

Make it Last

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Books by Bethany Lopez

Stories about Melissa - series

Ta Ta for Now.

xoxoxo

Ciao

TTYL

Friends & Lovers Trilogy

Make it Last

Bethany Lopez

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Make it Last

Thanks to Raine Thomas.

You have been an amazing source of knowledge and support. I am happy to call you my friend.

Prologue

Briana looked up at him, tears forming in her eyes. Colin felt his resolve begin to crumble, but reminded himself why he'd come to this decision. He was about to leave for college and Bree was beginning her senior year of high school. It made sense to end it now, rather than try to have a long distance relationship. Colin thought about the pro and con list he'd made, and it made sense to break up now, and looking into Briana's beautiful brown eyes he began to question his decision.

Colin shook his head to attempt to clear the doubt from his mind, he knew he had to try and make a clean break now.

"Look, Bree, I just can't be tied down right now," he explained, not quite meeting her eyes, he was sure that if he did, she'd see his uncertainty. "I'm leaving tomorrow. Going out together was cool while we were in high school, but we're about to be on different paths. I'm going to need to focus on football and keeping my grades up."

She turned her head and bit her lip, the way she did when she was trying to sort things out in her head. Finally she looked back at him, her face full of confusion.

"Is this because I wouldn't have sex with you?" Tears streamed down her face then, and he felt like a complete ass. He should have known she would go there. He'd been trying to have sex with her for the past few months. They'd been dating for a long time, and he was a teenage guy after all. But he understood her reasons for wanting to wait. Especially now.

"Of course not. I just don't think a long distance relationship will work. A clean break now would be best,

you know?" he replied, looking at something just over her head.

"Colin, the least you could do is look at me when you're being a total douche," she said tightly.

He looked down at her and his face softened. How could he not love her? She always called him on his shit.

Colin trying to block the thoughts from his mind and stiffened his resolve. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be, Bree."

"Are you being serious right now?" she asked.

"We've been dating for over a year. You said that you loved me. Now, all of a sudden, you want to break up? This is coming out of nowhere, Colin."

Everything she was said true. They had planned to continue dating and seeing each other on breaks and holidays, but after thinking about it, making lists, and talking to his friends and family, Colin realized that it would be best for both of them to go their separate ways now. He just needed to make her believe that he believed that.

He let out a long sigh, as if she was the one being unreasonable. "Bree, I'm about to be thousands of miles away. Don't you want to be free to enjoy your senior year? I won't be able to come back and go to dances and stuff with you, ya know." He shrugged his shoulders in an effort to appear unaffected by his words.

"We always knew you'd be leaving. I don't know why you're acting like this is a new development. We've talked about having a long distance relationship. What's changed?" Colin tried not to smile at her words. He should have known that she wouldn't give up without a fight. His stomach turned. He felt nauseous at the thought of what he was going to say next.

"Fine, Bree, you're right. I want to be free to see other people while I'm at college." He tried to sound

exasperated, and saw her face fall as he continued to speak. "I'm going to be playing football and looking at joining a fraternity. I don't want to end up cheating or doing something stupid. It just makes more sense to end it now. It'll be better in the long run, you'll see." He put his hand out as if to pat her shoulder, but she backed away.

"You don't get to touch me anymore, Colin," she stated, wiping her face with the back of her hand.

He hated the thought of hurting her and tried to think of something to say that would soften the blow. "Bree, don't be upset. I'll always love you. This is just the way it has to be."

She sniffed and continued wiping her cheeks. She stood up as tall as her five-foot, four-inch frame allowed and looked him in the eyes. "You'll regret this, Colin. One day you'll come back looking for a second chance, but it's never going to happen. I'm not going to forget this day."

He felt a lump form in his throat at her words.

Wavering about his decision, he reached his hand out to touch her again, then stopped himself.

"You're right," he said softly. "I wouldn't deserve a second chance."

He looked at her one last time, memorizing her delicate features. Her long hair flowed around her shoulders, just the way he liked it. His thoughts were tinged with regret, but he knew that breaking it off now was the only way to make sure they didn't end up hurting each other even more in the long run. Dropping his hand to his side, he walked away and left her behind.

Make it Last

Four Years Later...

Chapter One

Briana hated Wednesday nights. Twenty-five cent wings meant that not only was the Bar & Grill packed all evening, but that the fryers were absolutely disgusting. Although she loved good wings as much as the next person, it was her job to clean the fryers, so she dreaded her shift anytime she was scheduled for a Wednesday night.

She watched as Kara locked up behind the last customer, and then went behind the bar to turn up the music.

Other than the cleaning, Briana loved closing time. That's when the employees got together to chit-chat about their customers, made plans for what they were going to do after shift, and finally had the chance to enjoy their night.

The night manager, Pam, was pretty cool. She stayed in the back, counting the money and making sure everything balanced out, and then put it in the envelope to make the drop at the bank on her way home.

As long as they didn't leave until everything was spotless, she didn't give them a hard time about hanging out.

Briana joined Kara and Pete, one of the bar backs, over by the bar once she set the fryer to drain.

"What a night," Pete started, putting shots in front of Briana and Kara as they settled onto the stools.

"You can say that again," Kara replied, a big grin on her face. "I made two hundred in tips tonight. Gotta love twenty-five cent wings."

Kara worked the front of the house, not the back, so her view of Wednesday was a lot different than Briana's. As a waitress, Kara got to turn on her charm and flirt with the customers, one of her favorite pastimes, thus reaping the rewards of a busy Wednesday night.

The view from the back of the house was a lot different. During shift, Briana cooked all of the orders, so she spent her evenings covered in grease, ketchup, and everything else she spilled while making the food.

Her job was nowhere near as glamorous or profitable as Kara's, but she didn't think she could ever be a waitress. Just the thought of making a mistake and having a customer yell at her or something was enough to keep her in the back.

She didn't mind being a short-order cook though; she figured it was giving her experience that would only help her once she finally gained the courage and the funds to apply for culinary school.

She and Kara toasted each other's amber colored glasses, then Pete's, before downing the shot.

"Holy shit," Briana exclaimed, as the whiskey burned its way down her throat.

"Oops. Sorry, Bree. I forgot you don't like whiskey." Pete chuckled, not looking a single bit sorry as he took out a bottle of the vodka she preferred, and poured them each another shot.

They took the shots and then separated to start cleaning. Briana and Kara were having a party of sorts at their apartment after work, so they wanted to finish up quicker than usual.

Once the stainless steel of the fryer gleamed and the floors were scrubbed down, Briana took one last look around the kitchen and deemed it spotless.

She went out to see if Kara, Pete, or any of the others needed her help getting their side work done.

Kara was just finishing up rolling her silverware and Pete was turning off the radio when she walked up.

“You guys ready?” Briana asked.

A chorus of “Hell, yeah’s” were shouted and they all headed out, calling goodnight to Pam.

She and Kara rode together back to their apartment over the flower shop. Their Texas town was small enough that getting to the other side meant they only had to drive for five minutes to get wherever they needed to go.

They parked and ran up the stairs, racing to see who would get to the shower first.

Briana won by half a foot and yelled, “Sorry, sucker,” as she began stripping off her clothes, eager to get rid of the greasy stench.

She showered as quickly as she could, while still scrubbing the smells of the kitchen out of her hair and off of her body.

When she was done, Kara was waiting for her turn, and handed Briana a towel as they switched spots.

Briana ran down the short hallway to her room, rubbing the towel over herself as she mentally went through her wardrobe.

She decided that cutoff shorts and a frilly tank would do quite nicely on this hot summer night, and dug through her dresser trying to find the pair she was looking for.

Once she was dressed, she brushed out her chestnut colored hair and pulled it up into a high ponytail. She put minimal makeup on, then threw on her flip flops and hurried out to the kitchen to check the status of their provisions.

It was BYOB, so most of the people would have their own drinks, but a random moocher always showed up and needed some alcohol.

They had a bottle of wine, a twelve pack of Bud Light, and a bottle each of cherry vodka and Sprite.

They were good to go.

She took out a couple bags of chips, put them in bowls, and placed them around the living room.

She threw the blankets, a random sock, and the magazines that were littering the floor into the big hope chest that served as their coffee table.

She was considering running the vacuum when Kara came out, dressed in a sweet sunshine yellow sundress, her blond hair tousled around her face.

"Thanks, Bree, the place looks great. Do you think we should vacuum?"

"I was just thinking the same thing. Then I remembered who was coming over, and realized we'll probably have countless items spilled on the carpet before morning comes, so what's the point?" Brian laughed.

"Very true," Kara said. "Pre-game?"

"Absolutely," Briana replied, following Kara back to the kitchen to make herself a drink.

She'd barely taken her first sip of cherry vodka and Sprite when the front door opened and a group of people piled in. It didn't take long for the music to be turned up and the sound of laughter and chatter to fill the room.

Briana was talking to someone she had taken a college course with a few years ago, when she felt someone come up behind her and softly kiss her neck.

She turned and looked up at Kent over the rim of her glass.

"What's going on, Hot Stuff?" he asked with his cocky grin.

At six feet, he towered over Briana, and his unruly blond hair and self-assured manner always drew her to him.

“Not much, Kent, just getting the party started.”

She and Kent enjoyed each other when neither of them was in a serious relationship. Briana hadn't had one since Colin broke up with her in high school, so she was always ready to enjoy Kent.

Sometimes he tried to get too serious for her, and that was when she would tell him it was time to get him a girlfriend.

They weren't an item, and they weren't exclusive, but he was the only guy in this town with whom Briana knew she could enjoy an uncomplicated relationship.

“You here alone?” she asked him.

“Not anymore,” he replied, taking her hand and leading her into the kitchen, where he made himself a drink.

Once Kent had his Captain and Coke mixed, he leaned down to give Briana a quick kiss before they headed back into the living room.

“That's a promise of things to come,” he whispered against her lips.

Briana mingled and got caught up on all the town gossip. She was going back to fill up her glass when she caught site of Kara going into her room with Pete.

“*Well, that's new,*” she thought with a smile.

As she was filling her glass, the girl she had been talking to earlier when Kent interrupted, came into the kitchen.

She couldn't for the life of her remember the girl's name. Kendra or Kylie, maybe. She'd just think of her as Kendrie.

“Hey, Bree, I didn't get a chance to tell you earlier because that gorgeous guy pulled you away, but I'd wondered if you'd heard the news.”

“What news?” she asked absently.

“About Colin.” Kendrie seemed unable to control the glee that came out with that statement.

Briana ran into this a lot. In high school, most of the girls were jealous of her because she was dating Colin. Once he left for school, dumping her in the process, those same girls pretended to feel sorry for her, but she could tell that they really loved the fact that he’d dumped her.

Since their town was small, she knew anytime Colin came home on break. Everyone was more than eager to tell her about it.

Judging by the girl’s tone, she figured Colin must be home for the summer. It didn’t matter. She had successfully avoided him so far. She could manage to do so for another summer.

“What about him?” she asked, making her voice sound as bored as possible.

“He’s moving back for good.” Briana’s stomach dropped to the floor. She only half listened as Kendrie rambled on.

“He hurt his knee during the last game of the season and can’t play football anymore. He graduated and everything, but his dream of going on to play professional ball is over, so he’s coming back here. They say he’s going to work with his dad or something. I think he got in last night.” Kendrie continued to prattle on, not realizing that Briana was no longer listening to her.

Briana topped off her drink and walked out of the kitchen, leaving the girl to stare after her, her words still hanging in the air.

She walked in the opposite direction of the crowd in the living room, down the hall and into her room. She didn't bother to shut the door, but opened her window and crawled out onto the roof. She sat down and leaned back against the roof tiles, looking out over the lights of her town.

She drank from her glass as she thought about Colin.

How dare he come back here permanently? This was her town. Sure, he'd grown up here, but he'd always planned to get out and never look back. He wanted to go off to school and play football, then make it big and move off to a city somewhere. He'd always planned to visit once he'd left, but he'd never planned to live here forever.

She'd taken comfort in that fact, and now he was coming back to stay.

Well, things had changed, and Colin had better watch his step where she was concerned. She had no plans to welcome him back with open arms.

Chapter Two

Briana rolled out of bed at two in the afternoon, a headache giving her grief. She wandered out of her room and groaned at the sight that met her in the rest of the apartment.

Plastic cups and paper plates littered every surface, and just as she'd predicted, the carpet was a mess of spilled drink and food. Some moron had even used one of her favorite Aggie mugs as an ashtray. Gross.

She went into the kitchen and grimaced at the mess in there, but figured it was best to focus on one thing at a time. She grabbed a trash bag to get started in the living room.

She was about halfway done cleaning up when Kara came strolling in through the front door.

"Hey, Bree, you're up. Thanks for getting started in here. I just ran out to get some provisions," she stated, holding out a to-go coffee cup.

"Oh, thank God," Briana exclaimed, grabbing the cup and drinking as if her life depended on it.

Kara chuckled. "I knew that would brighten up your day. Gosh, what a bunch of slobs, huh? I can't believe this place looks so nasty. I'll just put these muffins in the kitchen and help you out."

"Wait... there are muffins? The kitchen is just as bad. You don't want to put them in there. We'd better just eat them now." Briana grabbed for the bag that Kara was keeping just out of reach.

Kara laughed again and took out a steaming banana nut muffin, Briana's favorite.

"I'll give you this on one condition."

“Anything,” Briana said.

“We don’t mention what happened last night with Pete. Like, ever.”

“Deal,” she said, grabbing the muffin and finding a clean corner of the couch to sit on.

Kara sat on the edge of the hope chest and began nibbling on her blueberry muffin.

“What happened to you last night?” she asked.

“Kent was looking for you, but I had no idea where you went.”

“After that weird girl from my Literary Dimensions on Film class dropped her bomb on me, I kinda disappeared for the night.”

Kara sat up, looking interested. “Do tell.”

“I shouldn’t have let it get to me, but she told me that Colin is moving home for good. Or, I guess he already did, a couple days ago.”

“Get out. I noticed you were gone when I came out of my room last night.” Kara just looked at Briana. “At first I figured you were with Kent, but then he came up to me and asked where you were. I didn’t know and I didn’t see you in your room, so I told him so. He hung out for a bit and then I lost track of him. I wondered if you two had ever hooked up. Wow. So...Colin, huh?”

“Yeah. I was on the roof. I just couldn’t stand the thought of that girl watching me and waiting for me to break down or react to her news. She was so excited to tell me, you know? It just pissed me off.”

“You should have told her to get lost,” Kara said, getting angry for her. “It’s our place. She can take her gossiping ass someplace else.”

Briana laughed. Kara always made her feel better when she was down.

“Anyway, I stayed out there most of the night. I wasn’t in the mood to see Kent, especially when I was thinking so much about Colin.” Briana was starting to lose her appetite.

“Look, I know this town is small as hell, and you’re going to run into him. But, Bree, it’s been four years. You’re a grown woman with a job, and apartment, and a hot man at your beck and call. You don’t need his shit. Just ignore him.”

Kara had never met Colin. She moved to town their senior year, after he left for school, and they had been best friends ever since. She never knew Briana and Colin as a couple; she just saw how Briana was affected after he left. She wasn’t his biggest fan.

“That’s easier said than done, Kara. That girl said that he was going to be working for his daddy. That means he’ll be working right down the street and he’s gonna come in to eat all the time.” The thought made Briana’s stomach hurt even more.

“Stop, Bree. You’re not seventeen anymore. Let him eat where he wants. Don’t let him bother you. You have the upper hand here.”

“You’re right. I know you are. I’m just scared to see him. It’s been so long. What if when I see him I feel just like I did when he left? I never want to feel that way again,” Briana said softly, looking up at Kara and hating how pathetic she sounded.

“Then don’t,” Kara said sternly. “In fact, we’ve spent enough time on the topic already. Let’s finish cleaning this pigsty up so we can relax a bit before work tonight.”

“Okay.”

Once they had everything spic and span again, they threw on their bikinis and went outside to lie out. They didn't have a pool or a yard, so they laid their towels out on the driveway and made do.

Kara brought out her iPod and Briana brought the tanning oil and the water. They relaxed, enjoying the music and the sun, until the alarm went off, signaling it was time to go in and get washed up for work.

They reluctantly headed into work, motivated by the fact that it was Thursday night, so shouldn't be too crowded, and that they had plans to meet up with some of their friends and go to the gravel pits after work. They brought their bikinis in their bags and sported fresh tan skin to show off in the moonlight.

It looked like it was going to be a pretty good night.

Chapter Three

About two hours into her shift, Briana realized just how wrong she had been.

She'd just finished an order and was rounding the corner to tell Kara that the burger and fries were up, when she caught sight of Colin's family coming in the front door.

Mrs. Grayson looked as sweet as ever, holding her husband's hand and smiling up at him as they waited for the rest of their party to come through the door. He bent over to say something to her, then they both looked over towards the entrance.

Briana had been swept up watching them, remembering a million different conversations that she'd had with the Grayson's, so she didn't immediately follow their gaze. When she did, her breath caught in her throat. She froze.

Kara came up beside her to check on the order. She started waving her hands in front of Briana's face when she saw how still Briana was.

"Hello? Earth to Bree. Is my order up?" Kara chuckled lightly, then turned to see what had caught her attention. "Who's that?"

Briana squeaked, so overcome by emotion that she couldn't form a thought. Then Colin looked up, catching her stare, and she was released. She took off in a flurry of movement, anxious to get back to the safety of the kitchen.

Once behind the swinging door, she braced herself against the stainless steel table and hung her head, breathing in and out.

“Was that him?” Kara asked, scrambling in after her. “Colin?”

“Yup,” she managed.

“Crap. I have to take out this order, Kara added a side of ketchup and mustard to the plate before picking it up. “I’ll be back, though. Maybe I’ll tell Nicole to seat them in my section.”

“No,” Briana said loudly. “Don’t make a scene, please.”

Kara tried her best to look innocent. “Who, me?” Then she walked out with a smile on her lips and a swing to her hips.

“Oh, God.” Briana held her head in her hands for a moment. “Pull it together, Bree. It’s been a long time,” she whispered. She stepped back from the table and shook her head, as if to shake the memories out.

She busied herself with the incoming orders, and was just starting to breath normally again, when Kara came back into the kitchen.

“So, Nicole did sit him in my section, but I swear I didn’t ask her to,” Kara said. “Holy crap, Bree, he is freakin’ HOT.”

“Shut up, Kara.”

“No, seriously... tall, dark, and freakishly handsome! I mean, those dimples... I just want to lick him,” Kara said dreamily.

“Jesus, Kara,” Briana snapped, “Are you kidding me right now?”

Kara laughed wickedly. “Not about the fact that he’s crazy hot, but yes, I’m kidding about wanting to lick him. You know I’d never poach.”

“Ugh, I know.” Briana closed her eyes. “She really sat them in your section?”

“Yup, all twelve of them. Can you say, ‘Big tip?’” Kara said, doing a little booty shake around the kitchen.

“Did they see me? Did they say anything?” Briana asked, hoping the answer was no.

“Well...” Kara began, finally standing still and twirling her finger around a lock of her blonde hair. “I did hear Colin mention that he saw you, and that you looked good.”

“He did not.”

“Uh, yeah, he did.”

“Oh, my gosh. Is that all he said?”

“So far,” Kara replied. “I just put in their order, and I have to get back to my other customers. But I’ll come back with updates.”

Kara sauntered back out into the dining room, leaving Briana momentarily distracted by what she’d just told her. Briana knew that she didn’t want to see Colin or talk to him, but she couldn’t help but feel some satisfaction upon hearing that he thought she looked good.

Good. Maybe he’d regret breaking her heart.

Briana went back to filling orders and waited for the next update from Kara. The word must have spread, because as the other servers came in to pick up their orders and grab condiments, they couldn’t help but make comments to Briana about Colin being in the other room.

“Damn, Bree, you used to date him?”

“That man is *fine*, Bree. If you don’t want him, I’d like to take him out for a spin.”

“Colin is lookin’ good, Bree. You sure you don’t want to relive the high school days?”

Briana was starting to lose it when Pete walked in.

“Don’t say it, Pete. I swear to God, I’ll kill you if you say *anything* about Colin,” she said.

Pete put his hands up, as if he were under arrest. "I wasn't going to, I promise," he answered. "Kara is over there with them now. Rich just walked in and joined them."

Rich and Colin had been best friends growing up. Briana got to know Rich pretty well when she dated Colin, and they both went to Texas A & M together. Rich was one of the only people she'd known when she got to college, so they were pretty close during her short stint there.

Pete went to high school with all of them, too, but he hadn't run with the same crowd they did, so they'd never hung out. But he knew Colin and Rich.

"Oh, yeah?" Briana asked. "I haven't seen Rich in ages. I didn't know he was back in town."

"I overheard him telling Mrs. Grayson that he was home for the summer. He only has one year left at A & M."

Briana paused for a minute, trying to ignore the ache in her chest when she realized that she would also be that close to finishing college if she'd stayed.

"Anyway, I didn't come back to talk about Colin and Rich, although I should have realized you were back here freaking out," Pete said.

"I'm not freaking out," she tried to play it off. "What's up?"

"Um...I wanted to ask about Kara," Pete said, his skin starting to match the shade of his hair. "You know, um, if she said anything to you about last night."

"Not really, Pete. You know Kara. She doesn't take that stuff seriously." Briana said. "She's not a relationship kind of girl."

Pete looked over her head and nodded. "Yeah, that's kinda what I figured."

He walked back out.

“Pete,” Briana called, but he didn’t turn back.

She hoped he didn’t end up getting hurt. Kara made sure that the guys she was with new the score before they did anything, but Briana knew that Pete was different from the guys that Kara usually hung out with.

Pete was one of the good ones.

Kara came in a few minutes later. “Okay, Mr. Hot Stuff has an equally gorgeous friend. This is his order. Can you make it up now so it goes out with the rest of the orders?”

“Sure,” Briana replied. “Mr. Gorgeous is Rich. We were all friends in high school. He and I went to A & M together, actually.”

“Wait. A. Minute,” Kara stated, pulling Briana so that they faced each other. “Is Mr. Gorgeous the A & M guy that you told me about?” she asked, eyes wide.

“Yes,” Briana admitted. “But you have to keep that to yourself. Seriously, no one else knows about that.”

“Wow.”

Briana shushed Kara when a couple of servers walked in to pick up their orders. She looked over as Bert came in from the back to join her for the night shift.

“So happy you could make it, Bert,” she said sarcastically, watching Kara as she backed out of the room.

“What?” Bert asked, stoned as usual.

“You were supposed to be here two hours ago. I’ve been slammed.”

“Whoa...chill, Bree. I just walked in and you’re going all ‘Nagging Mom’ on me,” Bert countered, holding up his hands.

What was with the guys at work today?

“Okay, well, since you’re here now, I’m going to take a quick break,” she said, trying to decide if she should go out the back door, or stop being a chicken and go through the dining room.

She held her head up and walked out the swinging door into the dining room. She tried to look straight ahead, but could hear the sound of Colin’s dad’s laugh and had to smile. She turned her head slightly and caught Rich’s eye.

Shit.

He put his hand up as if to wave, then stood and pushed away from the table. He said something to Colin, causing him to look over at her. He kept looking at Briana as Rich walked up to her, but she focused on Rich.

“Hey, Bree,” Rich said as he got closer, opening his arms to pull her into a hug.

She let herself be enveloped by his arms, her head barely coming to the middle of his chest. She smiled as she smelled his familiar cologne and was surprised by how happy she was to see him.

“Hi, Richie,” She said as she pulled back and smiled up at him.

“Girl, you’re the only one who can call me that and live,” he said, returning her smile.

He really was hot, she thought, studying his shaggy brown hair, hazel eyes, and the sweet little cleft in his chin. He put his finger under her chin, holding her face up so she kept looking at him.

“You doin’ good, Bree?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“I miss you at school,” he admitted dropping his hand and putting both hands in his pockets as he rocked back on his heels.

“I’ve missed you, too.” She looked at him for another moment, then said, “I only have a couple minutes left on my break, so I’ve gotta run. But we need to catch up while you’re home.”

“Sounds good. See ya, Bree,” he said, grinning as he walked backwards towards his table.

Briana grinned back, then looked over and saw that Colin still watched her. Her grin vanished. She walked out the front door, hoping to get some air before going back into the kitchen.

Luckily the rest of the night was uneventful, and after dealing with a hangover that morning and the craziness of her shift, Briana opted to go home rather than go out.

Chapter Four

“So, what was all of that last night with Bree?” Colin asked Rich, who was pulling himself up into Colin’s truck.

Rich looked over at him and shrugged. “Nothin’ much. I just haven’t seen her in a while. She left A & M pretty abruptly and I haven’t been home a lot since then, so I wanted to see how she’s been doing. Why?”

Colin looked at him thoughtfully, then back out at the road as he pulled away from Rich’s folk’s house. “I don’t know. You guys seemed pretty tight is all,” he said. “I’ve never seen you hug her like that.”

“It was no big deal, man. Just sayin’ hi.” Rich shrugged again and propped his boots up on the dashboard.

Colin knew that he should just let it go. He’d lost any claim he had on Bree four years ago, but he couldn’t help but feel like there was more to the story.

“Okay. Did she say she was doing all right?” he asked. Despite his vow to leave her alone now that he was back home for good, he couldn’t stop thinking about her. Seeing her at the restaurant last night had brought back all sorts of memories, and he couldn’t help but notice how good she’d looked. He also couldn’t forget the sick feeling he got in the pit of his stomach every time he thought about the way he’d ended it between them.

“Yeah, she’s cool,” Rich responded. “We’re supposed to hook up before I head back to school.” When Colin looked sharply at him, he amended his statement. “I just meant that we’re going to hang out.”

Colin didn't know how he felt about Briana and Rich being buddy-buddy. Rich was a good guy, but a real player. He didn't want Briana getting tangled up with him.

"When?" he asked, trying to keep his tone light.

"She invited me to go to a party at the gravel pits on Saturday. You know, to catch up and stuff. Some of the people she works with and guys from school will be there. No big deal. You should come," Rich said, as laid-back as usual.

"Yeah, right," Colin said with a laugh. "I don't think Bree would be too happy about that."

"Dude, you guys broke up like a million years ago. I doubt she'll be upset if you show up at the same party as her."

"I'll think about it," Colin answered, as they pulled into the parking lot of his dad's store. "You sure you want to work here for the summer? I thought you'd be looking forward to a summer of parties and girls."

"Oh, I am, brother, don't you worry," Rich said with his signature grin. "There will be plenty of parties and girls, but I need to have some extra cash. When your dad brought it up last night, I figured, why not?"

Colin turned off his truck and opened the door, ready to start the job that he'd always told himself, he'd never do. He'd always dreamed about leaving this town and making it big, whether it was in football or doing something else. He hadn't cared, as long as it wasn't this.

The General Store had been in this town since it was first settled, and it had always been run by Grayson's. When he was little, he used to think it was wonderful to come in and help his dad stock the shelves and clean the store, but when he got old enough to work there every day after school, the store lost its appeal.

Colin tried to appease himself by saying that working there was only temporary, but everyone knew the truth. He was back now, His father could retire in a few years, and Colin was going to end up behind that counter for the rest of his life.

“Come on, man. You look like you’re going to a funeral,” Rich said, waiting for him at the entrance to the store. “We’re gonna have a great time.”

Colin looked up at the building he had loved as a child, then down the street at the Bar & Grill. Well, at least he’d have an excuse to see Briana, since he’d be right down the street.

With one last sigh, he followed Rich into the store, ready to begin his sentence.

“Howdy, boys,” Colin’s father boomed. “It’s been pretty slow this morning, so why don’t you show Rich the ropes, Colin? We’ll have him running the soda fountain so he can talk up the customers. With his pretty face behind the counter, I see sales a-risin’.”

Mr. Grayson let out a big laugh and then turned back to the counter as Colin ushered Rich into the back room to show him around.

“This is pretty cool, dude. I mean, I’ve been in the store a million times, but this time I’ll be serving the kids at the counter, just like Ol’e Roberta used to serve me.” Rich looked tickled at the thought and Colin just shook his head. He wished he could be as excited as Rich about being there, but he couldn’t help but think of all of the possibilities that were lost to him now.

“Come on, man,” he said. “Let’s get you set up before the customers roll in and Dad loses it because we’re not ready.”

Colin took him around the back room and showed him where they kept the inventory, specifically, everything Rich needed to run the soda fountain. They offered only shakes, malts, and ice cream sundaes, so it was a pretty easy gig for Rich.

Once they had the cart loaded with the supplies they needed, Colin took Rich out to show him how to stock the counter and make the items on the menu. Just as they finished, they heard the jingle of the door opening and saw a lady come in with her little twin girls.

"Ice cream. Ice cream, Mama, please," the girls sang in unison, as they made their way to the back of the store.

"Okay, girls, but you have to sit there and eat it all while mommy gets her shopping done, all right?" the young mother answered.

"Okay, Mama, we promise," they said.

As they got to the counter and boosted themselves up on the stools, Rich turned on the charm.

"Good morning, ladies, what can I get for you on this fine day?"

The twins giggled and looked back at their mother, as if asking permission to speak.

"Go ahead, girls, tell the young man what you'd like," she coaxed with a smile.

Colin gave Rich a slight nod and then walked off to find his father. The girls' giggles followed him, as Rich laid on the charm. He couldn't help but laugh at the sound.

"Hey, Pop," he said as he approached the counter.

"Rich all set up?" his father asked.

Colin looked back over his shoulder where Rich was making up a couple of sundae's, talking to the girls as he worked.

"Oh, yeah, he'll be fine."

"I thought he'd be a good fit," Mr. Grayson replied. "It's just too bad he'll only be here for the summer."

"It's not like he'd want to work a soda fountain for the rest of his life, Pop. It's a temporary kind of job. I was thinking rather than trying to hire someone on like Roberta, we should focus on kids. No one wants to work a job like that for as long as she did, anymore. I think we should look at it as more of a temporary position."

His father looked at him and smiled. "You're probably right. Roberta was one of a kind, that's for sure. I know that no one wants to work for minimum wage for long if they don't have to, I just hate the thought of constantly having to train new people."

"If it's a part-time position, we could hire a few kids to work. That way, we'd always have someone with experience and they could do the training as the job turns over."

"See, Son? I knew you'd take to running this business like a dog to water." His father grinned, slapping his hand on his back.

Colin couldn't help but chuckle. "I don't think that's the expression, Pop."

He couldn't retain his foul mood with his dad so happy that he was there, and the sounds of Rich smooth-talking the customers coming from the back. He just hoped he could find a way to retain that happiness.

Make it Last

Chapter Five

Briana started her shift, happy that not only was it Friday, but that it was actually *her* Friday. Getting weekends was rare, and rarer still was getting weekends off with her friends so that they could barbecue at the gravel pits.

Pam had allowed Briana, Kara, and Pete to switch shifts with some of the more seasoned workers, who had the prime shifts already locked. Most of them were happy to pick up a weekend now and then. It was a lot more packed and they usually made better money.

It was busy, even for a Friday, but Briana had plenty of help in the kitchen, so she didn't feel like she was overwhelmed. Just busy, which was how she liked it.

Kara came sauntering back into the kitchen to pick up an order. "So, Bree, is Mr. Gorgeous going to be at the pits tomorrow?"

"Rich?" Briana asked absently, putting the finishing touches on the grilled chicken wrap for Kara's order. "Yeah, he said he was going to stop by."

Kara walked up to her, forcing her to look up and focus. She had an odd look on her face and didn't say anything for a minute.

"What?" Briana asked her. "I've got a lot of orders to finish, Kara. Why are you acting weird?"

"I'm not, I was just wondering if you would be upset if I talked to him, that's all."

"Who, Rich? No. Why would I care?" Briana looked at her and Kara gave her a look that said, "You know why."

“Kara, I told you about that. It was just a one-time deal. We never dated or had a relationship. It wasn’t like that. I have no claim on him. It’s fine, I swear.”

“Okay, cool,” Kara said with a smile and a bounce. “I didn’t want to poach. I just wanted to make sure there was nothing there. You know I’d never do that to you.”

“I do. Now get this wrap and get out of here. I’ve got work to do,” Briana said, trying to push her back out into the dining room.

Briana worked diligently, getting orders out as fast as she could until it was break time. She decided to go out into the dining room. Pam didn’t mind if they took their breaks out there, as long as it didn’t cause a problem for the customers.

Briana grabbed a Coke from Pete and was about to find a seat when she found herself face to face with Colin.

“Hey, Bree.”

This was the moment she’d been dreading, but now that it was there, she found that she knew just how to handle it.

“Hi, Colin,” She replied, and started to walk around him.

“Wait,” he said, putting his hand on her arm to stop her from walking away. “Can’t we talk?”

She looked pointedly at his hand and then up at his face, not saying anything until he removed it.

“We don’t have anything to talk about, Colin,” she said, hoping her face looked bored because her nerves were bouncing all over the place. “Besides, I’m working.”

“Looks like you’re on break,” he replied. “C’mon, Bree, just give me a couple minutes.”

She was about to tell him to shove it, when she felt someone come up behind her and two strong arms wrapped around her.

“Hey, Babe, I’ve been wondering if Pam was ever gonna give you a break.” Kent whispered in her ear

He said it loud enough for Colin to hear, and Briana noticed him stiffen at Kent’s words and his obvious familiarity.

“Yeah, I’ve got a quick one.” Briana turned and gave him a grateful look, before going up on her tip toes to meet him for a brief kiss.

She thought she heard a grunt or something come from Colin, so she turned to give him a smile and an introduction.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, though she wasn’t in the least. “Kent, this is Colin. We went to high school together. Colin, this is Kent.”

“What’s up, man?” Kent asked, extending his hand for a shake.

Colin looked at the offered hand, then back at Kent who may have been an inch shorter than him and shook it.

“Not much. You must be new around here.” Colin said.

Briana tried to hide a smirk at Colin’s discomfort. It looked like he wanted to punch Kent in the face.

“I’ve been here for about two years. I work over at the paper. You know, just temporary, to gain some experience and move on to a bigger gig.”

He seemed happy to hear that Kent was just a transient and that he’d be moving on eventually.

Briana couldn’t help but think that Colin had no right to be jealous of anyone in her life. He was the one who walked all of those years ago.

“Cool, man. Well, I’ll leave you two to your business and I’ll see you around,” Colin said, eager to get out of there. “Bye, Bree.”

“Yup,” was her only response. She pretended to ignore him as he walked away, focusing her attention on Kent. “Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

“Who was that guy?” Kent asked, looking up at Colin’s retreating back before looking back down at her. “At first I thought he was your date or something, but the look on your face changed my mind. It looked like you wanted out of the situation. I hope you didn’t mind me coming up behind you like that. It just seemed to fit the situation.”

“No, I didn’t mind, I appreciated it. We dated in high school and I really hoped I’d never have to see him again. Pretty stupid, considering how small the town is, but he’d never planned to move back here.”

Kent was quiet for a moment. “Oh, so he’s the douche from high school.” He looked up again, as if wishing Colin was still standing in front of him.

“Yeah, but it’s no big deal. It was a long time ago. He just took me by surprise, is all.” As did the feelings she’d had when his hand touched her. It didn’t seem fair that the one person she never wanted to see again was the one person who could set her body on fire with one innocent touch.

“All right, Babe. You know that I’m here for you anytime you need me. If you want to tell him we’re together, feel free,” Kent said with his cocky little grin lighting up his face.

Briana touched her hand to his cheek and smiled, wishing she felt the things for Kent that she’d felt for Colin.

“Thanks, but I’ll be okay. I don’t want to cramp your style and ruin your chance with the ladies,” she responded playfully, trying to soften her negative response.

Kent looked down at her seriously, his heart in his eyes. “Bree, you know, all you have to do is say the word, and there will be no other ladies.”

She nodded, wishing she could give him the answer he wanted.

He smiled again, all seriousness leaving his face. “You still want me to pick you up at one tomorrow?”

“You sure you still want to go?” she asked, giving him an out if he wanted one. “If you have other plans, I’ll understand.”

“Nope,” he replied. “I’m all yours.”

“Okay. One o’clock will be perfect.” She tip toed up to give him a quick kiss before turning to go back to the kitchen. “I’ll see you then.”

Chapter Six

Briana and Kent were among the first people to arrive at the gravel pits. They parked along the side of the dirt road and unloaded the stuff from the car. Kent grabbed the charcoal grill and started walking.

“Hey, Bree, if you can bring the bags and blanket, I’ll come back for the food and charcoal,” he grunted back at her, as he carried his heavy load.

“Okay,” she replied, grabbing the backpacks and following him down the lane.

Once they reached the end of the path, they walked through a hole in the chain-link fence. It opened up to a large pool of crystal blue water.

Kent walked up to their usual spot by the water and set the grill down. He turned and stopped to kiss Briana’s forehead before heading back to the car to get the rest of their stuff.

She set up their blanket and put their backpacks down to hold it in place. It was a pretty hot day already, so she pulled her hair back into a ponytail and put her sunglasses on, then applied some sunscreen and chapstick. When she saw Kent coming back in through the fence, she went over to grab a bag from him.

“Kara texted and said that she and Pete are almost here. They just stopped to put ice in the cooler.” Briana said.

“Sounds good. I’ll just get the charcoal started. That way it’ll be hot enough to start cooking when everyone gets here. If you want to jump in while you have the place to yourself, go ahead.”

Briana loved swimming, and Kent knew she cherished these moments of solitude in the water. Pretty soon the pits would be filled with people, so she decided to take him up on his offer.

She looked out over the water as she shimmied out of her cutoff shorts, so she didn't see the look on Kent's face as he watched her get undressed. She took her top off next, then ran to the water and dove in.

She swam around, enjoying the feel of the cool water on her hot skin. When she came up for air, she turned back to say something to Kent, and saw that Pete and Kara had arrived. They were setting up next to Kent. She swam back towards the shore to get out and join them.

She walked out of the water, her hair slicked back with droplets cascading down her body.

That was the image that greeted Colin when Rich ushered him in through the fence. He stopped abruptly. Rich ran into his back, and Colin stood there, mouth open, as he watched her.

"Dude," Rich yelled. "What the hell?"

Briana looked up at the sound of Rich's voice and saw Colin watching her. The look on his face was enough to make her body tingle, and she couldn't help but feel some satisfaction in the stupefied look on his face.

Kent looked up at Rich's shout as well, and was less than happy to see the way Colin stared at Briana. The only one who seemed oblivious was Rich, who was still trying to shove Colin through the gate.

"Colin, I can't walk through you, dude."

Rich's voice finally registered, and Colin said, "Sorry, man," as he got out of the way.

Briana walked over to her friends and pulled Kara off to the side. “What the hell is Colin doing here?” she asked, trying to keep her voice down. “Did you know he was coming?”

“No, I had no idea,” Kara replied. “I’m sure Rich invited him. It’ll be fine. There will be so many people here that you’ll never have to talk to him.”

Kara walked back over to finish setting up her blanket and unpacking her things. Briana watched Colin and Rich go up to Pete and slap hands to say hello. They all started talking, probably catching up since they last saw each other, and she took the opportunity to look Colin over while he was distracted.

He wore solid blue swim trunks with a tank top in the same shade. His arms looked really good, toned and tan. She felt that tingle run through her again and she couldn’t help but remember what it felt like to touch his body.

Back when she’d the ability to touch him whenever she wanted, she’d always loved to run her hands over his back and feel the taut muscles underneath. She’d always thought his body was amazing, thanks to the training he’d had to do every day.

She looked around and realized that there would be a lot of eye candy for the ladies today. Between Colin, Kent, Rich, and Pete there wasn’t an inch of body fat. She couldn’t wait until it was time to go swimming.

Maybe she would just enjoy the day and not worry about Colin. The town was small, but it was big enough for the both of them. Since they were bound to run into each other often, she might as well make the most of it.

Kent started grilling the food as the rest of the people started showing up. Everyone cracked open the beers and malt beverages. Kara put on some tunes and everyone started to enjoy the water and the company.

Briana was sitting on her blanket talking to Pete, when they noticed Kara walking over to where Rich and Colin stood talking.

“Don’t take it personally, Pete,” Briana said quietly to him.

“I don’t,” Pete replied. “I’ve known Kara a long time, Bree, and I know that she thinks that she can’t have a serious relationship because her mother never could. But she’s wrong.”

“Her mother’s a bitch, and Kara is nothing like her. But you’re right; she doesn’t think that she’s relationship material.”

“I’m a patient guy,” Pete said with a sad smile as he watched Kara pull Rich towards the water. “I can wait. I plan to be there when she realizes how much she has to offer.”

Briana looked over at him and put her hand up to ruffle his hair. “You’re the sweetest guy I know.”

“I know,” he said with a laugh, looking pointedly around. “But that’s not saying much.”

She laughed with him and punched him goodheartedly in the arm. “These guys aren’t so bad,” she replied.

They watched Kara and Rich splashing in the water until it became too much for Pete. He excused himself to go help Kent with the food.

Briana laid back on her blanket, eyes closed, soaking up the sun. After a few minutes she felt a shadow pass over her, as someone sat down on the blanket next to her. She knew it was Colin even before she opened her eyes. It was like her senses were still attuned to him and every nerve in her body stood at attention when he got close.

“Hey, Bree, I hope you don’t mind that Rich invited me here today,” he said in a quiet voice.

She didn’t open her eyes. “It’s a free country.”

He let out a deep sigh and tried to look out at the water, but all he wanted to do was take in the sight before him. Briana’s small frame was tanned and perfectly proportioned. He felt his body tightening as his eyes wandered, and he forced his gaze back out.

“I realize that, Bree, but I don’t want to ruin your party or anything. I haven’t done much since I’ve been home and when Rich invited me, it sounded like a good time. But I’m not trying to piss you off.”

Briana peeked up at him. Then, realizing he wasn’t leaving, she sat up and turned towards him.

“It’s a small town, Colin. We’re bound to run into each other. We still have a lot of the same friends. You should feel comfortable going and doing whatever you want. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be okay.”

“Cool,” he said with a small smile, his dimples flashing. “I’m glad to hear you say that. I know I ended things badly, Bree, but, shit, I was just a kid. I’m sorry.”

Briana looked out over the water. “Look, Colin, I know we’ll run into each other, but that doesn’t mean that I want to rehash everything that happened four years ago. I’m not ready to be your buddy.”

With that said she stood up to leave. As she walked down to the water she heard him say, “I’ve really missed you.”

Bethany Lopez

She ran and dove in, trying to swim as far away from him and his damned words as she could.

Chapter Seven

Briana was sitting on the couch, drinking coffee and watching E News the next morning, when Rich poked his head out of Kara's bedroom.

"Walk of shame, Rich?" Briana asked with a chuckle, not looking away from the TV.

"Shit. I was hoping you'd still be asleep, Bree."

"No such luck, Romeo."

He walked out with his pants slung around his hips, still unbuttoned, and his shirt in his hand. Briana looked back briefly and turned away when she saw his six pack rippling and started to inadvertently follow his happy trail with her eyes.

"Can you put your shirt on?" she pleaded.

He smiled at that and cocked his head to the side as he strolled over to her.

"What is it, baby? See something you like?" Rich could flirt in any situation, no matter how awkward or inappropriate. It was part of his charm.

"Been there, done that," she retorted.

He sat down next to her on the couch, his cocky smile gone, a serious look in its place.

"About that. You never said anything to Colin, did you?"

"No. I haven't talked to him in four years, Rich. When would it have come up?"

"I don't know, but I never told him, either. I don't know if we should."

“Rich, I doubt it would ever enter a conversation, but if it does, I won’t lie to him,” she said, looking him in the eye. “It shouldn’t matter to him, anyway. Don’t worry about it.”

He looked unsure for a minute, then glanced back towards Kara’s door.

“Does she know?” he asked.

“Yeah, she knows. She knew before she met you.” Briana replied. “It’s no big deal, Rich. Seriously, stop worrying.”

“Alright,” he said finally, then looked back at her, his cocky grin back in place. “You know I’ll always love you, right, Babe?”

Briana smiled back, but her look turned serious. “I know that, Richie. I’ll always love you too. You’re one of my best friends.” She leaned in to give him a hug, then realized he still didn’t have his shirt on. “I appreciate the fact that you work out and your body is *awesome*, but can you please put your shirt on? It’s hard to concentrate.”

Rich looked pleased at that. He stood up to go into the kitchen for coffee, throwing his shirt over his head along the way.

Kara came stumbling out moments late and grunted at Briana on her way to get some coffee.

“You’d better have left me some coffee,” she grumbled at Rich.

“Dang, girl, you’re lookin’ rough.” Rich stated with a laugh, running out of the kitchen to avoid Kara’s wrath.

“Shove it, Rich,” was Kara’s reply. She walked in holding the warm cup up to her face inhaling briefly, before taking her first sip. “Don’t mess with me before I’ve had my coffee.”

“Noted,” he replied, as he sat back down on the couch with his mug.

“So, ladies, what’s on your agenda today?”

Kara was still waiting for the coffee to take effect and didn’t reply, so Briana answered.

“Nothing much. I’m off today, so I’m planning to lie out in the sun and read. But Kara has to work.”

“Yeah, me too. I’ll be serving up some delicious treats at The General Store if you guys want to stop by,” he offered with a wink.

Kara looked at him blandly over her steaming mug. “No, thanks.”

“Yeah, I’ll pass, too,” Briana said with a look of regret. “Sorry, but although I know I’m going to run into Colin now that he’s back, that doesn’t mean I’m going to seek him out.”

“You’re not still mad at him for what happened four years ago, are you?” Rich questioned her. “Bree that was a long time ago. You guys have been apart way longer than you were ever together.”

“I loved him, Rich,” Briana replied quietly. “He really hurt me.”

“I know that. Believe me, if anyone knows how much he hurt you, it’s me. But give the dude a chance. It’s been a long time. He’s grown up, and I know he regrets hurting you.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready yet. A lot of time may have passed, but I’ve only just started to see him again. It’s like seeing him has brought back all of those feelings of hurt and resentment, as if it just happened.”

“Just think about it.” Rich stood up and took his cup back to the kitchen, then came back out to give them each a hug. “Well, ladies, I hate to break it to you, but I have to get going. Work is a’waitin’.”

“You’re working at a soda fountain,” Kara said, finally waking up enough to get snarky. “It’s not like the city will crumble if you don’t get to work on time.”

“Hey, Ms. Grumpy Pants, this is my last summer before I’m a college graduate and have to get a real job, with all of the stress and long hours that come along with it. I plan to make the most of my time at the counter, and vow to have the happiest customers in town,” he declared with a wink and a smile. Then he walked out the door.

Briana couldn’t help but giggle at his dramatic exit.

“You shouldn’t encourage that clown.” Kara said dryly.

“Hey, that clown is one of my best friends. Be nice.”

“Sorry. Didn’t get a lot of sleep last night,” Kara said with a satisfied smile.

“Please, spare me the details about two of my best friends’ night of passion,” Briana begged her. “This situation is strange enough without getting the play-by-play.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“You gonna see him again?”

“Nah... We talked it out last night. It was just a casual thing between friends, no big deal.” Kara got to her feet and walked out. “Gotta grab a shower.”

Briana knew that it was hypocritical, but she couldn’t help but wish that Kara would give a guy a chance. She had so much to offer and Briana knew that Kara would be a wonderful girlfriend for any guy, but Kara didn’t see it that way. Her mother had spent her life telling her that she would never be good enough for anyone, and Kara believed every word. She figured her mother knew her better than anyone, but she couldn’t have been more wrong. Kara was the most loving, loyal, and funny person that Briana had ever met, and she wished that she would allow herself to fall in love.

Make it Last

Although Briana would be the first one to say that love really did hurt, and that hurting really sucked, the love part really made it all worth it.

Having someone who listened to you, really listened. Who cared what happened to you. Who offered you comfort when you needed it. Someone you could laugh or cry hysterically with, someone who would allow you to just be yourself, no matter what. There was nothing like kissing someone that you truly loved. It made her sigh just thinking about it.

That was really the reason why Briana hadn't had a serious relationship since Colin. No one else made her feel the way that she had when they were together. She worried that no one else ever could.

Chapter Eight

Colin knew that it was a thinly veiled excuse to stop by and see Briana, but a guy had to eat, didn't he?

He'd talked Rich into heading down to the Bar & Grill after work. It didn't really take that much convincing; Rich was always ready to eat. He seemed especially after the work out he'd been treated to that morning.

When they walked into the crowded restaurant, Colin scanned the room for signs of Briana. He knew she'd more than likely be in the back, but he still hoped for a glimpse. He hadn't seen her in a few days, and he'd missed the sight of her.

He realized that he wasn't going to get to see her yet, so he walked up to where Rich was chatting up the hostess.

"C'mon, sweet Nicole. I'm sure you can find us a table somewhere in this place. There are just two of us."

The blonde hostess turned red at Rich's flirting and said that she'd see what she could do to find them a table right away.

"Leave that poor girl alone, Rich," Colin said as Nicole scurried off in search of a table. "She looks pretty sweet. I don't think she knows how to handle the likes of you."

"No harm," Rich smiled. "And see? It worked. She's fixin' something up for us right now."

Colin couldn't help but chuckle softly as they were led to their seats. Rich could charm the pants off anyone, and very nearly had.

They thanked Nicole, and she flushed again, murmuring, “You’re welcome,” as she walked back to her post.

They didn’t need to look at the menu. It was Wednesday after all, so wings were pretty much a given.

“Well, lucky me. Two of the most eligible bachelors in town, sitting at my table,” Kara drawled with a sexy grin.

“Hey, Kara,” Colin said. “How you doin’?”

“Can’t complain,” she replied. “Can I start ya’ll off with a beer?”

“Yes, ma’am.” This was delivered by Rich, with a sexy grin of his own.

“Comin’ right up, Sugar.” They both took a moment to watch Kara sashay to the bar. “She’s the female version of you,” Colin said shaking his head and turning back to Rich.

Rich just leaned back and grinned. “Ain’t that the truth.”

They got their beer and watched the game for a bit, drinking and talking. While they waited for their wings to come out, Rich asked Colin if he felt better about working at The General Store.

“No, man,” Colin said with a frown. “I love my parents and this town and everything, but I can’t help but resent the fact that I’m here doing the one thing I swore I’d never do.”

“Then why are you?”

“Everything just went to hell when I got hurt. I focused on finishing school, but then I just had to get out of there. I couldn’t stand to face the team and my coaches, knowing that I wasn’t a part of the game anymore.”

"It's not like coming here and running the store is your only option. If you hate it so much, look for something else," Rich offered.

Colin took a long drink, then replied, "Nothing means as much to me as football, so I might as well be miserable here, where I know people."

"That's a shitty way to look at it," Rich argued. "Dude, I know you're pissed I would be too, but playing football isn't the only way to be involved in the game."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Colin said thoughtfully. "I could look into coaching or something; I just don't know where to start."

"Well, you're gonna start at the bottom, but at least you'll be happy," Rich replied. Then he looked up at someone approaching their table.

Figuring it was Kara, Colin didn't look up. Then he heard Kent's voice.

"Hey, guys. How's it goin'?" he said when he got to the table. He had his arm slung around a beautiful girl with long blonde hair and amazing gray eyes. She smiled and Colin noticed she had a dimple on the left side of her face. "This is my sister, Roni. She's staying with me for a while and I wanted to introduce her around, make her feel welcome."

Colin and Rich stood up and shook her hand. Rich held on long enough for Kent to narrow his eyes at him.

Rich just smiled and said, "It's nice to meet you, Roni. You need anything, you just look for me."

Kent bent down to say something to Roni and she turned and walked back towards the bar.

"All right. The real reason I wanted to introduce you is because Roni will be at Kara and Bree's party tonight, and I wanted you both to know that she's my sister, so hands off," Kent said. "Especially you, Rich. I didn't like the way you were looking at her."

“No harm, man,” Rich said, holding his hands up as if to prove he was no threat. “You’re sister’s pretty man, that’s all. I’ll leave her alone.”

Kent looked at Colin, who just nodded.

Kent nodded back at both of them and said, “Later,” as he walked back in the direction his sister went.

They both sat down and Rich whistled. “Holy, shit. That was the most beautiful girl I have ever seen up close.” He declared with a look of wonder.

“I wouldn’t mess with Kent if I were you. He looked pretty serious.”

Rich was saved from answering when Kara arrived with their food, but Colin noticed that he couldn’t help but look over to where the tall, slender blonde leaned against the bar talking with Pete.

Chapter Nine

Briana was thrilled when they finally closed for the night. She felt so greasy and gross that she couldn't wait to get home and shower.

She put the finishing touches on her dish, then took it out to the bar to share with her co-workers.

"That looks so good, Bree," Kara moaned from her perch at the bar. She'd kicked off her heels and was rubbing her sore feet. "I'm so hungry, I could eat that whole plate of pasta."

"Get in line," Pete said as he poured some drinks to go with their meal.

"Wine for me, please," Nicole chimed in as she walked to the back of the room. "I can't wait to get everything cleaned and head to your place. I was so bummed I had to miss out last week, but I had to go home to watch my brothers and sisters."

"No problem," Briana said. "At least you're free tonight." Then she turned to Pete, "Wine sounds good. Would you pour me the red?"

They all sat down to enjoy the food and drinks, then went about cleaning up the front and back of the house as quickly as possible so they could head to Kara and Briana's apartment. They yelled goodnight to Pam, who thanked Briana for the pasta, then locked up behind them.

Kara and Briana hosted this get together most Wednesdays, so they knew the routine and got themselves and the apartment ready when they got home. Pretty soon the place was filled with people and the party was in full swing.

Briana and Kara both opted for sundresses, since it was a hot Texas night. When Nicole arrived wearing her hostess uniform, Briana offered to loan her something to wear.

When Nicole walked out wearing the dress, she looked uncertainly at Briana.

"I think it's too small."

"No, you just have bigger boobs than I do. It's perfect," Briana assured her. She fluffed out Nicole's hair to give it a fuller look, and told her to stop standing with her hands crossed over her chest.

"C'mon, let's go get you a drink. Stop worrying. You look amazing."

They went out to join the party and ran into Kent and Roni in the hall. Kent paused momentarily, taking in Nicole's drastic change in appearance. They all stood there for a moment, until Nicole blushed and looked down, and Roni cleared her throat.

"Oh, ahh, hey. What's up?" Kent said hoarsely, before clearing his throat. "Nicole, you met my sister, Roni, but Roni, you didn't get a chance to meet Bree yet."

Briana smiled at Roni, surprised at the striking resemblance between the two. It almost hurt to look at the pair of them, they were so beautiful.

"Wow, Kent, you never said you had a sister." Briana said, wondering what other things they'd never shared with each other.

"Yeah, Roni's my twin. She's going to be staying with me for a while," he said with a smile for his sister. He tried not to stare at Nicole's amazing body.

"Hi, Roni. It's great to meet you. Would you like something to drink?" Briana offered, taking her arm and steering her towards the kitchen.

That left Kent and Nicole standing in the hallway, her eyes on the floor and his on the ceiling.

“Um, I’m going to go get a drink,” Nicole said softly, excusing herself and following the girls.

Kent gave himself a moment to regain control, before turning and heading to join Pete and Kara in the living room.

Briana strolled around her apartment, talking with people and sipping on a beer. Eventually, she decided she’d ignored the corner where Colin and Rich sat deep in conversation, long enough.

She couldn’t believe that it had only been a week since she first found out that Colin was back in town. Now he was in her living room. Weird.

There were a couple of empty beer cans next to their seats, and she heard them talking about college as she got closer.

“Hey guys,” she said when she got close enough to be heard over the noise of the room.

They both stood up. She walked stepped closer to Rich to give him a hug. They embraced each other and murmured hello before pulling away and smiling.

When she turned away from Rich, she noticed Colin staring at them with a strange expression on his face.

“You guys never used to be that close before. I mean, back in high school we all hung out, but you guys were never on a hugging basis. Anyone watching would think that you were more than just friends,” he stated, looking guarded.

“She’s one of my best friends.” Rich said, trying not to make a big deal out of Colin’s observation.

"Hmm. Okay, I guess." Colin still looked confused. "It's just, Bree only went to A & M for like, a year, right? And you've been gone this whole time. When have you guys had time to get so close?"

"What's your point, Colin?" Briana asked, starting to get frustrated with the way he was acting.

"All I'm saying is that it seems like there's more to the story." He took a deep breath, then asked, "Did you guys hook up or something?"

Briana and Rich looked at each other and then looked at him. Both silent, but with expressions of guilt and regret.

"Are you fucking serious?" Colin asked in a low voice. "I was fishing! Did something really happen between the two of you?"

"Bro..." Rich started.

"Don't *Bro*, me, Rich. Answer the fucking question."

Briana stepped in between the two guys. "It was just one time, Colin. It was never anything serious," she said.

"That's. Just. Fucking. Great," he managed before turning and storming out of the apartment.

Briana turned to Rich, who had gone ashen with regret.

"Shit," he said simply, before sitting back down in his chair.

Briana went to find Kara, Kent, or Pete, but ran into Roni first.

"Roni," she said, grabbing her hand and pulling her over to Rich. "Can you keep an eye on him for me? Make sure he doesn't leave this apartment, okay?"

"Sure," Roni replied, looking anything but sure as she looked at the gorgeous guy sitting there like he'd just seen a ghost.

“Thanks.” Briana ran to her room to grab the car keys.

“What’s up, Bree?” Kara asked from the kitchen. She followed Briana into her room, noting her friend’s frantic movement.

“Who does he think he is?” she asked out loud. “He’s the one who dumped me! He has no right to act all pissed off, like we did something terrible to him.”

“What are we talking about?” Kara tried to get her attention, but she was scouring the room like a crazy person.

“Son of a bitch. Where are the keys?”

“Probably in your purse. Are you going somewhere?” Kara asked, picking up Briana’s purse and handing it to her.

“Yeah. I’m going to have it out with Colin, once and for all.”

Chapter Ten

Briana knew that Colin was staying at the apartments behind The General Store from a conversation she'd had with Rich. She just hoped that that's where he went after he left the party. Then she pulled behind the store and saw his truck, so she parked behind it.

She stormed up the steps and pounded on the door.

It swung open as she raised her fist to knock again.

"Not now, Bree." Colin said, swinging the door closed again.

She put her foot in the doorway and pushed the door as hard as she could, shoving past him and walking in, before turning to look at him with her hands on her hips.

"Yes, *now*, Colin," she countered.

He slammed the door shut and looked down at her small angry form.

"Fine, you wanna go?" he yelled, storming past her, his arms emphasizing his words. "Let's go."

"No," she turned on him, standing up on tip toe so she could get in his face. "You don't get to be mad here, Colin. You left me, not the other way around, and I doubt you've been celibate for the last four years. Tell me, are you still a *virgin*, Colin?"

“That’s not the point, *Briana*, I don’t care that you’re not a virgin. I didn’t expect you to stay a virgin forever. The point is that you slept with Rich - my best friend. Or should I say, my former best friend.”

“Oh, give me a break. Rich is still your best friend. You aren’t going to let one night three years ago ruin the friendship you’ve had your whole life.”

Colin turned from her to walk over to the window.

“Colin, listen,” she pleaded, her voice softening at the look on his face. “We were both away from home for the first time. I was upset because I was still missing you and I’d heard you had started seeing someone. He was upset because he’d been riding the bench all year. We were hanging out and drinking, and it just happened. It was only once, and it was really awkward afterwards. We agreed that we only wanted to be friends, and have been ever since. Don’t be mad at him.”

Colin looked at her, his heart heavy and jealousy coursing through his veins. “What about you, should I be mad at you?”

She felt her blood start to rise again, angry that he was trying to make her feel guilty when she had no reason to be.

“I don’t care if you’re mad at me or not, but it would sure be hypocritical of you, now wouldn’t it?”

He sighed loudly. “What did you come here for, Bree? Go back to your boyfriend and leave me be.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” she retorted. “I haven’t had the stomach for one since you left.”

Colin took a step closer. “That Kent guy isn’t your boyfriend?”

“No,” she responded. “Look, I came here because I was pissed that you got mad at us. You have no reason to be mad. I don’t get why you are. You’re the one who left. You didn’t want me then, so why do you care now?”

With that she whirled towards the door. She only made it a couple steps before Colin grabbed her arm and whirled her back. He walked her quickly backwards until she was stopped by the door.

Before she could register what was happening, she was flat against the door. His mouth was on hers.

She didn't think, she just reacted.

Her hands came up around his neck. His fastened under her bottom and lifter her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist, to get stabilized, then met his hot, hungry mouth with her own.

They kissed frantically, as if they had been starved for the contact. When his mouth left hers to trail kisses down her throat, her head fell back to allow him better access. As he licked his way back up to her mouth, she groaned loudly and he paused to look at her.

"Wanting you was never the problem," he stated, eyes black with need. Then he dove back in and began to drive her slowly crazy.

Her whole body thrummed with need and desire. She rocked against him, reveling in the fact that his body responded to her in a way that it never had before.

Suddenly, the door was no longer at her back as he turned and carried her through the rooms to his bed, his mouth never leaving hers. Once they got to his bed, he laid her down and stayed on top of her in one swift motion.

Prone on the bed, she had the ability to use her trembling hands to explore his rock hard body. She quickly drew his shirt over his head, but when he inhaled deeply and reached for her shirt, she put her hand on top of his to stop him from undressing her.

"I'm not ready for this." Briana looked up at him from beneath full lashes, trying to catch her breath as she spoke.

Colin knelt back on the bed, running his hands over his face and through his hair. He closed his eyes and nodded, then opened them with a smile.

“Okay.” He moved around on the bed so he could lie next to her, picking up her hand and lacing his fingers through hers. “We’ll do this on your terms, Bree.”

He laid back and patted his chest. She scooted over and placed her head over his racing heart and smiled. He traced his fingers over her shoulder and arm. She dozed off reveling in the smell and feel of him.

Briana opened her eyes to Colin’s face peaceful with sleep. She realized that she hadn’t seen him look this peaceful since he’d come back home.

She felt a rush of sadness for him that he’d fallen short of his childhood dream. For as long as she’d known him, football had been his life. It was as much a part of him as breathing. She’d loved his dedication to the sport and the fulfillment that it had given him.

She smiled as she remembered Colin and Rich at the first pep rally of his senior year. They had been in front of the entire school, pumped up for their game. Colin was named Captain of the team, and Briana had never been so proud.

Now, she enjoyed having the opportunity to really look at him. They’d never spent the night together, so she’d never seen him look this vulnerable. It tugged at something inside of her, something she’d tried for years to contain.

He began to shift and stretch, then he opened his eyes. He blinked, as if to focus, and when he shifted his hand, it touched her leg, causing him to turn his head towards her.

His face blossomed and his dimples flashed.

“Good morning,” he said softly, his voice still rough with sleep.

“Good morning.” She smiled back at him, caught up in the moment.

“I’m happy that you’re here,” he said, bringing his hand up to sweep the hair from her face.

“Me too,” she admitted.

“I’ve missed you.”

Briana didn’t say anything to that. She wasn’t ready to delve too deep into their relationship.

“What happened? With football?” she asked softly

“It was the last game of the season and I got hit. Hard. I went down wrong and messed up my knee pretty bad again. The doctor said that I have to stop playing, or I’ll have permanent damage. So that’s it. No more ball, well at least no more ball as a player.”

“Does that mean you’re thinking about still being involved with football, but in another capacity?”

“Yeah. Rich and I were just talking about this actually, and I’ve been doing some research online. I was thinking about trying to coach.” Colin’s eyes shone with excitement as he spoke. “I’d have to start as an assistant, but it would be great to still have the opportunity to be part of a team.”

Briana couldn’t help but be excited for him, but that also meant that his time here would be short-lived.

“That’s great. Have you said anything to you folks?”

“Nah, not yet. I know Dad will be disappointed. He was pretty happy when I came home, and he loves the idea of me running the store, but I know that ultimately they both want what’s best for me.” Colin brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it gently. “What about you? What happened at A & M?”

Briana felt the familiar regret when she answered.

“You’ve heard the story before: girl goes to college, girl doesn’t go to class as much as she should, and doesn’t do well when she does. Girl doesn’t get good enough grades to keep her financial aid, so girl returns home with her tail between her legs.”

“Hey,” he said, lifting her face so that he could look in her eyes. “Don’t do that. You’re not just any girl. You’re smart, capable, and confident. Sometimes shit happens, but you’re great.”

She smiled at him, then leaned in to kiss him softly on the lips.

“Thanks. I’ve been thinking about going back to school,” she admitted shyly. “Not back to university, but to culinary school.”

“Really? That’s wonderful.”

“Yeah, there’s one in Austin that I’ve been looking at.”

“You should do it, Bree. You’ll be great.”

“I’ve been saving up and my mom said she’d pay half, so I should have the money soon. I’ve been putting together the application.”

“How is your mother?” he asked with a grin. He and her mother had always been very fond of each other.

“She’s great. She moved with Ray, her new husband, out to a farm about thirty miles away. I don’t get to see her as often as I’d like, but I’m planning on heading out there this weekend.”

“I’m glad she’s happy. She deserves it.” Colin and Briana had just started dating when Briana’s father died of a brain aneurysm rupture. He’d passed away in his sleep. It had been a total shock for Briana and her mother. Colin had been a wonderful source of support for them both, and Briana would always love him for that.

Her heart swelled at the memory and her eyes started to fill. She leaned in to kiss him again, with more force and feeling this time. It didn't take much coaxing before Colin was resting on top of her, the weight of him causing the rest of her body to come alive.

The morning passed too quickly, and before she knew it, Briana had to leave so she could get some errands done before work that night.

Colin walked her to the door, his jeans unbuttoned and slung low on his hips.

She took a moment to appreciate the sight and feel of him before tearing herself away and reaching for the door handle.

"Will you go out with me Friday night?" he asked before she walked out the door.

She turned and looked up at him, "Like on a date?"

"Yes. I'll pick you up and we can go to dinner, or whatever you'd like." He looked so unsure of her answer that she couldn't help the smile that blossomed on her face.

"I'd like that," she replied. "But I'm leaving early on Saturday to go to my Mom's house, so it can't be a really late night."

"No problem," Colin said, grinning widely, his eyes sparkling with pleasure. "I'll pick you up at six."

"Okay, I'll see you then." She leaned in for a quick kiss, but paused before turning to go. "Go easy on Rich, all right? He loves you."

Colin just nodded as she walked away.

Chapter Eleven

Colin walked into work the next day with a skip in his step and a smile on his face. He was excited at the prospect of his date that evening with Bree, and hoped to continue to rebuild her trust in him.

He was heading towards the back room when he noticed Rich at the counter talking with a pretty blonde as he made a sundae. He knew that they needed to talk, but figured it best to have it out after Rich was done with his customers.

When he got to the back office he booted up the computer and checked his email. He deleted all of the spam and random giveaways, but paused, when he saw an email from his ex.

He'd met Shawn during Greek Week. Her sorority was having a rush party and he and some of the team were out hitting up all of the parties on Greek Row.

Shawn was definitely beautiful; there was no question about that. So when she pursued him, he hadn't put up a fight.

She made it pretty clear that she liked the fact that he was on the team and she enjoyed the perks and status that went along with dating him. He was totally focused on football and wasn't looking for a serious relationship, so she'd suited him just fine.

It didn't take long after he was injured, before it became apparent that his career in football was over, or for her to break off their relationship and move on.

It had hurt his pride a bit, especially on the tail-end of losing his dream of playing career ball, but there were no lasting effects.

When he saw her email address pop up in his inbox, he opened it with mild curiosity, figuring she had a question or something. When it said that she really wanted to see him, he deleted it without replying.

When he was finished in the office, he stood to go on the floor and was met by Rich coming in the back. Rich looked nervous and unsure, so Colin spoke first.

“Hey, man. I’m sorry about the other night, I was outta line.”

Rich looked relieved, but still said guiltily, “No. You had every right to be mad. I slept with your ex, and that is totally against man-code.”

“Rich, we’d been broken up for a year. Don’t sweat it. I shouldn’t have gotten so upset, but when you guys admitted that you’d been together, I was totally jealous. It was my gut reaction.”

“It’s understandable. She was your girl and I’m your best friend. You’re like a brother to me, man. It never should have happened.”

“Bree explained everything to me, so no hard feelings, all right?” Colin pulled Rich in for a quick hug, then looked at him with a smile. “Let’s just never talk about it again, okay?”

Rich grinned back, “Deal.”

The day went by pretty quickly, and at exactly six o’clock, Colin knocked on Briana’s door.

His breath caught when he took in her short skirt that billowed around her sexy legs. She looked fresh and beautiful as she greeted him with a smile.

He leaned in to kiss her cheek and said, “You look amazing,” which caused her smile to widen.

He held her hand as they walked down the stairs to his car. “Thanks for agreeing to go out with me, Bree.”

She stopped for a moment and said, “This is the only second chance you’re going to get, Colin. Don’t disappoint me.”

His stomach fluttered at her words, and he hoped that he wouldn’t.

“I won’t.”

When they got to the restaurant, he walked around to open her door and offered his hand in assistance.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said with a giggle. She tried to keep her skirt down as she got out of the truck.

“Anytime, Ma’am,” he replied, playing along.

She smiled as they walked up to the entrance.

“You remembered that I love seafood.”

“I remember everything, Bree,” he assured her as he opened the door.

When they were escorted to their table, he pulled out Briana’s seat for her, then sat across from her. Her delighted grin made him happy that he’d been taking care to be a gentleman for her.

They ordered their food and caught up as they nibbled on spinach dip.

“So,” Briana began, “how are your parents doing?”

“They seem happier than they’ve ever been,” he answered. “Mom started playing tennis and has made a beautiful garden in their yard. She’s taking more time for herself, since I’m out of the house, which is really good for her. Since she’s so happy, that makes Dad happy. They’re going out on date nights now and everything.”

“That’s wonderful. They’re such a great couple. I’ve always looked up to them for that,” Briana admitted. “When I get married, I hope my marriage is as great as theirs.”

“Me, too,” Colin replied, reaching over the table to hold her hand. “I know I’ve said this already, but I’ve really missed you, Bree.”

She looked down at the joined hands and then back up into his dark eyes.

“I’m sure you’ve had plenty of company over the last few years,” she said softly, not voicing the question that was apparent in her face.

“I’m not going to lie and say that I didn’t date after we broke up. I kept things pretty casual for the most part, but I did have one girlfriend while I was in school. It was more of a status thing. We liked each other, but we weren’t in love. It was nothing like my relationship with you, Bree. You’re the only girl that I’ve ever been in love with.”

Briana blushed at that, and couldn’t help the smile that formed at his words. She’d always assumed that he’d see other girls while he was a way, and she’d figured that unlike her, he would have another relationship. But she couldn’t help the uneasy feeling that came with hearing he’d had another girlfriend.

“What happened?” she asked. “Why’d you break up?”

“She was only interested in dating me because I played football and was getting scouted. Once I got injured, there was nothing that I could do to help her get what she wanted.”

“That sucks,” she said, getting angry on his behalf. “She sounds like a terrible person.”

Colin chuckled at her reaction. “Nah, she’s not that bad,” he replied. “Like I said, we knew what our relationship was, so the only thing that was injured when she dumped me was my pride.”

Briana squeezed his hand, then let it go when their food arrived and they both began to eat.

They talked a bit more while they ate, catching up on things they'd missed in each other's lives since they'd last spoken. As they waited for the waiter to return with their bill, Briana talked to him about Pete's love for Kara.

"I feel so bad. He's been in love with her for over a year, and every time she brings another guy around, she crushes him a little bit more."

"Does she know how he feels?" Colin asked.

She frowned. "She thinks he has a crush, so she doesn't take him seriously. She says that she wants to stay single and just enjoy life, but I don't think she is enjoying life. I think she would love to have someone, but that she's afraid of being hurt."

After he signed the bill, Colin took her hand and said, "You have to let them work this out. If you interfere, you're just going to upset Kara."

"I know," she admitted, "but I know that Pete is exactly what she needs. I just wish she'd give him a chance."

They walked out of the restaurant, but Colin paused before they got to his truck.

"I know that you have to get up early to go to your Moms, but I'm not ready for our night to end." He pushed a strand of hair behind her ear as he spoke.

"It's still early," she responded. "What did you have in mind?"

"I have a bottle of wine in the truck. How about the gravel pits?" he suggested.

"Okay," she agreed with a smile, reaching up to give him a soft kiss on the lips. "Thanks for dinner."

He leaned into her and deepened the kiss. "My pleasure."

When they got to the gravel pits and snuck through the fence, Colin opened his bag and produced a blanket, a bottle of wine, a corkscrew and two glasses.

“Looks like you thought of everything,” Briana said, pleasure lighting up her face.

He spread out the blanket near the edge of the water and opened the bottle as she got comfortable. He poured her a glass and handed it to her, sitting down so their thighs touched.

He held his glass up to her and said, “To second chances, and to the most amazing woman I know.”

“To second chances,” she toasted.

She took a sip and looked out over the water. “It’s a beautiful night. I love the way the moon shines out over the water. It’s magical.”

Colin looked at her face reflected in the moonlight as he tried his wine. He felt the familiar longing and contentment that he always had when he was with her.

“Hey.” She turned to him with a wicked grin. “Wanna go swimming?”

“We don’t have our suits.”

“You gonna let that stop you?” she asked as she stood up and placed her glass on a nearby rock and began to pull her shirt over her head.

Colin watched, awestruck, as she shimmied out of her skirt, then walked to the water and looked over her shoulder at him as she took off her bra and threw it on the ground next to her.

She gave him a come-hither smile. He jumped to his feet and yanked his shirt over his head. When he pulled at his buckle, he watched as she strode to the water and dove in, her gorgeous body softly glowing in the moonlight.

He almost tripped in his eagerness to get his pants off, but quickly righted himself and finished taking off the rest of his clothing. It seemed he was no longer capable of rational thought. His sole focus was on getting in that water as fast as possible.

He barely registered the chill of the water as he dove in the direction that Briana had gone. When he surfaced, she was a few feet away from him, treading water as she waited.

He swam up to her and pulled her to him. She wound her arms around his neck.

Their lips met frantically, both of them reveling in the feel of their wet bodies meeting beneath the water, forgetting momentarily to kick their legs in order to stay above water.

They stayed in the kiss for a moment, as their heads submerged, then pulled apart and resurfaced with a few kicks.

They were both laughing as they came up for air, then began to slowly swim towards the shallow end. When they reached solid ground, they came together, bodies hot and eager to touch.

Briana moaned into his mouth, as Colin began to lose control. Their hands were everywhere, the silky feel of her body turning him on more than he'd ever been. He broke from her lips and trailed kisses along her jaw and neck as her hands roamed freely under the surface.

The light shining in his face barely registered, as Colin licked and nibbled eagerly along Briana's shoulder, fueled by the soft sounds emitting from her throat.

But when he heard a voice say, "Come out of the water and leave the premises, you're on private property," the fog in his brain began to clear.

They broke apart and looked over towards the voice, which had come from a police officer. He shined his flashlight in their direction.

"Come out of the water folks," the officer said again.

Colin was almost to the shore when he realized that he and Briana were naked. She hid shyly behind his body.

“Um, Sir, we’re going to exit the water, but would you mind turning off the flashlight and allowing my date to get her clothes?” Colin said loudly, trying to sound firm but respectful at the same time. He didn’t want to anger the cop and get them in any further trouble.

The light went out and the policeman turned. They ran from the water to their clothes and dressed as quickly as possible, their bodies’ slick and no towels available to dry off.

Once they were dressed, Colin threw everything back into the bag and thanked the officer as they made their way back towards the fence.

“Just remember this is private property and it’s not safe to be out here at night,” the police officer called after them. “Don’t let me catch you here again.”

“Yes, Sir,” they both yelled back at him as they scurried down the road to Colin’s truck.

When they got inside, they both started laughing, and soon Briana was overcome by giggles.

“I was so scared when he started talking,” she managed. “I never heard him come up.”

“Neither did I. I almost had a heart attack when I realized what was happening.”

Briana giggled all the way back to her house. She tried to make her hair look presentable, but without access to a mirror and brush, she just threw it up in a bun on her head.

When he parked in front of her house, he turned to her and asked, “Can I walk you to your door?”

“Of course.”

He smiled, his dimples causing her heart to flutter in her chest. He held her hand up the stairs and turned her towards him when they reached her door.

“Thanks again for coming out with me, Bree. I had a wonderful time, cops and all.”

“So did I,” she agreed. “I can’t remember the last time I had so much fun.”

He leaned down slowly, watching her eyes as he drew near. He brought his hands up to either side of her face and held her gently, as his lips touched hers.

She brought her hands to his hips, digging her fingers in as the kiss melted every bone in her body. As he deepened the kiss, she moaned in his mouth, which caused his head to feel light and his pants to grow too tight.

He took a few more minutes to torture himself, but stopped when he still had it in him to do so.

“Call me when you get back from your mother’s?” he asked her, leaning his forehead against hers so he could catch his breath.

“I will.” She reached up for one last kiss before she opened the door and closed it on him leaving him with a sexy smile.

Colin stood there for a moment, staring at the place her beautiful face had just been, and realized that he may be in over his head this time.

Chapter Twelve

Briana rose early the next morning and got ready to drive out to her mother's. As she was getting dressed, she couldn't help but think back to her date with Colin.

She felt herself softening towards him. When they were together it felt just like it used to, comfortable and right, with a hint of sexual tension.

She worried about letting him get close to her again. She'd been hurt so badly when he'd broken up with her, but she had to admit that she was starting to like him for the man he was now, not just the boy he'd been. He'd been through a lot over the past few years, and he'd had to grow up and realize that the dream he'd always pursued would never come true now.

She was really enjoying spending time with him, and she had to admit, kissing him now was hotter than it had ever been when they were in high school. She just hoped she wasn't making a mistake by trusting him again.

She called goodbye to Kara as she walked out the door, and smiled at the grunt that answered her. It only took thirty minutes until she turned down the long, dirt road that led to her mother's farm.

When she got out and shut her car door, she smelled cooking bacon coming from inside the house.

She loved breakfast at her mother's. When she walked through the door, she was overcome by the feelings of safety and security that she remembered from her youth.

The décor was a mix of items from Briana's childhood and the new furniture that her mom and Ray had purchased together. The house was full of warmth and charm, and screamed of comfort and happiness. It was one of Briana's favorite places.

She walked into the kitchen, tiptoed across the floor, and wrapped her arms around her mother, squeezing her tight.

"Oh, Briana," her mother said breathlessly. "You startled me."

Her mother turned and threw her arms around her, hugging her close and kissing her cheek.

"It's good to see you, Baby Girl," she said with a big grin.

Briana thought her mother was gorgeous, with her grey hair styled in a sleek bob, and her face a map of years of laughter and happiness. Other than during the period of time after her father passed away, her mother had always been the happiest, most optimistic person that Briana knew.

She loved her to pieces.

"It's good to see you too, Mama."

"Come on over and have a seat. I'll call Ray and we can all sit down and enjoy our breakfast."

Briana sat down at the table and poured herself some coffee, putting a little cream and sugar in it.

When Ray walked into the room he went right over to kiss the top of Briana's head, before sitting in his seat.

"Hello, Bree," he said with a smile. "It's good to see you again. Your mama's been missing you."

"Now, Ray, I know Briana is a busy girl with a life of her own," her mother countered. "But I always welcome her visits."

"I'm sorry it's been so long, Mama. I've just been so caught up in work," Briana explained, feeling a tug of guilt at her mother's words. "I almost have my application finished for culinary school."

"That's wonderful, dear," her mother said, patting her hand. "And don't worry about coming to see me all of the time. You need to live your life, and I need to get used to you being far away again. When you get accepted to that school and move to Austin, I won't get to see you as much."

"I'll come home whenever I can."

"I'm sure you will. Now, tell me... what's this I hear about Colin being back in town?"

Briana blushed though she should have known that her mother's friends from town would be keeping her up-to-date on all of the latest gossip.

"He's back," Briana admitted. "He got injured and won't be able to play football anymore, so he came home. He's helping his daddy at the store now. But you know him, Mama. Running the store isn't what he wants to do for the rest of his life. He's thinking about trying to coach."

Briana's mother looked at Ray with a smile and then back at her daughter. "Sounds like you sure know a lot about it," she said with a wink.

Briana shoveled a piece of French toast into her mouth, trying to buy herself some time to compose herself. She couldn't prevent her embarrassed flush.

"That's okay. I can wait," her mother said with a smirk.

Ray just chuckled and helped himself to some more bacon.

Briana swallowed and took a swig of her coffee, trying to dampen her suddenly dry mouth. "Um, yeah, I've seen him," she stuttered.

“Really?” her mother asked gleefully. She’d always loved Colin and had expressed the hope that Briana would get back together with him someday.

“That’s wonderful, Bree. Are you two getting along?”

“Yes, Mama. We’ve talked a bit and I’m giving him the benefit of the doubt.”

“I’m so happy, dear. The two of you were always such a good match.”

Satisfied that her mother was going to leave the conversation after having said her piece, Briana enjoyed breakfast and then joined her mother for a walk around the farm. They spent a nice day together, catching up and talking about Briana’s plans for her culinary school application. As they sat at her mother’s favorite bench overlooking the pond, she brought up Colin again.

“So, when you said you’ve talked a bit, what does that mean?” her mother asked. She nudged Briana’s arm and smiled.

“We went on a date.”

“Really?” She drew the word out. “That’s interesting. How’d that go?”

“It was really nice, Mama. I’m comfortable with him. When we talk, it feels just like it always did, like we haven’t been apart all of these years.”

“You said he’s had to deal with a lot of changes,” her mother prompted.

Briana held onto her mother's hand and looked out over the water. "Yeah. He's had to let go of his dream and find a new one. He's really changed, Mama. He was always sweet, but even I can admit that he was pretty self-involved in high school. He knew what he wanted and was willing to do whatever he needed to do to make it happen. Now he seems to be putting his parents' needs ahead of his own. He's grown and realized the consequences of his actions. I'm really enjoying getting to know the man he's become."

Briana's mom just made a hmmm sound and they sat there in silence for a while, enjoying each other's company. When she walked Briana to the car, her mother engulfed her in one last hug before pulling back to look at her, brushing the hair off of Briana's forehead.

"Give Colin a second chance, Baby Girl," her mother said softly. "Your father and I always liked him. You complimented each other so well."

Briana just smiled and kissed her mother on the cheek, before getting in her car to drive back home.

She spent the next thirty minutes thinking about what her mother had said, and trying to decide how she felt about it.

Chapter Thirteen

When Briana got home on Saturday night, Kara told her that Rich had put together an impromptu barbecue at his parents' house for the next afternoon. They were out of town for a few weeks, so he thought it would be the perfect time to get everyone together.

Briana got up and went to the grocery store to pick up a few items that she could contribute to the party. She decided to make a spinach and raspberry salad and trifle for desert. Just as Briana wrapped up the dishes, Kara came out in a blue-green summer dress with strappy sandals.

"Ready?" Kara asked as she coated her lips with a shimmery gloss.

"Yup. I just need to grab my bag. You have your clothes for work?"

Kara patted the small backpack that she carried, frowning as she said, "Yes. It stinks that we have to work tonight. We're going to have to leave just when the party gets goin'."

Briana ran to her room and grabbed her stuff, then met Kara at the car to load everything. When they arrived at the party there were already quite a few cars lining the streets in front of the house. They followed the sound of the music and the smell of the grill around the side of the house and let themselves in through the gate. Pete and Nicole were sitting and talking at one of the folding tables, while Rich manned the grill. Colin, Kent and Roni stood awkwardly by a long table of food, talking intermittently.

Briana and Kara headed towards the table to put the dishes down and said, "Hi," to Pete and Nicole as they passed.

Kent walked over to Briana and leaned down to give her a kiss. She stood still, conscious of the fact that Colin was watching and unsure of how the next few minutes were going to play out. Kent pulled back and looked down at her face.

"Everything all right, Bree?" he asked confusion showing on his face.

"Yeah," she responded. "Everything's fine."

She couldn't stop her eyes from darting to Colin and Roni. Kent followed her gaze and then turned back to her.

"Is there something going on that I should know about?" He looked like he was trying not to get upset.

"Um, let's go inside and talk," she responded leading him through Rich's sliding glass door.

"Don't tell me you fell for his shit already, Bree," Kent started before she had a chance to close the door.

She saw Colin start, as if he was about to follow them inside, but she shook her head at him and turned to Kent. She looked up at him, her gaze taking in his blond hair and beautiful grey eyes. He'd always been so good to her, never pressuring her for more than she was ready to give. She felt horrible that she couldn't give him the one thing he'd always hoped for.

Her.

"Kent, it's not about Colin," she began. "I love you, and I always will, but we both know that this thing we've been doing for the past few years isn't good for either of us."

He dragged his hand through his hair as he paced around the room. "Don't tell me it's not about him. Things were great before he got here. Look, Bree, we have an understanding... we always have. If one of us is with someone, we back off. It's fine. I'll let you have your fun with Colin, then I'll be here for you when it's done."

He stopped in front of her and she saw the hope on his face. She knew then that she had to let him go. He deserved better than what she had to offer him.

She walked closer, until their bodies were almost touching, and placed her hand on his cheek. "You deserve better than this, Kent. Better than me. You're a wonderful guy. You deserve to be with a girl who will give you all of the love that she has to offer. Who will appreciate how kind and amazing you are." She looked into his eyes, "We can't do this anymore. Whether or not things work out with Colin, I won't be back to use you as my crutch. But I'll always cherish you as my friend."

Kent closed his eyes, then turned away. "Can you give me a minute?" he asked gruffly.

Briana didn't say anything, just turned and went back outside. She didn't meet Colin's eyes as she walked over to where Pete, Nicole, and Kara sat. She sat down, but didn't join their conversation. She couldn't help but picture Kent's crestfallen expression before he'd turned from her.

Before she knew it, the backyard was full of people and she went in search of Kara. She walked up to where Pete stood alone and asked him if he'd seen Kara. He nodded his head towards the tree line of the backyard, where Kara was making out with some tall, lanky guy that Briana didn't recognize.

"She's drunk," Pete stated.

“What?” Briana asked incredulously. “We have to be to work in an hour.”

“I don’t think she’s gonna make it.”

Briana walked over to Kara and tugged on her arm. “Kara. Kara. Stop. We have to go.”

The stranger pulled away long enough to say, “Fuck off,” then went back to slobbering all over Kara.

“Kara.” Briana tried getting closer and tapped her on the back. “We have to get to work.”

Kara looked back at her and said, “Hey, Bree,” then she giggled and turned back to resume her make-out session.

Pete approached from behind Briana and yanked Kara off the guy. He pushed her behind him and stood to face The Asshole.

The Asshole towered over him by a few feet and looked menacing, his jaw clenched and neck bulging.

“What’s your problem, Ginger?” Asshole yelled.

“You are,” Pete retorted. “You shouldn’t be taking advantage of Kara when she’s had too much to drink.”

“Shut up, Pete,” Kara shouted clawing at Pete’s back. “This is none of your business.”

“Why don’t you listen to her, Ginger?” Asshole said.

“Kara, just let me handle this. You deserve better,” Pete said to her over his shoulder.

Kara’s face turned red. She started to beat on Pete’s back. “Don’t tell me what I deserve.”

“How ‘bout you kick rocks and leave us be?” Asshole stated, trying to reach around Pete to grab Kara.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. Colin, Kent and Rich finally noticed what was going on and ran over to assist Pete. Pete knocked Asshole's hand away from Kara, causing Asshole's face to turn a bright shade of red. Kara continued to pound on Pete's back.

Briana watched in horror as Asshole reared back, then punched Pete square on his jaw. The impact caused Pete to fall back, toppling Kara over. Pete turned to the side in order to avoid falling on top of her.

The other guys grabbed Asshole and held him back as Kara and Briana rushed over to Pete. He sat up and looked dazed, but other than a red mark on his jaw, he was fine.

Kara stroked his jaw. She looked into his eyes and started to cry.

"I'm so sorry, Pete. I should have listened to you."

Pete pulled her to him and held her as she cried. Briana got up and walked away to let them have some privacy as the guys hustled Asshole out of the backyard through the gate.

"What the hell was that?" Roni asked. "What happened?"

"That guy got too rough and hit Pete, so they escorted him out," Briana said, trying to play off the situation.

Nicole came running over. "Is Pete okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, but I don't think Kara's going to be able to work tonight. Pam lets you serve sometimes, right? Do you think you'd be able to cover for her tonight?"

"Sure," Nicole said with a shrug. "I don't have any plans after this." She glanced up as the guys walked back through the gate.

Briana recognized the look of longing on her face, but didn't have time to wonder what had caused it. She was just grateful that Nicole agreed to cover for Kara so Kara didn't get in trouble. She thanked Nicole, then walked over to meet Colin, Rich, and Kent.

"Hey, guys, Nicole is going to cover for Kara at work tonight, so we need to get going. Can you keep an eye on Kara and Pete and make sure they get home okay?"

They all nodded. Briana gathered her things and told Nicole she'd see her in a few minutes at the restaurant. Before she made it to the car she heard Colin calling after her and paused.

"I really have to get to work, Colin. I'm going to be late as it is."

"I'll just take a second, Bree," he said quickly.

"Okay."

"When can I see you again?"

"Um, I work the next few nights, but we can hang out before work, or we can get together on my day off."

"Great." He smiled. "Give me a call tomorrow."

"Sounds good," she said, and started back towards her car.

"Hey, Bree," he called after her, causing her to look over her shoulder at him. "What happened with Kent?"

"I told him I couldn't see him anymore," she replied, then got in her car and drove away.

When she looked in her rearview mirror, Colin was still standing in the same spot with a huge grin on his face.

Chapter Fourteen

When Briana woke up the next morning, she stayed in bed for a few minutes, replaying the previous day in her mind.

She couldn't believe the way things had played out at the party: Kara getting drunk, even when she knew they had to work; the Asshole being belligerent; and Pete standing up for Kara and getting punched for his efforts.

Pam had been cool with Nicole covering for Kara. She said that she had been considering promoting Nicole to server, so it would give her a chance to see how she handled herself on the floor. Before closing for the night and heading home, Briana had thanked Nicole again for agreeing to help Kara out as they sat down and had a drink after work.

"No problem," Nicole said. "I'm sorry about what happened at the party, but I made out great in tips tonight. It was fun."

"That's great," Briana replied. Then she studied Nicole, taking in her good looks and the way she carried herself, as if she'd been born to privilege. "So, what's your story, Nicole? No offense, but you don't seem like the type to be working as a hostess at a bar and grill in the middle of nowhere."

Nicole had turned pink, then looked down at the napkin that she was slowly tearing to pieces. “Well, I grew up in Dallas. My parents are wealthy and I went to private schools all my life. It was expected that I would go to SAGU and study Youth Ministries, then come home and marry my high school sweetheart, and we would start a congregation together. The problem was that I don’t love Jake, and I couldn’t go through with my parents’ plans for me. I studied English in school and broke it off with Jake. My parents were very disappointed in me and I just couldn’t go back, so I came here to start a life on my own.”

“Wow. Did you know anyone here before you came?”

Nicole smiled and giggled a bit, as if still amazed by her decision. “No. I just picked a random spot on the map and showed up. I had a little money saved up, so I was able to rent an apartment, but even with the money I make as a hostess, it is started to become a struggle. That is why I’m hoping to move up to a serving position, and I’m thinking about getting a roommate.”

Briana looked at her in amazement. “You’re so brave. I don’t think I could ever do what you did, not in a million years.”

“Thanks, but it’s no big deal.” Nicole said with an embarrassed shrug.

Thinking back on the conversation, Briana couldn’t help but be impressed about Nicole and the decisions she’d made in order to be happy.

Deciding it was time to get some coffee, so she rolled out of bed and headed to the kitchen. When she walked in, she saw that Pete was already there making a pot.

“Hey,” she said with a yawn. “What are you doing here?”

When Pete turned, she saw that his jaw was colorful with the bruises that were starting to form.

“Ouch.”

“It’s not so bad,” he replied, gingerly touching his jaw. “I brought Kara home and stayed over. She was pretty shook up last night, and I wanted to make sure she was okay.”

“Is she?”

“Yeah,” he said smiling to himself as he made two cups of coffee. “She’s great.”

Before Briana could ask him about that smile, he wandered out of the kitchen and into Kara’s room, shutting the door behind him. She looked at the shut door for a moment, then shrugged and poured herself a cup of coffee.

Once she’d gotten her caffeine fix, she looked at the clock and decided that it was late enough to give Colin a call.

“Lo,” he said gruffly, answering on the third ring.

“Hey, Colin, it’s Bree. You asked me to give you a call.” Even though that was true, she felt nervous now that she was talking to him.

His voice got softer. “Good mornin’. I’m glad you called. I was just getting dressed, so I didn’t even look to see who it was before I answered it. I’m happy it’s you.”

She smiled at his response, and felt herself grow warm at the thought of him pulling his clothes on after a hot shower.

She cleared her throat. “Um... well, I was wondering if you wanted to do something today. I have to work tonight, but not until five.”

“That would be great. I’m working later tonight, too, because we have inventory, so that works out perfectly.”

Briana swore that she heard a smile in his voice. “Well,” she began, “I was thinking that I could come over and make you lunch. I’ll pick up everything at the market, then come by. Will that work for you?”

“That sounds great.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in a little bit.” She smiled as she disconnected, then ran to the bathroom so she could shower and get ready. She shaved, lotioned, and primped. She put on a red sundress with white sandals and blew her hair dry. She was trying to look effortlessly casual. It took a lot of work.

When she finished she headed to the market and picked up ingredients for Chicken Milano, with fettuccini noodles, salad, and asparagus. As an afterthought she grabbed a bottle of red wine, and headed to the register. She really wanted to impress Colin with this meal.

When she arrived at his place, she felt butterflies in her stomach as she carried the bags up the stairs.

Before she could knock, the door flew open, and Colin stood before her, all sexy and smiling. She took in his bare feet, cargo shorts, and grey T-shirt, before reaching his face and the flash of dimples. It was all she could do not to sigh and stare, but she gathered her wits and smiled up at him, lifting the grocery bags to show him what she’d brought.

He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, as he took the bags from her hands and moved to the side to allow her access inside.

“Hi,” he said as she walked past him.

“Hi,” she said back, her smile still in place.

They walked back in to the kitchen and Colin began taking the items out of the grocery bags. “What do you need me to do?” he asked when everything was lined up on the counter.

“If you want to start cutting the vegetables for the salad, I can get started on the main course. Is it okay if I rummage through your kitchen to find what I need?”

“Sure. Mi casa es su casa. My mom loaded it up when I moved in, so I should have everything that you need.”

“Cool.”

Briana started to prep the chicken. While she worked, she was conscious of Colin standing next to her chopping and building the salad. Her body seemed to hum and her pulse quickened at his nearness. She watched his bicep flex with every slice of the blade, and started to feel lightheaded.

She cleared her throat and focused on the chicken, getting it breaded and placed in the sauce so she could put it in the oven. Once that was done, she put the pasta water on to boil.

“Do you have a grill?” she asked.

He stopped cutting and looked up at her. It seemed like a current passed through the air, and she knew that he was as aware of the sexual tension as she was.

“Hmm?” he asked. “Did you say something?”

She laughed, her eyes blurring a bit as she met his gaze.

“Do you have a grill?” she asked again.

“Yeah. Do you need me to light it up?” he asked, placing the knife on the cutting board and waiting for her answer.

“Um, yeah.” Her lips felt as dry as her mouth and she licked them quickly out of habit. His gaze followed the flick of her tongue and stayed there for a moment, as he hoped she’d do it again. Her throat tightened and she struggled to remember what they were talking about.

“Oh, um... yeah. I wanted to grill the asparagus.”

“Sure.” His movements seemed slow, as he went out the back door to where she assumed he kept his grill.

Briana shook her head to try and clear the fog, then got out the asparagus and coated it with olive oil, pepper, and salt.

When Colin came back in she asked, “Is it gas or do I need to wait for the coals to warm up?”

“It’s gas.”

She picked up the plate of asparagus and walked by him, accidentally brushing her arm against his taut stomach. She heard his quick intake of breath, and bit back the groan that started in the back of her throat. She rushed out and put the asparagus on the grill.

When she got back into the kitchen, she looked at the timer and saw that the chicken still had forty-five minutes to bake, so she turned off the water that had begun to boil. Apparently being in the kitchen with Colin was making forget the basics.

“Shoot.”

Colin came up behind her, as if to try and get close enough to hear what she’d said.

“What is it?”

“I put the asparagus on too early. The chicken won’t be done for a while and I don’t need to cook the asparagus and the noodles yet.”

Colin went back outside and came back in a few seconds later.

“No problem. I turned off the grill and we can set it up again when you’re ready.”

“Thanks.”

“So,” Colin began, “Does that mean we have some time to kill before we have to do the rest?”

Briana looked at the timer again. “Yeah, about thirty minutes.”

She'd barely gotten the words out, when Colin pulled her against him. Her arms went around him eagerly and her mouth eagerly found his. He backed her up against the counter and she felt the long hard length of him against her.

His mouth was everywhere, her neck, her jaw, her earlobe. Her head fell back to allow him better access, and her hands began an exploration of their own.

His hands found their way to her bottom and he lifted her easily, causing her to wrap her legs around his waist. He set her on the countertop, and she shifted down, so she could feel his erection press against her. She began to thrust as she tried to work his shirt up and off of him.

He broke away from her to help her, tearing the shirt over his head and coming back to meet her lips with his.

Her hands thrilled in the feel of his bare skin. She loved the muscles that rippled with each movement and started to feel crazy with need.

She struggled with the straps of her dress. He reached down to help her, pushing the straps and the fabric down over her stomach, and taking her bra off in the process.

When their bare skin touched it was like a fire erupted inside of her. She rocked against him again, causing Colin to moan and he leaned her back to gain access to her breasts. Then he sucked on one nipple as he used his fingers to knead and stroke the other.

Briana kissed his forehead and leaned towards his ear, trying to reach his skin, but not interrupt his wonderful assault on her breasts. She scooted down a little further, eager to have him inside her. This caused her dress to push up further along her thighs. She was frustrated by his shorts and her panties, which caused an unwanted barrier.

Her movement caused a tortured sound to emit from his throat. Colin left her breasts and brought his lips back to her mouth, suckling and biting her lips, as he pulled her closer to him and lifted her off of the counter.

He carried her back to his room, but before placing her on the bed, he pulled away from her and looked into her eyes.

“Is this okay?” he asked, clearly trying to keep his control in check, even as she rocked against him once more.

“Yes,” Briana said with total confidence.
“Please.”

That was all the affirmation he needed. He laid her down and took off her clothes. Then he took off his. He laid next to her on the bed, stroking her skin with his hands, as he placed light kisses down her down her body. He started with the nape of her neck, then travelled along her collar bone to her breasts. After licking and nibbling her nipples again, he continued his descent along her stomach to her thighs.

He moved down the bed so he was in front of her, and nudged her legs, asking her to open them for him. She did as he requested, the blood pumping hot through her veins.

He kissed his way up her legs, starting at her knees, and ending in the one place that burned the most. When his mouth touched her, she felt momentarily embarrassed. No one had ever kissed her like this before, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it.

One second later, when his tongue began to lick her and he looked up to make sure she was okay, she lost all thoughts of embarrassment and let herself be taken away by the feelings he evoked.

It didn't take long for the tension to build in her core, causing her to buck and thrash against his mouth. He took that as a sign of encouragement and began to lick faster and deeper.

She came with a shout and a moan. She couldn't believe she was being so vocal, but she was no longer in control of herself.

Colin kissed her thighs once more, before kissing a trail back up her stomach to her chest. Her sensitive nipples tingled when he stroked them. She worked to catch her breath.

When he was fully on top of her, she moved appreciatively at the feel of his weight. His skin felt silky and slick, and she knew that he had to be ready to explode himself. She felt him throbbing against her.

She couldn't help the large grin of satisfaction that spread across her face, as he said, "I need to be inside you."

She felt him reach for the condom and heard the packet crinkle as he tore it open.

She pulled her knees up anticipating the feel of him inside her.

He slid in slowly, making her breath catch. Her eyes closed as she let the pleasure of this intimate joining overcome her.

When he was fully inside of her, he momentarily stilled, and looked into her eyes. Emotion washed over her. She lifted up to kiss him long and hard. She pulled her knees up further and wrapped her legs around him, lifting her pelvis up off of the bed and bringing him further inside of her.

His control snapped. He started pumping in and out of her, and she held onto his shoulders for support. She rocked her hips up, causing him to rub roughly against her. She felt the orgasm begin to spread through her limbs once more. When she knew she was about to cum, she suckled on his earlobe, then bit it.

“Oh, God. Yes, *Now*.”

Her throaty words caused him to intensify his thrusts, and they both came with moans and shouts of satisfaction.

Briana lay there, stroking Colin’s back and wondering at how he had just made her feel. He had brought things out of her that had never happened before.

She couldn’t help but smile, as she closed her eyes and kissed the side of his neck.

“I think I just died and went to heaven,” he muttered, his face in the pillow.

She giggled.

“If that’s what death is like, I’m ready to die. Repeatedly.”

Colin chuckled, then lifted his head up to look down at her. “You’re amazing.” He kissed one corner of her mouth, then the other, before kissing her fully on the lips.

“I think you’re amazing too.” she admitted, gazing up at him with happiness and hope in her eyes.

He smiled down at her, then cocked his head to the side and said, “What the hell is that beeping?”

“Oh, no.” She tried to move him off of her so she could get up. “My chicken. Has it been going off long?”

“I’m not sure,” he admitted, letting her up. “Let’s go check on it.”

They got up and ran to the kitchen to try and salvage their lunch.

Make it Last

Chapter Fifteen

After Briana left to get ready for work, Colin got on the computer and continued researching coaching at the college level. He was really excited about an opening at the University of Texas in Austin. He called his former coaches and asked if they would give him letters of reference, which they agreed to do. He looked at all of the requirements for the application and was excited at the prospect.

When he opened his email, he noticed another message from Shawn. All it said was “Call me, 911.” He really didn’t think there was anything left to say to her. He had no interest in getting involved with her again, or hearing about her latest conquest, so he deleted it.

While he was taking a shower before work, he couldn’t help but think back to his afternoon with Briana.

Damn, she was hot.

He figured years of pent-up sexual tension probably hadn’t hurt in making their first time together amazing. Lord knew he’d wanted her in high school. Bad. She hadn’t been ready then and he’d respected her and her wishes, but it had been difficult.

She was better than he’d ever imagined in his fantasies, and there had been plenty of those throughout the years. He turned the temperature of the water down and tried to cool himself off.

Once he was dressed and ready, he headed to the store to meet his dad for inventory. When he pulled up, his dad’s car was already there, so he went inside to meet him. He found him in the back storeroom.

“Hey, Pop,” he greeted his father. “You been here long?”

His dad looked up from his inventory sheet and gave him a broad grin. "Hey, Colin. Not too long. Your mother made sure I sat down for dinner before she let me leave the house. She's worried that I'm not eating healthy enough. She made me eat steamed vegetables," he said with a grimace.

Colin chuckled. His dad hated eating healthy. He was a meat and potatoes kind of guy.

"Where do you want me to start?" he asked.

His dad turned to him, dropping the clipboard to his side and looking seriously at his son. "Your mother and I had a long talk about you over supper," he said.

Colin blinked over the unexpected turn in the conversation. The mirror image of his own, and felt his heart ache at the sadness in them.

"What about?"

His father put his hand on Colin's shoulder and squeezed. "Look, Colin, we know how much getting injured has affected the plans you had for your life. We're so sorry that things turned out this way. Initially I thought that when you came back here, things would fall in to place... that you'd learn about the store and eventually take over. But it's obvious that you're not happy. I know that you love me and your mother, and that you want to help us and make us happy. But son, you settling for less than your dreams won't make us happy. Would I have been happy if your dream had been to run the store and pass it along to your children? Heck yeah. But that's my dream, not yours."

Colin throat tightened. He looked down and tried to get a handle on his emotions.

"Thanks, Pop. That means a lot to me. I don't want to disappoint you, and I know you're ready to retire. I want that for you. You work so hard. It's time for you to enjoy your life with Mom."

His father's face burst with pride. "You're a wonderful son, Colin, more so than your mother and I ever could have imagined. We don't want you to put our wants ahead of your own. There are other people in our family who can run the store. Your cousin Steve has always expressed an interest. Maybe I'll give him a call," his dad said. "We want you to do something that is going to give you a full and happy life."

Colin pulled his dad in for a hug, holding on a little longer than normal. He cleared his throat before he spoke, "Actually, they're hiring assistant coaches at UT. I was thinking about applying."

His father grinned again. "That sounds perfect. Now, we'd better get to work. These items aren't going to count themselves."

Colin was in dry storage when Rich came shuffling in through the door.

"What're you doing here, man?" Colin asked him.

"There's nothing going on tonight, This town is dead, so I thought you might be able to use an extra set of hands for inventory," Rich answered with a shrug.

"Sounds good." Colin pulled a page out and handed it to Rich. "There are pens and another clipboard on the desk. Thanks."

While they worked, Colin asked Rich how things had gone after he'd left the evening before.

“Nothin’ much happened,” Rich replied. “I made sure that Pete and Kara were okay. She sobered up pretty quickly. She was fawning over Pete, amazed that he’d stood up for her and taken a punch like that. Shit, I was pretty amazed myself. Who knew Pete had it in him. Anyway, Pete said he would make sure Kara got home safely, and they left. Kent was hanging out in the corner, drinking himself into a stupor, and growling at any chick who tried to talk to him. I think Bree messed him up pretty badly.”

“Yeah, she said that she told him that she didn’t want to see him anymore. But she said they only dated casually, I don’t know why he was so upset.”

“I guess he was more into her than she was into him,” Rich speculated. “He’ll be okay. There was no shortage of girls willing to help him get over Bree, that’s for sure.”

“As long as he stays away from Bree, I don’t care what he does,” Colin said mildly.

“Are you guys back on then?”

“I hope so. I think she is beginning to trust me again.”

“That’s great, man. I hope it works out. You two were always great together.”

“Thanks,” Colin said with a smile. “What about you? Any prospects on the horizon?”

“Well, I know it’s probably playing with fire, but I can’t stop thinking about Roni.”

“Kent’s sister?” Colin asked with a shake of his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Bro.”

“I know, I know. And to be honest, she doesn’t seem the least bit interested,” Rich stated with a wounded look on his face. “I talked to her for a bit yesterday, just to get to know her a little, and, man, she wasn’t giving me the time of day. It was like pulling teeth trying to get her to open up about herself. Usually girls like to spill everything, but not this girl. Maybe that’s what I like about her.”

“Just be careful, man. Kent already tried to warn you off. I know you’re always up for a challenge, but you may want to let this one go.”

Rich shrugged, then gave Colin a cocky grin. “Look who’s passing out dating advice. One night with Bree and you’re an expert.”

Colin chuckled and punched him good-naturedly on the arm. “Get to work.”

Chapter Sixteen

Briana hadn't had an opportunity to speak with Kara since the party at Rich's house. She was dying to know what had happened between her and Pete. But Kara wasn't home, so Briana went into work early, hoping to catch her before their shift started.

When she walked into the back room, she stopped dead in her tracks.

Kara and Pete sat at the break room table. Kara was sitting in his lap and they were kissing each other heatedly.

Briana cleared her throat, which caused them to jump apart. Kara caught herself before she fell to the floor, giggling. Pete's fair skin colored instantly.

"What's going on?" Briana asked.

"Shh." Kara responded, holding a finger to her lips. "I don't want Pam coming back here."

"Why not? What's going on?"

Pete stood up and headed towards the door. "I'll leave you two alone so you can talk."

He winked at Kara and walked out. Briana started out after him, then turned to Kara, who was smiling wider than she'd ever seen.

"Did I just enter the Twilight Zone?" Briana quipped, which caused Kara to giggle again.

"OMG, Bree things are totally crazy."

Briana had never seen Kara look or act this way, like a lovesick girl.

"Are you guys, like, together now?"

Kara sobered a bit and tried to look more serious, but she was so happy that even without the smile, she glowed.

"I'm so sorry about what happened the other day, Bree. I never should have started drinking, I knew we had to work, but one drink led to another and the next thing I knew, that asshole started looking pretty good. I should have listened when you came over and tried to get me to leave with you. I feel so bad about the way he treated you, and the way he treated Pete." She got a dreamy look on her face. "God, Pete. Can you believe the way he stood up for me? I mean, I always knew that he was a great guy and that he was crushing on me, but I've never had anyone do that for me before."

"What happened after I left, Kara?" Briana asked, taking a seat as she spoke, baffled by the look on Kara's face.

"Well, Pete took me back home. I was sorry that he'd gotten hit, but I was pretty pissed that he'd butted in. At least, at the time I was. I yelled at him and told him to mind his own business, that I wasn't his problem. He just watched me with that calm way he has, and let me rant. When I was done, he told me that I was a wonderful person, and that I deserved better than some drunken asshole pawing all over me at a party. That set me off again and I started yelling at him. When I was done he told me that he loved me, that he's loved me for the past year, and that he wants to spend the rest of his life proving to me how amazing I am." Her eyes began to fill as she spoke, and Briana started to get choked up.

"Then what happened?"

“I stopped yelling and started talking. I told him about my father leaving when I was a baby, and my mom blaming me for it. I told him how she’d lock me in a closet so she could go out and hook up with guys. I told him how she told me every day that I was worthless. I laid it all out for him and then explained that I wasn’t good enough for him. He’s a great guy and he deserves better than me.” Kara smiled through her tears. “He got mad and told me that if he ever heard me talk about myself like that again, he’d bend me over his knee. Ha. Then he said that I was exactly who he wanted and needed and that if he needed to, he would remind of that every day. Can you believe it?”

Briana smiled back at her, through tears of her own. “Yes, I believe it. You’re wonderful and Pete is the most amazing guy alive. You both deserve each other and you deserve to be happy.”

They hugged each other and cried softly in each other’s arms. When they pulled back Briana looked at the clock and said, “We’d better get cleaned up and get to work.”

She passed Pam’s office as she walked towards the kitchen, and noticed Pam talking to Nicole.

“Bree,” Pam called out to her.

Briana poked her head into the office. “Hi, Pam. What’s up?”

“Nicole is going to start serving next week. I was wondering if you knew anyone who might be good for the hostess position, before I post it in the paper.”

Briana looked at Nicole and smiled. “Congrats.” Then she turned back to Pam. “I might. I think I saw her in the dining room when I walked in, let me go check and see if she’s still here.”

Walking into the dining room, Briana spotted Roni sitting at the bar eating a salad and headed over to her.

“Hey, Roni, how’s it going?”

Roni looked up from her salad, but when she noticed it was Briana calling her, her face closed up.

“Hi.”

Briana grabbed the stool next to her and said, “Look, I know things between me and Kent are weird right now, but honestly, all we have ever been is friends. I know he’s upset now, but I also know that we’ll work it out, and I don’t want things to be strained between you and me in the meantime. I know we just met and all, but I’d like to think that we’re becoming friends.”

Roni considered this as she looked down at her salad, then looked Briana in the eyes.

“Yeah, he told me that you guys had an understanding and that you were never his girlfriend. But you hurt him. I’ve never seen him this upset over a girl before.”

Briana looked at Roni with regret.

“I’m sad to hear that. I hate to think that Kent is hurt, and that I’m the cause, but I don’t feel that way about him. I just don’t, and I think it would’ve hurt him more in the long run if I hadn’t let him go.” Briana paused for a moment as her words registered. She had to admit, at least to herself, that she finally understood Colin’s reasons for breaking it off with her before he left for college.

Roni nodded. “I get it, and sure, we’re cool. I just have to stick up for my brother, ya know.”

“Of course,” Briana assured her. “Listen, I know you’re here temporarily, but I was wondering if you were interested in getting a job while you’re here.”

“Actually, I’m going to be staying longer than I originally thought, and I’ve been looking for a job and maybe an apartment. I love Kent, but I can’t live with him anymore.”

“We have a hostess position opening up here and Pam, the boss, asked if I knew anyone who would be a good fit. It’s not the best pay, but it’s a job and it’s a good place to start. Kara and Nicole both started as hostesses here. I can take you back to talk to her if you’re interested.”

Roni smiled, her dimple flashing, and Briana had to blink at the brilliance of it. Roni’s beauty would have been intimidating if she wasn’t such a cool girl.

“That sounds great. Are you sure she would want to see me now? Do I look okay?” Roni smoothed her fitted top and pretty grey skirt.

“You look amazing I’ll go back and ask Pam if she’s ready to talk to you now. Oh, and I think Nicole is looking for a roommate, so if you’re looking for a place, you should talk to her.”

“Thanks, I will.” Roni smiled and looked excited about the new developments in her life. Briana couldn’t help but feel happy that she had a part in that.

Chapter Seventeen

Briana received a text from Colin, asking her to come over after work, so she cleaned the kitchen as quickly as she could and texted Colin that she was on her way.

She decided to walk, since it was just down the street, and left her car parked behind the restaurant. When she got about halfway down the street, she noticed Colin waiting in front of the store. He spotted her and started down the street at a jog in her direction.

“Hey,” he said when he got close enough. “I would have come to get you if I’d known you were walking.”

She ran into his arms and laughed when he swung her around. The streets were dark and still, and she heard the strained sounds of her coworkers closing up and leaving for the night.

“It’s such a nice night, I thought I’d enjoy the walk,” she replied. “I appreciate you waiting for me.”

She snuggled her nose into the crook of his neck, then gave him a little nibble.

“Careful,” he joked, “Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

She pulled back and looked at him. “Oh, I plan to finish it.”

He grinned. “Big talk.”

She ran her hands over him, pausing at the denim that strained against her hand. She felt brave in the cover of darkness and stroked him seductively.

His breath caught and he closed his eyes, seeming to enjoy the contrast of the cool wind against his enflamed skin. He groaned softly. Her breathing grew shallow and her body went pliant in his arms. She was getting turned on by giving him pleasure and sensed that he knew it.

“We should go inside,” he whispered in her ear, as he tried to move his body away from her eager hands.

She stepped forward, not willing to let him go that easily. Placing her hands on his hips to hold him in place, she rubbed her body against his as she kissed his bare chest.

“I don’t want to go inside,” she murmured, moving her hands up to stroke his hard nipples.

He shook his head, as though trying to clear it. He grabbed her hands by the wrists and kept them still.

“We can’t have sex on the street,” he said.

“Let’s go behind the store then, Colin.” She said, bringing their hands to her lips and kissing his fingers. “I want you outside.”

Colin looked as though he’d been knocked upside the head. He threw her over his shoulder, then carried her around the corner to where his truck was parked and lowered the tailgate.

He placed her down on the edge, unbuttoning her pants, pulling them swiftly down her legs and throwing them to the ground. Her panties went next.

She grabbed him by the waistband and unzipped his jeans, pushing them down roughly, signaling for him to take them off. Colin needed no such urging and pushed them down his legs.

Briana wanted him so badly that she was losing patience. She scooted up to meet him and put her hand through the flap of his boxer briefs. She pulled his penis out and pressed the tip against her, eager to have him fill her.

“Wait,” he said roughly, coming to his senses long enough to bend down to his jeans and pull out a condom.

She grinned, “You’re optimistic.”

He chuckled as he put on the protection. Once he was ready, he pulled her to him in a passionate kiss. He stroked her lips with his tongue, then bit her gently, before claiming her mouth.

He placed his hands under her bottom as he entered her, and held her in place as he thrust. She held onto his shoulders, kissing, licking, and sucking any part of him that she could reach.

When the pressure began to build, she leaned her upper body back, causing her lower body to press even deeper against him. He thrust faster and she came apart, moaning softly and driving him over the edge with her.

Briana lay back in the bed of the truck, panting, and started to laugh. Colin looked up from where his head rested on her stomach.

“What’s so funny?” he asked with a smile.

“I can’t believe we just did that.”

“I know. Who knew you were such a deviant?”

She slapped him playfully on the back. “Shut up.”

He scooted off of her and pulled his pants up, handing her her clothes. Then they raced up the stairs to his house, laughing at their brazen behavior all the way.

It didn’t take long for them to fall asleep once they made their way to his bed. Briana snuggled into his side and didn’t move all night.

She woke to Colin kissing the tip of her nose, and she smiled up at him, thinking how happy she was in that moment.

“You’re off today, right?” he asked.

“Yes, off today, back on schedule tomorrow,”

“Do you wanna spend the day together?”

“Absolutely.”

He kissed her nose again. “Let me go grab a quick shower, then I’m taking you to breakfast.”

“Sounds good,” she said, stretching languidly and looking up at him with a smile as he watched the sheet slip from her body. “I’ll go make some coffee.”

He growled and lifted the sheet to cover her back up. “It’ll be the quickest shower ever.”

She laughed as he raced out of the room.

Throwing on her clothes from the night before and wandered out in search of coffee.

She’d just hit the brew button when someone started pounding on the door. She heard the water running in the shower, so she went and opened the door.

Standing on the other side was a very tan, very pretty, very annoyed looking girl.

“Is Colin here?” she asked, seeming irritated that Briana answered the door and not Colin.

Briana crossed her arms over her chest and frowned.

“Who are you?” she asked. Not liking the feeling of jealousy that boiled in her gut.

“I’m Shawn. Who’re you?”

“Briana.”

“Oh...figures. I’ve heard about you,” she said with a smirk.

“Funny,” Briana spat back, “I’ve never heard of you.”

“Was that fast enough?” Colin asked as he came out of his room wearing only a pair of unbuttoned shorts.

He stopped in his tracks when he saw who stood at the door. “Shawn, what are you doing here?” he asked, coming up behind Briana and putting his arms around her.

Briana wrapped her arms around his, grateful for his thoughtfulness. He probably knew that she’d be upset, and was showing her and the tanning bed victim at the door, that he was one hundred percent with her.

“I tried emailing you and texting you, but you ignored me. I figured if I showed up in your little town, you’d be forced to deal with me.” Shawn explained.

“We ended it back at school. I ignored you because we have nothing left to say to each other.”

“Maybe you were just busy hooking up with an old flame.” She replied, not hiding her derision as she looked Briana up and down.

“What do you want, Shawn?” Colin asked, his tone conveying his impatience.

Shawn brushed past them and walked into the living room, forcing them to move aside and follow her in. She walked into the kitchen and came back out a few seconds later with a cup of coffee in her hand.

“Make yourself at home,” Briana said sarcastically.

“Thanks, I will.”

“What is this, Shawn?” Colin asked again, running his hands through his still damp hair. “You need to just leave.”

Shawn smiled over the rim of her cup, obviously enjoying the tension she was causing.

“I’m pregnant.”

It was like a bomb had been dropped in the center of the living room. Colin exhaled and crumpled down onto the couch. He looked at Shawn in disbelief.

Briana couldn't think, couldn't process. She went with her first instinct, turning on her heel, and walking out the door.

When she reached the other side, she stopped and leaned back against it. It was silent. Then she heard the faint sounds of Colin and Shawn talking inside.

Shawn was pregnant.

Briana closed her eyes and thought about what this meant. She knew Colin, so she knew that he would do the right thing, which meant he would help Shawn with this baby.

She knew that he had feelings for her, and didn't have feelings for Shawn, so she didn't think that he would offer to marry Shawn, but she supposed there was always that chance.

Could she handle it if he chose to marry Shawn?

Yes, but she really hoped that didn't happen.

Could she handle being with Colin as he went through Shawn's pregnancy, then as he helped raise a child with her, if he didn't marry her?

She thought that she could.

She breathed deeply in and out, trying to clear her head, and calm her shaking body.

She knew that what she and Colin had was special, and she wasn't willing to walk away without letting him know that she was going to stick with him no matter what. She knew what she had to do.

Chapter Eighteen

Colin sat in silence, his head in his hands, trying to make sense out of what Shawn had just said.

“We always used protection,” he said quietly, unable to accept her declaration as the truth. “Are you sure it’s mine?”

“Fuck you,” Shawn replied, finally losing the smirk that had donned her face since her arrival. “You know I never cheated on you, and I haven’t started seeing anyone new... yet.”

“I thought you said you were on the pill, and we used condoms. I just don’t get it.” He hung his head, shaking it as he tried to come to terms with yet another life changing event.

This didn’t have to ruin his plans, he assured himself as it sank in. He could be a coach and help Shawn raise their child. People did it every day.

When he looked up, Shawn was staring at him as she drank her coffee, studying him as if his every thought played across his face.

“All right,” he said loudly, as if speaking at a higher volume would convince him that everything would be okay.

Before he could finish his thought, Briana came storming back in the door. He was surprised at the relief he felt at seeing her. She walked over to him and sat down, putting her arm around his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asked, kissing her lightly on the cheek and brushing her hair back from her face.

She nodded, closing her eyes briefly at his touch.

“I just needed some air,” she explained, giving him a small smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

Colin held her gaze and tried to convey his feelings for her. He hoped that she trusted him enough to understand what he was about to say to Shawn.

Then he looked at Shawn again. She looked very annoyed at having to wait for him to respond to her little bombshell.

“All right,” he began again. “I’ll help you with whatever you need. I’ll be there with you through the pregnancy. I’m sure we can get you a place here if you want to be close until you have the baby. Then I’ll share joint custody with you and help you raise the baby. I’ll help with expenses and be a part of his or her life in every way possible.”

He turned back to Briana, to see if she was freaking out at what he’d just said, but she nodded and held her hand out for him to hold. She squeezed it and relief flooded through him.

She was going to stick with him.

He noticed that Shawn still hadn’t said anything. She was staring at him with her mouth open, as if surprised by what he’d said.

“Have you lost your mind?” she sputtered, putting the coffee cup down with a thud. “You actually think I’m going to keep this baby? You think I’m going to ruin my body for some washed up loser? No. I plan to marry someone who can take me places, and that won’t happen with a snot nosed brat at my hip.”

“What are you talking about, Shawn? Why are you here then?”

“I’m going to have an abortion,” she stated coldly. “I want you to pay for half.”

Colin stood up and faced her, his face turning red with anger. “And that’s it? You tell me that you’re pregnant with my kid, but I don’t get any say in whether it lives or dies?”

“It’s my body, Colin. The decision is mine.”

“Why’d you have to come here then?” he asked, his anger fading to sadness. “Why’d you even tell me about the baby if you never had any intention of keeping it?”

“I thought you should know,” she said smugly. “You’re just as responsible for this happening as I am, so you should pay half.”

Briana couldn’t stay quiet any longer. She stood up and got in Shawn’s face. “So you agree that he is partly responsible for this baby, but you don’t agree that he should have a say in what happens with the baby, is that right?”

“Yup,” Shawn responded. She put her finger in Briana’s face. “You, however, have no say in any of this, so why don’t you sit your ass down?”

“Hey,” Colin exclaimed, stepping in front of Briana to block her. “Don’t talk to her like that. You’re the one who is unwelcome here, so how about you tell me what you want and get out?”

“I made an appointment for next week. I just need you to send your half of the money to this address.” Shawn handed him a business card. “All of the information is on the back.”

“I’ll take care of it. Now please, just go.”

Shawn did as he requested and left as quickly as she’d arrived.

He walked back into his room and lay down on the bed, wondering how he’d ever recover from this latest development in his life.

Chapter Nineteen

Briana followed him and lay down next to him, cradling his body with hers.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He turned to face her, his eyes glistening as he spoke. “I’m not mad at her for her decision. She never wanted to have kids, I get that. But for one moment there, I was a father, and I found the possibility...exciting.”

She pulled his head to her breast and caressed his hair, letting him come to terms with the loss of a precious thing that he’d never really had. She couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened to their relationship if Shawn had been there to tell Colin that she was keeping the baby.

Briana was positive that he would be an amazing father. Although she knew that she wanted to focus on school and wasn’t ready to have a child of her own, she didn’t think that Colin having a child would have effected them negatively.

She had to admit that seeing the way he’d reacted to Shawn’s news had really made her proud, and nothing could have endeared him to her more.

More than she ever had before, she loved the man he was today.

I love Colin, she thought to herself, the smile building until it took over her face.

She continued to play with his hair until he fell in to a light sleep, then hugged him to her and wondered what their future would hold.

When Briana went to work the next evening, she was happy to see Roni and Nicole manning the hostess stand.

“Hey, Roni. It looks like you got the job. Congratulations.”

“Thanks, Bree,” Roni responded with a smile. “I appreciate the hook up. Nicole was just explaining everything to me before she goes to train with Kara. I think this will be fun.”

“Remember you said that in a few weeks, when you want to kill me for getting you into this,” Briana said with a chuckle as she walked towards the back. She noticed Kent sitting at the bar and wondered how long he’d been there. He looked like he was pretty hammered.

She went back to put her things down, and noticed that she had a text from Colin.

“Bree, I know I said this already, but you’re so amazing. It really means a lot that you were there for me yesterday. That was the craziest moment of my life, and you being there made it much more bearable.”

Briana smiled to herself and replied, *“Anytime. Really. I’m happy that I was there. I’ll talk to you after work.”*

She put her phone away and figured that she’d better man up and go out there and talk to Kent. She really did want to remain friends with him. She knew she wouldn’t be able to handle it if he hated her. He just meant too much.

She approached Kent and leaned against the bar next to him. “Hey, Kent,” she said softly. “How’s it going?”

He peered at her with bloodshot eyes. He looked like he hadn’t shaved in over a week, and he may not have showered in just as long.

“Hey, Babe,” he slurred. “You coming back?”

Briana felt sad in the pit of her stomach, unable to believe that he was this affected by her rejection. She knew that he liked her, but thought it was more of a passing fancy.

“No, Kent. I’m sorry. Why don’t you put the drink down and go home and get some rest?”

His face went from hopeful to angry. “How ‘bout you mind your own business?”

Nicole came up and stood in between Briana and Kent. “Is everything okay here, Bree?” she asked, looking pointedly at Kent.

Before Briana could answer, Kent reached up and snagged Nicole by her waist, pulling her into his side and squeezing her tightly.

“See, Bree? I don’t need you, either. There are other girls who are more than happy to take your place.” Kent leaned forward and tried to kiss Nicole, grabbing her bottom and trying to hold her to him.

She smacked him and pulled away. “Stop it, Kent. Don’t act like this,” Nicole pleaded.

“C’mon, Nic, don’tchyawanna hang out with me?” He gave her a bleary smile and tried to give her a pinch.

Her face flashed with hurt and embarrassment before turning to anger. “I’m not going to be one of your rebound girls, Kent.”

Then she turned and stormed off into the back of the restaurant.

Briana looked at Kent, who stared after Nicole with a confused look on his face.

“I wasn’t trying to make her mad,” he said.

Briana turned as Rich walked up beside them.

“Why don’t I give you a ride home, Bro?” he asked Kent, putting his hand on the other man’s shoulder.

Kent looked up at Rich and let him help him up off of the stool. "Hey, Rich. You don't think Nic's mad at me, do ya? I was just messin' around."

Rich grunted under the weight of the larger man and responded, "Nah, man. I'm sure she's okay. Let's get you home."

"Thanks, Richie," Briana said as they walked towards the exit.

"No problem, Bree," Rich responded with a wink.

Roni came up and put her hand on Briana's arm before Briana could walk into the kitchen.

"Don't take it personally, Bree," Roni implored. "It's not just you that has him upset, so please don't feel bad. There's some stuff going on with our parents, and Kent hasn't gotten any of the job offers that he was hoping for...all of that on top of what he sees as your rejection has just become too much for him. He's going to be fine, he always is. He's always been the strong one in our family. He just needs a little time to pull himself together."

"Okay, Roni. Thanks" Briana said, instinctively pulling the other girl in for a quick hug. "Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

"Sure," Roni said with a smile, then went back to the hostess stand to wait for the dinner rush to start.

Briana went back to check on Nicole before getting the kitchen set up the way she liked it. Nicole said that she was fine, that Kent had just surprised her, but Briana could tell by the look on Nicole's face that there was more to it than that. It was obvious that Nicole didn't want to talk about it anymore, so Briana didn't press her.

Once the dinner rush started, she was happy to be in the weeds. With all of the drama going on recently, it was nice to just cook and not have to think about anything..

Kara came in and out with Nicole, explaining the process of putting in the order, checking back on it and sometimes getting the condiments ready. Nicole seemed a little frazzled, but Briana was sure it was just first night jitters.

When it was time for her break, Briana went out on the floor to see how things were going. Roni was working her way through the crowd with a table of four, Kara and Nicole were waiting on a group of rowdy guys, and Briana noticed Rich and Colin sitting at the bar.

She went up behind Rich, wrapped her arms around him and gave him a loud kiss on the cheek.

He turned around with a grin and pulled her onto his lap, kissing her soundly on the mouth.

"Hey," Colin objected. "Get your hands off my girl."

Briana giggled and smacked her lips in an exaggerated way as she kissed Rich back. "Thanks for taking Kent home," she said, turning serious for a moment. "I really appreciate it."

"Sure thing," he replied with a wink, letting her off of his lap and turning to Colin. "*Your* girl?"

Colin looked sheepish for a moment, then pulled Briana over to him and looked into her eyes. "If she'll have me."

She met his lips gently at first, then deepened the kiss before pulling back and smiling brightly. "She'll have you," she replied.

Colin's face broke into a wide grin. He reached over to bump fists with Pete, who watched the whole exchange from behind the bar.

"You hear that, Petey?" Colin sang. "Looks like we've both hit the jackpot in the girlfriend department."

"Better ya'll than me," Rich quipped taking a drink of his two dollar draft.

“You say that now,” Colin laughed, “But just you wait. When the right girl comes along, you’ll be right there with us.”

“Fat chance,” Rich said, but Briana saw him watch Roni’s progress back to the hostess stand through the mirror over the bar.

“Briana, could you please not sit on the customers?” Pam requested as she came through the kitchen door.

Briana giggled and climbed off of Colin’s lap.

“Sorry, Pam. I was just finishing up my break.”

Pam rolled her eyes and told her to get back to work.

“You okay?” Briana whispered to Colin before going back to the kitchen.

He nodded at her and gave her a small smile.

As she went back to work she heard Rich ask, “So, what’s up dude? What did you want to talk to me about?”

She was leaving Colin in good hands with Rich. As much as he loved to joke around and have fun, Rich was the most loyal friend she’d ever known, and she knew without a doubt that he would be there for Colin now.

Chapter Twenty

Briana hung up the phone. Then she started jumping up and down and squealing.

“What?” Kara asked, running out of her bedroom. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” Briana shouted, jumping over to Kara and pulling her in a hug, jostling her around. “Everything is wonderful. I just got off the phone with the culinary school. They accepted my application and want me to start school in the fall.”

She broke apart from Kara and did a booty dance, shaking her butt and circling Kara.

Kara couldn’t help but laugh as she started dancing around the room with her.

“Yay! That’s wonderful.” Kara enthused. She stopped suddenly. “Wait a minute...that means you’re moving to Austin.”

She pouted prettily, which made Briana laugh.

“It’s just to Austin,” Briana assured her. “You’ll come visit me and I’ll come visit you.”

“Promise?”

Briana pulled her into a big hug. “Of course. You know I love you, girl.”

“I love you, too.”

“We still have a couple weeks together. Oh, I’ll have to give Pam notice. I feel bad about that, but she knows this is what I really want to do, so I think she’ll be happy for me.”

“She will be. Don’t worry about that, Bree. Everyone is going to be happy for you. I’m so proud of you for going after what you want.” Kara’s eyes misted over.

“Thanks, Kara. Oh. My. *Gosh*. I have to tell Colin,” Briana said. “I’m going to see if I can catch him at the store. I’ll see you at work, okay?”

“Sure,” Kara laughingly responded to Briana’s retreating back.

Briana parked and ran into the store, looking for Colin through the aisles. She stopped at the counter where Rich was making a shake for a little boy. He looked up at her and she mouthed, *Colin?* He pointed his head toward the back office and she gave him a huge grin before she went through the door to the back.

She found Colin sitting at the desk when she walked in. He was starting at the computer, a notepad in front of him and a pencil in his mouth. His brow was furrowed in thought.

He looked adorable.

She walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around him. He jumped, then smiled and leaned back to nuzzle her neck.

“Well, this is a nice surprise,” he said in between kisses along her jaw.

His hair smelled spicy and delicious. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feel and smell of him.

“I have some good news,” she whispered

He turned in his chair so he could face her. “I’m always ready for good news.”

“I just got off of the phone with the culinary school. I’ve been accepted to start in the fall.” She said it so quickly that by the time she got to the end of the sentence her voice was a few octaves higher than normal.

“That’s awesome,” he replied, pulling her in for a quick kiss on the lips, his pride in her evident on his face. “I knew they’d accept you. It’s so great that your dream is coming true.”

“I’m so glad you think so, ‘cause I’m super excited.” Briana squealed and gave him another quick kiss. “I’m gonna tell Pam tonight. I know it’s too soon to give notice, but I don’t want to keep it a secret. I want to tell *everyone*. And I want her to have a chance to hire someone else that I can train before I go.”

“I’m sure she’s going to be thrilled for you,” he assured her. He held her hands in his, looking up into her beaming face. “I love you, Bree.”

Briana’s mouth formed an O and her expression changed from excitement to surprise, and finally to happiness.

Colin continued talking before she could say anything. “I know now may not be the best time. You’ve just started to trust in me again, and it may seem too soon, but I swear, I’ve never stopped loving you. These last few weeks having you back in my life have been the happiest of my life, and I don’t want another moment to pass without you knowing that.”

Tears began to form in Briana’s eyes. She felt lighter, happier, than she ever had. It seemed like things were finally turning out the way she had always hoped they would.

“But I’m leaving for Austin.”

“That’s okay,” he tried to reassure her. “Austin isn’t that far. We can see each other on weekends and stuff. Don’t worry about that, we’ll work it out.”

She smiled even wider and nodded her head once in affirmation.

“I love you, too.” she exclaimed.

Colin beamed at her, bringing each of her hands to his lips. They heard a throat clear and jumped at the interruption.

"Sorry," Colin's father said gruffly. "I needed to get something off of the desk. I didn't mean to intrude."

"You could never intrude, Mr. Grayson," Briana said as she bounced over to him and gave him a hug. "I have to get to work, anyway." She looked over her shoulder and winked at Colin. "I'll see you later."

Colin's father chuckled and patted her back. "It's good to see you two so happy again."

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and bounded out of the office. She was a little early for her shift, but that gave her time to talk to Pam, so it worked out perfectly.

Just as everyone predicted, Pam was as excited about her attending the school as she was, and she was happy that Briana would be able to train a new short order cook before she left.

When she was in the break room clocking in and putting up her stuff, Kara and Pete came in laughing and holding hands.

"Close your eyes, Bree," Kara instructed. "We have a surprise for you,"

Briana glanced between them with suspicion, but did as she was told.

She heard the sound of shuffling feet and muffled voices and couldn't keep a smile from forming.

"Okay," Kara said loudly. "Open 'em."

Briana opened her eyes and saw every available shift worker piled into their small break room. In the center of the table was a delicious looking chocolate cake that read, "*Congratulations, Bree. We are so proud of you.*"

Make it Last

Briana didn't even attempt to hide the tears that streamed down her face.

"Thanks, guys. This means so much to me."

Everyone took turns giving her hugs and wishing her luck. The people who had to get on the floor got back to work with the promise that cake would be saved for each of them. Everyone else stayed to have a piece.

It was the best cake Briana had ever eaten.

Epilogue

The last couple of weeks before Briana left for Austin flew by. She spent every spare moment with Colin, which only strengthened their relationship.

The day that Shawn texted him to tell him that she had gone through with the abortion was difficult, but they got through it together. Colin was sad at the loss, but admitted that it probably wasn't the best time for him, or them, to start a family. He was adamant that he did want to have kids someday, which made Briana even more excited about their future.

She knew that long distance relationships didn't always work, but she had faith that after all that they had been through, they would find a way to make it work.

She trained the new hire at the restaurant and felt confident that he would work out just fine.

Nicole and Roni found an apartment together and were having fun picking out decorations. The biggest surprise came when Kara revealed that Pete would be taking Briana's place in their apartment.

"I know it sounds crazy. And fast. And crazy," Kara admitted to Briana when she told her. "But he needs a place and I've got a room opening up...it just makes sense. It's not like we're living together...I mean, yes, technically we're living together, but not living together."

Briana chuckled at Kara's rationale and said, "You guys will be great."

It was a sad day for both of them when it was finally time for Briana to leave.

"I'm going to miss you so much, Bree," Kara said between sniffles.

"Me, too," Briana whimpered back.

They hugged, squeezing each other tight. When Colin's truck pulled up, they were still locked in their embrace, not ready to let the other go.

"Hey, ladies, don't cry," Colin said when he got out and started loading Briana's things into the bed of his truck. "Please?"

Briana and Kara broke apart and wiped their faces, then Briana picked up one of her bags and went to put it in the truck. She paused before she lifted it in, looking at Colin in confusion.

"What are all of these other bags?"

Colin and Kara exchanged glances and turned to her with wide grins.

"I got hired on as an Assistant Coach at UT," he said. "I'm going to Austin with you."

Briana dropped her bag with a thud, her mouth wide with shock. The tears once again began to fall down her face.

"Oh. My. God."

She jumped into Colin's arms, wrapping herself around him and screaming in his ear. "I can't believe it."

He laughed as she pulled back and began to cover his face with kisses.

"I love you so much," she exclaimed.

"I love you, too, Bree," he replied. "And I promise that this time, we'll make it last."

Make it Last

Keep reading for an excerpt from the second book
in the Friends & Lovers Trilogy

I Choose You

Available in 2013

Prologue

Nicole knew that she would have to face her parents and let them know that not only had she changed her major, but that she didn't want to marry Jake and start a congregation.

She knew it would be difficult, and that they would be disappointed in her. But before she went to speak with them, she had to face Jake.

She pulled into the parking lot of the city park where they said they'd meet.

Jake was already there. He was sitting on the bench facing the pond, watching the ducks float by.

His light brown hair blew in the soft breeze and his expression was peaceful.

Nicole's stomach clenched at the thought of what she had to do. She knew that she should have broken it off three years ago, but she'd been too afraid.

"Hey, Jake," she said as she neared him.

Jake turned and stood up at the sound of her voice. They were almost the same height, so she could see his eyes light up as she walked up to him.

"Hey, Nicky," he said warmly as he put his arms out, expecting to be greeted with a hug as usual.

She walked into his arms willingly, taking stock of the familiarity of his hold, while breathing in the scent of his familiar cologne.

She knew Jake very well. She'd known him since they were small children, so she knew that he would never forgive her for what she was about to do.

She squeezed him tightly, one last time, before pulling back to look him in the eyes. He looked back at her, confusion spreading across his handsome face.

“What is it?” He could always tell when something was wrong.

“Can we sit?” Nicole asked, gesturing towards bench he’d been sitting on. She had to sit before her knees gave out.

“Okay,” Jake said slowly, as if already dreading what she was going to say next.

“Jake,” She began, clasping her hands nervously in her lap as she forced herself to look at him. “I’m sure you have noticed that I’ve changed over the last few years. Things aren’t the way they were when we began dating. First you went away for school, then I left for school. Since then, most of our relationship has been spent over the phone or on the internet.”

Jake nodded, waiting for her to finish explaining.

Nicole bit her lip nervously, then continued, “Look, I have to admit that I haven’t been honest with you, or my parents for some time now. I changed my major to English. I don’t want to study Youth Ministries and come back here to start a congregation. That was always my parents dream, and yours, not mine.”

Jake looked over her shoulder, processing what she was saying, then looked back at her.

“That’s okay, Nicky. I mean, I’m not happy that you lied, but I’m glad you told me now. You don’t have to run anything that you don’t want to. You can just be my wife. There will be plenty to keep you busy, as a Minister’s wife, even without running Youth Ministries.”

Nicole sighed, a little frustrated that he wasn’t hearing what she was saying.

“No, Jake, you aren’t getting it. I don’t want to live here at all. I don’t want to be a Minister’s wife. I don’t want to be *your* wife.” She stressed, not wanting to hurt him, but wanting him to understand.

Jake’s face fell, hurt and confusion taking over.

“What?” Jake asked, as if unable to believe what she’d just said. “You don’t want to marry me? We have been engaged for three years, and you’ve never had second thoughts about us, at least none you’ve ever shared with me. I don’t understand.”

Jake stood up and walked to the edge of the water. He shoved his hands through his hair, then in his pockets, as if unsure what he should do with them.

The pain on his face tore Nicole apart. She knew that she should have talked to him when she’d first begun to question their betrothal.

“Jake,” She whispered softly as she walked up next to him. “I’m so sorry. I love you and you’re the last person I ever wanted to hurt.”

He turned to her at that, anger flashing in his eyes.

“If you loved me, you wouldn’t be hurting me.”

Nicole felt hot ball of tears begin to form at the back of her throat, and turned to leave before she made matters worse.

“I’m sorry, Jake,” She said again, a little more loudly. “I promise that I’ll stay away and let you live your life. I wish you every happiness.”

When she got to her car, Nicole turned back for one last look at Jake.

He stood in the same spot looking out over the water as his shoulders softly shook with sadness.

Make it Last

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I decided to use a professional cover designer for the first time. I did a lot of research, because I wanted to find a designer that would be the perfect match for me and my work. When I found Stephanie Mooney, I knew she was the one. I hope you love the cover as much as I do. You can see more of Stephanie's work at her website: <http://mooneydesigns.net/>

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who has read, *Make it Last*. I appreciate your support, and I really hope you enjoyed the book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bethany Lopez was born in Detroit, Michigan, and grew up in Michigan and San Antonio, Texas. She went to High School at Dearborn High, in Dearborn, Michigan, which is where she has set her Young Adult series. She is married and has a blended family with five children. She is currently serving in the United States Air Force as a Recruiter in Los Angeles, California. She has always loved to read and write and has seen her dream realized by independently publishing her first novels through Amazon.

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