

NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

SAMANTHA
CHASE

*Can't Help
Falling in Love*



A MAGNOLIA SOUND NOVEL

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Falling in Love

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ONE

“Right there. Oh, that’s the spot.”

“Okay.” Pause. “Am I doing it too hard?”

A moan of pleasure was the first response before, “No. It’s perfect. Just like that.”

Violet Drake wasn’t sure where to look or what to say and was beginning to feel mildly uncomfortable. “Um...”

“Just...a little...more...”

“I’m starting to get a cramp. Maybe I should...”

“Oh, my God! Whew!” With a smile of pure relief, Violet’s best friend Katie turned to her and smiled. “Thank you! You have no idea how much I miss being able to scratch my own back!”

“I’m sure.”

“And seeing my feet.”

Unable to help herself, she laughed. “You’re not that big.”

“Oh, please. I have eyes,” Katie said with a small sigh as she got comfortable on her sofa. “And yesterday, Kira said I looked like one of those big Thanksgiving Day parade balloons.”

For a moment, Violet tried to think of something to say to make her friend feel better. “She’s only four. Maybe it was a compliment.”

The bland look her friend gave her spoke volumes.

Sitting at the other end of the couch, Violet relaxed. “Okay, I’m here, I’m unpacked, and settled in. What can I do to help?”

“Believe me, you’re already doing it.”

“All I’ve done is eat the sandwich you made for me and scratch your back.”

“It’s what Brian would be doing if he was here.”

There was a sadness to Katie’s words and Violet had to remember that she was here for a reason—because Brian was a Marine who was deployed and not going to be home before their baby was born. It was the main topic of conversation during every phone call they’d shared for the last six months, and once Katie started talking about how much she was struggling as the pregnancy progressed, the more Violet realized this was where she needed to be.

“Well,” she said after a minute, “I hope he’d be doing a little more than that for you.” Laughing, she nudged Katie’s foot. “You said married life was so much better than being single, but if all your husband was going to contribute was eating and the occasional back scratch, I’ll gladly stay single, thank you very much.”

Luckily, that made Katie smile. “I just figured I’d spare you the more intimate details of what Brian and I would be doing.”

“And I appreciate it.”

They smiled at one another before Katie reached for Violet’s hand. “You have no idea how much this means to me. I’ve made a lot of friends with military wives, but most of them live closer to the base. I was the one who insisted on moving further away.” She sighed happily. “There was just something about Magnolia Sound that just drew me in.”

“From what I’ve seen so far, it’s a cute town.”

“Oh, it’s more than that. Just wait until I give you the grand tour. There are so many fantastic little shops and restaurants, the beach is amazing, and it just seemed like a great place to raise a family.”

“You’ve made friends here too, though, right?”

“Absolutely. And the fact that I do childcare here in the house has been such a blessing.”

“How many kids do you watch?”

“Total? Four. Three of them are part-time, one is full-time.”

Violet looked around the house as if she might have missed them. “Where are they now?”

“You happened to arrive on a rare day when I only had one kiddo in the morning.” Sighing, she rested her head back against the sofa cushions. “It doesn’t happen often, but only because one family—my full-time one—has a different schedule every week.”

“Well, that’s just crazy. And a little inconsiderate of your time, isn’t it?”

Katie shrugged. “Not really. I get their schedule two weeks in advance, so I always know what to expect.” She paused. “I feel bad how they’re all going to be scrambling once this baby is here.” Rubbing a hand over her swollen belly, she smiled. “But if everything goes smoothly, I’ll just need four weeks before they all come back.”

“Four weeks? Are you crazy? You can’t open your door to all those kids a month after giving birth!”

This time Katie gave her a patient smile. “Vi, trust me. I can. I’ve sat down with all the parents, and we’re going to modify the schedules a bit, but I will be fine. Plus, you’ll be here until Brian gets back, so...”

Inwardly, she sighed. Violet had no problem being here to help her friend and her godchild *and* the new baby, but babysitting for a bunch of strangers’ kids wasn’t something she’d given too much thought to.

And now probably wasn’t the right time to say anything.

Or change her mind.

“What if they all find alternative childcare while you’re on maternity leave and don’t come back?”

Shrugging again, Katie replied, “It’s a possibility, but I’m not overly worried. I don’t really need to work right now; I just happen to enjoy it. You know I went to school for early childhood education and always dreamed of working for a preschool. This was a great way to help Kira socialize and to meet some new friends without overly stressing myself.”

“Still, I’m sure it hasn’t been easy while you’re pregnant.”

“Actually, it’s been a wonderful distraction. I miss Brian so much and I think it would be so much harder for me to cope if I didn’t keep busy.” With a smile, she reached for Violet’s hand and squeezed it. “And now you’re here and everything is going to be even better!”

With a smile of her own, Violet knew there wasn’t anything in the world she wouldn’t do for Katie. They were more than best friends, they were sisters. They had met thanks to the foster care system—both of them had been placed with the Michaels family. Violet had been twelve, Katie was thirteen. A bond had been formed from the moment they met and had yet to be broken.

Getting placed in foster care had been devastating.

Meeting Katie had pretty much saved her life.

The sound of Katie hissing as her hands flew to her belly snapped Violet out of her reverie. “Are you okay?” she asked, mildly panicked.

“Yeah...just...give me a minute.”

There were a dozen questions on the tip of her tongue, but as she watched her friend silently count backward from ten, Violet knew the best thing she could do was stay quiet.

Finally, Katie’s eyes opened, and she smiled. “That’s the third time it’s happened today.”

“The third time *what’s* happened?”

“Contraction. It’s no big deal.”

“Are you sure? Should we call someone? Where’s your doctor’s number? I should have that, right?” Frantically, Violet looked around and

wondered just what she was supposed to do when Katie went into labor.

“Okay, first of all, relax. I’ve got another six weeks to go, so there’s nothing to worry about. There’s a paper on the front of the refrigerator with all the important phone numbers on it. I had to put it up there when Brian’s mom moved here to try to help.”

“When did she move here? You didn’t mention it before.”

Sighing wearily, Katie rubbed her belly again. “Yeah, um...sorry.”

It seemed like an odd statement to make, but Violet figured there was a good reason.

“Two weeks ago, Rose just...showed up on the doorstep. There was a suitcase in her hand and a U-Haul in the driveway.”

“No!”

Nodding, Katie continued. “Oh, yeah. She said she knew I’d tell her not to come, and Brian had already told her not to, but she claimed she just *knew* she was needed here.”

“Wow.”

“I know.”

“So...where is she?”

“Luckily, I was able to convince her to find a place of her own.” Pausing, she rolled her eyes. “It was exhausting.”

“I don’t know. It sounds sweet. Like she’s doing the mom thing and coming to take care of you.”

Shifting, Katie leaned forward slightly. “Normally, I would agree. When Kira was born, Rose came and stayed with us for a month. It was awkward and uncomfortable and...I don’t know. I kind of resented her hovering and not giving me and Brian time to bond as a family.”

“Katie...she’s Brian’s mother and Kira’s her grandchild. Maybe she just...”

“Oh, I didn’t resent her coming and wanting to visit, I resented her staying in our home for a month—five weeks actually—and...” She groaned.

“I know I sound super ungrateful...”

“Just a little.”

“Look, you know me better than anyone, Vi. My mom was a drug addict, and that’s how I ended up in foster care. I always dreamed of having kids of my own and loving them the way I always wanted to be loved.” She sighed. “It was hard to settle in and do all the things I wanted to with someone looking over my shoulder.”

“Okay, I get it.” She squeezed Katie’s hand. “You just need some boundaries.”

“Exactly.”

“Then that’s what we’ll have. You just tell me what it is you want, and I’ll make sure it happens.”

“She’s really not so bad.”

Violet nodded.

“And she did quit her job, sell her house, and move here to be closer to us.”

Another nod.

“Just promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“You’ll help me encourage her to start making friends of her own and going out and socializing.”

“Sure! Maybe I’ll tell her about the single seniors’ cruise I coordinate every year! Do you think she’ll go for it?”

“Only one way to find out, right?”

“And if cruises aren’t her thing, there are definitely other options. Maybe she’d like one of those all-inclusive resort deals in the Caribbean. I’ve yet to find one that I haven’t loved! Or maybe she’s more of a domestic traveler! Plenty of great tour companies—especially here on the East Coast.” She paused and thought for a second. “Does she like to gamble? Do you think she’d be interested in going to Vegas and touring the Grand Canyon?”

You know what, I'll just feel her out and figure out what kind of traveler she is."

Katie smiled brightly at her.

"What? What's that smile about?"

"I just love listening to you talk about your career. It's so obvious how passionate you are about travel and helping people plan their dream vacations. It makes me happy for you. And I realized the name of your company is so perfect for you! I mean...Talk Travel to Me! It's brilliant!"

"Thanks. I never thought it would be my thing, but...I really do love it. And the perk of owning my own travel agency is I can work from anywhere! Lucky for you!"

Standing, Katie turned toward the kitchen. "I'm going to grab something to drink and then go check on Kira. She should be waking up from her nap soon. Can I get you anything?"

"Kate, you don't need to wait on me. I'm supposed to be helping you."

"You're starting to sound like a broken record!" Katie called out from the kitchen. "Why don't you work on setting up your office?"

Standing, Violet stretched. "Sure. Sounds good."

The house wasn't large—three bedrooms, two bathrooms—and the guestroom was the smallest. There was a twin bed, a dresser, and a desk. All the basics. It certainly wasn't going to be overly comfortable, but Violet had certainly lived in worse.

With a shudder, she pushed those negative memories aside and went about getting her temporary office set up.

* * *

"DAMMIT!"

"Problem?"

Hunter Jones stared at the phone in his hand and had the urge to smash it against the firehouse wall. It was the third time this week his ex was jerking around their shared custody agreement of their three-year-old son and he was beyond over it.

“Hunter?”

Oh, right. He wasn’t alone.

Letting out a long breath, he slid his phone back into his pocket. “It’s nothing, Captain,” he said, but even he knew it didn’t sound believable.

“Your ex?”

And apparently, his life had become predictable as well.

Great.

“Uh, yeah. She wants me to pick up Eli from daycare tomorrow, but I’ll be coming off a twenty-four-hour shift so...”

Part of him wished his captain would allow him to switch shifts with one of the other guys, but the guy was a stickler for the rules.

And didn’t believe in giving anyone preferential treatment.

No matter how much seniority they had.

“I’m sure you’ll work it out,” was all his boss said before walking away.

“Yup,” Hunter muttered. “Just like I always do.”

Luckily, things were currently quiet, so he took the opportunity to shoot out a family text to see if anyone was available to help him with his son. It wasn’t something he liked to do—and he didn’t do it often—but sometimes it was necessary.

Unfortunately, it seemed like everyone was busy. His sister Scarlett was currently out of town with her husband and son. His father and grandfather were away on a fishing trip—something he had completely forgotten about. His older brother Dean had a late-afternoon meeting at the Chamber of Commerce, and his younger brother Kyle wouldn’t be done with work in time.

Muttering another curse, Hunter knew he'd just have to tell Melissa no and remind her of how she was the one to set up their schedule and then deal with the hissy fit that was sure to come afterward.

While he was still riled up, he quickly responded to her text and then turned his phone off.

It was fortunate he'd taken care of things while it was quiet because no sooner had he started to relax, the alarm went off. Within minutes he was springing into action and getting his gear on. Their team moved around in a well-choreographed formation that took them from every room in the firehouse and onto the truck without anyone running into anyone else. If there were any time to appreciate it, he'd say it was a thing of beauty, but there was a fire raging at a commercial construction site on the south side of town which required all their attention.

It was crazy, the surge of adrenaline he felt as the truck pulled out of the station. Being a firefighter was something Hunter dreamed about since he was a little boy. The first time his kindergarten class had come to the station on a field trip, he was hooked. At the age of fourteen, he entered the Junior Volunteer Firefighter program and stayed with it through his high school graduation. Then he started college and took his courses to become an EMT. And finally, at the age of twenty, he became a full-time firefighter. It was everything he had ever dreamed it would be.

From his spot on the truck, he watched the town go by and smiled.

This was home.

Magnolia Sound was always where he wanted to be, and the fact that his job was to help protect it filled him with a huge sense of pride. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for the townspeople, and he loved knowing his son was going to grow up here. Although it seriously sucked that while his son was going to grow up in Magnolia Sound, he was going to be growing up as a child of divorce.

Okay, it was a little dramatic to think that way, but there it was. In all the years Hunter had fought for their relationship and envisioned them having the idyllic life he never had growing up, he never thought things would be like this. Melissa had never wanted to have kids, and when she got pregnant with Eli, Hunter just assumed she'd change her mind once she held their baby in her arms.

She hadn't.

And lately, she had been spending less and less time with Eli, which, to him, was worse than spending no time with him. His son was being bounced from house to house—including going to daycare—and Hunter was starting to see how it was having a negative effect on him.

And whatever Melissa's deal was about for tomorrow, it certainly wasn't going to help.

The siren roared all around him, and as they approached the property, Hunter adjusted his helmet and coat and immediately cleared his mind of everything except what they were here to do—put out a fire.

It took three hours to get everything under control before they could return to the firehouse. After a shower and a hot meal, Hunter grabbed all of two hours of sleep before the alarm went off again. This time for a fire down on the beach where some teenagers set up a bonfire that got out of control. This was completely unusual to have two fire events in one night, but...this was his job and he was going to give it everything he had.

They were back in the station in two hours, and after that, the crew went about their usual routine: doing a thorough check of all personal protective gear, which included a turnout jacket, pants, boots, air supply, and own PASS device. Hunter had done it so many times, he didn't even have to think about it. If anything, it was a mindless activity that he found oddly soothing.

Once he was done, he helped check out the fire truck and the equipment to make sure they were ready for the next emergency. When things

remained quiet, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to wash the truck. They were all avoiding the chore everyone seemed to dread—cleaning the station. It was basically a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors to dole out who was going to handle cleaning which area and Hunter was thankful he caught mopping rather than bathroom duty.

No one wanted that.

When his shift was over, all he wanted to do was go home and crawl into bed, and it seemed as if luck was on his side.

He stripped as he walked across his small house and placed his cell phone on the bedside table before he collapsed on the bed. His head hit the pillow, and he was instantly asleep.

The sound of his phone ringing woke him up.

Sitting straight up, it took a moment for him to get his bearings, and he had to wonder who was calling him so soon after he had fallen asleep. But as he reached for his phone, he realized he'd been asleep for over six hours.

"Damn," he murmured, reaching for his phone. Without looking at the name on the screen—mainly because his eyes wouldn't stay open—he hoarsely muttered, "Hello?"

"Hey, Hunter, it's Katie." Usually, Katie had a very cheery voice. She didn't right now.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Hey, Katie. What's up?"

"Um...listen, I don't mean to sound bitchy, but...did you lose track of time?"

Raking a hand through his hair, he sat straight up. "Excuse me?"

"You were supposed to pick up Eli. I don't normally mind if you or Melissa run late, but I can't get her on the phone, and she was supposed to pick up Eli an hour ago. Then I figured I must have gotten the schedule confused, and it was your turn to pick him up."

Now he was fully awake.

"Wait, are you telling me Melissa didn't pick Eli up?"

She sighed loudly. “Yes! Like I said, normally it’s not a big deal, but I’ve got some things going on and really need you to come and get your son. Please.”

“Is everything okay?” he asked as he climbed from the bed and began to scramble around to find clean clothes.

“It’s fine, but...I’d really appreciate it if you could come and get your son.” Her voice was tight and very out of character for Katie. And that’s when it hit him...

Pregnancy.

Advanced pregnancy.

No doubt she wasn’t feeling well, and his family drama wasn’t helping. Muttering a curse and then a quick apology, he slid on a pair of jeans. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. I promise.”

“Thanks, Hunter.”

“And again, Katie, I’m really sorry. I guess Melissa and I got our signals crossed. It won’t happen again.”

“We’ll see you soon,” she replied before hanging up.

So many thoughts raced through his head as he stumbled around the bedroom, finishing getting dressed. First and foremost was that he was done playing games with Melissa. Not picking up Eli was the final straw. Not long ago, his brother Dean had urged him to get a lawyer and simply get full custody so he could be done with dealing with his ex. He hadn’t wanted to do that to his son.

Now, however, it seemed like there wasn’t a choice.

There was no time to make himself some coffee or even brush his teeth, and that just fueled his anger. Hunter knew he’d have to find a way to make this up to Katie because he couldn’t afford to lose her. If he was going to have sole custody of his son—and there wasn’t a doubt in his mind that he was—then he was definitely going to need to have daycare covered.

As he stormed out the front door and climbed into his truck, he thought about offering to buy Katie and her daughter some takeout, or perhaps he'd pick up flowers or something and bring them the next time he dropped Eli off.

"What the hell was she thinking?" he murmured, thinking of his ex. The only way he was going to know was by calling her himself. Pulling out his phone, he pulled up her number and quickly hit send before he even left the driveway.

"Hey, you've reached Melissa. Leave your name and number and I'll call you back. Bye!"

It took every ounce of self-control not to scream, but what was the point? If she heard him yelling on the message, no doubt she wouldn't call him back. Instead, he took a steadying breath before speaking. "Hey, Mel. It's me. I'm on my way to pick up Eli..."

And his tone was getting a bit more sarcastic.

"Um...and why am I picking up Eli? I told you yesterday I couldn't do it and I thought we agreed. Now Katie's upset and I don't think it's fair to her that she got put in the middle of this." Pausing, he let out a long breath. "Can you please call me back and let me know what's going on? Or...I don't know...I guess we'll stop by your place after we leave Katie's. Maybe you'll be home by then. Talk to you later. Bye."

It was a game to her. He knew that. And yet it still pissed him off.

Katie lived only two miles away and that meant he needed to calm down before he got to her house. She was already upset with him; there was no reason to add to it by showing up at her home with a head full of steam. So he took the remainder of the drive to focus on seeing his son and thinking about how he had tomorrow off so the two of them could go to the park and maybe play ball or perhaps take Eli's bike with them so he could ride on the biking trail.

The image put a smile on his face, and by the time he pulled into Katie's driveway, he felt way more in control of his emotions. As he climbed out of his truck, Hunter decided he'd bring Katie some flowers and cupcakes the next time he dropped Eli off. He knew she had a sweet tooth and was particularly fond of Mrs. Henderson's tuxedo cupcakes with the chocolate ganache in them. It was a good plan and hopefully enough to make her forgive him. He was good friends with her husband and promised to help her out whenever he could. No doubt Brian would give him hell for everything that went down today.

He quickly made a mental note to treat them both to dinner when Brian got back from deployment.

Smiling, he climbed up the front steps and knocked on the door.

"I'll get it!" someone called out, and he wracked his brain to think of who would be here. Brian's mom had moved out last week and...

The door opened, and for a moment he was completely confused. He didn't recognize this woman, and his first instinct was that something had happened to Katie.

"Who are you?" he demanded as he stepped in close, ready to shove her aside to make sure Katie and his son were safe.

Big brown eyes went wide as they stared back at him.

Next came a smug grin followed by total disgust.

She was easily a foot shorter than him and looked like a strong wind could blow her over, and yet she seemed more than ready to go toe-to-toe with him.

Five minutes ago, he would have relished having a heated argument with someone, but something about this woman left him feeling more than a little unsure of himself.

Weird.

"You've got a lot of nerve coming here with all that attitude after what you did," she said, crossing her arms across her chest. "I ought to put in a

call to Child Protective Services! What kind of parent are you?”

And right then and there, Hunter was pretty sure his jaw hit the ground.

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TWO

Violet prided herself on being a friendly, mild-mannered person, but neglectful parents were a definite trigger for her. And after spending the day with that sweet little boy and then having his parents forget about him? Yeah, it was safe to say that she was utterly riled up.

Taking a step toward him, she kept her voice low. “I just want you to know that people like you make me sick. How dare you forget about that little boy in there who...”

It was his turn to step in close.

And tower entirely over her.

“I’m going to stop you before you say something you’ll regret.” His voice was low and deep and somewhat menacing, and it was clear he was angry.

Angry neglectful parents threw her over the edge.

“Oh, you’re going to stop me?” she mocked, her back going ram-rod straight. Not that it did her any good. The guy was so much bigger than her that it was almost comical. “All I’m saying is that poor, innocent child doesn’t deserve to be...”

There was a cry from inside the house before Katie called out, “Is Hunter here?” and before Violet could respond, he pushed past her and into the house. She turned and watched as he scooped Eli up in one arm and

kissed him on the cheek before crouching down in front of the chair where Katie was currently sitting in potential labor.

Great.

Walking into the house, she shut the door but kept her distance—wanting to observe what was happening.

“What’s going on, Miss Katie?” he asked softly. “Someone doing some acrobatics in there?”

Katie chuckled. “He’s trying to kick his way out; I just know it.”

“He? Do we know for sure it’s a he? Could be a little girl in there. You know, a future Rockette or something.”

With her hand rhythmically rubbing her belly, she smiled. “I suppose that’s an option, but this little bean feels way more active than Kira ever was when I was pregnant. I’m thinking boy, and I’m thinking linebacker.”

He laughed. “I’m sure no matter who’s going wild in there, they’re just anxious to come out and meet you.”

“You’re sweet,” Katie said, sighing.

“Okay, so how far apart are the contractions?” he asked.

“There’s no pattern to them. They’re kind of all over the place,” Katie said, her expression slightly pinched. “And some are kind of intense and others, not so much.”

Feeling like she’d heard enough—and seriously, who was this guy to come here and have anything to say? His lack of parental concern had probably caused Katie’s stress and, therefore, the early contractions.

She moved with purpose across the room and crouched down beside her friend. “Do you want me to take you to the hospital? We can call Rose to come over and stay with Kira, this way we can know for sure what’s going on.”

Bad parent guy chose that moment to chime back in. “I really don’t think that’s necessary,” he said calmly. “It sounds like Braxton Hicks.”

“Who the hell is Braxton Hicks?” she demanded. “Is he your doctor? I don’t remember seeing that name on the list on the fridge!”

Rather than answer or even acknowledge her, he kept his attention fully on Katie. “Did you have them with Kira?”

“I did, but I don’t remember them feeling quite like this.”

He nodded. “Have you been drinking enough water?”

“Water?” Violet cried, jumping to her feet. “What does water have to do with labor?”

But no one was listening to her. Katie’s attention was on...wait...what was his name? Harry? Harmon? Gunther? Oh...wait, not Gunther. Hunter. Ugh...

“I don’t think I’ve had my usual amount today. I took Violet out to show her the town. She’s never been to Magnolia Sound before and I wanted to get out for a bit. Since it was only Eli and Kira today and the weather was so nice, we walked down by the park and then went to the beach.”

He gave her a patient smile. “So maybe you just overdid it, huh?”

And then her friend did something she rarely did. She blushed as she admitted, “Now that I’m thinking about it, I probably did. Lately it seems like I get tired a lot easier and yet I don’t try to rest a little more. I know it’s hard to believe, but sometimes I forget I’m eight months pregnant and can’t run a marathon.”

Hunter placed his hand on Katie’s knee. “Maybe you should go and lie down for a little while. On your left side would probably be best.”

“What does the left side have to do with contractions?” Violet asked, none too nicely. “Isn’t she supposed to be comfortable?”

Again, no one was listening to her.

Katie started to stand up, and before Violet could help her, Hunter was already doing it.

While holding a three-year-old in one arm.

He was incredibly gentle and his voice was soft and oddly soothing as he walked Katie back to her bedroom. With nothing else to do, Violet followed.

“You get settled and comfortable and I’ll get you some water. Or would you prefer a cup of hot tea?” he asked.

“Violet?” Katie asked, suddenly remembering she was even there. “Can you please refill my water cup? The big blue one. Thanks!”

Part of her didn’t want to leave the room because...well...it was obvious this guy kind of knew what he was doing and she felt like maybe she should know some stuff too.

“Um...is there anything else you need me to get? Maybe something to eat?”

“Food really wouldn’t be helpful right now,” Hunter replied without looking at her. “We need to make sure she’s hydrated first. So...”

Yeah, she got the message.

With a quiet sigh, she stepped out of the room and found Kira coloring at her kiddie table in the kitchen. She bent down and kissed her on the head as she walked by. “Hey, baby girl. Whatcha coloring?”

“A puppy. Daddy says I can get one when he’s home!” She proudly held up a picture of a large brown...something she supposed could be a dog.

“That is awesome!” she replied as she filled Katie’s jumbo water mug. “Want to help me bring this to your mommy?”

“Yes!” And before Violet knew it, Kira had the cup and was running from the room.

Back in the bedroom, Hunter was now sitting on the corner of the bed with Eli in his lap. He accepted the cup from Kira with a big smile while thanking her profusely for being so helpful.

Kira. Not her.

It would be petty to point that out, so she stayed back and listened to whatever other pearls of wisdom he had to share.

“If you can, just try to relax for maybe thirty minutes,” Hunter was saying. “Drink your water, and if the contractions don’t calm down by then, try a nice warm shower.”

“I know you’re right,” Katie said softly. “I’ve been through this before. I think I was just tired and...” She paused and groaned. “Look, I don’t mean to pry, but...it was a little stressful when Eli started asking...”

Violet knew when to step in. “Hey, Kira, why don’t you and Eli come with me to the kitchen and we can draw some more puppies! What do you say?”

Eli scrambled off Hunter’s lap as he followed Kira from the room. Katie gave her a thankful smile, and Violet took that as her cue to leave.

Fifteen minutes later, Hunter walked into the kitchen and listened intently as Eli told him what he was drawing. Violet knew it was a firetruck but couldn’t figure out why he kept saying “Daddy’s firetruck.”

Hunter turned to her and grinned. “I’m a firefighter.”

And now she felt stupid for not putting two and two together sooner.

“Oh.”

He crossed his arms—which were seriously impressive—across an even more impressive chest as he studied her. She was about to tell him to quit staring when he motioned for her to follow him into the living room.

Which she did.

After a moment, he spoke. “I think you may have gotten the wrong impression of me earlier.” Then he held out his hand to her. “I’m Hunter Jones. Eli’s dad.”

“I figured that last part out,” she said, still not ready to think of him as anything other than a guy who forgot about his kid. But she did shake his hand because she always had manners.

“For the record, I didn’t forget about Eli. It was my ex’s day to pick him up. Had I known she wasn’t, believe me, I would have been here. We argued about it yesterday, and I told her I couldn’t.”

“And she obviously told you she couldn’t,” Violet fired back. “What exactly did you think was going to happen here?”

He raked a hand through his sandy brown hair as he let out a huff of frustration. “I’m not going to get into this with you because, honestly, it’s none of your business. Katie and I are good, and that’s all that matters right now.”

Why argue it? Violet knew the moment he was gone she was going to get all the information from her friend so...

“Okay, then. I guess you’ll be going,” she said smugly.

“You’re not even going to introduce yourself?” he asked, and Violet couldn’t tell if he actually wanted to know or if he was mocking her.

Manners. You have manners.

“I’m Violet Drake. An old friend of Katie’s. I’m going to be staying with her until Brian gets back.”

All he did was nod before walking back to the kitchen. “You ready, little man?”

“Yay!” Eli cried, and all but jumped into Hunter’s arms.

They walked around gathering Eli’s belongings, and once they had them all and were at the door, Hunter turned to her. “Katie should be fine. It sounds like she just overdid it today. But if the contractions become more consistent or get more intense, then you should call her doctor. You shouldn’t need to rush her to the hospital or even call Rose until the doctor says she needs to be seen. No need to get everyone all worked up. I know Katie wasn’t overly thrilled with having her mother-in-law hovering around last week.”

So clearly he knew Katie pretty well.

And had some medical knowledge.

She’d like to add that he was a good dad, but the jury was still out on that one.

At least until she had the chance to get all the details from Katie.

* * *

“OKAY, SO YOU’RE FREAKING OUT.”

“Really? What was your first clue?”

It was after nine, Eli was in bed, and Hunter was on the phone with his brother Dean. He hadn’t wanted to talk to anyone while his son was awake because a three-year-old didn’t need to hear his father saying the long line of hateful words Hunter had used to describe Melissa.

“There’s no need for sarcasm,” Dean replied. “You went to her house?”

“Yeah. Her car wasn’t there, the lights were out, and the doors were locked.”

“How many times have you called her?”

“I lost count.”

“Maybe something happened to her, Hunter. Have you thought of that?”

Letting out a long breath, he slowly sat down on his sofa. “Honestly? No. This sort of thing has been happening more and more lately.” He paused and tried to force himself to calm down. “She texted yesterday telling me I had to pick up Eli, and I said no. I told her it was her day per her rules, and I wasn’t available. I just never thought she’d completely forget about picking him up.”

“Damn. Was he okay when you got to Katie’s?”

“Yeah, he was fine from what I could tell, but...you know he’s quiet even on a good day, so...”

“I’m sorry, Hunter. Really. I know we talked about taking legal action a while ago, but...”

“Oh, I’m way ahead of you. I plan on reaching out to my attorney first thing tomorrow. I’m just...I’m done.”

Dean was quiet for a minute and Hunter knew his big brother well enough to know he was considering his next words carefully. “Okay, I know all of this just happened...”

“But...?”

“But...we all know Melissa wasn’t around much, but she was around enough that it helped with your schedule. Have you thought about how you’re going to continue working if you’re Eli’s primary parent now? I mean, you just got off doing a twenty-four-hour shift. How would you do it without her help?”

“Believe me, I’ve been thinking about it for a long time and I still don’t know.”

“You know we’d all help out where we could. Eli could sleep over here and Courtney and I would fill in where you need us. And I’m sure Scarlett and Mason would do the same, just like Dad and Kyle would. Hell, they would even be able to sleep at your place so Eli could sleep in his own bed and maybe start having more of a feeling of security.”

A lump formed in his throat when he realized just how screwed up things were. It wasn’t like his son was the first kid to bounce around between his parents’ houses, but it definitely wasn’t a life Hunter wanted for him.

“That’s all I want for him,” Hunter said, his voice gruff. “I just honestly don’t know how to make it happen.”

“Have you thought about maybe taking a leave of absence from work?”

“I’m already off tomorrow so I can get things started. And I already put in to take time off when Katie has her baby.” He sighed. “I hate this. I seriously hate this.”

“I know you do. Just know we’re all here for you. Do you want to come for dinner tomorrow night? We’ll invite everyone over so we can brainstorm and work out a possible schedule before you take any time off from work. What do you say?”

“Scarlett and Mason are out of town and I thought Dad and Gramps were too.”

“Oh. Right. Okay, then. Do you have any overnights the rest of the week?”

“No.”

“Okay, then. Let’s plan on everyone coming over on Sunday. I know it’s not going to help you the rest of the week, but don’t hesitate to reach out to Kyle and me at least. Between the two of us, we should be able to help out in a pinch.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it. And I’ll see you Sunday.”

They hung up, and for a few minutes, Hunter didn’t move. The phone was still in his hands, and he knew it was late, but there was no way he was going to sleep until he got some answers.

Or unless he tried one more time tonight to get some.

With a weary sigh, he called Melissa’s number and prayed she’d answer. She didn’t.

He had a feeling she wasn’t even listening to his messages, but he felt better leaving one because it helped him to vent.

“Hey, you’ve reached Melissa. Leave your name and number and I’ll call you back. Bye!”

“You’re going to have to answer me eventually,” he began, but there wasn’t much heat behind his words. “Look, I just need to know where you are and when you’ll be back. This isn’t fair to Eli and it sure as hell isn’t fair to me. He’s here with me, and tomorrow was my scheduled day with him so we’re good there, but I need to know whether or not you’re going to be around Friday for him so...call me. Soon. Bye.”

Tossing the phone aside with disgust, he slumped down on the couch. Who was he kidding? Even if she called him right now and said she’d be back on Friday for Eli, there was no way in hell he’d leave his son with her again. If anything, he wanted to go there and get all of Eli’s clothes and toys

and anything else he may want and just be done with it all. He'd let the lawyers handle the rest. As far as he was concerned, his son only had one parent.

Him.

Unfortunately, he was also a realist and knew he was going to have to have a plan. There was always the possibility of hiring a full-time housekeeper. But as he looked around, he knew it would be weird. He loved his house, but it was small—two bedrooms, one bathroom—and he would need someone to sleepover at least once a week when he worked overnight. There was no way he was going to let a stranger sleep in his bed. His father or brother he didn't mind, but a housekeeper? No way.

Plus, hiring someone meant firing Katie, and he didn't want to do that either. She had been a complete godsend to him when he desperately needed daycare options for Eli that were flexible. When Brian had mentioned how his wife did in-home childcare, it had been a no-brainer.

Although...she was advanced in her pregnancy and was going to need some time off soon, so maybe the timing wasn't quite so bad.

Shaking his head, he stood and walked into the kitchen to get himself something to drink.

And some ibuprofen because his head was pounding.

"It's all too damn much," he muttered.

He walked back into the living room and over to the small desk he kept in the corner. It was where he kept his laptop and decided he'd maybe feel a little more at ease if he made himself a list of things he needed to do tomorrow.

Calling the lawyer was number one. He knew nothing was going to be accomplished and finalized right away, but it was a way to get the ball rolling. After that, he figured he'd start calling Melissa's friends and family to see if any of them had heard from her.

“Probably should have called some of them earlier,” he said with a hint of disgust at himself.

Next, he added going to the park, making lunch, naptime...all the usual stuff he and Eli did together, and then added going to see Katie. Rather than waiting for the next time he dropped his son off there, he figured he should bring her the flowers and cupcakes sooner rather than later. It would also allow him to get her input on how he should move forward with childcare options as a single parent.

God, he hated airing his dirty laundry to everyone.

Like earlier today with Katie’s friend Violet.

The look of pure disgust on her face when he showed up had done something to him. The last thing he wanted was to have people pitying him and judging him and making him feel even worse about the current state of his life.

Although the look Violet had given him was purely judgmental, no pity.

No doubt Katie had told her everything about his situation by now. Not that it was going to make any difference. He had a feeling she would always see him as the guy who forgot about his kid.

And that was the last thing he wanted anyone to think about him.

Ever.

Leaning back in his chair, Hunter wondered how he was going to face her when he went to Katie’s the next day. It was clear she was here in Magnolia Sound for at least a couple of months, and if she was staying with Katie, there was no way he could realistically avoid her.

No matter how badly he wanted to.

Although...

Once he had gotten Katie settled and had found Violet in the kitchen with the kids, he had a chance to really look at her. Dark brown hair and even darker brown eyes, petite and curvy figure...if they had met under any other circumstances, he would have been tempted to flirt a little and offer to

show her around Magnolia Sound himself. There was nothing wrong with initiating a little flirtation and some potentially casual dating, right?

Except, in this case, there was.

Even if she got past seeing him as a neglectful parent, Hunter had a feeling he wasn't going to be able to forget how they met.

Again, none of this mattered. The last thing he had time for in the foreseeable future was dating anyone.

Casually, temporarily, or otherwise.

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THREE

“Okay, Mrs. Williams,” Violet said as she studied her laptop screen. “That’s everything. Your itinerary is all set and I’m emailing it to you right now!”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, Violet! Thank you so much for everything you’ve done. This is going to be the best vacation ever!”

“I’m so excited for you and your family!” Violet gushed as she hit send on the email to Mrs. Williams, which basically said everything Violet just had.

Five times.

Fortunately, the commission on this one last-minute trip was going to make her life a lot easier while she was staying in Magnolia Sound with Katie. Not that she had any financial issues, but the extra money meant she could spend some time visiting with her friend and not be thinking about—or obsessing about—her business.

Standing, she took her headset off and stretched. It didn’t take long to realize someone was here visiting. First, she heard Katie laugh, and then someone else.

A male someone.

She recognized Hunter’s voice immediately and heard him asking Katie how she was feeling and when the contractions had stopped. Fortunately,

they had stopped within an hour of Hunter leaving the night before. The water and lying down really seemed to do the trick.

In the distance, she heard her friend gasp and then laugh while telling Hunter she loved him.

Say what now?

Curious, she left her room and came up short when she found the two of them in the living room and Hunter serving Katie a cupcake.

A chocolate cupcake.

With lots of icing.

Act cool. Don't seem too anxious about asking if there's maybe another one in the box for me...

Katie spotted her first. "Hey! How did your call go? Did she book the trip?"

Smiling, Violet went and casually sat down on the sofa. "She did! For herself and fourteen family members." And yeah, she was feeling pretty good about herself right now. "It's a big two-week thing, staying in three different places—one of them a cruise ship—and, if I do say so myself, it's going to be spectacular!" Hands behind her head, she leaned back and smiled.

And hoped someone would offer her a congratulatory cupcake.

"I'm not really a cruise person," Katie said, "but once the kids are old enough, we will definitely be using you to book us a fantastic Disney vacation."

"Those are my specialty," Violet replied, still smiling. Still waiting on a cupcake.

"So, you're a travel agent?" Hunter asked as he sat on the sofa beside her.

Nodding, she said, "Yes. My agency is called Talk Travel to Me."

"She's amazing," Katie gushed. "Violet helped me and Brian book our honeymoon trip." With her hand over her heart, she went on, "It was the

most incredible experience. We flew to California and drove from San Francisco to Los Angeles on the Pacific Coast Highway. We stopped every night in a different city and experienced some of the best food and most beautiful scenery I've ever seen." Pausing, she smiled at Violet. "You picked the best places. Seriously, I don't think anything could have been better."

"And that's why I love what I do," she replied. "The praise!"

They all laughed along with her, and she thought now—definitely *now*—someone would offer her a damn cupcake.

"You must travel a lot then, huh?" Hunter commented.

"I do. It's much easier to sell a client on a location I've experienced myself. Some places look amazing in pictures, but not so much in person. I think it's important to have first-hand knowledge of the destinations. It puts potential clients at ease when they know I've been there first and can offer recommendations."

He nodded. "How many trips do you go on each year?"

Violet stopped and thought about it. "Hmm...last year I took ten trips. The year before, twelve." She smiled at him. "All the trips are for research purposes, but some are for actual training sessions with the supplier. Both Disney and Universal offer training seminars and hotel tours. I've even been able to tour one of the Disney cruise ships while it was in dock."

He nodded again but didn't comment.

"What's been your favorite trip?" Katie asked, even though they'd had this conversation probably a dozen times before.

"Lake Tahoe. It was just so beautiful. I mean, there seriously wasn't a bad view to be found! I've gone back twice and rented places right on the lake and..." She sighed happily. "It's always perfect."

"If we can get away without kids, I'd love to see it for myself."

"This baby's not even here and you're already planning trips to get away without him? What's that about?" she teased.

“Oh, please. You’ll understand when you have kids.” Katie grinned and turned to Hunter. “Back me up on this, Hunter. Having a child-free weekend is kind of blissful, right?”

His expression turned serious, and he glanced at Violet before he replied. “I wouldn’t know. My current situation doesn’t allow me any time to get away.” He shrugged. “And I’m not a big fan of travel. Everything I need is right here in Magnolia.”

Wow. Talk about a buzzkill...

And rather than debate the perks of travel—with or without kids—Violet decided to change the subject.

“So...cupcakes!” Leaning forward, she opened the lid on the big pink box and peeked inside.

And saw a glorious amount of chocolate icing.

“Oh, you have to try one, Vi,” Katie said as she picked up her own to taste. “Henderson’s Bakery is the best! I swear, this isn’t all baby weight you’re seeing on me. It’s mostly cupcake weight.” She took a bite and hummed happily. “And Hunter knows they’re my weakness.” She grinned at him. “All is forgiven.”

Violet could only assume she was referring to yesterday’s debacle.

After Hunter had left yesterday, Katie had filled her in on all the details. Single dad, nasty breakup with Eli’s mom who—apparently—was the real irresponsible one in the relationship. She bragged on Hunter ad nauseam, and by the time she was done, Violet felt a little guilty about how she’d talked to him.

But how was she to know? When a kid is left behind and is all but crying for his parents, and the one who shows up clearly had been sleeping...it just made sense that he was the bad guy.

Except he wasn’t and now she felt weird about her behavior.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hunter reaching for a napkin before he handed it to her. “This row has all Death by Chocolate. The

name's pretty self-explanatory. The middle row are called Tuxedos. Chocolate cake, vanilla icing, and there's white chocolate ganache in the middle."

"Oh, my..."

"And this last row has one Cookies and Cream, one Red Velvet, and two yellow cake with chocolate icing."

"Wow," she said, her eyes never leaving the box. "They all look amazing."

"Go for the Tuxedos," Katie said around a mouthful of cupcake. "The baby needs all the Death by Chocolate ones."

Laughing, Violet took her suggestion. "Far be it from me to deprive the baby." And with that, she took her first bite of Henderson's Tuxedo cupcake.

And immediately made a very sexual, near orgasmic sound.

"I told you they were good," Katie said with a knowing wink. She was about to say more when her phone rang. "I'll be right back. It's Rose." Awkwardly, she got to her feet before Hunter or Violet could help her and made her way down the hall to her bedroom to talk—effectively leaving them alone.

"So," she began once she finished chewing.

"So," he mimicked, studying his hands.

Violet knew she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't apologize for her behavior the previous day and...well...now seemed like the appropriate time. Reluctantly, she placed the rest of her cupcake on the coffee table and faced him.

"I'm sorry."

His aquamarine eyes went a little wide as he looked at her. "Excuse me?"

"I said, I'm sorry. About yesterday. I made a snap judgment about you without knowing any of the facts, and I was kind of bitchy to you, so..."

yeah.” She let out a long breath and wondered if it would be rude to take another bite of cake before she spoke again.

“I appreciate it, but it really wasn’t necessary,” he said as he went back to studying his hands.

Which—in turn—made *her* study his hands and...wow. They were impressive.

Like the rest of him.

Swallowing hard and forcing herself to look at anything other than his hands, she said, “It really was. I’m not usually like that. I mean, I’m opinionated and not shy, but I usually give people the benefit of the doubt before I verbally attack.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say attack...”

“No. It was an attack. For sure.” Pausing, she figured she’d give him the Reader’s Digest version of herself to make him understand where she was coming from. Shifting, she faced him. “I have a...a thing about bad parenting. I spent a lot of years in foster care and I saw a lot. Too much. And now, when I see parents mistreating their kids and being neglectful, it just...”

If anything, his expression softened slightly. “I get it, and I’m sorry you had to go through that. And for what it’s worth, I feel the same way about bad parenting. I didn’t have it easy growing up either. My mom died when I was eight, and my dad was stuck raising four kids under the age of ten.” He paused and shook his head. “He did the best he could, and he wasn’t abusive or a bad parent, but...we struggled. I swore to myself I would give my kids the life I never had.” Then he let out a mirthless laugh. “And I’m failing miserably.”

Unable to help herself, Violet placed her hand on his arm. “You’re not. You’re really not. Yesterday—from what I could tell—was just a crappy situation. I’m sorry for what you’re going through.”

“Thanks,” he said quietly before his head turned toward hers. “If you don’t mind my asking, how did you end up in foster care?”

It wasn’t something she enjoyed talking about, but considering she was the one who brought it up, Violet figured she owed him an explanation.

“My parents were barely out of high school when my mom got pregnant with me. Their parents begged them to put me up for adoption, but they swore they were in love and ready to get married.” She sighed. “My dad walked out when I was five and my mom started drinking. Heavily. My grandparents—my mom’s folks—stepped in and would take care of me when mom was too hungover to do it, but...by the time I was ten, they were both gone. I don’t even remember my dad’s parents.” She paused and took her hand off of him. “Things got worse once my grandparents weren’t there to help out. My mom would disappear for a day or two at a time and I sort of got used to it.”

She hated the tremble in her voice and reached for the rest of her cupcake before she said any more.

“Violet...”

“She went out one night, got drunk, and got into an accident. She killed three people. And herself.” She shook her head. “I had no time to grieve or to prepare for what was going to happen to me. It was all a blur. One minute I had a home—albeit a crappy one—and the next, I was told to pack up whatever could fit in one suitcase and taken away.”

“Holy shit, Violet. I’m so sorry. I...I can’t even imagine what that must have been like for you.”

She took another bite of cake and nodded.

“No wonder you were pissed at me yesterday.”

* * *

IF ANYONE HAD ASKED him why Violet had such an issue with him, Hunter never would have guessed this was it.

It bothered him.

A lot.

Maybe it was because it was a heartbreaking story and he couldn't imagine anyone doing something like that to their own child.

Or maybe it was because his immediate thought was of how it was something Melissa was capable of.

"Sorry," she said softly, breaking him out of his reverie. "It's not something I talk about often, but I thought it was important for you to hear so you don't think I'm a total bitch."

"I didn't think that, Violet," he replied, but when she looked at him, he knew she didn't believe him. "Okay, maybe I thought it a little bit yesterday."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For admitting it."

It seemed like a weird thing to thank him for, but...whatever. "Can I ask you something, and then I swear we'll change the subject?"

Beside him, she straightened. "Sure."

"Is that how you and Katie met?"

Her eyes went wide. "So...you know about...I mean..."

He held up a hand to stop her. "Yeah. I'm good friends with Brian, and we all hang out together a lot when he's not deployed. When Brian told me about Katie doing childcare and suggested I bring Eli here, it came up."

"Then you know she hasn't had it easy either."

All he could do was nod.

"We've been best friends for fifteen years and..." Pausing, she gave him a weak smile. "We're the only family each other has. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for her."

“It’s great how you’re here with her. Rose moving here seemed like a nice thing to do, but I could tell Katie wasn’t one hundred percent comfortable with her living in the house.”

Violet laughed softly. “Yeah, she told me.”

There were a dozen questions on the tip of his tongue—questions about her life and how she handled all the blows—but now wasn’t the time. Not only because they barely knew each other, and it was safe to say his curiosity was touching on very sensitive subjects, but because his son and Kira were running around.

They sat in companionable silence as the kids came into the room. Kira was carrying a book and Eli was holding onto a stuffed elephant. Hunter watched in amusement as the two of them sat down in the corner of the living room where Katie had set up a reading nook, and Kira proceeded to try to read the book to Eli.

“Okay, that’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen,” Violet whispered beside him. She had moved a little closer—probably so he could hear her—but when her shoulder brushed his, Hunter felt himself stiffen slightly. He forced himself not to move, not to react, but it was harder than he thought.

Glancing back over at the kids, he smiled. It wasn’t often he had the opportunity to watch his son interact with other kids and it was kind of cool.

“If you don’t mind me saying,” Violet began, “Eli’s kind of quiet. Kira’s a total social butterfly and chatterbox. I hope she gives him time to talk.” Then she laughed, and it was a little husky, and Hunter knew he should probably get up and go.

But he didn’t.

Instead, he figured since she had shared something personal with him, he should share a little something with her.

“Yeah, we’ve been a little concerned about Eli,” he began quietly, careful to keep his voice down so his son didn’t hear him. “He was a great baby, super easy going, but as he’s gotten older, I think the tension between

his mom and me just made him withdraw. He doesn't talk a lot, and he's kind of a people-watcher. I'd love to see him be as chatty and as social as Kira." Shaking his head, he continued, "Unfortunately, the way things are right now, I think it's going to get worse before it gets better."

Her hand was back on his arm. "You're doing a good job, Hunter."

The mirthless laugh was out before he could stop it. "That's not what you were saying yesterday."

Groaning, Violet hung her head. "I said I was sorry..."

Without realizing it, he placed his hand over hers. "I know, and I shouldn't have said that. But...you know what I'm saying. It's not easy, and it's all uncharted territory for me. I have no idea how to be the only parent. I mean, Melissa wasn't around much—less and less in the last several months—but she was there enough so I could handle working and taking care of Eli when I was home."

"I know it's none of my business, but...have you talked to her about this?"

Another sharp laugh. Turning his head and finding Violet's face closer than he thought, he said, "Many times. And right now, I don't even know where she is. I left about a hundred messages with her yesterday and she's yet to return one."

"Oh...um...wow. I don't even know what to say to that."

"Join the club."

They fell into a companionable silence again, and Hunter knew he really should get going. He had promised Eli a trip to the park with his bicycle and there were still a lot of calls he needed to make and things to do.

Slowly, he stood and looked toward the hallway Katie had gone down and figured she was still on her call. Beside him, Violet stood as well.

"We need to get going," he said. "Please tell Katie I'll have Eli here tomorrow morning around 7:30."

“Wow, that’s kind of early.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, it’s not great. I have to be at the station by eight, but it’s a normal shift tomorrow, so I’ll be here by five.”

The look on Violet’s face showed how she was dying to make a comment about how it was a long day and probably how it was a crappy way to raise a kid—by paying someone else to do it—and she’d be right. Unfortunately, this was the way things had to be for now.

And the foreseeable future.

Unless some sort of miracle happened, and the universe decided to stop crapping all over him.

Walking over to Eli, he encouraged him to say goodbye to Kira and Violet before scooping him up in his arms. It was crazy how he tended to carry his son, but he felt like they needed that connection sometimes.

Like now.

“Hey, I hope you guys have a good rest of your day,” Violet said brightly. “Any big plans?”

“We’re going to hit the park and ride our bike, right, Buddy?”

Eli nodded.

“That sounds like fun!” she gushed, gently poking Eli’s belly. “You’ll have to tell me about it tomorrow, okay?”

He nodded.

After another round of goodbyes, they were back in the truck and heading toward the park. The entire way there, Hunter would ask questions and his son would give him one or two-word responses. They were going to have to figure out a way to get him to talk more, but right now, he had no idea where to begin other than constantly talking with him.

And let’s face it, having a one-way conversation with a three-year-old was not easy.

But Hunter made it work and tried not to get too discouraged. They had a great time at the park and went food shopping on their way home. Once

there, Hunter put on *Paw Patrol* for his son to watch while he made some calls.

Melissa's parents didn't know where she was and didn't seem overly concerned. They lived in New Mexico now and had minimal contact with her in general. The few friends of hers he reached out to offered no insight either. There was a part of him that began to worry something awful had happened to her, but he refused to let that thought take hold.

He made it through making dinner, bathing Eli, reading him a story, and putting him to bed before he sat down and allowed himself to relax. Sitting in front of the TV, he did his best to get into a few episodes of *Game of Thrones* that he was seriously behind on watching. It was after ten, and he was contemplating going to bed when his phone rang.

Melissa.

He was quick to remind himself to stay calm and not go at her with all the rage he felt. Letting out a long breath, he answered the phone.

"Hey," he said, his voice low and almost deadly calm.

"Hey."

Hunter waited for her to say something—like apologize, explain herself, ask if Eli was okay—but she remained silent.

Guess it's up to me to move this along...

"Where are you?"

She groaned. "Okay, look, let's just start with the fact that I know you're pissed off."

"I'd say that's accurate."

"Yeah, I got that after listening to the six hundred messages you left."

"What did you expect?" he demanded angrily, jumping to his feet. "You deserted Eli, Mel!"

"I told you you had to pick him up!"

"And I told you I couldn't!"

“Well...neither could I!” she countered. “Obviously, you managed to find the time in your precious schedule to get him, so I don’t know what you’re annoyed about. It wasn’t like Katie left him on a street corner someplace.”

“Seriously? That’s not the point! We have a legal agreement, Mel! One that you had drawn up and agreed to, and yet you never freaking stick to it!” He stopped because the agreement was a moot point now. His call to his attorney this morning was going to see to that. “Just...where are you? Will you be around tomorrow?”

“No.”

No surprise there.

“When will you be home?”

She sighed loudly. “Hunter,” she began and then paused. “I’m not coming home.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah, so...I met someone. We’ve been dating for a little while and...I moved to Oregon with him.”

“*Oregon?*” he cried. “You moved across the damn country without telling anyone?” Hunter swore his head was going to explode. He began to pace as he sputtered and tried to get at least one coherent question past his lips, but he couldn’t quite make that happen.

“Hunt, come on. You and I both know things weren’t working. They haven’t for a long time. I told you years ago this wasn’t the life I wanted. I know you thought I’d change my mind, and I also know if I told you I was thinking of moving, you’d hound the crap out of me until you got your way.” Another sigh. “I couldn’t let you have your way on this. I was slowly dying in that town and hell, even I know I was a terrible mother to Eli. He doesn’t deserve that. If I stayed any longer, things were only going to get worse. Is that what you want?”

“None of this is what I want. Not one damn bit of it. What the hell am I supposed to tell Eli when he asks for you? How am I supposed to explain to him his mother cared more about herself than him, huh?”

And for some reason, Violet came to mind, and he realized how eerily similar their lives were before quickly pushing the thought aside.

“You’re a good man, Hunter, and an even better father. You’ll know exactly what to say to him so you won’t hurt him.”

“Be sure about this, Mel. Because if you aren’t coming home, then know I’m going to seek full custody of him. I’ll even file to terminate your parental rights. Is that what you want?”

“I already filed the paperwork myself. You should be getting papers from my lawyer next week.”

The room started to spin, and a pain pierced his heart as he sat down.

This was it.

She wasn’t bluffing.

In all the years they had been together, this had been their MO. They’d fight; they’d yell and scream. Then one of them would offer an ultimatum, and then they’d be okay.

Apparently, not anymore.

“Mel...don’t do this to him. Please.”

And for the first time in all the years they’d known each other, he heard genuine regret in her voice.

“I have to. It’s not fair to him. To any of us. I’m sorry it had to happen this way, I really am. But...this is how it had to be. You and I? We’re too different. You always wanted to live the small town life and settle down with the wife, the kids, the dog, and never see the world. Well, I do! I need to!”

“There’s nothing wrong with what I want!”

Her laugh was sad. “For you, it’s not. But not everyone wants to live that life, Hunter. I’m not belittling you for it; I’m just saying I can’t live like

that.”

Eyes closed, Hunter tried to grasp all that was happening. And even though he knew he shouldn’t be surprised, he was.

“Say something, Hunter. Please.”

His low laugh matched hers. “What would be the point? I think we’ve said it all.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly. “I guess you’re right.”

Later, there would be time to process all of this, but the logical part of his brain kicked in and he knew there were some practical matters to take care of.

“Um...Eli’s stuff. I know I have a lot of his things here, but I’m sure there are things at your place he’d like.”

“Oh, yeah. I left a key for you in the flowerpot on the front porch. You can go in and take whatever you want. I’ve got people coming in to clear the rest out next week, so...seriously, take anything you think you might want.”

“You didn’t take anything with you?”

“Just my clothes and a few personal items. I’m making a fresh start. Reinventing myself.”

It was almost enough to make him sick.

“Look, I need to go,” Melissa said carefully.

“Okay.”

“You’re going to be fine, Hunter. If anything, you’re going to be great. I’ve been holding you back. You and Eli. Go and be happy.”

Emotion he wasn’t expecting had him by the throat and all he could do was nod.

“Take care of yourself, Hunt.”

“You too.” The words were barely audible, and it wasn’t until the call disconnected that he realized tears were streaming down his face.

And he didn’t even try to stop them.

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FOUR

“You are going to *love* Hawaii, Mr. Chen. And your wife is going to be incredibly surprised!”

“Thanks, Violet! We’ll be sure to tag you in our Instagram stories!”

“I’ll be looking for them,” she replied with a smile. “Take care!”

“You too!”

Standing, Violet took off her headset and stretched. Her back was killing her, and she had a bit of a headache, but there was no way she was going to complain to Katie.

Not even to tell her the reason for those ailments was the hard and lumpy bed and the lack of sleep it was causing her.

Why? Because that’s what friends do for each other.

Apparently.

Plus, it had been a few days since the whole Braxton Hicks experience, and Katie still wasn’t feeling like herself. Violet knew next to nothing about pregnancy and chalked it up to her being so close to her due date. She was taking it easy, and right now was taking a nap. Eli and Kira were doing the same.

“Wish I could nap,” she muttered and realized there was something better she could do for herself.

Yoga.

She hadn't so much as given herself a proper stretch or even gone into a downward-facing dog in almost two weeks! It wasn't going to solve the uncomfortable bed problem, but it would certainly get out some of the kinks. Feeling energized, she changed into a pair of yoga pants and a cami and pulled her hair into a ponytail. She didn't have a mat with her, but that wasn't going to stop her. Grabbing her iPod and earbuds, she was ready to go.

Out in the living room, Violet was about to move the coffee table aside, when an even better idea came to her.

The yard.

It was a gorgeous day, the sun was shining, and being only a block from the beach meant the air smelled fantastic. Katie and Brian's yard wasn't overly large, but there was a beautiful grassy area that wasn't currently in the full-sun and she thought it would be the perfect spot to get her yoga on.

Within minutes, she had gone through some basic gentle stretches and felt some of the tension leaving her body. Feeling mildly encouraged, she transitioned into her warrior poses before stretching her hamstrings. Everything began to relax as she found her groove and she made a mental note to make time for this every day.

A half-hour later, she felt like a new woman. Everything was loose, and she gave in to the crazy urge to do something she hadn't done in years.

She did a row of cartwheels across the yard.

And came practically toe-to-toe with Eli after her last one.

"Oh, hey, buddy," she said with a smile, squatting down in front of him. "What are you doing out here? Does Katie know you're up?"

He nodded.

Violet wasn't quite sure she believed him, but Katie came to the sliding back door carrying her laptop. "Brian's surprised us with some FaceTime. Can you keep an eye on Eli for me?"

"Sure! No problem!"

“Thanks!” The door slid shut and Violet stared down at the wide-eyed boy.

“So...you want to play on the swings?”

He shook his head.

O-kay...

Looking around the yard, she spotted a ball. “How about we kick the ball around?”

Another head shake.

Hmm...now what?

“Can you flip?” he asked.

“Flip?”

He nodded. “Like before.”

When did she flip? “Oh! You mean the cartwheel? This?” And she immediately flew into another one and heard him giggle. When she was standing in front of him, he was smiling, and damn if it didn’t make her heart squeeze. He was a fairly solemn kid, so this was a real treat.

Then an idea came to her.

“Want to do some tumbling with me?”

He nodded, and she took him by the hand and led him out onto the grass. For the next few minutes, she showed him how to do a forward roll and a backward one. He listened intently to her instructions and almost seemed like he was studying for a test.

That’s when she realized she had to make this as fun as she could—like a game. Something to help him relax.

“How about this—let’s work on getting our wiggles out, and then we’ll roll across the yard. What do you say? You ready to wiggle and roll?”

“Yeah!” he said, jumping up with excitement, and Violet wished Hunter was here to see this. Maybe this wasn’t out of the ordinary, but she kind of had a feeling it was.

“Okay, then! Let’s...wiggle our hands!” She held her hands out and shook them and smiled when he mimicked her movements. “Now, our arms!” And she flapped them like a bird. “Let’s move those legs!” She jogged in place, and he did the same. “Now, let’s jump up and down!” And so he did. After a minute, she asked, “Are we ready to roll?”

“Yes!” he cried.

Side by side, they got into position. “Ready? Set? And roll!” Violet held back a little so Eli would be in front of her and she heard him squeal with laughter every time he completed a roll. It was a fantastic sound. He beat her to the fence and was cheering her on until she caught up with him. When she did, he asked her to flip again, and so she did.

And again and again per his requests until she was almost dizzy.

The sound of applause is what finally made her stop and turn.

Hunter.

Feeling mildly embarrassed, she fussed with her ponytail as she walked across the yard to where he was standing with Eli. “Uh...hey,” she said with a small smile. “You’re here early, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I had an appointment to go to after lunch and decided just to take a half a day.”

Not sure of what to do or say, she simply nodded in return.

“Daddy, we tumbled!” Eli said excitedly. “And Vi flipped!”

Hunter looked at him in wide-eyed disbelief. “Buddy, you tumbled?” Then he looked at Violet for confirmation. When she nodded, she swore he looked ready to burst with pride.

“I’ll show you!” Eli immediately scrambled away and began doing somersaults across the yard.

“Violet, I...wow. Just wow. I think that’s the most excited I’ve ever heard him. And I mean ever.” He paused and seemed to compose himself. “How did you do this?”

“I honestly don’t know,” she admitted. “I was out here doing some yoga, and then Brian surprised Katie with a FaceTime call, and Eli came out here with me and saw me do a cartwheel. He seemed to be thoroughly entertained by it, so I thought we could sort of roll around. I made a game out of it and he seemed to enjoy it.”

“I’m just...I mean...”

“Daddy! Look at me! Look at me!”

“I am! You’re doing a great job, Eli! That’s amazing!” he called out, and before she knew it, he was hugging her. Tightly. “Thank you,” he murmured against her ear. His body completely enveloped her, and it was all warm and hard and muscly and felt way too good.

Maybe he felt the same way because he wasn’t letting go. If anything, it felt like his arms were slowly tightening.

And damn if she didn’t go up slightly on her tiptoes to try to align their bodies a bit better.

Not that that was going to happen. He easily had eight inches of height on her.

But still, it had been a long time since a man had held her or made her feel this good. A low hum of appreciation was out before she could stop it.

Mortified, she quickly stepped out of his embrace and forced herself to watch Eli, who was now trying to do a cartwheel. “It was nothing,” she said softly. “Really. He’s a great kid, and it was my pleasure to see him look so happy.”

And when she watched him struggling to do a cartwheel, she excused herself and jogged across the yard and coached him through it—all the while feeling utterly self-conscious because Hunter was watching them.

Then Katie and Kira came out, and she found herself dealing with two students.

“I can’t believe you can still do all that!” Katie called out to her.

“It’s just like riding a bike!”

“Somehow, I doubt it!”

Kira caught on a bit faster and was making her way around the yard, but Eli wasn't far behind her, and the first time both his feet got up in the air, he landed and then threw himself into Violet's arms and hugged her tight.

And that's when she knew she was in trouble because both Jones men had hugged her today, and they both had her emotions all over the place.

But for very different reasons.

When the kids ran to play with the ball, Violet walked back over to the deck and groaned.

“Violet was so good she could have gone to the Olympics!” Katie gushed. “You can still see some of her college routines up on YouTube!”

“Kate...why?” she whined. “We swore never to bring those up again.”

Shrugging, her friend didn't look the least bit chastised. “You were the one flipping all over the yard; I just figured the cat was already out of the bag.”

“A couple of cartwheels doesn't equal being on YouTube!”

“Oops.” But again, no remorse.

Damn her.

“For what it's worth,” Hunter chimed in, “I don't ever go on YouTube, so your secret is safe with me.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

“But you really should,” Katie said with a grin. “Seriously, Vi was one of the most talented gymnasts I've ever seen. She would fly across the gym during her floor routine and everyone's jaw would be on the floor because she made it look so easy.”

Hanging her head and covering her face, Violet wished the ground would open up and swallow her. “C'mon, Kate...”

“Fine. I'll change the subject. Since Hunter's early, how about I treat you to dinner at the Sand Bar? Their burgers are legendary.” She nudged

Violet with her elbow. “And I know you happen to have a weakness for quality burgers.”

Slowly, she lifted her head. “And we’re done talking about...you know?”

Katie made a zipping motion across her lips.

“Fine. But only because I feel like I deserve a burger because I’ve been eating healthy all week.”

“Same,” Katie said with a wink. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go and call Rose and see if she’ll stay with Kira so we can have a girl’s night.”

Once she was out of sight, Violet and Hunter shared a look. “Somehow, I think this is more about Katie needing a burger.”

Laughing, Hunter agreed.

* * *

“THIS IS JUST WEIRD. Like...why would someone just leave all their stuff behind like this?”

Hunter had to wonder the same thing.

It was Sunday, and he and his brother Kyle were at Melissa’s place getting Eli’s things before heading over to Dean and Courtney’s for dinner. He had dropped Eli off with them earlier so he could come here and do what he had to do.

“I feel like we’re robbing the place,” Kyle said as he wandered from room to room. “Any minute, I’m expecting the cops to show up.”

“Dramatic much?”

“You know what I’m saying. Although...you have to admit...she was clearly prepared. There’s a stack of boxes with Eli’s name on them, so...”

Yeah. Hunter figured Melissa had been planning this for a while to be this organized. His son’s room had been cleared out—all his toys and clothes

were in boxes. It was the same in the living room where there were two small boxes with random books and family photographs. It was like she didn't take one thing to remind her of the life she was leaving behind.

"Do you want to take any of his furniture?" Kyle called out from Eli's room.

Did he? He had an entire bedroom set at his place, and yet...he felt like he should take it just in case at some point Eli wanted it.

"Uh...yeah. We'll take it and store it in the garage for me to deal with later." Then he looked around the house and considered if there was anything else he should take. This had been the first house he and Melissa had moved into together. The rent was cheap and most of the furniture was second-hand. They had always talked about how they would buy all new stuff when they were a little more settled.

They never got there.

And that's when he knew there wasn't a damn thing he was going to take other than Eli's stuff. There was nothing here he wanted to remember. The house he had purchased on his own had always felt better to him—everything about it. And most of the memories he'd made there had been good ones.

His brother walked by him with an armload of boxes, and Hunter knew he needed to get going with the rest of them so they could get out of here.

And thirty minutes later, when he locked the door and put the key in the flowerpot, he thought good riddance.

He climbed into his truck next to Kyle and sighed.

"I'm not gonna lie to you, that was a little anticlimactic," Kyle was saying as he buckled his seatbelt.

"What were you expecting?"

Shrugging, he replied, "I don't know. Maybe finding 'Screw you, Hunter' painted on the walls in dripping red paint?"

"What is wrong with you? No one does anything like that."

“Oh, please. It happens more than you think.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Luckily, no. Although I’m sure there’s been more than one woman who thought about doing it.”

Hunter fully agreed.

“So, how’s Eli been with all this? Has he been asking for Melissa?”

“Once. Then I told him he was going to be staying with me from now on, and that was it.”

“Again, anticlimactic.”

“Hey, it’s better than the alternative.”

“True.” He paused. “What did I hear him telling Courtney earlier? Something about flipping?”

Smiling, he thought of the day he found Eli and Violet in the yard tumbling.

And honestly, it was a toss-up as to which sight enthralled him more—his son laughing and tumbling around—or Violet doing cartwheels in snug yoga pants and then rolling around in the yard.

And that hug? Yeah, he felt the imprint of her curvy body from his head to his toes.

And wouldn’t mind doing it again.

“Okay, what put that goofy smile on your face? Is it the flipper? Is she hot? Wait! Did Eli mean stripper? Was somebody stripping and not flipping?” Kyle immediately started laughing, apparently cracking himself up. “Nah, you’re way too uptight to bring a stripper around your son, so...”

“Seriously, dude. Grow up.”

“Fine, then explain both the stupid grin and the flipping. Or stripping. Please tell me there was stripping.”

Only in my mind...

So he stuck to the basics. He told his brother all about Violet—from their disastrous first meeting to finding her doing gymnastics in the yard.

What he didn't mention was how he'd checked her out on YouTube and was seriously impressed.

And more than a little turned on.

That bit of information he was keeping to himself because, no doubt, his brother would totally go into creepy stalker mode and look for himself. And that wasn't something he wanted to happen. He had a feeling if Kyle met Violet, he'd be all over her and break into his ultimate flirter mode and... just no. Hunter didn't want to examine why that particular thought bothered him; he just knew it did. His brother could find his own women.

Not that Violet was his, but...

Yeah, okay. Fine. There was an attraction there. He'd been divorced for two years and had gone out on plenty of dates since then, and he knew there was nothing wrong with being interested in a beautiful woman.

And Violet was definitely beautiful—petite, curvy, and thanks to YouTube, he now knew how she looked in a skin-tight leotard and how bendy she was.

He'd be lying if he said that image wasn't burned into his brain.

But...she was Katie's friend who was only in town temporarily to help her out. She clearly had a busy life and traveled a lot so...it was pointless to engage in any kind of flirtation or imagine taking her out and seeing where it could go.

"It's obvious she made an impression on Eli," Kyle was saying. "Hell, I don't think I've ever heard him so chatty!"

"I know. It was...I'm telling you, it was an amazing sight. I walked into the yard and I heard him laughing. Like this honest-to-goodness belly laugh. He was doing somersaults across the yard, and when he saw me, he was grinning from ear to ear." He felt himself getting emotional. Again.

"How long is this girl in town for?"

"Until Brian gets back."

"And when is that?"

“Katie doesn’t have an exact date, but maybe six to eight weeks.”

“Okay, but think of what a great influence this Violet chick can be in that time? And really, what timing!”

“What do you mean?”

“Dude, you can’t be this clueless,” Kyle said with a little disgust. “Melissa leaves, and now there’s Violet!”

“Who is also going to leave,” Hunter reminded him. “If anything, it’s not particularly helpful. Eli will develop a relationship with Violet and then she’ll be gone. And don’t even get me started on what’s going to happen while Katie’s on maternity leave.”

“I thought you put in for personal time off during that time?”

“I did, but I told them I’d be on call if they really need me. Dad said he’d come and stay at the house if I need him...”

“And you know I’ll do it if Dad can’t.”

“Thanks. Scarlett said she’d be willing to watch him too since she works from home. Plus, she said it would be a great way for Eli and Asher to bond.”

“She realizes Asher’s still a baby, right? How much bonding could they do?”

“How the hell should I know? She offered, and I was so relieved that I just let her ramble on.”

“Smart move.”

“Yeah, so...Eli’s going to have his world turned upside down again for the month he doesn’t go to Katie’s.”

“And he doesn’t see Violet.”

“Exactly.”

“And then *you* don’t get to see Violet.”

“I know,” he said miserably.

“Ha! I knew it! I knew it wasn’t all about Eli! You’re into this girl!”

Great.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant...”

“You’re attracted to this woman. What’s the big deal?”

“It’s not a big deal because you’re way off base. I admire her because she did something nice for my son. That’s all. So whatever it is you’re thinking, forget it.”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” Hunter mimicked.

And immediately knew that was all too easy. Kyle was usually like a dog with a bone when he thought he was right. So why did he give up so fast? And did he really want to push his luck and argue it out with him?

Hell. No.

Luckily, they were pulling up to his house and had to unload all the boxes and furniture in the garage so they could meet up with the rest of the family back at Dean’s.

“I think we should put the furniture in the garage and the boxes in my room so I can go through them later and sort it all out. For all I know, there’s broken toys or duplicates of ones he already has here.”

“If you have any duplicates, you should give them to Dad to keep at his place. You know, for when Eli sleeps over and stuff.”

“Wow. Color me impressed,” Hunter said as he climbed down from the truck.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that it was a logical and practical suggestion.”

“I’m not a complete moron, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. But you’re usually a bit of a dufus, so...”

Groaning, Kyle opened the truck hatch and began pulling out parts to Eli’s bed. Hunter grabbed a few of the boxes and carried them into the house. They met back up at the truck and repeated their tasks. On the third trip, they moved the small dresser together, and then they were done.

Hunter locked everything up and met Kyle back in the truck. “What’s Dean making for dinner? Any idea?”

“I think I heard him saying Courtney decided on Italian,” Kyle replied. “Personally, I was hoping for some steaks on the grill, but...I’m just happy I’m not the one cooking.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Hey! I happen to be a decent cook!”

“Sure. If by cooking you mean frozen pizzas or macaroni and cheese.”

Frowning, Kyle came back with, “I happen to be a whiz with the grill. My friends have even called me the grill master!”

“And how many beers did they have before they called you that?” he teased, laughing.

“You’re an ass. Just...shut up and drive.”

“Gladly.” Luckily, Dean lived right up the road so they were there in a matter of minutes. Kyle was out of the truck without a word, and Hunter knew he was going to pout for a little while because he hated to be picked on.

And yet...he made it so easy!

Laughing to himself, Hunter walked into Dean’s house and made his way around saying hello to Dean and his wife Courtney, his sister Scarlett and her husband Mason, his father, and his grandfather. When he turned around, Kyle handed him a beer, and he figured they were all right.

“Hey, everyone,” Kyle called out. “Hunter’s got a crush on a gymnast who’s Katie’s best friend and got Eli talking!” And with a smug grin, he took a pull of his beer while everyone around him started talking at once.

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FIVE

Okay, so if Violet had to pick one thing she had learned while hanging out with a very pregnant woman, it was that living with one was like watching a ticking time bomb. There were little winces and sounds that made her feel like Katie was going to have the baby at any moment. It was utterly nerve-wracking!

It was the end of her second week in Magnolia Sound, and she had to admit, the town was amazing. Every day they went out, and either hung out at the beach or the park or just walked around the downtown area to shop and eat. There was a little home décor shop that she knew she was going to end up spending way too much money in and bringing stuff back to Nashville with her.

But it was the food in this little town that was seriously becoming a problem because she found herself eating way more than she usually did.

And Hunter Jones was partially to blame.

Those damn cupcakes were like crack to her and she found herself at Henderson's Bakery more times than should be allowed.

They had seen each other every day this week, and Violet had made sure she spent time outside with Eli daily so they could continue to work on his tumbling. Not only was he doing great with his balance and coordination, but he was really starting to come out of his shell and talking with her as

much as Kira did! When Hunter showed up each afternoon, she would tell him all the new things Eli had learned, and then Eli would come over and repeat most of what she said before putting on a little performance for his father.

It was the sweetest thing in the world and quite possibly her favorite part of the day.

The kids were napping right now, and Violet had set up her office on the back deck today because it was too lovely to stay inside. Behind her, the glass door slid open, and she turned to see Katie walking out.

“Hey,” she said. “Mind if I interrupt?”

Closing the laptop, Violet nodded. “Not at all. You doing okay?”

With a small groan, Katie sat on the chaise beside her. “I’m good. Just ready to not be pregnant anymore.” She laughed softly. “I can’t wait to hold this baby in my arms and not in my belly.”

All Violet could do was smile and nod because she had a feeling she’d be the same way.

“So listen, I have an awkward request.”

“O-kay...”

“My friend Julie just called and invited Kira and me to a playgroup dinner,” Katie explained. “We’re part of this group of moms and kids and we normally try to get together a couple of times a month and between Rose showing up here and you moving in, I guess it slipped my mind.” She sighed. “Kira really loves going, so I was wondering if you’d mind going solo tonight.”

Stay calm.

Don’t look too excited.

With a serene smile, Violet waved her off. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. I know how social your daughter is and I don’t expect you to entertain me 24/7. Go and have fun!”

“Are you sure? I feel kind of guilty leaving you by yourself...”

“It’s fine, Kate. I promise! You forget I’m used to living alone. It isn’t a big deal.”

“But we were going to go and grab a pizza, remember?”

“And I still can!” she reassured. “Maybe I’ll eat there, or maybe I’ll bring it home...or maybe I’ll say screw it and have ice cream for dinner while I walk along the pier!”

“Well...only if you’re sure...”

Taking one of Katie’s hands in hers, she squeezed it. “I’ll be fine. I promise. Go and have a good time.”

“We’re not leaving right now. Once the kids are up from their naps and Hunter picks up Eli, then we’ll be on our way.”

“Okay, then.” They sat side by side, enjoying the sun, and Violet was feeling incredibly relaxed. “You know, I never saw the appeal of living near the beach, but I’m definitely starting to get it.”

“I know, right? It’s way more crowded right now since it’s the summer and it’s tourist season, but the rest of the year it’s damn-near perfect.” Turning her head, Katie smiled. “Walking on the beach in the fall and winter when you have it basically all to yourself is kind of glorious.”

“I can imagine.”

“I know you’re a bit of a nomad, but would you ever consider moving this way permanently? Or at least semi-permanently?”

With a shrug, Violet replied honestly. “I never really thought about it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m enjoying myself here, but this has been a little like a vacation. My place in Nashville is right in the heart of the city and there’s always so much going on. Plus, most of the time, I’m living out of a suitcase so I don’t pay too much attention to whether or not I want to move.”

“Because you’re essentially always on the move.”

“Exactly.”

“Wow. I don’t know how you do it.” She paused. “I mean...I know why you started traveling, but I never thought you’d make a career out of it. For years you talked about going into advertising and...”

“What can I say? After planning those first few trips, I found I was good at it. Plus, if you think about it, I’m still into advertising. I market and promote not only myself and the agency, but the destinations I recommend to my clients.”

“You know Morgan would have loved working with you,” Katie said quietly after a minute.

“Yeah. I know.” Feeling the first sting of tears, she said, “I have a feeling she would have been more than happy to do nothing but travel the world non-stop; just renting a closet with one of us to keep random stuff.”

“Like her assortment of 80s metal CD’s.”

“And her collection of Minnie Mouse figurines.”

They both went quiet. Violet knew they were both thinking about the friend they’d lost too young. Morgan had rounded out their trio in foster care. They had spent years talking about going to college together, getting an apartment together, and all the places she was going to travel to. Her dream had been to see the world. Her whole life, she’d never left Tennessee. At eighteen, she’d been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. She died less than a year later.

One of the last conversations Violet had with Morgan, she had promised she’d go and visit all the places Morgan never would.

“I’m keeping my promise,” she said softly, and Katie squeezed her hand.

“I know.”

“Mommy! I gotta go pee!” Kira called from inside the house.

Violet jumped up and helped Katie get to her feet. When she was by the door, she turned to Violet and smiled. “Just be sure you remember that it’s

okay if you don't see the whole world, Vi. More than anything, she wanted you to be happy."

She was a little too overcome with emotion to do anything but nod.

Once Katie was out of sight, Violet turned toward the yard and let out a long breath. She wasn't lying when she said she loved what she did. It really was like she'd found her niche.

Did she ever think about doing anything else with her life? Not really.

Did she look at the life Katie had—married to a great guy and having a couple of kids—and feel a little envious? Sometimes.

The thing was, Violet had no idea how to do what Katie did. She didn't have the faith in herself—the confidence—to believe that anyone would want to do the whole happily ever after thing with her.

So travel was something safe for her. It was the perfect excuse to keep her from getting too seriously involved with anyone.

And at the end of the day, there was comfort in knowing she was the one who was leaving and not the one being left behind.

And just as that dark thought was starting to take hold, she heard tiny feet running toward her.

"It's time to flip, Vi!" Eli called out as he leaped into her arms.

Saving her.

* * *

HUNTER PULLED AWAY from his father's house with an enormous amount of guilt.

Not that it was anything new.

Tonight's guilt was because his father and Eli were having a sleepover. It was something they did at least once a month, and typically Hunter had no problems with it. With the way things were currently going, however, he felt guilty for every moment he wasn't with his son.

His father encouraged him to go out with his friends for drinks or to call up a pretty girl—his father’s words, not his—and go out on a date. Sadly, all he wanted to do was grab something to eat, take it home, and crash in front of the TV.

“It’s official. I’m completely lame,” he murmured as he turned onto Main Street. “When grabbing takeout is more appealing than taking out a woman, there’s a serious problem.”

But apparently not enough to make him reconsider his plans.

“Pizza. I want a large pizza with pepperoni, peppers, and mushrooms. And maybe even a beer or two.” Then he had to stop and think if he even had any beer in the house. He didn’t drink when Eli was staying with him, but considering it was now a full-time thing, he figured he’d probably have to stop and pick some up.

Pulling into the parking lot of Michael’s Italian Restaurant, he planned on ordering his pizza and then walking across the lot to the Publix grocery store and grabbing a six-pack of beer. He’d bring whatever was left over to his father’s tomorrow and leave it with him.

Feeling good about having a plan, he parked and climbed from the truck. He waved to Sam Westbrook who had just stepped out of the restaurant with a pizza and then said a quick hello to Mrs. Henderson from the bakery who was also leaving with her dinner. He was about to open the door to Michael’s when someone stepped up beside him.

“Here,” he said, smiling, “I got it.” When he turned, he saw it was Violet. “Oh, hey, Violet! Picking up dinner for Katie?”

She smiled and saw her cheeks flush slightly. “No, just for me. There was some playgroup get-together that she and Kira went to, so I’m on my own tonight.”

They stepped into the restaurant, but neither made their way to the counter to place their orders.

“You didn’t want to go with her?”

Laughing, Violet shook her head. “As much as I love kids, going to a mommy and me thing really didn’t seem like someplace I belonged.”

“I can understand that,” he said, grinning. “Although I bet you could have gotten a whole new group of kids doing cartwheels and somersaults.”

“As fun as that would have been, I’m kind of looking forward to a kid-free night.”

“Yeah, I imagine it’s not easy living in someone else’s house and being surrounded by kids all day—and kind of all night with Kira—when you’re used to being on your own.”

“It hasn’t been bad at all. Although...” She moved in like she had a big secret to tell. “The worst part is the incredibly uncomfortable bed in Katie’s guest room. It’s the worst.” Putting a little more space between them, she laughed.

The image of Violet in bed flashed through his mind—not for the first time if he were honest—but this time, it was a little more vivid.

“Anyway,” she went on, “because of what I do for a living, I’m used to not being in my own space and my own bed, but usually the beds are way more comfortable than this.”

His tongue was completely tied. Why did she have to keep saying bed?

“The day I first starting doing the tumbling with Eli? I had initially gone outside to do yoga so I could stretch and get some of the kinks out of my back.”

She arched her back and moaned for dramatic effect, he was sure, but all it managed to do was add a little more clarity to the scene playing out in his head.

“Instead of getting dinner, I tried to book myself an hour-long massage at the day spa around the corner, but they didn’t have any open appointments.” She sighed. “So I’ll have to settle for pizza and hopefully find a comfortable position to eat it in back at Katie’s.”

An idea came to him.

Leaning in, he asked, “What do you like on your pizza?”

“I love it all,” she admitted. “Okay, wait. That’s not completely true. I don’t like olives or anchovies or pineapple. I mean, I like pineapple, but not on my pizza. I am, however, partial to pepperoni.”

Nodding, he then asked, “Are you a beer drinker?”

Her smile was slow and sweet, and he hoped she realized what he was leading up to.

“I’m not a huge beer drinker, but I happen to enjoy it occasionally—and usually only with pizza.”

“Could I interest you in sharing a pizza with me? And maybe a beer or two?”

People were coming and going all around them, and the noise level was going up, but Hunter knew this was a typical Friday night during peak season. What he wanted to do was invite her back to his place, but he didn’t want to seem forward.

“I think you could,” she said. “But I do have a request.”

It was stupid how happy he felt at that moment. “Name it.”

“Can we get the pizza to go? It’s just so loud in here, and I was really looking forward to a much more relaxing dinner.”

“Violet, you have no idea how alike we think.” Nodding his head toward the counter, he added, “Let’s go order.”

“Great!”

Within minutes he shared his idea of going over to the Publix to grab some beer—which she was entirely on board with—and then suggested they grab some dessert.

“Dessert, huh? Tell me, Hunter, what kind of desserts do you usually go for?”

And if that wasn’t a loaded question, he didn’t know what was.

“Wait, is the bakery still open?” she asked, almost frantically looking around to see if they were anywhere near it.

“Sorry, but no. Henderson’s closes at five. I’m sure we can find something good in the store.”

They walked into the grocery store before Violet stopped and faced him. “No. You’ve completely ruined me for all other cakes. I have found an excuse to go to Henderson’s just about every single day since you brought those cupcakes over.”

“There were a dozen cupcakes in the box. How fast did you guys go through them?”

“Are you forgetting that Katie is extremely pregnant and emotional? Or that Kira likes to lick the icing because that’s her favorite part?” She was smiling and chuckling as she said it, so he knew she wasn’t overly upset.

“The pregnant and emotional, yeah. The Kira thing? That is brand-new information. Remind me to bring her her own box next time.”

They strolled around the store and scanned the bakery without either of them feeling particularly enthused. After grabbing a six-pack, Violet asked, “Where are we planning on taking the pizza to? Katie’s? We can eat out on the deck.”

He thought about it for a minute and decided to be a little bold. “Actually, I was thinking about my place.”

Her eyes went a little wide for just a moment.

“But if you’re not comfortable with that...” he quickly added.

“No, no, it’s fine. Great, actually. I have no idea what time the girls are going to get home and I’m sure they might appreciate not having an audience as Kira gets ready for bed.” She bit her bottom lip and Hunter wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth or if maybe she didn’t want them to be interrupted.

Option number two was what he was sincerely hoping for.

“Okay, then,” she said, walking away from him and toward the frozen food aisle. “I think I know the perfect dessert to have.”

Mutely, he followed and stopped beside her when they were standing in front of a large variety of ice cream.

Would it be way too obvious for him to gush about how ice cream was literally his all-time favorite dessert?

Probably.

“What’s your favorite flavor?” she asked, but her eyes were scanning the selection.

“Mint chocolate chip, all the way,” he said confidently as he reached into the freezer and snagged a pint. “What about you?”

“I prefer cookies and cream but with chocolate ice cream. It’s super hard to find.” She crouched down slightly and then said, “Yes! Found it!” before grabbing a pint of her own. Straightening, she smiled triumphantly. “This is turning out to be an excellent night.”

Figuring he’d go big or go home, he carefully took her hand in his as he balanced the beer and his ice cream in his other hand. “And it’s just getting started.”

Wait, did that sound completely lame? Am I this out of practice? Is she going to regret agreeing to have dinner with me?

“Ooo...I like a confident man,” she said, her voice a little low and husky. “Come on, let’s go check out before our ice cream melts and go grab our pizza.”

They did all of that while talking about the town, some of the places Katie had taken her to, and what she was still hoping to see and do. When they got to Hunter’s truck, he loaded all the food in. “If you want to ride with me, I can bring you back to get your car later.”

She nibbled her lip again. “How far do you live from here?”

“Three minutes away.”

With a knowing smile, she said, “I think I can handle following you then. I’m in the blue Hyundai SUV over there. Give me a minute and then you can lead the way!”

Hunter watched as she jogged over to her car and admired the way her shorts showcased those fantastic legs of hers.

And yeah, he was totally staring at her butt too.

Which was equally phenomenal.

The ride to his house really was only three minutes, and it wasn't until he saw Violet getting out of her car that he started to second-guess himself. This wasn't something he'd ever done—inviting a woman to his house. It was always something that was off-limits, even on the nights Eli wasn't with him. So why now? Why her?

Are you insane, dude? Look at her!

Okay, yeah. Even when she was telling him off the first time they met, he was attracted to her.

The circumstances...everything about them...wasn't the norm. She was only here in Magnolia for a short amount of time, living with a friend, his life was pretty much in a perpetual state of chaos so...

If for right now—tonight—he was a little impulsive? So what? For all he knew, they were just two friends hanging out and having some pizza rather than eating alone. Why was he making more out of it than he should?

“Wow,” she said as she walked over to him. “Your house is exactly what I envisioned it would be—all Craftsman bungalow and beachy!”

“Uh...thanks,” he said, unsure what the proper response was to her observation.

Together they grabbed the food and went into the house. Hunter was thankful he wasn't a slob and didn't have to worry about what she was going to see when she came inside.

It wasn't until the ice cream was in the freezer, the beer in the fridge, and the pizza on the table that Violet spoke. “Oh, Hunter, this house is perfect,” she said with a little awe as she walked around from room to room without even asking if he'd mind.

The house wasn't huge by any stretch of the imagination, but it had a fairly open floor plan—living room, dining room, and kitchen all in one big area and then a hallway with his bedroom at one end and Eli's at the other. And with the help of his brothers and a bunch of his firefighter buddies, he'd done the entire interior over from top to bottom within the first three months of buying it.

Why? Because he liked things orderly and couldn't live in chaos. He needed the house to be a clean and stable place for him and his son.

"I love how you kept so much of the original charm even though it's all been updated." Looking over her shoulder, she smiled at him. "I have a feeling you did a lot of this yourself, right?"

Nodding, he walked over and followed her to Eli's room. "He wanted boats, so we went with a nautical theme in here."

"Oh, my goodness! Did you build the boat bed yourself?"

"Yeah. My sister Scarlett saw a picture on Pinterest and helped me build it."

Her eyes went wide. "Really? Your sister helped you build this?"

That made him laugh because most people didn't know just how crafty and hands-on his baby sister was. "C'mon. Our pizza's getting cold. I'll tell you all about the amazing dog houses Scarlett builds. But when you meet her, you can't let on that you know. She's weird about it."

"Um...okay."

Together they sat at his dining room table and Violet served their pizza while Hunter opened their beers. "It's sort of this secret hobby of hers. She designs and builds dog houses and donates them to one of the local animal shelters."

"That is incredibly sweet! Why doesn't she want anyone to know about it?"

"Scarlett's a bit of a badass—or at least she thinks she is. She thinks people will make fun of her or something. It's crazy and more people know

about it than she realizes, but...I'm not going to tell her that." He took a bite of his dinner and watched her do the same.

After a moment, she asked, "How many siblings do you have?"

"Three. Scarlett's the baby of the family and the only girl. My brother Dean is older than me and my brother Kyle is younger. So I'm kind of the middle child."

She nodded. "It must have been nice to grow up with siblings." Then she stopped and shook her head. "Sorry. Not trying to turn this into some depressing conversation. I have Katie and I had Morgan so...I did have siblings. Just a little later in life."

Something in her wording seemed off, but he decided to hold off on asking.

The rest of the meal was spent talking about favorite things—music, movies, food, hobbies. She asked him about being a firefighter, he asked her about being a travel agent, and before he knew it, all the pizza was gone.

"I'd like to pretend that I don't normally eat this much, but I'd be lying," Violet teased as they cleaned up their mess. "And pizza is one of my weaknesses, so...please don't judge."

"Are you kidding me? I'm just glad you didn't hold back because I probably would have eaten the entire thing myself."

Violet's phone beeped with an incoming text and she excused herself to go and read it.

"It's just Katie," she offered. "She's curious about what I did for dinner." She began typing. "I hope you don't mind that I told her I'm here with you."

Mind? Why would he mind?

"Of course not."

Her low snort of laughter came next.

"What? What's so funny?"

Looking up at him, she held up her phone. “She wants to know if she should wait up for me.”

Swallowing hard, he slowly walked over to her until he could read the message himself. They were toe to toe and he could feel the warmth of her body as his hands twitched to touch her. Her dark eyes met his as a mischievous grin crossed her lips.

“Would it be too presumptuous for me to tell her no?”

“Actually, I was hoping that’s what you were going to tell her.”

Violet looked down at her phone and quickly typed out her response before putting it away and giving Hunter her full attention.

“Done.”

And yeah. So was he. For weeks she was slowly driving him crazy and now that she was here and they were alone—and clearly on the same page—he didn’t see the need to wait any longer.

Lowering his head, he gently touched his lips to hers. For a second, she didn’t move or respond, but then she stepped in closer, smoothed her hands up from his abs and over his chest, and fully pressed up against him, and he was lost.

They kissed like they had all night—which they did. It was a little slow and sensual, the kind of perfect first kiss where you were trying to learn something about one another. His hands reached up and caressed her cheeks and he felt her go up on her tiptoes to get her arms more comfortably around him. And as much as he hated to break the kiss, he knew they’d be much more comfortable on the couch.

Slowly, he broke the kiss. “I think we’d be more comfortable...”

“The couch,” she said breathlessly, placing light kisses along his jaw. “Yes, please.”

He fought the urge to pick her up and carry her there, but it took less than a dozen steps to get themselves settled. Pulling her in close, Hunter

was surprised when she climbed into his lap and straddled him. With her forehead rested against his, he said, "This is much better."

Mimicking his words from earlier, she said, "And we're just getting started," before capturing his lips and kissing him senseless.

He lost track of time because he was consumed by this woman. His hands roamed and caressed and touched every inch of her that he could. She purred and hummed and moved against him in a way that had his mind screaming at him how his bedroom was only a few steps away. The thought of stretching out on his bed with Violet was almost more than he could take.

Unfortunately, his conscience got the better of him.

Hunter trailed a line of kisses that became lighter and lighter down her throat until he stopped and lifted his head. Slightly breathless, he placed one last one on her lips. "As much as I'm enjoying this, I think maybe we need to stop."

"Stop?"

Nodding, he gently lifted her off his lap before he stood up. "How about that ice cream?" And he walked away before she had a chance to answer. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Violet jump up from the sofa and follow him into the kitchen. "Do you prefer a teaspoon or tablespoon?" And he didn't even look at her as he asked it.

"Um...what's going on?" she asked. Her hand reached out and touched his arm, forcing him to face her. "Hunter, talk to me. Did I do something wrong?" Her dark eyes were soft and pleading.

"No, of course not. Why would you even think that?"

"Um...maybe because I thought we were on the same page in there and...and...it seemed like we were really enjoying ourselves and you just got up and walked away like it was no big deal. So...again, what did I do wrong?"

"You didn't do anything wrong, Violet. I just felt like...I don't know...it would have been easy to keep going." He moved in close and put his hands

on her hips. “You’re an incredibly sexy woman, and believe me, I’d like nothing more than just to take you to bed and make love to you all night long.”

Nodding, she said, “Yeah, that’s what I thought was going to happen. I thought...”

Placing one finger over her lips, he stopped her. “That’s not the right thing to do,” he said and hoped she realized how hard it was for him to admit that. “This wasn’t even like a...a real date. You’re a friend of Katie’s and...well...my life is kind of a shit show right now. I don’t think jumping into bed with you...the timing just sucks, okay?”

“Hunter,” she countered. “I get what you’re saying but...I’m only going to be here for another six weeks tops. I’m not asking for some big commitment from you. I know you’ve got your hands full with Eli and your job and...I don’t know. I just really enjoyed spending time with you—sex or no sex.”

He seriously felt himself blush.

“But for the record, I’d be totally on board with the sex.” She winked playfully at him. “But, I’m also on board with slowing things down and getting to know you a little more.” She paused. “And maybe watching some TV while we eat ice cream.” Reaching past him, she grabbed her pint and a spoon. “What do you say?”

“I said it before and I’ll say it again. You have no idea how alike we think.” Hand in hand, they went back out to the living room and watched a couple of re-runs of *Friends*.

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SIX

As far as first dates went, Violet would say with great certainty that hers and Hunter's had topped them all. Hunter Jones was sweet and sexy and funny; he was a great conversationalist, and he kissed better than any man she'd ever kissed in her life.

However, finding time for a second date was proving to be a little more complicated than she imagined. She knew dating a single dad wasn't going to be easy. Most of the time they would have more like family dates and do things with Eli like picnics and movie nights. Once Eli was in bed, however, she and Hunter would make out like two horny teenagers trying not to get caught. What she wouldn't give for a full night alone with him!

"Ugh...you're doing it again."

Frowning, Violet looked up to find Katie grinning at her. "Doing what?"

"Thinking about Hunter."

Her eyes went wide, but...why deny it? "How do you do that? How can you possibly know what I'm thinking when I'm sitting here pretending to work?"

"Because I've known you for a long time. You've got this sappy little smile on your face, and every once in a while, you just sigh. It's not rocket science, just good old-fashioned observation skills." They were out on the

deck, and the kids were napping. Katie sat down beside her. “What can I do to help?”

“Believe me, I wish there was something you could do. It’s just bad timing. He’s got a fairly demanding job and his son is his top priority. There’s no way I’m going to mess with that and put any more pressure on him than he’s already dealing with. That would just be cruel.”

“Yeah, I get that. But I can see it on his face that he’s just as frustrated as you.”

That was new information.

“Really? What do you mean?”

“Vi, the two of you sneak off when he gets here and do some serious making out. You walk back in all breathless and glowy, and he’s got a look that says he’d like to sling you over his shoulder and take you home with him.”

“Well...he is a firefighter, so if anyone can sling me over their shoulder, it’s Hunter.”

“Mmm...now there’s an image.”

“Eeww. Stop it. You’re not allowed to imagine that. Like ever.” She shuddered.

“Please, I’m living vicariously through you. My husband is thousands of miles away, I haven’t seen him in over six months, and it would take a team of firefighters to haul me over their shoulder because I’m so big right now. So humor me.”

“When you put it like that...”

“Have you and Hunter talked about it? You know, going out on a real date? It’s been two weeks since you went over to his place for pizza, and you see one another almost every day, so...you’ve clearly gotten deep into the getting-to-know-you phase. Maybe talk to him when he gets here today about getting a babysitter or taking a day off so the two of you can have some alone time during the day when Eli’s here with me.”

Violet glanced over at her friend. “Are you trying to get rid of me or something? Oh, my God! Am I like Rose? Are you going to suggest I find someplace else to stay?”

Throwing her head back, Katie laughed hysterically. “Trust me, you are *not* like Rose! And believe me, I love her, I just don’t want to live with her.”

“Which is kind of what I think you’re trying—nicely—to say about me!”

It took Katie a moment to stop laughing, but when she did, she smiled patiently at Violet. “Sweetie, you and I spent many years living together, and I have loved having you here. But I want you to have a social life too. You don’t need to be hovering over me all day, every day. And it’s so obvious you and Hunter are into each other and I was just encouraging you to be bold and tell him what you want!”

“You know I don’t have a problem with that,” she began hesitantly.

“Then what is it?”

Sighing, she shifted in her seat to get more comfortable. “Hunter’s... different.” She paused to figure out how to say what she wanted to say. “He’s the first guy I’ve ever dated—and I’m using the term loosely—who has a kid. You know I don’t ever get seriously involved with men, and he’s not looking to get serious with anyone right now either, but...”

“Maybe you’re feeling a little more than casual about him?”

Groaning, she nodded. “It’s stupid, right? I mean...it’s just like a lust fog. Or maybe because he’s slightly unattainable because of Eli and it’s making me want him more? You know, like we always want the thing we can’t have?”

No response.

“C’mon! You know what I’m talking about! It’s like forbidden fruit!”

“Hunter’s not forbidden, Vi. He’s just not readily available, that’s all. And I think you’re making up excuses rather than dealing with the fact that you might actually like him.”

“Of course I like him! He’s a great guy! But I don’t...you know...*like* him, like him. No, it’s the lust fog or sex fog or...lack of sex fog.” Groaning again, she straightened and looked at her friend's slightly amused face. “Once we have a real date...”

“You mean sleep together.”

“Tomato-*tomahto*,” she corrected. “Either way, once we have a *real* date, I’m sure my logical side will return.”

“I’m guessing it will be happening soon.”

Violet shrugged and then froze. “Wait...why do you say that? Do you know something? Did Hunter talk to you about this?” Her hands flew up to cover her face. “Oh, my God! I’m beyond mortified!”

Katie smacked her hands away and gave her a stern look. “Would you relax? Geez! You and I have talked about boys since the day we met! I know about every guy you’ve ever crushed on, kissed, and slept with so quit pulling the embarrassment card.”

“Fine, but why did you say it’ll be happening soon?”

“Because it just makes sense! We both know it’s something you’re both looking to do, and I can’t imagine this getting dragged out much longer. You’re both too old for those ridiculous make-out sessions in my yard. I was tempted to turn the hose on the two of you more than once.”

“Thank you for showing some self-control.”

“I can say the same to you.”

“Mommy!” Kira called out, and Katie slowly got to her feet. “It feels like nap time is getting shorter and shorter.”

“Need a hand?”

“No. I’m good. But they’ll be heading out here in a little while to flip around with you.” She winked. “And can I just say how much I appreciate you doing that? The kids have been loving it, and Kira gets so worn out that she’s sleeping better at night.”

“Glad I can help.”

Thirty minutes later, Violet had two wide-eyed kids staring at her, begging her to do her flips. Yesterday she had done a few back handsprings and then front ones, and they had been beyond amazed. Personally, she had been shocked she could still do them, and last night, her body had reminded her how she really shouldn't do too many of them. So she had to think quickly about showing them something a little less...flippy.

"How about we work on headstands today?" she suggested, and even though the kids really had no idea what she was talking about, they jumped up and down excitedly.

Gotta love their enthusiasm...

So for an hour, Violet crouched down and helped Kira and Eli try to find their balance. Luckily, every time they fell over, they laughed about it, and all in all seemed to be having fun, but at the end of the hour, their attention span was gone because they both deserted her for the jungle gym.

Standing, she brushed the dirt off of her butt and almost jumped out of her skin when Hunter's hands playfully grabbed her ass.

"Oh, my God!" she quietly hissed. "What are you doing?"

"Just being helpful," he teased and gave her a quick kiss.

She desperately wanted to sneak off and kiss him properly, but she thought of her earlier conversation with Kate and figured it was now or never.

"So," she began, hoping she sounded casual. "I was wondering if there was any chance of us going out just the two of us this weekend."

And then she held her breath and waited.

"Funny you should mention that," he replied, moving in closer. "Courtney and Dean have asked if Eli could sleepover tonight."

She knew her eyes went wide. "Really?"

Nodding, he said, "Really."

"Wait, did they ask you or did you ask them?"

"What difference does it make?"

Her conscience hit her hard. “Because, Hunter...Eli’s your son and I don’t want to be the reason why he’s getting sent to sleep at some stranger’s house.”

“Okay, for starters, Dean’s my brother. Eli’s his nephew. No strangers involved. Secondly, he and Courtney are getting married next month and already talking about kids and want him there to practice.” Rolling his eyes, he added, “It’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard, but considering it gives us the entire night to ourselves, I wasn’t going to complain or question it.”

And basically, neither was she.

“Alrighty, then. What’s the plan?”

Closing the distance between them, his breath was warm against her ear. “Pack an overnight bag and be at my place at seven. I’ll handle the rest.” His tongue traced the shell of her ear and she shivered.

Swallowing hard, Violet forced herself to pull back slightly. “I don’t even know what to say. I was hoping we’d have this opportunity, but now that it’s happening...”

His finger was back over her lips. “No big plans, Violet. Just us, all alone. If you’d rather go out to dinner or a movie or...”

Gently pushing his hand away, she mimicked his pose by putting her finger over his lips. “There’s nothing else I’d rather do and anyplace else I want to go. If anything, I want it to be seven o’clock right now.”

“It will be. Soon enough.” He kissed her soundly before turning to go and get Eli.

* * *

COOKING WAS something Hunter did out of necessity. He had a few dishes that he made well, but for the most part, he stuck to the basics. For tonight, he opted to play it safe and ordered Chinese takeout. It had taken just a few minutes to grill Katie on all the things Violet liked, and then he

decided to be bold and order for her so the food was here and waiting when she arrived. And glancing at his watch, he saw that would be any minute.

Glancing around the house, he made sure everything was neat and clean. All Eli's toys were put away; every surface had been dusted, there were clean sheets on his bed and fresh towels in the bathroom.

When the doorbell rang, he had to remind himself not to pounce.

They had all night.

There was no reason to hurry.

But when he opened the door, his little pep talk went right out the window.

Standing on his front porch in a baby blue halter dress and carrying a small weekender bag, stood Violet. Her dark hair was loose around her shoulders and she was all curvy and tanned and...perfect.

Wordlessly, Hunter took her by the hand and led her into the house. He took her bag from her and together they carried it into his bedroom. Once he placed the bag on the floor next to the bed, he realized how this all looked.

"Um...I was really just putting the bag down," he began nervously. "I seriously wasn't implying that this is where our date is starting or...or..."

Violet moved in close, got up on her tip-toes, and silenced him with a kiss. When she moved away, she gave him a flirty smile. "Good to know. But for the record, I would have been more than okay if this was where our date started."

Damn.

He looked at the bed and then back at Violet before he shook his head. "Come on. I got us Chinese food, and it's all set up on the table waiting to be served." With her hand in his, he led her to the dining room, held out her chair for her as she sat, and felt himself start to relax.

"Ooo...it looks like you got us quite the selection here." He watched as she looked at all the containers and then smiled up at him as he poured her a

glass of wine.

“I cheated a bit and asked Katie about what you liked.”

“A man with a plan,” she teased, reaching for her glass. “I love that.”

“Well, I do what I can,” he added as he sat.

They made their plates, and Hunter realized he might have gone a little overboard. There was shrimp with lobster sauce, beef and broccoli, sweet and sour chicken, egg rolls, fried rice, steamed dumplings, and crab Rangoon.

Yeah. Seriously overboard.

“Did Eli get settled okay at your brother’s?”

It was crazy how that one little question made him like this woman even more.

Clearing his throat, he picked up his fork. “Yeah. He was excited too.” Chuckling, he explained, “They’re going to watch *The Lego Movie*, eat pizza, and Courtney baked cookies, so...”

“Essentially, it’s his perfect night.”

“Exactly!” They both began to eat, and Hunter realized for all their conversations over the last few weeks, there was still so much he didn’t know about her.

“So, tell me about your business.”

Violet finished chewing. “It’s called ‘Talk Travel to Me,’ and yeah, there’s a story behind it.”

“Go on,” he prompted.

“Katie and I had a third foster sister. Her name was Morgan Hedrick. She had a weird obsession with 80’s metal bands—the glam ones especially. Anyway, Poison’s ‘Talk Dirty to Me’ was her personal favorite.” She paused and took a sip of her wine. “Anyway, when she wasn’t listening to music, she was talking about all the places in the world she wanted to travel to and see. Sometimes she would fantasize about marrying some famous rock star and touring the world with the band.”

“She sounds like a lot of fun! Although, I would have pegged you for more of a boy band kind of girl.”

“Oh, I was. My love of Justin Timberlake knows no bounds, but Morgan was all about the hair bands.”

Nodding, he asked, “Where does she live now? Does she know she inspired your travel business?”

He watched as Violet’s head lowered, but not before he saw her expression turn sad. She took a moment before looking at him again and answering.

“Morgan was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor when she was eighteen. She died less than a year later,” she explained quietly. “I had promised her during our many bedside talks that I would visit all the places she never would.” With a shrug, she went on. “At first I thought it would be something I’d do for pleasure—like a yearly vacation kind of thing to different places I could afford to—but after I planned those first few trips, I found I genuinely enjoyed it. Then I helped some friends plan vacations and...that was it. I found my niche and I’ve never looked back.”

Reaching across the table, he placed his hand on top of hers. “I am so sorry. If I had known, I never would have brought it up.”

“It’s okay, Hunter. It breaks my heart how Morgan’s life was over before she got to live and enjoy it, but I’ve made my peace with it. And every new place I travel to, I always make sure I take some quiet time to talk to her about it.”

“I do that with my mom, too,” he admitted softly. When Violet’s expression softened, he squeezed her hand. “Every once in a while, I just sort of...sit and talk to her. Tell her about Eli and my life. It’s not the same as her being here to see it all herself, but it makes me...I don’t know. Sometimes I just need the connection.”

“I understand completely.”

They both fell silent, still holding hands, as they ate their dinner.

After several moments passed, Hunter couldn't help but laugh softly.

"What's so funny?"

"I think it's been too long since I've tried to seduce a woman because here I was making all these plans for a great night and then I introduce an incredibly depressing topic." He shook his head. "I am so sorry. I'm not usually this bad at this."

"You're fine, Hunter. And honestly, I think this is all part of getting to know each other. You don't only get to hear the happy stuff."

"Yeah, well...I kind of feel like all I've been showing you is the depressing stuff and...now I'm whining." He was this close to just banging his head on the table and vowing not to speak another word tonight.

Beside him, Violet softly laughed. "Okay, change of subject. Where's the last place you went on vacation?"

With a casual shrug, he replied, "Right here."

"Ah, ...sorry. Single dad, shared custody. You probably don't have a big travel budget."

Was she serious? "Actually, I get three weeks of paid vacation every year. I just prefer to stay here. We've got the beach and my brothers and I have a boat to go fishing...everything I want is right here."

Her dark eyes went wide, but she didn't comment.

"What about you?" he asked, figuring it was going to be someplace fabulous.

"Three months ago, I went to check out a new resort in Denver. It's one of those all-inclusive spas. The views were amazing, the services they offered were off-the-chart, and the food was top-notch. They probably had the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in." She gave him a come-hither smile before adding, "So far."

Slowly, Hunter pushed his plate away. "I'm a firm believer in a quality mattress." Pausing and resting his arms on the table, he lowered his voice

just a touch. “That’s why I spent more on mine than anything else in the house. I’m very particular about my bed.”

One dark brow arched at him. “I’m intrigued, Mr. Jones. But you know, I can’t possibly take your word for it. I’m going to have to try it out for myself.”

“Would I lie to you, Violet?” he asked silkily.

She rose from her chair and held her hand out to him. “I don’t think so, but, like you, I take my beds very seriously. We’ve been fairly compatible so far on our likes and dislikes; now I’d like to see if we can hold that record when dealing with where we sleep.”

He came to his feet, placing his hand in hers and was only mildly surprised when she led the way back to his bedroom. The view of Violet from behind was just as sexy as the front. The halter dress left her back bare to her waist and he couldn’t wait to touch all that smooth, tanned skin.

Actually, he couldn’t wait to touch and taste every inch of her—so much so his mouth began to water even as his hands began to twitch.

At the door to his room, she dropped his hand and slowly walked over to his bed. Next, she made a bit of a show of running her hand along the comforter and pushing down on the mattress to check the firmness before turning to face him.

“It all looks good so far,” she said, her voice taking on that husky quality he was coming to love.

“And it will look even better when you’re sprawled out on it,” he said, advancing on her. When he reached her, he cupped her face in his hands and simply leaned in and kissed her like he’d been dying to since she got here.

Who was he kidding—like he’d been dying to ever since they kissed for the first time two weeks ago.

Knowing there were no distractions, no one was going to have to go home, meant he could unleash everything he’d been feeling for her.

The good news was Violet was kissing him back with just as much urgency as he was using on her.

The better news was that she was reaching behind her neck and untying the halter part of her dress.

All without breaking their kiss.

He knew the instant the fabric fell away, and his hands immediately skimmed down over her jaw, her throat, her collarbone, until he was able to cup her breasts. The hum of pure pleasure was out before he could stop it. Her skin was so warm and soft, and Hunter couldn't wait to explore the rest of her.

As if of one mind, they slowly maneuvered until they were both on the bed—stretched out, facing one another, and still kissing. And as with every other time his mouth was on hers, he lost all track of time. They could have been kissing for minutes or hours; all he knew was he couldn't get enough.

But when one of Violet's legs crept up and anchored over his hip and she moved impossibly closer, he began to feel his self-control slipping. Moving to rain kisses along her cheek before simply being bold and going directly to her breasts, Hunter smiled when he heard Violet breathlessly say, "Finally."

Good to know she's enjoying this as much as I am...

With his lips thoroughly enjoying kissing and licking and tasting more of her, Hunter let one hand wander to slide her dress down over her hips with Violet's help. He allowed himself one brief moment to lift his head and look at her as she lay there in nothing more than a pair of soft pink panties.

"I think we need to work on getting some of your clothes off," she teased, easing up onto her elbows to look at him.

"You think so?" he asked, even as he sat up and whipped his shirt up over his head, tossing it to the floor. Kicking his shoes off, he went to lie down again when Violet stopped him.

"Lose the pants, Jones."

Laughing softly, he obliged.

This time when he went to resume his spot nestled between her legs so he could continue to kiss her breasts, she didn't stop him. But once they were skin to skin, it was like hitting the launch button. The feel of her underneath him, of her soft hands smoothing up and down his back before going up and raking through his hair, and hearing her throaty, sexy as hell moans when he kissed or touched her someplace she liked made Hunter realize there was time for slow exploration.

Later.

Kissing his way back up to her lips, he forced himself to raise his head. "In my mind, I envisioned us having dinner..." He placed a light kiss on her cheek. "And then having dessert..." Another kiss. "And then slowly making our way in here." And another.

"But..." she prompted, nipping at his earlobe as he continued peppering her face with tiny kisses.

"But...I underestimated the effect of having you naked beneath me."

"I'm not naked," she said huskily, biting his ear teasingly. "Yet."

Groaning, Hunter rested his forehead against hers. "Next time," he said, his voice low and gruff as one hand wandered down to her hip to toy with the edge of her panties. "Next time, I swear to go slow, but right now..."

"Hunter?"

"Hmm?"

"You had me at next time." She grinned up at him before raking her hands into his hair and bringing his lips back to hers.

And damn if he wasn't already looking forward to it.

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SEVEN

It was almost noon on Saturday and Violet still felt like she needed to tiptoe back into Katie's house. She knew she would look ridiculous, and yet she couldn't help herself.

Then she screamed when Katie yanked open the front door. "Oh, my God! I have been waiting for you! I thought you'd be home sooner!" Taking Violet by the hand, she pulled her into the house.

Panic immediately gripped her. Spinning, she grasped her friend's shoulders. "It's okay. I'm here. Are you having contractions? Are you timing them?" She frantically looked around. "Where's your bag? We said we were going to keep an overnight bag by the door!" With a mild cry of despair, she ran to Katie's room and looked around. "Where did you put it?"

"Vi?" Katie called out.

"It's okay! It's okay..." she said breathlessly as she ran back into the living room. "Did Rose already come and get Kira? Do we need to drop her off? Oh, my God...I parked behind you in the driveway! Gah! Why didn't you call me earlier?"

Katie sat down on the couch.

"That's good. You rest right there while I find that damn bag." She power-walked to the kitchen. "Did you call your doctor? Is she meeting us there?"

“Vi...” Katie sang out.

“Kira! Are you here?” Violet called out, and sure enough, the sassy child came skipping into the kitchen.

“Hi, Aunt Vi! Mommy said we’re gonna bake cookies today, and you were gonna tell a story! But it was a special story you were going to tell her when I took a nap. Is it story time now?” Then she bit her lip. “I’m not sleepy yet.”

What the...?

Walking over to Katie—who looked ready to burst out laughing—she realized no one was in labor. There was no need to find the packed bag.

“I’m supposed to tell you a story?” she mocked.

And then her friend did laugh.

Hard.

Hysterically.

“Can I watch *Frozen* and have peanut butter and jelly?” Kira asked, completely unphased by her mother’s laughter.

“Of course you can, baby girl,” Katie said, coming to her feet. As she walked past Violet, she murmured, “But once the movie starts, I want all the details about last night.”

Yeah, Violet knew they were going to do this, she just didn’t think it was going to cause this much drama.

Sheesh.

Twenty minutes later, she and Katie were back on the couch—each with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

“That was like an Olympic event,” she murmured.

“Really? Sex with Hunter was that good?”

“Yes. I mean...no! No, I was referring to wrangling your daughter up and getting her situated with a sandwich and a movie. Good Lord...the demands! Her blanket, her dolls, her special chair, her special cup...how do you do it?”

“Well...I’ve had lots of practice and know if she’s watching *Frozen*, she needs all of her Anna and Elsa paraphernalia.”

“Yeah, well...maybe don’t buy the new baby so much...paraphernalia. You’ll need a bigger house for sure if you do.”

“Need I remind you how you purchased most of the items Kira requested?”

“Fine, I enjoy spoiling her. She’s my godchild. So sue me.”

“You know what I think?”

Turning her head, Violet replied, “No, what?”

“I think you’re stalling. I want to hear all about your date with Hunter and if it was everything you thought it was going to be!” she stated excitedly. “I mean...I don’t even remember what it’s like to have a romantic night and when Brian gets home, a romantic night will be the last thing on either of our minds because we’ll have a new baby and a four-year-old running around. So please...for the love of it...tell me about your date!”

It wasn’t like they hadn’t done this dozens of times before, but it was the first time they would be talking about Hunter.

“Are you sure you want to know this? I mean...he’s a friend of yours and Brian’s. Do you really want me to put these images in your head?”

“Nice try. Spill it.”

With a groan, her head hit the back of the sofa. “He had ordered Chinese for us...”

“You’re welcome. I told him all your favorites.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“So, there was dinner and then...?”

Ugh...why was this so weird?

“We didn’t even make it to dessert,” she blurted out. “Although we did eat it in bed between rounds.”

“Ooo! There were rounds! Yay! How many? Two? Three?” Katie asked, practically bouncing up and down in her spot. “Four? Oh, my God! Tell me

it was four!”

“Now who needs the hose turned on them?”

Pouting, Katie settled back comfortably in her seat. “Go on.”

Where did she even begin? Twisting slightly to face her friend, she sighed. “It’s not good.”

“Oh, no! The sex was bad?” She paused. “No, that’s not possible. He’s a fireman, for crying out loud. And you said there were rounds. If the sex was bad, you would have been fine having a one and done.” Giving Violet the side-eye, she asked, “Does he have some sort of weird kink? Fetish? Wait... do I even want to know?”

So not the direction she thought they’d go in...

“The sex was amazing. Beyond amazing! Just like everything else Hunter does, he’s a giver. Good lord is he a giver!” she clarified. “No one’s ever...”

“Given?”

“Oh, yeah. So...much...giving. I swear I went blind a time or two.”

“Damn,” Katie said, fanning herself. “So then what’s not good?”

“If anything...I’m usually the one and done,” she admitted lowly. “I don’t...connect. I don’t get all touchy-feely and want to cuddle. Hell, I love sleeping alone! But last night?” Pausing, she shook her head. “Last night I slept beside a man who likes to snuggle and...I didn’t hate it.”

“Ooohhh...okay. I get it. You’re freaked out.”

“Well yeah! Of course I am! We cuddled! All night!”

“In between the rounds, though, right?” she prodded. “Three rounds? I’d guess three.”

“Yes! Fine! It was three! Three rounds last night! There, happy now?”

“As a matter of fact...no.” There was the side-eye again. “Last night.”

“What?”

“You said there were three rounds last night. Does that mean there were more rounds this morning?”

“Ugh...why are you like this? Can you stop focusing on the sex and help me! What am I going to do?”

“About what?” Katie asked with a small laugh. “You’re dating one of the nicest guys I’ve ever met. He’s a good friend, a great dad, and... according to you...amazing in bed! What could you possibly need help with?”

Flopping back on the couch, she groaned. “I’m not staying in Magnolia, Kate. Once Brian comes home, I’m leaving.”

“And?”

“And I have a feeling it’s not going to be so easy to leave.” One arm flung over her eyes as she sighed. “The last thing I want to do is hurt Hunter.”

“Have you talked about this? I mean, he knows you’re only here for a few weeks.”

“No, we didn’t talk about that.”

“Then what did you talk about? You didn’t just sit in silence between rounds, did you?”

“Okay, can you stop saying rounds?”

“Sorry. You didn’t just sit in silence between all the *lovemaking*. There, better?”

With a roll of her eyes, Violet sat back up. “I know I didn’t want to talk about it. We had a rather depressing conversation over dinner so the rest of the night, we stuck to safe topics. He told me about being a fireman, I told him about being a travel agent...I learned all about his family...then we watched some TV and would talk about what we were watching.” She shrugged.

“Well, I don’t have anything overly wise to suggest, you just really need to talk to him about this and make sure you’re both on the same page.”

“Yeah, but what page am I on? I don’t want to admit I have some really strong feelings for him if he’s only taking this casually.”

“Hunter doesn’t strike me as the casual type. He doesn’t date a whole lot, but...” She shrugged. “I don’t talk to him about his personal life. When are you seeing him again?”

“Not until Monday when he drops off and picks up Eli.”

“Maybe see about having dinner with them and after Eli’s in bed, the two of you can talk.”

“I don’t know. I kind of feel guilty.”

“About what?”

“You! I’m supposed to be here with you and I’m making plans with Hunter!”

Reaching out, Katie patted her leg. “Don’t worry about me. Magnolia Sound is small and even if you were out, all I’d have to do is call and you’d be here in a matter of minutes. We’re good. Plus...I like seeing you happy.”

“I’m not feeling so happy right now. Right now, I kind of feel like I’m freaking out a little.”

“That’s because you are,” Katie said simply. “But don’t worry. You’ll get over it.” Slowly, she got to her feet. “Now come on. Let’s bake some chocolate chip cookies.” She started to walk away before turning and adding, “And if you’re good, I’ll even let you eat some of the raw dough.”

Now that got her attention!

* * *

“DO you think it’s weird that I don’t travel?”

Kyle looked at his brother like he’d grown a second head. “Travel? Like to where? Europe?”

“No, just...anywhere. Is it strange?”

“I don’t think so. Not everyone likes to travel or has the time to.”

“I mean...you’ve traveled a bit. Is it something amazing I’m missing out on?”

His brother eyed him suspiciously. “Amazing?” He shrugged. “Hunt, you and I are very different and have very different ideas on the definition of amazing. And fun.”

Frowning, he demanded, “What the hell does that mean?”

“Remember when I went down to Florida for spring break in college? It was a week of being drunk and stupid and sleeping on the floor with fifteen other people.”

“That’s just stupid. You can’t consider that to be fun.”

“But I do,” Kyle replied, picking up the ham and swiss sandwich he had made for himself out of Hunter’s refrigerator. “And how about last year when I went skiing with a group of friends?”

“Yeah...”

“It took us almost eight hours to get to Sugar Mountain, we got three tickets along the way, we crammed six guys into a hotel room with two full-sized beds, skied for two days straight, drank way too much, and primarily ate out of vending machines. Fun to you?”

“I can’t imagine that’s fun for anyone! What is wrong with you?”

Kyle took a huge bite of his sandwich before answering, “Not a damn thing. I’m not uptight like you.”

“I am not uptight.”

“Dude, we all call Dean the careful one, you’re the uptight one, and Scarlett’s the girl.”

It was a ridiculous conversation, but he had to ask, “And what do you think we all call you?”

“Me? I’m the laid back and lovable one.” And with a stupid grin, he took another disgustingly large bite of his sandwich.

Unable to help himself, the bark of laughter came out.

And kept on going.

After a minute, the sandwich was gone, and Kyle stood glaring at him.

“Bro, you are definitely laid back, but...that’s not what we all call you.”

Taking what Hunter supposed was a menacing step toward him, Kyle said, “Oh, yeah? Then what do you call me?”

“Weren’t we talking about travel? I had a legit question about that.”

“First tell me what you call me and then we’ll get back to your weird travel issue.”

“It’s not an issue, per se...”

“Tell me what you all call me! It’s not that hard! For the love of it, just answer me!”

Smirking, Hunter leaned in close and told him what he so desperately wanted to hear. “We call you the attention whore. There.” He paused to let his words sink in before pulling back and sitting down at the dining room table. “Now, do you think I’m in the minority because I don’t have any interest in traveling?”

Kyle pulled up the chair opposite him—while pouting—and let out a long breath. “Honestly, yeah. You’re probably in the minority. It doesn’t make you a total weirdo, but...”

“But...?”

“I don’t know, maybe if you’d unclench a bit, you’d find that it’s kind of fun. Maybe take Eli someplace fun like Sea World or Legoland—you know, something the kid would probably enjoy.”

“Those places aren’t free, Kyle.”

With a groan and eye roll, his brother slumped down in his chair. “Okay, I get you’re a single dad and you have to watch your money. But that doesn’t mean you can’t live.” He paused. “Do you remember when we were kids and Mom was still alive and how we’d go to Busch Gardens for a weekend?”

It had been years since he’d thought about that, but now that it was there, it did make him smile. “She hated most of the rides,” he said with a quiet laugh.

“Yeah, she did. But we would go, and Dad would take us on most of the bigger ones while she’d take Scarlett on the merry-go-round. We never had a lot of money, Hunter, but it was something they did with us. We’d eat sandwiches Mom made for us and kept in a cooler in the car and it was a big deal when they’d buy us ice cream or popcorn in the park. And after Mom died, Gramps would take us up to the Port of Virginia to watch the cargo ships come in and we’d stay overnight and just hang out. It was his time to hang out with just the grandkids.”

Another memory he hadn’t thought about in years, however...

“Okay, those are weekend trips, not big ass vacations.”

Studying him, Kyle said, “Okay, what exactly is this all about? Why the sudden interest in your travel habits?”

As much as he enjoyed being a private person, Hunter knew he needed to talk to someone about this before his head exploded. So he told his brother all about Violet and their night together and how it was so obvious that traveling was a huge part of her life and...he didn’t get it.

“Wait...so this is the gymnast? The one who got Eli talking more?”

“Um...”

Holding up his hand, Kyle chuckled. “First, let me say good for you.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because you haven’t been seriously interested in a woman in a while.”

“That’s not true. I’ve dated.”

“Yeah, casually. A date here, a date there. And you’ve never talked about one like you’re talking about Violet. So I’m guessing this is serious, huh?”

Why did I think this was a good idea?

“Hate to burst your bubble, but...no. It’s not. It can’t be.”

“Why not? I can tell you’re crazy about her, and even though I’ve never met or seen her, I can already see she’s good for you!” And before Hunter

could even respond, Kyle was talking again. “If this is about Melissa and you holding out some hope...”

“This has nothing to do with Melissa!” he cried, frustrated that everyone seemed to think that was his problem. Jumping up from his seat, he started to pace. “Here’s the thing that no one seems to understand—the only reason Melissa was a factor in anything was for Eli’s sake. I never held out romantic hope for us after the divorce. I knew our relationship wasn’t working for a long time, but I had hoped she’d at least put in an effort for our son’s sake.”

“O-kay...then why don’t you date more?”

Eyes wide, he stared at his clueless brother. “Dude, I have a son to raise, I work crazy hours, and there are only twenty-four of them in a day! When am I supposed to find time to date?”

“You’ve found time now with Violet.”

And there was no way to argue that.

“It’s just...she’s...she’s different. I don’t know. It’s sort of like the planets all aligned or something because there was suddenly...time.” He shrugged.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“She’s not staying, Kyle. She’s here for a few weeks to help out Katie and then she’s leaving.”

“Maybe she won’t.”

He gave his brother a bland look. “Brian’s coming home and there’s going to be a new baby. The last thing they need is a houseguest. Plus, Violet’s got a life back in Nashville.”

Kyle excitedly got to his feet. “Then there’s your answer!”

“What’s my answer?”

“Yeah, the travel thing! You can go to Nashville! I hear it’s awesome! Go and spend a long weekend there and then she can come here...you know...the long-distance thing!”

But Hunter was already shaking his head. “Nuh-uh. That’s a big no.”

“Why? Because it means you having to break out of your boring routine?”

“Oh, so now I’m uptight *and* boring. Do I have that right?”

“Add big fat baby to the list, and yeah. That’s you.”

The pacing was getting him nowhere, so Hunter sat back down. “Okay, let’s just...stop with the name calling because it’s not helping.”

Kyle shrugged.

“The thing is...I have a legit feeling of...I don’t know...I’m starting to feel things for Violet that I never felt before, and then there are feelings there that I know are going to come back and bite me in the ass.”

Thankfully, his brother refrained from making a joke and realized he was serious. He straightened in his chair and studied Hunter hard for a moment.

“I get what you’re saying, and I’m sure it sucks to feel the way you do.” He paused. “But can I make an observation?”

With a curt nod, Hunter felt himself hold his breath.

“You know I am all for going out and having a good time with a woman. Hell, that’s usually all I enjoy doing. This thing with Violet...you know it’s temporary. You can’t let your feelings get all involved in it because she’s going back to Nashville and then on to whatever trip is on her calendar next.”

“I know, but...”

“There are no buts here, Hunter. That’s what her life is. And do you really want to get in any deeper with a woman who you already know isn’t interested in sitting around and growing old in a small town? Didn’t you learn anything from Melissa?”

When Hunter went to argue, Kyle held up a hand to stop him.

“You knew all the way back in high school that she did not want to stay in Magnolia Sound forever and you thought you’d change her mind. Then

you thought having a baby would change her mind.” Another pause. “I don’t want to see you get hurt like that again.”

Well, damn. Who knew his dufus of a brother would be the one to toss genuine logic his way?

“So what do I do, Kyle? How the hell do I stop myself from having feelings for her?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. Maybe just don’t...you know...see her.”

“She’s living with Katie. I see her every time I drop off and pick up Eli.”

And on top of that, he really wanted to see her.

Letting out a long, weary breath, he shook his head. “I’m so screwed.”

“You could just talk to her. Maybe if you do, you’ll get a little more clarity. You’re a very level-headed guy, Hunter. I think you can handle having a no-strings affair for the next month. Hell, you might even enjoy it!”

Somehow, he didn’t think it was going to work quite like that for him.

But if given the option of seeing Violet or not seeing Violet, he’d always opt to see her.

And if he had to choose between making the most of the next month or breaking things off? Well...only time would tell.

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EIGHT

“That was...amazing.”

Hunter leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her lips. “Thank you.”

“No, seriously. How do you do it?”

His laugh was so deep and masculine she was practically in a puddle at just the sound of it. “It’s really not a big deal.”

“Oh, believe me,” she countered. “It is.”

Straightening, he smiled down at her. “Okay, the key is to get the bacon extra crispy before you stuff it in the middle of the uncooked meatloaf. You put half the ground beef mixture in the bottom of the loaf pan, then add the bacon and cheese, then top with the rest of the meat and bake. It’s fairly simple.”

“I never even thought about stuffing a meatloaf!” Then she laughed. “Hell, I can’t even remember the last time I *had* meatloaf!”

“We happen to love it,” he replied, clearing away the dinner dishes. “Plus, it allows Eli to make a mashed potato volcano, so...everybody wins.”

Smiling, Violet got up to help him with the cleanup.

If anyone had told her she’d be happy having a date night that consisted of meatloaf and watching *Toy Story 4*, she would have said they were crazy. And yet...here she was.

And not hating it.

They worked side-by-side—talking about the school kids who had come to the firehouse for a field trip today, and the vacation to Greece Violet had booked for a senior’s group—and it was all so very domestic that it should have made her twitchy.

But it didn’t.

Once that was done, Hunter took Eli to bathe him and get him into bed while Violet checked her emails and looked over some new incentives the people at Visit California had sent her. All the trips sounded terrific, and there was a part of her that would love just to spend a month there and experience as much of it as she could. It would make one hell of a road trip—similar to the one she’d helped Katie and Brian do for their honeymoon—only longer. Plus, she’d love to follow the travel bureau’s route and be able to tell clients all about it.

The idea had merit.

Once Brian was home and she returned to Nashville, she didn’t have anything else on the schedule until after the new year. Maybe it would be the perfect time to go and see what else California had to offer.

Of course, she’d want to spend a few weeks at home just to check in with everything and plan properly...

“Hmm...” Pulling up the notes app on her phone, she made a notation to take a closer look at her calendar in the morning and start thinking about the logistics of making such a trip and what she would realistically have to spend to do it right. “I do love when a plan starts to come together,” she murmured.

“What are you planning?” Hunter asked with a smile as he walked back into the room.

“Just looking at some travel opportunities in California.” Holding up her phone, she showed him a promo picture from the Visit California site. “I’ve never done a road trip vacation before personally, but I’m thinking of trying

it after the baby's born." Putting her phone away, she rubbed the spot on the couch beside her. "Eli asleep?"

But Hunter wasn't smiling.

If anything, he seemed...sad.

"Is everything okay?"

When he sat down, it was at the other end of the couch—effectively confirming that something was bothering him.

"So you're going to leave here, go home to Nashville, swap out suitcases and then...what? Fly to California?"

Weird question, but...okay. "Well, it's not quite that simple. I'll go home for a few weeks—maybe more—depends on how long it takes to plan everything out. I'm going to want to start in Northern California and drive all the way down so I see the whole state from end to end. I know I'm not going to see everything, but enough of it to be able to offer some fantastic options for clients. And I can do blog posts and take pictures to put up on my website and do Instagram stories on it," she went on, smiling. "I think it will be a lot of fun!"

He nodded but didn't comment.

After a moment, she sighed, "Okay, out with it. What are you thinking right now?"

"Honestly? I'm wondering how you can live like that."

Frowning, she asked, "Like what?"

"Out of a suitcase!" he said with more than a little heat. "By the time Katie has her baby, you'll have been here for almost two months! I get that your job makes it easy for you to work from anywhere, but don't you want to see friends? Relax in your own home?"

"Hunter..."

"No, I'm serious, Violet. I just don't get it. I can't imagine having zero interest in my own home, my town!" He made a small growl of frustration

before he leaned back against the cushions. When he finally looked at her, he looked miserable. “What are we even doing here?”

And that’s when it hit her—he was having all the same anxieties she was. This was just his version of it.

And strangely, that made her feel better.

Scooching closer to him, she rested one hand on his denim-clad leg. “You know why it’s so easy for me to pick up and go?” she asked. “It’s because that’s how my life was growing up. We didn’t stay in any one place for long, and when you go into foster care, you can’t get too attached to a home or the people because you never know when you’re going to have to leave. Some psychologist would probably have a field day with me right now, but there it is.”

“Violet, I’m...”

But she wasn’t listening. “Look, Hunter, I’m not asking you to live my life. And we both went into this...whatever it is we’re doing, knowing I wasn’t going to be here long.” Closing her eyes, she took one of his hands in hers and loved how big and warm and strong it felt. “You need to know I didn’t plan on meeting you—or anyone—and even though I’m only here for a short time, I’d like to spend some of it with you.”

When she opened her eyes, she saw he looked a little less miserable.

“I don’t normally do things like this,” he began, his voice low. “Eli and my job take up all of my time. And when I do go out with a woman, I already know going into it that it’s not going anywhere.” He paused and gave her a look that could only be described as hopeless. “You’re the first woman I wished it was going somewhere with.”

And damn if that didn’t sum up her feelings too.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything,” he went on. “Maybe it’s too soon even to be thinking it, but I just thought...” He paused and shook his head. “I believe in being honest and upfront with people, Violet, and I knew this was going to bother me if I didn’t say anything. So...”

“You want to know something funny?”

“Sure.”

“I’ve been asking myself what we’re doing too.” She offered him a weak smile. “You know a little of my history and where I came from, Hunter. I usually prefer to keep things casual and I don’t get too emotionally involved.”

“Oh.”

“But...it’s not like that with you. And, like you, I kept thinking it’s too soon, and maybe I don’t really know what I feel, but as we’re sitting here and talking about this, I know I feel something for you. Actually, I feel a lot about you. And even though I’m not going to be here for long, I’d like to spend what I can with you too.”

She held her breath and waited for him to respond.

And waited.

Weird, I essentially agreed with everything he said he wanted...

“Are you sure?” he finally asked, and Violet felt herself sag with relief.

“Yeah, Hunter. I’m sure.”

He closed the distance between them, cupped her face in his hands, and kissed her as if his life depended on it.

Yeah, she was definitely sure.

* * *

THE REST of the week was a combination of running Katie all around town doing all her last-minute preparations for both the arrival of the baby and her husband returning home and running around with Hunter as they tried to find time to be alone.

The running around with Hunter was way more fun.

And creative!

Just thinking about some of the ways they had managed to find time to be alone uninterrupted made her a little giggly.

Of course, Hunter had a house, and it was the obvious place they could be together, but...they both felt weird about having sex in the house while Eli was there. That meant most of their sexy time had to take place at random times of the day.

Like whenever Hunter was on a break, he'd text her and she'd meet him at his house or his brother Kyle would show up after dinner and offer to take Eli out for ice cream so they could have an hour alone...

It was fun, and it felt like they were kids sneaking around and it added to the excitement of being together.

Although, to be honest, they didn't need anything to help in that category. All Hunter had to do was look at her and she was practically weak in the knees and ready to strip down for him. The man was becoming a serious addiction and she wouldn't change a thing.

Okay, that wasn't entirely true. She was starting to wish she was going to be staying in Magnolia Sound for a little longer. Of course, she totally could, but...was it the right thing to do? Violet already knew she wasn't someone looking for a long-term relationship, but she also knew she wasn't ready to let Hunter go yet.

It was Saturday afternoon, and she was in the guest room looking over some emails. Rose had just left with Kira, who she was taking for the night, and Katie had asked if it was okay if she had the house to herself for the night. How could Violet possibly say no?

Lucky for her, Hunter had invited her to come for dinner and said he had something important to talk to her about. Her curiosity was piqued, but he assured her it wasn't anything bad.

Eli was staying with his grandfather tonight, so they were going to have the whole night alone together.

"Am I being an ungrateful bitch?"

Violet turned and found Katie standing in the doorway. “What are you talking about?”

Sighing dramatically, she trudged into the room and sat down on the bed. “You’ve done so much for me this week—driving me to doctor appointments, doing the grocery shopping, and going to the mall to get all my crazy last-minute baby stuff—and what do I do? I throw you out tonight! I even threw my own daughter out! I’m awful!”

Dealing with an emotional pregnant woman was exhausting, but Violet was getting used to it. “Okay, before you spiral any further, you need to relax. We already knew we were going to do all the shopping this week because it just made sense. And as for throwing me out, you have to realize you’re doing me a huge favor. I have only a limited amount of full nights left with Hunter, and the fact that I can leave here guilt-free means I can enjoy it even more!”

For a minute, Katie looked mildly confused.

Then she smiled.

“So what I’m hearing is...I’m a great friend who is completely selfless and awesome, right?”

Unable to help herself, Violet laughed. “Yes. That is exactly what you’re hearing.”

“Yay, me!”

Hugging, Violet rested her head against Katie’s. “Admit it, Brian’s able to FaceTime with you tonight, isn’t he?”

“Busted.”

With a quick kiss on her friend’s cheek, she stood. “Then you go get you some too!”

“Please,” she replied with a snort. “There is nothing sexy about me right now. Plus, for all I know, an orgasm could send me into labor.” Then she paused. “Although...the idea has merit.”

“Oh, no you don’t! You let that baby keep cooking. You’ve only got a few more weeks!”

“I know you’re right.” Sighing, she looked up at Violet. “So what do you think Hunter wants to talk to you about tonight? Did he give you any clues?”

“Not a one. And for the life of me, I can’t imagine what it is. We’ve had the whole this is only temporary talk so...what else could it be?”

“Maybe he wants to spend more time with you.”

“Or maybe less...” And damn if that wasn’t a depressing thought.

“Okay, don’t go in that direction. I doubt he’d give you a head’s up if he were looking to end things.”

“Maybe.”

“You know what? Forget I even brought it up. Now finish doing what you’re doing and you can tell me all about it tomorrow.”

And for a pregnant woman, Katie almost sprinted from the room.

* * *

“HOW WOULD you feel about coming to my brother’s wedding with me?”

Violet’s eyes went wide and she pretty much froze at his question.

Not quite the reaction I was hoping for...

“Um...what?”

Hunter almost took the invitation back but figured it was already out there. “Yeah, so my brother Dean is getting married in two weeks and I’d like you to be my date.”

“But...” She paused and cleared her throat. “Aren’t you in the bridal party or something?”

Nodding, he said, “I am, but it’s not a big, formal thing. Not really. The whole thing is being held at my sister Scarlett’s house. She and her husband

have a brand-new place on the sound—like right on the water—and the ceremony and reception are going to be held there.”

“Oh...well, sure,” she said, smiling. “I should probably add that as long as Katie’s not in labor, I’ll be there because...”

“I know,” he said, feeling extremely relieved. He had worried he’d have to try harder to convince her. “How’s she feeling? Any more Braxton Hicks issues?”

“Nothing like she experienced the first week I was here, thankfully. But I think she’s seriously ready to give birth. Like if Brian were home, she’d be doing everything humanly possible to induce labor.”

“I’m sure. Those last weeks are the worst.”

“Eli’s mom felt the same way?”

“She was miserable throughout the entire pregnancy, so there was no real difference,” he said, hoping he sounded amused and not resentful. “But I saw it with Scarlett and with multiple expectant mothers I’ve encountered as part of the EMT squad.”

“She’s got the house to herself tonight and is supposed to FaceTime with Brian. I teased her about it being sexy time, and she shot me down. Of course, there’s the possibility she didn’t want to share that with me...”

“Are you trying to tell me the two of you don’t talk about things like that? Because I find that hard to believe.”

With a knowing smirk, she looked him in the eye. “Are you really sure you want to know? Because now that we’re involved, it would mean we would have talked about you too.”

There was no mirror to confirm or deny it, but Hunter was pretty sure he seriously paled. “Um...yeah. No. Never mind.” Jumping to his feet, he quickly looked around and scrambled to change the subject. “So, uh...are you hungry? I thought we’d go out and get something to eat—maybe go to the Sand Bar or something.”

Standing, she walked toward him and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Smart man. And yes, I am definitely hungry.”

He had warred with himself about whether to go out to eat or to get takeout or even to grill up some burgers, mainly because he didn’t want any intrusions on their time alone. As it was, they hardly had any, and the thought of wasting any of it going out to a restaurant wasn’t all that appealing. Then he realized he didn’t want Violet to feel like he only wanted to see her for sex.

Sometimes it was damn hard having a conscience.

The drive into town didn’t take long, and they happened to luck out with a short wait for a table. The place was as crowded as it usually was, and as Hunter looked around, he saw a lot of familiar faces. He waved and smiled as they walked to their table, but stopped when he spotted his brother Dean waving them over.

“Who’s that?” Violet asked.

“Dean and Courtney. I’ll just go over and say hello real quick. I’ll meet you at the table.”

“Oh, uh...”

Yeah, it was kind of a dick move, but he wasn’t in the mood to share Violet with anyone tonight. So he quickly wove through the tables and smiled at his brother and future sister-in-law. “Hey, guys.”

Courtney looked beyond him. “Did you seriously just ditch your date to come over here?”

Looking over his shoulder, he saw Violet sitting in the booth, chatting with the waitress. “Uh...maybe? Sort of.” He looked back at them. “Date night, and we don’t get a lot of time to ourselves, so...”

“Why don’t you join us?” Dean asked, grinning.

“Baby,” Courtney said sweetly. “He just said...”

“Hunter, come on, man!” his brother said with a disapproving look. “Go over there and get her and then join us.”

“We really only have this one night to...”

“Although, your booth is roomier than our table, so why don’t we join you?” And before Hunter could utter a protest, Dean and Courtney were on their feet and heading toward Violet.

By the time Hunter joined them, Violet was laughing and smiling, and he was having a hard time being annoyed with his family.

Sliding into the booth beside her, Hunter put his arm around Violet. “So, this is my brother Dean and his fiancé, Courtney.” And then wanted to smack the smile off his brother’s face. “I guess they’re joining us.”

“You’re getting married soon, right?”

“Yes, we are!” Courtney replied excitedly.

The conversation immediately went into talk of wedding plans, followed by how they’d met. Not that it was a particularly exciting of a story—Courtney was his sister’s best friend. She’d been coming to their house since she and Scarlett were in kindergarten. For the life of him, he didn’t get why she loved telling that story so much, but...she did.

They ordered food and Violet answered all kinds of questions about her travel business. No matter what destination Courtney and Dean threw at her, she had information about it.

“So, where are you going on your honeymoon?” Violet asked.

“Well, Dean is not big on travel,” Courtney began, and Hunter and his brother shared a look that essentially said, “Because it’s not a big deal.” Not that anyone noticed. “We were going to go on a cruise, but neither of us felt it was the right choice. So after what felt like months of looking at options, we finally agreed on Sanibel Island down in Florida. Dean’s shop is under construction, so we didn’t want to be away too long. We’re basically only going for a long weekend...”

“Five days, actually,” Dean clarified. “But we hope to take another trip next year to Hawaii.”

“Wow,” Violet said, comfortably leaning into his side. “I would have imagined you’d pick something that wasn’t beachy considering you live at the beach already.”

“Yeah, we thought of that too, but we both just love it so much.” Courtney smiled at Dean before resting her head on his shoulder. “It’s our happy place.”

“It’s hard to argue with that,” Violet commented. “And when you’re ready to plan, if you need any help, you can always reach out and give me a call. I can find you some amazing deals.”

“Ooo! Thank you! I totally will!”

After that, their food was served, the conversation flowed, and Hunter begrudgingly admitted to himself how it was nice to hang out with another couple.

Too bad this will probably be the only time...

He refused to let that thought take hold, and by the time they were all walking out to their cars and saying they should do it again sometime, he simply agreed. No reason to remind everyone how this was temporary.

“I have to admit,” Violet began once they were in his car and heading back to his place, “when they first walked over to the table and introduced themselves, I was a little peeved.”

That was surprising.

“Really? Why?”

Reaching over, she took one of his hands in hers and let out a soft sigh. “We already don’t get a lot of time to ourselves, and I selfishly wanted to have you all to myself tonight.”

“Can I let you in on a secret?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“I was kind of pissed at them, too. And for the same reason.”

“Great minds,” she said, her voice all soft and sultry. “I bet we’re both thinking the same thing now too.”

“Oh, yeah? What are you thinking?”

“Hmm...I’m thinking how I can’t wait to get back to your place and take off these sandals.”

“Not...quite what I was thinking...”

“And then I’m going to help you off with your shirt.”

“Keep going...”

“Then I’m hoping you’ll help me with mine.”

“That is something I would totally do...”

“I imagine we’ll be doing that as we cross the living room, and we’ll keep stripping—could potentially be almost naked by the time we got to your bed.” She looked over at him and winked. “How did I do? Are we on the same page?”

Hunter’s answer was a husky laugh and to hit the gas pedal a little harder.

By the time they were parked in the driveway, he could barely wait to touch her.

“Hunter...”

“Out of the car, Violet,” he commanded, his voice foreign to his own ears. He heard her soft hiss of breath before she did as he said. He knew if he touched her before they got in the house, his neighbors would quite possibly get a bit of a show.

His hand shook as he tried to get the key in the lock, but once the door opened and Violet walked inside with him hot on her heels, he slammed the door so hard the walls shook. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten her with his need and the intensity of it, but when she turned and looked at him, he saw he had nothing to worry about.

Her sandals came off, and she gently kicked them toward the wall. Then her smile turned a little wicked as she slowly walked over to him. Toe to toe, her warm hands skimmed under his shirt and slid it up and over his head, tossing it on top of the sandals.

“You have the sexiest chest I have ever seen,” she whispered before placing kisses along his pecs. “So damn sexy.” Her tongue traced a lazy circle around his nipple and that was all he could take.

Scooping Violet up in his arms, he stalked to the bedroom and kicked the door closed behind him.

“I thought we were going to...”

But he never let her finish. His lips captured hers in a kiss that was a little raw, a little dirty, and so full of need it shocked him. Down on the bed, his body covered hers, and it seemed like hours passed before he finally raised his head.

“It scares me how much I want you, Violet,” he admitted gruffly. “All night it made me crazy thinking about how much I wanted to get us home so I could have you here like this.”

Her nails raked through his hair as her tongue slowly traced her lips. “I feel the same way, Hunter. I would have been fine staying in and ordering pizza if it meant being here like this with you.” She paused, her eyes scanning his face. “Are we crazy?”

“No. We’re just two people who know exactly what we want.” Then he stopped himself. “And as much as I love having you in my bed and making love with you, it’s...I mean, it’s not just...” And dammit, he couldn’t seem to get the words out.

Fortunately, she didn’t have the same issue.

“It’s just being together,” she said softly. “I love talking with you, laughing with you, and just being with you when we’re not doing anything except sitting together and watching TV. I’m comfortable with you, Hunter, and...I think you’re comfortable with me.”

More than you know...

They stayed like that—with Hunter braced above her, staring down into those beautiful dark eyes—and Violet’s soft hands gently caressing him everywhere she could reach. Where moments ago he felt frantic and out of

control, now he found himself wanting to give her everything he had—to show her with actions how he felt about her.

To make her feel what he felt.

To want what he wanted.

And to make her wish it never had to end.

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NINE

The first time Violet woke up the next morning, it was to Hunter kissing his way down her body. He made love to her, and they were both a little sleepy, but it was slow and sweet and oh-so-good.

The next time she woke up, it was to breakfast in bed.

And for a moment, she seriously thought she was dreaming because never in her life had anyone done anything like this for her.

“Good morning, beautiful,” Hunter said as he carefully placed a tray over her lap. “I thought you might be hungry.”

Groggily, she sat up and did her best to take the sheet with her—hot coffee and bare breasts while haphazardly propped against pillows were not a good combination.

“What’s all this?” Pushing her hair away from her face, she did her best to focus on all the food in front of her. Waffles, bacon, juice, coffee, and fresh strawberries. Was this man for real?

“I’m used to getting up early, and, on the weekends, Eli and I usually make waffles together. I thought you might enjoy them.”

She was slowly waking up a little more and still couldn’t believe this was happening. Looking up at him, she smiled and thanked him. “I hope you’re going to join me.”

Hunter was shirtless and wearing a pair of faded jeans and looked good enough to eat.

After the waffles and strawberries, of course.

Violet held onto the tray as Hunter carefully climbed onto the bed beside her. They each took their coffee mugs and placed them on the bedside tables to avoid any spillage. She was ready to dig in when she turned and looked at him, suddenly feeling a little overcome with emotion. “Thank you,” she whispered.

The look on his face was one of sweet confusion. Like he couldn’t understand why she was getting choked up over waffles. Reaching up, he caressed her cheek. “Hey. You okay?”

Nodding and forcing herself not to embarrass herself by crying, she said, “It’s just...I’ve never had breakfast in bed before.” Then she gave a careless shrug. “I always thought it was something you saw in movies or on Mother’s Day commercials. Never thought it was a real thing.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she looked away and put her attention on the food in front of her. “I can’t believe you had time to make all this. What time did you get up?”

But Hunter wasn’t fooled. It just took the touch of his hand on her cheek again to make her look at him. He didn’t say a word, but he did lean in and kissed her.

Slowly.

Thoroughly.

To the point that their breakfast was on the verge of getting cold.

When he finally broke the kiss, they were both a little breathless, but also both aware of how they needed to eat.

“To answer your question, I got up about an hour ago. I seriously contemplated staying in bed and waking you up like I did earlier, but then I thought about treating you to breakfast.”

“Hunter, we could have gone to a diner or something. I don’t expect you to cook for me.” And she could feel her cheeks heat. Turning her head, she smiled. “But I’m delighted you did. This is...it’s incredible.”

“You haven’t tasted anything yet.”

“If you’d stop distracting me, I could,” she teased just as her stomach growled. “And now we know I can’t wait any longer.”

Laughing, Hunter poured warm syrup over their waffles before holding up a strawberry for her to taste. She usually wasn’t much of a breakfast person, but this was something a girl could get used to for sure.

“So, what do you have planned for today? Anything fun?” she asked after several bites of food.

“I’m going to help my father with some yard work, and then I promised Eli we’d get a pizza and watch a movie.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Although, I doubt he’ll make it through a movie.”

“How come?”

“Whenever he sleeps at my dad’s place, they stay up late and are up early. They like to go fishing together,” he explained. “So by the time I get him home and get him a bath and have dinner, he’s practically asleep.”

“It’s sweet that you still make the plans with him rather than pointing out how he won’t be awake to watch anything.”

“Yeah, well...why point out the negative? He’s only three, and it makes him happy, so...”

“You’re a good dad, Hunter. A really good dad.” Putting her utensils down, she leaned over and kissed him. “I’ve watched you with him, and I listen to you talk, and it’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced before.” She paused. “As you know, I have no real experience to draw from except how my father took off. The fact that you’re here and so hands-on with Eli—and knowing how you and his mom weren’t together, and you were still so hands-on...” Shaking her head, she went on. “You’ve opened my eyes,

Hunter Jones. You've shown me that not all fathers are bad and there are some good men in this world. Thank you."

It was his turn to get a little choked up with emotion. He mouthed the words 'thank you' and she wondered if anyone realized just how amazing this man was. Did his family see it? His friends? His co-workers? Violet was excellent at being able to pick out and call out bad parents, but she had never seen anyone like Hunter—a guy who lived to give his son a good life. She could only hope one day, Eli realized how lucky he was.

They ate in companionable silence for several minutes before he put the focus on her. "What about you? Do you and Katie have anything exciting planned for the weekend?"

"I think everything is in order around the house. Like if she went into labor today, the baby could come home and have everything it needed. Well...except for Brian." She shook her head. "I find it so weird how his return date is so hush-hush. I mean...aren't families entitled to know when their soldier is coming home?"

"I'm sure the closer it gets, the more information she'll have. Anything can cause a delay, and they probably don't give that information out until they can guarantee they'll be home."

"I guess. It's just so hard on her. She never complains, but I can tell—it's in the little things she says, the little comments. Brian isn't going to re-up again, so I know she's excited about that."

Nodding, Hunter told her how he'd heard the same thing. "I know he struggled with getting deployed this time. They had just found out Katie was pregnant, and it just about killed him to leave."

"It's why I ended up coming here. We would talk all the time and as the months went by, I could hear it in her voice how she was struggling. I figured I could be a good distraction."

He let out a long breath. "And here I am keeping you from helping her. I told Brian I'd be there for her too and look at what a crappy job I'm doing."

He muttered a curse and Violet muttered one of her own when she realized she couldn't maneuver toward him without knocking their plates on the floor.

"Hunter, stop. You're not keeping me from anything. I have loved staying with Katie and hanging out with her, but we also need our own space too. And if I felt like she needed me, I wouldn't have left her. Especially not overnight."

"Are you sure?"

"There's one very important thing you should know about me, Hunter. I never lie. Like ever. On top of that, I am fiercely loyal to my friends. Especially Katie."

"That's two things," he said softly, but his lips twitched, so she knew he was teasing her.

"You know what I'm saying..."

"I do and thank you. I'd hate to think I'm causing her any stress."

"You're not. But as for the rest of the weekend, I'm not so sure. Rose is joining us for dinner tonight—we're making Mexican—and just having a girls' night."

"Has Rose been coming around a lot since you've been there?"

"I wouldn't say a lot, but I think she could seriously stand to make some friends." She finished her last bite of breakfast. "Oh, I think she's going to your dad's shop this week to get the oil changed in her car. I heard Katie telling her to do it and how he's got the best shop in town."

"It's kind of the only one in town for now. Dean's building a shop on the other side of town, but it will still essentially be one business. They've just outgrown the current location."

"Wow! That's awesome. And kudos to Dean for dealing with work, construction, a wedding, and a honeymoon trip all at once! Impressive!"

"Yeah, well, my brother is the king of being cautious, so he worked all the logistics out before he started seriously putting anything in motion."

“Sounds like organization runs in the family.”

With a low laugh, he disagreed. “Nope. Just the two of us. Dad’s a little scattered, but we’ve always been there to help since my mother died. Kyle sort of flies through life doing whatever it is he wants or whatever he’s in the mood for. It makes me crazy.”

“I can imagine.”

“And Scarlett’s somewhere in between. She’s organized and can multitask, but she’s way more impulsive. And yet at the same time manages to only see things in black or white. There’s no middle ground with her.”

“That is quite the family dynamic.” Putting her fork down, Violet leaned back against the pillows. “And that was a fantastic breakfast. Thank you.”

Wordlessly, Hunter stood. He came around to her side of the bed and took the tray off of her lap and placed it on the floor.

And the view of him from behind was just as impressive as the view of the front. When he turned, his grin told her he totally knew she was checking him out.

“See anything you like?” he asked, his voice gruff and oh-so-sexy.

Nodding, she crooked her finger at him to get him to come closer. When he was beside the bed, she boldly reached out and ran her hand slowly up his abs. “All of it.” And since she was already being bold, she flung the sheet off of herself. “How about coming back to bed?”

No sooner were her words out, then he was quickly undoing his button fly. “I didn’t want to be presumptuous.”

Once Hunter covered her body with his, Violet wrapped herself around him. “Where this is concerned, Hunter, it’s always going to be okay to be presumptuous.”

* * *

“I INVITED Violet to Dean and Courtney’s wedding.”

Why he was so nervous about telling his family about his plans, he had no idea. But when he looked up and saw his entire family staring at him, Hunter realized he couldn't get a read on any of their reactions.

And then started to squirm in his seat.

"Okay, somebody say something. Please."

He expected Dean or Courtney to be the ones to speak first, considering it was their wedding, but after some exchanged glances, it was his sister who opted to be the voice of the family.

Everyone was quiet as Scarlett cleared her throat. "Hunter, what we're all hearing is you are...dating someone, and you'd like to include her in a family event. Do I have that right?"

Why did he think this was going to be a simple thing?

Forcing a smile—because he knew they were all just messing with him—he nodded. "Yes, I believe that is exactly what I'm saying. Courtney and Dean..."

"Uh-uh-uh..." she quickly interrupted. "Not so fast."

One glance around the table showed him how amused everyone was.

Including his father.

Traitor.

"Yes, I believe there was talk of the four of you having dinner together Friday night," Scarlett went on. "So, there was a double date..."

"It wasn't a double date..."

"A double date," she repeated for emphasis, "and now the wedding. Dare we think this is getting serious?"

He caught his brother Kyle's eye and saw him barely holding in his laughter. He hated airing his personal stuff like this—especially where Violet was concerned because it wasn't conventional. At least not for him. And it certainly wasn't the kind of relationship that justified bringing her to such an important event.

But time was ticking fast on their relationship and he wanted to squeeze every minute out of it that he could. There was going to come a time when she was gone and all he was going to have were the memories—and he'd only get to enjoy them in between working way too much and making sure Eli was taken care of by his lone parent.

His sigh was out when there was still silence and everyone piled on at that point.

“So, it’s serious?”

“Why didn’t you invite her to dinner?”

“Call her now and invite her for dessert!”

“When did she decide to stay in Magnolia?”

Rubbing his temples, Hunter finally shouted, “Enough!” And remarkably, everyone stopped talking. “Everybody needs to just calm down.”

“Geez, way to ruin the fun, Hunter,” Kyle murmured.

“Yeah, we’re just happy for you,” Scarlett added.

“I’m not trying to ruin anyone’s fun,” he reasoned, “but you’re all a little off-base here and need to reel it in a bit, okay?”

“What’s going on?” his father asked. “I must have missed something.”

Hunter had shared with his father that he was casually dating someone, but he hadn’t given him any specifics—mainly because it wasn’t the kind of thing he and his father usually talked about. “This isn’t anything serious because she’s not staying. Once the baby’s born and Brian is home, she’s going back to Nashville and already has her next big travel trip planned. So…” He let out a long breath. “I just thought it would be okay to ask her to come to the wedding as my date. I didn’t want to be the only one there going stag.”

“Um… I don’t have a date,” his father said, and Hunter both loved him for it and wanted to explain how that statement wasn’t helping anything.

“Yeah, I’m not bringing anyone either,” Kyle said. “Because, let’s face it, Courtney’s got some hot single friends and who knows? I may get lucky.”

Everyone groaned.

“Kyle, please try to not be that guy,” Courtney groaned.

“What guy?”

“The smarmy guy who hits on the bridesmaids or single women at a wedding. It’s sad,” she explained.

“But...”

“No buts,” Dean interjected. “Just...don’t.”

Frowning, Kyle looked around the table before blurting out, “Weren’t we focusing on Hunter and his secret girlfriend?”

“She’s not secret,” Hunter countered. “We’re just...this is temporary. If it’s that big of a deal, I don’t have to bring her. I just thought...”

“No one said you couldn’t bring her,” Courtney corrected. “I think she’s amazing, and I’m a little bummed she’s not staying because she’d be really cool to hang out with.”

“Really?” Scarlett cried. “Like someone we can take to lunch and get mani-pedis with?”

“Exactly!” Courtney agreed. “I mean, you and I will always be BFF’s, but I think Violet would be an awesome addition to our little group.”

“As long as she doesn’t try to steal you away...”

Things were spiraling, and he had no idea how to stop it.

Fortunately, his brother Dean had his back. “No one’s stealing your BFF, Scar. Violet’s just really nice, and trust me, you’ll like her too.” Then he looked at Kyle, sternly. “And you? Keep it in your pants at the wedding or I will have to kick your ass.” Next, he turned to Hunter. “We’re thrilled you invited Violet to the wedding, and for what it’s worth, we all think it’s great you’re so happy. And hopefully, she’ll stick around after Katie and Brian’s baby arrives.”

Yeah, so did he, but he wasn't going to say that here with this crowd.

"So...everything set for the wedding?" he asked in hopes of the topic turning toward something other than him.

Luckily, it worked.

For the remainder of the dinner, conversation flowed, and no one brought up Violet—or his dating life—again.

Until he was getting ready to leave and his father walked out to the car with him and Eli.

"Everything okay, Hunter?"

"Uh, yeah. Why?"

"You just got a little defensive in there over dinner. You know no one meant any harm."

He nodded. "I know, Dad. It's just...I don't know, after everything that happened with Melissa—how everyone warned me I was making a mistake—the last thing I want is anyone offering any opinions on my relationships. And I certainly don't want anyone pointing out how they think I'm making another mistake."

"Do you think you're making a mistake?"

Do I?

"Honestly, Dad? I don't know. It doesn't feel like a mistake, but..." he let out a long breath. "Other people have casual relationships with no regrets and don't call it a mistake, so...why can't I?"

"Because you're not like most people, Hunter. You give 100% of yourself—you lead with your heart—and that's not a bad thing. So for you to be involved with this girl, you must have feelings for her."

"I do, but..."

"She's not staying."

"Exactly."

"And yet you knew that from the get-go and you still got involved."

All he could do was nod.

Reaching out, Dominic Jones placed a reassuring hand on his son's shoulder. "You know it's going to hurt when she leaves."

"I know," he replied lowly.

"And know we're all here for you. Your brothers and sister may like to poke fun at you, but they love you and just want to see you happy."

"I know that too."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt you to laugh at yourself a little." Then he gave him a small clap on the back. "How about you let Eli spend the night again next weekend? Which night do you have off?"

"Unfortunately, I'm working all weekend and I'm doing my twenty-four on Saturday, so if you don't mind taking him Saturday night, it would be a big help."

"You can count on me, Hunter. You know I love having Eli over. We watch cartoons and work in the yard, and he even likes my cooking."

"I'm glad the two of you have fun. And really, thanks, Dad. I appreciate you."

After a round of hugs and making sure Eli was secured in his car seat, Hunter headed home.

For the next few hours, he bathed Eli, did some laundry, and played a game of Chutes and Ladders with him before putting him to bed. Sitting on the sofa in his living room, Hunter took a few minutes to just enjoy the quiet.

Until...he wasn't.

He usually didn't mind sitting alone at the end of the day. It gave him time to clear his mind and relax before he had to think about what he needed to do the next day. But right now, he didn't want to be in his head; he wanted to talk to someone.

Violet.

It wasn't unusual for them to talk on the phone at night, but this was the first time he felt desperate to talk to her.

Liar.

Okay, he was feeling it more and more, and the smart thing to do would be to fight the urge. Maybe it would make things easier in the long-run, but he knew no matter what, he was going to be devastated when she left.

Sometimes he tried to tell himself how this was all for the better. Violet was so different from him and clearly wanted things that he didn't and vice versa. You would think he would have learned his lesson already with his ex, but it was apparent he hadn't.

Resting his head back against the sofa cushions, he sighed.

"This is stupid," he murmured, reminding himself how Violet loved to travel—it was her livelihood—and it wasn't something he was interested in at all. She saw small town living as being quaint for a short time, but the way she talked about her life in Nashville, he knew she would never want to live in Magnolia full time.

So why was he setting himself up for another failure?

But he already knew the answer—because he couldn't help himself. She made him happy. And he'd rather be happy for a short time than not at all.

Before he over-thought himself to death, he pulled out his phone and called her.

"Hey, you," she said softly. "How was your day?"

"It was good. Had dinner with my family—as in everyone—over at my dad's—and just got Eli to bed a little while ago. How about you? How was the rest of your weekend?"

"Kind of uneventful. We did our Mexican night last night with Rose and it was all very yummy. There was so much food that we ate all the leftovers today. Not to brag, but...I can probably eat my weight in nachos."

He laughed with her. "Well, who couldn't? They're addictive!"

"Definitely! I'll have to work out for an extra hour or seven, but still worth it."

"Nothing wrong with that."

“Oh, and Rose is definitely bringing her car to your dad’s place tomorrow. I’m following her over so she can drop the car off and leave it with him. Do you mind if I introduce myself to him?”

“Mind? Why would I mind?”

“Well, I wasn’t sure if you told him about me.” She paused. “And just so we’re clear, I didn’t plan on walking up to him and introducing myself as the woman who’s sleeping with his son.”

He knew she was joking, but it still bothered him to even think like that.

“You know that’s not all we’re doing, Violet,” he gently chided her.

A soft sigh was her first response. “I know, but...if I let myself think too much about it...”

“Yeah,” he quickly interrupted. “I know.”

They were going to have to talk about it, eventually.

Just not right now.

“I’m off on Wednesday,” he said, changing the subject as he was doing more and more lately. “I was wondering if maybe I could still bring Eli to Katie’s for a few hours so you and I could go to lunch. What do you think?”

“Well, I don’t want to answer for Katie, so that part you’ll have to ask her yourself, but if she’s good with it, then I’m in. Although, she’s moving a little slow this weekend so...we may have to play it by ear.”

“Is she okay? Has she mentioned if anything’s out of the ordinary?”

“Like what?”

“Sometimes signs of labor aren’t obvious. Does her back hurt?”

“No more than usual. She just said she isn’t sleeping well, so I’m sure that’s just messing with her. But I’ll definitely ask about the back. Anything else?”

“The back, an upset stomach, and of course, the mucous plug.”

“Ugh...I don’t even want to *think* about what exactly that is, but...I’ll mention it.”

Hunter couldn't help but laugh. "You don't have to know it or see it, but maybe just casually ask Katie about it. If any of those things are going on, she should put all of her parents on alert."

"There's only you and one other family now. One decided to put their daughter in full-time pre-pre-school, and the other got the option to work from home. I didn't even know pre-pre-school was a thing, but apparently it's a private school so...yeah. But I will talk to her about it once we're off the phone."

"Should I let you go?" he asked and secretly wished she'd reply with "never."

"No, we're good. She's putting Kira to bed, and we have a habit of sitting out on the back deck at night and end our day looking up at the stars while drinking tea." She laughed softly. "I would kind of prefer to end it with a glass of wine, but it just seems mean to drink it in front of her. I mean, I sometimes do, but when we're out there relaxing, I drink tea."

"You're a good friend, Violet."

"Thank you. I really do try."

"I don't think you need to try so hard. You're just a good person." She got quiet and Hunter had a feeling he'd embarrassed her. Not that it mattered because it was true. No doubt Violet wasn't used to being praised by people who genuinely cared about her, but he wanted to make sure she knew how special and amazing she was.

After a moment, she cleared her throat. "Um...I should go. I just heard Katie say goodnight to Kira, so..."

"I'll see you in the morning when I drop Eli off."

"Have a good night, Hunter. Sweet dreams."

"They'll be filled with you, so of course they'll be sweet." And before she could argue or give him a sassy comeback, he whispered, "Good night, Violet," and hung up.

TEN

“Dominic Jones was so polite and so patient with me,” Rose was saying the following afternoon. “I’m really good about taking care of the regular maintenance on the car, but he took the time to explain all the options to me.”

“Wasn’t it just an oil change?” Katie asked, sounding confused. “How many options can there be?”

“Well, he explained about the different kinds of oil and which would be best for my car. No one’s ever done that for me before. I thought it was very sweet of him.”

Katie and Violet shared a look.

It appeared that Rose was a little smitten with Mr. Jones.

Actually, Violet realized it when she tried to introduce herself, but Rose simply kept asking Dominic questions and wouldn’t let her get a word in edge-wise. So she’d simply waved and waited out in the car.

And then she didn’t even try when she brought Rose back to pick up her car. Violet figured she’d get a chance to meet him at the wedding.

“He did a tire rotation for me for free and I’m going to bring the car back next week for a tune-up.” She sighed happily. “And he even offered to drive me home if I didn’t have anyone to help me. Isn’t that sweet?”

“Sure is,” Katie said, grinning. “It must run in the family.” She looked like she was about to say more when her face scrunched up and her hand went to her belly.

“Kate? You okay?” Violet asked, immediately on alert.

“Um...I think it’s another of those Braxton Hicks things.” She let out a long breath. “I’m sure I’m fine.”

But Violet wasn’t taking any chances. She pulled out her phone and decided to start timing things without drawing attention to herself. The best thing to do was to distract Katie.

“So, Rose,” she began while keeping one eye on her friend, “did you know Dominic is single?”

“Oh...really?” she asked, smiling. “I didn’t. But then again, I don’t suppose it would have come up in a conversation about the best oil to use in a 2014 Ford Escape, right?”

“I don’t suppose it would,” Violet said and watched as Katie seemed to be relaxing. A quick glance at her watch showed the contraction lasted a minute. Now to see how soon another one hit. “Still, if you like him—and it seems like you do—maybe you could invite him for coffee or something. Especially if he drives you home next week.”

“Do you think that would be all right?” Rose asked nervously. “Is that appropriate to do with your mechanic?”

Katie stood and slowly joined them by the kitchen island. “I think coffee is completely harmless. And who knows? Maybe it will lead to him asking you to dinner sometime.”

The idea seemed to please Rose, and she started talking about all the possibilities a date with Dominic could lead to. It was a good distraction, but Violet was watching Katie like a hawk.

“Ooo...Violet, do you think we could double date? You know, you and Hunter and me and Dominic?”

Oh, good lord...

“Yeah, Vi,” Katie chimed in with a mischievous grin. “Do you think that could happen?”

Now wasn’t the time to argue, so she just went with it.

“Sure! I bet that would be a lot of fun,” she replied enthusiastically. “We could go to Michael’s or maybe one of the fancier places and do it up right!”

Rose was beaming, Katie was trying not to laugh, and Violet tried to push images of double dating with the older couple out of her mind.

“Or maybe I can make dinner at my place for the four of us!” Rose suggested. “My fried chicken recipe has won awards over the years. I’ll bet we could work together on a menu, Violet! I’ll make the main course, you can make the appetizers, and we’ll ask the boys to bring dessert! Won’t that be fun?”

How did we get from the two of them having coffee to me making appetizers for a dinner party?

“Uh...sure. But why don’t you see how coffee goes first?”

Nodding, Rose agreed. “You’re right. You’re right. For all we know, Dominic might be dating someone.” She sighed. “I hope he’s not dating anyone. I’d really like a chance to get to know him.”

“And you feel this way just because he talked motor oil to you?” Katie asked, her hand going to her belly again.

“Kate?”

“Um...maybe start timing these,” she said, and it was obvious she was tense.

For the next hour, the contractions were growing more intense and consistent, and Violet tried so hard to be calm and levelheaded, but she was starting to freak out. There was a knock at the door and she ran for it and practically sagged with relief when she saw it was Hunter. He took one look at her and knew something was wrong.

“Katie?” he asked quietly, and when she nodded, he kissed her quickly on the cheek and made his way over to where the action was at.

Violet watched in awe as he calmly talked to her friend and got all the information on what was going on. After a minute, he turned to Rose.

“Rose, would you be able to stay with Kira and Eli for a little while? I’ll call one of my brothers or my dad to come and pick him up, but I’m going to go with Katie and Violet to the hospital if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course! Of course! Oh, this is so exciting! I can’t believe the day is finally here, and I’m so glad I took a chance and moved close by so I can help with Kira!”

Okay, that was one hurdle crossed, she thought, before realizing it was only the beginning.

“Vi, can you get Katie’s bag while I make my calls?” Hunter asked, and she nodded even as she couldn’t understand how he could be so calm.

Ten minutes later, they were all in Violet’s car and on their way to the hospital. “Is there anyone you want me to call, Katie? I mean, I know Rose is making some but...anyone else I’m supposed to reach out to? A friend who did Lamaze with you or something?”

“No,” she panted. “Just wish Brian was here.”

So do I...

Maybe Hunter was a mind-reader or perhaps he was just normally helpful in every situation, but he took over talking to Katie for the rest of the drive. And when they got to the hospital, he walked her in while Violet parked the car. By the time she walked into the hospital, she figured she was off the hook and her job was done. But just as she was about to breathe a big sigh of relief, Hunter came jogging toward her.

“Oh, good. There you are. They’re taking Katie up to labor and delivery and you need to go with them, so...”

She froze.

Well, her head was wildly shaking back and forth, but no words were coming out of her mouth.

“Vi,” he began calmly. “Katie’s having her baby. This is what you’re here for and she’s counting on you!”

It suddenly felt way too hot. Her throat was dry, and she felt like everything was starting to spin.

Hunter’s arms immediately went around her, and he led her over to the nearest set of chairs and sat her down. Crouching in front of her, she could see the concern on his face. “Okay, deep breaths,” he said softly. “Just focus on breathing and I’ll go get you some water. I’ll be right back.”

But Violet knew all the water in the world wasn’t going to help her.

Breathe. Just breathe...

Before she knew it, Hunter was back and handing her a cup of water. She drank it because she knew he wanted her to, but all it managed to do was kill three seconds.

When he sat down beside her, he took one of her hands in his. “What’s going on?”

Later, she knew she’d be mortified by the blathering she was about to do, but...she couldn’t seem to stop it.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen!” she cried. “I mean, I knew Katie was going to have the baby, but...we never talked about me being the one with her! I don’t know anything about birthing a baby! There were no classes or videos or anything!” Looking at him as the hysteria threatened to overwhelm her, she went on. “Shouldn’t she have someone who has a clue about childbirth be with her? Shouldn’t I have some sort of qualifications? You know what I’m qualified for? Booking the baby its first vacation! That’s it!” Groaning, she got to her feet.

“Violet, it’s not...”

But she wasn’t listening. “Not once did Katie say I was her labor coach! I just assumed there was going to be someone else with her! Why would she

think I could do this?" By now, she was practically in his face as more insanity poured out. "I was here to be a distraction for her—someone to keep her company—not someone to remind her to breathe or push or..." She shuddered. "Or cut the cord!"

Slowly, Hunter came to his feet and gently grasped her by the shoulders. "Vi, stop. It's okay. You're spiraling."

"You don't understand! I..."

He gave her a gentle shake. "I do understand, okay? I get it. But you need to pull it together because Katie needs you. Now!"

Reaching up, she frantically cupped his face. "You have to come with me, Hunter! Please! I...I don't want to mess this up!"

For a minute, she seriously thought he was going to tell her no, but with a curt nod, he stepped back and took one of her hands in his and led them across the lobby and back to the room where Katie was finishing getting checked in. When she spotted the two of them, she looked confused.

"If it's okay with you, Kate," he said carefully, "I'm coming up too. Violet's a little nervous and..."

"It's fine," she replied around another contraction, and once she seemed to relax, their little group began making their way up to labor and delivery.

The nurse was talking to Katie, and Violet knew she had a death grip on Hunter's hand. By the time they were in the elevator, she was beginning to resign herself to what was happening.

"You're going to be fine," he whispered in her ear. "You've got this. Just do what you've been doing since you came—distract Katie and encourage her through the contractions. That's it."

Turning her head and going up on her tiptoes, she whispered back, "I don't want to...you know...see the baby being born. I can stay up near her head, right?"

"Oh, my God, I can totally hear you," Katie whined. "Yes, you can stay up by my head, no, you don't have to see anything." Then she glanced at

Hunter. “And you better *not* see anything!”

Violet breathed a sigh of relief even as Hunter promised to keep his eyes at the head of the bed.

And once they were all gowned up and in the delivery room, the smile Hunter gave her told her he believed in her and that he was there for her.

Other than Katie, no one else had ever made her feel that way.

* * *

THIS SO WASN'T the way he envisioned his night going, but...here he was.

His father was picking up Eli and taking him home with him, and Hunter had no idea when he'd be leaving the hospital.

Although things seemed to be moving along rapidly. Katie had gone from no signs of labor just a few hours ago, to being at eight centimeters. Glancing over at Violet, he noted she still looked a little pale, but she was chatting away with Katie and doing a great job of keeping her calm.

So what am I doing here?

Then he remembered. He was here for Violet.

Technically, it should have been that he was here for Katie's benefit, and he was. Just in a kind of roundabout way.

One hour turned into two without much happening, but then...shit got real.

“Okay, Katie. Here we go,” her OB said calmly. “Let's get ready to meet your baby.”

Hunter had been there when Eli was born and had delivered three babies as part of the EMT squad, but this was the first time he wasn't sure what to do with himself. Violet was standing at Katie's right shoulder, so he opted to go to the left, and together they held her hands and helped her sit up and became a synchronized cheering squad while she pushed.

It took a little over an hour for little Benjamin Kristoff Holden to make his way into the world, and once Katie got to hold him, everyone relaxed.

Unable to help himself, he asked, “Kristoff?”

Smiling, Katie nodded. “We promised Kira she could help name the baby. She picked Elsa for a girl and Kristoff for a boy.” She looked up at him and winked. “We never said it would be the baby’s first name, so technically...”

“You’re not breaking any promises,” he finished for her.

“Exactly.” With a very contented sigh, she kissed her son’s tiny head.

Hunter looked over at Violet and saw tears streaming down her face as she looked down at Katie and the baby.

Without being too obvious, he walked around to her side of the bed and luckily the nurses were scurrying around to help mother and baby and it was the perfect time to step out into the hallway. As soon as the door was shut behind them, he pulled Violet into his arms and she sobbed for several minutes.

Tucking a finger under her chin, he smiled down at her. “You okay?”

“It was...it was amazing,” she said softly, wiping her eyes. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it. I wanted to scream at the doctor to help more and to take away Katie’s pain, but when he held Benjamin up, it was like...everything stopped.” Her eyes were wide with wonder as she looked up at him. “He was both gross and beautiful all at once, and it was crazy to believe I was standing there as he was making his entrance into the world.”

“It’s pretty incredible.”

“And I got to be there for it.” She started tearing up again. “Brian missed it, but I got to be there to see his son born. How unfair is that?”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing about myself.” He held her tighter, kissing the top of her head. “I’m proud of you.”

She pulled back slightly. “You...you are? Why? I was a blathering idiot earlier.”

“No, you weren’t. You were scared, and you were worried you weren’t going to be able to help your friend. Why? Because you’re a good person, Violet.” Another kiss. “You did an amazing job in there. Katie’s lucky to have you as a friend.”

When she started to cry again, he thought he’d said something wrong, but...

“She’s the only family I’ve got,” she said against his chest. “Now she has Brian and Rose and Kira and Benjamin and...she’s the luckiest person in the world.”

As much as his family made him crazy sometimes, Hunter knew how fortunate he was to have them. There was no way he could fully understand what Violet was feeling. It killed him to think of her being all alone in the world—even though she had Katie—and it just about gutted him to know she’d be going back out into that world in a matter of weeks.

And yeah, he was pretty sure he was close to crushing her because he was hugging her so hard, but he couldn’t seem to let go.

Luckily, she was holding him just as tight.

Behind them, someone cleared their throat and Hunter turned his head to see one of the delivery nurses standing there.

“Katie was asking for Violet,” she said hesitantly.

“Thank you.” Hunter kissed the top of Violet’s head one more time and reluctantly let her go. “Why don’t you go check on Katie and I’m going to call my dad and make sure he got Eli okay.”

She started to walk away but stopped before she went more than a few feet. “Hunter?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you,” she said, and he could see her pulling herself together right before his eyes. “I don’t know what I would have done without you

today.”

But before he could respond, she walked away.

It was probably for the best because he almost blurted out how he would always be there for her.

And that would have only complicated an already complicated situation.

Sighing, he raked his hand through his hair and pulled out his phone and immediately called his father. “Hey, Dad. How’s it going?”

“Hey! We’re good. Having fun with Kira and Rose,” Dominic replied. “So? Is there a baby?”

“Wait. Why are you still over at Katie’s?”

“Well, I got here, and the kids were playing so nicely, and Rose asked me if I wanted a cup of coffee, and I said yes. Then we got to talking and decided to order a pizza. We’re having a wonderful time. Can you believe we just met earlier today for the first time? Such a small world, right?” He laughed softly. “She’s so excited about the baby and was hoping to hear something soon. So? Are you calling with news?”

“News?” His head was spinning a bit. It seemed a little surreal that his father was willingly hanging out with someone he barely knew—and a woman no less!—and he was being downright chatty!

“About the baby?” Dominic prompted. “I thought that’s why you were calling.”

“Dad, I was calling you to make sure you and Eli were okay. I had no idea you would still be at Katie’s.”

“Okay, but now that you know it’s where I am, are you going to answer the question?” He paused. “Oh, wait...Rose’s phone is ringing. Maybe it’s Katie calling to give her an update.”

“Um...maybe...”

“It probably would be better to hear the news from Katie instead of you—not that it wouldn’t be appreciated—but it probably isn’t your place to be calling like this.”

“Dad!” he cried out with exasperation. “I just said...”

“It’s a boy!” he heard Rose cry out. “A beautiful baby boy!”

“Well alright,” Dominic said happily. “Did you hear that, Hunt? It’s a boy!”

“Dad, I’m here! I was in the room when he was born!”

“Then why didn’t you say that when I asked you?”

Hunter pinched the bridge of his nose and prayed for patience because this conversation was making him crazy. “Dad,” he began calmly, “Katie had a baby boy. It’s late—it’s past Eli’s bedtime—are you taking him home with you or to my place?”

“I’ll probably take him home with me. It’s been a long day and I’m pretty beat too and would like to sleep in my own bed. Are you gonna be okay?”

“Me? Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“Well, you worked all day and have been at the hospital for hours so...”

Now that he had a minute to relax, he realized he was kind of tired. “I’m a little tired myself, but I’m going to be here for a little while longer since I rode here with Violet, and then I’m going to grab something to eat since I missed dinner.”

“I’m sure Violet did too. Maybe the two of you should stop for something to eat on the way home.”

“Yeah, maybe...”

“Dean’s opening the shop tomorrow so I’ve got the morning off,” his father went on. “I know Katie had the baby sooner than everyone expected so I’m sure you have to work out options for Eli.”

“Oh, crap. I didn’t even think of that...”

His father chuckled again. “Now I know you’re tired. If you don’t have a plan of action ready, then I know something’s up.”

“Dad...”

“You go and do what you need to do and I’ve got Eli tomorrow—all day if you need me to—so don’t worry. Now go and let Katie get some rest and you and Violet grab some dinner.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll talk in the morning.”

“Thanks, Dad. Kiss Eli for me.”

“I will. Goodnight.”

Hanging up, he slid the phone back in his pocket before he went back into Katie’s room. She was sitting up in the bed and looked a little better than she had a short while ago. When she spotted him, she smiled. “I was wondering if you were coming back or if I had scared you off.”

“I’m pretty tough,” he said, walking closer to the bed. “And I don’t scare easily.”

“Thank God.” She sighed happily. “They’re getting ready to move me to a real room in a few minutes, and I just got off the phone with Rose, so I know Kira’s good. The only thing left to do is try to get a message to Brian. I did what I could, but...”

A small cry came from the corner of the room and Hunter turned to see Violet sitting in a chair cradling Benjamin in her arms—and the sight hit him like a sucker punch to the gut.

She was gazing down at the baby and talking softly to him, and she looked more at peace than he’d ever seen her. When she looked up at him, she smiled, and he knew at that moment he was in deep trouble.

He was falling in love with her.

Before the thought could take hold, nurses came in, and it became mildly chaotic as they put Benjamin in the bassinet and secured Katie to move them to their private room.

“Do you want me to stay?” Violet asked before they moved the bed at all.

“No,” Katie said around a yawn. “It’s been a long day and I’m kind of looking forward to having some quality time with this little guy. But thank you.” She looked over at Hunter. “Both of you. You have no idea how much it means to me that you were here to help.”

After a round of goodbyes, Hunter and Violet were alone in the now-empty room.

“So,” he said after a minute. “Are you hungry? I thought we could grab something to eat on the way home.”

She studied him for a moment. “Um...yeah. Sure.” Then she nodded more enthusiastically. “Okay, yeah. Sorry. I’m definitely hungry. What were you thinking? Pizza? Burgers?”

“I guess we can grab a pizza and take it back to Katie’s. I’m sure you need to get back so Rose can go home, right? Or did Rose take Kira to her place? Plus, I need to get my truck.”

“She’s staying the night,” Violet told him as she picked up her purse. “But I’m sure you need to get home to Eli and relieve your dad, right?”

He smiled as they walked out of the room and toward the elevator. “He took Eli home with him so I’m in no rush either.” Violet came to a halt, and he was a few feet ahead of her before he realized it. “What? What’s the matter?”

Her smile was slow and a little sexy, and yet he had no idea why.

“Well, I guess I was just wondering since Kira is taken care of and Eli is with your dad...it means we kind of have the night to ourselves.”

Ah, ...he hadn’t thought about that.

But now that she brought it up...

Moving in close to her, he said, “Maybe we can pick up something on the way and take it back to my place.”

She nodded. “My thoughts exactly.”

“Do you need to let Rose know you won’t be home?”

Rather than answer, she started walking toward the elevator again.

“Violet?”

Glancing over her shoulder, she said, “Who do you think suggested I not come home tonight?”

Right then and there, he made a mental note to thank Rose the next time he saw her.

It would be wrong to run out of the hospital like a couple of kids leaving on the last day of school, so he did his best to keep things casual as they made their way out to her car. Once they were pulling out of the parking lot, he finally asked, “So what are we getting? I can call in and save us some time.”

She grinned at him. “Let’s go with a pizza—how about pepperoni and mushrooms?”

“Sounds good.” He made the call and when he was done, he mentioned how he didn’t have any beer.

“Oh, that is fine with me. At this point, water would be more than okay with me.”

“I do have some red wine if you’re interested.”

“Hunter?”

“Hmm?”

“It doesn’t matter to me what you have to drink.” She glanced at him. “I’m just looking forward to spending the night with you. As it is, the pizza will be cold before we finish it.”

“Violet, I really love the way you think.”

The ride to pick up the pizza seemed to take forever, but once they had it, in the blink of an eye, they were pulling into his driveway.

Unfortunately, his stomach growled—loudly—and he knew they were going to have to eat at least a little bit before they did anything else.

And the thought of waiting another moment to get Violet into his bed seemed like torture.

Inside, she grabbed some plates while he poured them each a glass of wine because...well...it seemed like there should be wine. Hunter handed her a glass and lifted his in a toast. "To little Benjamin Kristoff," he said. "It's a night I will always remember, and I'm glad I was a part of it."

Violet lifted her glass. "To Benjamin."

They were about to touch glasses when he paused. "And to you, Violet. You did a great job tonight. I know I said it earlier, but...it bears repeating. You were an excellent labor coach."

Blushing, she tapped her glass to his. "Thank you."

They drank and then essentially dove into the pizza. He swore he'd only eat one slice, but one led to two, and two somehow led to four. Violet only ate two before she had her hand on her stomach and was leaning away from the table. "I know I could eat more, but I'm choosing not to," she said. "But feel free to finish what's left."

"How about we save them for later?" he suggested as he came to his feet.

"All two slices?" she teased.

"One for you, one for me," he reasoned.

Violet stood and started to clean off the table, but he stopped her. "Later. Right now, I want to take you to my room and then...take you."

"Oh, my," she replied breathlessly. "I like the sound of that."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "But...I wouldn't mind if you did a little taking right here in the kitchen too."

That took him a little off guard.

But not much.

Reaching out, Hunter hauled her into his arms and lifted her. With her legs banded around his waist, he claimed her mouth in a kiss that was full of promise. Maneuvering them across the room, he sat her down on the

countertop and realized this was something he'd never done before, and it was more than a little exciting.

Violet pulled back suddenly—effectively ending the kiss—and he watched as she took her top off and tossed it onto a nearby chair. Her bra was black and lacey and looked so delicate he was afraid to touch it.

As if reading his mind, she leaned forward. “Go ahead. You can buy me a new one if you like.”

It was all the motivation he needed.

But rather than use his hands, he bent and kissed his way along the edge—over each glorious swell of her breasts—before using his teeth to get to the skin underneath.

Violet cried out his name as her hands anchored into his hair. Her breath hitched as she moved against him and there wasn't a doubt in his mind that he was not only buying her some new lingerie, but they also weren't going to the bedroom any time soon.

And for once, he embraced the chaos.

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ELEVEN

The sun was just starting to come up and Violet was sitting out on the back deck with one-week-old baby Benjamin.

This had sort of become their routine the last few days because poor Katie wasn't getting enough sleep. Violet would get up with the baby at five a.m., feed him from a bottle Katie prepared the night before, and they'd sit and enjoy the sunrise together. The temperature was already warm at this time of day, and still she kept him swaddled up tight so he wouldn't get any kind of chill.

It was amazing how much she was embracing this crazy new schedule. There was something to be said about the peacefulness of the early morning and she was seriously in love with this precious baby. He had a sweet temperament and even though she'd never say it to Katie, she thought he cried less for her.

"But we're not going to tell your mommy that, are we?" she said softly, caressing his cheek. "You and I know the truth. Aunt Violet has the magic touch, but it will be our little secret, right?"

Yeah, she even loved talking to him. They'd had more than one heart-to-heart talk during the morning bottle. She found it made her feel a little less crazy to be speaking out loud to herself when there was a baby in her

arms. He had no idea what she was saying, but she kept her tone soothing, and it was helping her work through some of her...issues.

Mainly where Hunter was concerned.

Not that they *really* had issues, but...she was going to be heading back to Nashville soon, and it wasn't as appealing as she once thought it would be.

Of course, there wasn't any real rush for her to leave Magnolia Sound. Brian was coming home, and she had a feeling he and Katie would appreciate not having a houseguest, but...she didn't have to stay with them. Last night she had gone online to look at some weekly rentals here in town. Since it was tourist season, there weren't any available, but there was a bed-and-breakfast she found had availability for at least a week.

Ideally, she wished she could just stay with Hunter, but she didn't want to even suggest it. Eli might only be three, but she felt weird about moving herself in—even temporarily.

So where did that leave her?

"I wish I knew, Ben," she said, taking the bottle from his mouth and positioning him over her shoulder to rub his tiny back. "Of all the times for me to not want to pick up and go, why did it have to be now?"

Yeah, it didn't matter how many times she said it—either out loud or in her head—Violet had never felt the pull to stay put someplace. Traveling had filled a void in her life and given her a sense of purpose while also keeping so many of her demons at bay. Picking up and moving on to the next travel destination or planning another trip gave her control of her destiny—or, in a less dramatic sense, simply gave her control over her own life. Since meeting Hunter, however, a little of that wanderlust had vanished.

She realized she never did look up any more details for the California road trip and didn't feel like it was something she wanted to do.

Especially by herself.

Now if Hunter were up to it, she would love driving all over California with him. Or anywhere, for that matter. The need to experience a romantic getaway with him was so strong she knew it would be the only trip she'd be able to focus on.

Maybe if she planned something, he'd be open to it. Eli could stay with his grandfather, or one of Hunter's siblings, right? It shouldn't be too hard for him to get away for a week. He had time off coming to him while Katie was on maternity leave, so...why not book them someplace romantic to go?

Benjamin let out a rather noisy little burp, and she maneuvered him until he was cradled in her arms again. "For such a tiny boy, you let out very loud burps, little man. Good gracious." He was already falling back to sleep, but she was content to stay where she was for a little longer. Katie would be up in another hour or so, but for now, all was right with her world.

While everything was still quiet, Violet thought about potential getaways for her and Hunter. They could go down to Hilton Head or Myrtle Beach if he didn't want to go too far. Although she was pretty sure she'd have the same challenges finding a hotel at a coastal resort as she had trying to find a room here in Magnolia.

"We could get on a plane and go someplace," she mused. "But where?" From everything Hunter had ever told her, traveling was not his thing, but she figured it was mainly because of his circumstances with his ex. Under the right conditions, she didn't have a doubt he'd enjoy getting away for at least a few days.

"Maybe the mountains." Looking down at Benjamin, she smiled as his little lips puckered like he was still sucking on his bottle. "What do you think, baby boy? You think a trip to the mountains at one of those fancy resorts might be appealing to Hunter?"

She almost laughed at how ridiculous she was being. There was a part of her that really couldn't picture Hunter at a fancy spa-type resort. He would probably be more at ease at something more rustic.

“Options,” she said quietly. “I’ll have to have a few options for him to choose from.” Holding Benjamin a little closer, she kissed him softly on his head and decided to go inside and pull out her laptop.

“Look at me getting stuff done while holding you, baby boy. You should be seriously impressed. I wasn’t nearly this competent when your sister was born.” Then she paused. “Then again, I wasn’t living with your parents and helping out nearly as much, but still, yay us!” And with another kiss on his head, she got comfortable and began looking at some of the most romantic vacation spots that weren’t the beach or a cruise or anything too over the top that Hunter immediately wouldn’t like.

“Sort of eliminates a lot of stuff, but I am up for the challenge.” Then, for the next several minutes, she read descriptions of hotels and destinations out loud to Benjamin. Some of them sounded fantastic—so much so she wished she could get in her car today and take them there.

“Listen to this,” she said quietly. “Private, rustic cabins perfect for lovers. King-sized bed, fireplace, private hot tub, and a view of the mountains. Where do I sign up?”

“If you happen to find out, let me know,” Katie said before yawning loudly.

“You looking for a getaway to the mountains too?”

“In different circumstances, I would be all over that. But somehow, a romantic cabin wouldn’t be quite so romantic with an infant and a four-year-old.”

“You may have a point.”

“Trust me. I do.” She walked over and carefully took her son from Violet’s arms and kissed him. “Was he okay for you?”

“Are you kidding? He is perfect.” And as she watched Katie walk around cooing to the baby, Violet felt a little...envious.

Okay, a lot envious.

What is going on with me?

“I know I’m biased,” Katie said, interrupting her thoughts, “but he really is. Kira wasn’t nearly this agreeable.”

“Oh, stop. She was a good baby too. I just think you and Brian were a little more uptight because she was your first.”

“Maybe, but other than being a bit of a night owl, this little guy is just...”

“You can say it. He’s perfect.”

Katie grinned. “Yeah, he is.”

Violet closed her laptop and got up to stretch. “Did I hear you talking to Brian late last night?”

“Five days,” she said excitedly and immediately cringed when Benjamin startled in her arms. “He’ll be home in five days!”

“Oh, my goodness! That’s amazing!”

“I know! It’s a whole week sooner than we were expecting, so...”

“So...?” And then it hit her. “So five’s a crowd, huh?”

“What? No! Oh, my gosh, no! I was going to say it’s not a lot of time to prepare.”

“Prepare? Like how? This is his house, and you just had a baby. What could you possibly have to prepare for?”

“Just...give me a minute,” Katie said before going and placing Benjamin in his crib. When she came back into the living room two minutes later, she looked a little frazzled. “I need to make sure all his favorite foods are here, the whole place needs a good cleaning, and...and...his car could use a tune-up since it’s been sitting so long and...”

It would be wrong to give her a good shake and tell her to relax, so Violet opted to walk over and gently grasp her friend by the shoulders.

“Kate? Relax. I am sure we can get most of that stuff done, but if we can’t, it’s still going to be okay. Brian’s not going to be expecting perfection when he gets home. He’s just going to be so happy to see you and Kira and to meet his son.” She smiled. “It’s going to be amazing.”

And just when she thought she had said all the right things, Katie's face scrunched up, and she started to cry.

Hard.

"Oh, crap! Oh, Katie, I'm sorry! I just thought..." But she never got to finish because she found herself in her friend's fierce embrace.

And it wasn't a bad place to be.

So she hugged her back, knew in her mind this was just hormones, and came to the realization she wasn't going to have a moment's peace until Brian was home.

* * *

"ELI, LET'S GO!" Hunter called out with more snap than he meant to.

"You okay, Hunt?" It wasn't the first time his father had asked him that this week and more than likely wasn't going to be the last.

"It's just been a long day, Dad, and I still have a shit-ton of stuff to do."

"Today was your last day of work for a few weeks, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

"So then what's the hurry? You're going to have plenty of time on your hands to do anything you want or need to do," his father stated simply.

If only...

He hadn't seen Violet since she left his house the morning after the baby was born. They talked and texted every day, but it wasn't enough.

And it was making him more than a little irritable.

"Hey, Dad!" his brother Kyle called out as he walked through the front door with a couple of pizzas. "I brought dinner!" He grinned on his way to the kitchen. "You and Eli staying?"

"Uh...no. I didn't know you were bringing dinner," he murmured and looked for where Eli was.

“So, stay,” Kyle said. “There’s plenty here and I’m sure you don’t feel like going home and putting on your apron.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” he demanded.

His brother stared at him blandly before shrugging. “Still in a pissy mood, huh?”

“What the hell...”

“Dude, you seriously sound like a broken record. Get a new phrase, for crying out loud. And while you’re at it, maybe find a way to get Violet to come out and help you get out of this mood you’re in.”

“I’m not in a mood...” But even he knew he was lying.

“Trust me, you are so in a mood,” his brother countered.

“Okay, fine. I’m in a mood. Happy?”

“Always,” Kyle said with a big grin. “Life is good. Why be depressed or pissed off?” He shrugged. “Life is all how you look at it.”

Yeah, easy for him to say, Hunter thought. His brother had no real responsibilities—he only had himself to worry about. No doubt, if he were a single father who was suddenly thrust into the role of sole parenting while trying to work a full-time job while his daycare provider was on maternity leave, maybe he’d understand.

And all of those things combined hadn’t put him in the foul mood he was in.

He missed Violet.

Needed her.

Craved her.

Knew he was going slowly insane without her.

None of these things were good signs. If anything, this week should have been precisely what he needed to get his head on straight. Now that Katie had given birth and Brian was coming home, he knew Violet was leaving. So why wasn’t he taking advantage of this time to work on making a break from her?

Because I don't want a break from her. I want her to stay.

Oh, right. That.

It's like they both knew it was coming, but neither wanted to bring it up. And the fact that they hadn't had any alone time together all week wasn't helping. Violet was busy helping Katie with the baby and getting everything ready for when Brian came home, and he was working all kinds of crazy hours before taking his leave of absence that it was helping them both avoid the one thing they needed to talk about the most.

At least...he did.

"Uncle Kyle!" Eli called out as he ran into the room and jumped into Kyle's arms. And that's when Hunter realized maybe it would be a good thing for them to stay and hang out and have dinner together. It was better than the two of them home alone—especially since he knew he was a little short-tempered.

As if reading his mind, his father walked by and said, "I'll set two more plates at the table." And just like that, Hunter felt like he could breathe a little easier.

For the next hour, he talked about his plans to go through all the boxes of Eli's stuff they had gotten from Melissa while he was home for the next several weeks and the possibility of doing some work in his yard—expanding the deck and building a jungle gym for Eli.

"Why expand the deck?" Kyle asked. "You ask me, the two of you are going to outgrow that house. You should look into adding another room or two. You know I could help you with it."

"It's not like it's something we could do, just the two of us," he countered. "We'd need engineers and architects and..."

"Yeah, and I work for a construction company, so you'd have access to all of it," Kyle reasoned. "You know it was something you talked about when you bought the place."

It had been something he planned on, but...life had other plans for him.

“It’s fine for us for now. And there’s no harm in making the yard someplace a little more enjoyable for us. I know when everyone comes over that it would be nice to eat outside and have more furniture out there—maybe add a firepit with some seating around it...”

“I guess. But wouldn’t you love to have a second story with a real master suite for you with your own bathroom?”

Would he? Hell yes! But it wasn’t practical. “I wouldn’t be comfortable sleeping upstairs and Eli being downstairs.” He shuddered at the thought of it. “Maybe when he’s older, but...”

“Maybe by then you could move to a bigger place,” his father chimed in. “You know the house was just a starter house for you, Hunter. And there are a lot of great places available in the area. We’re still a little untapped here—the tourists aren’t moving here full-time yet. You’d be smart to think about selling and getting something with more room before more people realize what a great place Magnolia Sound is.”

After that, Kyle shared news on what he was working on with Coleman Construction and how much he was hoping to get promoted to a foreman position. There wasn’t a doubt in Hunter’s mind that his brother could handle the position, but Kyle tended to be a little impatient and impulsive. Hopefully, his bosses would start him out on a small job if they did promote him.

There was never a lull in the conversation, but by the time they were done eating, Hunter realized his son had fallen asleep—his head resting on the table.

“Okay, I think that’s my cue to get going,” he said as he stood. “You must have really worn him out today, Dad.”

“Well, we worked in the yard. He helped me plant some vegetables and seemed to enjoy digging.”

Carefully, Hunter picked him up and got him settled in his arms. After a quiet round of goodnights, he made the cautious effort of getting Eli in the

car without waking him up. Although, it wouldn't be the worst thing if he were awake, but sometimes he tended to be more of a bear who refused to go back to sleep.

By the time they were home a few minutes later, it was obvious Eli was out for the count. Hunter changed him into his pajamas and tucked him into bed and breathed a sigh of relief when he pulled the bedroom door closed behind him.

He wandered from room to room and knew there were plenty of things for him to do, but...it was late, he was tired, and there would be plenty of time to do work around the house tomorrow.

And over the next few weeks while he wasn't working.

With nothing else to do and knowing he was going to do it eventually, he sat down, pulled out his phone and texted Violet.

Hunter: Hey. You around?

Violet: Hey, you! How was your day?

Before he could answer, she was typing again.

Violet: Wait...it's kind of early for you to be texting. What's Eli doing?

And yeah, his heart kicked hard in his chest just like it did every time she thought of his son first.

Hunter: Dad wore him out and he was practically asleep in his pizza. He slept through the ride home and even through me changing him into his pajamas.

Violet: Aww...that is completely adorable <3

As much as he enjoyed texting with her, he much preferred hearing the sound of her voice.

Hunter: Can I call you?

Violet: It's a little loud here right now. Brian actually came home today. He surprised Katie by ringing the doorbell an hour ago.

Hunter: Holy crap!

Violet: Yeah, it's been a wild and emotional night for sure. What are you doing right now?

As much as he hated to sound vulnerable, his response was out before he could stop it.

Hunter: Missing you.

Violet: Aww...

Violet: Give me fifteen minutes and I'll call you. We're just finishing dinner.

Hunter: Okay. Talk to you in a few.

Putting the phone down, Hunter stood and kicked off his boots and decided he might as well take the next few minutes to get comfortable by changing into a pair of athletic shorts. Looking at his bed, he wished he had just invited her over. Eli was a heavy sleeper, and although he'd never been tempted to invite a woman to spend the night while his son was home, Violet wasn't just a random hook-up. She meant something to him. And while he had no idea what the morning would look like if Violet *did* spend the night, he didn't think it would be overly traumatic to his son.

"I guess Dean's not the only overly cautious brother," he murmured, walking into the kitchen and grabbing a bottle of water. And then, cursing himself for the missed opportunity, he made his way back to the living room and got comfortable on the couch.

While he waited for Violet's call, he checked his emails and was about to play a game of solitaire when he thought about the conversation over dinner. Houses. With a shrug, he pulled up the site for a local realtor and figured it couldn't hurt to just see what kind of prices larger houses were going for. It wasn't like he needed a large home, but maybe something with three bedrooms—especially a master bedroom with its own bathroom.

And the image of sharing that room with Violet immediately came to mind and he groaned because...yeah, he had it bad.

There was a soft knock on the front door—so quiet he almost thought he'd imagined it. But when he heard it again, he slowly rose to his feet and walked over to answer it.

And there was Violet, standing on his front porch like an answer to a prayer.

"Violet," he said, feeling almost giddy. Holding out a hand to her, he invited her in. "What are you doing here?"

Blushing slightly, she smiled. "First, I'm sorry if it's not cool that I stopped by unannounced, but...it's Brian's first night home and I wanted to give them some privacy."

"Oh...uh...okay. I didn't know..."

Her hand immediately flew up to stop him. "Don't worry! I'm not suggesting I stay here!" she blurted out quickly. "I'm going to go and stay at a hotel down in Wilmington."

"Wilmington? But...that's kind of a long drive for you, isn't it?"

"In the grand scheme of things, not really. But the hotel in town—Magnolia on the Beach?—yeah, they didn't have any rooms available. Like I said, I wanted to give Katie and Brian their privacy." She let out a soft sigh and a small smile. "So...I just thought I'd stop in for a few minutes and say hey. So...hey."

So many thoughts were swirling around in his head and yet he couldn't get his mouth to utter any of them. When he saw Violet's smile start to fade and her expression turn to one of uncertainty and then regret, he knew he needed to snap out of it.

"You're not going to Wilmington," he finally said.

"Um...why? I already told Katie I wouldn't be home tonight. I thought about calling the B&B here in town, but I figured it was too late to do that."

"It's only eight o'clock, Vi. I'm pretty sure they're still open."

"You know what I mean. I don't think of them as being like a regular hotel." She shrugged. "I could be wrong, but...I don't know. I just figured a

hotel was the safer option.”

Moving in close, Hunter looked down at her. “The safest option is to stay here tonight. With me.”

Her dark eyes went wide. “Here?”

He nodded.

She looked beyond him—toward the hallway that led to his and Eli’s bedrooms. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Hunter. Eli could wake up and...”

“And he’d be thrilled to see you,” he assured her. Reaching up, he caressed her cheek. “Just like I’d be if I woke up and you were beside me.”

Her expression softened. “Hunter...”

“I’m asking you to stay, Violet.” Pausing, he shook his head. “I wanted to ask you when we were texting.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because I was being overly cautious.”

“So what changed in the last fifteen minutes?”

“Honestly?” Bending slightly, he rested his forehead against hers. “I’m tired of being cautious. I just want to be with you.”

It felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders at his admission and he held his breath as he waited for her response.

One delicate hand raked up through his hair. “And I really want to be with you. With Brian coming home, I don’t know when...”

But he never let her finish. Slowly, he closed the minute distance between them and gently claimed her lips with his. As much as he wanted to plunder and devour, he held himself in check. Hunter knew she was going to need to be coaxed into staying the night.

He could be wild with her.

Later.

He could unleash the beast she brought out in him.

Later.

For now, he wanted her to know that he was sure she should be here. And besides showing her like this, the kiss served to end their conversation. The last thing he wanted was to talk about her leaving. If Hunter had his way, she wouldn't be going back to Nashville except to pack up all her things so she could move here to Magnolia to be with him.

But for right now, he'd work on convincing her to stay for one night.

They could figure out the rest later.

Lifting his head, he smiled at the dazed woman staring back at him.

"Stay, Violet. Please."

He watched as she swallowed hard before nodding.

It was all the encouragement he needed.

Taking one of her hands in his, he first walked over and locked the front door. Next, he turned off the living room light. It wasn't until they were in his bedroom with the door closed that he let go of her hand and faced her.

"You're so beautiful."

There was that blush again as she shook her head. "You're crazy."

"No. Not crazy. I know exactly what I'm saying and what I'm seeing."

"Hunter..."

He guided her over to the bed and sat beside her. "I'm being presumptuous that you would want to come directly to bed. If you want to sit back and watch some TV or have something for dessert, then we can totally do that."

She seemed to consider his words for a moment before she spoke. "Do you want to know one of the most attractive things about you?"

And for some reason, that made him nervous. "Um...I don't know. Do I?"

With a soft chuckle, she took one of his hands in hers. "I've never met a man who always puts my needs and my comfort first." Smiling, she continued. "You always ask if it's what I want even when you know I'm

ready to climb you like a tree. And the fact that you refuse to put your own needs and wants before my own is seriously the sexiest thing about you.”

He had no idea what to say or how to respond.

Luckily, Violet wasn't looking for his words. She gracefully moved until her hands were braced on his shoulders and she was straddling his lap. It was his turn to swallow hard.

“I want you to know something, Hunter. It means a lot to me that you trust me enough to let me be here with you while Eli's home. If at any time you change your mind, I need you to promise me you'll say something and I'll go, no questions asked.”

“I would never do that...”

“Promise me, Hunter,” she quietly demanded.

So he nodded, even though he knew he'd never ask her to leave. If anything, he needed to find the words to ask her to stay beyond tonight.

But he'd deal with that later because right now, as his hands skimmed down her back before gently kneading her ass, the only thought in his mind was of all the things he wanted to do to her.

“This is where I want to be,” she said as if reading his mind. “And I want all the things you want, Hunter.”

“We'll have to be quiet,” he said because...well...he wasn't that far gone yet.

She made a sassy little zipping motion over her lips before winking at him. Leaning in, she whispered in his ear, “Although, I don't think I'm the noisy one here.”

Pulling back, he grinned. “Is that a challenge?”

“It is. You up for it?”

And yeah, he didn't miss the double meaning there.

“I'm up for all of it, Violet. All of you, all night.”

She pulled back before unbuttoning the sleeveless blouse she was wearing. When the hot pink lace beneath was on full display, she said, “It's

all yours. Take what you want.”

And he did.

Repeatedly.

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TWELVE

Violet squinted sleepily in the darkness until she spotted Hunter's bedside clock. It was a little after five in the morning and she knew it would be best for her to leave before Hunter woke up.

Not that she particularly wanted to. It was positively decadent to be in this bed with him wrapped around her. It was weird how she found herself sleeping better than she ever had—and not just while staying at Katie's, but ever.

Like...ever, ever.

But still, she felt uncomfortable about Eli finding her here. She adored that little boy more than she thought possible, and the last thing she wanted to do was upset him. So the smart thing to do was leave.

As if sensing the direction of her thoughts, Hunter's arm tightened around her, and she promised she'd just enjoy the feel of his warm body pressed up against her from head to toe for a few more minutes.

Five tops.

The next time she opened her eyes, there was sunlight streaming in from behind the window blinds, and Hunter was trailing kisses along her shoulder.

Damn the man. He knows that's one of my weaknesses...

"Good morning," he murmured between kisses.

“Good morning.” And yeah, she may have snuggled a little closer.

Who am I??

“I have to admit, I was afraid I’d wake up and find you gone.”

Swallowing hard, Violet looked over her shoulder at him. “You almost did.”

There was a flash of something in his expression that might have been hurt, but it was gone in the blink of an eye.

“What changed your mind?”

Okay, don’t be flippant, and don’t say something stupid.

Rolling over so she could face him—and good lord, he felt even better like this—Violet felt their legs tangle together and tried to not let it distract her.

“I know I wouldn’t be here if you didn’t think it was okay,” she said quietly. “But I’m not going to lie to you; I’m mildly uncomfortable.”

He immediately began putting some space between them and apologizing, but Violet quickly pulled him back in close.

“Not physically uncomfortable, Hunter,” she clarified. “I don’t want to upset or confuse Eli. His life has already been turned upside-down recently, and I don’t want to add to any issues he may be having.”

“Trust me, you’re not. If anything, you’ve helped him.”

That was brand new information. “I have?”

Nodding, he hugged her close, his chin resting on top of her head. “We’re a pretty loud family and I think we overwhelm Eli at times. He sits and listens, and he’ll answer questions if you ask him, but something about you...” He placed a soft kiss on her head before continuing. “It’s like you drew him out of his shell. That day when you first tumbled in the yard with him will forever be burned into my brain because it’s the first time I saw him being so carefree. He talks about you nonstop and tells everyone about the flips that you do and how you taught him to stand on his head.”

Her heart squeezed hard in her chest and it felt...foreign... like nothing she'd ever felt before. Whatever it was...it was threatening to overwhelm her, and she was starting to panic.

“Um...”

Hunter gently pulled back and smiled down at her with such affection and gratitude that she swore she was about to cry. “You’ve made a difference in his life, Violet, and I want you to know that.” He paused. “You’ve made a difference in both of our lives, so...thank you.”

Oh, God...she really was going to cry. Tears stung her eyes and all she could do was nod before burying her face against his chest. Luckily, Hunter must have known she needed a minute because one strong hand gently cradled her head while the other slowly smoothed up and down her back.

After several moments, he kissed her before saying, “Eli’s going to be up soon. We usually make some breakfast together and have a lazy morning. I’d really love it if you joined us, but if you’d rather not...”

Cursing the few stray tears that were still falling, she looked up at him. “Please don’t think I’m a weirdo...”

His soft chuckle was the first response, but he quickly schooled his features. “I don’t think you’re a weirdo, Violet. You’re a single woman who is probably used to sleeping in on a Saturday morning and having a lazy day until you’re ready to do something. Our day starts early and it’s lazy for us but not to other’s standards. There’s breakfast and cartoons and some random chores. Not that you’d have to help with them, but...I totally get it if you’d rather go.”

Did she?

Honesty was important to her, so she knew she needed to explain to Hunter what was going on in her head.

“I don’t remember a time when I was growing up that things were normal. Things were typically chaotic when my mother was alive, and it didn’t matter if it was a school day morning or a weekend, I usually had to

fend for myself. When I went into foster care, every home was different. I bounced around for a year or two before getting placed in the same house as Katie. The Michaels' were regimented—and I mean that in a positive way. There was a schedule that we followed, and while we always sat down to breakfast together, it..." She sighed as she searched for the right word. "It was still obvious—at least to me—that it wasn't my home. It wasn't my family. I was always on guard and waiting for the moment when I'd have to pack up and leave again."

She expected him to comment or tell her how sorry he was like most people did, but he didn't. He simply lay back and let her talk.

"You may not believe this, but...being around families—normal families—is a little hard for me because I'm not sure how to act."

"Just be you, Violet. There's no one else you need to pretend to be."

"That's just it, Hunter, I'm not even sure how to just be myself because...because..." And dammit, she couldn't stop the tears now even if she wanted to. "Because no one wanted me when I was myself. So I'm always trying to be who everyone else is being or acting how everyone else is, and it's awkward and exhausting and..."

"Were you pretending with Eli in the yard that first day?"

She shook her head. "No, of course not. We were just goofing around and having fun."

"Were you pretending the day Benjamin was born?"

Her snort was a little un-ladylike, but was out before she knew it. "Are you kidding? I was terrified! That wasn't an act at all."

Nodding, he said, "Okay, last question. Were you pretending last night here with me?"

"No," she admitted quietly.

"Let me tell you something, Violet Drake," he said, cupping her cheek. "I like the woman you are. A lot. And if you're telling me that all the times we've been together you haven't been faking anything or pretending, then I

can say with great certainty that I like who you are. And you know what? So does Eli. And Katie. And everyone else you know.” He kissed her forehead. “I think you put a lot of pressure on yourself, and I’m here to tell you there’s no one here you need to impress because we already are.”

“Hunter...”

“Stay and have breakfast with us. That’s it. That’s all I’m asking. For now,” he added. “After we eat, we’ll see how you feel, and if at any time you feel overwhelmed or...awkward, you just say the word, and we’ll wish you a good day.”

“A good day?” she asked, unable to hide her smile. “That’s a little formal, don’t you think?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t sure how to word it, but...you know what I mean. If you want to go, I won’t stop you. Not now, not later. What do you say?”

It scared her how much she wanted to stay—to be a part of their little morning breakfast routine and just be with them.

Granted, she’d been living with Katie for a month and had experienced her family routine, but...this was different. She was comfortable with Katie; she was family, and Violet never had to pretend anything with her. But this? Being with Hunter and Eli felt like a much bigger deal.

Stop being a weirdo; it’s just breakfast for crying out loud! Surely you can handle sitting through some cereal without freaking out!

Off in the distance, she heard some movement in the other room and figured Eli was up.

“Vi?” Hunter asked. “I need to get up and throw on some clothes. You probably should do the same.”

“Oh...yeah. Right. Sorry.” She went to scramble from the bed, but he stopped her and kissed her with an intensity that surprised her. They had been lying there talking about some deep stuff and yet he kissed like they

had been making love. When he lifted his head, he was smiling. “What’s that smile about?”

“You. It’s just about you.” Then he jumped up and pulled on his shorts from last night and was dressed before she even sat up. “I know I said I had only one more question, and I already asked it but...I lied. There’s one more thing.”

“O-kay...”

“How do you like your eggs?”

Kicking the blankets off, she stood and pressed up against him. It felt a little decadent to be completely naked while he was dressed. “However you want to make them.” Then with a quick kiss, she started pulling on her clothes.

* * *

HUNTER HAD SEEN a lot in his life—both in his personal life and professional one. He’d survived losing his mother at a young age, he’d witnessed life coming into the world and watched as death claimed one. But listening to Violet talk this morning hit him hard.

To the world, she presented a picture of a very confident woman. The type who could conquer the world. And yet, his invitation to have breakfast with him and his son had exposed a vulnerable side—a softer side—and he wanted nothing more than to make everything better for her. Of course, he couldn’t take away the pain of her childhood, but he desperately wanted to show her how good life could be.

With him.

He was so far in over his head and it was both terrifying and exciting all at the same time. Violet made him believe he could have all the things he wanted—that part of him wasn’t dead or even just going through the motions because he had to.

The terrifying part was going to be convincing her things weren't happening too quickly, and she didn't need to travel the world to be happy.

And what better way to start than with a great family breakfast with him and Eli.

"Breakfast is served!" he called out. Violet and Eli had been doing yoga in the living room and it was one of the most adorable things he'd ever seen. The serious look on his son's face as he tried to hold the poses Violet was doing had been priceless. It was obvious Eli was a little infatuated with Violet, and Hunter couldn't blame him. Even now, Eli wouldn't come to the table until he held Violet's hand and could lead her there.

Fortunately, she didn't look the least bit put out by it either.

Thank God...

Pouring himself a cup of coffee, Hunter had to wonder how he went from sort of being okay with this being a casual relationship to needing Violet to move her life here to Magnolia Sound with him.

His family would say this was typical of him—how they all knew he wasn't capable of having a fling. And they would be right. Then they'd point out how he only has two speeds when it came to relationships—full-speed ahead or dead in the water. And again, they would be right. But that didn't mean this was wrong, did it?

Yes, this was fast, and yes, they didn't know each other all that well yet, but it didn't diminish what he felt for her and what he hoped she felt for him.

Maybe it was time to sit down with Violet and see if they were on the same page.

Or even remotely near it.

"Ooo...omelets?" Violet asked as she sat down. Wide-eyed, she looked at him. "You seriously just whipped up some omelets?"

Nodding, he took his seat and smiled. "Eli and I love farmer's omelets. They're our favorite, right, buddy?"

“Yeah!” Eli cried out before he dug into his breakfast.

“Wow,” she said as she slowly picked up her fork. “I never knew anyone who made omelets at home. I always thought they were the sort of thing people got when they went out for breakfast to the diner or something.”

“We are big fans of breakfast food,” Hunter explained. “Pancakes, waffles, French toast, bacon and eggs, and cinnamon rolls. Those happen to be my favorite—especially the ones from Henderson’s Bakery.”

“I’ve had them! Honestly, I think I’ve had one of everything they have in that bakery and it’s all fantastic.”

Conversation flowed over breakfast with Violet asking Eli lots of questions about his room, his favorite toys, and what were some of his other favorite foods. And Hunter sat back in amazement as his son chatted away—in full sentences no less!—answering all of her questions. By the time they were done eating, Eli ran off to build Violet a castle out of blocks. It was incredibly sweet and Hunter decided to take the opportunity to broach the subject that had been consuming him all morning.

“So...Brian’s back,” he began before taking a casual sip of his coffee. “Katie and Kira must be thrilled.”

“Oh, they are. I teared up watching them. And when he saw Benjamin for the first time?” Her hand rested over her heart. “It was amazing. He cried like a baby and then Katie was crying...” She shook her head. “Kira was hugging Brian’s leg and started crying, but I don’t think she really knew why.”

“Wow.”

“I know. That’s why I felt like I shouldn’t be there. I wanted to give them some time to be alone as a family without an audience. I know Rose is going over there today, so...”

Hopefully that meant she wasn’t in a rush to leave...

“Do you have plans for the day or do you need to get back to Katie’s?”

“Um...no. No plans. I told her I’d be back tonight for dinner.”

“You’re more than welcome to hang out with us today. I wasn’t doing anything except working on some plans for a new deck.”

“A new deck?” Violet craned her neck to look out the back door. “What’s wrong with the current deck?”

Shrugging, he explained, “It’s fine, but it’s a little small. Like I can grill out there and maybe another person or two can hang out with me, but there’s not enough room for a place to eat.” Pausing, he figured he’d get her input on some other things. “I was talking to my dad and Kyle about it last night over dinner and they both seem to think I should be looking into buying a bigger house.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I guess now that Eli’s living with me full-time, it makes sense. It’s a small house and we’ll outgrow it, eventually.”

“Seriously? But it’s just the two of you.”

Hunter stared at her for a moment and carefully chose his next words.

“Well, it might not be just the two of us forever.”

And then he waited for Violet to react or respond.

And waited.

And waited.

She took a sip of her coffee, nodded, and stared down at her plate before she said, “I guess that makes sense. Plus, there’s a good chance Eli’s going to be as big as you and will outgrow his room before you know it.”

“Uh...sure.” He paused. “I hadn’t given it much thought until recently, but I wouldn’t mind a little privacy. You know, a real master bedroom with its own bathroom and maybe not five feet away from my son’s room.”

Another nod, another sip of coffee.

Okay, maybe he needed to be a little more...obvious.

“You know,” he began after a moment, “if I had a bigger place that afforded us a little more privacy, we wouldn’t have to be as quiet as we

were last night. Not that it wasn't satisfying on a whole other level, but...I kind of like being vocal with you."

Blushing, Violet put her mug down. "I like being vocal with you too, Hunter," she replied shyly. "But...I don't think you're going to move in the next few weeks, so..."

"Maybe not in the next few weeks, but...in the near future. You know, if you decided to hang out a little longer."

"Hunter..."

"No, I mean...I know Brian's back and all that, but you're still coming to the wedding with me next weekend, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"So...maybe you stay a little after the wedding."

"Hunter, it's already a little crowded at Katie's..."

"You can stay here!" he blurted out. "Obviously Eli's not scarred from having you here this morning and that was my biggest concern, so, you know, it would be fine. Great, even. I'm off for the next several weeks so we could finally get to spend some real time together. I could show you all the hidden gems here in Magnolia!"

That seemed to perk her up a bit.

Reaching over, she placed her hand on top of his. "Funny you should mention that because I was thinking of you and I maybe getting away for a few days. You know, we can go to the mountains, or I could show you Nashville..." She shifted excitedly in her seat. "I was looking up some resorts near Asheville and Grandfather Mountain, and I think we could have an amazing time in our own private cabin with a hot tub! No one around for miles so we could be as vocal as we wanted. What do you think?"

I think we are so not on the same page.

We're not even in the same book.

Carefully, he pulled his hand away and stood up. "I should get this mess cleaned up."

Her brows furrowed as she looked at him. “I’m sorry? Did I say something wrong?”

“What? Uh...no. No. I just hate looking at this mess, so...”

Violet was immediately on her feet. “No, let me. Please. You go and see how Eli’s doing, and I’ll do the dishes.”

“Violet...that’s not necessary.”

She shooed him away and gave him a playful shove toward Eli’s room. “Nope. You cooked; I’ll clean. Those are the rules. Go.”

He knew it was a common rule, but he felt it was a lot more common for her, and his heart ached for her all over again.

Not that he let himself dwell on it.

Or on the fact that maybe he was getting a little too far ahead of himself.

These next few weeks that he was going to be home were for him to spend time with Eli and take care of things around the house, not go gallivanting to resorts in the mountains or go to Nashville. As a parent, he couldn’t just pick up and go and especially not right now! It was bad enough he’d had to bounce Eli around between all his siblings this past week, there was no way he was going to pack him off just so he could go on a trip with Violet.

Pushing all that aside, he walked into Eli’s room and found him building the castle he’d promised to Violet. He helped him and a few minutes later, Violet joined them. After that, it was hard to feel anything but happy because this was the kind of setting he always envisioned for himself when Eli was born—a family sitting together for breakfast and then playing together and just enjoying each other’s company. That never happened with Melissa, but it was now and...

Holy shit! Is that what I’m doing? Am I putting Violet in this role because I genuinely have strong feelings for her and want a future or am I doing it because she fit in easily?

Okay, yeah. That was something he was going to have to deal with.
Fast.

Like before he started making any more plans in his mind for the two of them.

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THIRTEEN

“Want to tell me why Hunter thinks you were home with us last night?”

Busted.

It was just after six in the morning and the last thing Violet expected was an ambush at the front door.

After putting her purse on the sofa and her overnight bag on the floor, she faced Katie and sighed. “I needed some time alone to think.”

Motioning for her to sit down, Katie made herself comfortable as well. “Before I say anything else, are you okay? Where did you stay last night? I kind of figured you’d spend the weekend at Hunter’s. I thought the whole going to a hotel story was a little flimsy.”

“Well...my plan had been to go down to Wilmington for the weekend to give you guys some time alone, but I stopped at Hunter’s on my way out of town Friday night and spent the night there.”

“You know his place is in the opposite direction of leaving Magnolia for Wilmington, right?”

Violet simply stared at her.

“Okay, fine. So you stayed there Friday night. Why didn’t you just stay for the weekend? And for what it’s worth, he was kind of freaked out that you weren’t taking his calls.”

Sighing, she asked, “What did you tell him?”

“Well, considering you told me you were going to a hotel for the weekend, that’s what I told him.”

“Shit.”

“Sorry, but...” She shrugged. “Okay, so what happened that you lied to him and left?”

“I told you, I needed some time alone to think.”

“About what?”

“Everything.”

“Um, yeah. I’m going to need something a little more specific than that.”

Violet explained about her time with Hunter and Eli—from spending the night to breakfast omelets, building castles, shopping for plants, and designing a deck.

“Okay, clearly I’m missing something because that all sounds great. Like everything that just came out of your mouth was positive.”

Twisting on the couch, she let her head fall back and let out a huff of annoyance. “He wants me to stay, Kate! Like...move here! With him! I mean...that’s crazy, right? People don’t do that!”

Slowly, Katie raised her hand. “I did. If you remember, I met Brian when he was on leave and visiting Nashville for a long weekend. We did the long-distance thing for a month when I packed up and moved here. Well, not here to Magnolia Sound, but Jacksonville by the base.”

“Okay, fine, but...that was different.”

“How?”

“What do you mean how? It was you and Brian! You guys were like in love at first sight!”

“Ooohhh...okay. I get it now.”

Violet’s head snapped up. “Get what?”

“You’re freaking out.” She shook her head. “I should have seen this coming.”

“What on earth are you even talking about? Seen what coming?”

Reaching out, Katie took one of Violet’s hands in hers and squeezed. “Sweetie, I love you like a sister. You’re seriously the only family I have besides Brian and Rose, and I know you better than anyone.” She paused. “But you kind of have a tendency to...sabotage your relationships.”

“*What?* You’re crazy! I do *not* do that!” She went to jump up, but Katie kept a tight grasp on her.

“Yes, you do.”

She tried to yank her hand free, but Katie wasn’t having any of it. With another huff of annoyance and a low growl, she let her hand drop to the cushion. “Give me one example of how you think I sabotage my relationships.”

“Remember David Klein? Junior year of college? You were crazy about him and he was even crazier about you and you dumped him when he started talking about moving in together.”

“It wasn’t sabotaging, Kate. I just wasn’t ready to live with him.”

“Okay, after David was Max Collins. He was hot and sexy and played guitar and wanted to take you on tour with him the summer after you broke up with David. You dumped him too.”

“He was touring with a band called Riot Hammers! Why would I want to go on tour with them?”

“Because he wrote a ton of songs about you and would talk about you at every show! He practically worshipped the ground you walked on, and on top of that, he was a genuinely great guy!”

She sighed loudly. “None of this is sabotage, Kate.”

They sat in silence for a few moments. “So what’s wrong with Hunter, huh? He’s great, he’s got a career, he’s a solid, standup kind of guy who must seriously be crazy about you if he not only wants you to move here but move in with him and his son.” She paused and let that sink in. “You have to realize something; Hunter has been almost obsessive about keeping

any woman he's dated away from Eli. If he trusts you with his kid, then he's not messing around, Vi. So what is tripping you up here?"

Oh, God...

There wasn't anything in the world that she couldn't tell Katie. Her friend wasn't lying when she said she knew Violet better than anyone, but that didn't mean she was ready to admit her biggest fears.

Or maybe...she needed to.

"He's just interested now because things just sort of crashed and burned with his ex," she said flippantly, even as the words made her heart ache. Swallowing hard, she added, "I'm the rebound."

"Oh, Vi. You don't really believe that, do you?"

She shrugged. "Trust me. It's all it is. And you know the rebound thing never works out, so why should I linger? It would be better for everyone if I just...you know...let this be a fling and leave like I had planned." She paused. "Okay, not quite as I planned. I've got the wedding to go to with him next weekend and then I plan on staying for another week."

"Really?" Katie asked excitedly.

"Yeah, but...don't be upset with me..."

"Oh, lord. Now what?"

"I'm going to stay at the B&B."

"Why? There's no reason for you to do that!"

"Kate, your husband just came home after being deployed. I'm sure he'd like to ease back into his home life with you and the kids without a houseguest." And before Katie could argue, Violet held up a hand to stop her. "You know it's true. The last thing I want is to feel like a fifth wheel. I think we can both agree I've had enough of that in my life. So...just let me do this, okay?"

Luckily, her friend didn't argue, but her face showed her displeasure.

"Believe me, I have loved having this time with you—just having the time for it to just be the girls and hanging out like we used to. But if it

wasn't for the wedding, I would probably be leaving today. Or maybe even yesterday, so..."

"That has nothing to do with you going to stay at the B&B. Although, I have to admit, I'm a little envious. That place is gorgeous and I've secretly been wanting to stay there—even though it's so close to home."

"Then why don't you?"

The only way to describe the look on Kate's face was confused.

And maybe laced with a little pity.

"Um...I have kids, Vi. You don't just pick up and go away for the weekend when you're a parent. And on top of that, the B&B has only been open for a year, and during most of that time, I've been pregnant, Brian's been deployed, and...oh, yeah, I have Kira!" Shaking her head, she laughed. "I know you don't think picking up and going away on vacation—even one close to home—is a big deal, but it's not always easy to do. And before Rose moved here, there was no one to watch Kira overnight."

"Yeah, okay, maybe," she agreed. Sort of. "But you probably could have asked a friend to watch Kira or even just invited Rose for the weekend before Brian deployed."

"Do you even hear yourself? Why would I make Rose fly here for a weekend just so Brian and I could go someplace a mile up the road for the night?"

Violet had heard enough, and this was getting her nowhere. She went to stand up, and this time Kate didn't stop her.

But her words did.

"Would I love to travel more? Yes. But being a parent to Kira and now to Benjamin means more to me. They're only little for such a short amount of time. Why would I want to keep pawning them off on other people for my own selfish needs?"

"Selfish needs? Kate, you have children, you're not a prisoner in your own home, for crying out loud! There's nothing wrong with taking a little

time for yourself! If anything, it would help you de-stress a little and probably make you an even better parent!”

“You may not believe this, but I can de-stress by taking a nice long bubble bath after the kids are asleep or curling up with a good book.” She shrugged. “You’re into travel—it’s your livelihood—so I know why you’re so passionate about promoting it. But my house?” She motioned to the space around her. “It’s a pretty great place to be. And when the kids are a little older, we will go on vacations—some with the kids, some without. But for now, I want to be here with them.”

Oh, God...is that how Hunter felt when I talked about us going away together? Is that why he changed the subject?

Before she could go down the rabbit hole with that thought, Kate was speaking again.

“So what did you have to think about? I mean, if you think this is just a fling and Hunter doesn’t mean anything, then why get away for the night?”

No one other than Katie dared to question her like this.

And, unfortunately, she was also the only person who got Violet to open up.

“That’s the conclusion I came to after having the night to myself,” she said, walking to the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee.

Like a ninja, her friend was beside her. “And before you came to that stupid and completely ridiculous conclusion...”

“Why don’t you tell me how you really feel, Kate?” she mocked while putting her coffee pod in the machine.

“You must have been considering his offer, Violet. You were freaking out over it because you were seriously considering it.”

Her heart was racing like mad and her hand was shaking as she picked up her mug, but she held it together without spilling anything—her feelings or her coffee—until she was sitting at the kitchen table.

“Okay, fine. I was considering it. But only for like a second! It’s not something I’d actually do! I mean...geez! Come on! It’s *me* we’re talking about. And once Hunter really thinks about it, he’ll realize it was a mistake, so...crisis averted.”

And even as she took her sip of coffee, Violet knew she was lying—to herself and Katie. Because more than anything, she wanted to believe someone like Hunter genuinely cared for her and wanted her in his life for the long-haul. Unfortunately, life had taught her that she wasn’t enough for the people who mattered—not her parents, and certainly none of her foster parents. She was the girl who was okay to take care of for the short-term, but not enough to want in their lives forever.

Unshed tears stung her eyes, and she stared down at her coffee until she felt a little more under control.

It took a solid five minutes before she looked up. And there was Katie. Patiently waiting.

“You may not believe this, but you are an amazing woman who is more than worthy of being loved,” her friend said fiercely. “I can’t make you believe it, but I know it. You are the best person I know. I wish you had the faith to take this step with Hunter because you deserve to be happy. And I know he would do that for you.”

There was nothing left to say.

Her heart was already in so much turmoil.

So together, they drank their coffee until Brian and the kids woke up. And then moved on with their day.

* * *

“YOU KNOW, when you said you were thinking of expanding the deck, I didn’t think you meant right now,” Kyle said as he nailed the last beam into the frame.

All Hunter did was grunt as he hauled more lumber across the yard and dropped it at his brother's feet.

"Okay, are we going to talk about why you're in such a pissy mood? Because I've got to tell you, this is not how I want to spend the day."

"So leave," he all but growled before picking up another bundle of wood.

This time when he dropped it over by Kyle, his brother gave him a shove that almost sent him flying onto his ass.

It was all the provocation he needed before he charged forward with a head full of steam and hit Kyle with enough force to send them both stumbling over construction material.

"What the hell?" Kyle demanded even as he regained his footing and came back at him with another hard shove.

But Hunter wasn't interested in talking. He needed to pound on something—or someone—to get out all the frustration he was feeling, and his brother was a handy outlet. One shove led to another and then fists were flying. The first time his hand met with his brother's cheek, he felt a sense of satisfaction that was almost enough to calm him.

His brother's fist hitting his face turned that right around.

After that, it was hard to say how long they went at it, but it was his father's ear-splitting whistle that stopped them both in their tracks.

"What in the world is going on out here?" Dominic shouted before frantically looking around the yard. "Your son is here, for crying out loud, Hunter! What were you thinking?"

"I uh..."

"He came at me for no reason!" Kyle explained—almost whining—and it was tempting to hit him again.

Luckily, his sanity prevailed, and he dropped his arms to his side. Eli was in the corner of the yard playing with his trucks in the sandbox and wasn't at all phased by the insanity happening over here.

Thank God.

Hunter took a step back and wiped the sweat from his brow but didn't say anything. Meanwhile, Kyle was going on about being attacked when it was completely unprovoked.

And...he kind of had a point.

It wasn't his fault that Hunter needed to get out his frustration.

Not that he was going to admit it.

"Hunter, it's not like you to be so aggressive. What's going on?" his father asked.

"It's nothing, Dad. I don't want to talk about it."

"Well that's too bad because you're obviously upset and you've brought it to everyone's attention, so...out with it."

"I'm probably going to have a bruise on my face for the wedding," Kyle said. "You know, in case anyone's interested."

"We'll ask Scarlett to put some makeup on you," his father quipped, and for some reason, that broke all the tension and had them all laughing. "Okay, come on. Let's grab something to drink and talk in the shade."

Hunter looked at the piles of lumber and knew he needed to be working, but...getting some things off his chest was probably the smarter thing to start with.

It took a few minutes to get themselves settled and to make sure Eli didn't need anything, but by the time they had some chairs situated in the shade, Hunter felt more than ready to talk.

He told them about Violet coming over Friday night and spending the night and how they had breakfast with Eli and played with him before going to the local home improvement store and looking at furniture for the yard and even coming back home and going online to look for design inspiration.

"That all sounds good," his father commented. "There's nothing about that to make you so angry."

“Yeah, well...over breakfast, I sort of...hinted at her moving to Magnolia.”

“Oh, good Lord,” Kyle huffed.

“What? What’s wrong with that?” Dominic asked.

“What’s wrong?” Kyle repeated. “They’ve been dating a month! One month!” He shook his head. “Although we shouldn’t be surprised. I mean, this is your M.O. You rush in and get serious way too soon. Remember with you and Melissa...”

Hunter never let him finish. “I’m going to stop you right there. Melissa and I were kids when we started dating, and if you remember, it was always on again, off again. There was always drama! Did I love her? Yes. There was a time when I definitely did. But she messed with me for years and knew how to manipulate me to get what she wanted.”

“Dude, you always went back—even when you swore you wouldn’t,” Kyle reminded him.

“Yeah, but I also dated other women in between. It’s not like she’s the only woman I’ve ever been with.”

“He’s right,” his father said. “Although, Melissa seemed to be the only girl you ever got serious with.”

Nodding, he replied, “I know. And we stayed together longer than we should have, but that was mostly because of Eli. I really thought we could make it work. But any romantic part of our relationship ended when he was a baby.” Raking a hand through his hair, he sighed. “Honestly, I fell out of love with her while she was pregnant, but we were having a baby, and I wanted to...I mean, I hoped we could...”

“We get what you’re saying, son. It was very admirable for you to work as hard as you did with her. But we’re rehashing ancient history as far as I’m concerned. This is about you and Violet.”

With another nod, he took a sip of his water. “From the moment she opened the door to me at Katie’s, I was drawn to her. Every time I talked to

her, there was...there was just something there. At first, I thought it was just...you know...lust. A physical attraction.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that, bro. You don’t have to dress it up to mean something more.”

“That’s the thing, Kyle. I’m not. I look at Violet and...things suddenly fit.” He jumped to his feet and began to pace. “I think about her all the time! I want to talk to her about my day and hear about hers, and...and...dammit, I don’t know, she’s just...” He growled as he tried to find the words.

“Hunter, do you think it’s practical to be asking her to move here? Bottom line is you don’t know her that well.”

“I know how I *feel*,” he said defensively. “I may not know all there is to know about her, but do we ever know everything about the person we fall in love with?” He looked at his father. “Can you honestly say you knew everything about mom?”

“Well...no...”

He looked at Kyle and waved him off. “I’d ask you, but I don’t think you’ve ever been in love, so...”

“As a matter of fact, I have,” Kyle snapped. “You remember Sydney? We dated for two years!”

“Please, that was in high school,” Hunter said, waving him off again. “That hardly counts.”

“Funny, it counted when you talked about you and Melissa!”

“Boys...” Dominic said wearily.

“I’m just saying,” Kyle interrupted. “I was in love with Sydney and I knew everything about her!”

“Right. You screwed up that relationship,” Hunter argued. “And if you knew her so well, then you would have known your behavior was going to break you up.”

Now Kyle was on his feet. “I don’t need this...”

“Why? It’s okay for you to point out stuff you think I’m doing wrong, but I can’t do the same to you? And why are you getting so ticked off? That stuff with Sydney was like...ten years ago!”

“Boys!” Dominic yelled. “Both of you sit your asses down!” He rubbed his temples until everyone was sitting again. “Kyle, relax. And Hunter? I’m not going to say you’re wrong for wanting Violet to move here. It is a little fast and I want you to really think about it. How does she feel about it?”

He groaned.

“Ooohhh...I get it,” Kyle said. “That’s why you’re pissed off! She wasn’t as excited about it as you are. Am I right?”

There was no way to deny it.

“I think I freaked her out a bit.”

“Oh, boy,” Dominic muttered.

“And the thing is, after I mentioned it, she started talking about the two of us going away together—like taking a vacation just the two of us. I mean...I can’t just do that! I have Eli to consider!”

“Plus the whole you not liking to have fun thing,” Kyle interjected, but one glare from their father and he immediately stopped talking.

“I like to have fun; I just don’t feel like I have to travel to do so!”

“Okay, so are you seeing how this is maybe not the right relationship for you?” his father asked carefully. “I’m not saying you can’t have feelings for her, Hunter, but relationships take compromise and they take time to grow. Why are you rushing this? Take the time to get to know one another better.”

“How can I do that when she lives 700 miles away?” Slouching in his chair, he sighed. “I just...I want more time with her.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Kyle said, “but maybe try doing the long-distance thing for a while and then see if she wants to move here.”

“Maybe...”

“Of course, that will mean you’ll have to give a little and travel to her,” he added slowly. “So...think about that.”

“I guess...”

“Dude, please tell me you didn’t ask her to move here so you wouldn’t have to travel to Nashville!” Kyle blurted out.

“It never even crossed my mind! Geez!”

“Okay, then.”

With a curt nod, his father said, “Alright. That’s settled then.” He glanced at Hunter. “Or is there more?”

Again, why deny it.

“When she left here on Saturday, she said she was going back to Katie’s, but...she didn’t. I wanted her to spend the weekend, but she said she promised Katie she’d be back that night.”

“How do you know she didn’t go home?”

“Because her phone kept going to voicemail, I got worried, so I called Katie and...she told me Violet was away for the weekend.”

“Damn,” Kyle muttered.

“Son, I hate to say it, but...”

“You are totally freaking this girl out!” Kyle finished.

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that,” Dominic corrected. “But it does sound like maybe you’re moving a little fast for her.”

Yeah, he had a feeling that’s what it was but was afraid to admit it out loud.

“So now what do I do?”

“Wait for her to call you. Chances are Katie’s going to tell her you called,” his father reasoned. “Just...be patient.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Sure. Okay. I can do that.”

Hunter prided himself on not being a liar. But he feared that’s exactly what he was.

FOURTEEN

Staring down at the big pink box in her hands, Violet was seriously second-guessing herself. Unfortunately, she'd already knocked on the door so it was too late to run.

Hunter opened the door, looking all kinds of sexy—messed up hair, athletic shorts, and no shirt. It was enough to almost make her forget how to speak.

"It's seven-thirty in the morning, Violet," he said, his voice low and gruff. "What's going on?" His body filled the doorway and as much as she knew he was always up early, it almost looked like she had woken him up.

"Um...I brought breakfast," she said lamely, holding up the box to him. "I know I should have called..."

"You mean this morning or Saturday night or yesterday...?"

Okay, he wasn't going to make things easy on her and she knew she deserved it. "Can I come in, please? I'd really like to talk to you."

"You sure about that?"

She let out a frustrated breath. "I get it, Hunter. I screwed up." Shoving the box into his hands, she turned and walked away, cursing herself the entire time.

Why had she thought this was a good idea? None of this should be a surprise. Of course he wouldn't want to see or talk to her. She had run out

of here Saturday afternoon and hadn't talked to him since. It was obvious he was pissed off and she should have just...she should have known better. People don't like to be messed with and she knew better than to wish for second chances.

Lesson learned.

Pulling open her car door, she screamed when Hunter's hand slammed against it to stop her. Whipping around, she stared up at him, breathless.

"What are you...?"

"You don't get to just throw a bakery box at me and leave, Violet," he said with just a hint of weariness.

"I came to apologize, but it's obvious you're not in a very forgiving mood, so..."

"I just woke up!" he argued. "I didn't expect you to just...show up here after ghosting me all weekend!"

"I wasn't ghosting you..."

The look he gave her told her he didn't believe her.

Hell, she didn't even believe herself.

"Okay, fine. I kind of did. But in my defense, you freaked me out on Saturday!" Hell, if he could be mad and vent his frustration, so could she.

"You started talking about buying a bigger house and me moving here and...and...we both know I'm a rebound person for you! Why would you ask me to move here when this is just casual?"

"*Rebound person?! Is that seriously what you think?*"

And right then and there, Violet knew she had completely misread the entire situation and possibly ruined everything.

"Um..."

Arms flexed, Hunter raked both hands through his hair and she had to fight the urge to lean forward and kiss his chest and let her hands roam. It was a completely inappropriate time to even think of something like that, but she couldn't help herself.

“Dammit, Violet, why would you even think that?”

But before she could answer, he was talking again.

“We talked about this—do you think I would have invited you to spend the night here or...or move in with my son and me if this was just casual?”

“I...I thought you just said it in the heat of the moment and were going to regret it! It didn’t seem possible you would want me like that!”

“Like what? Like I have strong feelings for you? Like I enjoy being with you? Like I’m falling in love with you?”

Gasping, her hands instantly flew over her mouth.

She waited for him to take the words back or to try to clarify how he didn’t mean he was really in love with her, but...he didn’t.

Slowly, she lowered her hands. “You...you don’t mean that. You can’t.” And dammit, she hated the tremor in her voice.

His expression softened as he moved in close. “Yes, I can.” Cupping her face, he rested his forehead against hers. “I’m falling in love with you, Violet.”

Men had told her they loved her before, but never like this—never with such earnest and raw emotion. Reaching up, she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. It was slow and sweet and the perfect combination of happiness and lust.

Because...yeah. Seriously, a shirtless Hunter was the stuff of fireman calendars.

When he broke the kiss, his smile was almost blinding. “As much as I’d like to keep kissing you, I’d rather do it in the privacy of my house.”

“I like the sound of that.” Together, they walked hand in hand back to the porch where she spotted her box from Henderson’s Bakery sitting on the ground. “Oh, no! Did you just drop it there?”

Chuckling, he bent and scooped the box up. “Are you kidding me? I can smell the cinnamon. No way I’m dropping that sucker on the ground.”

Once they were inside, he didn't release her hand. Instead, he led her through to the kitchen and placed the box on the table. Then he hauled her in close and kissed her like a man hell-bent on seduction.

Which she was entirely on board with.

Only...

As much as it pained her, she pulled back. "Where's Eli?"

"Sleeping. We stayed up extra late last night. He won't be up for at least another hour." Then he dove in for another kiss. And then another.

His arms banded around her as he picked her up and began to walk toward his bedroom. She wanted to laugh or, at the very least, tell him how much she was loving this idea, but it was necessary to stay quiet and not wake up his son.

With the bedroom door closed and locked, Hunter gently put her down on the edge of the bed before getting on his knees in front of her.

"If you're not comfortable with this, just say the word." His hand slid up her thighs—skin on skin as she was wearing shorts—and when they slowly smoothed their way under the hem, Violet wasn't sure she could even remember her own name.

"More touching," she said as she leaned forward and began to rain kisses along his jaw. "Less talking."

His laugh was deep and rich and oh-so masculine that she was practically in a puddle, but it was clear that playtime was over. And as much as she loved making love with him and taking their time, there was something wildly erotic about the quiet franticness of the moment.

Clothes were shifted but not completely removed.

Every movement was urgent and a little rough.

And every emotion was expressed with their eyes and breathy, whispered words.

Hunter held her gaze the entire time, and it was quite possibly the most intimate part of the whole encounter. Never before had a man looked at her

like this—like she was everything—and damn if she didn't want to see that look every day.

It was fast and furious and over way too soon, but as Hunter rolled onto his back and cradled her in his arms, all Violet could think was how perfect it was.

"That was wildly unexpected," she said after she caught her breath. "I'm going to have to bring you cinnamon rolls every day."

He placed a soft kiss on her forehead. "This had nothing to do with cinnamon rolls, but...I certainly wouldn't say no to you bringing more tomorrow."

They lay in companionable silence for several minutes before Violet felt like she had to say something. Leaning up on one elbow, she smiled down at him. One hand gently caressed his face, his jaw, before she stopped and traced the small bruise she spotted there.

"How did that happen?"

"Kyle's stupid fist," he murmured, taking her hand in his and kissing her palm. "It's no big deal. The one I left on him is much bigger."

Violet felt her eyes go wide. "You had a fistfight with your brother? Why?"

"He's annoying. Trust me."

"Hunter, that's not the sort of thing you should be doing around your son. Violence is never the answer."

His smile was slow and sweet as his grip on her hand gentled. "It rarely happens, and once in a while, we just need to pound on something when we're frustrated. It's a guy thing."

"Hunter..."

"How about this, I promise it will never happen again." He kissed her palm again. "And it's not anything you ever have to worry about."

She had a feeling that wasn't entirely true, but she also knew there wasn't anything to fear where Hunter and violence were concerned. He was

the most caring and nurturing person she'd ever met.

After a minute, Hunter whispered her name, and when she looked at him, he looked concerned. "Violet, it's really okay. There's nothing for you to be scared of."

"I know," she said quietly.

"Are you sure? Because you look a little worried."

Her hand skimmed down over his chest. Then, meeting his gaze, she said, "I am a little worried. And afraid."

"Of what?" his voice was barely a whisper.

"Of this. Of how I feel about you and how you feel about me." Luckily, he didn't make her try to explain why, but there was more she needed to say. "I kind of have a habit of running away from situations like this because I'm afraid of getting hurt." She swallowed hard. "But the way you look at me? It tells me you'd never hurt me; that I can trust you."

This time it was his hand that reached up and cupped her cheek. "You can trust me, Violet. I would never-ever-hurt you."

Unable to speak because emotion had her by the throat, she nodded.

Hunter guided her head down until it was resting over his heart, and for the first time in her life, Violet felt like she was home.

* * *

THERE WAS a spring in his step and he felt lighter than he had in years.

And it felt fan-freaking-tastic.

His face actually hurt from smiling so much, but he didn't care. Violet was here with him and Hunter felt like his life was finally falling into place.

Together, like a family, they'd had the cinnamon rolls she had brought with her once Eli woke up. After that, Hunter showed her the progress he'd made on the deck. He felt a sense of pride as she marveled over what he and

his family had accomplished in only one day. They stayed out in the yard and played ball with Eli, and then Violet did some yoga with him.

Hunter opted to sit back and watch.

The day was going along so damn perfectly that he was waiting for something to ruin it.

And it did.

Eli was down for a nap and Hunter was ready to suggest that he and Violet do the same when he got the call from his captain asking if he could cover an EMT shift.

“I hated to even ask, Hunter, and it’s just for today from four to eleven. Can you do it?”

“That’s two hours from now. Eli’s down for a nap and my whole family’s at work...”

Violet, who was sitting beside him, waved at him. “I can stay with him.”

“Uh...Captain? Let me call you back.” When he hung up, he looked at her like she was crazy. “You want to babysit while I go to work?”

She shrugged. “Sure! Eli and I will be fine.”

“I don’t know...I hate to ask that of you. Besides, don’t you need to check-in and make sure Katie doesn’t need you?”

“She’s fine and Brian’s home. Actually, she packed me an overnight bag and threw it in the back of my car so...I think she’s fine.”

“Oh, okay. Um...wow.” He was utterly conflicted. The last thing he expected was to be called in to work on his first week of leave, but he knew there had to be serious circumstances for them to reach out to him. But he also didn’t want to take advantage of Violet. Things were still new, and...he shook his head. “No. I’ll just tell him I can’t do it.”

“Hunter,” she pleaded, her soft hand resting on his arm. “You know it’s going to be on your mind all night if you don’t go in. It’s one shift. Eli and I will be fine. We’ll have dinner together, watch some cartoons, play some

games, and he'll be in bed by eight." Leaning over, she kissed him on the cheek. "You need to do this."

She was right.

He was already feeling guilty about taking time off and if it was just this one time then...

"Okay," he said, a little begrudgingly. "But promise me you'll call and let me know if you're feeling overwhelmed." He jumped to his feet and walked into the kitchen and began writing down numbers for her. "My dad is always the easiest to get in touch with. Try the shop first and then after five you can reach him on his cell phone. If he can't come, he'll get in touch with one of my brothers or Scarlett to come and help you."

"Hunter, I don't think there's going to be any problems. Unless you think Eli will be upset to wake up and you're not here?"

Damn. He hadn't thought of that.

She must have seen the panic on his face because she immediately backtracked. "Tell you what, how about we call you when he wakes up? This way he can talk to you and put his mind at ease."

"Yeah. Okay. That will work." Once he had the list written, Hunter wasn't sure what to do with himself.

That wasn't entirely true. He wanted to take Violet back to bed, but he hated the thought of another quickie before going to work.

Plus, he really needed to take a shower.

They could linger in there for a little while...he could wash her back, she could wash his...technically, it was the perfect solution.

She was sitting at the kitchen table looking over his list when he announced his plan.

"I'm going to go take a shower."

Smiling up at him, she said, "Okay."

Moving behind her, he bent over and kissed the sweet spot behind her ear he knew she loved. "It's kind of lonely in there. I wouldn't mind some

company.”

“Hmm...I imagine we’d have to be quiet in there too,” she said softly, tilting her head to give him better access.

Dammit again. Another thing he hadn’t thought of. Suddenly his charming little house was kind of a pain in the ass and practically cock-blocking him.

“I’m game for trying if you are,” she said, interrupting his thoughts.

Scooping her up from the chair, he carried Violet into the bathroom where they had the steamiest, sexiest, and quietest sex of his life.

* * *

IT WAS ELEVEN-THIRTY, the house was dark, and Hunter was exhausted.

Quietly, he let himself in, kicked off his shoes, and padded to the kitchen to get something to drink. There was light coming out from under his bedroom door, so he hoped it meant Violet was still awake. Grabbing a bottle of water, he drank half of it down and just took a minute to finish decompressing from the night.

It was anything but quiet in Magnolia Sound tonight, it seemed. They’d gone out on three calls—two were car accidents, and one was for an elderly gentleman who was having a heart attack. In between emergencies, Hunter had called and checked on Eli and talked with Violet. She told him how the two of them had done some tumbling in the yard, watched *Finding Nemo*, ate macaroni and cheese and chicken fingers for dinner, did some pre-bath yoga, and read two books before Eli went to bed.

All in all, it was an extremely successful night.

And it made his heart happy.

Finishing his drink, he made sure the front door was locked, and made his way to Eli’s room and smiled down at his son. He kissed him on the

cheek, tucked his blanket around him, and quietly walked out, leaving the door partially open.

Next, Hunter opened the door to his room and there was Violet in his bed and reading on her phone. She looked up and smiled at him and it was everything he ever wanted—ever dreamed of. It seemed crazy that something as simple as finding the woman you love waiting up for you made all the difference in your life, and yet...it did.

“Hey,” she said softly. “How was your night?”

“It was good. Busy. We had three calls total, but nothing we couldn’t handle.” She studied him as he took off his shirt and then his jeans. “What?”

“We talked several times while you were at work and you never once talked about what was going on.” She shrugged. “I guess I was just curious about your work.”

He was a little confused. “You want to know about my job?”

“Of course! Why wouldn’t I?”

Any time he talked to Melissa about his work, she would tell him she wasn’t interested. And he never got serious with any of the women he dated where he wanted to talk about his work with. So this was new. And he wasn’t sure just how much to share.

Sliding beneath the sheets, he decided to give her the basics. “There were two car accidents—one was a multi-car, and the other was a drunk driver who hit a tree. Then we had a call about an elderly gentleman having chest pains. It was a heart attack, and we got him to the hospital.”

Beside him, Violet sat up a little, twisting toward him. “Oh, my goodness! Is everyone okay? How many people were involved in the multi-car accident? There weren’t any children in the cars, were there?” Her hand rested over her heart. “This is such a small town! Was it anyone you knew?”

It was obvious the topic was a little upsetting for her, and then he remembered her history and how her mother had died, and he mentally

cursed himself for even bringing the subject up. Reaching out, he wrapped his arm around her and held her close. Placing a soft kiss on her forehead, he said, “No kids. All minor injuries. I didn’t know anyone involved, and last I checked, our cardiac guy was doing well. So all in all, it was a good night.”

“I don’t know about that. People got hurt, and you had to go and rescue them.” She shivered slightly. “How do you do it? How do you deal with it? You must see some pretty horrendous stuff and yet you’re always fairly upbeat.”

“Well, the reality is that you have to detach yourself. I’ve seen so much...some of it is horrific and it would give me nightmares. In the beginning, I would come home and do everything I could to stay awake because once I closed my eyes...”

She hugged him tightly. “I’m so sorry. I think what you do is amazing, but I hate what it does to you.” With a soft kiss on his chest, she added, “Thank you for being so brave.”

No one had ever said that to him before.

At least, no one he knew personally.

Together they slowly slid a little further under the sheets. “I should be the one thanking you for being brave,” he said once they were settled and comfortable.

Her laugh was soft and a little sleepy. “How was I brave?”

“You spent the second half of the day with a three-year-old. I’ve seen seasoned parents and grandparents looking haggard after doing that. And look at you,” he said with just a hint of awe, caressing her cheek. “You’re beautiful.”

“Stop. You’re crazy.” The flush of her cheeks told him she wasn’t used to being complimented.

“Crazy about you,” he murmured before touching his lips to hers. It was a chaste kiss, a tender kiss. Reluctantly, he lifted his head so he could turn

and shut off the bedside lamp. And in the darkness, he found her again.

Kissed her again.

And relished the fact that he could hold her all night long tonight and all the nights to come.

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FIFTEEN

“Are you sure this looks okay?”

“You look beautiful.”

Glancing over her shoulder, Violet frowned at Katie. “Are you just saying that so I’ll shut up and leave?”

“No, of course not.”

“Maybe I should try on the red dress again. I think if I changed to the silver necklace...”

“Oh, my God! Enough!” Katie cried, jumping to her feet. “You’ve tried on five different dresses already and they all looked fantastic on you! What are you freaking out about?”

“It’s a wedding and I’m meeting Hunter’s entire family today! Those are all perfectly legit reasons to freak out!”

Groaning, Katie sat back down on the bed. “Okay, fine.” She sighed. “What’s wrong with this one you have on? It’s simple and elegant and perfect for an outdoor wedding.”

Studying herself in the mirror, this one was probably her favorite—navy blue, strapless, and hit right at the knees. It showcased her body without being too tight or revealing. Plus, the multi-colored beaded necklace she purchased in town was gorgeous. Glancing down at her feet, she smiled at

her recently pedicured toes and knew the pop of coral would look perfect with the sandals she would wear.

“Okay, fine. This one really does work.” She faced Katie. “What if... what if they don’t like me?”

Wide-eyed, her friend was on her feet again and hugged her. “They are going to love you,” she said fiercely. “How could they not? You’re amazing.”

Sitting back on the bed, side by side, Violet wished she felt that positive.

“Do you remember when we first met?” Katie asked.

Violet looked at her like she was crazy. “Of course I do. It was the day I was placed in the Michaels’ home.”

“I was sitting on my bed reading, and you walked in and looked so mature and confident,” Katie said. “All the other kids I had roomed with would mock my love of reading and I just expected you to do the same. But you sat with me and asked about the book and then told me about some of your favorites.”

Violet smiled at the memory. “Do you remember going to the library together and we would have our own book club to discuss what we were reading?”

Beside her, Katie nodded. “Remember when Morgan introduced us to reading Harlequin romances?”

“That was a game-changer.” Laughing, she shook her head. “Thank you for putting a good memory in my head, but...what does that have to do with today?”

“Vi, you have always been a confident and fun person. You were almost an Olympic athlete, and you run a very successful business. Why are you doubting yourself so hard right now?”

Her eyes closed, and she let out a long breath. “It would kill me to find myself in love with Hunter and then lose him because...because his family didn’t like me. You know he’s close with them and it’s not inconceivable

that he'd listen to their opinion." Eyes open, she looked at Katie. "What if I've let myself truly believe there's someone who genuinely wants me—loves me—and then...they send me away?"

Katie immediately began to cry—the tears streaming down her face. Taking both of Violet's hands in hers, she squeezed them. "You listen to me, Violet Drake. No one knows better than me how unfair life has been to you. But after all these years, you need to realize that your parents...that was about them and who they were as people! Not you! Their behavior isn't your fault!"

"But..."

"No! There're no buts! Some people are weak, Violet. They can't handle responsibility, or they struggle with their own demons, or they are just genuinely selfish people who aren't meant to be parents. I hate how that happened to you! I hate how their selfish behavior has made you doubt yourself! But don't let it ruin what you have right here, right now with Hunter!"

She let out a shaky breath. "Deep down, I know that. But...it's hard to not have a knee-jerk reaction; to not feel like at any moment, things are going to change and he's going to decide he made a mistake. That *I'm* a mistake."

Now she was crying, and her makeup was running down her cheeks, and she couldn't stop it even if she wanted to. Right now, she needed to cry—needed to make this admission out loud so maybe, just maybe, she'd have the release of all her pent-up fear and anxiety.

Reaching over, Katie hugged her, and Violet wrapped her arms around her and held her tight. She had no idea how long they stayed like that, but when they finally pulled apart, it was Katie who wiped away her tears before cupping her face in her hands.

"Never forget how awesome and special you are and never let anyone make you feel like you don't deserve the best in this world."

“I’ll try,” she whispered.

“Alrighty then.” And on her feet, Katie scanned the room. “Now we have some serious damage control because your makeup is completely ruined, so let’s get to work!”

And for the next hour, Violet did her best to calm her nerves and relax.

Hunter had volunteered to pick her up, but she knew he had things to do with his family and didn’t want to be in the way. It meant she was driving herself over to his sister Scarlett’s place and potentially embarrassing herself.

Think positive!

When she pulled up the long driveway that led to a spectacular home, her nerves kicked into high gear. This wasn’t a small, quaint home like Hunter’s; this place was easily a million-dollar house!

And now I might throw up. Awesome.

Frantically pulling her phone from her purse, she texted Hunter to let him know she was here. Hopefully he’d come outside and walk in with her and tell her that maybe his sister and brother-in-law had won the lottery or won the house in an HGTV contest or something.

Parking the car, she took several deep breaths while she waited for Hunter. She was so focused on her breathing and not vomiting that she never heard him approach until he knocked on her window. Her loud scream should have sent everyone within a five-mile radius running, but luckily didn’t.

Opening the door for her, Hunter held out his hand. He looked ridiculously handsome. Her hand shook as she placed it in his and climbed from the car.

“Wow,” he said, kissing her cheek. “We almost look like we coordinated this.”

“What? Oh!” Violet realized he was in navy trousers with a matching vest and a crisp white shirt. “I’m sorry! I should go home and change! I

don't want to take away from the bridal party and..."

Pulling her in close, he chuckled. "You're not taking anything away from the bridal party. The girls are wearing pink, so...relax."

She wanted to burrow in close and stay like that for the rest of the day. Unfortunately, it wasn't realistic. Pulling herself together, she leaned back and smiled up at him. "Okay then. Let's do this."

But Hunter didn't move. If anything, she seemed to hug her a little tighter. "First, how did things go with your tour group people? Did they book?"

She loved how he remembered. "Yes. There was a lot of back and forth, but we managed to book two groups of forty to do the Alaska package that includes whale watching, a cruise, and a tour by train. It's going to be fabulous, and it's something I've always wanted to do, so I hope they all love it."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him if he'd like to see Alaska, but she had a feeling now wasn't the right time. Today was about Hunter's family and the fact that his brother was getting married.

"You ready to meet everyone?" he asked.

It would be wrong to turn and run, so instead she said, "Absolutely!"

* * *

"I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU, man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Hunter smiled and clapped along with everyone else when his brother kissed his new wife. The weather was perfect—not a cloud in the sky—and he couldn't imagine a better day for a wedding.

As Courtney and Dean made their way up the aisle toward the house, Hunter spotted his son sitting with his dad. Eli waved, and he looked utterly adorable in his little suit. Sitting beside him was Violet. She smiled and

waved along with his son, and he wished the photographer could capture that moment. After all, this was a big day for them too.

Not as big as his brother's but still...big.

He walked with his sister up the aisle. There were maybe a total of fifty people in attendance and he was thankful for it. Violet had been visibly nervous when she arrived, and even as they walked around before most of the guests arrived so she could meet his family, he could tell she was still a little uncomfortable. Luckily, he had an awesome family, and they all did everything they could to make her feel at home. Mason and Scarlett even invited them to come for dinner one night next week and Violet seemed genuinely excited about it.

And then asked if they had won the house in an HGTV contest.

It was an odd question, but then he explained how his brother-in-law happened to come from a very wealthy family and had inherited the property. It mildly appeased her, but once Scarlett took her on a tour and was her typical chatty self with no filter, it seemed to completely put Violet at ease.

Then there was his father who appeared to be slightly smitten with her and with getting information on Brian's mother, Rose. Hunter had no idea where that had come from, but it meant the two of them had something to talk about other than him.

"I like her."

Turning his head, Hunter looked at his sister. "What?"

"Violet. I like her." She squeezed his arm as they kept walking up the aisle toward where they were going to do family pictures. "She seems really nice and friendly and very easy to talk to. Plus, Eli hasn't stopped talking about her—or talking in general—and that tells me she is practically a miracle worker." She grinned up at him devilishly. "Well, that and the fact that she got you to bring a date to a family event."

"Scarlett..."

“Oh, hush. I’m happy for you. No one deserves it more. You’ve spent a lot of years struggling because of she-who-will-not-be-mentioned.”

“She who will not...What are you even talking about?”

“You are so clueless sometimes. It’s painful. All I’m saying is she obviously makes you happy, and that makes me happy. I think she’d make an awesome addition to the family.”

“Don’t you think you’re getting a little...”

“Please, we all know you’ve asked her to move here, and that means it’s only a matter of time before you ask her to marry you. You don’t do anything halfway, Hunter.”

“How do you know I asked her to move here?”

“Kyle told me.”

Groaning, he said, “Why does he have such a big mouth?”

“You know he loves to gossip.”

“No, he just likes being a blabbermouth.”

“Okay, fine. You’re rubber, he’s glue. Feel better now?”

Only Scarlett could say something like this in the middle of a wedding processional and get away with it.

There wasn’t time to argue with her because the photographer was waiting to get some shots of the bridal party before inviting the immediate family to pose with them. Eli came running over since he was the ring bearer, and for the next hour, it was non-stop posing all over the yard and then down on the pier with the gazebo on the end near the boat lift Mason had recently installed. By the time they were done, everyone was a little wilted from the heat and more than ready to get under the tent where the reception dinner was set up.

When Hunter finally spotted Violet, she was talking to Mason’s sisters, Parker and Peyton. Peyton had handled catering all the food for the wedding, and Parker was helping her out. The closer he got, he was able to hear them talking excitedly about a trip to Cancun. It wasn’t surprising that

the topic of conversation was travel. It was what Violet did, what she was passionate about, but...he still didn't get it.

Although, if he was being fair, he imagined she probably didn't fully understand why he chose a career that had him running into burning buildings either.

"Ladies," he said when he was next to Violet. His arm immediately wrapped around her waist because it felt like a lifetime since he'd held her close rather than a few hours. "Everything looks amazing, Peyton."

"Thanks, Hunter. I was a little nervous about this being my first catering, but Courtney assured me she had confidence in me."

With an eye roll that spoke volumes, Parker nudged her sister with her elbow. "Why would you admit being nervous to the guests?" she cried. "You should never do anything like that! You should exude confidence and say thank you before pointing out the best thing on the menu!"

Peyton gave both him and Violet an apologetic smile before excusing herself.

And her sister.

"So, having fun?" he asked, turning her in his arms so he could place a soft kiss on her lips.

"I am," she replied, smiling up at him. "Everyone's been very nice and super friendly. Once you left to take pictures, I came up here to the tent and introduced myself to Parker. Turns out, she's a bit of a travel enthusiast so we had a lot to talk about."

"Well, that was certainly convenient," he murmured as they walked around until they found their table.

"It's about time you all started to come in and sit down!" This coming from his grandfather who had a beer in his hand and his napkin in his lap waiting for dinner to be served.

"Gramps, there were plenty of things to snack on," Hunter reminded him. "And at least you got to sit here in the shade. The bridal party didn't

have it as easy.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Could you please flag Kyle down and tell him to grab me another beer!” He chuckled and winked at Violet. “There are certain perks to being the patriarch of this family. I get the best seat at the table and the kids always make sure I have what I need.”

Violet laughed with him. “As they should, Mr. Flynn!”

Waving her off, he said, “Call me Tommy. All that Mr. Flynn stuff is way too formal. Besides, the way I hear it, you’re practically family.”

“Gramps!” Hunter hissed.

“What? What did I say?”

Luckily Violet was laughing and his grandfather immediately began telling her all about his pub and some of the history of Magnolia Sound. Hunter felt it was safe to go and find the rest of his family. Courtney and Dean had a table for two at the rear of the tent and the family table was off to the right.

“Daddy!” Eli called out as he ran into Hunter’s arms, hugging him tightly.

“Hey, buddy! You and Grandpa having fun?”

“Yeah! We saw fish!”

“You did? That’s awesome!” His father walked over and looked a little exhausted. “Thanks, Dad. I appreciate you keeping an eye on him.”

“No worries.”

“C’mon. Gramps is already getting antsy about eating and I’m supposed to go find Kyle.”

“I saw him over by the bar,” Dominic replied and then pointed to the far corner of the tent. “There he is.”

“I’m going to get Gramps his beer. You want one?”

“Definitely. You want me to take Eli?”

“Nah, I got him. Go and make sure Gramps isn’t boring poor Violet.”

“Are you kidding? You should be more worried about him flirting with her!”

They both laughed, but Hunter knew his grandfather was a consummate flirt and he loved nothing more than meeting someone new to charm. No doubt Violet would get a kick out of it.

At least...he hoped she would.

Within minutes, he and Kyle and Eli were all back at their table and taking their seats. Eli had insisted on sitting next to Violet, which complicated the whole seating arrangement. By the time they all got done playing musical chairs, his son sat on Violet’s right and Hunter was on her left.

“You doing okay?” he whispered in her ear.

“I’m fine. Your family is amazing.”

Thankful she felt that way, he made sure to point out how his father was sitting on the other side of his son and would help with Eli so she wouldn’t have to.

“Hunter, stop,” she gently chided. “I think your dad could use a break. He’s been chasing Eli around for a little while. Let him relax. I’ll help him with his dinner.”

And she did.

At one point, she even swatted his father’s hand away when he went to cut Eli’s chicken—something Eli thought was hysterical. Once dinner was through, Courtney and Dean got up for their first dance—something Hunter was looking forward to because it would be the first time he and Violet would be dancing together. As soon as guests were encouraged to join the bride and groom on the dancefloor, he immediately asked Violet to dance.

“This is nice,” he said as they found their spot. His arm banded around her waist, her hand in his. “I’m really glad you came with me today.”

She hummed softly and rested her head on his chest as they swayed to the music. “Me too.”

Looking around the tent, Hunter realized he was surrounded by everyone he loved and how happy everyone looked.

And for the first time, that included him.

Because, yeah, he hadn't been happy for a long time. Not that he ever complained about it, but for years he felt like he was simply existing and going through the motions of getting by as a single dad. This was a whole new world for him, and he had so much hope for the future that he was ready to burst with joy.

And he realized how ridiculous that sounded and was glad it was his own internal dialogue. No doubt his siblings would make fun of him if he said it out loud.

One ballad led to another and his sister and her husband were now dancing beside them.

"Hey, you two," Scarlett said, grinning. "You're looking very cozy over here."

"Scarlett," Mason said with a bit of amusement. "Don't embarrass your brother."

"How am I embarrassing him? I was just making an observation."

Mason gave him a look that said he knew exactly what his wife was doing.

"So, Violet," Scarlett went on, "when do you have to head back to Nashville?"

Hunter found himself holding his breath suddenly. They hadn't had time to talk about any specifics of when she was leaving and when she'd be back. The last week had been incredibly busy because she had a lot of clients to handle, and he was trying to spend some quality one-on-one time with Eli. Whenever he and Violet were together, talking about her move just never seemed to come up.

Well, he had tried to bring it up a couple of times, but somehow the subject always got changed.

“My original plan was to go back once Brian got home,” she was explaining. “But when Hunter asked me to come to the wedding, I knew I’d be staying until after this weekend.”

“So you’re heading back this week?” Scarlett asked, eyes wide as she looked between him and Violet, and he had a feeling his expression mirrored his sister’s.

“I’m still not a hundred percent sure. I was thinking of staying at that new B&B here in town rather than at Katie and Brian’s. He just got home so...”

“My aunt owns that B&B,” Mason said, no doubt trying to distract from what was becoming an awkward conversation.

“Really? That’s amazing! It looks gorgeous from everything I’ve seen online,” Violet replied.

“The house has been in our family for almost a hundred years. My great-grandfather lived there his entire life. When he passed away two years ago, he left the house to my aunt, and she turned it into a B&B.”

“It’s gorgeous,” Scarlett commented, but she was still glancing at him.

“I’m looking forward to seeing it. But I’m thinking I should head home by next weekend because I’ve already been gone for so long. Then,” she continued, smiling up at Hunter, “I figured your brother could come to Nashville and see where I’m from, and I can show him around. We’ll have to do the back-and-forth thing until I can get everything organized.”

“Oh, right,” Scarlett said. “Since you’re going to hopefully be moving here, I’m sure there’s a lot you have to do to get ready for that.”

“Absolutely. It’s not like I can just go home and pack up and move. But we’ll work it out. And who knows, Hunter may find he likes Nashville just as much as Magnolia Sound!” Violet said, and before the conversation could continue, the music turned to a more upbeat song, and it seemed they both were done dancing.

The four of them walked back to the table, but Hunter was done with family time. After checking on Eli and asking Kyle to keep an eye on him, he turned his attention to Violet. “Hey, how about a walk down on the pier?”

“Ooo...that sounds wonderful.”

Hand in hand, they walked across the yard and down to the massive pier. Hunter’s heart was pounding hard in his chest, and it wasn’t until they were halfway to the gazebo that he finally spoke.

“So, um...I’m sorry my sister put you on the spot like that.”

“What do you mean?”

The sun was going down, and normally he would be pointing out how spectacular the sunset was, but all he could focus on was what she had said to Scarlett.

“I mean, we haven’t even talked about getting you moved here,” he explained, hoping he sounded casual. “I know you were just speaking off the top of your head since we never discussed me going to Nashville.”

They reached the gazebo, and he motioned for her to sit.

But she didn’t.

Pulling her hand slowly from his, she faced him. “Well, I realize we haven’t talked about it, but...if I’m going to move here, I would hope you’d help with it. Plus, just like I said to your sister, it’s not like this is going to happen overnight. It’s going to take time, Hunter.”

“Why? Packing up shouldn’t take long. I can’t imagine that you have a huge house to go through.”

Arms crossed, hip cocked, she glared at him. “Oh, really? And why is that?”

“Why is what?”

“Why would you just assume I don’t live in a big house?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, Violet. I didn’t mean anything negative by it. I just figured you’re a single woman and you’re very practical. You don’t

strike me as the kind of person to have a large house when it's just you."

Clearly it was the wrong thing to say.

"I'm going to just ignore what you just said," she huffed. "And for the record, I happen to have a fantastic townhouse that I own, Hunter. It has three bedrooms, three bathrooms, and it's fantastic. So yeah, even though I'm practical, I also enjoy having a nice place to live where my friends can come and stay if they need to."

"Oh. Um...I guess..."

"I'm going to have a lot to pack up and deal with putting it on the market," she went on. "So I realize it's not going to be a quick transition, but it appears you did not."

Raking a hand through his hair, he realized all the ways he'd misread the conversation.

And the situation.

"Let me ask you something, Hunter. Will you be coming to Nashville at all?"

"Um...well...I guess it would depend," he stammered. "I mean, I can't just pick up and leave, Violet. I have to worry about Eli, and once Katie starts working again, I'll be going back to work so I can't put in for any more time off..."

She held up a hand to stop him. "If I said to bring Eli with you and come home with me next week, would you?"

And he froze. It was a simple question, but for some reason, he simply wasn't prepared to answer it.

"And not just to help me pack," she added for clarification.

"Violet, why don't we put a pin in this for today and we'll sit down and talk more about it his week."

And for a minute, he thought she'd agree.

"What if I said we should take a week and take Eli to Legoland down in Florida? Or that we plan a trip to Disney World in the fall?"

“What does that have to do with anything right now?” he asked, feeling more than a little exasperated. This wasn’t going as he had planned and things were quickly spiraling out of control.

“Fair enough,” she said slowly. “What if I said I was going to need a few months to make this transition?”

“But...why? I get that you have to pack up, Violet, but you can put your place on the market and still move here. You’d be moving in with me so your only expense would be for the movers. And I’d be more than willing to help with that.”

She began to pace. “You don’t get it. Like you seriously aren’t getting this.”

“Getting what?” he demanded, hitting his own limit.

Rather than answer, Violet paced back and forth for a moment as if trying to choose her words carefully.

Wish I had thought of that before suggesting coming down here...

“Okay,” she said after a minute. “I think maybe we’re rushing things because it’s becoming blazingly apparent we’re not on the same page.”

She didn’t give him a chance to respond.

“This can’t all be one way, Hunter. I can’t be the only one making sacrifices or being willing to travel. You need to be willing to meet me halfway!”

Quickly calculating the math in his head, he said, “So...what? We meet up in Charlotte for a weekend?”

The look of utter disbelief on her face told him—again—how wrong he was.

“Violet, I...”

“No,” she interrupted, her voice oddly calm. “I think we need some time to think about this because we’re getting nowhere. Plus, this really isn’t the time or place to be discussing this.”

The sounds of laughter and music suddenly felt like it was mocking him.

“Please tell everyone I said goodbye.” With a curt nod, she went to walk past him. His hand reached out and gently grasped her arm to stop her.

“You’re leaving?”

And now that she was standing close, he could see the slight tremble of her lips, the unshed tears in her eyes, and he felt utterly helpless.

“I think it’s for the best. This is a happy occasion, and you should be up there celebrating with your family.” Leaning in, she kissed him on the cheek. “But I need to go.” When he didn’t release her arm right away, she glanced down at his hand and then back up to his face. “Please.”

With no other choice, he released her.

Staying where he was, he helplessly watched as she walked up the pier and out of the yard.

And possibly...out of his life.

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SIXTEEN

“Go ahead and say it. You think I’m making a mistake.”

“Do you think you’re making a mistake?”

Violet closed her suitcase and turned to stare at Katie. “Don’t do that. Don’t answer my question with a question.”

“Technically, you didn’t ask me a question.”

“Kate...”

“Okay, fine. I think you’re making a mistake. I think you hit a bump in the road and you’re running.” She sighed. “And I’m not going to say I told you so, but...I do recall having a conversation with you about this and telling you this is your M.O.”

“It’s not like that. Not this time,” she argued, placing the luggage on the floor. “He’s completely inflexible! Like the thought of leaving his precious town paralyzes him! I’m not asking him to climb Everest or to bungee jump off of the Macau Tower, for crying out loud! I asked him to come to Nashville and see the city!”

“What’s the Macau Tower?”

“Seriously? That’s what you’re focusing on?” With a huff of annoyance, she answered, “It’s the highest bungee jump in the world. Now, can we please get back to the topic at hand?”

“Sue me for being curious. I’m not as worldly as you.” And yes, there was a lot of sarcasm in that one statement.

“I was more than ready to take the leap, Kate!” She began to pace the small room. “And you know that wasn’t easy for me! I had started looking at real estate back home to see what I could sell the townhouse for!”

“I know, but...”

“I was willing to relocate my entire life here to Magnolia Sound to be with Hunter and Eli!”

“Yes, I know that too, but...”

“All I was asking was for him to be willing to come to Nashville! Not even for the long-term, and I certainly never would have suggested that he pick up and move there, but he wouldn’t even consider coming for a damn weekend! I refuse to be the only one giving and sacrificing! It’s not reasonable!” And before Katie could comment, Violet quickly added, “And this is *not* about me running away or sabotaging anything! This is about Hunter not being flexible about anything!”

You could have heard a pin drop in the room and it was a stark contrast to the last several minutes. Violet was breathless and full of nervous energy and she didn’t know what to do with herself.

“May I speak now?” Katie quietly asked, and all Violet could do was nod. “I get that you’re upset and rightfully so. But I also believe you owe it to yourself and to Hunter to sit down and talk to him.”

“I don’t think it’s going to make a difference. Yesterday he...”

“He was at his brother’s wedding, Violet. Frankly, it was stupid on his part to even bring the subject up in the middle of such a big family celebration.” Grabbing Violet’s hand, she tugged her down onto the bed to sit beside her. “I don’t want you to have any regrets, and I think if you leave without trying to talk to Hunter, you’ll regret it.”

“Or...Hunter and I both were living in a bubble. A temporary bubble,” Violet said miserably. “And the thing about bubbles? They burst.” She

sighed wearily as she rested her head on Katie's shoulder.

"You have to know this was a big step for Hunter. Brian and I have known him for a while and...neither of us remember him getting serious with anyone. His ex really did a number on him, and he's kind of obsessive about who he brings around Eli. But with you, he was different—more relaxed and happier than I've ever seen him."

"So what are you saying? He deserves a pass because he's been hurt?" She straightened. "We've all been hurt. And you know, we can make a list of who's been hurt more, but at the end of the day, it won't matter. He talked about wanting a future with me, but if he's still clinging to what happened in his past and using it as an excuse to stay cocooned in his safe little world, then what kind of future can we have?"

"All relationships take work, Vi."

"I get that, but they also have to have compromise from both parties. I deserve more than someone who refuses to give even an inch."

The sad look on Katie's face told her everything she needed to know.

She was about to say that she was planning on leaving today after lunch when her phone dinged with an incoming text. When she picked it up and swiped the screen, she saw it was from Hunter.

Hunter: Hey. Can we please get together for lunch? I'd really like to talk to you.

Her heart sank a little at the impersonal tone. They had gotten to the point where their texts were usually fun and flirty and always had some kind of emoji. Considering the circumstances, she figured this was just part of them going their separate ways.

Violet: Sure. Where do you want to meet?

Hunter: Here if it's okay with you.

"What?" Katie asked. "What is it? Is it Hunter? Is he apologizing?"

Rolling her eyes, she sighed. "No. He wants me to come over for lunch. I'm guessing we'll have 'the talk' and...that'll be it."

“Wow. Way to be positive.”

“We’ve been over this!”

“Okay, okay. You’re right.” She paused. “So are you going to go?”

“According to you, I have to.” Which reminded her...

Violet: Sure. About an hour?

Hunter: See you then.

Putting the phone down, Violet swore she was okay. This was the way things had to be. She’d go over, they’d each say their piece, and then say goodbye.

She didn’t even realize she was crying until Katie got up to hug her.

And she didn’t stop until it was almost time for her to go.

* * *

“DAD? WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

Hunter had just finished texting with Violet and was making up some sandwiches. He needed the next hour to figure out what he was going to say.

Or rather...how he was going to say goodbye.

“There’s a carnival over at the high school and I thought I’d take Eli over to check it out,” Dominic said as he walked over and sat down at the kitchen table.

“Why didn’t you mention it yesterday?”

“You were a little distracted—especially after dinner.” He paused and studied Hunter. “You want to talk about it?”

“Not particularly.”

“Well, that’s too bad because I had to get tough with Scarlett and Kyle who were arm-wrestling over who was going to get to come over here and kick your butt.”

“*What?!*”

Nodding, his father explained. “Even without telling anyone the specifics, we all know Violet didn’t just suddenly remember something she had to do. We all figured there was a disagreement—for lack of a better word—over her moving here.”

“Oh, really? And who thought that?” he asked and hated how defensive he sounded.

“Scarlett mentioned the awkward conversation y’all were having while you were dancing. You take that and the fact the two of you disappeared not long after and only one of you came back? Well...we may not be a family of geniuses, Hunter, but we’re certainly not stupid either.”

It was rare that his father pried, so Hunter sat down and told him about the disastrous conversation he and Violet had at the wedding.

“So what are you going to do now?”

“She’s going to be here in a little while so we can talk about it.”

Dominic nodded. “And you’re going to tell her you were wrong, right? That you’ll go to Nashville?”

“Um...no,” Hunter replied, thoroughly confused. “Why would I do that?”

“The question really is, why wouldn’t you?”

“Because there’s no reason to! She’s moving here! Why do I need to go there?”

His father’s brows furrowed, and for a moment, he seemed at a loss for words.

Unfortunately, that didn’t last long.

“You need to go there because it’s part of her life,” he reasoned. “You need to go there because it’s someplace that has meaning to her. And lastly—and this is the most important one—you need to go there because she asked you to.”

He rolled his eyes. “Dad, no one does everything someone asks of them. Eli asked me to take him to the moon last week. Clearly that’s not going to

happen.”

“You’re over-simplifying as much as you’re deflecting, Hunter. You and I both know you can’t take your son to the moon, but you *can* go to Nashville.” He paused. “Why are you so against it?”

Good question.

“Look, we all know you have some weird issues where traveling outside of Magnolia is concerned.”

“It’s not weird...”

“And to be honest, I don’t know where that came from. Your mother and I couldn’t afford to travel much—mainly because we had you all so close together, and it was hard to herd you all up and go anyplace. But we would go places, Hunter. We took day trips and sometimes got away for the weekend. Nothing bad ever happened to you when we traveled, so what’s this phobia of yours all about?”

“It’s not a phobia, Dad.”

His father let out a long, weary breath. “Hunter...”

“Why aren’t I enough?” he asked a little too loudly. The shocked look on his father’s face told him that was not the explanation he was expecting. But he didn’t let it deter him. “I was a good kid, Dad! I followed all the rules, I got good grades, I did my chores, and...and Mom still left!”

Holy shit! Where did that come from?

Reaching over, his father placed his hand on top of his. “Hunter, your mother didn’t leave because of anything you did. Don’t you think if given a chance she would have stayed? Lived? There wasn’t a choice. Life is unfair like that. You have to know that given a choice, she would have been here to watch you all grow up!”

“Then there was Melissa. All she did was talk about how great everything would be if we left Magnolia—if we moved. I was faithful, and I did everything I could to make that relationship work, and where did it get me, huh?”

“It got you that amazing little boy playing in the other room,” Dominic said fiercely.

“Eli is the greatest thing to ever happen to me, Dad. I know that. But what is so great about everyplace else, huh? What is wrong with being happy with just me? Or with being here? Why...” He paused as emotion had him by the throat. “Why am I not enough to make someone happy? It was always, ‘I love you, Hunter, but what if we moved?’ and now I feel like Violet’s saying the same thing.”

“Violet is not like Melissa, son.”

“There are a lot of similarities, Dad. The same...what’s the word...wanderlust. It’s just a matter of time before she’ll pack up and leave too.”

“I realize I don’t know Violet as well as you do. But from everything you’ve told me before today, and what Rose told me about her, and even what Dean and Courtney observed from the night you all had dinner together, I can say with some certainty that she is nothing like Melissa. Hell, just watching her with Eli yesterday proved that! Plus, she’s not asking you to move, she’s asking you to share a part of her life with her. Briefly.”

“And that’s another thing that’s an issue—the traveling. She does it a lot for her career and she’s going to want me to go with her.”

“So?”

Groaning, his head fell forward. “I’m just not someone who wants to travel.”

“That’s not a good reason, Hunter. Now don’t get me wrong, not everyone likes to travel, but I never heard of anyone being as openly hostile toward it as you. So what gives?”

Standing, he walked over and leaned against the kitchen counter. “Look at this place, Dad. I’m just an average guy making an average amount of money. On top of that, I’m a single parent. I don’t have the money to waste

on trips and if I do happen to have a little extra income, I can think of better ways of spending it than on a trip.”

“So you’re just being practical, is that it?”

“Exactly. It would be damn irresponsible of me to waste my money like that. You taught us to always be mindful of our spending.”

“Oh, so now this is my fault?”

“That’s not what I’m saying...” He huffed with annoyance. “Dad, you have to admit, it was chaos after Mom died. We struggled, and everything was just...there was no order! Well, I don’t want that for Eli! I know you did the best you could, and the circumstances were different, but...”

“You feel the need to stay in control and have the control since you grew up in a chaotic house where everything was out of your control. Do I have that right?”

Now he felt like crap. “I...I never should have said anything. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. I just...” He growled with frustration. “And I’m not that big of a control freak!”

“Says you.” Dominic stood and walked over until they were almost toe to toe. “You bought this house, did all the renovations on it, and furnished it without any help financially, right?”

He nodded.

“You own your truck? Have money in savings? Have money in your retirement fund?”

“Of course!”

“Son, you can have all the money in the world tucked away for your future, but if you’re not living your life, what’s the point? What is there to look forward to in your future? Make the memories with your son while he’s still young. You aren’t poor. You’re doing better financially than most people. I’m not saying you have to take a cruise around the world, but would it kill you to take Eli someplace just for the joy of it? Someplace not here in town?”

“Dad...”

Dominic held up his hands in defeat. “I’ve said all I’m going to say. We always teased how Dean was the cautious one, but you make him look like a daredevil comparatively.” Placing a hand on Hunter’s shoulder, he said, “Think about that.” Then he turned and called out to Eli that they were going to the carnival to have some real *fun*.

The jab was not lost on him.

There wasn’t much time for him to let anything his father said to really sink in because before he knew it, Violet was knocking on his door.

The urge to pull her into his arms, kiss her, and tell her everything was going to work out was so strong, but she stood there looking defiant and almost hostile—almost exactly like the very first time they met.

Not a good sign...

“Hey,” he said softly and motioned for her to come in.

Her posture was stiff, and she gave him a curt nod as she walked past him. It wasn’t until she was in the kitchen that she stopped and turned to face him. “Where’s Eli?” she asked, her tone much gentler than her expression.

“Oh, my dad took him to the carnival up at the high school. Why don’t you have a seat? I um...I made up some sandwiches for us.”

“You didn’t have to make anything.”

Yeah, definitely not a good sign...

He put the food on the table and took the seat opposite her. Neither paid any attention to the sandwiches. “About yesterday...”

Holding up her hand, she stopped him. “Look, Hunter, I think we can both agree we’re not ready for...you know...what we thought we were ready for.”

“I don’t think that’s quite it, but...”

“But what, Hunter?” she asked wearily. “Are we going to keep going in circles again? A relationship—a good relationship—requires us to be partners.

Equals. And that means I'm not the only one making sacrifices. I was willing to sacrifice for you. For us. And for all your big talk about how much you wanted this, you weren't willing to give up anything."

"Violet, it's not that simple."

"It really is," she said, her expression sad. "If you're not willing to bend at all at this early stage of our relationship, where will be a year from now? Two years from now?" Pausing, she gave him a small smile. "You're an amazing man and an even more amazing father. You're structured because you have to be, but your unwillingness to bend? That's just you making that choice."

"I wish I could be different," he murmured, staring down at his hands because it pained him to say the words out loud.

"Me too. But I've spent the better part of my life dealing with feelings of inadequacy, and I'm finally at a point in my life where I like who I am, and I'm proud of the things I'm doing and psyched about what's to come. I want to grow my business, and while I don't have to see the whole world, I want to see more than my backyard. And I can't be with someone who refuses to grow with me. I'm sorry."

When she stood, he couldn't make himself move. Bending down, she kissed him on the cheek and lingered there for a moment.

"For what it's worth, I don't regret falling in love with you, Hunter. Thank you for letting me into your life and letting me be a part of yours and Eli's world for a little while. I'll never forget you." She looked toward his son's room. "It's probably for the best that he's not here. I don't think I could have said goodbye to him without crying."

She was killing him.

Standing, he walked up behind her, his hands gently resting on her shoulders. "Don't go." His voice was low and gruff and he barely recognized it.

Turning, Violet looked up at him, her eyes bright with unshed tears.
“Give me a reason to stay, Hunter.”

He could tell her he loved her.

He could tell her he’d try to change.

But it was hard to change a lifetime of behavior, and he had a feeling his promises would be empty, and he’d end up hurting her in the long run. It was better to let her go so she could find someone who would travel the world with her and encourage her to fly and chase after her dreams.

Cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her. It wasn’t meant to seduce; there was only tenderness. The kind of kiss that said a million things that he couldn’t.

Namely, goodbye.

When he lifted his head, he tasted the salt of her tears and saw them streaming down her cheeks. Violet’s hand reached up and wiped at his lips.
“Take care of yourself, Hunter Jones. Be happy.”

And then she was walking away, and Hunter had no idea if it was for the best or not, but he was ashamed of himself for simply letting this end. For someone whose job was being brave, he just proved he was anything but.

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SEVENTEEN

“Thank you so much, Frannie! I know this is going to be an amazing trip! Take care!” Taking her headset off, Violet stood and stretched. She’d been back in Nashville for two weeks and luckily had been incredibly busy. It looked like all the advertising and promo she’d been doing on social media was really starting to pay off. Her sales for this month alone were her highest ever, and with the networking she’d been doing, there wasn’t a doubt in her mind that she was going to double what she made last year. This was everything she’d dreamed of and yet...she was miserable.

There wasn’t anyone to talk to about her day, and it just seemed wrong to call up Katie for the sole purpose of bragging about herself.

Besides, they both knew she’d end up asking about Hunter and Eli just like she had every time she’d called her friend.

Which was almost every day.

Sure, she made a good play of making it seem like she wanted to make sure Katie was feeling well, that Brian was adjusting to life at home, and that the kids were both okay. Inevitably, Katie would ask her if she wanted to know how Hunter was, and because she was a glutton for punishment, she always said yes. Apparently, Brian had gone over to help Hunter with the deck, and they’d been hanging out more and more.

Which made getting her daily dose of torture much more convenient.

“Okay, no calling Katie. I’m sure I have emails to answer.”

And she did.

Most people who were looking for quotes on a vacation reached out via email first so she could work out the numbers for them before they hopped on the phone. It made the process much easier, but unfortunately, not everyone was tech-savvy, and occasionally she had inquiries where they forgot to leave their name or phone number. Emailing back and forth always felt impersonal, but sometimes it was the way things had to be.

Like now. This was the second time the same person had filled out the form on her website looking for recommendations for a romantic getaway. No dates were given, no specific locations.

After a couple of back-and-forth emails, she finally had a place to start. It felt like she’d already run a marathon, so when her phone rang, she was thankful for the distraction.

Katie’s face was smiling up at her, and Violet happily scooped up her phone. “Hey! How’s my favorite family doing today?”

“Girl, I am exhausted!”

“Oh, no! What’s going on?”

“My sweet Benjamin has turned into a bit of a terror. He’s got his days and nights mixed up and I swear he’s looking for you.”

Her smile grew. “Is it wrong how I love that so much?”

“Yes! I know I didn’t want to admit it while you were here, but you really were like the baby whisperer with him. Can you come back for a few days so Brian and I can sleep?”

“As tempting as that sounds, I think I’m going to pass,” she said with a small laugh.

“Wow, I guess we found there are limitations on this friendship.”

Violet knew she was teasing and figured she could tease too. “Well, I always knew this day would come. Of course, the fact that you haven’t

booked a vacation with me since your honeymoon has made me wonder if you don't trust me..."

"Ooo! That reminds me!" Katie excitedly interrupted. "Brian wants us to plan a trip!"

"Kate, I was just kidding! I know you guys have a ton of other things on your plate right now—like a newborn. We're cool. Really."

"No, I'm totally serious right now! He wants to take us to Disney!"

"Really? When?"

"Next month."

"Oh, sweetie. No. Don't do it."

"What? Why?"

"It's too much with an infant."

"Rose will be with us to help out! Trust me, it's going to be great! We want to go the end of next month since school starts the first week, we figured most people wouldn't be taking vacations at the end. Lower crowds and maybe better deals. Plus, you know, military discount. Can you work something up for us?"

"Of course! You know I'd love to do that for you. Text me the dates and I'll have some numbers for you by tomorrow."

"You are the best!" she gushed. "So how's business? I know you said it's been busy, but I hope you're taking some time for yourself and not overdoing it."

"Kate, I work from home in my pajamas most days. Trust me, I'm not overdoing it."

"Still, I worry about you."

I'm glad someone does...

"I'm thinking of not doing daycare anymore."

"What?!"

"Yeah, like I said, Ben's just struggling with a schedule right now, and I'm exhausted. I seriously underestimated how much having a second child

would affect our lives. And even with Brian being home, he's got to go to work and needs his sleep too. I just think it's best for us as a family for me to let the daycare go."

"But...what about the families? I mean, I know some of them found other options, but...what about...you know...?"

"Hunter?"

Dammit. "Yeah. Have you talked to him about it? Could you maybe just handle having Eli?"

"It's too soon. Believe me, I am agonizing over it. Brian's over at Hunter's now talking to him because I'm too much of a chicken to do it."

"Obviously there are other daycares in town. I'm sure he'll find something."

"Yeah, I'm sure he will, but...with his schedule, it's harder. His siblings will help out, but I hate it for Eli."

Me too...

"Anyway, I won't bore you with my tales of woe," Katie said with a sigh. "I hear Kira getting up from her nap so I need to go. I'll get those dates over to you, and I want you to give us a quote that includes everything you think we'll enjoy. Brian says not to worry about the budget so go deluxe for us!"

"I'm already thinking of the perfect place! I'll email you tomorrow."

"Thank you! Talk to you later!"

When they hung up, Violet stared at her computer and decided she needed something to eat since she worked through lunch. Once she ate, she'd work on Katie's trip and wished she had one planned for herself. She thought about the California trip she had considered back when she and Hunter first started dating. Maybe what she needed was a little time away to get out of this funk so she could stop thinking about and missing Hunter.

The more she thought about it, the more excited she got. A good road trip through some of the most beautiful cities and towns in California would

be a great way to escape for a little while and to help her regroup a bit. The urge to start pulling up some websites immediately was strong, but her growling stomach was stronger.

“Fine! Food first and then I’m going to plan the most epic road trip California has ever seen!” she said as she walked to the kitchen to make herself a sandwich.

And tried to push away the thoughts of how she wished she had someone to take the epic road trip with her.

* * *

IT WAS AFTER MIDNIGHT, and Hunter was still wide awake and staring at the ceiling.

Which had kind of become the norm for him lately.

He wasn’t sleeping well, he had no appetite, and he was working himself to death around the house while trying to still have plenty of quality time with his son. The deck was done, he built a jungle gym, and had done some major landscaping around the perimeter of the yard. And yet no matter how much he exhausted himself, whenever he climbed into bed at the end of the day, he couldn’t fall asleep.

It didn’t seem possible that one person could leave such a big hole in his life when she’d only been a part of it for such a short time. It didn’t seem logical or practical—two things that ruled his life—and yet...he missed Violet so damn much he felt like he could barely breathe. His whole life was turned upside down and in chaos and he couldn’t seem to control or fix any of it.

It was maddening.

When Brian had come by earlier and told him how Katie wasn’t sure she’d be doing daycare anymore, it had been just one more thing to add to the list of what was beyond his control. He still had another month of leave

from the department, so he knew there was plenty of time for him to find a new daycare for Eli. His friend had worried that he'd be pissed or angry at Katie for changing her mind, but he wasn't. Hell, he envied how she was doing what was best for her.

"I don't even know what's best for me," he murmured into the darkness. "I thought I did, but..." Yawning, he rolled onto his side and punched his pillow. Not that it mattered. He couldn't get comfortable anyway. With nothing left to do, he closed his eyes and prayed sleep would claim him.

The next thing he knew, Eli was climbing onto the bed.

"Daddy?" His little hands rested on Hunter's arms and shook him. "Daddy, I'm hungry."

"What the...?" Rolling over, he noticed the room was bright, and when he looked at the bedside clock, it was after eight. Muttering a curse, he pulled Eli into his arms and hugged him. "Sorry, buddy. I didn't mean to oversleep."

Off in the distance, the doorbell rang, and Hunter's head was spinning as he tried to wake himself up.

Placing Eli on the bed beside him, Hunter kicked off the blankets and stumbled out of the room. The sun streaming into the living room was almost blinding, and by the time he got to the front door, he swore he'd never see normally again.

"Dean?" Opening the door, he found his older brother standing there with a box from Henderson's bakery and a tray with—what he hoped—was two cups of coffee. "What are you doing here?" Stepping aside, he motioned for his brother to come in.

"Uncle Dean!" Eli cried as he ran into the room. Luckily his brother was swift on his feet and managed to slide the box and drinks onto the kitchen table before Eli launched himself at him.

"Hey, little man! You want a cinnamon roll?" Dean asked.

“Yeah!” Eli immediately scrambled out of Dean’s arms and sat at the table before opening the box for himself.

Hunter slowly made his way into the kitchen and gladly accepted the cup his brother handed him. “Thanks.”

Dean poured Eli some juice before sitting down and grabbing a pastry for himself and then pushing the box toward Hunter. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah, why?”

“For starters? It looks like you just woke up.”

“I did just wake up.”

“Dude, you’re an early riser. So what gives?”

“I like to sleep in on the weekend. It’s no big deal.”

“It’s Tuesday,” Dean said flatly. “Try again.”

Hunter casually nodded toward his son, and thankfully his brother knew to change the subject until they could talk freely. In the meantime, they talked about all the work he’d done in the yard.

“Dad mentioned how this all started because you wanted a bigger deck. It’s amazing how these things can snowball, right?”

“Yeah, sure.” He took a sip of his coffee and it tasted better than anything had in a while.

At least until he took a bite of the cinnamon roll.

That was pure heaven.

“I swear, I don’t know what Mrs. Henderson does to these things,” Dean commented, “but they are pure perfection every time.”

Hunter whole-heartedly agreed.

Once they were done, Hunter set up Eli in the living room to watch *Doc McStuffins* so he and Dean could talk. Back in the kitchen, he sat down and took another sip of his coffee and figured his brother would start the conversation.

And he did.

“You know you’re a colossal jackass, right?” Dean said with a small grin.

Choking on his coffee, it took a minute for him to catch his breath. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“Look, I know Dad’s talked to you, I know Kyle’s talked to you, and I’m sure Scarlett’s talked to you too.”

They all had, but it was a bit of a blur to Hunter. Everyone was telling him how wrong he was and to unclench and go after Violet, but...he’d been a little busy trying *not* to think about her, so he ignored all their talks.

“So I’m here to return the favor.”

“Um...what?”

Nodding, Dean took a sip of his coffee before continuing. “Do you remember when Courtney was planning on leaving Magnolia and moving to Raleigh and you came over and pretty much knocked some sense into me?”

Crap...

“Yeah...”

“The dumbest thing I ever did was not being honest with Court when we first started dating.”

“No, the dumbest thing you ever did was not notice she was in love with you for years before you started dating.”

Frowning, Dean murmured, “Agree to disagree.” He took another sip of his coffee. “Hunt, it’s obvious you’re crazy about this girl—possibly even in love with her. Are you really going to sit here and say your need to be in control all the time and only see Magnolia Sound for the rest of your life is more important to you than having a future with Violet?”

The simple answer was no.

He realized that now.

But he also had no idea to fix what he’d done.

“The difference between you and me is that Courtney never got the chance to leave,” Hunter said lowly, staring down at his coffee. “I let Violet go. I can’t imagine she’d be willing to give me another chance.”

“You’ll never know, Hunt, until you try.”

It all sounded easy, but Hunter was a realist. “I could call her and beg her to take me back. I can apologize until the cows come home.” He sighed. “But we both know how I am, Dean. In the long run, I’ll revert to my old ways and stifle her.”

“Most of my life, you all picked at me for being too cautious. Hell, sometimes you still do. Courtney knows that about me and reminds me of it almost daily. But she also encourages me to relax and open my mind a little. She’s the reason I finally took the step to open my own garage. She’s the reason we’re flipping houses.” He smiled. “And she’s the reason I’m confident I can handle all that and a baby too.”

“What?” he cried. “You guys are having a baby?” Jumping up, he hugged his brother. “This is amazing! Congratulations!”

“Thanks. We’re both really excited about it. Slightly overwhelmed, but excited.”

“Dude, what are you doing here worrying about me?” he asked with a nervous laugh. “Clearly you have enough on your plate. I’ll be fine.” He shrugged. “I always am. I’ve been through breakups before, so...”

“Not like this,” Dean said, his tone serious. “The way you looked at Violet was like nothing I’d ever seen on you before. Don’t give that up. You’ll regret it.”

“I already do,” he admitted after a moment.

“Then do something about it!”

“I’m afraid, Dean! I don’t...I don’t want to screw this up. Violet’s had a rough life, and she deserves someone who doesn’t have as many issues as I do.”

“We all have issues, Hunt. Good or bad, we all have them.”

“Yeah, well...she spent a lot of years in foster care, and...you know...I don’t want to...”

“Do you love her?” Dean interrupted.

“Of course, I do!”

“Okay then. You ask me, what Violet wants is someone who loves her and fights for her. Someone who can prove she matters more to them than anything else. The rest of the stuff? Your weird travel phobia?”

“It’s not weird!”

“It’s weird and everybody thinks so,” Dean deadpanned. “But all that aside, the other stuff will work itself out. You are going to have to make a grand gesture to prove to her that she means more to you than all your crazy hang-ups.”

“They’re not crazy...”

“Oh, my God! Enough! You are so damn annoying!”

“Great pep talk.”

Reaching over, Dean smacked him on the side of the head. “Like I said, I’m returning the favor. Now, what do we need to do to get your girl back?”

“I...I don’t even know where to begin. She wanted me to go to Nashville, but...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. You wouldn’t do it. Now you will.”

“I will?”

Nodding enthusiastically, Dean said, “Yeah. You will. And before you give me your list of excuses, I’m here to tell you none of them will work.”

His heart was pounding like wild in his chest. “What about Eli?”

“Well, I think you can bring him with you, but considering you’re going to have to grovel, it would probably be best if you go solo. That’s why Scarlett and Mason have agreed to have him come and stay with them while you’re gone.”

“But...what if I’m gone for like...more than a couple of days?”

Dean snorted with laughter. “Dude, please. We all know you’re not that advanced in the relaxing stage yet. You have five days, ideally. But I’m sure if you needed more, it wouldn’t be a problem.”

Nodding, he said, “What if she turns me down?”

“Try not to talk too much. This way, we can guarantee she won’t.”

“Not funny.”

“Wasn’t joking...”

Getting up, he began to pace. “This...this is crazy! How do I even know where she lives? Do I drive there? Fly? I...how do I even get her to talk to me?”

“Katie brought her mother-in-law to the shop yesterday,” Dean explained. “We talked about this whole thing and she gave me Violet’s address.”

“Seriously?”

Dean nodded. “And she said you better not screw this up.”

“Great. So no one has any confidence in me.”

“Well...you’ve been a disappointment so far. But I guess you can turn it around.”

He felt like he was going to be sick.

“Flying will be the easiest for you. There’s a flight out this afternoon we can get you on that will have you to Nashville in three and a half hours. You give me the go-ahead and Scarlett’s standing by waiting to book it for you.”

Unsure of what to say, he paced.

“Stop overthinking this. That’s how you got into this mess. Take a chance, Hunter! Show Violet you’re willing to put in the work!” When he still didn’t answer, Dean huffed with annoyance. “C’mon, man! Say something!”

Ignoring his brother, Hunter walked to the living room and stood next to his son. “How would you like to stay with Aunt Scarlett and Uncle Mason for a few days?”

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EIGHTEEN

It was a beautiful afternoon and Violet knew she should be working, but it was too lovely out to stay inside. As she walked around the park, it occurred to her how she wished she had a dog to walk. All around her, people were walking dogs and—not for the first time—she wished she could just go to the local shelter and adopt one.

“No, dopey. You travel too much. How fair would that be to a dog?”

It didn’t stop her from wanting one, though.

Well, a dog, a husband, a couple of kids, a house with a white picket fence...yeah, damn Hunter Jones for opening her eyes to a life she never thought she’d have. Even after all her visits with Katie, she never felt the tug of longing to settle down like she did after spending time with Hunter and Eli.

Visions of Eli with a puppy came to mind, and her heart ached.

A few blocks from home, she considered stopping for some groceries so she could cook dinner rather than getting takeout, but immediately reconsidered.

“I will stop at the bakery though,” she murmured, already envisioning getting one of the monster fudge brownies or maybe some cupcakes.

And immediately her mind went to Hunter.

Not like it was hard to make that happen. It seemed like it didn't take much these days to make her think of him.

Deciding she didn't want to invite the memories, she opted to just go home and dive into her work. There was zero chance of *that* making her think of Hunter. After all, he had made it abundantly clear he no interest in traveling anywhere ever. So the faster she got home, the faster she could push her thoughts of him out of her mind for a little while.

She caught a faint whiff of sweetness from the bakery, so she thought of Hunter.

She walked by a pizza place and thought of Hunter.

Then she passed a fire hydrant. And thought of Hunter.

"Ugh...I seriously need to find a way to stop doing this. It's not possible to walk around and see and think of Hunter everywhere I go." Turning onto her block, she saw someone standing at her door and...yeah...he looked like Hunter.

Groaning, she mentally chided herself because he wasn't the only man on the planet who was tall with sandy brown hair and built like a fantasy. Hell, she knew she could pick up any fireman calendar or look at any men's magazine and see dozens of guys who looked exactly like Hunter.

Wracking her brain, Violet tried to think if she had ordered something and the guy at her door was delivering it.

The closer she got, she saw he did have something in his hands and her heart kicked hard in her chest when she saw it was a pink box.

Just like the ones from Henderson's bakery.

Suddenly, she was frozen on the spot—afraid to get any closer. What if this was a mirage? What if all these crazy thoughts she'd been having for the last several minutes were making her think she was seeing Hunter when he wasn't really there?

But what if it's really him?

Tears stung her eyes as she realized if he was there...then he came to get her.

No one had ever come back for her.

Her entire life was spent with people leaving her, but if that was Hunter Jones in the flesh on her doorstep, then for once in her life, she meant enough to someone for them to come back for her.

It was a terrifying and exciting thought.

Up ahead, she saw him turn to look around and knew the instant he spotted her.

The practical, bad-ass side of her demanded she calmly walk the rest of the way and assume an air of confidence—like it was no big deal that he was here. But her heart had other plans, and before she knew it, Violet was running up the block and didn't care how crazy she looked.

The closer she got, the bigger her smile grew, and she noticed Hunter's was the same. And when she was close enough to jump into his arms, she did. Wrapping herself completely around him, she held on as tight as she could—afraid somehow that this wasn't real or that she was dreaming.

Two strong arms banded around her, and as she buried her face against his neck and smelled the fresh scent of his cologne, she knew she was awake and this was real.

He was here.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks and down onto his neck, but neither let go for a long time. When she finally forced herself to look up, she feared she looked like hell and frantically tried to wipe at her face.

Hunter was the one to gently push her hands away so he could be the one to wipe away her tears, and the tender look on his face was enough to make her start crying again.

Carefully, he carried her over to her front steps and sat down with her in his lap. After a moment, he finally spoke. "Please tell me these are happy tears."

Nodding, she reached up and grabbed his face and kissed him. There were quite possibly a million things she wanted to say, but they all could wait. Kissing Hunter and being kissed by him was what she needed more than anything right now. It was a little frantic and wet and all-consuming and so not the place for it, and that's the only reason why she reluctantly lifted her head.

"Hunter Jones, I have one very important question for you," she said breathlessly.

She saw him swallow hard before he nodded.

"Are there cupcakes in that box?"

Laughing, he got them both onto their feet. "Let's go inside and find out." He scooped up the box while she scrambled to find her keys in her purse, and once they were inside and away from the rest of the world, she took a minute to finally let it sink in that he was here. In her house. In Nashville. It was new and yet it felt like he was always supposed to be there.

"So, um...this is my home," she said nervously.

He walked around and she was happy the place was clean. When she first got back from Magnolia Sound, there had been a few days where she let the dishes and laundry pile up. Luckily, she had gotten over that. The entire first floor was a fairly open floor plan and her office was tucked away in its own room. Upstairs she had three decent-sized bedrooms. It had been the first home she had purchased after years of renting. It was bigger than what she needed, but after so many years of sharing a room or having roommates, she wanted enough space of her own that she'd never feel crowded. But right now, she couldn't wait to sell it and move to a tiny beach bungalow with two of the greatest guys in the world.

At least, she hoped that's what was going to happen.

Clearing her throat to get his attention, she figured they should probably start talking. "What are you doing here, Hunter?"

His hands slid into his pockets and she could see the uncertainty in his eyes—like he suddenly didn’t know what to say. Motioning for him to have a seat on the sofa, Violet did her best to patiently wait to hear what he had to say. To keep herself busy, she opened the bakery box and smiled when she saw half a dozen cupcakes in there. Picking two of them, she put them on a plate and carried them out to the living room before sitting on the opposite end of the sofa.

“Your house is very nice, Violet,” he began as he stared down at his clasped hands. “And your neighborhood seems to be in a great location. Lots of stuff nearby.”

“Thanks, and yeah, one of the reasons I chose it was because I could walk to almost everything I need.”

He nodded, and they went quiet again.

“Hunter...”

“I should never have let you leave,” he finally said, turning his head to look at her. “You asked me to give you a reason to stay, and I should have said that I loved you. I should have said I’d do whatever it was you wanted because you mean more to me than anything else.” Then he chuckled and shook his head. “Except for Eli, but...”

“I know what you’re saying,” she interrupted, fighting the urge to cry again. “I desperately wanted you to give me a reason that day, Hunter, but it seemed like you were warring with yourself and...” Pausing, she sighed. “You weren’t ready.”

“I’m ready now,” he stated, his voice stronger than it was a moment ago. “And I’m ashamed that it took me this long. My whole life, I thought I was brave and strong and I could get through anything, but then you came along and it suddenly felt like I was second-guessing everything about myself. I run into burning buildings and yet I couldn’t tell you that I loved you.” Hanging his head, he shook it.

Sliding across the sofa, Violet pressed up against him, taking his hands in hers. “Then we make a perfect pair because I’ve spent most of my life acting like nothing bothers me and that I don’t need anyone. But I need you, Hunter. And Eli. I need you both so much that it scares me.”

Hunter twisted so he was facing her, reversing the position of their hands so he was holding hers. “And we need you, Violet. I am so damn in love with you, and if you give me another chance, I promise to not be so uptight and structured, and I promise to even give traveling a try!”

“Hunter...”

“I mean, I flew here, and it wasn’t so bad,” he explained. “But...you’ll have to be patient with me. I’m not big on the idea of cruises or international trips, and I don’t like the idea of leaving Eli home without me too often...”

“Hunter?”

“Hmm?”

“How about we start with a simple tour of Nashville and take it from there?”

His shoulders sagged with relief. “I think I’d like that very much.” Then he tugged her back into his arms, resting his forehead against hers. “But later. Right now, the only tour I want is to see your bedroom.”

Every inch of her tingled with anticipation. “Straight up the stairs, last doorway on the left.” She squealed with excitement as he stood and hauled her over his shoulder in a typical fireman’s pose.

And it was a complete turn-on.

The first of many.

* * *

“I THOUGHT you were a mirage when I saw you standing on my doorstep,” Violet said sleepily. “Boy, am I glad you were real.” She was

naked and warm and pressed up against him under the sheets, and it was the perfect way to end the day.

Except...it was still light out and he was starving.

"I'm happy I'm real too," he replied, kissing her softly on her forehead.

"What made you decide to come here? I swore I wouldn't ask, but...I'm just so surprised."

"Like I said, I regretted the way I behaved since you left. I built the deck, I built Eli a jungle gym, I landscaped the backyard, and did everything I could to exhaust myself." Pausing, he kissed her again. "But I was miserable. I missed you so damn much. Plus, everyone in my family was reminding me of what a jackass I was to let you get away."

"Wow."

Nodding, he said, "Yeah. But Dean came by this morning and...we've always told him how overly cautious he was. He's slow to make a decision, and he overthinks everything. So when he's the one telling me I'm being too cautious, then I knew I had to do something about it. Honestly, I didn't think you'd even want to see me."

"I'm sure you realized how much you were mistaken when I pulled a *Dirty Dancing* leap on you."

"*Dirty Dancing* leap?"

Violet pushed herself up and looked up at him. "Please tell me you've seen the movie!"

"Um...I think so."

"At the end? Their last dance when she runs up to him and he lifts her up in the air?"

Gently, Hunter guided her head back onto his shoulder. "I don't think it was quite like that, but yeah, when you wrapped yourself around me, I knew you were happy to see me. And believe me, I was nervous as hell that you'd tell me to leave."

“Well...you had cupcakes with you so I figured I could at least hear you out.”

Hugging her tight, he tickled her ribs a little. “So it’s not really me that you love, it’s just the cupcakes. Is that what you’re saying?”

“The fact that you’re up here with me and the cupcakes are downstairs all by themselves should tell you exactly where you stand.”

He fell silent and rolled Violet onto her back. “Where do I stand, Violet?” he asked quietly, realizing he’d said he loved her and...she hadn’t said it back. And more than anything, he needed to hear her say it to him and know he wasn’t alone.

One soft, delicate hand caressed his jaw, down the column of his neck, and came to rest over his heart. “I love you, Hunter Jones. I love the fact that you got on a plane to come here to me.” She kissed him softly on the lips. “I love talking with you, I love laughing with you, I really love making love with you, and yes, I love that you brought cupcakes with you.” She paused and gave him a sassy grin. “And I wish we had brought them upstairs with us because I’m starving.”

“Me too!”

“Oh, thank God! I was so afraid to admit that and ruin the moment!” She maneuvered out from under him and got up. Hunter lay back in awe as she stretched and walked around the bed completely naked and beyond sexy. She walked into what he guessed was her en suite bathroom and came back out wearing a robe. “Okay, I had planned on getting takeout tonight, so what are you in the mood for? Pizza? Chinese? Mexican? There’s a great chicken and barbecue place I order from all the time that I think you’d like. Or...”

“Or,” he interrupted as he climbed from the bed. “We can go out to eat and you can show me around the city a bit. What do you say?”

“I say...” She moved in close and wrapped her arms around his waist. “That I love you and I’d very much like to take you out and show you

around.” And she kissed his chest before looking up at him. “But I think we need a shower first. What do you say?”

“Can we be as loud as we want?” he teased.

“Hell, yeah!”

* * *

“THAT WAS...AMAZING.”

“I have to agree.”

“You know, you see these things on TV, but you don’t realize how truly amazing they are.”

“Well, it is one of the main reasons I bought this house.”

They were drying off after their second shower of the night. They had gone out to dinner and had walked around downtown for a while before coming home and having the cupcakes for dessert.

And using the icing for pleasure purposes.

Exhausted and clean, they climbed back into the bed and snuggled in close. Violet left one of the bedside lamps on so there was some soft lighting in the room, and Hunter realized just how practical his home was compared to hers. Everything here looked like it had been handpicked to make the room feel cozy. Whereas everything in his home was there because it was functional. The structure of the house itself was great, but sadly, his decorating skills kind of sucked.

Damn.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“What? What do you mean?”

“Hunter, you just sighed like...I don’t know...like something’s bothering you. Did you not have fun tonight? Was all the walking around too much? Too boring?” She gasped and sat up to face him. “Are you regretting coming here and you’re going to fly home in the morning?”

“Violet...”

“You never did say when your return flight was. Did you only plan on being here for the night? Oh, God...we really need to talk about stuff like this!”

“No, Violet, I was just thinking...”

“All night I yammered on and on and on about the city and all the things we were seeing and trying to keep the conversation light. When really, I should have been asking the big questions and figuring out where we go from here.”

Much like he had earlier, Hunter gently guided her back down beside him so she could rest her head on his shoulder. “Okay, take a breath and relax. I was sighing because your home is ...it’s fantastic, Violet. I’m looking around and realizing how much is lacking back at my place. Like you have all this great furniture that matches and looks a little like it came from a decorating magazine. Then I think of my place and it’s kind of depressing.”

“I wouldn’t say depressing...”

“You certainly wouldn’t see any of my rooms in a decorating magazine.”

“Well, don’t be too impressed,” she began slowly. “Because...this was the model home, and I bought it furnished, so...I can’t take all the credit. Or any of it, actually. And for what it’s worth, I love your house. It’s comfortable and lived in and...I can’t wait to be there with you again.”

This girl...

Holding her tight, he let out a long breath. “I know I was kind of unbending about this move, but I want you to know I get it now. You can’t just pack up your whole life in a week. It’s just not possible. So take as long as you want and I’ll come back as much as you need. Maybe I can even bring Eli on one of the trips.”

“I would love that, but...I’ve kind of been thinking about it all too.”

“Really?”

“And I mean since I left Magnolia and not just tonight.”

“O-kay...”

“I was being kind of bratty and pushing you too much. I love that you’re here, but the truth is that I could have done it all—packed up and sold the house all by myself. I just saw how you were being and it made me defensive. I’m so sorry, Hunter.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. You had every right to push. I was the one being stubborn and selfish. I wish I could say it will never happen again, but...I’m sure you’ll have to stay on me over it.”

“I don’t want you to change, Hunter,” she said softly. “I fell in love with you just the way you are.”

“Just remember that the next time I’m being stubborn about something.” Luckily, she knew he was teasing because she laughed.

“You may have met your match, Hunter, because I can be pretty stubborn too.”

“Hmm...that is true. Two stubborn people living in the same house... things could get ugly. Oh, well...at least we tried, right?”

Laughing, she elbowed him in the ribs. “Not so fast. Our stubbornness led us to giving up too easily. I say we put a little more effort in this time. What do you say? A little more than a few hours?”

He pretended to ponder what she was saying.

“Um...Hunter?”

“I’m thinking!” he teased, and then looked down and met her gaze. “I definitely think we should give it more than a few hours.”

She let out a sigh of relief. “Geez, way to be dramatic there. You scared me.”

Chuckling, he kissed her. “Sorry.” Then he paused for a moment. “You want to know what I personally think is the perfect timeline for us to genuinely know for sure if we can live with each other’s stubbornness?”

Glancing up at him, she shook her head.

“I’m thinking at least forty or fifty years. What do you say, Violet? You ready to take a chance with me?”

“I am. I really am.”

Lowering his lips to hers, he kissed her sweetly, then deeply, then thoroughly.

This time when they made love, they took their time, and it was as if they had the time in the world.

Which they did.

They had forever.

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EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH LATER...

“Hey, can you step outside for a minute?”

Violet looked up from her laptop and smiled at Hunter. “Sure. Let me just hit send on this email.” And she did. “What’s up?”

“Just...I need you to see something.”

It wasn’t like him to be so vague, but ever since she moved in with him, he’d been in a constant state of motion to try to get the house ready to sell. Honestly, she was perfectly fine with them staying here for a while, but he had been adamant about them getting someplace bigger so they could have more privacy.

And it was hard to argue with that.

Standing, she stretched and figured he was going to show her whatever else he had done to the yard, but when she stepped out onto the porch, she saw Eli sitting on the steps with the cutest little black and white puppy wearing a big red bow.

“Oh my goodness! Who is this?” she said softly as she sat down beside them. The dog was on its hind legs, tail wagging, and desperately trying to lick her face. Unable to resist, she picked him up and snuggled him close while her face was bathed in puppy kisses.

She noticed Hunter and Eli exchange a look before either spoke.

“His name is Nash’ll!” Eli said excitedly, and Hunter chuckled.

“We named him Nashville,” he explained. “But we’ll probably call him Nash for short. What do you think?”

It didn’t seem possible for her heart to be this full of love.

Shifting the squirming puppy to one arm, she held out the other so she could hug Eli. “Did you name him?”

He nodded. “Yup!”

“It was kind of a...group effort,” Hunter clarified. “We thought he’d make a great addition to our family.”

Violet couldn’t help but giggle because Nash was squirming desperately to get down and presumably play. “Does he have a leash or something? Can I just put him down?”

Reaching over, Hunter took the puppy from her and held him up to look at him. “He certainly is cute.”

“He really is! I can’t believe you guys did this! Where did you get him?”

“Scarlett works with an animal rescue here in town—Happy Tails. They got a litter of these little guys and when she told me about them, I knew we needed to give at least one of them a home.”

“What kind of dog is he?”

“A Boston Terrier.” The puppy reached up to lick Hunter’s face, and he laughed before moving him a little out of reach. “But you know what really drew him to me?”

She shook her head.

“Boston Terriers are known for their tuxedo coat and I thought it was perfect.”

“Um...I don’t get it.”

Hunter and Eli exchanged glances again before they moved to kneel in front of her.

“Violet, you have given so much to us,” Hunter began. “You made us a bigger and better family than I ever could have imagined.” He looked at Eli.

“Right, buddy?”

Eli nodded.

“We love you so much, and you’ve made us so happy, and we thought what better way to show you than with this little guy. You’ve mentioned before how much you’ve always wanted a dog,” he added before reading into his back pocket. “Here. We think you should be the one to put his new collar on him.”

She knew she was smiling from ear to ear and couldn’t believe how much her life had changed. A month ago, she thought all hope was lost for her and Hunter. Then he showed up on her doorstep and things had been amazing ever since.

Hunter had stayed for five wonderful days, and they spent them packing and going sight-seeing. It was an exhausting time, but when she took him to the airport and had to say goodbye, they both realized long distance wasn’t for them. For so long, there had been a part of her life that she felt was missing, and she found it with Hunter. As soon as she’d gotten home, Violet called a friend who was in real estate and listed her townhouse.

It sold in a week.

That’s when she definitely knew she was doing the right thing.

Now, her home was in Magnolia Sound, and she was close to Katie and Brian, but also made a ton of new friends. It seemed like Hunter and his siblings knew everyone in town and it was overwhelming and wonderful, and it filled her heart to overflowing to find herself as part of this incredible family.

She was home.

And now she had an adorable puppy too!

Reaching out, she took the collar from him and saw a little sparkle on it. “Um...did you get this sweet boy dog a blingy collar?” But when she looked a little closer, she saw it wasn’t bling for Nash. It was a ring for her. “Oh my goodness,” she whispered.

Hunter took the collar back and took the ring off and held it up to her. “You complete us, Violet. And Eli and I wanted to ask you...”

“Will you marry us?” Eli cried out excitedly, jumping to his feet.

Violet couldn’t have uttered a word if she wanted to, but she nodded and held out her hand and watched in awe as Hunter slid the beautiful marquis onto her finger.

“Yay! She’s gonna marry us!” Eli said before going to run in circles on the grass. Nash immediately jumped out of Hunter’s arm to join in. Which was just as well. That freed up his hands so he could pull her close and kiss her senseless.

When they finally broke apart, she looked at him with pure wonder. “How did I ever get this lucky?”

“We’re the lucky ones,” Hunter said gruffly. “And I can’t wait to make you my wife.”

“Ooo...I like the sound of that,” she said, smiling.

“I do have...well...maybe one request to make.”

“A request?”

He nodded.

“Um...o-kay...”

“All the talk you, Katie, and Brian did about that California road trip,” he said, “I think I’d like to check that out for our honeymoon. What do you think?”

Eyes wide, she cupped his face and gave him a loud, smacking kiss on the lips. “Hunter Jones, I would go anywhere with you. And I can’t wait to plan a trip just for us!”

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PREVIEW OF LAST BEAUTIFUL GIRL

Want to know what happens with Hunter's brother Kyle??
Here's an excerpt of

*Last Beautiful
Girl*

“To the happy couple!”

Kyle lifted his glass of champagne along with everyone else and smiled at the happy couple. His brother Hunter and his fiancé Violet were both beaming as everyone toasted their new engagement. And as much as he

usually made fun of people who opted to tie themselves to someone for the rest of their lives, he had to admit he was happy for them.

Hey, just because he didn't want to take the plunge, didn't mean others couldn't.

"There he is, the last Jones standing."

Looking over his shoulder, Kyle smiled at his oldest brother Dean walked over and clapped him on the shoulder. "Yup. That's me!"

They stood shoulder to shoulder as Hunter and Vi shared a kiss. "Nice of you to fix yourself up."

"What? What's wrong with the way I look?"

Dean reached over and ruffled his hair. "You couldn't bother getting a haircut?"

Groaning, he raked a hand through his hair. "For an engagement party? Not necessary. I've always worn my hair long and no one has a problem with it." Then he paused. "Wait...do they?"

Chuckling, Dean shook his head. "Sometimes you make it too easy."

"Ass."

"Look at him," Dean said after a moment. "I don't think I've ever seen Hunter look so happy."

"I agree. And honestly, he deserves it." Nodding, Kyle took another sip of his champagne.

"What about you, bro? When are you going to give up your wild ways and settle down?"

It wasn't the first time someone had mentioned how it was time for him to give up his partying lifestyle and it certainly wouldn't be the last. Honestly, it didn't even bother him.

"Never," he said mildly.

Beside him, Dean chuckled. "Seriously?"

Another nod. "Not everyone wants to settle down. Me? I enjoy dating. I enjoy dating different women." Then he chuckled. "And many different

women enjoy dating me.”

Rolling his eyes, Dean shook his head. “It’s going to get old eventually. And so are you. And then where will you be?”

“That is a long way off and I’m not worried about it. You weren’t in any rush to settle down.”

“And yet I did. I just had to find the perfect woman.”

That made him laugh. “Yeah, and she’d been right under your nose for most of your life. You were a little slow on the uptake there.”

But his brother didn’t even seem mildly offended by the ribbing. “True, but once I realized that Court was it for me, I didn’t waste any time.”

True, he had married her six months after he proposed.

Whatever.

He was about to comment on it when Dean’s wife walked over and snagged her husband to go and dance. He raised a glass to them and told them to have fun, but now he wished he had someone to dance with. Glancing around the room, there were plenty of women he knew, but they all were here with dates. Hell, he could have brought a date, too, but taking someone to your brother’s engagement party implied a level of commitment that he just wasn’t interested in.

No thank you.

There was a time when he thought it was, but...that was a whole other lifetime ago.

His father walked over and took the spot his brother had just vacated.

“You know what I wish?” Dominic Jones asked.

“What’s that, Dad?”

“That I had someone to dance with.”

Wow...color me surprised.

Turning his head, he looked curiously at his father who had been widowed for close to thirty years. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why don’t you date?”

Shrugging, his father said, “I guess I just sort of...forgot how.” He laughed softly. “For so many years after your mother died, I was focused on just trying to keep it together and raise you kids. Then I was so set in my routine that I didn’t even think about it. But now? Now I’d like to think about it, but I don’t know how.” Sliding his hands into his trouser pockets, he glanced at Kyle. “You know any single women my age?”

Kyle almost choked on his champagne. “Ugh...you are *not* asking me to set you up with anyone. Just...no.”

“Why not? It’s not a big deal. You have a very active social life, surely you’ve met older women who might be looking to go out with someone like me.”

“Someone like...? What is happening right now?”

“What? What’s the matter?”

He knew his eyes were pretty much bugging out, and Kyle looked around frantically for someone to save him from this conversation. But no one was paying any attention to them, and if they weren’t at a formal event, he seriously would have considered throwing something at either Dean or Hunter to get their attention.

Letting out a long breath, he said, “I thought you’d gone out for coffee a few times with...with...” Damn, what was her name? “Rose! Yeah, I thought you’d gone out with Rose a few times. What happened there?”

“Happened? Um...nothing. We went out a few times for coffee, but...I don’t think she’s interested in me.”

“Why? Did you ever ask her out on a real date? Like dinner or something?”

“No, but...I thought she was just being friendly. You know...like a friend.”

“Well, wouldn’t you like to find out if she’s interested? She’s here tonight. Maybe go and ask her to dance.”

“Oh,” Domenic said, “I don’t know. I just thought...”

“Look, I think it’s great that you want to start dating again. If you ask me, you should have done it a long time ago. But maybe your friends—you know, people your own age—can fix you up with someone.”

His father made a non-committal sound before asking, “What about one of those apps? You know, the kind where you swipe or something.”

Now he really needed someone over here to help him out because there was no way he was going to have the talk about what swiping on a dating app meant. Scanning the room again, he spotted his boss Jake talking to Pastor Steve. The only one to catch his eye, however, was the pastor.

And if that’s not an answer to a prayer, nothing is.

Waving, he was relieved when they both began walking toward them. Kyle took a long drink of his champagne and waited. They all shook hands as they said hello.

“Well, Domenic, Kyle, how are you both doing?” Steve asked with a friendly smile. “It’s been a big year for your family, hasn’t it?”

“That it has,” his father replied.

“You must be very proud. Your family is growing and everyone looks so happy.”

Nodding, Domenic said, “I am and they are. It does my heart good to see them all settling down and starting families.”

“Well,” Steve said, grinning at Kyle. “Not all of them.”

Ugh...why did I think this was a better idea?

With a bit of a forced smile, he said, “So how about you, Pastor Steve? What’s new and exciting with you?”

Luckily, he took the change of subject in stride. “Well, let’s see...oh, Shelby and Sam are expecting a baby!”

Of course they are...

“That’s wonderful news!” Domenic said. “Congratulations! First grandbabies are always exciting!” Then he smiled at Jake. “And you’ve got

a new baby, as well, right?”

“Yes, sir. This is mine and Mallory’s first big outing since Emma was born.”

Kyle tuned out while they talked about the wonders of children and grandchildren and he wished he was anywhere but here. Everywhere he looked, people were laughing and smiling and having a great time, and all he could think about was when he could leave. Maybe once dessert was served, he’d go out to The Sand Bar for some drinks and maybe see who was hanging out or maybe even drive down the coast a bit and see if any of the other clubs looked promising.

“So Jake and I were just talking about an upcoming project that might interest you, Kyle,” Steve was saying, interrupting his thoughts.

“Oh?”

“Do you happen to remember the Albright family?”

His heart literally stopped. He was certain of it.

“The name sounds familiar, but...” he choked out, desperately wishing he’d walked away sooner.

“Of course you remember them, Kyle,” his father said, smacking Kyle on the back of the head. “You dated their daughter Sydney for two years in high school! What’s the matter with you?”

Right now? The possibility of having a heart attack.

“Yes,” Steve said, remembering. “Their younger daughter—Sydney—was a year behind you in school and their older daughter Tracy was a year ahead,” Steve went on. “Anyway, they all lived here in Magnolia up until a few years ago. Dan and Lisa retired down in Florida, Sydney went away to school and is working up in Boston, and Tracy married Daren Trager. They had been living down in Georgia but recently moved back and bought a house here in town.”

“O-kay...”

“Last month, Tracy and Daren were killed in a car accident. You remember the one where the car went off the bridge?”

Everyone remembered it, Kyle thought. It was right here on the edge of town. He remembered seeing the news reports on TV and reading about it in the newspaper. It was incredibly sad. He’d gone to the funeral and paid his respects—from a distance. He had been a little too afraid to go and talk to Sydney because of the way things had ended between them.

“Wait...they had a kid, right? A daughter?” Kyle asked, suddenly unsure what the reports said happened to the child.

Steve nodded somberly. “Fortunately, Haley wasn’t in the car with them. They had gone out on a date night.” He shook his head. “It was a bit of a mad scramble because Daren doesn’t have any family left—only child and his parents had him later in life—and all of Tracy’s family was out of state. Haley was sleeping at a friend’s house and was able to stay with them until Dan, Lisa, and Sydney were able to get here.”

Kyle took another sip of his drink before asking, “Definitely a tragedy, but...what does this have to do with me?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Steve said with a small laugh. “Sydney has decided to move here. She’s Haley’s guardian. She’s going to move into their home and raise her niece here in Magnolia.”

“I’m still not seeing...”

Jake was the one to respond. “Daren and Tracy had just purchased their home a few months ago. It’s located on Sound Drive, down near the end. Older home. They were very excited about renovations. Apparently, they got an excellent deal on the house because it needed so much work.”

Okay, now it was all beginning to make sense.

“So Coleman’s going to do the work?”

Jake nodded. He was the owner of the largest construction company in the region and it made sense that he’d be involved.

“I had planned on talking to you about it on Monday,” Jake said, giving Steve a quick glance. “But...maybe it’s the kind of project that you’d like to take the lead on.”

“Me?” he asked incredulously.

Steve just smiled serenely. “I just wanted you to have a little backstory so you’d take it into consideration. Right now, Sydney needs all the help she can get. Losing her sister, becoming a full-time caregiver to her niece, moving, finding a new job, and dealing with a home that needs a considerable amount of work is a lot for anyone to take on.” He smiled again. “Just...promise you’ll think about it.” Then he congratulated Domenic again and nodded to both Jake and Kyle before walking away.

“That’s the kind of story that just breaks your heart and makes you thankful for all the good we’ve got in our lives, doesn’t it?” his father asked.

Jake nodded solemnly. “We can talk about this on Monday, Kyle. I didn’t expect Steve to bring it up in the middle of the party.”

“Just...just tell me now.”

With a frown, Jake straightened. “The church is raising funds to help with the renovations Sydney is going to need to do on the house. I went over there on Thursday and checked it all out, and...it’s kind of a mess.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. I know.” He paused. “It’s not just cosmetic, it’s everything. Whatever it was that Tracy and Daren paid for that house, I think it was too much because it’s a lot of work. I know Daren was kind of handy and he started a few things, but we’re looking at plumbing, electrical...hell, I wish we could just gut the place, but that’s not going to happen.”

“Is it even safe for her to be living there? And with a kid?”

“It’s not ideal, but now that we know exactly what the issues are, we’re going to do what we can to get things fixed as soon as possible. The plumbing and electric had to come first.”

He nodded. "Right."

"Luckily, both those guys were willing to donate their time and only charged for materials. The church already had enough money in their fund to cover that."

"Okay. Great."

Jake took a moment and looked around the room, waving to someone and smiling, and Kyle felt like he was more confused than he was a few minutes ago.

"Um...Jake?"

Facing him, his boss gave a grim smile. "Do you remember Ezekiel Coleman?"

"You mean the guy who started Coleman Construction? Founding member of Magnolia Sound? Um...yeah."

"He was also my mentor. He spent his life working to make this town everything it is today and always strived to help the people in the community. I want to follow that example."

He nodded again and figured there was a point to this story.

"The thing is, I don't have the funding behind me that Zeke did. If it were up to me, I'd cover the cost of all the work Sydney needs. I'm going to do what I can, but...I need someone I can trust to be there every day to make sure the work is getting done and getting done right." He paused. "I'd like you to take on that position, Kyle."

"Seriously? Me? Why?"

"You've been with me for a while now and I can see you're ready to take on more responsibility. I haven't had any jobs come in that I felt were a good fit for you to start training as a foreman on, but I think this could be it."

"Holy shit! That's amazing! Thank you! I...I really wanted to talk to you about moving up, but...I don't know, I didn't want to overstep or anything."

Jake smiled. “You’re a great worker, Kyle, and I know you’ve helped out with some home renovation work with all of your siblings’ homes, so... I figured this would be a good project for you.” Then he paused.

“But...?”

“But...it’s going to be different from most of the jobs you’ve worked on.”

“In what way?”

“We need to be mindful of Sydney and Haley. They’re going to be living in the middle of a construction zone, and...well...things are already a little overwhelming for them. So there may be days when you aren’t going to get everything done that needs to be or you’re going to have to re-think the order of what you wanted to do.”

“So...they’re seriously going to be living there while we’re working?” he asked incredulously. Part of him had been hoping to not have to work closely with Sydney. Clearing his throat, he went on, “Are we sure that’s a good thing? Maybe you can talk her into staying somewhere else.”

Jake shook his head. “Not going to happen.”

“But...that just means the job is going to take longer. I would think she’d want us in and out as quickly as possible.”

“It’s a delicate situation and one that we’re going to have to just...go with the flow. Once we pass the inspections for the electrical and plumbing, you’re going to go in and start on the rest. You think you’re up for it?”

“Um...”

Chuckling softly, Jake shook his head. “I would have thought you’d be more excited about this. I know it’s not a big commercial construction job, but...”

“You heard my dad before. Sydney and I have a history, and...well...let’s just say things didn’t end great.”

“Oh.”

And he figured honesty was the best policy with his boss. Especially on this. “It was years ago but...I guess I don’t know if I’m the guy she’s going to want working with her.”

Understanding dawned on Jake’s face. “I appreciate you sharing that with me.” He let out a long breath. “How about this, we stick to this plan and see how it all goes. If Sydney’s really uncomfortable with you, I’ll have to put someone else on the job. But if nothing goes wrong...”

“I’m willing to try.”

“Good man.”

* * *

IF ONE MORE THING GOES WRONG...

Looking around the room, Sydney wanted to cry.

There were holes in all the walls, there was dust everywhere, and no matter how much she tried to tell herself that it was all going to be okay, she was finding it hard to believe it.

They were down to one functioning bathroom while the plumber finished working on the pipes, and the power had been shut off all morning so the electrician could do his thing. They weren’t supposed to be here on the same day, but it just happened to work out that way. And as much as she appreciated them being there on a Saturday, she longed for a little peace and quiet so she could simply *think*.

“If you want us to stay...” Beside her, her mother was dusting and taking in the mess around them. “You know your father and I don’t mind helping out. Or maybe you and Haley should just come home with us until things settle down.”

Things were never going to settle down, she thought. It wasn’t possible. No matter how optimistic she usually was, even she knew when to wave the white flag.

“Your mother’s right, Syd,” her father chimed in. “Maybe we should come home with us for a month and then—hopefully—the house will be a little more...livable.”

It was a conversation they’d had almost daily since the accident. And as much as Sydney knew there was some real merit to their offer, the practical side of her reasoned how she needed to deal with the situation and not run from it. It didn’t matter if they went to Florida for a month, her sister and Daren were still going to be gone, and their daughter was still going to be without her parents. Right now, this house was the only thing that was familiar to her. How could she possibly take that away from her too?

That was why she packed up everything she had to move back to Magnolia Sound. It would be too much to put Haley through such a significant upheaval. The only time she seemed okay was when she was in his own room and surrounded by her own things.

At twelve, she was already a mass of pre-teen emotion and old enough to understand everything that was going on. Losing her parents was devastating, and that was after having to move away from all of her friends in Georgia only months before. So if that meant moving her life around to help her niece adjust better, that’s what she was going to do.

It’s what she knew her sister would want her to do.

At the familiar sting of tears, Sydney turned away from her parents and pretended to busy herself with folding the afghan that lay over the sofa. “We’ve talked about this,” she said, proud of the fact that her voice was steady. “Haley and I are going to be fine. This is like a little adventure and we’re going to get through it.” She smoothed the blanket out. “Besides, your bungalow hardly has enough room for all of us.”

“At the time, we were excited to downsize,” her mother said, fluffing one of the sofa cushions. “And it really is the perfect size for just the two of us. We didn’t think about the possibility of anyone moving back in with us.”

“No one’s moving in with you,” Sydney replied wearily. Seriously, they’d had this discussion so many times, she could practically recite it. “The community has been wonderful and Haley and I are going to be just fine.” She paused. “There are going to be days where it’s going to be harder than others, but...we’ll make it work.”

“I spoke to Pastor Steve,” her father said. “And he said that if there are times when the work here is too much, he can always make arrangements for you and Haley to stay with some people from the church.”

She smiled and tried to remember that he thought he was being helpful. “Dad, I’m hardly a stranger here. I grew up in this town and still have a lot of friends who live here. I’m telling you, it’s going to be fine.”

And maybe if she kept saying it out loud, she’d eventually believe it.

“Still, if you can’t find a place to stay with a friend in a pinch, don’t forget to call the church,” he commented.

Rather than argue how it wasn’t going to be necessary, she simply nodded. “I won’t forget. Thanks, Dad.” Reaching over, she hugged him. All around them, lights came back on and appliances began to hum. “Oh, thank God.” Pulling back, she smiled. “See that? One thing fixed!”

“Sydney, it’s not just the power...”

But she wasn’t willing to listen to another lecture. “If we don’t get moving, you’re going to miss your flight. Is everything in the car?”

Within minutes, she was standing in the driveway with her arm around her niece and waving goodbye. Haley rested her head on her shoulder and she could hear her sniffing. She had cried as her parents had gotten into the car and said goodbye. She had been expecting it. Doing everything she could to comfort her, she had let her cry, and it had nearly killed her to see her parents crying as well. The whole damn situation wasn’t fair, and unfortunately, there wasn’t anything any of them could do to change it. Hell, most days Sydney either woke up and cried or would cry herself to

sleep. It was all she could do, and she prayed that one day it would start to get better.

But clearly today wasn't that day.

"Hey," she said softly. "How about we go inside and have some lunch?"

"I'm not hungry," Haley murmured before turning and running back inside, slamming the door behind her.

Turning toward the house, Sydney looked up at it and sighed. This was her life now. This was her home. It wasn't a place she would have chosen, but...she would stay here for at least a couple of years and make it the kind of place Tracy wanted for her daughter. It was the least she could do.

She made it all of two steps before the electrician came out and told her he was done for the day and all the work was completed. Thanking him, she walked up the front steps and paused.

One down, one to go...

Walking inside, she found Haley sitting on the couch, staring at her phone. Pasting a smile on her face, she said, "How about some mac and cheese?"

Haley shook her head.

O-kay...

"How about some chicken salad? Grandma made a batch this morning."

Another small head shake.

Walking over to the couch, she sat down on the coffee table in front of her niece. "How about you tell me what you want to eat?"

"I already said I wasn't hungry."

"Yeah, I know, but you also didn't eat breakfast and you really need to have some lunch. So...come on. How about I make us my super-thin-crust pepperoni pizzas? I know you like them."

"Aunt Syd..."

"Please? Just...do this for me. You know I hate eating alone." Eventually, Sydney knew she was going to have to stop letting Haley call

the shots, but for right now, it seemed like the best way to handle things.

“Fine,” her niece said with a loud huff.

“You got it,” she said softly, thankful the power was restored. Standing, she kissed the top of Haley’s blond head before heading to the kitchen.

The freezer was stocked with casseroles and all kinds of food that friends and neighbors had been bringing over, but she was dying for something that wasn’t microwaved. Honestly, she would have preferred calling and having a pizza delivered, but she was learning to be a bit more frugal with her money.

The move back to Magnolia and leaving her job meant her income had severely dwindled. She’d sold off most of her furniture and managed to maintain half of her savings. Then she had gotten the life insurance money from Tracy and Daren. The money meant she could raise Haley, but she knew it was going to take a lot more than that to do it. She had to work—had to find a job. And on top of that, she put a large portion of that money into a college fund for her niece—something her sister and brother-in-law had never done.

“I should probably focus more on how we’re going to survive right now,” she murmured as she pulled out the ingredients to make their lunch. Once everything was in the oven, she looked into the living room and saw Haley was exactly where she left her.

With her laptop sitting on the kitchen counter, she opened it and decided to job hunt while she waited for their pizza to bake. Her eyes widened when she saw an email from her friend Mia with the subject “Job for you!”

Quickly opening it, she felt the first wave of excitement.

The job was actually...working for Mia. Her friend had recently published her fourth book—she was a phenomenal mystery writer—and was currently in need of an assistant.

A virtual assistant.

“Oh, Mia,” she whispered. “Please don’t be messing with me.”

The job description pretty much fit Sydney to a tee: handle all correspondence, schedule and coordinate signings and events, social media marketing, graphic design for promos...

Back in Boston, she had been a digital executive producer of a local news station. It had taken her years to work her way up to the position. Before that, she had been an administrative assistant to an anchorwoman of the local news. She had worked at the television station and had done everything from fetching coffee to being on-site at events to assist the “talent.” But she had worked hard and did everything she could to gain experience and had finally gotten the promotion six months ago.

Before the accident.

Behind her, she turned and checked on the pizzas to make sure they were cooking properly. Then, unable to help herself, she quickly pulled out her phone and called Mia.

“I take it you got my email?” Mia asked when she answered.

“I did! Are you serious? I mean, is this job for real or are you just throwing me a bone?”

Laughing, Mia said, “Girl, don’t even. Both my agent and editor have been telling me how I need an assistant, but I thought they were crazy. Now that the new book is out and my schedule is starting to get crazy, I realized I really needed help. And you are the queen of keeping things organized.”

It was true. Sydney did have a knack for keeping things neat and orderly, and it was just one of the reasons this whole house project was killing her.

“I don’t even know what to say! I’m not even sure I’d know where to begin!”

“Well, do you have space to set up a home office?”

“Space isn’t an issue. The house has four bedrooms. But right now it’s all sort of...chaotic.” She sighed. “I told you about that, right?”

“You did and I’m sorry.”

She shook her head and forced herself to think positively. "It's okay. Hopefully in a month, things will be done. So...you said a home office?"

"Yeah. I'll be sending you an inventory of each of my books and you'll be responsible for sending them out to readers—you know for giveaways and things like that. Eventually I'm going to set up an online store, but that's a couple of months down the line. And hopefully something you'll be able to help get up and running."

"That sounds amazing!"

"Basically, you'll do everything you would do if you were right here with me, except you're doing it from your place."

"This almost sounds too good to be true! Are you sure about this?"

"You are my first and only choice. You know the way I work and the way I like things to be done. Hell, you've lived with me so you probably know me better than I know myself!"

They had been roommates in college, and yeah, Sydney knew everything about her.

Including how disorganized Mia was.

"I'm going to need a little time to get set up, but if you start by sending me a list of where we need to get started, I'll look it over and give you a timeframe for when I can get it done. And..."

"Syd," Mia interrupted. "Aren't you forgetting one crucial thing?"

Frowning, she thought about it for a moment. "Um...I don't think so."

"Salary? Aren't you the least bit interested in what I'll be paying you? And what kind of hours are involved?"

"Oh, right!" She laughed. "Yeah, that would be important information to have. So, um..."

Mia laughed too before saying the hourly wage. "And we're looking at around thirty hours a week."

"Are you serious?" she cried. "How is that even possible?"

“Well, with everything going on with you, we haven’t had a chance to talk,” Mia said, “but...I just signed for another six books...”

“Oh, my God! That’s amazing! Congratulations!”

“And...my first book was just optioned—well, we’re already under contract—to be made into a movie! A real full-length motion picture! Can you believe it?”

She let out a happy little scream and even danced in place. “Mia, this is...oh my goodness...I can’t even believe it! This is everything you ever dreamed of!”

“It’s more than I ever could have imagined. So...yeah, I definitely need an assistant to help me keep my shit in order.”

“And I am the girl to make that happen!” And there she was, starting to cry again. “I don’t even know how to thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

Mia was quiet for a long moment. “You have no idea how much I hate what you’re going through, and if I can do this and help you, then I am more than happy to do it. Hell, I wish I could do more.”

“You’re doing more than you even realize and I am so excited to get started.” The oven beeped and she let out a long breath. “I need to go. Lunch is ready. Email me what we need to get started and I promise to call you later after I’ve looked it all over.”

“Sound good. And Syd?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. You’re a real lifesaver.”

She smiled. “Funny, that’s what I was about to call you.”

They hung up and her smile stayed in place and actually felt sincere for the first time in a month. She felt...hopeful.

Taking the pizza from the oven, she sliced it and divvied it up on two plates. She was about to put them on the kitchen table, but opted to change things up a bit.

Walking back into the living room, she put their plates on the coffee table and smiled down at her niece. “How about we picnic in here while watching TV?”

“Seriously?”

“Absolutely,” she said, smiling. “I know I couldn’t do it while grandma and grandpa were here, but back in Boston, I almost always ate in front of the TV. It would make your grandmother batty.” She shuddered dramatically and laughed—hoping her improved mood and outlook might help Haley’s too.

Leaning forward, Haley examined her pizza before looking up at Sydney. “Can I have a can of Coke with this?”

With a small laugh that was part snort, Sydney turned toward the kitchen. “Like there’s any other drink to have with pizza. Please.”

And for the first time in almost a month, her niece smiled. “Thanks, Aunt Syd.”

“Okay, I’ll get the drinks, you find us something to watch!”

It was so simple but...she felt like they were finally turning a corner.

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Samantha Chase is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller of contemporary romance that's hotter than sweet, sweeter than hot. She released her debut novel in 2011 and currently has more than sixty titles under her belt – including *THE CHRISTMAS COTTAGE* which was a Hallmark Christmas movie in 2017! When she's not working on a new story, she spends her time reading romances, playing way too many games of Solitaire on Facebook, wearing a tiara while playing with her sassy pug Maylene...oh, and spending time with her husband of 30 years and their two sons in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

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