised as principle.”

Birdy opened her mouth—ready to volley another counterpoint—when a polite throat-clearing cut between them like a gavel.

Her date. Still seated. Still holding his now-empty coffee cup.

“I think I’m going to call it a night,” Daniel said, not unkindly. “It’s clear there’s something... going on here.”

Birdy opened her mouth to protest—but he was already walking away. She'd wanted to get away from him. Now that had taken place because Paul Winters had entered the chat.

She turned back to Paul. He was watching her with a look she couldn't quite name.

Something that made her want to sit back down, pick up her book, and pretend none of this was happening.

That they were still two strangers on a screen, on opposite sides of the world, flirting over policy forms and typos.

But this was real. Her heart was beating far too fast for her to pretend otherwise.

The bell over the café door jingled as her date left. The sound was light and final, like a punctuation mark on a sentence that never really mattered.

Birdy watched him go. He hadn't been awful—just forgettable. The kind of man who would list his qualifications in a dating profile and still think “emotionally intelligent” was a flex.

She turned back to Paul. He slid into the seat across from her like he'd always belonged there. He rested his elbows on the table and looked at her. He said nothing

for a long while. The snow melted slowly into droplets on his jacket.

Birdy reached for her coat. "I should go. We're on opposite sides of this case. It would be a conflict of interest if we...."

"We're not on opposite sides. We both want what's best for the baby."

Birdy didn't answer. The latte in front of her had gone cold, the foam collapsing in soft, curdled peaks. She pushed the cup away.

"I think I know who the father is," Paul continued. "And I think he's in trouble. More than he's letting on."

"The father isn't my concern. My client is."

"But the baby is the one who matters most."

"What's best for the baby," she said, voice tight, "is being with her mother."

Paul's jaw flexed, but he didn't argue. He just looked at her with that same frustrating mix of patience and challenge, like he was trying to hold space for both her fire and his logic.

"We don't have to be enemies," he said softly.

"I'm not your enemy," she said. "I'm just not on your side."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Paul sat on the edge of his bed. The glow from his phone cast a soft light across the dark room. The rest of the world had gone still. There was just the occasional hiss from the heater and the muffled groan of wind slipping past the eaves.

The baby was back with the mayor and Bunny. The office was locked up. His work inbox was blissfully silent after a busy day. But his mind was loud.

There'd been three school meetings, two home visits, and a heated call with a foster parent who didn't understand why a twelve-year-old might hoard granola bars under the bed.

Then there was the mountain of paperwork: safety assessments, case notes, resource referrals, and the dreaded progress reports due by Monday.

He'd reviewed a custody request flagged for suspicion and taken a call from a guidance counselor about a student showing signs of neglect.

All of it necessary. All of it important. All of it exhausting.

But none of it compared to the echo of Birdy's voice in his head. Or the weight of what he hadn't told her at the coffee shop. He rubbed a hand over his jaw, phone cradled in the other, thumb hovering over the message app.

Birdy Chou—Mobile

It was still surreal seeing her name like that. It stared back at him in bold black letters, so official. So close. He hadn't heard back from the email. No surprise.

Still... he wanted to try again. This time in a language she spoke fluently: the language of precision. And maybe a little provocation. He opened a new message and started typing.

PAUL:

Here's my issue with *The Justice Paradox*. The verdict felt rushed. The way the author structured the courtroom scenes? That was masterful. She wrote chaos like someone who craves control.

He paused. Deleted the last line. It was too obvious. He typed again.

PAUL:

You said it was about the cost of telling the truth. I can see your point now. You were right.

Another pause. He could stop there. He should stop there. He knew that's what she was craving: validation. Instead, he added:

PAUL:

You were right about the truth-telling. But tell me why I'm wrong about the rest of it.

He read it over twice. Three times. Then he hit send.

The phone made a soft whoosh. The sound was final and weightless, like a bird taking off before its captor could change their mind. Paul set the phone on the

nightstand and leaned back into the pillows.

He glanced at the phone. Then away. The silence around him grew thick with expectation. Outside, snow tapped softly at the window. A tapping sound came from the phone.

Paul sat up straighter when the three little dots appeared. The dots blinked. Disappeared. Then blinked again. Then her message came through.

Birdy:

This is inappropriate. We shouldn't be talking.

A grin lit Paul's face. He had her. He typed back before the moment could cool.

Paul:

We're not talking. We're texting. Completely different ethical territory.

Three dots again. They bounced once. Then her message lit the screen, black letters on a white background.

Birdy:

We're on opposite sides of a case.

Paul let out a quiet laugh, his breath fogging the screen. But it didn't obscure her message because she had typed that to him, and she would type more. Because he'd hooked her.

Paul:

You're the one who brought up the case. I was talking about The Justice Paradox. But nice pivot. Very attorney of you.

He stared at the screen, heart ticking faster than he'd like to admit. There was a soft heat blooming in his chest. This was an echo of that night on the chat line. That strange, rare click of finding someone who made his thoughts sharper and his pulse louder.

The dots danced. Paul leaned in, cradling the phone in his palm.

Birdy:

The book is brilliant. You're wrong about chapter twelve. That monologue isn't a cop-out. It's a thesis. The author deliberately subverts the hero's arc. It's not about winning. It's about surviving the truth.

He bit the inside of his cheek. There she was. She wasn't only hooked; she was letting herself be reeled in.

He could agree with her statement. He should agree. But this wasn't about right or wrong. It was about getting closer to her.

Paul:

Or it's lazy narrative closure dressed in emotional shorthand. The entire second act builds toward a legal showdown and we get a speech about feelings?

He hit send. And waited. Another pause. Then?—

Birdy:

You clearly missed the point. The legal showdown was internal. The rest was noise.

Paul:

I don't know... sounds like someone's letting their love for courtroom drama blind them to a soft ending.

Birdy:

Says the man who thinks stoicism is a character trait.

He laughed out loud, the sound surprising in the stillness. This—this was what he'd missed. Not just the banter — the feeling. That tangle of intelligence and wit and tension that made the hours slip by unnoticed.

He hadn't felt this giddy in a long time. Not since the chat that started it all. And somewhere between the phone's blinking dots and his blinking eyes, he realized he didn't want this conversation to end. Not tonight. Maybe not ever.

Birdy:

I have to go. It's family dinner at Chow Town.

Paul:

I've heard of that restaurant. Any good?

Birdy:

Best Asian fusion in the state.

Paul:

Maybe you'll take me sometime.

Three dots. Nothing.

Paul:

I am new in town. Still trying to get my lay of the land.

Three dots. Nothing. And then.

Birdy:

Good night Mr. Winters.

Paul:

Sweet dreams, Ms. Chou.

Three dots.

Nothing.

And still nothing when he checked the phone again in the morning. Paul wanted to press his luck. He wanted to text her good morning. But he figured he'd be seeing her soon.

Later that morning, when he returned to the coffee shop, he saw another person he was hoping to run into.

The bell above the café door gave a cheerful jingle as Paul stepped inside. He stomped his boots by the welcome mat. It was early—still that gray-blue kind of morning where the sky hadn't decided if it wanted to brighten up or stay sullen all day. Paul had been up since dawn, restless.

He stepped up to the counter, rubbing his hands together while the barista poured a black, strong, no frills coffee—and that's when he saw him.

The kid.

Hunched over at a corner table, hoodie up, stirring something that looked too fancy to be his. The cup was untouched. His foot bounced under the table. Paul's instincts kicked in like muscle memory. He took his coffee and walked over.

“Mind if I sit?”

The kid didn't look up. Just shrugged. Paul slid into the seat across from him. They sat in silence for a moment, just the hiss of the milk steamer behind them.

“I'm not here to get you in trouble,” Paul said finally. “I'm here to give you a chance.”

The kid's eyes flicked up. He was young. Too young to carry this much weight on his shoulders.

“You don't have to say anything. Just come with me. See the baby. That's it. No paperwork. No pressure.”

Something cracked—barely—in the boy's expression. A flicker of something between guilt and longing.

Paul stood slowly. “I’ll wait outside.”

He didn’t wait long.

They drove to the mayor’s house in silence, snow crunching underfoot, the world muffled and pale. At some point, the kid gave him his name but nothing else.

They pulled up to the mayor's house and got out.

Paul knocked on the door while the kid made slow work of the steps.

It wasn't Bunny that opened the door, nor the mayor.

The child's mother was the one who pulled the door open, the baby cradled lovingly in her arms. The smile on her face lit up her features, highlighting a tear at the corner of her eyelids.

All that happiness dried up the moment she glanced behind Paul.

“Zeke?”

She took one look at the boy, then the baby—and something in her posture curled inward. Like she was bracing for a hit.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Y ou brought him here?” Birdy folded her arms tight across her chest like she could hold back the heat rising up her neck.

Paul’s jaw twitched, his voice calm but firm. “He has a right to see the baby.”

Before she could snap something back, she grabbed his arm and yanked him out of the doorway and into the hall.

“Seriously?” she hissed, eyes flashing. “You thought now was the time to bring the maybe-father into the mayor’s house? While Beverly is still barely holding herself together?”

She didn’t let go of his arm. She should’ve. But her fingers had wrapped around the soft cotton of his shirt sleeve, and underneath—dear God—he was solid. Not just fit. Not just toned. Solid. All quiet strength and military stillness.

She caught a whiff of something clean and dark—cypress, maybe, and coffee. And heat. He radiated it. Like the kind of man a woman could lean into on a cold night.

Her breath stuttered. She didn’t want to nap against his chest. She wanted to be wide awake. Curled into him. Pressed to that steady heartbeat. Warm and anchored and—no.

What was she doing? Birdy dropped his arm like it had burned her. What was that?

Paul didn't move. He just watched her, still and grounded, like he hadn't felt the jolt too—but she knew he had. She saw it in the way his eyes softened as they swept over her face. Birdy took a step back, crossing her arms again to hide the tremble in her fingertips.

“You're on his side,” she accused. “I knew it. You always were. From the second you stepped into that office.”

Paul didn't take the bait. “I'm on the baby's side. You're the one who made this about sides.”

Birdy opened her mouth, then shut it. Last night, in their texts, he'd baited her then, too. Intentionally. With charm and intelligence and just the right amount of push. And she'd liked it. She couldn't remember the last time a man hadn't backed away from her sharp edges—or tried to dull them.

But Paul? He kept walking toward her. Even now, she could feel his gaze—steady, patient, like he was offering her space and a challenge at the same time. She hated how much she wanted both.

“We don't even have a paternity test yet. My client?—”

The baby's sudden, startled cry cut through the air like a fire alarm.

Birdy's spine snapped straight. Instinct took over.

She turned on her heel and strode back into the living room.

She had kept Beverly in her line of sight, but that was before she'd copped a feel of Paul Winter's biceps and he'd addled her brain.

Beverly's voice rose—panicked, shaking—and then there was Zeke, one hand gripping Beverly's upper arm, his fingers pale against her coat sleeve.

Zeke stood too close. One hand gripped Beverly's upper arm, his knuckles white, fingers digging into the fabric of her coat like he was anchoring himself—and her—with force. The baby wailed louder in her mother's arms, the sound raw and frightened.

“Let go of her!” Birdy snapped, already moving.

But Paul was faster. He crossed the space in a blur, inserting himself between them with military precision. His hand shot out and gripped Zeke's wrist, yanking him back with just enough force to make the message clear.

“What are you doing?” Paul said, his voice low and hard.

Birdy was already at Beverly's side, scooping both mom and the baby from her arms and holding them against her shoulder, bouncing gently to soothe their sobs. The baby hiccupped, clutching a fistful of Birdy's hair, her tiny frame trembling.

Beverly looked like she might collapse. And Zeke? Zeke wasn't done.

“They're mine,” the boy hissed. “You don't get to take them from me. If Beverly doesn't want me back, fine—she can run. But the baby? My mother's got the money, lawyers. She will win.”

Birdy's blood went ice cold. The baby whimpered again, pressing her damp cheek to Birdy's collarbone. She looked at Paul, who stood between them all like a wall.

For once, Birdy didn't argue. Because the only thing more terrifying than the boy who made threats was the man standing between them.

Paul didn't raise his voice. He didn't puff up his chest or step closer to Zeke. He just looked at the boy and said, low and even, "You need to go. Now."

Zeke's jaw twitched. The corner of his mouth pulled into a sneer. He turned to Beverly and snapped his fingers. "Let's go."

Beverly flinched. That tiny, involuntary recoil punched through Birdy's chest like a fist. Without thinking, Beverly moved—not toward Zeke, but toward Birdy. She dove closer into Birdy's side, closing the distance like she was seeking shelter.

Birdy shifted the baby onto her hip and stepped forward, blocking Zeke's line of sight. Their eyes met. Birdy didn't look away. Her gaze locked on his, sharp as glass, cold as law. It wasn't loud. It wasn't showy. But it was deadly clear.

Zeke faltered. His bravado cracked. It was just a hair. But that was enough to show the boy underneath the threat, the one who'd never had anyone glare back with more power than his punch.

He looked at the baby in Birdy's arms. Then at Paul, who hadn't moved but somehow seemed larger now—anchored, immovable.

And finally, Zeke looked at Beverly, who stood quiet and trembling but not alone.

He swore under his breath and turned on his heel, storming out the front door without another word. The screen door slammed behind him.

Paul exhaled slowly, as though grounding himself in the quiet after the storm. His muscles were still coiled, like adrenaline was pulsing through his veins. But his demeanor shifted the moment his eyes landed on Beverly.

She stood frozen, her shoulders rigid, eyes locked on the door like she was waiting

for it to fly back open. Like Zeke might come charging through again and this time wouldn't stop at words.

"Did he hurt you?" Paul asked.

Beverly's gaze dropped to the floor. She didn't speak. Her fingers curled tightly around the hem of her coat, knuckles white with the effort. That silence was answer enough for both Paul and Birdy.

"Hey." Paul knelt slightly to meet her eye level. "You don't have to protect him anymore. I'll protect you. Both of you."

Beverly's lower lip trembled. Her chin dipped in the smallest of nods.

Birdy stood there, cradling the baby against her shoulder, one hand rubbing small, soothing circles on the infant's back. But her eyes were on him. He didn't say a word to her. He didn't need to.

Because Birdy felt it. The quiet vow in his gaze. The promise humming between them louder than any declaration.

He'd protect Beverly. He'd protect the baby. But he'd protect her, too.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Paul sat stiffly in a metal-framed chair beside Birdy. Her hands rested on the table, fingers laced tightly like they were the only thing keeping her from unraveling.

He wanted to reach out. To comfort her. To connect to her. To unlace those fingers one by one and slide his own between them. To give her something steady to hold on to that wasn't rage or control or the pressure of being the one everyone else leaned on.

But he didn't move. Because he'd broken something. Again.

He shouldn't have brought Zeke to the house. Not on a hunch. He should have vetted the young man first.

Across from them, his supervisor—Marla Jensen, straight-backed and razor-voiced—was tapping her pen against a file folder with the kind of rhythm that made his pulse climb.

“As it stands, Zeke's mother has filed for emergency custody.

She has legal resources. Money. Connections.

And Beverly...” Marla looked at the file like it might somehow soften.

“Beverly's underage. She's couch-surfing.

No guardianship, no consistent schooling, no viable plan.

The court will see her as unstable. The baby will be placed in a temporary foster home by the end of the week.

Possibly with Zeke's family, depending on the judge. ”

Paul's throat burned. It was all falling apart. He'd promised Beverly safety. He'd looked her in the eye and told her she was protected. And now it was going to end in a courtroom where people like Zeke's mother always came out ahead.

“There has to be another option,” Birdy said, pulling a notepad from her bag. “A motion for temporary guardianship? I can file it today. Or what if we requested an emergency hearing based on the signs of emotional abuse? There's precedent?—”

She was in motion now. Her fingers no longer clenched together. They moved through the air, sharp and fluid, like she was flipping through legal codes in her head or rifling through a deck of cards.

Paul sat back, watching her work. She was back in a tailored business suit. Her hair was once more in that tight, no-nonsense bun. As he watched her, the sting of failure slowly dissolved into something else.

This was the woman he'd written to in the dark, anonymous hours of a snowstorm. This was the woman he debated over text messages. This was the fire. And the grace. And the clarity. And he was falling again.

Hard.

“What if,” Birdy said slowly, tapping the notepad, “it was Beverly that went into guardianship? Voluntarily. That would protect her from being declared unfit. It keeps

her close to the baby, too.”

Marla’s eyebrows lifted. “With who? Her mother is in and out of recovery. We can’t find her father. She’s been alone for months.”

“The mayor and Bunny?” Birdy offered. “They’d take her in. You’ve seen how they are with the baby?—”

Marla shook her head. “They’re not married. And with the election coming up, anything that looks even slightly unofficial would likely dampen his chances. We can’t ask that of Mayor Carter.”

Silence settled over the room like dust. Birdy exhaled and slumped back in her chair, finally still. Paul stared at the scratched surface of the table. A small chip in the laminate caught the light. He tapped it once. He wasn’t really seeing it, though.

His mind kept drifting—to the mayor and Bunny.

To the way the man said ‘fiancée’ like it was a title he’d earned.

To Fish and his wife Jules, whose quiet affection filled every corner of whatever room they were in.

To Jed, who grumbled and cursed and made it sound like a hardship to be married to Jami Chou—but whose eyes said something else entirely whenever she came into a room.

All of them were married—or nearly.

All of them got to wake up every morning beside a Chou woman.

And Paul... he'd gotten a three-line text from Birdy Chou that morning. All business. Terse. Professional.

It wasn't cold, exactly. But it wasn't warm either. Not like their banter from the night before. Not like that easy, teasing rhythm they'd slipped into like an old dance. No jokes. No jabs. No sparks. Just facts.

Birdy:

Custody hearing is scheduled for 2 p.m. I'll meet you there.

He read it three times, anyway. If they were married, they wouldn't need chat features. Wouldn't need email chains and court calendars and office drop-ins.

He could just... talk to her. In real time. Over breakfast. In the car. Late at night, when she was pacing the kitchen in her robe, rambling about legal strategies and case law while he brewed her another cup of tea.

He could tell her she was brilliant when that crease of doubt appeared between her brow. He could kiss her when she got anxious. He could stay—not leave when things got hard, not shut down when she got sharp. He could be the one man who stood happily in the glow of the light that was her.

He could be hers.

That thought bloomed low and steady in Paul's chest. It didn't feel impulsive. It felt true.

He looked up at Birdy. The slump was gone. Her back was once again straight as she scanned her notes. Her brow was furrowed, but not with worry. It was heavy with concentration. She was already thinking ten moves ahead.

And something clicked. Something that felt less like a strategy... and more like a vow.

“What if we were the guardians?”

Birdy lifted her head from the paperwork. She blinked up at him as though she'd forgotten he was sitting there. “What?”

“You and me,” Paul said, heart thudding. “What if we get married? What if we adopt Beverly and the baby? What if we give them a stable household, legal standing, community support? You have the legal knowledge. I have the case history and agency access. It would work.”

The room went completely still. Not the quiet of resolution, but the breath-held silence of a courtroom just after someone dropped a bombshell confession.

Marla blinked, her pen pausing mid-scribble. Her mouth opened, then closed. The legal pad in her lap slid a fraction before she caught it. “I’m sorry,” she said carefully. “Did you just... propose marriage?”

Birdy turned her head toward him slowly, like it took effort to swivel her disbelief in his direction. Her dark eyes locked with his. Yes, her expression said. He had lost his mind.

Paul felt clear. Clearer than he had in weeks. Maybe ever.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Kitty had commandeered the big bay window again. Her canvas was propped on the easel. Her brush flicked in little arcs as she brought two lovebirds to life in a tree.

“They mate for life,” Kitty said dreamily, adding a bit more blush to the birds’ bellies.

“So do penguins.” Birdy scowled. “That doesn’t mean I want to be waddling around the rest of my life stuck with a man I barely know.”

“From what I can tell, you do know him,” Kitty pointed out. “You fell for him before you even saw his face.”

Bunny snorted from the armchair, where she was bouncing the baby on her knee while nibbling on a crust of toast. “Technically, she fell for his punctuation.”

“No, no—she fell for his parentheticals,” Kitty teased, dipping her brush again.

Birdy rolled her eyes and glanced at her phone. There was another text. From him.

Paul:

“Sometimes the best decisions aren’t made in the courtroom. They’re made when you realize you can’t walk away.” — The Justice Paradox, chapter seventeen.

Her thumb hovered over the screen. She didn’t hit reply. She didn’t delete it either.

“It’s not romantic,” she muttered, staring at the floorboards. “It’s absurd. A fake marriage? For guardianship?”

Kitty didn’t look up from her painting. “You wouldn’t be the first.”

“You’d be saving two lives,” Bunny added, her voice quieter now. More serious. “Beverly’s and the baby’s.”

Birdy didn’t answer. Because that was the argument that got to her.

The one that pierced past her pride and her cynicism and that leftover ache still lodged in her ribs from the day Paul asked how he could help her in an anonymous chat room.

And then proceeded to help her. And then proceeded to reject her publicly.

Only to turn around with hat in hand to try and win her friendship.

And then to drop a bomb of a proposal in her lap.

The man was maddening. And persistent.

Her phone buzzed again. Another quote. This one wasn’t from the book.

Paul:

If I were making closing arguments, I’d say this isn’t about logic. It’s about faith. And you’re the only person I’ve ever met who made me want to believe in something more.

Birdy swallowed. The room faded a little—the baby’s soft gurgle, Kitty’s brush

against canvas, Bunny's toast crumbs all dimmed behind the pulse in her ears and the glow of the screen.

"What's he saying now?" one of her sisters, she wasn't sure which one, asked.

"I need some air," Birdy said, already reaching for her coat.

Kitty was now delicately stippling feathers onto her lovebirds, like she was dressing them for a wedding. Bunny raised an eyebrow but didn't argue. The baby gurgled at her.

It was the baby that made Birdy stutterstep. The kid was better off being raised in her family. The only way that could happen would be for Birdy to become a guardian for Beverly. The only way that would happen would be for Birdy to marry Paul.

"Where are you going?" Kitty asked, half-singing the words.

"To clear my head," Birdy muttered, wrapping her scarf a little tighter than necessary. "And maybe punch a wall."

"Try not to use your left hand," Bunny called. "That's the one the ring goes on."

Birdy didn't bother with a comeback. The door clicked behind her. The cold air hit her full in the face like a truth she didn't want to deal with.

She considered her grandmother's house. N?inai made tea that tasted like courage. It was a dark oolong blend with ginger slices and that honey that only came from some mysterious farmer at the end of the county line.

But it was game night. Birdy could already picture the scene.

Her grandmother's kitchen would be full of laughter, the click of mahjong tiles, a tray of egg tarts disappearing fast, and Nai's sharp-eyed friends asking nosy questions about Birdy's nonexistent love life.

Only it was no longer nonexistent since Paul Winters had entered her life.

Birdy turned on her heel and headed for the coffee shop. It was mostly empty this time of day. There should only be the hum of conversation and the hiss of the espresso machine. She slowed when she reached the window, boots crunching softly on the salted sidewalk.

Then she saw him. Paul was seated at a table near the back. His broad shoulders were framed by the big bay window and bathed in the evening glow of the setting sun. He was frowning at his phone, thumbs flying.

Her stomach fluttered. It was an involuntary stutter that she tried to ignore. Was he texting her? Her hand dipped into her coat pocket, fingers brushing her phone.

Nothing. No buzz. No message.

Paul looked up—and smiled. But not at her.

A woman was sliding into the chair across from him.

Tall. Curvy. Great hair. Effortlessly pretty in that windblown 'I woke up like this' kind of way.

Birdy watched as Paul's date leaned forward and laid a hand on his arm.

The gesture was the same way Birdy had wrapped her fingers around his arm in the hallway of the mayor's house when they'd argued.

Her fingers had felt muscle. Strength. Heat. Now someone else was touching it.

Birdy stood there, frozen, breath fogging the glass.

The woman laughed at something Paul said.

Then he stood—stood!—and pulled her into a hug.

His hand lingered for a moment on the woman's back.

Birdy felt her blood pressure spike like she'd just downed six shots of espresso and a triple betrayal chaser.

He was cheating on her!

But they weren't even together.

But he'd proposed.

Even if it was insane. Even if she hadn't answered. Even if it was for the baby that wasn't theirs.

Maybe he was asking another woman to marry him to save Beverly and the baby. But she hadn't even given him her answer yet. She was first in line. Shouldn't he wait for her response?

Paul, the serial proposing cheater, sat back down. He tapped his phone once—then turned it face-down on the table. And gave the woman his full attention.

Birdy's feet shifted. She could turn around. Walk away. Be dignified. But she had never been the kind of woman who backed away from a courtroom, a boardroom, or

a coffee shop showdown. And so she stepped forward.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The coffee shop was nearly empty this late, save for the low hum of the espresso machine being cleaned for the night and the quiet clink of silverware as a barista restocked napkin holders with half-lidded exhaustion.

Paul sat across from Captain Mariah Ellis, one of the few people in the world who could both out-shoot him and out-argue him—on paper and in person. Well, aside from Birdy Chou.

Mariah's dark curls were tucked beneath a knit cap. Her JAG-issued posture was softened slightly by the faded hoodie and scarf she'd thrown on over her uniform. She cradled her mug of coffee like it was ammunition.

“In two of the cases, the court defaulted to the grandparents because the parents were considered unstable,” she was saying, tapping her blunt fingernail against the ceramic.

“But when the guardian was already married and in a secure household, the kid stayed put. Judges like married people. It feels tidy.”

Paul nodded at his friend, but his gaze drifted to his phone. It was face down out of respect. He'd left the vibrator on. The phone hadn't buzzed since he started texting Birdy. It remained quiet after his last missive.

Mariah gave him a side glance. “You hearing any of this, or are you just nodding like one of those bobbleheads on your old dashboard?”

Paul exhaled, chuckling faintly. “I’m listening. Just... I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

She narrowed her eyes over the rim of her mug. “Let me guess. Not the case. A woman.”

“I proposed marriage.”

Mariah cocked her head to the side. “Excuse me?”

“To the lawyer representing the baby’s mother.”

That made her put her mug down.

“It’s for guardianship. It’s a legal strategy. To keep the baby and the mom together.”

Mariah tilted her head, one brow arching with slow, amused precision. “Unconventional. Risky. But yeah, it would probably work.”

She studied him for a long beat, eyes sharp and steady. Then: “But you’re not that guy, Paul. You’re the one who always wanted the house and the picket fence. You used to carry around a picture of your niece like she was your own baby.”

Paul still had that picture of baby Allison in his wallet. But that was because the little cherub was the spitting image of him and it annoyed his brother, who was of a fairer complexion.

“Are you in love with this lawyer?”

Paul opened his mouth. He meant to say something practical. Something dismissive. Maybe even deflect with a joke. But then he saw her.

Birdy Chou was marching toward him from across the café. Her dark coat flared out behind her. Her hair caught the warm glow of the overhead lights. She moved like someone who didn't ask for permission, like someone who made things happen.

The smile hit him before he could stop it. Full, bright, and uncontrollable. His heart did this stupid flip, and every part of him—from his spine to the soles of his boots—leaned toward her.

Mariah followed his gaze, then turned back slowly, a knowing smirk tugging at her lips.

“Huh,” she said, standing and sliding her chair in. “Guess I got my answer.”

Paul got his answer too; he was in love with Birdy Chou. It didn't make sense. And that was fine by him.

No woman had ever gotten his heart to skip this many beats. No woman made him want to take care of her and also watch her soar. He could help Birdy fly so high and then tuck her safely into his arms. If only she'd let him.

“So what's this, huh? I don't give you the answer you want, so you start chatting up another woman to fake marry?”

Those were all words from the English language. Except when put together, they made no sense. Until they did.

“Birdy,” Paul said, his grin hitching back into place, “I can't see anyone else.”

Her mouth opened—ready for another volley—but he didn't let her get a word in.

“I mean that literally. When you walk into a room? It's like someone cut the lights on

everyone else.

You're all I can see. When I close my eyes, it's only you.

When I'm writing a report, and I spellcheck the word 'intimidating'—it comes with a picture of you in my mind.

If you weren't a lawyer, I'd accuse you of witchcraft. ”

Birdy's jaw worked. Her eyes flashed. But the fire was... faltering. Not gone—but flickering. Like he'd managed to surprise her.

Her fingers curled into fists at her sides, like she didn't know what to do with her hands. She looked at him like he was the storm now. And she wasn't quite sure if she wanted to run through it or take cover inside of it.

“Birdy,” he said gently, “this is Mariah. Captain Mariah Ellis. Army JAG. Old friend.”

Mariah raised a hand with an amused little wave.

“She was consulting on the case. Custody issues, guardianship angles. She's brilliant. Almost as brilliant as the woman who argued six successful motions before lunch yesterday. Whose only flaw, apparently, is misfiling her biennial paperwork.”

Mariah slung her coat over her arm. “Well. I'll leave you two to your... courtship strategy meeting. Good luck.”

Paul waited until Mariah was out of earshot. He was already going to get raked over the coals in their vet group chat by the pieces Mariah had heard firsthand. No need to give her more ammunition.

When Paul turned back to Birdy, she was suddenly all business, her voice clipped, her eyes focused. Her arms crossed over her chest, hands balled into determined little fists.

“If we do this?—“

Truth be told, that's all Paul heard. Everything after that was static. In fact, he didn't even hear the if. All he heard was we and do and this .

“...it's because it's the most legally sound option. It gives Beverly and the baby stability, and it strengthens our position in front of the judge. I have a clause I'll want added to the guardianship agreement...”

He couldn't help it. His smile broke wider. Brighter. Like the sun had just elbowed through cloud cover and parked itself across his whole body.

She'd stopped talking. She was staring at him. She reached for his arm... and gave his biceps a squeeze. “Put your arms around me.”

Paul didn't ask why. He did as he was told. He wondered if he should flex. But her next action stole the breath from his lungs and the strength from his entire body.

Birdy Chou rose up on her toes. And then she kissed him. No warning. No lead-up. Just a swift, sudden, soft press of her lips against his.

The impact was a detonation behind his eyes. His pulse roared. His hands moved on instinct, ready to pull her in, to anchor her, to never let her go?—

But she was already gone.

One step back.

Then another. Distance. Composure sliding into place like armor.

“Why?” he managed, blinking at her like someone who’s just gotten knocked down by the world heavyweight champion.

Birdy adjusted her coat, chin high. “Because in romance novels and movies, the first kiss in a marriage of convenience happens at the vows. And it’s always a surprise. I just wanted to get it over with.”

Paul followed her gaze as she glanced around the café. The barista and two customers were staring openly, mouths parted mid-sip. He turned back to her, dazed and smitten.

“If that was getting it over with, I cannot wait for the next chapter.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was the best kiss of her life. And Birdy Chou was not easily impressed. Not by men. Not by flowers. Definitely not by kisses.

In fact, she could barely remember the last time someone kissed her and made her feel anything other than mildly obligated or vaguely annoyed.

The faces of the boys she'd once dated were already fading from memory, their names sliding into irrelevance like chapters from a middle grade book she'd long since outgrown.

But Paul? The texture of Paul Winters' upper lip was seared into her skin. She wished she'd managed to capture his lower lip in the brief transaction. Was it just as soft? Just as pliable? Just as giving and receptive as the upper lip?

She would know soon enough. They were going to be married. She'd said yes, which meant she'd kiss him again at least one more time.

He was smiling at her. A big, unapologetic, sunburst grin that lit up his entire face like he'd just won a lifetime supply of joy and decided to spend it all on her. Because she had said yes to his crazy proposal and now he thought he had her.

The truth was, he did have her. If seeing him with another woman and feeling the jealousy try to suffocate her hadn't told her, then that kiss had.

Birdy couldn't breathe.

No—correction. She could breathe. And it was the first time in forever that she felt like she wasn't holding her breath, waiting for a man to handle her shine.

Because Paul? He wasn't shrinking. He wasn't flinching. He wasn't trying to dim her. He was amplifying her.

She felt incandescent in his presence. Like he wasn't standing in her light—he was reflecting it back at her.

Her heart did a bold little lurch in her chest. Her brain, ever the cynic, threw up a warning flag.

Steady, counselor. But there wasn't any other part of her body that was listening.

She was raring to go. She bet he'd let her kiss him again.

Let her taste that lower lip. Maybe even his full mouth. If she'd just ask him.

Birdy cleared her throat and straightened her coat. "Sit down," she said, gesturing to his chair. "We have things to discuss."

Paul blinked, still looking like he'd just been gifted a puppy and a hot fudge sundae and a full presidential pardon all at once. He sat as she commanded. It was the second time he'd followed her edict without balking. Interesting.

Birdy took the seat across from him. She placed her hands carefully on the table. Then she looked him dead in the eye.

"I'm not just a lawyer. I'm a business owner. I run my own firm. I have a long-term expansion plan, a nonprofit pipeline, and I've already started laying groundwork to mentor undergrad pre-law students."

Paul nodded, eyes never leaving hers. He didn't interrupt. He waited patiently, like he was happy to let her go on until she finished. So she went on.

“I want kids,” she added softly. “But not until I'm thirty.

And I still plan to work and I want my husband to do at least fifty percent of the rearing because I don't plan to be a super mom.

I'm going to be a great mom and a great career woman.

I can't give one hundred percent to both. That's not how math works.”

Where had that come from? This was going to be a fake marriage.

A marriage of convenience. But Birdy had the suspicion that once Paul Winters gave her his vows, he was not going to take them back.

That's exactly how Jacqui and Jules and Jami had all wound up tied in knots.

Their marriages were all supposed to be temporary, but Birdy had seen the gleam in the eyes of their husbands-to-be.

Not a single one of those men had ever had any intentions of letting their brides go.

Paul had the same gleam. He said nothing. Just listened. Rapt. Engaged. Believing.

“I want love,” she whispered, surprising herself again. “But I’m terrified it’ll ask me to become small. To compromise.”

Paul leaned forward now. Slowly, like he was coming to the edge of something sacred. “I don’t want you to be small, Birdy. I want to stand next to you while you do

all of it. The firm. The mentoring. The change-making. The baby-making.”

At that, she blushed. Because she wanted it too. Not just a matching taste to Paul Winter's upper lip.

“I want in. All the way.” Paul reached for her hand. Took it gently in his. “Will you marry me?”

Birdy looked down at their joined hands. Her heart was already screaming yes. But she wasn't the type of woman that was built to leap without checking the terrain. She gently eased her hand back, just enough to clasp them together between them.

“Is this crazy? We barely know each other. We chatted... in an anonymous government chat feature, Paul. This isn't a love story. It's a... municipal meet-cute.”

“People meet online all the time,” he said. “Apps. Websites. Forums. It's normal now.”

Paul inched his hand closer to hers.

Birdy didn't reach for him.

But she didn't pull away either.

“I stopped going to bars and clubs a long time ago,” he said. “They're loud, chaotic, full of noise. Online dating? I liked it because I could read people's profiles. You learn a lot about someone by what they choose to say about themselves.”

His index and middle finger walked closer to hers on the table.

“I read your profile on your firm's website. And I'm pretty sure you read mine on the

Social Services staff page. We've chatted. We've texted. We've argued. We've made up." His voice dropped slightly. "We've kissed. What's left, Birdy?"

Her name in his voice was a balm. Steady. Certain. Anchored.

"We can do this. For Beverly. For the baby. For the right reasons."

Paul's index fingers brushed her thumb.

Birdy pulled her hand away—just enough to grab her phone from her coat pocket. She typed quickly. Precisely. Like she was filing a motion.

Across the table, Paul's phone vibrated. It was still face-down on the wood. He didn't move.

"Go ahead," she said, tipping her chin toward it. "Answer it."

He turned the phone over, read the screen... and grinned.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The cordless phone crackled a little as Paul leaned back in the worn armchair by the window.

He cradled his coffee in one hand and the receiver in the other.

Outside, the late afternoon sky was fading into dusky blues and purples, the streetlights blinking on like slow winks against the snow-dusted sidewalks.

“You met someone?” His mother's voice was sharp with delighted disbelief.

“Finally!” his father crowed from somewhere in the background. “It’s a Christmas miracle.”

Paul chuckled, feeling a rare, buoyant lightness inside his chest. “Yeah, I met someone.”

He let the words hang there a moment, savoring them like a secret unwrapped too soon. He hadn't told them that he was engaged. That he was getting married in the morning. He couldn't decide how to breach that topic. Maybe he could just bring her home over Christmas wrapped in a bow?

In his mind, Birdy's face appeared—vivid, electric.

That perfect, serious mouth made for arguing.

.. and kissing. Those dark, intelligent eyes that always looked like they were three steps ahead of whatever he was about to say.

The high, sleek twist of her hair pulled into a no-nonsense bun that dared anyone to underestimate her.

God, he wanted to see it down again. Loose and wild around her shoulders, the way he imagined it would look first thing in the morning, when she wasn't bracing herself against the world. When she'd unfurled herself from the cocoon of his arms to greet both the day and him.

Paul thought about her sharp, fitted dress suits.

The confident click of her heels across courthouse floors.

And he wanted—achingly wanted—to see her in sweatpants.

Or sleep shorts. To see her barefoot, hair mussed, coffee mug in hand, glaring at him for smiling too much, smiling at her.

Because he had landed her. Because she was going to be his wife.

He wanted the whole picture. The polished Birdy. The unguarded Birdy. The lawyer who conquered courtrooms. The wife who fell asleep mid-book on the couch with her head against his shoulder.

And somehow the world had reshaped itself so that he would have it. Paul would have all of these things. Because she was going to be his wife.

The thought warmed him from the inside out.

But even stronger than the images—the suits, the hair, the disheveled mornings—were the words.

The ones they'd shared when they didn't even know each other's names. Typed across a government chat window. Soft, sharp, teasing, vulnerable. Words that had built something between them before he'd ever touched her hand or tasted her mouth.

He wanted a lifetime of that. Of words—and arguments—and teasing, and fierce, furious kisses.

He couldn't stop thinking about that kiss. The way she'd surprised him. Surprised herself, maybe. The heat of it. The claim of it. How the whole coffee shop had disappeared until there was nothing but the feel of her mouth on his, the taste of snow-melt and longing and yes.

“Is she nice?” his mother asked.

“Is she pretty?” his father chimed in.

“She's... a lot more than that. She's smart. Fierce. Beautiful. And she's got this”—Paul shook his head, searching for the right word—“fire in her that you just have to see to believe.”

His dad whistled low. “Son, you've always been picky. Picky about your food, picky about your toys, picky about your friends. If you're this sure about this girl — sure enough to tell Captain Winters — then she must be something.”

Over the line, Paul heard the faint thump of a pillow hitting flesh, followed by his mother's mock-outraged “Oh, you did not!”

Paul could see it in his mind's eye—his dad grinning like a teenager, ducking as his

mother lobbed another throw pillow at him across their worn-in living room.

She'd be half-laughing, half-threatening to revoke his dinner privileges, while his father called her "Ma'am" in that exaggerated way that always made her roll her eyes and kiss him, anyway.

It was their rhythm. Their language. Banter laced with bedrock love.

But his father had a point. About his mother, true.

But also about Paul and his pickiness. When he was a kid, Paul had refused to eat vegetables unless they were separated on the plate.

He once went three whole weeks without playing with anyone at recess because he "didn't want to waste time on people who didn't get it." Whatever it had been.

"Yeah," Paul said, feeling the truth of it settle somewhere deep and sure inside him. "I think she's going to be a keeper."

He stared at the quiet little town outside the window.

Porch lights glowed gold against the early dusk, casting halos over shoveled walkways.

A kid in a puffy coat shuffled past with a sled dragging behind him.

Somewhere in the distance, wind chimes jingled softly from a front porch.

Smoke curled lazily from chimneys, and the glow from the bakery's windows across the street painted the sidewalk with buttery light.

It looked like a town that tucked its people in. A place where strangers waved without thinking, where the coffee shop remembered your order and the post office clerk asked about your aunt's hip surgery. A place where roots could grow deep and strong—if you let them.

“I think I could be happy spending the rest of my life with her.”

He tested out the notion to his parents. They weren't spontaneous people. They were both planners. They shared an electronic calendar and paper calendar to coordinate their schedules. It was planned down to the hour—especially when Mom had been away and Dad had been solo parenting.

There was a beat of silence on the line. Then his father whooped so loudly Paul had to pull the phone away from his ear.

“When you know, you know!” his dad said, laughter rumbling through the receiver. “That's how it was with your mother. Saw her once at the PX, and that was it. Done for.”

Paul smiled, a slow, aching thing that filled up his whole body. Because it hit him then. Birdy reminded him of his mother.

Both women stood tall in a world that sometimes wanted to shove them down. Both women wielded intelligence like a weapon—his mother with her crisp uniform and gleaming medals, Birdy with her legal pad and pen sharp enough to carve out a space where she belonged.

His mother had his father at her side. Always at her back. And when necessary, stepping forward to take the hits so she could keep marching forward.

Paul's throat tightened. Because he wanted that too. Not just to stand beside

Birdy—but to protect her dreams, her fire, her future. To be her shield when the world didn't deserve her brilliance. He set down his coffee, gripping the phone a little tighter.

“Guys,” he said, voice rough with something bigger than nerves, bigger than excitement. “There's more I need to tell you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Birdy stood in the middle of Kitty's spare bedroom, arms folded tightly across her chest as her sisters flitted around her like a pair of overly caffeinated sparrows.

Bunny was knee-deep in the closet, muttering about hem lengths and proper neckline etiquette.

Kitty sat cross-legged on the bed, flipping through a chaotic pile of dresses, holding each one up like a game show model before tossing it aside.

"You realize I'm the only Chou sister who's going to have a proper church wedding now," Bunny said, pulling a navy-blue cocktail dress off a hanger.

Each of the Chou women had gotten married at the town hall in a quickie wedding, starting with Kitten just after she'd turned eighteen.

Then Jacqui saw sparks with Noah and got hitched.

Jules should have had a big wedding with her doctor fiancé, but Fish had stepped in and reeled her in with his devotion to her.

Jami thought she was going to marry her high school boyfriend, but at the last minute—and for a few dollars down—Jed Winchester had pulled a switcheroo which neither of them had come to regret. Tomorrow it would be Birdy's turn.

Kitty held the next dress up to herself as she looked in the mirror. "Maybe my second

wedding will be big and splashy.”

All four pairs of eyes slowly turned to her. Birdy lowered her arms from across her chest. Bunny clutched at the hanger she'd been about to replace back on the rod. The baby, from her perch in Beverly's arms across the room, let out a soft gurgle, almost like she could sense the shift in the air.

Kitty blinked rapidly, using the sleeve of the dress to dab at one eye with her sleeve. Then she pasted on a bright, shaky smile.

Neither Birdy nor Bunny pressed the matter. They hadn't talked much about Kitty's absent husband. About the years of silence. About the unanswered texts and unsigned divorce papers.

Instead, Kitty grabbed a soft, creamy dress from the pile and held it out to Birdy. “Wear this one,” she said, her voice a little too cheerful. “You'll look like a snow queen. But, you know, nice.”

Birdy brushed her fingers over the fabric—smooth, soft, simple. It was perfect. She nodded once at her sister. Kitty returned the nod, as though the whole affair was settled and would never be spoken of again.

A giggle bubbled from the corner. Birdy turned to see Beverly holding the baby, the young mother's arms tight but loving around the squirming little girl. Beverly's eyes—wide and dark and still so unsure—locked on Birdy's.

“You don't have to do this for me,” Beverly said. “You should find a guy who really loves you. You deserve that.”

Birdy inhaled deeply. She pursed her lips together as she thought about how to reply.

Once upon a time, she would've believed that too.

She'd told herself—over and over—that love wasn't for women like her.

Women who didn't soften their voices. Women who corrected opinions presented as facts.

Women who refused to laugh politely when a man explained something she already knew.

She'd convinced herself that being strong meant being alone.

But standing here now, the soft glow of the lamp catching the hopeful tilt of the baby's smile, the quiet strength of her sisters beside her... Birdy saw the truth. She didn't have to dim to be loved. She just had to be seen.

And Paul—Paul—had seen her from the very beginning. Through their chat. Their texts. Their arguments. Their kisses.

He wasn't afraid of her fire. He wanted to build a life with it.

Birdy stepped forward, reaching out to touch Beverly's shoulder. "You deserve it too. You and your baby. You deserve people who love you, who protect you, who stand beside you."

Beverly bit her lip. But her tooth missed because her lips were trembling. The words rushed out in a ragged whisper: "Zeke—he—he wasn't always bad."

Beverly clutched the baby tighter, her voice cracking.

"Sometimes he was sweet. Sometimes he said sorry. He tried to love me...he just

didn't know how.

His mom—she treated him awful. Yelled at him.

Hit him. I thought—” She broke off, swallowing hard.

“I thought if I loved him enough, he could be better.”

Birdy's heart twisted painfully. Because she recognized that quiet, desperate hope—the one that said if you were just good enough, patient enough, you could fix someone else's brokenness.

“He didn't mean to,” Beverly whispered. “He just... didn't know any different. And neither did I.”

Birdy knelt a little so they were eye to eye. Her voice was steady. Unshakable. “Love,” she said firmly, “should never hurt. And it should never make you feel small.”

The baby gurgled happily in Beverly's arms, kicking her tiny feet, oblivious to the storm that had passed over her young mother's life. Beverly stared down at her daughter for a long moment. Then she gave a shaky inhale—and nodded.

Kitty moved closer, brushing a hand gently over Beverly's back. Bunny leaned in, too, her expression fierce and protective. These two girls were about to become Chou women.

Well, technically Winters. But even though each of her sisters and cousins were married and engaged and were taking other families' names, they were still Chou through and through. Beverly and the baby would be too.

“You’re not alone anymore,” Birdy said. “You have all of us now. And you have the right to a life that's bigger and brighter than what you came from.”

The baby clapped her chubby hands together, giggling. Beverly smiled—a real one this time. Tentative. Fragile. Hopeful.

Birdy felt it settle in her bones: She was making the right choice.

She wasn’t just marrying Paul to protect Beverly and the baby.

She was marrying him because she wanted the kind of love that didn’t ask her to shrink.

She wanted a life where all of them could grow bigger, louder, stronger—together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The air outside Town Hall was crisp and sharp. The snow from last week's storm still stubbornly clung to the edges of the sidewalks. Paul adjusted the collar of his jacket and took a long breath, letting the cold fill his lungs.

Today was the day. His wedding day.

It still didn't feel entirely real—that he was about to marry Birdy Chou. That the fierce, brilliant woman who had once been a faceless voice across a chat window was about to become his wife.

He glanced to his left, where Noah, Jed, and Teddy fell into an easy formation beside him. All four men had married or were currently engaged to Chou women. All four men were grinning like idiots.

“You're about to join the club,” Jed said, slapping him on the back with enough force to make him stumble.

With his movie-star jawline and effortless charm, Jed looked like he was about to step onto a soundstage rather than into a pew.

No surprise for a man who made his name as a celebrity competition chef.

“Best club there is,” Noah added, long, trim fingers adjusting his tie like he was disarming a bomb instead of preparing for a wedding.

The town's grinning golden boy mayor rocked on his heels with his usual twinkle-eyed swagger, hands shoved in his pockets like he was seconds from launching into a campaign speech—or a stand-up set. “If you think you're in charge now, wait until after the vows.”

They all laughed, the sound loud and familiar against the frozen air.

Paul smiled, feeling a deep, unexpected camaraderie.

Not just because he was marrying into the Chou family—but because all of them were soldiers.

Men who understood loyalty, duty, and the fierce, unbreakable bonds of love and brotherhood.

He thought back to that night at the state office.

Sitting behind a blinking computer screen.

Answering a chat message from a woman in a panic, who didn't even know she was about to change his life.

If he hadn't been there—hadn't answered—he might never have gotten close enough to Birdy to even try to win her heart.

He was grateful for every twist of fate that had led him here. To her. And today, he was going to put a ring on her finger.

Fish came outside just then. The man ducked under the door frame and straightened once over the threshold. His beard was slightly dusted with flour, like he'd stepped out of a lumberjack calendar and into a bakery. “They're ready for you.”

One by one, the men turned to file into the building.

Paul would have been the last to go in, if he hadn't heard someone call his name from across the street. He turned, heart still soaring from his future being seconds away from starting — and immediately felt it clench. Zeke's mother stood there, wrapped tightly in an expensive-looking coat, her mouth pressed into a thin, angry line.

“Go on ahead,” he said to the guys. “I’ll be right behind you.”

They didn't argue, just gave him nods of understanding and disappeared into the town hall. Paul walked toward the sidewalk, his boots crunching over salted gravel, every muscle in his body locking down tight.

Zeke's mom didn't waste time. “I know what you're doing,” she hissed. “You and that lawyer. Marrying to take my grandbaby away.”

Paul kept his face neutral. “You told me yourself the baby wasn't Zeke's. Are you amending that statement now?”

Her lips pursed tighter, bloodless. “I will not be made a fool of,” she snapped. “If that child's got my blood, I have a right to see her raised properly.”

“It's too late for that,” Paul said calmly. “We've checked everything with the court. The marriage will be legal. The guardianship of Beverly and her baby will be as well.”

“You think you've won?”

Paul said nothing.

“I have friends at the state office,” she said, voice sly now. “Friends who tell me your

little lawyer fiancée has a few... loose threads. Some paperwork problems with her business registration.”

Birdy's late filing? The form that almost jeopardized her entire practice? Paul had had that taken care of. Sure, he'd pulled some strings, but nothing illegal. People did it all the time in the office.

Zeke's mother smiled thinly, seeing the hesitation flash across his face.

“It would be a shame,” she said, voice oily, “if someone made trouble for Ms. Chou. If someone filed a few complaints. Made things... messy.”

The woman was threatening Birdy. Threatening the life Birdy had built with her bare hands. Threatening the thing that made her light up in this world.

Paul stood a little taller, letting the full weight of his presence settle over the conversation like a shield. His voice was calm, controlled—barely. “We can discuss supervised visits next week. Because the child deserves to know her roots, if it's safe.”

Zeke's mother narrowed her eyes. “No, that's not what we're going to do.

” Her voice was venomous, sugarcoated in civility.

“You're going to call off the guardianship.

I'm going to get my grandbaby. And that loose little floozie will stay away from my son and his daughter. Otherwise, I'll end Ms. Chou's business and ruin your career.”

The words hit him like a slap. His pulse stuttered, then roared to life. For a heartbeat, he couldn't move—couldn't think—only feel the sucker punch of hearing Birdy's

name used like a weapon. A slur thrown at Beverly. A baby referred to like a possession.

Shock turned to rage. Hot. Blinding. His hands fisted at his sides, his breath coming faster, shorter, his throat tight. He wanted to shout, to shake the woman, to demand what kind of monster used a child—used threats—as leverage.

But he didn't move. Didn't speak. Because anger wouldn't protect anyone.

The urge to defend Birdy surged through him, fierce and instinctual. He could almost see her in his mind—head high, jaw set, eyes flashing with pride and fire. She'd face this down like she did everything else: with logic and law and that ferocious heart of hers.

God, he loved her. He was in love with her. But this moment wasn't about him. Not even about Birdy—not really. It was about the baby.

That tiny, helpless girl who had clutched his lanyard and hiccup-laughed like she didn't know the world could be cruel. The child who had burrowed against his chest and fallen asleep as if she already trusted him to keep her safe.

He had promised, silently, the moment he'd held her—he would protect her. No matter what. Even if it meant swallowing the hurt, burying his pride, and letting this woman believe she'd won.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The winter sun gleamed off the white stone, lighting up the doorway where Birdy's life was about to change. Where her life was about to begin.

The structure stood firm and proud, all sharp lines and right angles, its red-brick exterior unapologetically solid. No frills. No softness. Just strength.

Birdy had always admired buildings like this—sturdy, practical, built to last. She'd shaped her life the same way.

Edges clean. Corners sharp. Foundation unshakable.

But just like the courthouse, beneath her rigid exterior was something more vital—purpose.

Shelter. Protection for those who needed it most.

She paused at the foot of the stairs, her breath rising in small clouds around her. Her heart was pounding. Not from nerves—she'd stood in plenty of courtrooms and never blinked—but from anticipation.

She clutched the soft folds of her dress tighter around her, heart fluttering in her chest like a startled sparrow. She wasn't used to feeling like this—giddy. Light. A little breathless, like she'd caught a lucky gust of wind and was half-flying.

Her sisters' laughter floated around her. Bunny was teasing Kitty, who was balancing

Beverly's diaper bag and a bouquet at the same time. Beverly, holding her baby tightly against her chest, smiled shyly up at Birdy, as if offering silent encouragement.

Birdy's gaze skipped ahead—and then locked on to him. Paul. He stood by the courthouse door, his hands tucked into the pockets of his jacket. He looked so solid and sure against the sweep of white behind him.

“Go on ahead,” Birdy told her sisters.

“I thought it was bad luck to see the bride before the wedding,” said Bunny.

Birdy ignored her baby sister. Although maybe she shouldn't have. Kitty had walked hand in hand with her bridegroom to this same courthouse years ago, and look where it had gotten her.

But this was Paul. Paul was here, and he was steady, and he didn't shrink—from her. He kept communication lines open, even when they were arguing—especially when they were arguing. Paul would not let her down.

Birdy crossed the snowy sidewalk, heart thundering. Paul turned at her approach, and his face lit up. Lit up in a way that seared itself into her memory. Like she was the only thing in the world he wanted to look at.

Something cracked open inside her. Wide and tender.

For the first time in her life, she didn't brace herself.

She didn't hold anything back. Birdy launched herself into Paul's arms, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Her mouth found his in a kiss that tasted like hope and snowflakes and everything she thought she might never have.

Paul froze for all of half a second. Then he kissed her back.

His arms locked around her like a shelter.

His hands pulled her in. His mouth deepened the kiss until Birdy felt it in her knees, in her spine, in her very soul.

When he finally pulled back, he rested his forehead against hers, breathing hard.

“I want to marry you,” he insisted. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Birdy’s heart stopped. Then kicked. Then soared—wild, giddy, unmoored. The words hit her like warm sunlight cracking through storm clouds. Her breath caught, the world around her blurring, collapsing inward to just him. His eyes were steady and sincere, his voice low and sure.

Something in her cracked open. She could see it—just for a second—the life they might build together. The stolen kisses in the kitchen. The quiet strength of his hand in hers in a courtroom. Laughter. Safety. A home. Love.

Then he kept talking. And the moment splintered.

“But we can’t move forward with the guardianship for Beverly.”

Birdy blinked, the words not quite computing. “What?”

Paul stepped back. His hands remained on her waist, as though fearful that she might bolt if he let her go. “I found a placement for Beverly. At a girls’ home. They’ll take

Beverly and the baby. She'll be safe. Cared for. But she'll have to share custody with Zeke."

The world tilted. The solid courthouse. The shoveled snow. Paul's steady hands.

Birdy took a step back from him, feeling her foundations rock beneath her feet. But she didn't crumble. She held herself together with the force of sheer will.

"Why?" she asked. "Why would we do that to her? Why are you suggesting this?"

"I have to think about what's best for everyone involved."

"We are what's best for them. You. Me. A real family."

Paul nodded slowly. Almost sadly. "I know," he said. "But I have to think about more than just Beverly and the baby. I had to think about you, too. About your business. Your future."

"My business? What does my business have to do with anything?"

Paul pursed his lips, like he was searching for the words to explain to her. Was he about to mansplain something to her? About her business?

Suddenly, she did not want to hear another word from him. No matter what those words might be. It didn't matter that he still wanted to marry her. He was changing the rules. Without consulting her.

"I just want to protect you, Birdy."

Birdy reared back like he'd slapped her. There it was. Exactly what she'd known all along.

The fire that had been building inside her, banked and barely controlled for days, exploded. “You think I need protecting from my own life?” she hissed. “From the business I built with my own hands?”

Paul opened his mouth to respond, but Birdy wasn’t done.

“You think you get to decide what's best for me? Because you’re afraid I might fly too high and you can't keep up?”

Her hands trembled, but her voice never wavered. She stared him down, heart pounding.

“This is the plan, Paul. This is what we're doing. Either you marry me right now or I'll find someone else who will.”

“You don't understand?—”

“Don't tell me what I do or do not understand!”

Paul’s eyes widened, a thousand emotions flickering across his face.

Birdy didn’t flinch. Didn’t blink. Didn’t back down.

How could she have been so stupid? How could she have thought he was different? Men didn’t want women like her. Not really.

They said they did—until it got messy. Until it got real. Until her ambition and dreams and sharp edges became inconvenient.

But it wouldn't this time. She wouldn't change herself to fit what he wanted her to be. Because this time—this time—she was choosing herself. Even if it broke her heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The door swung shut behind Birdy with a soft, final click. Paul stood frozen outside the courthouse steps. The cold air bit at his cheeks, but it didn't even register over the raw ache blooming in his chest.

He'd let her go.

Again.

Because he thought it was the right thing to do. Because he thought protecting her meant choosing the harder path. But watching her walk away—head high, shoulders squared even as hurt shimmered in her eyes—felt like tearing out his own heart with his bare hands.

A sharp gust of wind whipped through the street, carrying the scent of fresh snow and something sweeter—vanilla from the coffee shop across the square, laughter from a nearby bench where a group of teenagers threw snowballs at each other.

Life went on. But inside him, everything felt... still. Wrong.

Out of the corner of his eye, Paul caught movement.

It was Zeke. The kid stood near the corner of the building, half-hidden in the shadow of a column, watching him with an unreadable expression.

Had he seen it all? The conversation with his mother—the threats, the tension that

still thrummed under Paul's skin like a taut wire?

Or worse, had he seen the scene between Paul and Birdy?

Her stepping back from him like he'd burned her?

The way his whole future had tilted on its axis in the space of a heartbeat?

Zeke's shoulders were hunched, hands shoved deep into his coat pockets. He looked smaller somehow. Younger. Like a boy trying to wear the armor of a man and realizing it didn't quite fit.

Paul exhaled slowly. He'd been so focused on protecting everyone else—Beverly, the baby, Birdy—that he hadn't spared much thought for Zeke. Not since that disastrous day at the mayor's house, when the kid had shown every red flag Paul had ever been trained to spot.

But standing here now, watching him... Paul saw something else. A kid so used to conflict he mistook it for connection. A kid raised on manipulation and silence. A kid who had probably never been listened to without judgment.

With a mother like his, Zeke didn't need punishment—he needed help.

Unfortunately, Paul was up to his eyeballs. He was drowning. But that didn't mean Zeke should be left to sink too.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Zeke was already turning, walking away with stiff, fast strides like he'd seen too much and regretted it.

"There he is!"

Paul turned just as his father clapped a big, callused hand on his shoulder, nearly spinning him around.

“Still solid as ever,” his dad said with a grin, pulling him in for a brief, back-thumping hug.

His father hadn’t shrunk with age. The man was still broad through the chest, still moving with the confidence of a man who knew his way around both a toolbox and a barbecue pit.

The only real difference now was his hair.

What had once been a deep black trim cut had now gone completely silver.

Not white. Silver. Like a knight from one of those old bedtime stories he'd read to his children. Weathered, yes, but unshakable.

His mother’s arms were already wrapping him into a hug.

Her honey perfume enveloped him like a warm blanket folded straight from the dryer.

She was wearing a dress. Every time she was out of fatigues, it surprised him.

The structured sheath was navy blue, of course, as crisp as a uniform but distinctly... soft.

It always jarred Paul, seeing her like this—out of her command boots, her military insignias, her sharply creased slacks.

The woman who used to bark orders and hold platoons in line now wore flats and pearl earrings.

And yet she still looked like she could straighten a spine just by arching an eyebrow.

“Mom,” he murmured against her shoulder.

“You didn’t think I’d miss this, did you?” she said, pulling back to study his face with sharp, assessing eyes. “My son getting married? I’d show up in a snowstorm on crutches.”

Paul smiled, overwhelmed and oddly steadied by the weight of their presence. This was what love looked like. Solid, capable, enduring. This was what he wanted to build with Birdy.

“Are we too late?” his dad asked, beaming so wide his cheeks practically creased shut. “We dropped everything. We weren’t going to miss this.”

“We’re so proud of you, baby.”

Paul swallowed hard, blinking against the sudden burn in his eyes. He hugged his parents tighter, gratitude pressing so hard against his ribs he could barely breathe.

He'd grown up so lucky—so loved. Even when he made mistakes. Even when he didn't know the right words.

He wanted that for Birdy. For Beverly. For the baby. For all of them. Even for Zeke. That kid's mother was awful, and she shouldn't have contact with her grandbaby, maybe not even with her son.

Paul wanted to be the kind of man his father had been—steady, loyal, always standing in the corner of the woman he loved, no matter what storms came.

He wanted to marry Birdy Chou. Not because they had to. Not because of

guardianship or appearances. But because he loved her. And he wasn't about to lose her without a fight.

Paul pulled back from the hug, grinning a little as he ruffled his dad's thinning hair.

“No,” he said, voice rough with emotion. “You’re not too late.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Birdy stormed through the big double doors of City Hall. She moved fast, furious, certain she'd combust if she didn't keep going. But with every determined step, the fire inside her began to sputter. Burn itself down to something quieter. Something dangerously close to... regret.

He'd rejected her again.

Except—he hadn't.

Not really.

Paul hadn't rejected her the first time, either.

The first time, it had been a power outage and a chat window lost to the storm.

The second time, it had been misunderstanding and heat-of-the-moment pride.

Every time she'd retreated, Paul had come back.

With patience. With clarity. With that steady, maddening calm that made her want to shake him and kiss him in the same breath.

Even today—just now—it hadn't been rejection. He hadn't run. He hadn't turned cold. He'd explained. Or tried to. He'd even told her he loved her, or close enough to break her heart wide open.

The thought hit her like a cold wind, slicing straight through her layers of defensiveness and fear. What was she afraid of, really? That he'd leave? Paul always came back. He listened. He explained. He gave her space—and still stood firm.

Maybe it wasn't Paul she didn't trust. Maybe it was herself.

Birdy slowed just outside the clerk's office, her heart thudding like a second hand ticking out her indecision. She could keep walking. Keep pretending she was better off alone. Or...

She glanced back toward the doors she'd come through. Or she could go back.

Inside, her sisters and Beverly all turned toward her, smiles bright, faces expectant. The baby let out a happy squeal from Beverly's arms, tiny legs kicking like she already sensed this was a big day.

Bunny tilted her head. "Everything okay?"

Kitty elbowed her playfully. "Or were you and your husband-to-be getting an early start on the honeymoon?"

Both sisters giggled, delighted. Birdy swallowed hard and forced a tight smile.

She glanced at Beverly—at the way the girl's shoulders had finally dropped from their usual tense hunch, at the lightness in her eyes she hadn't dared show before.

How could she tell her? How could she tell Beverly that everything she thought she was getting today—safety, family, a future—was about to be ripped away?

Birdy's stomach twisted so hard she had to press a hand to it. The silk of her dress felt too tight, too stiff. She couldn't breathe. Her throat burned. She feared she might

actually be sick, right here in the echoing hall of City Hall, where the lights overhead buzzed like distant judgment.

“Just had to go over some details,” she said.

“Sure,” Kitty said with a quirk to her lips.

“I just need to freshen up,” Birdy said lightly, smoothing a hand over her skirt.

“Mm-hmm,” Bunny teased. “Freshen up.”

“She probably needs to fix her lipstick after making out with her fiancé,” Kitty whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Birdy didn't correct them. She didn't say that she wasn't sure she even had a fiancé anymore. Instead, she turned and headed toward the back hallway, her heels clicking against the floor, the sound sharp and a little desperate.

This didn't make sense. Why would Paul do this? He'd said he wanted to marry her. He'd looked at her like she was everything. She could still feel the imprint of his gaze on her skin—warm, steady, reverent. And then he'd taken it all back.

No. That wasn't fair. He hadn't taken anything back. He hadn't even explained. Because she hadn't let him.

She'd shut him down. Turned away. Marched off like she always did—before he could finish, before she could hear him. Because it was easier to feel betrayed than it was to risk being broken.

But what if she was wrong?

What if there was more to the story? What if—God, what if he'd done something stupid for a good reason?

What if he was still waiting for her, like he always did?

Birdy straightened slowly, the cold dread in her belly giving way to something sharper, hotter—determination. She couldn't let Beverly down. She wouldn't walk away from someone she cared about again without getting the full truth.

A flash of movement caught her eye. A man stood a few feet away, bundled in a thick coat, a hat pulled low over his forehead. His features were familiar in a way that hit her straight in the gut.

The man smiled warmly, the same easy, boyish smile she loved seeing on Paul's face.

"You must be Birdy," he said, his voice rich and kind.

Before she could answer, he stepped forward—arms wide.

Birdy didn't think. She moved into his embrace like it was the most natural thing in the world. His arms wrapped around her, solid and safe and real. He smelled of fresh snow and wood smoke and soap. Like home.

The tears she'd been fighting pricked harder behind her eyes.

"I'm Paul's father," he said, his voice rumbling comfort against her ear. "Welcome to the family, sweetheart."

Birdy squeezed her eyes shut. She melted into his embrace. A part of her—an old, raw, battered part—soaked up his affection like parched earth drinking rain.

When he pulled back, he cupped her shoulders and looked her square in the eye. “You having second thoughts?”

Birdy tried to laugh, but it came out watery. “I’ve never felt like this before. I’m so confused. I don’t know what I’m feeling.”

“You don’t have to feel it alone,” Mr. Winters said. “You can tell Paul. He’ll walk through it with you. Or you can tell me. I’m already on your side.”

Birdy’s throat closed. She didn’t just want Paul. She wanted this. This steady, kind, unwavering love.

She opened her mouth to confess—to pour it all out?—

And that’s when she saw it. A blur across the parking lot.

Zeke. Running.

Beverly close behind him, cradling the baby protectively against her chest.

Why was she running behind Zeke?

Because he was pulling her.

Birdy jerked out of her future father-in-law’s arms. Her heart leapt into her throat as the picture out in the parking lot grew clearer. Zeke was kidnapping mother and daughter.

“No,” Birdy gasped. “No, no?—”

She took off at a dead sprint. Out the side door. Down the steps. Across the sidewalk

and into the parking lot. Her sensible shoes slipped on the ice-slicked pavement.

Behind her, Paul's father shouted something—but Birdy didn't hear it.

All she could see was Beverly's terrified face—and the baby's tiny arms reaching out.

And the feeling—bone-deep, all-consuming—that if she didn't catch them, she was going to lose everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Phones rang off desks. A police radio crackled.

The loud hum of voices filled the big open lobby as the wedding party and half the town's emergency volunteers scrambled to coordinate the search.

Paul moved through the chaos of City Hall like a man on a mission, his gaze laser-focused on Birdy, who sat at a small round table by the window.

For the first time that he'd known her, she was still. Silent. A porcelain cup was clutched between her hands like a lifeline.

Paul crossed to her, weaving past volunteers, ignoring the worried glances being thrown his way. When he reached her side, he saw the cup was empty. She was just holding it, not even realizing.

He knelt down in front of her. Gently, he pried the empty cup from her fingers. He set it on the table and replaced it with a fresh, steaming one from a passing volunteer. When his fingers brushed hers, he found them cold and trembling.

Birdy lifted her head to find his gaze. Her eyes were too wide, too bright, full of emotions she wasn't letting fall. She clasped his fingers, desperate and vulnerable, and he didn't hesitate. Paul sank fully onto one knee, his hands enclosing hers.

"I'm here," he said quietly. "We're going to get through this. We're going to find them."

For a long, suspended heartbeat, she just looked at him. Then she nodded, a tiny, broken motion. Then she did something that Paul would have never expected.

Birdy Chou bent her head and burrowed into his chest like she could hide there. Paul wrapped his arms around her tightly, fiercely, feeling the delicate trembling that ran through her body. She smelled of honey and mint and... strangely, a little like his dad.

She was still in her dress. He was still in his suit. The lace of her wedding dress crinkled under his palms. His tie felt strangling around his throat.

This wasn't how this day was supposed to end.

Paul pressed a kiss to the crown of Birdy's hair and let himself dream for half a second. He dreamed of standing with her in front of the town clerk, of slipping a ring onto her finger, of signing the papers that made her his, not by necessity but by choice.

He wondered how late City Hall stayed open.

They had a big mission to complete: finding Beverly and the baby.

Paul didn't doubt for a second that they would.

The kids couldn't have gotten that far. One thing he didn't want to let slip through his fingers was ending this day without making Birdy Chou his wife.

"It's okay," he murmured as she shuddered in his arms. Paul tightened his hold. "I've got you. I'm here. I'm strong enough for both of us."

Birdy shifted, pulling back just far enough to look up at him, her eyes searching his.

“Because you have to?”

Paul brushed a stray hair that dared defy her bun. “Because I have to what?”

That stray wasn't alone. Other wisps of hair had escaped her bun to frame her face. They softened her features, making her looking both vulnerable and lovely.

“You said once that the strong don’t show up to be heroes. They show up because someone has to.”

“I did say that.”

“You showed up. Even after I pushed you away.”

Paul cupped her face, his thumb brushing the soft curve of her cheek. “I’m not here because I have to be, Birdy. I’m here because I want to be. I want to be with you.”

Birdy sucked in a trembling breath. Her shoulders relaxed. A few more tendrils of her hair fell from the loosening hold of her bun.

In that moment, Paul felt like he had all the time in the world. Closing hours in City Hall could come and go. Birdy Chou had just granted him forever.

“Love isn’t protecting someone from challenges,” he said. “It’s standing beside them in the fight.”

She leaned her forehead against his, breath warm and mingling with his. That closeness, the tender brush of skin, the way her eyes fluttered shut, it stole every last thought from Paul’s head except kiss her .

“I’m a really good fighter,” Birdy whispered.

Paul let out a quiet chuckle, rough with affection, and brought both hands to cradle her face. Her skin was soft against his palms, but he could feel the tension humming beneath it. Energy. Fire. The storm of her.

“I will always have your back,” he said. “Even when I disagree with you.”

“I’m never wrong.”

“Whatever you say, dear.”

His thumbs traced the curve of her cheekbones. Her lashes lifted, and their eyes locked. Her mouth was a breath away from his.

Paul leaned in, a fraction closer, drawn like a tide to the shore. Like her mouth was the answer to every ache in his body. Her hands slid up his chest, curling into his lapels.

A crash of the front doors broke the moment. Zeke’s mother stormed into the lobby like a winter squall. “You called the police on my son! My son is trying to protect his child. And you—you people—are conspiring to take her away. I’ll have all your jobs! Every single one of you!”

Birdy stepped forward first, spine straight, chin high. Paul followed instantly, his instincts screaming to put himself between her and the fury barreling through the doors. But this wasn’t a war she needed shielding from—this was a stand they needed to take together.

So he didn’t step in front of her. He stepped beside her. He reached out and laced his fingers with hers. Her hand, warm and steady, tightened around his without hesitation.

Before either of them could speak, the mayor stepped forward, his voice calm but iron-clad.

“Ma’am,” Teddy said crisply. “You are in a public building. A place of civil service and support. If you raise your voice again or continue to threaten these professionals, I will personally escort you out. And I won’t need a badge to do it.”

The woman sputtered, her gaze bouncing around the room, searching for backup—and finding none. Everyone stood firm. Everyone stood with Paul and Birdy.

The next sound in the room was a shrill one. It wasn't Zeke's mother. It was Paul's phone.

Some instinct told him it was best he took a look at the caller ID. So he did. The name on the face of the phone read Unknown Caller .

That same instinct that told Paul to look at the phone told him to answer it.

“Winters,” he said, voice tight.

There was a beat of silence. Then a voice, low and tense.

“It’s Zeke,” the boy said. “I—I need help.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Birdy gripped the passenger door handle tighter as the narrow road turned from paved asphalt to a rutted dirt path. The woods thickened around them. Branches hung low, weighed heavy with snow. The world turned muffled and silent except for the crunch of tires over salt-dusted gravel.

Beside her, Paul drove with calm focus. His big hands were steady on the wheel. But she could feel the tension rolling off him. The worry was sharp enough to taste in the cold air that seeped through the closed windows.

They hadn't told anyone at the courthouse where they were going.

That had made Zeke's mother rant and rage.

But they'd left the mayor and the police behind to deal with her.

The more she screeched, the more it was clear to see that she was a major part of the problem.

Not that that excused Zeke's behavior one bit.

"She threatened you."

Birdy turned to Paul. "Who?"

"Zeke's mom... she threatened your business. If we went through with the

guardianship.”

Birdy blinked. The pieces clicked into place with sickening clarity. “That’s why you called off the wedding.”

“I thought I was protecting you. You told me how much your business meant to you. I couldn't?—”

“You thought you couldn't compete with my career?”

He lifted one shoulder as she turned the steering wheel.

“Well, you know you kinda saved my career when we first met.”

“I helped you file some paperwork. Actually, I pulled some strings to slide your paperwork under the door and then?—”

“I choose you.”

The vehicle was going straight down a two-lane highway that had been reduced to one lane, with the snow piled up on each side. Paul took one hand off the wheel. He laced it with Birdy's, and they drove in silence for a while.

Up ahead, a cabin emerged from the tangle of frost-laced trees. It was tucked deep into one of the wealthier outskirts of town. The stretch was known for private properties and generational wealth. But this place didn’t gleam with affluence.

Its once-proud bones had gone soft with time.

The wood siding was faded to a silvery gray and warped in places.

The porch sagged slightly to the left, its railing bowed like tired shoulders.

One shutter hung loose by a single rusted hinge, clapping idly in the wind.

A light puff of smoke curled from the chimney, the only sign that someone still cared enough to keep the fire burning.

It had the look of something that had been passed down but never properly maintained: still technically valuable, still part of something exclusive, but left to slowly unravel in the shadows.

Beverly and Zeke sat side by side on the sagging porch steps.

Both kids' knees were drawn up, their breath fogging in the cold. Beverly's posture was composed—shoulders squared, chin lifted.

But her eyes tracked every movement like a cornered animal waiting to flinch.

She was unharmed, but wariness clung to her like the blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

Beside her, Zeke looked like the storm had already hit him.

His hoodie hung loose off one shoulder, hands jittering between his knees.

He kept bouncing his foot like he was trying to shake something off—guilt, fear, the sheer pressure of too many bad choices.

His eyes darted toward the tree line and then to Beverly, landing nowhere for long.

He looked young. Too young for the weight bowing his spine.

Too young to be the villain. Too tired to be anything else.

As the truck rolled to a stop in front of them, Zeke stood, his posture wary but not aggressive. Birdy barely waited for the vehicle to stop before jumping out, her heels slipping slightly on the icy gravel.

“Beverly,” she called, rushing forward.

The girl rose too, smiling shakily. “I’m okay. The baby’s inside, sleeping.”

Birdy wrapped Beverly in a fierce hug, holding on tightly, her heartbeat thudding against Beverly’s ear.

For one moment, just one, she let herself feel the sheer relief of finding them safe.

Then she pulled back, hands flying up to frame the girl’s face, scanning her from head to toe. “Are you hurt? Did he?—”

Beverly shook her head.

Birdy exhaled. Her shoulders dropped—just an inch—before her gaze snapped up to Zeke. The warmth drained from her eyes. Her hands dropped from Beverly’s shoulders as she turned. Her glare landed squarely on Zeke, sharp enough to flay skin.

“What. Were. You. Thinking?” she asked, each word cold and clipped, her voice low but laced with steel.

“I didn’t mean to make things worse,” he said, voice low and raw. “I just... nobody listens to me. They all just tell me what to do. I just wanted to talk to Beverly. I know it was stupid. I know I caused a mess. I just... I don’t know how to do better.”

Zeke scrubbed a hand through his hair, looking every bit the lost boy.

Birdy's anger faltered, uncertainty sneaking in. She didn't want to feel anything for Zeke.

She had spent the better part of her career going to war against men like him—entitled, explosive, manipulative.

Men who used apologies like erasers, who wielded power like fists.

She'd sat across from too many scared women with bruised arms and broken trust, women who told her that the man they once loved was “just stressed” or “didn't mean it” or “didn't know any better. ”

And now here was Zeke, looking at her with eyes that were too old and too young all at once, shoulders drawn up like a boy bracing for punishment that had been doled out his whole life.

Her instincts screamed for her to shut him down, to draw the line and make it permanent. Because she did not want to cross to his side of the street. But she didn't have to.

Paul stepped forward, quiet and steady beside her. This—this was his lane. Redemption. Intervention. Grace.

So Birdy stepped back. Because she didn't have to save everyone. She had a partner at her side.

“I don't wanna be with my mom,” Zeke was saying. “But she controls everything. She won't let me work. She watches my car with GPS. Tracks my bank account. Calls if I'm five minutes late. If I leave, she cuts me off.”

“That’s abuse, Zeke,” said Paul.

The boy gave a helpless shrug, staring at the scuffed toes of his boots.

Birdy exhaled slowly, her breath puffing in the cold air. She saw him now—not as a threat, not as the enemy. As a scared kid trapped in a life too small, too tight, too suffocating. The same way Beverly had been trapped. The same way too many girls Birdy had represented had been.

Beverly wiped at her eyes. “I don’t want him to get in trouble. I just... I want him to get help. Like you helped me.”

“I can do that,” Paul assured Beverly. Then he turned back to Zeke. “But you're going to have to agree. You're going to have to meet me more than halfway.”

Zeke shifted, uncertainty flickering across his face.

“The problem isn’t you,” Paul continued. “It’s her. Your mother.”

“So we take her power away,” Birdy said, feeling something fierce and certain rise inside her. “We cut the leash she has around your neck.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Paul stood at the altar, his heart thundering in his chest, his palms slightly damp even though he wasn't nervous. At least not about his impending marriage. Never about that.

His thoughts swirled with everything else.

He had a dozen cases, a dozen lives he was trying to help stitch back together.

The young mother who came into the office last week looking like she hadn't eaten in two days—her cheeks hollow, her arms wrapped protectively around her toddler like a human shield.

But Fish had started slipping extra meals into her pickup orders from the bakery, and Jules made sure she left with bread, muffins, and something sweet to remind her she deserved a little kindness.

Then there was the seventeen-year-old who'd filed for emancipation from a nightmare home situation, a kid too old for foster care but too young to carry that kind of burden. Paul had worried endlessly about him—until Noah mentioned needing help in the kitchen, and Jacqui said she could always use an extra set of hands at Chow Town. They'd taken him in and handed him an apron and a place to belong. It was a start.

He was still worried about looming budget cuts to youth outreach and after-school programs. But Mayor Teddy had sat down with him over coffee three times that week

to go over strategy.

And Paul also knew he had an in with the mayor's very persuasive fiancée who had told Paul on more than one occasion that he was her favorite brother-in-law.

Though Paul figured he'd won that spot by default since he was the only present brother-in-law.

They were applying for a grant next month. Paul wanted to get some good press ahead of it, maybe a human interest story that would show the program's heart. Jed, who had one foot in the restaurant world and the other still in TV, said he knew a producer who owed him a favor.

So no, Paul wasn't worried about his wedding. He wasn't even worried about work—not really. He'd found a community of heroes. People who showed up not for glory but because someone had to. And he was about to marry one of the fiercest among them.

Birdy Chou didn't just fight for people—she lit the way for them. Paul's only prayer, as he stood there waiting to call her his wife, was that he could be the man worthy of walking beside her in that light. Every single day.

Warmth radiated from the crowd packed into the pews—family, friends, the entire town, it seemed. Smiling faces, glistening eyes, tissues tucked discreetly into hands.

And then—Birdy.

She walked toward him in a simple breathtaking gown that skimmed her figure like it had been stitched by angels. Her hair was down, loose and soft around her shoulders, like he'd always imagined. Like she trusted him enough to let him see her unguarded.

He almost left his place at the altar and walked to her. He wanted to be anywhere she

was. She was everything.

When she reached his side, he took her hand in his. He threaded their fingers together, like a lock finally finding its key.

The pastor spoke, but Paul barely heard him. Because all he could see, all he could feel, was Birdy. His wife-to-be. When it came time for his vows, Paul's voice was steady, sure.

"You told me once," he said, his thumb brushing along the back of her hand, "that you wanted love that didn't make you smaller. I don't want to take your light. I want to stand in it with you. Every day."

A chorus of sighs rippled through the crowd. Someone sniffled audibly.

Birdy's face crumpled for just a second before she smiled—a smile that lit him up from the inside. When it was her turn, her voice trembled at first but grew stronger with every word.

"Paul, you support me. You make me feel bright. Whole. You don't try to shrink me to fit yourself. You stretch yourself to meet me where I am. I vow to stand tall beside you. And be strong enough to let you hold me when I feel weak. To trust you to be my strength, my partner, my best friend."

Paul's heart swelled so big he thought he might not survive it. He dipped his head to kiss her, but a throat being cleared held him back.

The pastor smiled indulgently at him. "By the power vested in me... I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Finally! Paul cupped Birdy's face in both hands and kissed her. His kiss was soft and reverent at first, then deeper, more sure. He was vaguely aware of the church erupting

in cheers and clapping and a few joyful whistles.

Paul didn't want to, but he knew custom dictated that he not make out with his new wife in front of the whole town. It was a stupid rule. But one he'd have to obey if he wanted to get out of here soon and get his new wife alone. And so he pulled back, just enough to rest his forehead against hers.

“Mine,” he whispered.

“Yours,” she whispered back.

He turned with her to face their family—their community. His parents stood near the front, his mom wiping her eyes unabashedly. His dad grinned so widely his cheeks might split. His brothers hooted and pumped their fists.

Beverly and Zeke sat in the second pew, the baby between them.

Zeke looked awkward but hopeful, his big hand tentatively holding the baby's tiny one as she giggled and gurgled at him. Beverly smiled softly, still a little wary, but there was kindness in her gaze. They were healing.

Around them, the Chou women and their husbands celebrated.

Jacqui leaned against her rugged husband.

Jules laughed with her gruff, adoring beast of a man.

Jami stole a kiss from her handsome chef.

Jacqui's fingers were entwined with Teddy's, who rubbed his thumb over the engagement ring on her left hand.

At the very end of the row, their grandmother, N?inai sat beaming smugly. She gave Paul a wink before her gaze lifted upward, as if she were silently telling her late husband, Another mission accomplished .

But then Paul noticed N?inai glance sideways—to Kitty.

Kitty sat smiling, clapping along with the rest, but there was a telltale shimmer in the young woman's eyes. A brightness that was all sadness, no joy. She was the only Chou woman alone.

Paul looked down at Birdy, glowing beside him, and his heart squeezed tighter still. They had helped so many already. Maybe it was time to help one of their own next.

He squeezed Birdy's hand gently. Birdy's eyes danced. A tear slipped free down her cheek. It did something to him that she let him see her this vulnerable.

Paul caught the tear with his thumb. Then he pressed a kiss to the corner of her eye.

“Thank you for not brushing me off,” she said.

“Thank you for taking my help.”

“Too bad there's not a snowstorm or power outage to get us out of this party so we can start a private chat.”

Paul grinned, leaning in close, his voice low against her ear. “Hmm... let me see what I can do. Forecast's calling for a hundred percent chance of us getting snowed in... somewhere steamy.”

Want to meet Kitty's husband?

So does she!

The reunion happens in

The Enlisted Engagement!