



Blindsided By Fake Love

(Sweet Sports Kisses #1)

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Category: Sport

Description: A jilted bride. A rebound marriage. And a lifetime of secret pining.

Beau

My teammates know I'm not the biggest party guy, and Vegas is not my scene. But they wouldn't take no for an answer.

When Christy 'Kit' Garrett, my high school nemesis, appears out of nowhere, wearing a wedding gown, I'm certain I'm hallucinating.

Fast forward twelve hours later: I have a massive headache, a ring on my finger, and Kit sleeping next to me.

Kit

Yesterday I was set to go from Miss. to Mrs., until my fiancé left me at the altar.

That man was not Beau Matthews, Blindsided Flanker for the Ironclad Marauders, so a dream about marrying him is beyond bizarre.

But when Beau's gruff voice penetrates my sleep filled haze, and I find steel grey eyes staring back at me; It's safe to say I wasn't dreaming.

The real surprise? I'm not sure it was a mistake.

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Chapter One

Beau

Tie game. Five seconds left, and we just scored a try. The two point conversion would put us over the top for the win against the Vegas Scrum Renegades.

They played a great game but it appears like the Ironclad Marauders' will go home with the win.

As long as our fly-half makes the kick.

Who says rugby isn't exciting?

Swiping the towel across my face, I wet my mouth with a last drink before handing it and the water bottle back to the Marauders' water carrier. The sun is high and the dry heat is working to rip every ounce of fluid from my body.

"BD is coming out with us tonight when I get these points," Ralph 'Karate Kid' Marone taunts, taking a swig of water—his mom and dad are huge '80s movie and series fans. I side-eye him and stiffly shake my head. My team knows I'm not a big party guy, especially after a game. "Come on, Beau Duke! We're in Vegas. You have to come out with us for a tiny bit. Then you can go back to your boring, old existence."

"Get it through the uprights, and we'll see," I grumble. The rest of the 'younger' guys snicker at what is a regular occurrence for most of our away games. Ralph is

continually working to get me to ‘whoop it up’—party—with the team. I love playing with my teammates, but most of them are young. I remember being there...eight years ago.

It was fun while it lasted, but it's just not my thing anymore. Me? I'm ready for the hot tub that has my name written all over it.

We jog back onto the pitch to the sound of fans cheering and get into position at the 22-meter line for the conversion that could win the Marauders the game.

Lining up into position, Karate Kid gets ready. He points to me, a cocky grin on his face. Running a hand through my wet hair, my lips quirk slightly. A rumble moves through my body and I shake my head. The arrogance of this kid never fails to amaze me.

Even though I didn't say yes, Ralph has no intention of letting me stay in tonight because he won't miss.

He never does.

Nursing a Dr. Pepper, I watch the guys shamelessly tease each other. My lips twitch. The murmur of the people at the bar is mixed with bells, clinking coins, and the occasional cheer from someone's successful wager.

Drinks flow freely, and the boys get more boisterous, which makes me grin. They're a good group; they just enjoy celebrating after a win.

A small glass is shoved in front of my face. I push a hand out and shake my head.

“Just one?” Jackson ‘Worm’ Martin, the Marauders' scrum half, pleads. I peek at the drink he's holding and glance back up at Jackson. This won't be their last attempt

tonight, but I'll have the same answer.

"Sorry, boys." I shrug, lips quirking. Raising my glass toward them, I continue. "Consider me the designated driver."

"We can get an Uber," someone shouts.

My lips curl up, and I laugh softly. Looking up, I find fourteen sets of eyes directed my way and watch the hopeful expressions in their eyes fade. Some of them pretend to act like they're wounded. I roll my eyes and take another sip of Dr. Pepper.

"Worth a shot." Jackson winks at me and shrugs.

Bouncing back as if nothing happened, Karate Kid raises his glass to the sky and shouts. "To a hard-fought win against a tough opponent. May the rest of our season be this victorious!"

I raise my glass to support that toast.

"Beau!" A feminine voice calls out. Glancing over my left shoulder, I see a woman in a wedding dress waving what seems to be a bouquet, walking in my direction.

Rubbing my eyes, I freeze. "Kit?" I barely breathe out. My skin tingles as a thrill surges through me.

"Did you forget to tell us you're getting married tonight, big guy?" Oliver Benjamin, the Marauders' hooker, slaps me on the back laughing. The other guys start hooting and hollering just as Christy 'Kit' Garrett calls my name again.

Her auburn hair is up, well, partially; the rest of it gives the appearance that she's been in a scuffle and lost. Her hazel brown eyes are sparkling, and she seems slightly

off balance as she makes her way toward me.

My breath catches, and my heart stops before beating like a jackhammer.

An elated grin spreads across her face, but as she gets closer, I can see her mascara is smudged. Her hands are raised up, and I'm not sure if she's going to hug me or slap me. Considering the last time I saw her, it could be either.

My body tenses, but then she throws her arms around my neck and plants her mouth on mine—the mouth I spent all senior year dreaming about. I stiffen for a moment before wrapping my arms around her and kissing her back. Lifting her up, I pull her body flush against me. Every inch of me vibrates.

It's been years since I've seen her. The last time was a warm August night the summer after graduation. And as much as kissing her was what I wanted to do back then, I didn't dare.

“Beau,” she says, breathless. The dazzling smile she beams my way leaves me heated. Like a burning candle, melted wax dripping down its side. “Beau Matthews. Imagine finding you here today of all days.”

“Looks like BD is getting married!” Noah Jones, one of the Marauders second row, teases, and the others snicker. I ignore them all. My sole focus is intently on the woman I'm still holding in my arms. The sweet scent of honeysuckle overwhelms my senses and brings back the past.

“I wanted to do that that night,” she whispers, running a finger down my lips. A crooked smile slides across my face before she taps me on the cheek...hard. “If only you weren't...”

My chest clenches. I remember that moment well.

“Are you okay?” I ask, brows furrowing. “Don’t get me wrong, that was the best greeting of my life. But even you have to admit it’s a bit out of character, considering our history.”

I watch the light in her eyes dim and her arms loosen from around my neck. As I gently lower her to the ground, she smacks me in the chest with her bouquet and lets out a weary chuckle before cackling.

Quirking a brow, I wait for her to respond. She’s acting the opposite of the serious Christy Garrett I remember, especially when interacting with me. The only reason I could see her being this ‘friendly’ is that she’s been imbibing.

I’m sure this isn’t typical for her—okay, it’s been a while since I’ve seen her, and I’m making a big assumption—the question is why?

“Completely fine.” She waves her hand in the air. Taking a step away from me, she sways, and I reach out with a hand to steady her. “I’m celebrating.”

“Celebrating?” My forehead pulls together.

“Celebrate with us!” Karate Kid chirps, waving his hand toward the bar and earning a scowl from me. He grins and lifts his hands, shrugging.

“Great idea!” Kit shouts, throwing an arm in his direction and shaking my hand off. I watch as she unsteadily marches her way toward the bar. The guys part like the Red Sea and open a space so she can sit on one of the stools.

Before the group can close up around her, I push my way through and place my body firmly behind her, surprising everyone. From the whispers I hear behind me; the ribbing I’m going to get about Kit will be merciless. But right now, I have an old ‘friend’ who seems to be in trouble.

An old nemesis is a better description. The truth is I only tried to make her life miserable because she was the girl I wanted. Teenage boys are ridiculous, I know. Hormones. What can I say?

“Let’s celebrate my fiancé, Scott Palmer, leaving me at the altar!” She says sardonically. My jaw clenches at the thought of her marrying that tool. Scott Palmer was two years older than us and a complete slimeball. Why would Kit want to marry him?

“You dodged a bullet,” I mutter.

“To dodging a bullet,” Jackson shouts. A mischievous glint in his eyes as he nudges me and hands me a shot. “We should all drink to that.”

Cheers from my teammates and Kit erupt. Rolling my eyes, I take the shot and chug it. The burning of the liquid moving through my body drowns out the burning sensation in my chest.

I open my eyes and immediately snap them shut as sunlight sends exploding pain through my skull. I take a deep breath and a heaviness weighs down my chest and thighs. Keeping my eyes closed, I slide a hand down and come upon an arm resting there. Squinting, I glance over and find red wavy locks spread out around my head.

Slamming my eyes shut, I groan.

What the heck happened last night, and which one of my teammates am I going to have to murder?

Opening my eyes again, I turn my head to find Kit still in her wedding gown and breathe a sigh of relief. Slowly sliding out from under her arm and leg, I scooch off the side of the bed and gently roll to the floor. I grip my head with my hands, leaning

back against the bed as a hammer bangs against my skull.

Resting my elbows on my knees, I take slow, deep breaths in an attempt to calm my accelerated heart rate. Behind me, I hear Kit grumbling in her sleep and a rustling noise as she switches positions. My lip curls up at the sweet tone of her voice—only to gasp as an image of us standing at an altar pops into my mind.

Slapping my hand over my mouth, I hold my breath and listen for any sound alerting me to her waking up. When her even breathing reaches my ears, I blow out a quiet breath.

I run my hand down my face but pause when I feel something cold. I peel my hand away from my face and catch sight of a gold band. I pinch the bridge of my nose. Spreading my fingers, I slowly open my eyes again and peek down at my left hand.

My eyes widen to the size of saucers, a jolt runs through me, replacing the pain in my head.

Carefully getting up, I turn, and face Kit stretched out on the bed, a small smile resting on her face.

Even after all this time, she really is captivating, even more so when she's not taunting me with some audacious comeback that has her eyes sparkling and my stomach tightening. Unable to stop myself from giving in to the itch telling me I have to touch her, I walk over to her side of the bed and gently push her hair back from her face.

My body tenses right before my heart sinks to my stomach.

Shaking my hand through my hair, I frantically search around for my phone and a room key. I need to get out of here and think about how I'm going to handle my

current situation.

Walking quickly and quietly toward the door, I rub my chest to work away the tightness gathering when I look down.

Probably a good idea to put a shirt on first.

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Chapter Two

Kit

Memories I've pushed to the deep recesses of my mind come back in full force. A dream that was so real I'm left with an ache. The touch of him. That scent of Obsession mixed with the essence that was purely Beau Matthews fills every one of my senses.

Gray eyes with that mischievous glint stare back at me, crinkling at the corner. The smile that tortured me as a girl and still makes my stomach swoop as a woman. Fingers running over full lips on that one summer night I thought they would finally be pressed against mine.

Movement next to me tries to pull me out of the dream I never want to wake up from. I fight against it. I want to stay right here, with this man, for as long as possible before I'm ripped back and have to deal with what happened yesterday.

"Kit." The husky voice of the man I'm dreaming about seeps through my consciousness. Knowing I'm imagining it, I wave my hand to make whoever is not Beau saying my name go away.

A gentle touch slides my hair off my face and the voice tries again. "Kit. It's time to wake up."

Blinking awake, the brightness of the morning light startles me, but not quite as much as the face and gray gaze I've been dreaming about watching me.

The sheepish, lopsided grin sends my pulse racing. I snap my eyes shut and blink hard for good measure before I open them again. When I do, I inspect the man standing over me.

“Beau?” His lips twitch, warmth spreading through me. I hesitantly reach out to touch him but stop myself. “Are you real?”

His rich chuckle runs through my body, sending chills down my spine. “Here.” He holds out a coffee to me. “I thought you might need a bit of caffeine after last night.”

“Last night?” I ask, pulling myself up; I take the cup of coffee and lean against the headboard.

“I just got you a regular latte since I have no idea what you like.” He shoves his hands into his jeans. “Heck, I’m not even sure you like coffee.”

“Cream or milk?” I say, bringing the cup to my mouth and sighing. “Cream. Good call.”

Lifting the cup again, I pause and turn toward Beau, who is still gazing down at me with a self-conscious expression. “How did you get in my room?”

“I think a better question is, how much do you remember about last night?” He pulls his bottom lip in with his teeth, his body moving up and down. I check out his feet to find him tapping the heel of one of them.

“Last night?” I echo. “Honestly, I don’t remember much after...”

I stop not wanting to tell anyone that Scott left me at the altar yesterday. After being engaged for years. Years. Not wanting to set a date, he suggests we come to Las Vegas and finally get married. It wasn’t my dream wedding by any means. But any

wedding is better than no wedding, right?

Wrong.

Especially if the man you came here to marry tells you, in front of a room full of strangers, that he can't go through with the wedding. That he isn't even sure he ever really loved you and that proposing was a mistake.

A mistake?! Like he couldn't tell me that in Starhaven?

Him calling off our engagement would've been embarrassing enough. But ending our relationship twenty-one hundred miles away in front of a room full of strangers? Humiliating.

"Do you remember...umm...calling out to me?" He questions, brows drawn together and jaw tight. I narrow my eyes and tilt my head, trying to figure out what he's not saying.

Pressing a hand to my forehead, I wince only to groan at the pounding that ensues. "No," I grumble. "I just remember not handling Scott leaving me at the altar so well."

"I know." I whip my head toward him, regretting the moment I do. His gaze is filled with a myriad of emotions that I can't read. "I'm so sorry he did that to you, Christy."

Turning from me, he walks toward the window. I can see his shoulders rise and fall as he exhales.

I also can't help but notice how broad his shoulders are or how his arms stretch the T-shirt he's wearing to max capacity.

Those must be some really strong seams.

When he turns back to me and meets my gaze, my cheeks heat at being caught checking him out. But then I notice the worry lining his forehead, and my stomach twists.

“So...” he starts hesitantly. And my eyes are drawn back to his bottom lip as he chews on it. “I have some news.”

“News?” I parrot him for the thousandth time in five minutes. His mouth lifts and it’s suddenly too warm in here.

“Yes,” he says with a laugh. “News.”

Then he scrunches his face and spits out. “So apparently we got married last night.” His chest falls and I watch his face relax. “I wasn’t sure I could get that out.”

My brows furrow and I tilt my head. “You got it out okay, but I have absolutely no idea what you said.”

I watch him drag his hands over his cheeks and roughly rub up and down, nearly laughing at his obvious distress.

But then I see it.

The gold band on his left hand.

Slamming my hand against my lips, I squeak out.
“Did you just say we got married last night?!”

My world is falling out from under me.

“Yes!” He drops his head back and blows out a short breath. “That was so hard to

say.”

The back of my eyes burn, and my throat tightens. In two steps, Beau is on the bed before me, wrapping his arms around me. Held against his warmth, his steady pulse beating against my cheek, a sense of safety comes over me.

“Kit. We’ll fix this. I promise. No one needs to know. I’ll tell my teammates that if anyone talks about the events of last night, they’ll rue the day they were born.”

“Your teammates?” I creak, dropping my head in my hands. Of course, he’s a professional athlete; I mean, only athletes have bodies like his. “Great! You’re a professional football player. I’m sure someone saw us together and took a picture. We’re probably all over the internet.”

He chuckles, and I glare at him. His face sobers, but his eyes twinkle. “Not a professional football player.” I relax, only to tense up at his next words. “A professional rugby player.”

“Noooo.” I push off of his chest, that’s too hard to be just muscles, and land on the bed. “How could you let this happen?!”

“Well, before the rest of the night got fuzzy, I distinctly remember you—” he lightly pokes me in the shoulder. “Calling out to me and kissing me soundly in front of my entire team.”

“What?!” My eyebrows shoot past my hairline.

“Yup.” He nods and a smirk creeps onto his lips. I want to wipe it away. “You were...umm...very excited to see me. Not that I’m complaining or anything. But—”

I lift my arm and slap him on his shoulder, but I might as well be a fly with what little

impact it has. “That’s not funny.”

“It wasn’t funny at all...it was umm...quite nice.”

“Beau!” Screeching, I conceal my head with my hands, heat crawling up my entire body and my cheeks burning. “Please say you’re teasing me.”

“Of course, I’m teasing you.” Relief floods me. “But I’m not joking. Everything I just told you is true.”

Dropping my head in my hand, my stomach rolling, and I groan loudly.

“Kit,” Beau’s gentle voice is doing funny things to my insides. “Look at me.”

I shake my head. I’m never leaving this room or this state. I’ll just have to change my name and start a new life out here because there is no way I’m heading home as not only a jilted bride but now a wife. That’s just crazy talk.

I’d rather fall off the face of the earth than deal with the people in town talking.

A finger gently lifts my chin, but I squeeze my eyes shut, refusing to let him see how humiliated I am. But I can’t stop a tear from rolling down my cheek. A rough finger wipes it away gently, and a sigh falls from me.

“Kit, please,” Beau’s deep voice is gentle and pleading. “Look at me.”

Unable to refuse the beseeching tone, I look up and nearly fall into the emotions I see reflected in his gaze.

“I promise I will fix this. I’ll call my attorney and have him reach out to you immediately. We’ll get this marriage annulled. And I’ll tell every one of our fourteen

witnesses that if they breathe a word of anything that happened, I'll make up some ridiculous locker room stories and leak them all to the press."

I stare at him, unable to form words with all the thoughts galloping through my head. They're moving so fast I can barely grasp them.

But there's one that won't stop repeating.

This is the man I could've married years ago.

Dang Luna Larkin.

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Chapter Three

Beau

“Okay?” I say, voice soft.

Kit is staring at me like a deer in headlights, and all I want to do is kiss the worry I see written all over her face away. Let her know I’ll take care of everything. That with how we said we still care about each other, we can get through anything.

But just like that one night, I don’t dare do that.

She doesn’t remember any of it. And I’m not forcing myself into her life.

My stomach spirals, and I have a metallic taste in my mouth. But it’s not from the hangover.

Last night, we cleared the air. We talked about what happened that summer night when we decided to try dating. About Luna. What I regretted most. Everything.

The clincher? She told me the same.

The wedding? Well, that part’s a bit hazy...the thirty minutes away from the room made me realize I want this second chance. But it’s now clear that she doesn’t.

Swallowing hard, I run a thumb against her soft cheek, knowing this will be the last time I touch her. The ache in my chest is palpable.

Meeting her gaze, my gut tightens.

Nodding, I say, “I got this.”

Staring at me a moment longer, Kit nods slowly before staring at her folded hands and whispering. “I’m just so embarrassed.”

“Why? You stole the show last night.” The lightness in my tone belies the heaviness in my chest.

The glare she gives me makes me grin. This scowl is the Kit I’m used to. The same expression that happened anytime she saw me in the hallway.

“So...” Taking the focus off our short marriage, I change the topic. “What have you been up to since the last time I saw you?”

“You mean last night?” Her mouth quirks, and a brow lifts.

My grin widens, and I laugh softly. “Since high school, dork.”

I missed this back-and-forth with her. The thrill that would course through me anytime I would see her and try to get a rise out of her. I lived for it.

It wasn’t until the one time I went too far and she told me off that I realized the feelings I felt for her had nothing to do with hate.

“Oh, you know. Graduated college. Went to vet school. Opened my own clinic,” Kit responds, interrupting my trip down memory lane.

If I still regret not forcing her to hear me out about Luna when I was eighteen, how much will this hurt?

“What about you?” I don’t answer right away; I can’t. I’m so caught up in the thoughts running through my head, and Kit’s brown eyes have a shade of green around the pupil that changes based on the color she’s wearing. A green that’s the same shade as the trees in spring. Her eyes darken and my gaze drops slightly to her mouth. “Beau?”

Is it me, or is she breathless? “Yeah?”

“What have you been up to since school?” She pushes my shoulder gently. That simple touch does two things.

One, it brings me back to reality, and two, it makes me want to capture her lips and make her mine.

Instead, I answer the question.

“Oh, you know. Graduating college. Playing professional rugby.” I shrug and give her a smirk. “Nothing too exciting.”

Her shoulders drop, and her smile relaxes. “Gen told me you played something. She’s constantly trying to get me to watch with her, but you know I’m not really a big sports fan. She even has an Ironclad Marauders jersey. Number six, I think.”

Immediately I’m reeling from a gut punch. A longing so strong comes over me. I want Kit wearing my jersey.

“I’m happy to have one Garrett sister who’s a fan. How is Genevieve?” I push off the bed and move to the chair a few feet away. If I don’t start creating distance now, I’m not sure I’ll be able to leave.

“Oh, you know, Gen.” Her voice is saying one thing, but the expression on her face

says another. “She’s doing amazing! She’s a sought-after professional dog trainer. Pretty famous in her own right.”

It’s not a surprise to me that both of the Garrett sisters have chosen careers that involve animals. Their entire family loved them.

Wiping my hands down my pant legs, I stand and pull out my phone to open my contacts. “That’s awesome. I’ll make sure to keep her in mind if anyone I know needs help. Can I get your number?”

Silence greets me, and I glance up. I snort at her surprised expression. “I want my attorney to call you about the annulment,” I clarify.

“Oh,” she says, her face relaxing. “Yeah, your attorney.”

She spouts off her number, and I enter it in my phone. Instead of putting Kit Garrett as the contact name, I enter ‘My Wife.’ A tiny zing of energy zips through me when I give her that title. I rationalize it by telling myself I’m protecting her privacy.

Yeah, that’s what it’s for. Not because I like calling her that or anything.

I hit send and hear a ding. “That’s me. Just wanted to make sure I entered it correctly.” Avoiding eye contact, I shove my phone in my pocket and pull out the card key, slipping it on the nightstand beside her.

“I gotta head out,” I throw a thumb over my shoulder. “Don’t want to miss my flight home.”

I lift my head and glance at Kit one more time. Her stare holds questions I don’t have answers to. I let out a sigh and force a smile. “It was great seeing you again. I’m sure I won’t forget the experience anytime soon.”

“Ha.” A taut grin curves her lips, and that question still lingers in her eyes. I try to walk away, but it’s like my feet are carrying concrete cinder blocks. My body won’t move.

Blowing out a deep breath, a small smile crawls across my face, and I turn to walk away. “Beau?” My heart squeezes at the sound of my name on her lips.

“Yeah?” I peek over my shoulder. Letting my eyes roam over her face to memorize every inch before walking out of her life...again.

“If I had to marry anyone, I’m glad it was you.” My mouth drops, but I recognize the teasing gleam in her look. This is just part of the game we’d play.

I place my hand over my heart and bow, never breaking our gaze. “I’m happy to have been of service.” Standing up and holding her gaze one last time I smile. “Bye, Kit. Get home safe.”

Without turning back, I walk out the door. Kit’s faint “Bye, Beau” squeezes my chest. Lifting my hand to my chest, I work to rub out the ache.

“Beau, cuz. How are you?” Mike shouts through my earbuds. “You’re on speaker, and I’m at the station, so behave yourself.”

Mike Matthews, my cousin, is like an older brother to me. He lives in New York State, and is the fire chief for his station. He’s the one person I can trust with my impromptu marriage. And he knows the entire history between me and Kit.

I only used to talk about her incessantly when I was in high school.

Passing the hotel rooms and carrying my overnight bag, I’m heading down to the lobby to meet my team for checkout; then heading to the airport to hop on the plane

ride home.

“Thanks for the heads-up. I have something I need to talk to you about,” my voice echoes as I step into the stairwell, the door slamming closed behind me.

“Is it about that game yesterday?” Cole Nichols, Mike’s best friend and fellow firefighter, asks. “That was a nailbiter. Rugby is growing on me.”

I laugh lightly, I scrub my hand up and down my face, giving extra attention to the morning scruff. Yesterday’s game seems like weeks ago with everything that’s happened since then. “Yeah, it was.”

“Is everything okay?” Mike asks. “You sound off.”

I blow out a heavy breath. “Yes. No. Maybe. I don’t know.” I groan. Stopping on the landing, I lean against the wall and pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Ut-oh” Cole chuckles. “Sounds like girl problems.”

“Give me a second, and I’ll take you off speaker,” Mike says. “Just need to finish doing this one thing.”

“I got it,” Cole says. “Go.”

I hear mumbling on the other end and then steps as Mike walks out of the station and into the parking lot. “Okay spill.”

“Do you remember Kit?”

“The girl you talked my ear off about your senior year of high school and freshman year of college?” Mike teases. “Um, no. Why don’t you tell me who she is?”

I snort and shake my head. Okay so it's safe to say I was obsessed with her for a long time. "I ran into her last night."

"Is that a good or bad thing?"

"It depends, I guess," I hedge. "We did clear the air."

"Finally!" Mike shouts. "Well, isn't that a good thing? Is she single? Maybe you two can try and pick up where you left off."

"Yeah, about that." My chin drops to my chest, and I grip the back of my neck.

"I'm not sure I like that tone."

"We kind of got married." I push out through a tight throat.

"You kind of got married?" Mike's voice gets an octave higher. "Kind of, or you did?"

"We did."

"Beau, that's...wait." I picture Mike scrubbing his face and taking a deep breath. It's what he does whenever his wife Melanie does something that vexes him, and he needs to pull himself together before he says anything that could get him in trouble.

My body rumbles, and the tightness in my chest loosens a bit.

"The two of you talked about everything, and you told her how you felt?" Mike asks, enunciating every word. "Did she tell you how she felt?"

"Yup." My lip curls at the corner. Mike is exactly the comic relief I need at the

moment. Because even though this situation is not funny, his reaction is.

“So it’s good, then?” He affirms.

“Umm—”

“Beau, you’re acting like Mel and it’s driving me crazy. Just tell me what the heck happened.”

“Well that’s the thing…”

“Beau,” Mike growls, and I let out a chuckle.

“Okay, okay. Geez. You’d think you’re the one who just had the craziest night of his life.”

“I’m gonna hang up.”

My eyes crinkle.

“We talked and cleared the air about everything. It was great. Then I woke up next to her this morning with a ring on my finger,” I pause, and take a deep breath before blowing it out.

“And…”

Pushing my head against the wall and squeezing my eyes shut, I mumble. “She doesn’t remember any of it.”

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Chapter Four

Kit

Rubbing my hair with a towel, I pull up Genevieve's contact and hit the call button. My pulse thunders like a runaway herd. I need to tell her what happened yesterday.

Everything that happened! Before my sister has a complete meltdown. It's been almost twenty-four hours since I've talked to her.

Honestly, I'm surprised she hasn't shown up at the hotel already. Sure, she's sent me a ridiculous amount of texts and left ten messages. But as far as I know, she hasn't called the National Guard to come find me yet, so that's a plus.

I'm sure the only reason that hasn't happened is because she believes I'm with Scott.

"Hey! Did your new husband keep you so busy that you couldn't send any pictures of the wedding to your older sister?" Her voice is animated and excited, with a tiny hint of annoyance mixed in. My stomach spins. "You know how much I hated not being able to make it. I was waiting for pictures."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But honestly, you didn't miss much." I giggle awkwardly, a knot forms in my throat. "Except maybe Scott telling me we were a mistake and he couldn't go through with marrying me."

"You're kidding, right?" Genevieve shouts, her voice echoes throughout the bathroom.

“Nope, not kidding.” My throat tightens, and tears threaten to spill. “He did that. With a room full of strangers.”

“Oh, Christy. I’m so so sorry. Is he still alive? Cause if he is, it won’t be for long. I will make sure to hunt him down—”

“Gen, can we leave it be?” I cut her off and try to calm her down. “Just the thought of coming home and everyone finding out what happened is enough to take in. I’d hate to have to bail my sister out of jail and find her a defense attorney in the same week.”

I push my hand through my damp hair and sigh.

“I can’t make any promises.” The frustration lacing her tone tells me she won’t go seeking out Scott, but he better steer clear of her if he knows what’s good for him. The corner of my lip lifts at her protectiveness. “Did he at least have the decency to book a separate room for himself last night?”

“I’m not sure what he did. I haven’t seen him since he walked out before the wedding ceremony.”

“Wait, he left you?” Genevieve’s voice is strained, and every word gets louder as she continues, “In Vegas? By yourself?!”

I suck in a deep breath and slowly exhale.

“Kit! You could’ve died. Someone could’ve taken you. How—”

“I could’ve gotten married...” I chuckle softly, staring at my reflection in the mirror. Still in complete disbelief that an entire night has been wiped from my memory. I don’t remember marrying Beau, and I definitely don’t remember kissing him.

Blah. I really wish I could remember the kissing part.

“Wait, what?!” Genevieve utters. “I’m confused. I thought you said Scott left you...”

“He did.”

“But then, who would you marry?” Genevieve’s bewilderment is comical. This entire situation is a bit humorous. You know, except for the part where I got married. For real. To a man I haven’t seen in a very long time. Not funny.

“Apparently, Beau.” Squeezing the bridge of my nose, I head out of the bathroom and sit on the bed before throwing myself back.

A hint of Obsession surrounds me and a surprise sense of longing fills me.

What if it was Beau that I originally came here to marry?

“Beau? Who’s Beau? I feel like I’m walking around a maze in circles.”

Gen’s voice brings me back to the present and a small rumble moves through my body at an image of her walking around in circles. Before I know what’s happening a hysterical laugh bubbles out of me.

It’s official, I’m losing it.

“Beau,” I force out, wiping a tear from my face. “Beau Matthews.”

“Kit, you’re not making any sense. You haven’t seen Beau in...nooooo!” Genevieve’s voice sounds guttural before raising an octave. “He was in Vegas yesterday for a game, wasn’t he?!”

Putting a palm on my forehead, I nod. “Yup. Great timing, huh?”

“Sounds like serendipitous timing.” I roll my eyes. Here she goes with the whole fate thing. My sister is a huge believer in the ‘there-are-no-coincidences’ and all that ‘woo-woo’ stuff. “I want all the details. Tell me what happened from the moment you saw him.”

“I woke up having the most amazing, realistic dream I’ve ever had in my entire life, and he was in it. But then...”

“But then...” Genevieve repeats, waiting for my next words.

“I woke up.”

“Kitttt,” she groans. “Why do you take pleasure in torturing me?”

She’s not wrong. I do thoroughly enjoy being dramatic, but this getting married thing....I’m still trying to process.

Beau’s gray eyes staring back at me, the five o’clock shadow on his chin, his lips. Oh man, his lips.

“You woke up, and then what?” I forgot that Gen was still on the phone. “Then what?!”

“Beau was staring at me, holding out a cup of coffee.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait. WAIT!” I cover my mouth to keep the giggle wanting to bust out. I can’t believe I’m amused by this when, just a few hours ago, I wanted to cry. Maybe it’s because of how I felt when he held me and told me he would fix it. We’ll get a quick annulment, and no one will be the wiser. “But what about the whole

‘how-you-got-married-part?’”

“Oh that!” I wave a hand in the air and shrug. Heat filling me. “I forgot.”

“You FORGOT?!” Genevieve parrots, and this time, I do laugh out loud. I can’t help it. The genetics between us are strong. I would love to have a replay of me this morning with Beau. I’m pretty sure it would be almost identical to how my sister is acting now.

“Yeah,” I grumble. “I have this teeeeny-tiny problem of not remembering much after my marriage fiasco.”

“Beau left you there, too?” Genevieve growls on the other end of the line, reminding me of one of my four-legged clients who isn’t thrilled to be visiting me. I need to make sure I handle her with care.

“No. Beau would never do that.” The certainty I have at that awareness surprises me.

I hear her softly count to ten before she calmly asks. “What did Beau say happened?”

“He asked me what I remembered.” I pull my bottom lip between my teeth and play with the belt on the robe I’m wearing. “When I said nothing, he told me I gave him a very...umm...enthusiastic greeting. That his entire team got to witness.”

“An enthusiastic greeting?”

“I kissed him, Gen!” I squeak, my face heating. “Like really kissed him. In front of everyone.”

“Well, better late than never.” Pulling the phone from my ear, I stare at the screen, my mouth hanging open.

Did she just say better late than never?

“Better late than...what?”

“Kit, he always had a thing for you.” My stomach flips, and I swallow against the wad of cotton that’s stuck in my throat. “Don’t you remember how he would stare at you?”

“Nooo. I mean, yeah. But that was so that he could tease me,” I say dismissively, ignoring the silly grin, trying to escape. “Like when I would put my lip balm on, and he would stare before saying something like, ‘How many layers do you need?’ or ‘Ewww, cherry!’”

Genevieve giggles. “You still do that! And no. That wasn’t about teasing you.”

“Yes, it was,” I declare. “He did it all the time.”

“Kit, you putting on the amount of lip balm you do is ridiculous—”

“Hey!”

“Buuut he said it because it drew attention to your lips.” Unconsciously, I lift a finger to the organ we’re talking about. “And because your face would scrunch up while your eyes got this fiery glint in them. It was easy to see he couldn’t resist himself. Or you.”

“If that’s true, then why was he dating Luna?”

“First, they were talking and had gone on a few dates. They weren’t dating, dating. Second, he broke things off with her immediately after you had that little talk.”

“I don’t believe you.” I stubbornly cross my arms over my chest and work to push away the gigantic surge that just shot through me. “Why didn’t he come and talk to me? Why did he just let me leave town without saying a word?”

“You don’t remember how many times he called or texted you? What about him showing up at Harris Teeter so often while you were working that people thought he worked there, too?”

“Of course, I remember. I just thought he was taunting me.” That time in my life is crystal clear. Every time Beau showed up around me, I saw red. I felt like I was a joke to him. I was embarrassed and hurt when I thought Beau Matthews, the Beau Matthews, would actually be interested in dating me .

For years, I acted like he annoyed the bejesus out of me, and sometimes, he truly did. But most of the time, everything about Beau made me feel alive.

The gruffness of his voice made my knees weak. His breath, when he whispered stupid things in my ear, sent chills down my spine. That smirk he would give me just as he would throw a zinger at me, heart-melting.

That night, in the park, something changed between us. For the first time, we weren’t trying to one-up each other; we were just enjoying each other’s company. When he told me he liked me and wanted to see where things could go, I nearly floated away. Excitement running through me.

But then I stopped at Circle-K on the way home, where I overheard Luna talking about the two of them going to the movies the next day.

My emotions took a swan dive into the whirlpool that was my stomach. After that I wasn’t about to hear anything he had to say. Or what anyone else was saying, for that matter.

“He wasn’t taunting you.” Genevieve’s words cause my pulse to race. “But that’s neither here nor there now, right?”

“Right,” I say, trying to sound confident in my decision. “His attorney is going to call me, and we’re going to get an annulment.”

“Problem solved.” I can hear Genevieve brushing her hands together. “Sounds like it was a crazy time.”

“Yeah. Crazy indeed.” I pull the phone away from my ear, putting Gen on speaker phone. Peeking at my texts, I see Beau’s number.

Unknown Number:

Beau Matthews

A small smile tugs at my mouth at his text being just his name. Like I could ever forget who he is.

“Did you hear me?” Gen asks.

“No, sorry.”

“Do you need a ride home from the airport?”

“No, I’m good. I have a driver coming to pick me up.” At that second, a text confirms that my driver will indeed be meeting me at the airport at my arrival time. “Let me go and pack. I’ll call when I get home.”

“Sounds good,” she teases. “Mrs. Matthews.”

Before I can respond, she hangs up. But the butterflies flying around my stomach keep me busy for a few hours afterward.

Chapter Five

Beau

“Her not remembering throws a bit of a monkey wrench in things, doesn’t it?” Mike chuckles. I start walking down the stairwell. Missing my flight would be the icing on the cake after the events of the last twelve hours. “It can also give you an easy out if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t know.” Is that what I want? I mean, getting married was idiotic. I don’t know Kit anymore, but apparently, I still have feelings. “At this point, it’s moot. I don’t even know where she lives.”

“But you have her number? Maybe you can call her. Have an honest conversation about why you married her. Actually talk to her this time.”

Running my hand through my hair, I mull over what Mike just said. I could do that. Get to know her again? Would she let me? Memories from the past resurface. Kit was completely unapproachable before. I did everything I could to get her to talk to me. I pushed it to the point where I started to feel like a stalker.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“This sounds awfully familiar, Beau. But hey...it’s your life.” I can imagine Mike shrugging his shoulders. It’s what he always does whenever he doesn’t want to influence a decision that’s mine to make. I hate it. I hate what he says next even more. “The decision is ultimately yours. Hopefully, it’s not one you regret...again.”

Could he be any more dramatic? Leaving the hallway behind, I walk into the hotel lobby and make my way toward my team, waiting by the entryway for the bus to the airport.

“BD! Where’s the wifey?” Karate Kid yells, high-fiving Noah.

“I gotta go,” I mumble, squeezing the back of my neck. Heat creeping up my body.

“Thanks, Mike. I’ll think about everything you said.”

“Anytime,” he responds, then playfully says, “Enjoy your flight home.”

His chuckle rings in my ear as I brace myself for more of my teammates' needling.

“Where’s the ‘Mrs’?” Noah teases, then winks. “You two were awfully comfortable last night. A match made in heaven...or Graceland.”

I scrub my face.

Was that meant to be an Elvis joke?

Groaning, I roll my eyes and plop in the seat next to Jackson. “What about you? Wanna get your hits in, too?”

“Nah.” He shrugs. “I think everyone else has it covered for today...I’ll get you next time I see you.”

I glance over at him and am overwhelmed with gratitude for the reprieve. Even if it’s only temporary. The wink and dancing eyes let me know he’s dying to say something but is restraining himself.

I nod.

“Besides, after what I witnessed last night,” Jackson waggles his eyebrows and nudges me with his elbow, “You have some serious thinking to do.”

Pressing my hand against my forehead, I mutter. “I’m not so sure.” I can’t think clearly right now. My head is pounding, and I hate the way I left things with Kit. My life is spinning out of control, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

“Trust me,” Jackson snickers. “You do.”

I turn toward him right before he sticks his head back in whatever book he’s reading at the moment. He always has his head in a book, it’s how he got his nickname ‘bookworm’, or ‘worm’ for short.

“Worm, can you do me a favor?” Jackson lifts his head and shoots a raised eyebrow in my direction. “Would you ask the guys to keep this quiet for now? Kit is—”

“Gotcha covered, BD,” he leans in and whispers. “The group of us had a meeting this morning. We’ll keep it low-key outside of the locker room.”

“Thanks, man.” Immediately, the tension that’s been gripping my shoulders eases. His next words bring it back in full force.

“Though once you decide to stay married, you’re never going to hear the end of it.”

Covering my face with my hand, I grumble.

“Time to go, boys,” Max Taylor, the Ironclad Marauders assistant coach, yells out. “Let’s go home.”

Grabbing my bag, I head over and follow behind my rowdy teammates, envying their ability to bounce back after the night we had.

While I'm certain they'll be entertaining each other, I, on the other hand, have every intention of sleeping the entire flight back.

The bus ride to the airport blurs, my thoughts a tangled mess.

Throwing my bag in the overhead bin, I settle into my seat and put my headphones in. Just as I go to pull up the audiobook I'm listening to, my phone buzzes.

A wry smile curves my lips, and my gut twists at the name appearing on my phone.

My Wife:

Thanks for the reminder. I'm not sure what I would've done if you didn't introduce yourself.

I snort, my heart doing all kinds of backflips.

Did she just give me an opening?

"I'm pretty sure I was in love with you, but you also drove me insane. Why didn't you make me listen to you?" The intensity in her gaze when she told me what she wanted that summer had my blood soaring like an eagle. "All I wanted was for you to tell me I was the one for you. That there wasn't anyone else. But you didn't."

She's right; I didn't because I was afraid to. I'm not going to be afraid anymore. "Marry me," I said.

"Beau! Are you crazy?" Her eyes begged me to say yes. But they also begged me to mean what I was asking. At that moment, I knew only one thing mattered, and I wasn't letting her go this time.

“About you. Come on, Kit.” I grabbed her hands and held them in mine. Staring into her hazel eyes, I raised my hand to cup her cheek. “Marry me,” I whispered.

Mike’s words about regret play in my head. Without hesitating, I respond.

Beau:

I thought it was the least I could do. wink emoji

Everything is up in the air right now, but that text proves that Kit hasn’t shut me out.

She’s leaving a door open.

And I’m walking in.

The flight home was relatively joke-free, and I got in a solid hour or two of shut-eye. But I’m still exhausted.

When I get home, I plan to hydrate and then head to bed early. Tomorrow, when I have a clear head, I can strategize a plan of action for my marriage.

Crossing the town line into my hometown, a smile blooms across my face.

When the Ironclad Marauders moved from Wilmington to Charlotte it allowed me to move back to Starhaven. The move was sudden and for reasons not quite known to all of us players. I’ve only been in this house on Cherry Street for a few weeks, and the majority of that time was spent getting settled at the new stadium and preparing for pre-season.

Feeling nostalgic, I take a left instead of the right I usually make once I get off the highway and drive through the center of town. A trip down memory lane is just what

the doctor ordered.

Opening my window, I breathe in the warm spring air filled with the light perfume scent of blooming dogwoods.

Main Street is lined with gorgeous white oak trees. The vibrant green leaves have my throat tightening as a pair of hazel eyes rimmed with the same lush color fill my thoughts.

When I drive by the Harris Teeter where Kit worked senior summer, I snort. I still can't believe the amount of time I spent there praying for just one chance to explain what really happened with Luna.

My cheeks pull up as I remember Ross, her manager, asking me if I'd like to be paid for all the hours I was spending there.

I forgot how head over heels I was for Kit. That time in my life seems like forever ago, and yet, after last night, it seems like yesterday.

How can two contradictory sentiments live with each other at the same time?

I make a right onto the next street. A sign that says Starlight Vet Haven catches my eye just as a dark sedan pulls up.

I slow down to watch the vehicle. A man in a suit gets out of the driver's side, while a woman with long, curly auburn hair gets out of the passenger side. I see the curve of her face, and I pull over onto the side of the road.

Doing a double take, I glance in the rearview mirror, confirming who I thought I saw. A slow smirk slides across my face, and I shake my head quietly, chuckling at the way things seem to be unfolding.

If that's who I think it is, then her veterinary clinic is right around the corner from where I live.

I put the car in park. When I'm positive the woman I'm watching is Kit, I get out and call her name.

She's too absorbed in her conversation with the driver and she doesn't hear me. I pick up my pace and start lightly jogging toward her.

The smile on her face as she chuckles at something the driver says makes my gut knot and my insides twist.

He gets into the car and drives off. As she walks up the stairs, I call out again, louder this time. "Kit! Hey, wait up!"

Her forehead pulls together as she turns around, trying to find where the voice is coming from.

"Over here," I shout, waving at her from the same side of the street she's on.

When her eyes finally find mine, my breath is dragged from my lungs. And for a moment, I can't breathe.

I'm not letting her go this time.

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Chapter Six

Kit

“Thank you!” I wave to my driver, Neal, as he gets in the car and pulls away.

“Kit!”

“Great!” I mutter, dragging my luggage up the stairs. “Now I’m hearing Beau’s voice in my head.”

When the voice calls out again, I pause. My brows furrow as I scan the block to see if there actually is someone calling my name. I spot a man waving at me, a grin on his face.

A man who resembles Beau Matthews.

Missing a step, I fall backward. Panicking, I try to catch myself but fail.

I’m going down.

Instead of hitting concrete, I’m lifted by a warm, hard body. It’s as solid as concrete but much softer. And warm. That sense of safety is back.

When I shift my gaze, I find a pair of gray eyes smiling at me. They’re crinkled at the corner and filled with a hint of amusement.

The same shade of gray I woke up to this morning.

“Whoa. Careful.” His deep voice has nearly the same effect on my body as being pressed against him. I take a few breaths to slow my heart rate, praying he can’t feel it trying to pummel its way through my ribcage.

It’s a good thing I’m in his arms because I’m pretty sure my legs wouldn’t be able to support me if I were standing.

“Maybe I should carry you over the threshold.” He waggles his brows at me. “I seem to remember something about it being a tradition for newlyweds.”

When my eyes pop, a smile splits his face. Gently placing me back on the step, he makes sure I’m steady before slowly moving his arm from my waist. He hesitates for a second before his fingers follow. The air crackles, stealing my breath with it. I swallow hard and swear I catch his gaze flick to my mouth.

Just then, my brain starts working again. My ‘husband’ is standing in front of me. In Starhaven.

“What are you doing here?” I narrow my eyes and step back, bumping into the stair behind me and nearly falling in the other direction. Beau places a hand on my arm and steadies me. His eyes cloud over at my sudden movement. “Are you stalking me?”

“Am I what?” He asks, brows pulling together. I sheepishly shrug my right shoulder. His mouth drops open before he throws his head back and laughs.

“First, thanks for having such a high opinion of the man you married.” His smirk sends tiny shivers shooting to my toes. “And second, I live on Cherry Street.” His head tilts toward the corner, toward Cherry Street.

I cross my arms and narrow my eyes. “This town is ridiculously small. You live around the corner, and I didn’t hear about it?”

“Yes.” His cheeks lift higher, and I hate him a little as my breath catches. “Fourty-six. Mrs. Maple’s old house.”

Mrs. Maple passed away a few months ago, and her kids only recently got around to putting it on the market. I vaguely recall Katy Blake, the town gossip, and a few others talking about it being sold one morning at Bean Me Up, but I didn’t catch the name of the buyer.

I’m sure I would’ve remembered if they said Beau’s name.

Does Gen know? Is it possible that someone mentioned it, and I completely forgot? Would I forget hearing that he was the buyer?

The truth is maybe. I’ve been so busy with the clinic and trying to plan a wedding with a man who didn’t want to marry me that not remembering is definitely possible but highly unlikely.

Reading my face like a book, he raises his hands. “I swear! It’s just been hectic with the Marauders switching stadiums so close to pre-season. I’m still not fully unpacked.”

Staring at him, an eyebrow raised and arms still crossed, I don’t say anything.

“When I come home, I usually take the left from the highway; it’s more direct. Today, I took the scenic route. When I saw the clinic, I thought of you, and then—boom—there you were!”

What he’s saying makes sense, but it’s hard for me to believe that I wouldn’t have

seen him at some point before today.

Starhaven isn't big.

"Kit, we didn't talk about where we lived. I would've told you had you asked." The playful glint in his eyes has my cheeks pulling up. I uncross my arms and go to grab my bag. But he pushes his body in front of mine and grabs it first. "I got this. I'll walk you to your door."

The brushing of his body against mine sends shivers down my spine. For a second, I just stand there, frozen, watching him walk up my stairs.

My high school self is doing cartwheels while the adult version of me is admiring the man he's become. And not just physically.

Though he is quite the specimen, a smirk crosses my face.

"Are you just gonna stand there, Garrett?" My gaze snaps up from Beau's...um...attributes to his eyes, and the teasing glint there tells me he knows exactly what I was doing.

My face flames, and I stomp up the stairs with my head down. The sound of his amusement sets a swarm of butterflies in motion and makes me want to die of embarrassment.

Nothing has changed. I still want to kiss and kill Beau Matthews all in the same breath.

Ordering my cheeks to cool, I walk toward him and gaze down so my eyes aren't tempted to admire him again.

The last thing I want is to give Beau the upper hand.

What if that's not what you're doing? A quiet voice asks. What if this entire crazy situation is actually an opportunity?

"Be quiet," I mumble to the voice in my head. Not wanting to think about the emotions that being around this man is invoking.

"Everything okay?" He asks when I meet him on the porch. The humor in his eyes is replaced with a softness that makes my stomach flip. And sucks all the air from my lungs.

A small smile creeps along my face, and I scoff. "That's a loaded question...Husband."

His eyes dance for a moment before they shift to an emotion I can't read. "Who would've thought that was ever a good idea, huh?"

Me.

Woah! Where did that come from?

"As much as I love talking about you being my wife and all, I do have a serious question for you." A surge of energy races around my body like a strike of lightning struck me and I can't breathe. "I'm a mentor for an organization called Play It Forward. When I moved here, I was assigned Jack Samuels as my new mentee."

My pulse slows, and my nerves flutter when I realize the topic he's discussing has nothing to do with us.

I will need a nap after the roller coaster of emotions I've gone through in the last five

minutes.

“I know Jack, Nicky’s fourteen-year-old nephew, right?”

“That’s him.” Beau’s lips curve, and my chest constricts. “He’s great but having a rough time. Not uncommon for kids his age in his situation.”

Jack’s short life has been tough. I don’t know the full story, and I haven’t pried. What I do know is that Jack was all but abandoned by his parents and came to live with his grandmother, Missy Samuels, and his Aunt Nicky two summers ago.

I nod my agreement and fish around my purse for my keys.

“From the few times I’ve talked with him, I was able to yank out of him that he likes animals. I was going to ask around town if any animal professionals would be interested in meeting with him.”

Snapping my eyes to his, I see he’s being completely sincere. There isn’t an ounce of teasing in his look.

“That’s a great idea.”

“Glad you agree.” The teasing tone is back. “Would you be interested? It would be great for him to learn about the options available and how he can get involved in something he’s passionate about.”

“I’d love to help Jack out.” I smile, trying to ignore the stomach swoop at the kindness of the man in front of me. “Every summer, I search for someone interested in what I do, like an intern. It lets them know what’s involved with working in the veterinary field. If he’s interested, maybe we can work something out.”

“Really?” Beau’s brows shoot up. “That could be perfect.”

Reaching out to grab my suitcase, my hand brushes Beau’s. A zing of energy rushes through my body. When I glance into his eyes, I know he felt it, too. My breath catches. But like the speed of light, his expression shifts to something else.

“I’m meeting up with him Wednesday afternoon. Are you available?”

Blinking rapidly, I try to remember what we were talking about.

Beau flashes a smile and I can see every one of his teeth. Warmth creeps up my face again.

“To meet up with Jack?”

I take a deep breath and focus on finding the key that unlocks the door. “Sure. Wednesday works great.”

“Amazing. Thanks, Kit.” Pushing the door open, I shove my suitcase inside. The weight of Beau’s eyes lingers. Trails of heat move along with his gaze. “Sure you don’t want me to carry you in?”

Quirking a brow, I turn toward him. He’s the epitome of innocence, but the gleam in his eye makes me giggle.

“I think I got it,” I snort, and he waves before heading down the stairs.

“See you around...” His pause has my insides twisting, “Neighbor.”

Pulling myself together, I wave goodbye, but I don’t stop watching him head to his car. When he gets there, he turns around. He stares for a moment before waving again

and getting in.

Stepping over the threshold, I can't help but wonder what it would've felt like if he had carried me inside.

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Chapter Seven

Beau

Shoving my duffle back in the locker, I check through my texts for the tenth time in five minutes. It's been two days, thirteen hours, and fifteen minutes since I last talked to Kit.

It's not like I'm counting or anything. Four o'clock can't get here soon enough.

Living around the corner isn't helping. It's taken every ounce of control I have not to walk over and knock on her door.

"Hey BD. How's married life treating you?" The more restless I get, the worse the needling becomes. "Still wanting to get the marriage annulled, or are you reconsidering?"

I shrug and slide the phone back into my bag, not sure what to say. They were all with Kit and I in Vegas. Witnessed the wedding. They know me. They saw my response to her.

"Why would Beau want to let that sweet thing go? Did you see the way she looked at him?" Jones teases. "I'm sorry—kissed him? There's obvious history BD isn't telling us about."

Here we go.

“Isn’t there anyone else’s love life you’re more interested in?” I tilt my head toward Romeo, aka Jeremy Thomas, our fullback. “We haven’t heard about—”

“Nope,” Romeo answers. “You’ve officially made my life dull.”

I snort. Practice is almost done. If I can hold on five more minutes and let the jabs roll off, like water off a duck’s back, I’ll make it out unscathed.

“If the annulment is still happening, I’d love her number so I can ask her out.” Teddy ‘Bear’ Wilson says nonchalantly. “She’s hot, and I love redheads.”

I clench my jaw and my fists ball at my side.

“Not sure our blindside flanker likes that idea, Bear.” Oliver snickers as my eyes burn holes in Bear’s back.

“What do you mean?” He turns a confused expression toward Oliver, then glances at me. “Ooooh. Yeah. Would you look at that? Seems like someone has a crush on their wife.”

His raised brow has me itching to smack it away.

Bear is a handsome guy. And, like Jeremy, he has a line of women that he goes through. There is no way that I would ever let him anywhere near Kit.

“Breathe, big guy.” Bear slaps me on the back, that wry smile still there. “I was just teasing. Usually, nothing gets you riled up.”

Rolling my eyes, heat creeps up my neck.

“The dating thing still holds, though.” When I pin him with my gaze, he throws his

hands up. “I’m just saying. Geez.”

“Mr and Mrs, sitting in a tree,” Karate Kid starts to sing, and everyone except Wilson, joins in. “K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”

Running my hand through my hair, I shake my head and quirk a brow, working to keep the goofy grin from my face.

I’m acting like an infatuated fool. Oh, who am I kidding? I am an infatuated fool.

I just hate that everyone in this locker room knows it.

“Okay, songbirds, listen up!” Coach Hudson shouts, a gleam in his eye as he walks through the door. “The Play It Forward event is coming up and will be here before you know it.”

The Play It Forward organization puts on an incredible day for their mentors/mentees that includes activities, food, and one main competition that allows us to compete as a team. This year, we weren’t sure if they’d be able to accommodate the move, but they made it happen.

Having had a mentor growing up, I know the difference it can make in a person’s life. Given a day to celebrate that relationship is priceless.

“Make sure the families know so they can join in on the fun. If a parent or guardian can’t make it and you’re responsible for bringing your mentee, get the permission slip that legal sent you filled out and signed,” Coach continues. “Don’t forget to send the signed copy back to—”

Stopping to see who’s calling him, he shakes his head. “I don’t know how he does it, but here’s Milo now.”

Miles “Milo” O’Donnell, Play it Forward’s Director, is one of the quirkiest individuals I’ve ever met. Despite that, he’s undeniably easy to like. His passion and dedication to the mentor program make him hard not to respect—even if he is a strange bird.

Coach answers the video call. “Hey Milo! We were just talking about the Play It Forward day.”

Milo’s obviously in an airport, traveling, with his Play It Forward windbreaker on. He’s never not repping the organization.

“That’s great! My trip had a layover, and I’m stopping at one of the other team events in...” Stopping in the middle of the airport, he starts to sing. “The stars at night are big and bright.”

We all hear three claps from what seems like hundreds of people before they break out in song. “Deep in the heart of Texas.”

“Iconic,” Karate Kid says in awe, and snickers are heard around the locker room.

“Thanks for checking in, Milo,” Coach says, trying to end the call. Milo will talk for hours if you let him. “Hopefully, we’ll be as lucky as the group in Texas and get a visit on the day of our event.”

“Well, you know what they always say: When life throws you an unexpected curve, make some lemonade.” Groans can be heard around the room. No one says that. “Well, actually, no one says it, but I think it’s a good philosophy to live by.”

“Wise indeed.” Coach chuckles. “Thanks again. Have a great time in Texas.”

“Thanks,” Milo says. “Did I ever tell you about the time—”

“Talk soon,” Coach says, ending the call before he can tell us one of his many stories. “Where were we...oh yeah. Play It Forward and getting signed permission slips back to legal. Do it sooner rather than later.”

“This week, we’re playing NOLA Gold.” Coach gets a teasing glint in his eye before turning to me. “Anyone else planning on getting married this weekend?”

Scrubbing my face with my hand, I groan while the room erupts with amused murmurs. “I’m never gonna live this down.”

“Not while I’m your coach,” Hudson razzes. “But on a more serious note, team, you have some homework to do. Gold is a great team and some serious competition. Let’s focus on getting a win.” He points at me and smirks. “See you tomorrow, boys!”

Grabbing my duffle, I shake my head and chuckle. Guess I better get used to being the butt of jokes for a while.

When I pull up to Jack’s house, he’s sitting on the porch waiting. The expression on his face has me taking a deep breath and getting prepared to deal with teenage angst.

“Jack!” He stands up and rolls his eyes so hard I’m waiting for them to fall out of an ear. A ton of teenage angst. “You said you’re a fan of animals, right?”

Jack walks over to the car, his shoulders slouched. “Yeah.” His tone tells me he’s less than thrilled about anything I could potentially want to do today. He gets in the car and fastens his seatbelt.

“Super! I have an incredible afternoon planned for you.” My cheeks pull up as he rolls his eyes again. Is eye-rolling an Olympic sport I don’t know about now?

“Super?” He quirks a brow, and the corner of his lip pulls up, which is the result I

was hoping for. “Aging yourself there.”

I shrug. “Maybe you think I’m cool, but I’m really not.” This time, both corners lift, and I nudge him. “So, how are things at school? Any new crushes you want to tell me about?”

Immediately, the smile fades, and his eyes shutter. I have definitely struck a nerve. Rather than dig deeper, I change tactics.

“Did you watch the game last week?” Silence greets me. Okay—not sports today.

We drive in silence for a bit while I try to figure out a new game plan.

“Do you think I could get some advice?”

Jack’s brows shoot up, and he points to his chest. “From me?”

“No. The person in the backseat.” When Jack glances over his shoulder, confusion lining his face, I chortle. “Yes, you!”

A reluctant twitch tugs at the corner of his mouth. “You’re weird.”

“When you get older, you won’t think being weird is such a bad thing.” Some more eye-rolling. Teenagers. “But seriously, I need some help.”

When silence greets me, I glance over to see him staring out the window. I can see his emotions hovering under the surface. Rather than ignore this opportunity, I choose to take his silence as consent.

“There’s this girl I like, but I’m not sure if she’s interested in me or not.” Jack scoffs. “What? I can’t have these problems?”

“You’re a professional athlete,” Jack says, and I see his shoulders droop from the corner of my eye. “Everyone likes you.”

Ahhh, so that’s what’s going on. “That is definitely not true. You’d be surprised at how many people don’t like me because I’m a professional athlete.”

“Really?” Surprise laces Jack’s voice; his eyebrows shoot toward his hairline. “I thought that meant you were automatically popular.”

“Popularity is code for what other people think about you. It doesn’t dictate how well-liked you are. Or, more importantly, whether or not you’re a good human being.”

I turn to Jack, who’s sitting in silence, his brow furrowed, and I wait. Working with kids, I’ve learned that there are some who will talk your head off and others that you need to let get uncomfortable enough to fill the silence.

Jack is the latter.

Just when I start to think I was mistaken, Jack starts talking softly.

“There’s this girl at school. She’s a cheerleader.” Uh-oh. Jocks can be ridiculous when they think someone is encroaching on their territory. “We have math class together, and she needed help, so I helped her. But then we started talking. She’s fun.”

“And cute I bet,” I say, wiggling my brows. “What’s her name?”

“Stephanie,” he pauses, and I notice him pulling at his jeans. “She used to date the captain of the soccer team.”

This is where things get tricky. I'm not sure if I should wait for him to continue or start talking. Since I'm still not sure what the problem is. I wait again, only to be rewarded with him continuing.

"Yesterday, a few of the guys from the team came over while we were talking and brought up my parents. They continued on about me being an outcast and dirt. Everyone was laughing."

"What about Stephanie?" I ask cautiously. "What did she do?"

"I don't want to talk about this anymore." And just like that, he shuts down on me.

"No problem. I'm here if you do." So many thoughts are running through my head, but I also know that I can't fix this for him. Kids are tough—I know, I was one once. And though I wasn't mean, I was pretty brutal in taunting others.

Just ask Kit.

My face lights up just thinking about her.

Bringing my attention back to the boy next to me, I offer. "Just remember, how people treat you is a reflection of their character. What you do with it is a reflection of yours."

"Huh?"

I glance over at him. "What your parents did doesn't make you any less valuable, Jack. What people say to you or think about you isn't as important as what you think and feel about yourself. Does that make sense?"

"Not really." His head falls to his chest, and he lets out a sigh.. "All of this is just

hard.”

I cup his shoulder and give him a squeeze. “I know. I think you’re doing great, though.”

“Really?” He asks, eyes huge.

“Really! Being your age is way harder than being mine.” I chuckle.

“So what do I do when I see Stephanie again? I’m so embarrassed.”

“Why are you embarrassed when the others were the ones making fools of themselves?”

“Because everyone was watching and laughing,” he scoffs.

He’s right. Seeing everyone again the first time after that can be tough.

“I’m gonna share a secret with you. It’s what I do whenever someone points out something I did or said. Professionally or personally.”

He’s watching me with an intent expression on his face. It’s the perfect time to share with him the lesson that changed my life.

“Has anyone ever talked to you about ducks?”

Chapter Eight

Kit

“Sammy Sosa is in great shape, Mr. Herbert.” Sammy, named after the famous baseball player, is a twelve-year-old black American Shorthair cat here for his annual check-up. He’s one of the few cats who doesn’t try to scratch my eyes out when he comes for a visit. For that alone, he holds a soft spot in my heart. “All of his vitals are normal. When I get the blood work back from the lab, I’ll call you.”

A low, contented purr comes from Sammy as I stroke my hand down his back. When my hand reaches by his tail, his body arches, and I smile.

“He really does love you,” Tony Herbert says to me, but his smile is aimed at Sammy. One thing that will never get old is how much people love their animals. It’s one of the best parts of my job. “Come on, Sammy; it’s time to go home.”

Mr. Herbert places Sammy’s carrier on the exam table, and Sammy prances on in, purring the entire way.

“Well, he can come and visit anytime,” I tease, but I’m completely serious. Most animals don’t like coming to see me, so it’s nice to have ones that do. Genevieve is working with me on how to get my patients to love their visits, but it’s still a work in progress.

I can’t say I blame them. I do my best to speak cat and dog, but I am merely a human.

Walking to the front, I sit down and get Mr. Herbert checked out. He puts the carrier on the desk, and Sammy rubs his head against the gate. I reach in and pet him. “I look forward to your next visit too, handsome.”

“No offense, but I hope we don’t need to see you until next year,” Mr. Herbert jokes with a small smile.

“Agreed.” I stand up and move out from behind the desk. “Tell Mrs. Herbert I said hello. It’s been a while since I’ve seen her. Hope she’s okay.”

“She’s fantastic.” His eyes soften as he talks about his wife. “She had her knitting group today. You know how those ladies are.”

I giggle and he winks at me. “Oh I know! I’ve been to a few of their meetings.” The smile still lingers on his face as I walk them to the door and hold it open. “Have a great day! Bye, Sammy.”

A soft ‘meeow’ echoes, and Mr. Herbert waves as they walk down the stairs.

Closing the door, I head back to the front desk and quickly check the calendar to see what my afternoon schedule is. It’s pretty open, which is usually not ideal, but it coincidentally works perfectly since Beau and Jack are coming today.

A rush sparks, knowing I’ll see Beau in a couple of hours. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t started going on walks more frequently since I found out he lived around the corner. It’s something I’ve been meaning to do. Apparently I just needed some motivation to get it done.

Sadly, I haven’t ‘accidentally’ run into him on any of them.

A buzz from my phone grabs my attention, and I answer it without glancing at the

number. “Starlight Vet Haven. How can I help you today?”

“Hello. My name is Paul Jeffries,” says a male voice I don’t recognize. “Is Christy Garrett available?”

“This is Dr. Christy Garrett.” I plaster a customer service smile on my face. Having a smile in your voice for potential new clients is a must. Or so I’ve been told.

“Hi, Christy. I’m Beau Matthews' attorney. Is now a good time to talk?” Immediately, the smile falls from my face at the realization he’s calling about the annulment. My reaction catches me off guard.

“Hi, Paul. Now is a great time.” Swallowing hard, I listen as he tells me he spoke with Beau and filed a petition with the court today.

“You’ll receive a copy of the petition, and the court will schedule a hearing date. The entire process should take anywhere from six weeks to a few months.” His voice is matter-of-fact and non-judgmental. “Do you have any questions about how it works?”

“Is there anything I need to do?” I pull my bottom lip between my teeth and fiddle with the stapler on my desk. I hear the jingling of the bells as the door to the clinic opens and I peek up to see Genevieve walking in.

“I’m on the phone.” I mouth just as she’s about to start talking. “Give me one sec.”

“You don’t,” Paul says. “The annulment can be granted with or without your participation. But if you do participate, it could potentially move things along faster. Potentially. No guarantees.”

“Great.” I force a cheerfulness I’m not feeling. Gen quirks an eyebrow and tilts her head, and I peer down at the desk and pick up a pencil. “Thank you so much for the

update.”

“Of course. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask,” Paul tells me. “Beau said to ensure you know I’m here to assist you with any questions.”

“That was nice of him,” I force out, angry that he’s moving forward with this so quickly. It’s not rational, I know. Breathing in, I attempt to calm my racing pulse.

This is what you want. It’s the smart thing to do.

So why does it suddenly feel wrong?

“Thank you again, Paul. I’ll call if I have any questions. Have a great day.”

“Sounds good. You too!”

I scowl as I put the phone on my desk.

“Paul?” Genevieve asks.

“Beau’s attorney.” I don’t meet her gaze when I answer. Instead, I pretend to be doing something on the computer. “He was calling with an update on the annulment process.”

“Oh,” Gen’s voice lifts at the end. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

When I glance up at her, her eyes are dancing. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

“What do you mean?” She huffs out a laugh and sits in one of the chairs lined against the wall, a smirk on her face.

“That look.” I stare at her pointedly and circle my face with my hand. “What’s with that look?”

“Nothing.” She snorts.

“Sure,” I scoff and shake my head. Even though I know exactly what she’s thinking, there’s no way I’m going to talk about this situation with her. “What brings you by today?”

“Oh no, you don’t!” Gen stands up and moves to sit on the desk. “We’re not changing the subject.”

“I thought we were done with the subject?” I heave out a sigh. “We got married. Soon, we won’t be. End of story.”

“End of story? End of story?!”

“Yes. End of story. It’s simple. Why does it need to be complicated?”

“Because nothing about you and Beau is simple,” Genevieve insists. “I mean, c’mon, Kit! The first time you see him in years—YEARS—you get married. Then you come home to find he’s living around the corner.” Her eyes are so large they resemble saucers.

“It’s not fate, Gen. He called his attorney.” I roll the pencil on the desk, not picking my head up. My shoulders slump. “It’s obvious this is what he wants.”

“The only obvious thing is that he did what you asked.” She jams a finger in my arm.

Standing up, the chair slides across the wood floor. I walk to the treatment room with Genevieve close on my heels. “Can we not talk about this right now?” Grabbing the

disinfectant, I spray the table Sammy Sosa was on and wipe it down.

When I glance over at Gen, she's leaning against the door frame with her arms crossed. A gleam in her eyes. "Sure. What are your plans for this afternoon?"

Well, that question brings us full circle. Not making eye contact with Genevieve, I let her know that Beau and his mentee, Jack Samuels, will be coming by in a little bit. She doesn't say a word, but her quirked eyebrow and crooked grin say it all.

"Jack likes animals, so I mentioned you might be willing to help show him the ropes of dog training." Her eyes are burning a hole in my face. Luckily, she doesn't say what she's really thinking.

"Of course." Her answer is straightforward, but a tinge of humor is lacing it. "Just tell Beau to reach out to me, and we can arrange something."

A tinkling sound from up front can be heard, and my head whips in the direction of the door. Gen notices it, wiggling her eyebrows. "Or maybe I can just let him know myself."

Chuckling, I follow behind her, fighting to hold back a goofy grin that wants to creep upon my face.

"Ugh," Genevieve groans, and immediately, I know the person out front is not Beau. "What are you doing here?"

My gut twists when I notice Scott standing by my desk, his hands shoved in his pockets.

"Nice to see you too, Genevieve." Scott has the dignity to appear somewhat ashamed as he responds. "I wanted to talk to Kit."

Genevieve turns to me, and I can see the anger glittering in her eyes. “Do you want me to stay?”

“I’m good,” I respond, shaking my head. As I head to the door with her, she turns and kisses me on the cheek.

“I can’t wait to hear more about this new man.” Her eyes sparkle. I clear my throat and scratch my head, trying not to laugh aloud. Then she peers over my shoulder and stares at Scott. “From what you’ve told me, he’s amazing. Bye, Scott.” She smirks, and wiggles her fingers as she waves goodbye.

Not wanting to be anywhere alone with him, I follow Gen out onto the porch and wave as she gets into her car.

“New man?” Scott says, standing close behind me. My skin crawls, and I step forward before turning around to face him. His gaze burns with anger.

“From how you left me at the altar in Vegas, I’m pretty sure I don’t owe you any explanations.” I cross my arms and glare at him.

Scott’s head drops, and he blows out a breath. For a second, I think he might actually regret how he treated me, but when his gaze meets mine, all I see is annoyance.

“Who’s the new guy?” He asks bitterly, and my stomach swirls.

How did I never see that the only person Scott cares about is Scott?

Behind me, a car door slams. I turn and there’s Beau getting out of his car, striding toward us like he’s exactly where he belongs. And just like that, the tension in my chest finally breaks.

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Chapter Nine

Beau

“Are you being serious right now?” Jack’s eyes bore into the side of my head. “A duck? That has to be one of the stupidest things I’ve ever heard.”

I nod, my grin widening. “And yet, it works. Every. Time.”

“Really?” The skepticism in his voice and on his face reminds me of the first time I was told this little trick.

“Really!” I say firmly. “The key is to let everything, whatever it is, roll off. It’s not easy, and takes practice to executes it. But once you get it, it changes everything.”

“Hmm,” Jack says, his finger on his chin. From the corner of my eye, I notice his shoulders shaking. And then, for the first time since spending time with him, he laughs. Not just any laugh, but a full belly laugh. I would be offended except I take the advice I gave him and let it roll off—like water off a duck’s back.

“Hey!” I say, pretending to be offended. “One day, you’ll realize that’s the best advice you’ve ever gotten.”

He’s holding his stomach, struggling to breathe. “But every time I try to use it, I’m going to think of you!”

“Awwww. You love me.” I give him a soft shove on his shoulder and am rewarded

with my new favorite behavior—the eye roll. “I had the same experience with the person who gave me this advice. Surprisingly, that made putting it into practice easier.”

“It did?” Jack’s fully invested in this tidbit of information.

“Yup! Any time someone said something that would normally hurt me or make me angry, I would think of my dad. I’d end up laughing at how silly the whole ‘duck’ thing was. Once that happened, whatever it was that bothered me didn’t anymore.” And the smile breaks free across my face as I remember this exact conversation with my dad. I was younger, but it went a lot like this one. “If it works as well for you as it has for me, I’m fine being the butt of your joke.”

When I turn toward him, he rolls his eyes...again, and I can’t help but snicker.

My humor fades when I park in front of the clinic and see Kit with Scott.

Jack’s gaze follows mine, his brows furrowed as he picks up on the tense exchange, too. “Is she okay?”

Kit’s shoulders are up to her ears, and her arms are wrapped protectively around her body.

From here, I can see Scott glaring at her. My hands tighten around the steering wheel, and my jaw clenches. I glance at Jack while reaching for my door handle.

“I’m gonna go check. Stay here until I tell you to come up, okay?” I don’t wait for an answer before getting out of the car. As I pass by the front of the hood, I point through the windshield. “Wait for me to call you.”

Jack stops reaching for the door handle, his forehead pulls, and he nods. Hopefully,

he stays put.

With Jack taken care of, I turn back to the porch and notice when Kit sees me. I watch her shoulders drop. Immediately, the tension in my chest starts to ease.

Taking the steps three at a time, I position myself between Scott and Kit and stay close to her side. Sliding my arm around her waist, I kiss her on the cheek.

“Hey. Sorry I’m late.” I search Kit’s face for a sign that she’s okay. Her eyes flare with surprise before giving me the slightest of nods. I unclench my jaw. “I hope you weren’t waiting long.”

Without removing my one hand from her back, I reach the other hand out to Scott. “Hey, Palmer. How are you?”

“Beau? Beau Matthews?” Scott’s jaw drops out as he shakes my hand. “What are you doing in town?”

A wry curve crosses my face. “Me moving back seems to be the best-kept secret of the year. Which for a town like Starhaven is completely unexpected.”

“You’re back?” His shock-filled expression would be comical if I didn’t have an overwhelming urge to toss him from the porch. “In town?”

“I’m back.” I give him an overly bright smile before glancing back at Kit and winking. Her brows shoot past her hairline, and a delightful shade of pink colors her cheeks. “Just around the corner in Mrs. Maple’s old house.”

Keeping my gaze on her, I feel Scott’s eyes bouncing back and forth between the two of us, trying to figure out what’s going on. Meanwhile, hers are shooting daggers at me. My smirk broadens, and my blood hums, excitement surging through me.

The smile on her face is tight, and her glare screaming, ‘What are you doing?’

I pull my brows together and silently reply, ‘Helping.’

Her eyes narrow, and the corners of my mouth curve higher. I love it when she gets that fire in her eyes. Being the one who causes it is one of my all-time favorite things.

“Is that how the two of you started talking again?” Scott questions, pointing at me. I forgot he was here, witnessing our silent exchange. A sense of satisfaction fills me, knowing I’m the reason behind his agitation.

“Nope.” I pop the ‘p,’ Letting my smirk get impossibly bigger. “We just happened to run into each other over the past weekend in Las Vegas.”

Scott’s mouth falls open before forming an ‘O’. He snaps his head toward Kit and scowls at her. A muscle in his jaw ticks. Watching his reaction, one would think he was the victim of a runaway bride instead of being the runaway groom.

Is that even a thing?

“Right, Kit?” I give her one last squeeze before removing my hand and nudging her. “Seeing each other that night caught both of us by surprise.”

Kit lets out a tight chuckle, and her jaw tightens. “Total surprise! I mean, what are the odds that I’d run into Beau?” She nudges me not so gently with her elbow, and I rub my side. “Crazy, right, Scott?”

“Wait.” I can see the wheels start spinning in his head. “He’s not the new man Genevieve was talking about?”

Glancing back at Kit, her face is a delightful shade of red. I probably shouldn’t be

having so much fun with this, but I am. “There’s a new man in your life, eh?”

“I wouldn’t say that exactly,” she grinds out through clenched teeth. Glaring back at me. The sparkle in her eyes is doing funny things to my gut. I have to use every inch of control to keep my eyes from dipping to her lips.

“Well, what would you say?” At Scott’s tone, I shift my gaze to his face and immediately my fist clenches.

His eyes move up and down Kit as if she’s something that crawled out from under his shoe. Heat creeps up the back of my neck, and my body inches closer to Kit as if having a will of its own.

“What’s going on between me and Beau is none of your business,” Kit says angrily. “Especially after what you did.”

I forgot that Kit can take care of herself. She’s made bigger men regret getting into it with her, but Scott isn’t that smart. He doesn’t back down. “What do you mean it’s none of my business? I’m your—”

“My what?” Kit dares him to continue. A sense of pride flares up in my chest. And I want to high-five her. “We’re over. I can date anyone I want. Even Beau Matthews.”

“You’d never date him. The two of you hated each other back in school.” This time, when Scott’s gaze bounces back and forth between us, he glares at us with pure loathing.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I interrupt. Glancing over at Kit, I allow the affection that has been swirling since seeing her again show. “There’s a fine line, my friend. I never hated Kit. It was my attempt to cover that I had a massive thing for her.”

Kit's head whips in my direction, her expression confused and her mouth slightly parted. This time, I can't stop my gaze from dropping to her lips. When I glance back at her, there's a stunned look on her face.

"Running into her was probably the best thing that's ever happened to me." Kit's surprised expression has turned to one of annoyance. I'm pretty sure she thinks I'm playing a game. And I am. Just not the one she believes.

The game I'm playing is for keeps.

Chapter Ten

Kit

Beau's words wash over me like hot tea, warming me to my core. Searching his face, I don't see any hint of teasing—no glint, no smirk. None of the tell-tale signs that Beau Matthews is trying to pull one over on me.

If I see anything, it's sincerity.

Could he be telling the truth?

My stomach swoops, and my knees turn to jelly. Completely lost in his heated silver gaze, Scott's words bring me back to the fact that there are three of us here.

"You," Scott's voice drips with disdain as he thrusts a finger at Beau before pointing that finger at me. "Had a thing for her?"

At this, a spark lights Beau's eyes, and an unspoken challenge fills them. A sly quirk curves his lips, causing goosebumps to pop on my skin. I can see the dare he's throwing my way clear as day.

He's all but shouting, 'Are you going to let him get away with saying that?'

And for the first time I'm tired of letting Scott treat me like a consolation prize.

How did I not see it before?

A rush of adrenaline courses through my body, and the corner of my lip pulls up.

Challenge accepted.

I know the moment Beau understands. He snakes his arm around my waist and pulls me close.

Claiming me.

The warmth from his hand grounds me.

Without breaking his stare, Beau responds, “It’s why I asked her to marry me when I saw her.” His smile broadens, and my breath catches. I’m so caught up in Beau that I barely notice the growl that comes from Scott. “I wasn’t about to let her go...again.”

“You two,” Scott snarls, “are married?!”

“I guess you could call it a whirlwind romance.” His lips quirk. And I turn my head toward Scott. The confusion on his face fills me with a sense of deep satisfaction. “You’re the first person we’ve told. We’d appreciate it if you could keep it quiet for a bit. We need to iron out a few details since it happened so fast and all. But it’s only fair since...well...you know, we were engaged up until recently.”

I gently pat Scott on the arm and instantly regret it from the glare he throws my way.

“You did me a favor leaving her.” Beau presses his lips on the top of my head, sending tiny shivers down to my toes. His strong arm wrapped around my waist gives me a sense of invincibility.

I can’t count the number of times I’ve backed down when Scott has gotten like this in the past. Standing up to him feels good, even if the situation is unorthodox.

I forgot what it felt like to be physically and emotionally supported by a 'boyfriend'.

Scott's eyes fill with rage. But right now, all I want to do is stick my tongue out at him and shout 'Na Na Na Na Na Na'.

But I don't, because that would be childish.

My cheeks pull up, and Scott's jaw clenches. Without saying a word, he stomps from the porch while Beau and I quietly watch him go.

"You know the news of our marriage will spread like wildfire, right?" His words vibrate against the side of my body, and his snicker sends shivers down my spine.

"Did you mean what you said?" I push out, my throat suddenly tight. I'll think about the gossip later; right now, the only question I want answered is the one I just asked.

"Which part?" He takes a tiny step back, putting some distance between us so he can see my expression. His eyes are a shade of molten lead. His hand is still on my waist like he's reluctant to stop touching me. "I said a lot."

"All of it?" Gazing into his eyes, I see the truth staring back at me. But I need to hear him say it.

"Do you really not remember what we talked about that night in Vegas?" His voice holds so much emotion, and his eyes are searching mine as if trying to gather all the secrets hidden behind them.

I swallow and lift my palm to rest on his chest. I hear his breath catch, and warmth washes over me. He covers my hand with his, he gently squeezes.

"No," I say softly. His eyes drop to my mouth, and my breath hitches. "But I'm

starting to wish I—”

“It’s okay that I’m here now, right?” Jack’s voice has Beau and me jumping apart like two teenagers getting caught cheating on a test. The corner of Jack’s mouth lifts, and his eyes dance with humor. “I called out, but you didn’t hear me. I figured it would be okay to come up since he left.”

Realizing I’m standing with my mouth open, I snap it shut and muster a grin. “Jack, right? I’m so happy to meet you. Beau said you’re a huge animal lover.”

Jack gives me a nod and shoves his hands in his jean pockets. His smile is now sheepish.

“Great!” Even to me, my voice sounds overly cheerful. I glance over at Beau to find him watching me. His eyes dance, and his crooked grin has my pulse skyrocketing. Remembering we have an audience, I turn my attention back to Jack. “Come on, let’s go inside.”

As I walk through the clinic door, the bell jingles. Behind me, I hear Jack whisper. “Is this the girl you were talking about? I think she likes you.”

Beau coughs before clearing his throat and changing the topic. “This is a nice setup you have here, Kit.”

My mouth quirks and I act like my heart didn’t try to take a flying leap from my chest at Jack’s words. Beau talking about me, even if just with Jack, leaves me floating on cloud nine. When I turn to face them, I hope my expression is schooled, but I’m having difficulty keeping a huge smile off my face.

“Thank you. I’m proud of it.” I turn and try to see my office through the eyes of someone coming in for the first time. I stand a little taller. I have done well for

myself. When my gaze falls on Beau, the warmth I see there makes my stomach flutter. I immediately shift my attention over to Jack. “Do you have any questions yet, Jack, or do you want to start with the office tour?”

Jack shakes his head. “No questions yet.”

“Okay then let’s start with a tour first.” I head over toward the treatment rooms. “These two spaces are where I see my patients. It’s where I do any initial exams and talk with the owners to get an overview of how their pets are doing. Or try to problem solve if they’re here because something is wrong.”

I glance back to find Jack scanning the room and Beau staring at me. Heat creeps up my cheeks, and I lose my train of thought. Luckily, Jack rescues me with a question.

“What are the reasons people would bring in their animals?” He then points to the scale on the floor. “What’s this big metal thing down here?”

“That’s a scale.” Grateful for Jack’s questions, I do my best to focus on him, not the man leaning quietly against the door frame watching me. Heat lingers wherever Beau’s eyes fall. A jolt cascades through me, and I’m back in vet school trying to pass a final exam.

Lucky for me, neither Jack nor Beau know what I’m talking about, so any mistakes I may make won’t be caught.

Jack notices everything and asks great questions. When we’re back in the reception area. I bring up that I’ll need some help over the summer and ask if he’d be interested. His eyes light up, and a huge smile crosses his face.

“Truly?” he says, eyes wide, and I nod. “That would be awesome.”

“Perfect.” I grab a card and hand it to him. “Have your aunt or grandmother call me, and once I have their permission, we’ll chat and figure out when you can get started.”

“Thank you so much.” The excitement that lights up his face when he examines my business card makes me understand why Beau does this mentorship program. This is my first experience with a mentor program, and I can already sense how it makes a difference in people’s lives. “I didn’t know anything like this was possible before joining Play It Forward. Are you coming with us to the Play It Forward event?”

“Play It Forward event?” My brows pull together, and I turn from him to Beau. “I’m not sure what that is...”

“Every year Play It Forward has an annual bonding event for all the mentors and mentees,” Beau explains.

“You have to come,” Jack insists. “It’s going to be so much fun.”

I glance up at Beau, and he lifts a shoulder. “He’s not wrong; it’ll be fun. You should join us.”

“Maybe I will,” I say, walking out the front door and onto the porch. “Jack, it was so nice to meet you, and I’m excited to get to know you better.”

“Thanks, Kit.” Jack starts to walk down the steps but stops when he notices that Beau isn’t following.

“Go ahead, Jack,” Beau says. “I’ll be there in a second.”

Both of us watch Jack as he makes his way to the car.

“Thanks for asking me to be a part of this. I think he enjoyed it.” I smile as Jack

slides into the passenger seat and pulls out his phone. I can see the smile on his face from where I stand.

When I turn back toward Beau, I find his gaze on me, a lopsided smirk on his face. My stomach flutters, and my pulse thrums.

“Are you around later?” he asks. Is it just me, or is his voice hesitant? “I’m thinking we could grab dinner, talk about Play It Forward, and work on getting our story straight.”

I narrow my eyes and tilt my head. “Story straight?”

He beams at me, and my knees nearly fall out from under me. This man is deadly where my heart is concerned. “About our whirlwind romance? The entire town is probably buzzing with the news already.”

I’m not sure about that, only because I don’t know how quick Scott will be to admit his role in our ‘unexpected’ marriage. But there is no way I’m going to say no to dinner.

I’ve been waiting a long time for this chance with Beau Matthews. Genevieve’s gonna die when I tell her.

Chapter Eleven

Beau

“She’s nice,” Jack grins as I slide into the car, a gleam in his stare. “And pretty.”

A warm grin spreads, and we both glance toward the porch. Kit’s still standing there, watching.

Starting the car, my smile expands, and I wave before pulling away. I’ll be picking her up at seven. One hundred twenty minutes is too long, but it will give me time to see if The Glowing Fork is available tonight.

“Do you think she was serious about getting a chance to work with her?” Jack’s voice is hopeful, but when I look over, the uncertainty in his eyes is obvious.

“I do. She mentioned the idea when I talked about bringing you by. You must’ve made a good impression if Kit asked you if you’d be interested.” The smile that crosses his face at my words reinforces why I do this. So many kids just need an opportunity to see what’s available.

A tiny bit of hope for the life that’s possible.

It’s easy to get lost in today’s world without guidance. I’m glad that I’m in a position to help. Play It Forward has changed the lives of the kids I’ve worked with and mine.

Jack’s reaction, combined with Kit saying she’d go out with me, has me walking on

top of the world.

And nervous. I wipe my hand down my jeans.

Jack is texting furiously, a massive smile on his face when I turn down his street. Pulling up to his house, I see Missy Samuels, Jack's grandmother, sitting on the porch in a rocking chair. Putting the car in park, Jack jumps out and runs to the house.

"Hi Missy," I call through the window.

"Hi, Beau! Thanks for taking Jack—Jack Samuels! What have I told you about running in the house?" Missy scolds, and my lips curve up.

"Sorry, Gram," Jack says contritely and slows his pace to a trot. Right before he gets in the house, Missy scolds again.

"Where do you think you're going without giving me a proper greeting?" Jack turns and rolls his eyes but kisses his grandmother on the cheek. "Did you have fun?"

"It was great—"

"Jack, I'll see you in two weeks. Bye, Missy." They both turn and wave as I drive off. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I see Jack animatedly talking to his grandmother.

My cheeks pull up, and lightness fills me.

When I get home, that smirk is still there. Like Jack, my excitement has me running up the stairs and into the house.

Luckily, there's no one to tell me to slow down. I'm not sure I'd listen if there were.

Dropping my keys in a bowl on the entryway table, I send Mike a quick text.

Beau:

Secret marriage is a secret no longer.

Taking Kit to dinner to talk details.

I'll update you later.

Mike:

I'm so proud of my little cousin.

You're becoming a big boy.

Beau:

eye roll emoji

Mike:

laughing emoji

Go get 'er, Tiger. fist bump emoji

Chuckling at his response, I send one last text before putting down my phone.

Beau:

That's my plan. wink emoji

Leaving a trail of clothes in my wake I'm sure my mother would chastise me for if I still lived at home, I head down the hall to the bathroom. Usually, I'm not this messy, but then again, it's not every day I get to take Kit Garrett out on a date.

I hop in the shower without a second thought about the mess I'm gonna have to clean up.

The two minutes it takes me to get to Kit's house has done nothing but exacerbate my churning stomach.

Wiping my hands on my pants, I get out of the car and take a slow, deep breath. Running my hands along my collar and down my shirt, I glance up as I hear a door close. When my eyes land on Kit standing on the porch, I stop dead in my tracks.

Her long auburn hair is hanging in curls, framing her face and resting on her shoulders. She's wearing a simple light blue dress with fitted long sleeves that has her skin glowing. I let my gaze slowly trail the length of her before returning to her face. My heart quivers at the gleam in her eyes.

I wipe my hands down my pants again before heading up the stairs.

"You look incredible," I lean in, kissing her cheek gently. If I moved an inch, I'd be touching her lips, but the name of the game here is patience. One thing I usually do not have. Pulling back, I let my eyes take in her face.

"Thank you." She smiles. Her eyes lower to my shoulders and linger on my chest before she brings her gaze back to mine. Her cheeks color, and my smile brightens. "You look good, too."

I quirk an eyebrow and smirk. "Is that a compliment, Garrett?"

“Don’t make me regret it, Matthews.” She giggles as she walks past me down the stairs. “Where are we going?”

Rushing to the car, I reach out for the door handle before she can. When she turns to me with a raised brow, my brow pulls in confusion. Her giggles wash over me and send quivers down my spine.

“I asked: Where are we going?”

“Oh,” I huff a laugh. “Sorry, I was a bit distracted.” I hold the door open for her and hold her gaze. The sweet scent of honeysuckle teases my senses, and I swallow hard. She slips into the passenger side seat, and I find my voice. “The Glowing Fork.” Closing the door, I walk over to the driver’s side.

“I love that place,” she beams as I start the engine.

“I know.” I shift into drive. “That’s where I wanted to take you when I asked you out the first time. It’s just a few years later than I had planned.”

She turns away and fiddles with her bag. I also notice her chewing her bottom lip. I turn my eyes forward and pull away from the house.

“Beau?” Her voice is hesitant. “Why didn’t you tell me about Luna that night?”

My stomach drops, and I swallow to get rid of the cotton filling my mouth. The weight of her eyes on me as she waits for my response. I grip the steering wheel a few times before answering.

“I never intended to say anything about how I felt that night. But then we started talking, and I did.” Kit doesn’t say anything, and the only thing I hear is the sound of my heart pounding. “When you said you felt the same, everything else stopped

matter. It wasn't until I went to kiss you that I remembered about Luna."

"Which would've been the perfect time to tell me." At the hardness in her voice, my stomach clenches. I glance at her only to find a soft expression and a teasing glint in her eyes. The knot in my stomach eases.

"Yes it would've. I see that now. But..." I bite the inside of my cheek, thinking about the reasoning of my eighteen-year-old self versus how I would handle it today. He was such a child. "You intimidated the heck out of me, and I wasn't thinking clearly. Not to mention, I didn't want to take the chance that you would get mad at me and think I was trying to play you. In layman's terms, I panicked."

She lets out a small chuckle and runs her fingers through her hair. My fingers itch to be the ones running through the silky waves.

"Besides, with how much I believed you hated me and how much I knew you didn't like Luna, it just seemed like the best option at the time."

"How'd that work out for you?" She turns to me with a smile so bright that I can't help but follow her lead.

"Hmmm, pretty bad." I snort, shrugging a shoulder. "So bad that I thought about it for the next two years. Just ask my cousin. He had no problem remembering even though I haven't talked about you in years. However, if you had just let me explain what happened before you left, it's possible that we could've cleared things up sooner. But nooooo, you had to hold a grudge."

I look her way and find her facing forward. When she turns toward me with dumbfounded hazel eyes I gently nudge her. "You can still apologize."

"What if I'm not sorry?" She playfully slaps my arm, and I pull it away like she hurt

me.

“That’s not what you said in Vegas,” I tease, keeping my gaze forward. I slowly exhale and my stomach sinks a little bit.

She covers her face with her hands and groans. “I wish I could remember that night. At the very least, I wish I could remember what I said.”

How much do I say? Everything? Nothing? I don’t know.

But she’s here. Maybe I can just let myself go with the flow? Let her decide? What if I’m just honest about how I feel?

“I do too,” I say softly, then pull into a parking spot down the street from where we’re eating. I kill the engine and turn to fully face her. She’s playing with her hair and staring out the passenger-side window. “Kit.”

She turns and faces me, worry lining her forehead. I grab her hand and gently hold it in mine, rubbing my thumb on her palm. “I can tell you...if you want. But I also think what you said that night doesn’t matter as much as the fact that we’re here. Now.”

Chapter Twelve

Kit

Beau's touch sets my nerves humming. I can barely focus on what he's saying, but the emotion in his stare has all of me nearly melting.

Fear fills me at the thought of admitting how I felt, feel, about Beau. I wasn't myself that night in Las Vegas, and any filter I had was gone.

Clearly, I still care about him—even I can acknowledge that to myself. But am I ready to dive in even more than I already have?

"I know why I married you," he says gruffly, making my stomach flutter. "Even if it was spontaneous and insane. I don't regret it."

"What about the annulment?" I ask, swallowing hard. "You said you wanted an annulment—"

"No, I didn't." There's an earnest gleam in his look that makes my stomach flip. "I only brought it up because you seemed so distraught."

He didn't? I could've sworn he did, but honestly that morning is a blur.

He lifts his hand to my face, and my breath hitches at the touch. I close my eyes and lean into his palm. I bask at how his thumb running over my cheek makes my body hum.

“You were so panicked after everything so I said what I thought you needed to hear. Not what I wanted to say.” His voice is soft but sure, and it’s doing all kinds of things to my insides. Not to mention the way his voice causes tingles to course through me. “At the time, I didn’t know we lived around the corner from each other, or I may have said something entirely different.”

“You living around the corner was a surprise!” I shake my head, thinking about my reaction.

““Are you stalking me?”” Beau razzes. “That was the worst thing anyone’s ever asked me.”

“Well, you did kind of stalk me that summer before college,” I giggle. His hand goes still, and I glance up. His eyes are filled with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine.

“I should’ve tried harder,” he whispers. “I was a fool to let you go.”

Heat pours through my body and fills my belly. My chin drops, and I look away. “No, you weren’t.” I push through a tight throat. “I was.”

Beau’s thumb gently lifts my chin, and my gaze slams into his. Countless emotions run through his eyes like a carousel. I can’t keep up with them. But I can sense them. My gaze drops to his lips, and I watch as they part.

“Kit,” he hoarsely breathes out my name. His voice sends a chill down to my toes. When he raises his other hand to cup my face, a sigh escapes me, and I sink into his touch.

The air simmers with electricity, and I wonder if he can hear my heart racing. I hear him sigh contentedly when I lift my hand and wrap it around his wrist. When I open

my eyes, the air is sucked from my lungs.

The emotion staring back at me is pulling my body toward him like a magnet. The pull is overwhelming, but I'm not afraid. I want nothing more than to touch him.

Hesitantly, I move my hand from his wrist to his cheek. He sucks in a breath and I freeze. I've nearly melted into the seat when he turns his mouth toward my palm and kisses it.

"Beau?"

"Hmmm?" He hums against my palm. The vibration sends a tiny shiver through me. He chuckles. "Cold?"

"Oh, you!" I go to rip my hand away, but before it goes anywhere, his hand is on mine, pressing it against his cheek.

His eyes whip to mine, and I swear the world stops for a moment.

"I'm sorry. Teasing you is addictive." His lopsided grin makes me blush uncontrollably. "Can I kiss you?"

A gasp escapes me. One he misreads.

I watch as the corner of his mouth falls, and before I know what I'm doing, my other hand is cupping his other cheek.

Kissing him.

He's frozen beneath me, and I instantly regret what I did, but then he wraps his hand around the back of my head pulling me closer.

I breathe him in, and when he deepens the kiss, I nearly die.

A tapping noise on the window has us both jumping out of our skin.

“So it’s true!” Katy Blake screams excitedly. “You are together!”

“Ugh,” Beau groans, leaning his forehead against mine while he tries to catch his breath. “She always did have awful timing.”

“I need the tea, you two!” I slide my head over to glance out Beau’s window and find Katy’s big blue eyes staring back at me. The determination in her gaze is clear. She isn’t going anywhere.

I sheepishly smile and give her a small wave.

“Do you think if we pretend we don’t hear her, she’ll go away?” Beau asks, his eyes hopeful.

I chuckle. “Unlikely. Katy is like a dog with a bone. She’s not giving it up. Looks like we’ll just have to face the music.” I beam as he scrunches his face together and groans.

He lifts his face and stares me straight in the eyes before firmly placing his lips on mine one last time. His lips curve up, making my cheeks lift higher.

“Fine.” He blows a breath, slowly letting his hands fall from my face. “Let’s go eat.”

“Try not to make having dinner with me sound so awful.” His pained expression is amusing, and I bite my lip.

“Well, when the alternative is kissing you...it is.” The wink he sends my way makes

me beam. Just then his stomach chooses to growl.

“Apparently your stomach doesn’t agree,” I manage to choke out between giggles.

“Yeah, well. It doesn’t have the same craving the rest of me does.” He waggles his eyebrows, and heat creeps up my cheeks. But the gleam in his eyes has me rethinking my stance on dinner. Just then, another knock on the window reminds me why we stopped kissing in the first place.

“We’re coming!” Beau growls at Katy.

Watching him get out of the car, my cheeks pull up. My cheeks hurt. I’m reminded that it’s been a very long time since I’ve felt this happy about anything.

Beau does an expert job of not answering Katy’s questions, but he does it in a way that even leaves me believing like he gave her information when he actually didn’t.

When she turns to leave, her scrunched up face has me staring at Beau in amazement.

“That was masterful!” He laces his fingers with mine and smiles down at me. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Masterful? Hmmm...I like hearing you say that about me.” He leans in and kisses my nose. I wrap my other arm around his and move closer to him. The urge to be near him is startling. “What did I do?”

“Lead the conversation in a way that left Katy speechless.” I shake my head, and Beau grins. “Poor Katy didn’t stand a chance against you. It was an impressive sight to behold.”

“Thank you,” he says, as we start walking toward The Glowing Fork.

“But seriously, where did you learn that technique?” Beau has always been good on his feet; I should know since I was usually on the other end of his witty comebacks.

“College.” He takes a deep breath, and the hand interlaced with mine flexes. “When I was on the football team, they taught us how to deal with the press.”

“That’s right! You played in college—”

“Were you stalking me?” he teases me, nudging my hip, and I giggle.

“I may have listened a bit more intently if I heard your name mentioned.” I grin. “But Genevieve was the one who followed your college career. How is it that you ended up playing rugby?”

“That’s a great topic of conversation for dinner,” he says as he grabs the handle and pulls open the door to The Glowing Fork.

Beau holds the door open for me, and I walk over the threshold. Gideon Wren is standing behind the hostess station with a wry grin that widens when he sees Beau walk in behind me.

“Hello, you two,” he says, his eyes twinkling. Then picks up a menu and whispers, “Or should I say Mr. and Mrs.?”

I chuckle nervously, but Beau responds without hesitation. “‘You two’ is perfect for now. How are you, Gideon?”

“Excited to have the most talked about couple here at my restaurant tonight! I have the best table for you.” He points to the table in the center of the room and I nearly roll my eyes and groan.

It's always so much fun being in a fishbowl. In a small town. Where gossip is queen.

The only saving grace is that The Glowing Fork has a unique environment.

One of the things about living in a town called Starhaven is that many businesses have fun with the star part. My business, 'Starlight Vet Haven', a coffee shop named 'Bean Me Up' (I love that one), and then The Glowing Fork.

Though stars have nothing to do with the name, the interior is decorated like a starry night. When you walk through the door, you feel like you're in an open field under a clear night sky.

Gideon and his wife, Aurora, are huge stargazers. I remember when they moved to Starhaven and opened the restaurant with a stargazing theme. You needed a reservation weeks in advance.

So sitting in the middle of the room for everyone to watch isn't so bad, especially since it's dark.

The only lights in the room come from the lamps on the tables. The rest is all blacklight and UV tape. Gideon grabs two menus.

"Follow me."

When we step into the dining area, the constellations on Gideon's blue shirt start to glow immediately. On the floor, the UV strips lead us through the pathway of tables.

"Here we are."

Beau pulls out the chair for me, and I shyly smile, feeling self-conscious, knowing my teeth are probably a lovely shade of blue. I also can't help but notice how quiet

the room has gotten.

Scanning the room, I find everyone is staring at us. I swallow hard. As if my nerves weren't on edge already, now we have an audience.

Chapter Thirteen

Beau

“Chloe will be your waitress tonight,” Gideon grins, as he places menus in front of us. “She’ll be with you shortly. Enjoy your dinner.” He winks at us and walks away, his shirt shining with the Big Dipper on one side and Orion on the other.

“Thanks, Gideon,” Kit beams, and I can’t help but chuckle at her glowing teeth. “What?”

“Your teeth.” My eyes crinkle at the corners. The expression on her face is irresistible. She’s like a little kid at the candy store and I’m captivated.

“Yours too!” she says with sparkling eyes, and this time, I burst out laughing. Kit leans to the middle, lifting a hand to her cheek and whispering, “And theirs.”

My lips twitch as I scan the room, spotting glowing teeth and stares watching us. “Hello, everyone. Are you enjoying your night out?”

The room fills with amused chuckles and a few greetings. And the hum of conversation fills the room. I turn back to Kit, a smirk still lingering on my face. She’s shaking her head and smirking.

“Hi, I’m Chloe.” Our waitress introduces herself and fills a tall glass in front of each of us with water. “I know you were just seated, so I’ll give you a few minutes to decide what you’d like to eat.”

“Thank you, Chloe,” Kit and I say in unison. Our gazes meeting in surprise.

A shy expression covers Kit’s face before she starts reading the menu—the menu glowing with words and a few constellations. My cheeks pull up and a surge of emotion rushes through me. Slowly inhaling, I pick my menu up and start to read over the options. “I always forget that the restaurant fare is one hundred percent comfort food.”

“I know.” I can all but hear the smile in Kit’s voice. “It’s one of my favorite parts about eating here.”

Scanning the menu, I ask. “What are you in the mood for?”

A shy smile curves her lips. She leans on the table, resting her head on her palm. “It’s between the Sparkling Grilled Cheese and the Dazzling Pot Pie.” Her expression has my gut tightening as heat pools. I lift my glass to wet my parched mouth.

I swallow hard. “Sparkling Grilled Cheese ?” I quirk a brow and look at her skeptically.

“Oh yes! It’s the absolute best grilled cheese you’ll ever eat.” She places her other elbow on the table and leans in. I’m surrounded in honeysuckle and take a moment to breathe her in. I’m tempted to reach for her hand, but I’m not sure what she’d think about such a public display of affection, so I decide against it. “Not to mention the tomato soup. Sooo good!”

“So you’re a grilled cheese girl, huh?” I press my jaw together and try not to chuckle at how adorable she is. Her eyes glitter with excitement and I’m lost in their warm depths.

“I’m a comfort food girl. Any time. All the time,” she says, her expression so serious

that the chortle I've been holding bursts out. "Are you making fun of me?"

Her narrowed eyes are softened by the smirk she's wearing. "Never." She tosses her napkin across the table, hitting me in the face.

"You're the worst!" She scoffs.

"And you like it." Her eyes flare, and she looks shyly down at the table. I'm positive that if there were more light in this room, I'd see pink on her cheeks. I reach across the table with her napkin. When she grabs it I hold on, not letting go until she meets my eyes. "Maybe just a little?"

Her head tilts in the most sweet way as she tugs at her bottom lip. Putting the napkin back on her lap, she mumbles. "Maybe a little."

A grin spreads across my face, and my chest flutters, pools of warmth flooding me. Pulling my eyes from her I glance back at my menu. "What do you think I should order?"

"I don't think you can go wrong with anything on the menu." She beams, her teeth glowing and puts her elbows on the table clasping her hands together. Tiny points of heat touch my face, making my pulse jump. Taking another sip of water, I work to focus on the menu so that I can pick something. But how do I pick from the menu when all I crave is the woman sitting across from me?

"What about the Braised Back Rib Glow?" She asks, interrupting my thoughts that are about anything but food.

"The Braised Back Rib Glow?" I echo, lifting an eyebrow.

"Yeah," she smirks and chews on her bottom lip. Her gaze drops to my shoulders and

slides over my chest. I can't help myself. I flex. Her eyes jump back to mine. A surprised expression flits across her face, quickly replaced by a satisfied smirk. "You seem like a rib man."

Even in the dim light I can see her hazel eyes dancing, and her shoulders bounce with silent humor. She shrugs again and covers her mouth with a hand. My lips curve up. Unable to stop myself, I reach across the table and pull her hand away from her mouth.

The moment I touch her skin, a shock courses through me. Maybe I imagined the spark of electricity between us, but then I hear her breath hitch. The pounding of her heartbeat under my thumb makes my mouth go dry. The warmth from her skin lights up my senses. We stare at each other across the table, the air between us charged. My eyes flick to her lips before quickly bouncing back to her gaze.

I wish we were back in my car so I could press my lips—

"Have you decided on your meals?" At Chloe's voice, Kit's eyes sparkle, and a playful expression crosses my face.

"Ladies first." Lowering our hands to the table, I slowly let my thumb drag across her palm before returning my hand back to my menu. I hear a sharp inhale, and a sense of gratification fills me.

She likes me—more than a little.

My cheeks are sore from smiling. My body is humming. I feel like I'm eighteen again, lost in the eyes of the most beautiful girl in the world.

"So you agree with my meal choices?" Kit's voice cuts through my thoughts.

“Umm. Huh?” Her eyes dance, and heat creeps up my face.

I don’t like how easy it is for me to be distracted by her. It’s even worse that she knows it.

“I said I’d get the Sparkling Grilled Cheese and you’d have the Dazzling Pot Pie. Is that okay?”

“Wait, I thought you said I should get the Braised Back Rib Glow because I look like a rib man?” I raise a brow and stare at her pointedly.

A snicker and then a cough come from my left, and I see Chloe trying not to laugh at us.

“You do,” Kit smirks, her eyes roaming over my shoulders and chest again. “You definitely do. But I can’t decide which one I want.”

“Oh, wait!” My eyebrows shoot up. And I lean on the table. “Are you picking out my meal based on what you want so you can have mine, too?”

“Well, only some of yours,” she says, a mischievous expression lights her face. Her eyes glimmer in the dim light. “You don’t mind, right?”

Muffled laughter echoes around the restaurant, and I hear a cough that sounds surprisingly like a ‘no’.

I roll my eyes, feeling a bit like my teenage mentee. “Fine. Noooo, I don’t mind.”

I glance at Kit, and the playful grin she has on her face fills me with mirth.

“Do you want anything else, Beau?” Chloe asks. And when I shake my head, her lips

lift. “You got it. I’ll put your orders in now.”

“Thank you,” I say, and smirk at Kit. “That was smooth, Garrett.”

“Tell me how you started playing rugby.” She leans both elbows on the table and rests her chin on her palm. “I honestly thought you would end up drafted to the NFL.”

“Nice pivot.” I grin and take a sip of water. “My college roommate, Sam.”

Playing with my water glass, I remember the first time Sam convinced me to play. The game was similar enough to football that I caught on to the rules quickly, but something about it had me hooked from the moment I played my first game. It wasn’t just about the lack of equipment but how you pushed your body. It was different from anything I had ever done before. It quickly became something I wanted to play any chance I got. “He was from Ireland and a huge rugby fan. He’d been needling me about playing American football and how weak I was.”

“Sam sounds like my kind of guy,” Kit teases. My gaze snaps to hers, and for a second, I’m lost in the pools of brown staring back at me. Right now, her eyes are almost the same color as her hair; at least the low lights are giving them that appearance.

Warm and inviting.

“I think the two of you would like each other.” I haven’t talked about this in a long time, but it brings back how disappointed my dad was when he learned I wouldn’t be pursuing a career in football. Kit must notice something because she places her hand on my forearm.

“Everything okay?” She asks, those amber eyes filled with concern.

Heat rushes through me, and my heartstrings tug as I take her in. “It is now,” I say gruffly.

Her eyes darken, and an impish expression rests on my face.

I clear my throat before I start talking. “People in town had high hopes for me being drafted and playing professional football. Don’t get me wrong, so did I.”

“But?” Kit asks softly, her gaze watching me intently, making my pulse thud around my chest like a drummer.

“But I didn’t.” I shrug, the memory of that time consuming me. “I was good, but I wasn’t ‘professional’ good. More than that, though, I’m not sure I wanted it.”

“Okay.” Her head is tilted as she watches me, a question filling her eyes. I know what I’m saying is vague, but it’s the truth. “So how did you start playing professional rugby?”

“When the Ironclad Marauders had tryouts I knew I wanted to play, so I went. I made the cut. And the rest is history.”

“I see.” Kit nods.

“Sometimes life throws you curveballs that lead you in directions you never considered.” Kind of like me being married to the woman sitting across from me. The one woman I never stopped comparing everyone I dated to.

The girl I craved teasing in high school and the person I don’t want to live another day without.

“Kit, your Sparkling Grilled Cheese, and Beau, your Dazzling Pot Pie.” Chloe’s voice

breaks the charged silence. “Bon Appetit.” She grins and walks away.

“Woah,” I say as I glance down at my food. The pot pie is ‘dazzling’ as it seems to glow in the dark. Shifting my gaze across the table, I find Kit’s Grilled Cheese literally sparkling. A grin crosses my face. “This is very cool.”

“Do you want a taste?” Kit holds out her fork to me with some grilled cheese. I stare at it, then up at her. She pushes her hand toward me. “I promise you won’t regret it.”

I put my mouth on the fork and take the Grilled Cheese, then close my eyes and groan. “This is possibly the best thing I’ve ever tasted in my entire life.”

Kit beams and my stomach quivers with excitement.

Just like marrying her was the best thing I’ve ever done. Now, I just need to find a way to convince her.

Chapter Fourteen

Kit

“You have to tell me about this kiss!” Genevieve teases, making smooching noises. My face is on fire. “Katy said the car windows were fogging up.”

“They were not fogging up!” I squeak out of a dry mouth. Not because that kiss wasn’t scorching, but because we were interrupted. I grumble. “That’s such an exaggeration.”

Taking a sip of my soda, I point at the TV. “Oh look, the game’s back on.” My sister is a massive sports fan. I know it’s the only thing that’ll stop her from asking more questions. For now.

I’m not sure I’m ready to talk about the kiss that shook my entire world yet.

“Don’t think you’re getting out of this.” She points a finger at me, a determined glint in her eye.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I chuckle. An action from the players grabs my attention. “Why are those two players lifting that guy up?”

Usually, I let Gen watch her games and don’t ask questions, but since this is Beau’s team, I’m curious.

“The ball was kicked out of bounds, so the other team executes a ‘lineout’.” She’s

staring at the screen, watching every move intently while talking over her shoulder. “The players will pick up one of their teammates in a ‘lineout lift’ to catch the ball. Usually, the player throwing it makes sure to aim it at his team’s side.”

Okay, that went over my head.

But I can’t get over how rough rugby is as I’m watching. This is brutal.

How does Beau not get hurt?

They keep banging into each other. My face scrunches up whenever someone carries the ball while the other players use their weight to push the ball carrier forward or block an opponent.

“Why did they kick it out of bounds just then?”

“The other team was getting too close to the try line, so they kicked the ball out of bounds to relieve some pressure in their territory,” she spits out, waving her hand at me to be quiet.

I chuckle at her, and shake my head. We’re supposed to be watching the game so she can help me understand how rugby is played.

Genevieve is a true sports fanatic, and once there’s a game on television, she can’t focus on anything else. “Yes!” She yells and turns toward me with her hand in the air.

“What?” I furrow my brow and slap her palm with mine.

“They scored! Five points on the board. Now, Marone will attempt the conversion kick for another two points.”

I watch the angle the kicker is standing at and shake my head. There's no way he's making that. How could anyone make it through the uprights at that angle? Not possible.

And just like that, he does. "Wow! That was impressive."

"The kick! I know. The angle is insane." Gen takes a sip of her soda. "I always hold my breath a little every time they go for a conversion. But Marone is good. Really good."

She turns her focus back to the game and then nudges me. "Hey! There's your man. Next to the touchline in the scrum."

"The what?" She couldn't have just said scum. I'm pretty sure that's not a thing.

"Scrum. I said scrum," she rakes her hand through her hair. "You're driving me crazy."

"I'm driving you crazy?!" I snort. "You're supposed to be teaching me about rugby, remember?"

"What do you think I've been doing?"

"Yelling out weird words I don't understand." Genevieve turns and glares at me, and I can't help myself. I chuckle. And then I chortle some more. Before I know it, Gen is giggling with me.

"Yeah, I think I'll let Beau teach you," she snickers. "I don't have the patience while trying to watch."

She turns back to the screen and starts screaming. "They got another try. They got

another try.” When she whirls around to me with her hand in the air, her excited expression turns pained. “You don’t know what a try is, do you?”

I pull my bottom lip in through my teeth and sheepishly shrug. “I know what the word ‘try’ means but forgot what it means in rugby.”

“Ugh,” she groans, covering her face with her hands.

“I’m sorry. Sports are your thing,” I chuckle. She turns back to the game and continues watching. I glance at the score and see the Marauders are down by two. “Except for golf. You don’t like golf, do you?”

I hear her mumble something under her breath but she doesn’t answer me. Her new client is a professional golfer and is well known. Even I’ve heard of Luke Nichols, and I don’t know anyone in sports.

Doesn’t hurt that he’s from a town close to Starhaven. Which means the locals are always keeping track of him.

He’s a bit of a celebrity, despite being a tad grumpy.

Gen, however, is not a fan.

Genevieve, who is notorious for commenting on a man’s physical appearance—and Luke is a ‘hot male model’ type—has said nothing. Not to mention, she’s avoided answering any questions I’ve asked about him.

“YES!” Genevieve screams. “They scored!” She jumps around, cheering and doing this odd dance she does. I can’t even describe it.

“Can you please stop that? You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Skipping over to me, she grabs my arms and starts swinging them around. “Embarrassing myself?”

“Oh, jeez. Can we just finish watching the game?”

Gen stops and rolls her eyes at me. “The game is over. The Marauders won in the last two minutes.”

“Oh.” I apologetically grin. “Yay! Go team.”

Genevieve cracks up, and I shrug. But then I hear Beau’s voice.

I whip my head toward the TV, and there he is, talking to one of the reporters. He’s a sweaty mess, and I think he has some blood on his face, but the sight of him makes my heart stop.

The reporter just asked him about the upcoming Play It Forward event.

“It’s going to be a blast.” His lips lift in an excited smile as he answers the question. “Just like every year. I’m so grateful to be a mentor for the organization. Working with the kids has made my life better.”

My head tilts as a grin slides across my face.

“Oh, the windows of that car were definitely fogging up.” I swat at her, but my entire face is on fire.

“The windows were not fogging up,” I admonish, a heat creeping up my neck. Gen’s laughter fills the room. “But if Katy didn’t interrupt us, they probably would’ve been.”

The sun streams through the bedroom window filling the room with a radiant glow. Feeling a bit lazy this morning, I haven't gotten out of bed yet. When my phone buzzes, anticipation races through me, and I reach for the phone excitedly.

Beau:

Morning Beautiful.

I can't wait to see you tonight.

My cheeks hurt from the smirk that splits my face. Since dinner at The Glowing Fork, Beau and I have been in communication every day.

And every day I fall for him a bit more.

The need to know what I said the night we got married is fading. I'm pretty certain it was every secret I kept to myself where he was concerned.

Knowing that I most likely told him I loved him has me cringing, but admitting that to him makes the most sense as to why we got married.

Did he admit that he was in love with me too?

Ugh! I wish I could remember. Shaking my head at the entire situation, my grin gets impossibly bigger.

Kit:

Me too.

When will you be back?

Beau:

I'm leaving for the airport in a little bit.

So a few hours max.

Kit:

See you at 6?

Beau:

Wouldn't miss it. wink emoji

Throwing the covers off, I hop out of bed and skip to the bathroom. I brush my teeth and my hair, pulling it into a high ponytail. Once back in my bedroom, I slip on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved, navy T-shirt.

Heading to the kitchen, I grab my purse and keys. As I run down the stairs, a crooked grin creeps on my face at the thought of my grandmother telling me I sound like an elephant. I need to stop in town for a few things I need for dinner.

I'm cooking.

A couple of minutes later, I'm walking through the sliding doors of Harris Teeter, a sly smile resting on my face. It's not long before I hear murmurs all around me. People are staring and whispering.

I shrug at them, my lips twitching.

It's not like they don't have something to talk about; I just don't have any solid

answers other than Beau and I are married.

Making my way around the store, I grab what I want and a few others before I head over to Bean Me Up.

The smell of ground coffee beans and the sound of the frother bring me to another level of happiness.

“Hey, Nora. Can I get my usual?” Nora turns to me with eyes the size of saucers, and my insides lurch. I haven’t been hiding from anyone but haven’t been answering questions either.

“The last time I talked to you, you were marrying Scott,” she whispers as she rings up my order. “What the heck happened?”

“That was the plan.” I shrug and hand over the money for my coffee. Scott can tell everyone what he did, but at this point, it doesn’t matter to me anymore.

She takes the money and stares at me, expecting me to say more. My cheeks pull up, and I stay silent.

“Okay, so then how did you end up married to Beau Matthews?” she asks. I glance around the coffee shop, checking to see if the hum of conversation has stopped or if I’m imagining it.

Yup. Everyone’s eyes are on me, and I chuckle until my gaze falls on Scott. My stomach drops, and my jaw clenches. I blow out a big breath and turn back to Nora.

“Well, isn’t it normal to plan to marry one person and end up married to another?” I ask, arching a brow as Nora slides my cup across the counter. I chuckle as her mouth nearly hits the floor.

“Thanks!” When I walk toward the exit, everyone is still watching me. The surprised, curious expressions pull a full body laugh from me. “Don’t act so surprised, everyone! I swear I haven’t lost my mind. Your pets are still safe.”

Pushing the door open, I take one more glance back, beaming at them all. Just as I step out onto the sidewalk, I hear Scott’s voice, and I groan.

“Kit!” He calls. But I keep walking, pretending not to hear him. “Christy, wait!”

Taking a sip of my coffee, I continue walking. Taking in a deep breath of the smell of spring flowers blooming.

“I need to talk to you.” He puts his hand on my shoulder. My body tenses, and my skin crawls. Scott immediately takes his hand away.

I inhale deeply and slowly exhale, whirling to face him without saying a word. I take a sip of coffee and stare at him. The look he wears is the one that he would always don when he was trying to get his way.

When we were together, it was easier to let him win. But now, we’re over, and I don’t care what he wants.

“So speak,” I say after a few moments of standing there with him just staring at me. I take another sip before asking. “Do you want to tell me what’s on your mind?”

“Can’t we talk about this? I made a mistake and should’ve never left you at the altar.” I just stare at him. Any previous emotions gone. With nothing to say. “Did you hear me?” his voice cracks. “I made a mistake.”

“I heard you.” I lift my cup and take a swig. At this rate, I’m not going to even be able to enjoy my drink. “Was that all?”

Scott's eyes narrow, and his lips purse for a moment before he catches himself. There's the Scott I know. "You made a huge mistake marrying him. You know that, right?"

My jaw clenches, and my eyes snap open for a moment. "I did make a mistake."

"I knew you'd come to your senses." A big grin crosses his face, and relief fills his eyes. "You can just get a divorce, and we can go back to the way things were—"

I cackle. "No, Scott. You misunderstood me. Beau wasn't the mistake—you were." I poke his chest to make sure my words hit home. "You were the mistake."

I leave him standing there with a shocked expression, sputtering. The birds chirping in the trees, and joy fills me.

As I intentionally walk away from the past I thought was my future, a sense of lightness fills my body.

I don't turn around. The only way to move is toward the future.

Checking my phone, a warm smile spreads as I read Beau's last text.

And that future is with Beau.

Chapter Fifteen

Beau

“I did make a mistake.”

Kit’s words wash over me in waves of confusion. My gut churns, and my throat constricts. My heart falls to my stomach causing my blood to run cold. Her voice and those words play over and over again.

Rubbing over my sternum, I think of how I felt seeing Scott touch Kit. It took every ounce of control I had not to run over and deck him.

He still thinks the world revolves around him and couldn't care less about how horribly he treated her.

But when I saw Kit’s expression, I knew she had it under control. So, instead of interrupting this time, I waited down the street. Far enough away that I wasn’t intruding but close enough so that I could be there if she needed me.

Raking my hand through my hair, I get in my car and drive off.

I never thought I could feel worse than I did that summer. But I do.

After what happened, I blamed myself. But now—

“What was I thinking?” I grumble. “She admitted this was a mistake from the

beginning. She wanted the annulment. Why did I challenge her to admit to Scott we were married?"

"Cause he's a complete jerk, and I wanted her to have one over on him." I talk back to myself. "I mean, what kind of idiot leaves a woman like that?"

My chest is gripped in a vice, and I'm getting a headache.

Dialing Mike's number, I hear the ring over the car's speaker.

"Beau! Are you calling to give us an update?" I can hear the guys at the station in the background.

"Mike tells me things have been going well between you and Kit." Cole Nichols, Mike's best friend and fellow fighter, chuckles.

"She said I was a mistake," I mumble, scrubbing my brow with my hand.

"Beau, are you driving?" I nod my head without answering. "If you are, I want you to stop now."

Without saying a word, I pull over and put the car in park.

Leaning my forehead against the steering wheel, the back of my eyes burn.

This is worse than that summer. This time, I got a taste of what it would be like to be with Kit. It was better than I could've imagined, but then it was over before it started.

"Okay," Mike says slowly and softly, like he's dealing with someone in shock. "Why don't you tell us what happened?"

I fill them both in on what I saw, did, and heard. The car is quiet, and I check my phone to see if the call dropped.

“Wait, did you say you noticed her tense when Scott touched her?” Cole asks. I rub my forehead and nod. “Beau?”

“Sorry,” I push through a tight throat. “Yes. I almost went to them.”

“So she wasn’t happy to be talking with him?” Mike asks, like he’s trying to piece together a puzzle.

Kit’s strained look comes to my memory. It did appear like that when I first caught sight of them. I bite my lip. “She said she made—”

“We got that,” Cole says in the same tone Mike uses, cutting me off. “But the question is, was she talking about you being the mistake?”

I slide my fingers over my jaw and stop at my chin. “What do you mean? She said I was the mistake.”

“No, she said, ‘I made a mistake.’ Not Beau was a mistake,” Mike says firmly, then softer. “Are you sure you didn’t misunderstand exactly what she meant?”

Doubt creeps in before the nausea returns. I start to shake my head again when Cole’s voice fills the car.

“Did you stay for the entire conversation?” My fists clench around the steering wheel, and my breathing is short. “Beau?”

“I’m still here.” My voice is strained, and I’m struggling to process what they’re saying, but the pain that’s gripping me is clouding my thoughts.

“Did you stay for the entire conversation?” Mike calmly asks this time.

“No.” I rake my hand through my hair. “But what does—”

“It matters,” Mike cuts me off. “Because maybe she wasn’t talking about you.”

“Yeah. What if the mistake she was talking about was Scott?” Cole hops on Mike’s point. “What if she finally realized that the fool she was engaged to, who then left her at the altar and alone in Las Vegas , was the mistake?”

“I don’t know.” I frown.

“This sounds very familiar to me,” Mike says in a sing-song voice. “When are you seeing her next?”

My emotions are all over the place, and I can’t think straight. Cole’s and Mike’s words aren’t processing.

“Beau, just hear me out for a second,” Mike starts but pauses for me to object. When I don’t say anything, he continues. “You told me the night you went to The Glowing Fork—”

“The Glowing what?!” Cole spits out.

“The Glowing Fork,” I mumble. “It’s a restaurant in town.”

“Bro, if you’re ever in Starhaven, you need to bring Noelle. It serves the best comfort food, and it’s basically like eating and stargazing—”

“Do you mind if you tell Cole about that later?” I mutter, my voice hoarse.

“Oh yeah. Sorry, Beau.” Mike clears his throat. “As I was saying. Since your date, things have been going well, right? You’ve been talking every day, and you have dinner plans for tonight, yes?”

“Yes,” I rub my face with my hand. “But—”

“No buts,” Mike says. “The answer is yes. You need to go to dinner and talk to her. Don’t let this be like that summer.”

“I’m not sure that’s—”

“Beau, I know what it’s like to make a mistake you regret and have to live with for years,” Cole says, and I can hear the sincerity in his voice.

Cole and his wife Noelle were dating in college. He intended to marry her, but then life happened, and Cole let her go. It was one of his biggest regrets.

Then last Christmas, he and Noelle got trapped together in a blizzard and were forced to talk it out. They cleared the air, made up, and now they’re married. But it was a decade of pain and regret.

“You’re being given a second chance,” Cole continues. “Do you want to be so stubborn that you let part of a conversation you overheard be how you make a decision?”

“Are you going to walk away without fighting for what you want?” Mike questions. “Again?”

Again?

The word hangs in the air staring me in the face, waiting to crush me.

And it comes down to one simple question: Do I want to lose Kit...again?

When I pull up in front of Jack's house, I see Missy Samuels and her daughter, Nicky, sitting on the porch.

"Beau," Missy greets me with a massive smile and gets up from her rocking chair to give me a hug as I walk up the stairs. "We were just talking about you."

"All good, I hope." I chuckle and give them a half-hearted smile. Nicky gets up and follows her mom's lead.

"Oh yes," Nicky says. "In the short amount of time you've been helping Jack, we've seen a huge difference. The boy actually comes home and does more than grunt at us."

The ache in my heart loosens at hearing this, and my smile brightens slightly. "I'm glad. I get so much out of helping the kids. Even if they do give me a run for my money."

"Do you want to sit and talk with us?" Missy points to the third chair, and I decline as they sit back down.

"Is Jack home?"

"He's not," Missy's brow furrows. "Were you supposed to meet with him today? I can call him."

"No, we weren't supposed to meet up today. I was just curious to see how things were going after our conversation the last time I saw him."

"You mean the 'duck' talk?" Nicky says, making us chuckle.

“That would be the one.” I give them a lopsided grin. I was thinking more about how things were going with Stephanie, but maybe I need to be reminded of the duck story myself. “Has it helped at all?”

“Has it helped?!” Missy and Nicky yell together.

“It’s almost as if a switch has flipped.” Nicky smiles. “He’s still learning how to adjust to this new life, but that little story has given him a way to bounce back faster. Thank you.”

My gaze jumps back and forth between the two of them, and the tightness in my lungs loosen. This is why I love Play It Forward. It gives me the opportunity to help not just a child but also their family.

My phone vibrates, and I pull it out of my pocket to see a text from Kit. My eyebrows knit together.

Missy reaches out and grabs my hand. I turn my gaze toward her. “Is everything okay? You look as if you could use your own advice.”

She gives me a squeeze, and I stare down at her grip. I sigh and then shift my gaze back to hers. Her eyes are filled with compassion, and an ache blooms in my core at her kindness. “Is something going on with that new wife of yours?”

My brows shoot up, and my gaze jumps between the two of them. “It’s a small town, Beau.” Nicky’s gaze glints as she chuckles. “And Scott’s ego is bruised.”

I scoff and stuff my hands in my pocket. “Well, he’s the idiot for not marrying her when he had multiple opportunities.”

“She’s too good for him.” Missy snorts. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

Glancing between them, I try to decide how much I want to say. “I’m not sure,” I say honestly. “Today’s been a bit rough.”

I rub the back of my neck to ease the tension that’s been sitting there since leaving Kit and Scott.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Missy asks softly. “We’re good listeners.”

“You’ve done so much for Jack already...let us try to help.” Nicky points to the chair beside her, and I hesitate.

Mike’s and Cole’s words run through my head. The reminder of my conversation with Jack echoes, too.

I’m not sure this is a case where I can let what happened roll off my back, but it may require me shaking it off enough to have a conversation.

A conversation that I’ve been avoiding since waking up married.

“Beau?” I look up at Nicky.

A sheepish grin slides across my face just as my phone vibrates again.

“I think this is a conversation I need to have with my wife.” I start to walk down the stairs but turn and say over my shoulder. “Wish me luck.”

“If Kit knows what’s good for her, you won’t need any luck.” The glint in Missy’s eyes has mine crinkling. “If she doesn’t, I’m still on the market.”

I throw my head back and howl, then wink at her. “I’ll let her know she has some serious competition.”

When I reach the car, I remember the Play It Forward event this upcoming weekend.

“Play It Forward has its annual tour for our area this upcoming weekend. I’d love it if the two of you could join! Have Jack text me if you’re interested, and I’ll get you all the details.”

Waving at them, I hop in my car and head home.

I have dinner to get ready for and a woman to convince that marrying me wasn’t a mistake.

Wish me luck is right.

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Chapter Sixteen

Kit

I slide the Chicken Francese in the oven and set the timer for fifteen minutes. Next, I prep the string bean almondine and braised potatoes. When I check the time, I rip the apron from around my head and dart to the bathroom.

“Beau’s gonna be here in twenty minutes. I’m never going to be ready!” I squeal as I toss my clothes on the floor and then run back to pick up what I threw down and put it in the laundry basket.

Five minutes, and possibly the fastest shower I’ve ever taken, later I rub my damp hair with a towel. Tearing through my closet, I try to decide what to wear.

“I should’ve picked my outfit out earlier,” I groan.

Grabbing my phone, I call my sister. The phone almost goes to voicemail before Gen picks up, breathless.

“Kit, what’s up?” she answers, gasping for air.

“Are you okay? You sound like you’re having a heart attack!” I stop flipping through my clothes, concerned.

“I’m fine. I was just running.” She huffs.

“Running?” My voice fills with surprise. “You hate running!”

“Yeah, well that’s what you need to do when someone...” her tone is scathing. “Is careless with the leash.”

“Do you need to go?” I ask. She’s obviously working. Though, I’ve never heard her talk to one of her clients like that, especially when she’s still with them.

My eyebrow raises. I think this situation is one I need to hear more about.

“No, we caught him. Hold on tight,” she grumbles, and I hear a muffled male voice respond to her before she asks. “What do you need?”

“Beau is coming over for dinner, and I don’t know what to wear.” I start flipping through the clothes in my closet again.

“Do you still have that teal top? The one that’s super flowy, has a v-neck, and ruffles?” I stare at the exact shirt my fingers just landed on.

“Umm, yes.”

“Perfect! Pair it with jeans and those black ankle boots you have, and you’re all set.” I can hear her clap in the background. “Beau is going to die when he sees you.”

“I haven’t heard from him since this morning,” I say, chewing on my fingernail. “Do you think I should be worried?”

“Kit, I’m so sorry, I have to go. Mr. Pro Golfer needs help. Have fun with Beau, and I can’t wait to hear how it goes.”

I stare at the phone, brows pulled together and the corner of my lip lifted. So that’s

who has Genevieve's feathers all ruffled.

I cannot wait to meet Luke Nichols in person, especially if he can make my beyond sunshiney sister grumpy.

Throwing the outfit Gen suggested on, I put on a bit of mascara, blush, and lip gloss. I give myself a quick once-over before I hear the timer in the kitchen.

I reset it for 15 minutes and put the potatoes and string beans in just as the doorbell rings.

My heart flutters, and my mouth feels like the Sahara desert. I run my palms down my shirt and walk down the stairs.

Placing my hand on the doorknob I inhale deeply and slowly blow it out. When I open the door, the man standing before me steals my breath.

Beau is wearing a dark blue, long-sleeved Henley that hugs his chest, shoulders, and arms. This man's upper body is amazing, and once again, I wonder how these shirts don't bust at the seams. His hands are tucked in his front jean pockets.

When I realize I'm staring, my face gets hot, but when I meet Beau's gaze, the teasing glint I would normally find lingering isn't there.

Instead, I find lifeless silver eyes staring back at me. My stomach clenches, but I blow it off. Positive I'm making something out of nothing.

"Hey!" I smile brightly. "How are you?"

"I'm good," he answers, his voice as flat as his eyes. My pulse accelerates but for a completely different reason than when I first came down the stairs.

I want so badly to wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him, but his greeting throws me off kilter. So instead, I turn and start walking up the stairs, forcing my voice to sound cheerful. “Come on up. Dinner should be ready soon,” I toss over my shoulder.

I hear Beau’s footsteps following me. The steps are in time with the drumming of my heart, and I make my way over to the cabinets to grab two glasses. “What do you want to drink? I have sweet tea, Dr. Pepper, or water with lime and lemon.”

I place the glasses on the table and glance up. For a moment, I notice a flash of emotion run across his gaze, but it passes quickly.

“Dr. Pepper would be great. Thanks.” The corner of his mouth lifts briefly before returning to a tight, straight line.

“Do you want ice?” I ask, holding the glass in front of the ice maker on the fridge. Holding his stare.

“No thanks.” He shakes his head. The fizzing from the soda being poured sounds like someone’s popping bubble wrap.

“Great game yesterday,” I toss out as I hand him his drink. Our fingers brush, and my breath hitches. When my gaze meets Beau’s, his eyes are like molten steel, and heat runs through my body. I let my gaze fall to his lips. But when I glance up into his look, the emptiness is back, and he’s taking a sip. Something is off, but I’m unsure how to address it. Yet. “I don’t know how you all don’t get seriously injured. That was one of the most brutal sports I’ve ever watched.”

“Make sure you don’t watch MMA. That’s way worse than rugby.” The chill in his voice has me rubbing my hands up and down my arms. “It’s not for everyone.”

My mouth falls open. I stare at him, trying to figure out what happened between the last time we talked and now.

“Are you—” Beeping fills the room, and I hesitate before turning to the oven. Tiny pricks heat the back of my neck and I know Beau is watching me. Grabbing the oven mitts, I pull out the chicken and place it on a trivet on the counter to rest. “I hope you like Chicken Francese.”

I close the oven and set the timer for another ten minutes so the potatoes and string beans can finish cooking.

“No mistake about it,” he says tightly, his jaw clenched. My brows knit, and I turn toward him. The glass is at his mouth, and my eyes fall to his Adam’s apple as he swallows. When I slide my gaze to his face, I see his jaw tick.

“You’re acting weird.” I lean against the counter, and cross my arms over my chest.

“Me? Acting weird?” He points to himself as one of his brows quirks. There’s a hardness to his gaze, but it’s also a challenge. “I think you’re mistaken. You make mistakes, right, Kit?”

“Everyone makes mistakes.” I pull my bottom lip in through my teeth and meet his hard gaze straight on. Pushing myself from the counter, I start to walk toward him, never letting my eyes leave his. “Want to tell me what we’re talking about here? Because I’m completely lost.”

Standing a foot from him, his gaze flicks away before meeting mine again. There’s pain in them, and I don’t understand why. An ache in my heart blooms, and I reach for him, but he steps away. “Is something wrong?”

“Did you get the paperwork from Paul?” My head tilts, and my brows pull together.

That came out of nowhere. “My attorney. You know, for the annulment.”

“I know who Paul is,” I say softly, taking another step toward him. His body stiffens, and I stop.

“You said you made a mistake, and I want to make sure that you get it rectified as quickly as possible.”

“Wait.” I put out my hand and rest it on his chest. This time, he doesn’t pull away. The heavy pounding of his heart gives me a tiny sliver of relief, and I flash him a playful quirk. “Did you overhear me talking to Scott earlier?”

For a moment, anger flares in his eyes, and my stomach dips. I’ve seen Beau all different ways, but I’ve never seen this side of him before. I almost step away, but then I recognize another emotion. “Beau?”

He grips my wrist, and for a second, I think he’s going to push me away, but instead, his chin dips. His voice is so low that I have to strain to hear him when he talks. “It’s okay if marrying me was a mistake. I just wish you would’ve told me.”

I sigh. “I did make a mistake.” His hand falls from mine, and he whips his gaze up.

“Okay, then I’ll—”

“But it wasn’t us getting married,” I whisper. Cupping his cheek, I step up against him. His eyes fill with uncertainty. “It was so many other things but never marrying you. Running to you that night in Vegas—”

“Don’t you mean running into me?” He leans his cheek into my palm and lets out a sigh. I step closer until I’m close enough to feel the heat coming off his body. I cup his other cheek.

“No,” I say firmly. “I mean running to you. I don’t remember it, but I’m positive I knew exactly where I wanted to be when I saw you.”

The molten steel is back, and my knees turn to jelly. “But I heard you—”

“Oh, I know you did! Typical man that you are, instead of asking me, you jump to—” Beau’s lips stop the flow of words falling from my mouth. His arms wrap around my back and pull me flush against him. I let my body sink against his warmth. Letting every part of myself give in to all the emotions that are running through me.

This kiss is everything. Everything that I could’ve ever wanted.

When he pulls away, I groan.

He presses his lips against mine again before whispering in my ear.

Chapter Seventeen

Beau

“The timer.”

“Hmm?” Kit’s eyes are glazed, and the last thing I want to do is let her go, but I don’t want the food to burn either.

Using all my strength, I step away from the woman in my arms and grab the oven mitt from the counter. Turning the timer off, I open the oven door and pull out the vegetables.

“You look sexy doing that.” Pin points of heat hit my back as she watches me, and I smirk.

“I aim to please.” I wink at her, then ask. “Where should I put these?”

She points toward the counter at a space next to the chicken. I place down the baking sheet, turn the oven off, and then remove the oven mitt.

Kit hasn’t moved from where I left her.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, sheepishly. “I didn’t handle that very well.”

She beams, and my chest lifts. “No, you didn’t. But you’ll have a long time and many opportunities to make it up to me.”

“Oh?” I waggle my eyebrows at her and snake my arm around her waist, pulling her close. She nods her head, a sparkle in her gaze.

When her hands lift to my face and her expression brims with affection, a shiver shoots down my spine.

“Beau.” She strokes my chin, her eyes turning mischievous. “Marrying you was the craziest thing I’ve ever done. But I’m so glad I found you at the lowest point in my life.”

Her lips press against mine, and I can feel the truth in her words. When she pulls back, I follow and kiss her again, softly. I lean in for more when her hand covers my mouth, so I kiss her palm instead.

“Please let me finish.” She chuckles at what I’m sure is a pained expression on my face. Her smile is so bright that I quell the desire to tell her we can talk all she wants later and begrudgingly nod. Her gaze glints mischievously at me. The vibration moves through my body, and my cheeks pull up.

She wraps her arms around my neck and presses fully against me. “You’re the best decision I’ve ever made, Beau Matthews, even if initially I felt like I made a mistake—”

I squint at her. “So I was a mistake?”

When she shakes her head and smiles, I can’t help but grin back. “The real mistake was how stubborn I was.”

“You are pretty stubborn.” I pull her tighter against me as she playfully smacks my shoulder and tries to push away from me.

“I’m trying to tell you I love you, and you keep interrupting—”

“You love me?” My pulse skips, and for a second, I can’t breathe.

“Yes.” Her gaze glows, and her lips curve shyly. “I love you.”

Cupping her cheek, I pull her face to me, and just before I can touch her sweet lips, she pushes away from my chest.

“Hey!”

“Do you even have to ask?” I whisper against her mouth.

“After the way you threw a temper tant—”

Cutting off her words, I cover her mouth and pull her up tighter against me—the need to be as close as possible is overwhelming. When she wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me to her, I lift her off the ground. When I pull away, her protest makes me grin. “Yes, Christy ‘Kit’ Garrett, I love you. I’m pretty sure I’ve loved you from the very first moment you told me off in front of the entire cafeteria.”

“I didn’t tell you—”

“Oh yes, you did.” I murmur amusedly. “In the best way possible.”

Placing her feet on the ground, I lower my body so we’re at eye level. Her eyes sparkling.

My grin swells, and I gruffly ask. “Will you be my wife, Kit? For real?”

An impish gleam fills her gaze. “Dinner’s getting cold—”

“Are you serious right now?” I squeak, and she giggles, her mouth forming an ‘O’.

“I didn’t know your voice could get that high!”

“Kit,” I groan. “Are you going to answer me?”

Placing her hands on my cheeks, she says thickly. “Dinner’s going to be very cold, Mr. Matthews.”

Joy blossoms through my chest, and a grin spreads across my face, threatening to crack my cheeks.

I waggle my eyebrows and say gruffly, “Good thing we can reheat it, Mrs. Matthews.”

“Beau Matthews,” Miles ‘Milo’ O’Donnell, Play It Forward’s Director, pats me on the back, a gleeful smile on his face. “It’s so good to see you here today!”

It’s a perfect day for Play It Forward’s annual event in North Carolina. Overhead is a clear blue sky, the sun is shining, and the weather is perfect for spring. We couldn’t have asked for anything better.

I glance over to find Kit and Jack walking through the crowd, back from the food stands. Kit is carrying a funnel cake in one hand and trying to take a bite out of a pretzel in the other. Jack is munching on a corndog.

A lopsided grin spreads at the sight of Kit with Jack. This is the life I always wanted, but didn’t think I would have.

Missy and Nicky stopped by for a short time but had to leave. When everything is done, Jack will come home with Kit and me.

My gaze roams over Kit. Her skin is glowing, her eyes are sparkling, and her grin is so bright it rivals the sun. She laughs at something Jack says, and the sound sends a shiver of delight through me. When she looks at me, that smile gets unthinkably brighter, a surge of happiness courses through me.

“Who’s the lovely lady?” Milo asks, sticking his head in front of me, to see where I’m looking, and I chuckle. If you didn’t know him, you’d think he was being rude. But Milo just likes to show that he’s interested in other people’s lives.

Sometimes, a bit too interested, but not in an unkind way.

“That’s my wife Kit. She’s with my mentee Jack,” I say, just as Kit and Jack get to us. “Kit and Jack, I’d like for you to meet Milo, the director of Play It Forward.”

“So nice to meet you.” Kit smiles and passes me the funnel cake. Wiping her palm on her jeans, she reaches out to shake Milo’s outstretched hand. “We weren’t sure if we’d get to see you today. So glad we did.”

“What did you do to marry such a beautiful woman?” Milo asks, just as I slide my arm over Kit’s shoulders, placing a kiss on her cheek.

“I just happened to get lucky one night.” Recalling the night this amazing woman threw her arms around my neck and changed my life forever. Milo’s eyebrows shoot up, and Kit slaps me on my stomach.

“Beau!” she yells, her cheeks turning pink.

Milo covers his laugh with a cough.

“In Vegas,” I shake my head, chuckling. “I got lucky when she found me in Las Vegas.”

“Oh,” Milo says slowly, confusion written all over his face. He forces a smile. “Well, congratulations to the two of you. May you have many—”

“Milo!” A woman rushes over and starts pulling Milo away. “We have to get ready for the three-legged race. Then we have to head out.”

“This is my assistant, Martha,” Milo tells us as Martha tries to usher him away. “Are you joining the competition?”

“Yes.” I nod, nudging Jack, who beams. He’s been waiting all day for this event. Apparently, he was the three-legged champion in third grade. “Jack was—”

Martha pulls him away as Milo turns back to us and waves. “Good luck!” He yells and starts to say something that we can’t hear with all the other people talking around us.

I lift my hand and wave.

“He’s weird,” Jack says. I press my mouth together to keep from snorting, and I see Kit doing the same.

“We’re all weird in one way or another,” I say, trying to be serious. “It’s what makes us unique.”

“Nice save,” Kit whispers in my ear, giggling.

I see Jack shaking his head and rolling his eyes. I reach over and gently grab his shoulder, giving it a shake. “Ready to go win this thing?”

His face lights up. “Let’s do this.” He raises his hand in the air, and I hit it with mine.

“You gonna wish me luck?” I ask Kit, pushing a stray hair behind her ear. Her gaze darkens at my touch.

The gleam shining back at me has me wondering what she’s thinking. A crooked grin crosses her face as she leans close. Right before she kisses me, she whispers, “I’m going to hope the two of you fall so I can laugh.”

Then she presses her lips to mine. A shudder moves through my body, and my stomach tightens. Kissing her will never get old, but then her words register, and my eyes pop open. “Wait? What did you say?”

She laughs and kisses me on the cheek, turns me around, and says, “Go kick some butt,” before slapping my left butt cheek.

I glance over my shoulder and pull my brows together. When she gives me a mock salute and a wink, I throw my head back and burst out laughing. A grin so big I’m sure my cheeks will crack.

Walking over to Jack, we head to the field where the three-legged contest is being held. My wife follows behind.

I really wasn’t kidding when I said I got lucky one night.

Kit

Carrying one of the few boxes I have, I slowly make my way up the steps to Beau's house, our home as he keeps telling me, and watch the hustle and bustle of activity. Some of my husband's teammates are helping move the few pieces of furniture I'm taking with me.

Honestly, there wasn't a need for me to bring anything, but Beau wanted me to know it was my house too, so I brought the things I thought I would miss.

After putting the box inside with all the others, I come back out and take in the scene unfolding before me. Karate Kid, Jackson, and Teddy are strategizing how best to get my grandmother's china and buffet cabinets in the house.

Karate Kid says he's the one who's best at hitting all angles and that they should listen to him. Jackson and Teddy tell him how silly that is, especially since Jackson's family owns a moving business.

I shake my head at the ridiculousness of it all when a pair of arms wrap around me and a chin rests on my shoulder. I let out a contented sigh.

"How are you feeling about all of this?" Beau's gruff voice sends tiny shivers down my spine. I'm excited for our first night under the same roof.

Turning around in his arms, I slide my hands up his chest and then around his neck. The flash of heat in his eyes at my touch fills my body with warmth, and my mouth curls up. His arms tighten around me, pulling me closer.

The smile he's beaming my way makes me grateful he's supporting me, and the affection shining in his silver gaze makes my pulse hum through me.

Three weeks ago, I was set to marry a man I quietly doubted was right for me, only for fate to intervene and end up in the arms of the man standing in front of me.

"Okay, love birds," Jackson's exacerbated voice carries from the bottom of the stairs. "Do you mind breaking this up while we move the china cabinet in?"

My eyes widen in surprise as Beau lifts me off the ground and carries me out of their path before placing me back down onto the porch.

"That'll work, too." Teddy chuckles as he walks by with the first side of the cabinet.

"This reminds me of the two of you in Las Vegas," Karate Kid snickers as he walks by, carrying the other end. And I turn my gaze toward them. "Except for your outfit, of course, Kit."

My cheeks flame as I remember my outfit that day. It was a beautiful wedding gown that I picked out with my mother and sister when we thought I'd be having a traditional wedding.

"But if I remember correctly," Jackson's teasing tone draws my attention to the bottom of the stairs where he's leaning against the railing. His eyes dance. "You literally threw your bridal self at our man Beau here."

My cheeks burn, and I tuck my face against Beau's vibrating shoulder. "Best night of my life," he responds, kissing the top of my head.

Embarrassment fills me as I hug him tighter. If I could crawl into his skin so that no one could see me right now, I would.

“What do you think about the two of us having a real wedding?” Beau mumbles softly. “You know, one that you actually remember.”

“BD,” Teddy yells. “Catch.”

I open my eyes to see Beau reaching up and grabbing a velvet box from the air, a smirk on his face. My brows furrow, and my forehead pulls.

“Are you serious?” I ask, tears stinging.

He opens the black velvet box, and inside is a simple cushion-style engagement ring with a matching wedding band.

“Ohhh.” My mouth falls open as the diamond sparkles in the daylight, and I shift my gaze to his.

“I don’t need to get married again.” His voice is husky. “But I don’t want you to regret not having a wedding.”

“A wedding is just one day,” I push through a tight throat. “Every day after that is what matters most.” I reach up and run my fingers over his cheek. When he leans into my palm, my insides melt.

“I love you,” he whispers, wrapping his arms around me. He captures my lips with his and lifts me off the ground. When I let out a sigh, he deepens the kiss and all but takes my breath away.

It takes a moment for the catcalling from the sidewalk to push through my bubble, but Beau’s snort brings it into focus.

“Now it’s really like Vegas,” Teddy shouts, Karate Kid and Jackson cheering.

My face starts to heat, again, and Beau chuckles. “Don’t you have something you could be doing right now?” Beau scoffs at his teammates.

I turn to find the three of them leaning against the black pick-up truck we borrowed for the move, arms crossed against their chests and broad smirks on their faces. My lips curve up faintly.

“Okay, boys,” I say to the three of them. “The sooner you finish, the sooner I can get some alone time with my husband. Do you think you could make that happen for me?”

Teddy and Jackson start to head toward the back of the pick-up, but Karate Kid just stands in place, staring at me and Beau.

“Ouch!” He shouts, putting his hand on his head over the place where Teddy slapped him. “What did you do that for?”

“Let’s get moving so we can give them their alone time,” Teddy murmurs.

“I thought we were getting pizza for helping them move,” Karate Kid complains.

Hoots of laughter erupt from everyone.

“We are,” Jackson answers, pointing to himself, Teddy, and Karate Kid.

Tiny points of heat dot my cheek, and I shift my attention back to Beau.

Being here with him now fills me with a burst of happiness. I squeeze my arms around his neck and feel his arms tighten around me.

“We’re almost done, you two,” Jackson jests. “Just give us ten minutes.”

Placing my feet on the ground, Beau gives me the sweetest kiss before following them into the house.

An hour later, I'm sitting on the couch in the living room, taking in my new home. I delight in the fact that not only did I get married, but I moved into a house I've always loved, with the man I never thought I'd see again.

I chuckle at all the boxes we'll need to unpack. Beau wasn't kidding when he said he still had boxes sitting around. It's going to take us a few weeks to get everything in its rightful place.

It's actually perfect. We get to make this house a home together, and I love it.

The front door opens, and Beau walks in, carrying a pizza. He ended up going to get a pie for us.

"I got half black olive and half pepperoni," he says, placing the box on the dining room table.

My eyebrows lift, and my cheeks pull up. In high school, my family would get pizza every Saturday night. Beau worked at the pizzeria, answering the phones. Every time I'd call, I'd pretend not to know who was taking the order, but I always knew it was him.

"You remembered?"

A grin spreads, and there's a gleam in his eyes as he walks over to the couch, mimicking my high-pitched voice as he pretends to be me ordering pizza in high school. "Hi. I'd like to place an order for two pies. One plain and the other with half black olives and half pepperoni delivered to 124 Oak Tree Road."

A giggle falls from me as I cover my mouth, watching him walk toward me. When he reaches me, he puts his arms on the back of the couch beside my head, eyes twinkling.

“Of course I remembered! You would act like you didn’t know who was answering the phone, and it would drive me crazy.”

I grin, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth and sliding my palms up his arms.

“I know. It was the most fun I had all week.” I smirk, tugging him toward me.

“Aren’t you hungry?” He asks, beaming at me as he lowers his face toward me.

“I am,” I say against his mouth. “But I’m okay eating later if you are.”

Beau hops over the back of the couch, sitting in the seat next to me, and pulls me onto his lap. Cupping his hand around my cheek, he brushes the sweetest of kisses against my lips.

“I guess that’s a yes.” I smirk. When he doesn’t answer me. I pull back and ask. “Is that a yes?”

He growls as he pulls me closer making me chuckle. “It’s always a yes,” he says, gruffly.

I pull back. “Always?”

“Kit!” he grumbles, rolling his eyes and trying to pull me close.

“So testy,” I tease, running a finger over his jaw.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” he whispers. His lip curving under my thumb.

“At least you’ll die happy.”

His laughter rumbles, and he runs a finger along my chin before pushing a strand of hair behind my ear, sending tingles throughout my body. “At least I’ll die happy, ” he confirms.

His smile makes my stomach flip and butterflies furiously flap their wings. I cup his face, and my chest expands. He wraps his arms around me, and I sink into the cocoon he’s creating.

Leaning in, I press my lips against his and whisper.

“That makes two of us.”

The End.

I hope you fell in love with Beau and Kit, I had a ridiculous amount of fun writing their story!

A Not So Merry Ex-Mas

For years I've been dreaming of a real Christmas back home. Tree trimming, decorating, Christmas carols. What I wasn't expecting was Cole. If I was to dream up the perfect man even my wildest imagination would have fallen short compared to Cole Nichols. Tall, broad shoulders, smile to die for and dreamy green eyes that held a mischievous glint. Add in a heart of gold, always helping others in need. We had planned out every detail of our lives together...including his dream of becoming a major league pitcher. So when my gran got sick and I needed to take care of her, I gave him the push he needed, breaking my heart, and his, in the process. A decade, and a divorce later, I'm heading back home to start my life over. That new start begins with Christmas at my best friend's cabin...and the man I've done everything to leave behind. Is Christmas past here to haunt me, or to bring a future I stopped letting myself dream of? (Click here to read A Not So Merry Ex-Mas)

Chapter One Noelle

"This one." I point at the six-foot balsam fir before me, not even trying to hold my smile back. "It's perfect!"

The crisp New York air has my face stinging, my fingers numb, and my body vibrating. I finally found exactly what I was looking for.

"Are you sure?" Jason, the employee at the Christmas tree stand, asks.

I nod my head vigorously. "Positive."

This will be my first Christmas at home in over a decade and the first after my divorce. I want it to be flawless.

I blow warm air on my fingertips as I walk across the gravel path, leading Jason toward my red Volkswagen Beetle so he can secure the tree to the roof.

“We don’t see many of these around here with the snow, ice, and all.” He smirks as he looks over Belle. “Hopefully, you’ll arrive at your destination before bad weather hits.”

“I’m heading to my friend’s cabin for the holiday. It’s only about ten minutes from here, and I’m confident Belle will make it without a hitch.”

“Belle, huh?” His lips quirk, and his brows rise when I mention the name of my car. It’s the usual reaction from people. He chuckles. “Well, she’s definitely a beauty.”

“That she is!” I rub the hood of my baby and smile at him. “Thank you so much for your help in finding the perfect tree!”

“It was my pleasure.” Jason’s eyes sparkle and crinkle at the corners. “Have a very Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” I return as I climb into Belle and stick the key into the ignition, blasting the heat. The radio blares with Brenda Lee singing her classic Rockin’ Around The Christmas Tree, and I find myself singing along as I head back onto the highway.

As I get closer to Melanie’s family cabin, the trees pass in a blur, and memories from my childhood flashback. Spending holidays there with them were some of my best teenage memories. Melanie’s parents eventually stopped celebrating holidays at the cabin as they got older and decided to travel the world instead. Despite that, Mel and

I would make it a point to come up and spend as much time as possible once we could drive ourselves.

After my father cheated on my mother, she divorced him and moved us halfway across the country just to spite him. Even though he didn't earn any Father of the Year awards, he was still my dad and loved me. But she knew he wouldn't be able to come to New York to see me.

When I moved from Utah to New York after my parents' divorce, Melanie took me under her wing, and we became instant friends.

My chest clenches as I remember that time in my life. Mel was like a healing balm to my lost soul, and we've been friends ever since.

A heaviness overcomes me as I can't help but see the mirror reflection I'm living from my mother's life almost twenty years ago, but I shake it off.

"You are not your mother, Noelle!" I chastise myself even though a light quiver crosses my stomach. Just then, my phone rings and I look to see Dean's name across my screen. My finger punches the decline button and I send the call to voicemail.

"Perfect timing, Dean. As always." I'm no longer in love with my ex-husband, but I can't stop the bitterness from rising after all the time I spent unhappily married to him.

I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. All the joy I was feeling at coming home drains from my body. Our divorce was finalized last week. It was only a matter of time before he called me. He always liked to have the last word. I clench my jaw and snort.

"He is your past, and you are driving into your future!" I force my jaw to relax and

attempt to put a smile on my face, hoping the tightness in my chest will ease if I force myself into happiness. “Act as if, right?”

Without warning, a pair of green sparkling eyes and a smile to die for crosses my mind. Cole. My heart beats a bit faster while my stomach drops. I remember the last time we spent Christmas together, ten years ago, before everything went topsy-turvy.

For the second time in five minutes, I take a deep breath and work to push that memory out of my mind. Cole has popped into my head more times than I want to count over the past six years since last seeing him at Melanie and Mike’s wedding.

I shake my head and chuckle sardonically while one of my many regrets fills me. I let the love of my life walk away from me because I didn’t believe that we could make things work, and instead, I settled for a man who would never love anyone but himself.

Even though marrying Dean was a huge mistake, his cheating on me was exactly what I needed to move forward with my life. I’m grateful to him, in a weird, slightly sadistic way, but I know that if he hadn’t had an affair, I would’ve stayed in a loveless marriage, forever regretting my choices, which would have been infinitely worse.

Jingle Bells breaks through my reverie, and I look to see Melanie’s name on my phone. I turn down the radio and answer.

“I’m almost there.” I can’t hold back the smile that spreads across my face. “How far away are you?”

Mike and Melanie are meeting me at the cabin, and we planned to arrive at almost the exact time, so Mel and I won’t miss a minute of girl time.

“We haven’t gotten on the road yet.” Melanie’s voice carries through the speaker, and my stomach twists. “Mike was called into the firehouse to cover for one of the guys whose wife went into labor.”

“Oh.” I force a cheerfulness I don’t feel. “Well, that’s exciting. And it’s good for Mike to help. His co-worker should be at the hospital for the birth of his child.”

“I’m so sorry, Noe. I know you wanted to start all the holiday fun as soon as possible. We plan to head up tomorrow, so it will only be a small delay.”

“I understand,” I respond. “Really. Things come up. And when babies are ready to come into the world, nothing will stop them. I can wait another twenty-four hours.”

Mel chuckles. “You’re still a terrible liar.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” I feel a crooked smile creep across my lips.

“A very good thing,” she teases. “The cabin is all stocked up, so you won’t have to worry about food for tonight.”

I hadn’t forgotten about food; I just thought we’d stop at the store when we got settled. I did make sure to bring hot chocolate and marshmallows, however. At least I have my priorities straight.

“Mike and I made sure that all your favorites are there,” she continues. “I made sure to include everything you need to make cookies from scratch. So make sure to have them coming out of the oven by the time we arrive.”

“You’re so demanding.” A warmth fills me as I shake my head at her excitement.

“I’ve had to live without fresh-baked cookies from you for almost a decade. I’m

going to make sure that I get my fill this year!” Melanie says.

“You make it sound like you haven’t gotten cookies in the mail for a decade.”

“It’s not the same!” Melanie squeaks. “You aren’t attached to them. I’m so glad you’re moving back.”

My lips lift, and tenderness expands in my chest. I’ve missed being away from her so very much. Yes, we talked almost every day but it’s not the same as getting to see her.

Another blessing from Dean.

“I’m happy too, Mel.” My smile widens, and my chest feels light. “I can’t wait to see you tomorrow. I love you.”

“I love you too.” As the phone beeps, I let her words flow through me from the inside out. I turn my focus back to the road and realize I don’t recognize where I am. It’s changed since I last was here. I pull over to the side of the road and try to pull up my GPS to reorient myself, but the screen just glows. No bars available.

“Great,” I mutter.

I make a u-turn across the two lane highway and double back over the road I just traveled to see where I still have reception. Thankfully, it’s only about fifty feet before reception comes back and I’m able to enter the address for the cabin. Turns out I drove past the street.

I continue heading in my current direction. Before I know it, I reach Mountain Road and turn left, driving another two miles before hitting the cabin’s driveway. It’s at least another mile before I can see the roof.

A grin splits my face, and my body starts to vibrate. I tighten my grip on the wheel as Belle wobbles. Dirt roads are not Belle's friend, and her shocks will not be happy with me, but I don't care. However, I stop myself from stepping on the gas to get there faster.

Little by little, the cabin comes into view, and I feel my heartbeat elevating. The wrap-around porch is still the stuff of my dreams, but the exterior is slightly worse for wear. It's not surprising since it's almost eighty years old.

My brow furrows as a pick up truck appears ahead of me. I pull Belle up beside, wary; we weren't expecting anyone else.

I know it's not Mike or Mel. Maybe a neighbor they had stop by to make sure I could get in?

Oh darn! Mel never told me where to find the house key. It's possible the spare is in the same spot it's always been, which is why she didn't mention it.

I kill the engine, push open the car door, and head to the old hidey spot, lifting up the rock.

Nothing.

"Darn," I grumble. Maybe whoever is here knows. If not, I'll need to call Mel back.

"Ladybug?" My heart stops, and my stomach swoops as my name falls from the lips of a voice I would recognize anywhere. If I'm honest, it's a voice I've dreamed of hearing again for years.

As if moving in slow motion, I turn to see a man holding a stack of logs. His handsome face has a wide smile, and his eyes sparkle—bright green eyes, to be

specific.

I feel my body heat, and my heart moves to my throat. My eyes move down the length of his body of their own accord. My lips lift into a half smile before turning into a scowl. When my eyes meet his again, I see a flicker of emotion before an amused expression fills them.

What on earth is Cole Nichols doing here? More importantly—why didn't Mel tell me he was coming? ([Click here to read A Not So Merry Ex-Mas](#))

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My best friend's annoying brother, some spilled tea, and a crazy proposition. Josh Owen's is the top receiver in the NFL, with a bad boy reputation. He's click bait fodder for any, and all, gossip columns. Now me, 'good girl' Brie, is in the rumor mills with him. A released video shows us "kissing", and the news is spreading like wildfire. His agent sees a golden opportunity for Josh to get on better terms with his team. I think it's crazy, but Josh needs help. In spite of our love-hate relationship, I agree to be his "girlfriend". Spending time with him, I get to know the real person, not just the one who's constantly pushing my buttons. I can't deny that I don't hate him. In fact, I like him. A lot. As fake kisses feel more real, Josh brings up making 'us' real. Only one problem, when my parents died, my heart went on lock down. Can the bane of my existence be the one who's had the key all along? (Click here to read)

Chapter 1

Josh

Leaning against a tree with her head buried in a book is Brianne, my sister's best friend and our next door neighbor. I feel a smile creep up on my lips as I think of how often she's in this same position. That girl studies like no one I've ever met before. It's also the reason she's top in her class and will probably graduate as valedictorian.

"Hey Brain-anne," I tease, and feel laughter getting ready to break through as I see her shoulders tense at my nickname for her, but I hold it in. The fact that she hates that nickname makes using it that much more fun. I admire how smart she is, but I would never tell her that. Plus it's way too enjoyable getting a rise out of her.

"Hey, jerk." She scowls at me. The laughter I've been holding back falls from my

lips, making her scowl deepen which just makes me laugh harder.

“Not trying to scare the world today?” I think about the face masks her and my sister Susie were wearing at their usual Friday night sleepover. They’re always doing these girly things and although I would never admit it to anyone, I’ve never seen anyone look more adorable with a green face.

I laugh even harder as she sticks her tongue out at me. “Witty come back, Brainanne,” I throw over my shoulder, as I walk past her.

“Dude, she’s so cute,” Scott says. Scott has been one of my teammates and friends since freshman year.

“No.” The word is out of my mouth before I can stop myself. That single word by itself is more of a tell than I would like, especially since there is nothing to tell. Brie is just my sister’s friend.

“She’s serious girlfriend material and not the fling type. Plus she’s like a sister to me and if you ever hurt her I’d have to do something about it.”

“I was just saying.” Scott gives me a questioning look that I ignore. I’ve given away too much already. He shrugs and drops the subject, shaking his head.

Brianne, “Brie”, is two years younger than me and has been friends with my sister since the first time they met when she came to visit her aunt and uncle with her parents. I was five and Susie and Brie were both three. Any time Brie would come to visit they would follow me around like puppies and do whatever I was doing. I would complain to Mom constantly.

“Be nice to your sister and Brie.” I can still hear her words ringing in my head. It used to annoy me to no end. Finally they got their own hobbies and would go off to do those things instead of being my constant shadows. Remembering Brie in her

braids and Susie in her pigtails makes me smile. Okay, they were two of the cutest, most annoying girls in the world.

It's not that I don't love my sister or Brie, who's like a second sister; it's just that having two girls follow you everywhere when all you want to do is play with your friends is a bit of a drag. Plus all my friends would tease me about them or tease them. Which was the worst.

Even though they annoyed me, I wouldn't hesitate to beat up anyone who would pick on them. It's caused me to get into a few scuffles here and there.

I remember Johnny Smith picking on Brie because she was an orphan and making her cry. She was only eight at the time. I heard Susie yelling at Johnny telling him he was mean, and Johnny just laughing and pointing at Brie. He looked like an idiot.

I couldn't believe that someone would dare pick on Brie. Before I knew it, red hot anger had me rushing over to him on the playground. The teachers had to pull us apart, and we were both sent home for fighting.

That was the last time he, or anyone else, ever picked on Brie about the fact that her parents died in a car accident, or that she was living with her aunt and uncle.

Brie was mad at me for drawing attention to her, my sister was proud, and my mom lectured me about how fighting wasn't the answer.

"What Johnny did was wrong, Josh, and I know you were only trying to help, but using your fists is never the answer," she chided me.

"But Mom," I complained. "He made Brie cry."

"Josh, honey, your intentions were good but not your actions. Using your fists to solve a problem is rarely the answer." She would always say stuff like this to me.

Unfortunately, I was never as level headed as she would have liked me to be.

“I heard you got into a fight at school with someone picking on Brie,” my dad said that night when he got home, giving me a pat on the back and a proud smile. At my mom’s stern look he tried to look disappointed, failing miserably. “You’re still grounded with no video games for a week,” he said firmly.

That wasn’t the last time I would be grounded for fighting. But that particular incident was completely worth it.

Even now, I am still overly protective of both Brie and Susie, and everyone knows it.

It annoyed Susie a little but at the same time she took advantage of knowing that she could flirt with anyone and just have fun. It only truly bothered her if she had a crush on someone. Brie, on the other hand, completely hated it.

“He’s your brother, not mine, and yet he acts like he has to protect me from the world. It’s annoying,” I overheard Brie as I walked by Susie’s partially open door. I had just come home after a night out celebrating a win that got us a place in the playoffs.

“He just loves you,” Susie responded. Her words made my heart stop and my mouth go dry.

Love? I don’t love Brie.

“No he doesn’t, he hates me! Why else would he tease me?”

“That’s what big brothers do,” Susie laughed. “You’re just being sensitive.” Brie let out that little huff she does when she’s still annoyed but doesn’t have a comeback.

Ahhh yes, brotherly love. I definitely love Brie like a sister.

As we got older, Susie leaned more towards sports like me, but Brie was still seen with a book in her hand anywhere she went. If I didn't know both of them personally I would never understand why two seemingly opposite people were friends. But Susie and Brie, minus their enjoyment in slightly opposite things, were identical. It was weird, but endearing.

"Hey, big bro." Susie taps my arm bringing me back to the present moment as she walks by with a smile at Jake and Scott. Brianne, who is walking next to her, gives me a glare and the smirk that was on my face turns into a full-blown smile. I love getting her all riled up and mad at me. I swear pushing her buttons throughout the day is something I wake up looking forward to.

I hear Scott and Jake laugh and I remember they're standing across from me. We walk toward the building with everyone else.

"Dude, let's head in, the bell's gonna ring soon and I need to stop at my locker," Jake says. He's the very conscientious student out of our trio. That perfect blend of academics and athletics. Teachers love him.

"Friday night's game is going to be a tough one," Scott says. He's all about sports. "If our D can't stop that offense there's no way we'll be able to win."

"Well, considering we are the defense and the offense we better find a way," Jake says, smacking Scott on the back of the head. "Right, Josh?"

"I'm gonna trust Coach to have a game plan," I say distractedly just as I see Brie open her locker. I grin, and just as I get closer to her, I step over to the right and gently push her locker door closed. The initial surprise on her face as the locker door swings shut immediately turns to annoyance as she realizes it's me and I chuckle.

"Seriously, Josh? You have the maturity level of a flea."

“Fleas have maturity levels? You’ll have to tell me more about this one day,” I say as I walk backward and smile at her. She grabs her book and slams her locker door. She’s so easy to poke fun at. I turn around and walk forward still smiling. Scott and Jake join me as we go to our first period. They exchange a look and Jake takes a deep breath.

“Hey, Josh,” Jake says slightly hesitantly. “I’m thinking of asking Brie to Homecoming.”

“You are?” The smile falls from my face and I feel my chest tighten. I pick up my hand and rub circles in the general vicinity of my heart to loosen up the area. I’m ignoring that his words mean anything to me. “That’s probably not a good idea.”

My tone is harsher than I mean it to be so I try to soften it. “I mean, her uncle is really strict about things like that.”

“Sure, that’s what you meant.” Scott glances at me with a sarcastic glint in his eye, and I push him into a locker.

“Stop. Brie’s like a sister and you know how I am about Susie. It’s the same thing. I’d rather not have to hurt one of my friends for breaking their hearts.”

They both give me a side eye. I shrug and roll my eyes.

“Seriously.”

“Okay,” they chorus, but I can tell they don’t really believe me.

“It was just a thought,” Jake says as we head into Homeroom.

Brianne Woodbury is nothing more to me than my little sister’s best friend. I pick on both of them equally, and am just as protective over Susie as I am Brie. There is no

way that I would let anyone take advantage or hurt them.

It's not my fault people think something differently. There is no way that I have anything more than platonic feelings for her. Period. End of story.

As the bell rings, the last thought in my head before I sit at my desk is of Brie's scowling face when I shut her locker door. A smirk crawls on my face. Okay, so maybe I like teasing her just a tiny bit more than I do my sister. But it still doesn't mean anything.