

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, their skin glistening with water droplets. The man, on the left, is shirtless and has dark, wet hair. The woman, on the right, has long, wavy, wet blonde hair and is looking up at him with her eyes closed. They are positioned in front of a dense background of green palm fronds, which are slightly out of focus. The lighting is warm and soft, creating a sensual atmosphere.

ELLE AMERY

SAVING  
**SOPHIE**

ra<sup>v</sup>enous  
*romance*

***Saving Sophie***

A Ravenous Romance™ Modern Love™ Original Publication

**Elle Amery**

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication

[www.ravenousromance.com](http://www.ravenousromance.com)

Saving Sophie

Copyright © 2008 by Elle Amery

Ravenous Romance™

100 Cummings Center

Suite 125G

Beverly, MA 01915

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission from the publisher, except by reviewers who may quote brief excerpts in connection with a review.

ISBN-13: 978-1-60777-013-8

This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

## Chapter One

“Think she’ll expect sex?”

Jake Muscat’s head snapped up so fast he felt a neck muscle pull. He’d been zoning out—maybe he’d missed something in his conversation with Brett Huntsman, his friend of 16 years, something that could have made this comment sensible. But then again, Brett rarely made sense anyway. “What are you talking about?”

“The girl, the one who wins you tonight—think she’ll expect you to put out?” Brett pulled back the heavy red velvet curtain and gestured to the throng of women covering every inch of the theater.

Built in the late 1800s at the height of the gold-mining era, the Nugget Theater had been well cared for, retaining its regal atmosphere with the original brick façade and iron shutters, high ceilings, and private balconies. The cast-iron, red velvet-covered rows of seats, usually lining the auditorium, had been removed to make room for the growing crowd of women holding auction paddles, dressed in their finest, and creating a roar comparable to that at a pro football game.

Jake wondered if he hadn’t made a terrible, horrible, God-awful mistake when he told Sophie Huntsman, Brett’s sister, he’d be the headliner for the fund-raising bachelor auction she arranged. How she’d ever sweet-talked him into being auctioned off like a piece of meat was beyond him. Jake always swore he’d be a good friend—but this was a bit much to ask of anyone.

Now, listening to the catcalls and howls erupting from the crowd—amazingly raunchy noises

from these single women—he cringed.

“What did I get myself into?” Jake clung to the stem of his martini glass as though ready to strangle it. Pure estrogen filled the theater—the only men who’d dared risk their presence at this function were Victorian-costumed volunteers and tuxedo-clad eligible bachelors, Jake included, stashed away backstage.

“I love women: their bodies, their smell, their boobs; but this is scary,” he commented to Brett, still peeking through the curtains at the crowd. “The way they scream every time a new victim walks on stage makes me think of some Amazon tribe of women who kept men captive.”

“No problem here being tied up as a sex slave.” Brett’s reply was muffled, his face obscured by thick folds of velvet.

Jake spent his high school years on this very stage, acting in plays put on by the American Playwrights Festival. The philanthropic Huntsman Foundation, run and owned by Brett and Sophie’s parents, had initiated 30 years ago a small summer-stock festival featuring plays written by American writers.

Within five years, the Festival grew to national importance and put the old mining town of Quartzton on the map. The small, flagging economy—thriving during the gold rush but battered down ever since—was revitalized by tourist dollars pouring in from festival attendees.

Now, Quartzton shimmered as the epitome of a quaint and sweet American small town, with wooden sidewalks, two-storied brick shops, and gingerbread Victorian homes. Several five-star restaurants and pricey boutiques dotted the main street; and several acting stars had gotten their start on Quartzton’s theater stage—Jake among them.

Jake performed in the festival when he was 14. He would star in several plays before leaving for college on the East Coast, leaving behind his hometown, friends, and little sister Grace.

Although Harvard and Broadway brought him success, Jake missed the small town with its beautiful forests and winding river, tightly woven community, and, especially, his sister.

At least the excuse of the auction had allowed him a long-overdue visit with Grace. Even when he had switched from acting to directing, his agent had kept him on such a busy schedule he rarely came to Quartzton to see her. Staying away had been such a mistake, he mused.

The familiar wave dissipated when one of Jake's fellow bachelors stepped on his foot, making him yelp. Jake had tried to stay inconspicuous by squeezing his six-foot-four-inch body in the corner, to no avail. The backstage area set aside for 30 bachelors seemed about the size of a Porta-Potty.

The heat was suffocating. The fact all the men had to wear tuxes didn't help the situation. He could tell his hair, now affected by the humidity, was curling. He'd inherited his mother's Native American thick, black hair, but from his father's Irish genes he got fair skin and hair that went curly every chance it could.

One of the bachelors abandoned his seat, heading to the stage. Jake grabbed the chair, swung it around backward, and settled his lanky frame down, one arm wrapped around the chair back like a shield; the other cradling his martini from the cluster of other eligible bachelors.

"You really think they might expect sex?" he asked Brett. One-night stands were great—he just didn't think he'd like being bought for one. Besides, he wasn't a complete and utter horn-dog like Brett. Jake liked the idea of getting to know a woman before taking her to bed. Sex always seemed better with personality involved.

"I'm hoping," Brett answered, digging his face out from between the curtain folds to flash Jake a smile. "I'd like a really hot one, someone who wants me to run my tongue up and down her body in one smooth motion, over and over again."

Jake let out a low chuckle; Brett was nothing if not consistent. “These women may actually be after something other than sex with you. Although,” he paused, “I guess it’s better if the girl who wins me is after just sex instead of a boyfriend.”

Brett nudged him with an elbow. “Someday some woman’s going to knock your socks right off and you’ll be whipping out an engagement ring, down on your knee in front of her, yammering on about a lifetime together and all the babies you two will make.”

Jake’s jaw tightened. “Not gonna happen.”

“Yeah right. Just you wait,” Brett said, elbowing him again.

“Really Brett, it won’t happen. End of story.” Realizing his voice had taken on a harsh edge, Jake mimicked Brett and dug an elbow into his friend’s ribs, bringing the cocky smile back to Brett’s face. Jake’s decision to remain single perplexed his friends over the years; but a relationship—being someone else’s other half, having them rely on him, someone sinking her soul into his—it just couldn’t happen. Not with him.

One of the bachelors pulled the curtain back a little too far when he went on stage, probably in a panic over seeing all the horny women shrieking from the seats. The gap allowed Jake a good look at the horde. The auditorium was filled with women. Haze dry ice floated at eye-level, giving the room an ethereal feel.

Then he saw her. An angel in the far back of the crowd, talking to his sister Grace, was just the woman to make Jake forget all his resistance to hurrying into bed. He could see himself running his tongue—and his hands, and his naked body—all over her.

It wasn’t just that she was beautiful. The girl radiated. Even with her features blurred by dry-ice vapor, she stood out.

Good God, Jake thought. Did she ever stand out.

Jake felt a hard-on growing—an instant reaction. The woman shifted and long, sleek hair cascaded over her shoulders. A black silk dress with a plunging neckline swirled around her legs, outlining a perfect, long body with gorgeous, deep cleavage. And that face: even through the haze he could see pink cheeks, bright eyes, and a broad, wet smile. Definitely lickable.

When she tipped her head back, laughing at something Grace said, Jake felt his stomach flip. This wasn't just some hot chick. No, this woman was the stuff dreams—fantasies—were made of.

“Brett,” Jake tugged at his friend's sleeve, keeping his eyes glued to the angel in black silk. “Who's that girl?”

Brett leaned to the side, trying for Jake's viewpoint. “Which one, buddy? In case you haven't noticed, half the female population of Quartzton is staring straight at us, dying to strip us and have their wicked way with our eager bodies.”

“Knock it off,” Jake said. “The tall blonde, there, talking to my sister.”

Jake pointed, but the crowd had shifted. The vapor had grown heavier, and he could no longer see the woman. He swept his view across the crowd, praying to the God of Eligible Bachelors to reveal her again. Just then, a volunteer walked by and pulled Brett and the curtain back, blocking any possibility of seeing the bombshell again.

Jake sunk back into his seat. He swept a hand across the side of his head, stopping to twirl a black curl with his fingers. He had seen an auction paddle in her hand, hadn't he? Was she here for someone else, or would she bid on him?

If he was going to have a one-night stand, Jake thought, he hoped to the High Almighty that it would be with her.

\* \* \* \*

Sometimes life just sucks, Sophie thought to herself, which was why she was bent on immersing herself in multiple vodka martinis. Drinks were just another thing she hadn't had enough of lately—that, and multiple orgasms.

She swore loudly, pissed off. This was supposed to be a glorious day: the day she'd see Jake after 12 long and fantasy-filled years. Jake, the man of her dreams, her unfinished business. She was going to be gorgeous—perfectly straightened hair, perfect makeup, perfect dress—and he was going to be speechless when he saw her. She wasn't the scrawny twerp he'd last seen; she was all woman now, and she wanted to knock his socks off.

Instead, she looked like a mess. Her flight had been delayed, her luggage somehow sent to Denver, and she'd had problems with a recalcitrant rental car. She had to cancel the pre-auction dinner she arranged with Jake—utter devastation—and barely had time to shower, straighten her hair, dash on some makeup, and find something in her closet, since the dress for tonight was on an airplane somewhere over the Rockies.

Sophie stuck her tongue out at the image in the mirror and tried to flatten the hair around her face—hair she'd taken her flat iron to less than an hour ago. Thank God for her flat iron, she mused, God's second-greatest gift to the world.

Jake, of course, was God's *first* greatest gift to the world. Ever since Sophie was 11, no boyfriend measured up to Jake. Not even any of her battery-operated ones, she laughed to herself.

Still looking in the mirror, Sophie turned sideways and groaned. The dress she wore did nothing for her figure. It fell too close to her knees, meant for someone shorter than her five feet,

10 inches and with a much nicer ass. Then again, Sophie sighed, her flat ass remained flat no matter what she wore.

“It’s just Jake, you idiot,” she whispered to her image in the mirror. But it wasn’t *just* Jake—it never had been *just* Jake.

With a deep breath, she turned away and swung open the bathroom door. Stepping back into the theater, she was slammed with the intense energy of the crowd—all women—eager to win a dream date with a dream bachelor. Good God, what hell had she unleashed upon the tiny town of Quartzton when dreaming up this bachelor auction as a fundraiser for her beloved American Playwrights Festival?

The crowd had grown since she’d arrived. She was supposed to meet her two best friends, Tally Bennet and Jake’s little sister, Grace, but the pack of women seemed to grow with an other-worldly life force, making Sophie wonder if she’d ever get out alive, much less find her friends.

Through the insatiable roar of the crowd she heard the loud call of her name. She whipped her head toward the sound and felt an immediate rush of relief. Tally shouldered her way past a group of heavily made up, middle-aged women fanning themselves with auction paddles. A full-length, sleeveless white satin gown clung to Tally’s lush curves. Ropes of pearls swayed in rhythm with her long auburn locks as she strode forward. With a martini glass in each hand, she looked the epitome of a 1930s starlet.

“Tally!” Sophie called back, opening her arms to hug her friend.

Before Tally could reach her, however, she stumbled, swishing martini contents all over the floor.

“Damn heels!” Tally swore, handing Sophie a nearly empty drink.

Sophie laughed as Tally removed the four-inch silver heels from her feet and tossed them behind a potted plant.

“You can’t be serious!” Sophie said. “You’re going to dump your shoes?”

Tally downed her martini and reached for Sophie’s, effectively finishing it off. “Of course I am. I detest heels. They may make my legs look great, but at such a sacrifice. Nothing’s worth that much pain!”

“I can’t believe you threw your shoes away.” Sophie bent to peek behind the bush, looking for a gleam of silver. “You may be a fashion geek, but this is a bit much, even for you.”

Having fashion and style drilled into her on a daily basis by a perfectionist mother made Sophie keenly aware of style and dress. But no matter how hard she tried to pass on some of her mother’s style advice to Tally, it never rubbed off. Tally would be content dressed in a paper bag or wandering around life buck-naked, Sophie snorted to herself.

Tonight, however, Tally looked beautiful. The dress suited her, even if the shoes didn’t.

“Leave them there,” Tally said. “I picked them up at Shoes-For-Less for less than ten dollars. They’re not worth you crawling around on the ground trying to keep me shod.”

“Fine,” Sophie huffed; slightly offended her friend would go without shoes to a fundraiser she sweated blood and tears over for months. “Have it your way. Go barefoot for all I care. Oh—wait—that’s right: you *are* barefoot!”

Tally exploded in laughter. Rolling her eyes but smiling, Sophie linked arms with her friend, pulling her along on a hunt for a fresh martini.

“Is Grace here yet?” Sophie asked.

Tally nodded. “She’s in the auditorium, looking for you. We were afraid you wouldn’t make it.”

“I almost didn’t because of that damned airline. I got into town less than an hour ago. I’m frazzled and needed that martini you dumped because you can’t walk in heels like a normal person.”

“Don’t worry—I’ll get you another.” Tally ignored her rant. “I’m just glad you’re here. I got to see Jake earlier. He seemed bummed that he didn’t get to see you in person before it started. I didn’t realize you two haven’t seen each other since our brothers all graduated from high school.”

Sophie squeezed between two skinny older women, drenched in heavy floral perfume and discussing which hot young boy-toy they planned to win.

“It’s been twelve years. But we’ve always kept in touch,” Sophie said. She didn’t admit that every time she heard Jake’s voice on the other end of the line, her mouth went dry and her stomach quivered. “He forwards me all the stupid joke e-mails he gets, and we talk on the phone every once in a while. I hope he won’t hate me for convincing him to be part of the auction. These women are absolutely insane over the idea of buying a date with a cute guy.”

Tally interrupted to ask for a couple Lemon Drops when the harried bartender caught her eye. “Well, I haven’t gone off my rocker over a bunch of useless men. I’m going to buy my own brother tonight. There’s a big leak in my roof and Wyatt keeps saying he doesn’t have time to help me fix it. So instead of scoring a date I don’t want to go on anyway, I’ll buy Wyatt and get that leak fixed.”

With a flourish, the bartender set two Lemon Drops on the antique oak bar, surreptitiously glancing over his shoulder. Pulling two \$20 bills out of her black leather clutch, Sophie caught his appreciative eye.

“I don’t think I’ll buy my brother,” Sophie said, licking the sugared rim of her drink. “I

wouldn't know what to do with Brett. He's useless."

Tally chuckled. Without spilling her drink this time, she pulled Sophie along behind her into the crowded and stuffy auditorium. "Brett is just a little hung up on himself. But you're right; I wouldn't know what to do with him either. Put him on a pedestal with a mirror in front of him and let him admire himself, maybe."

"Pretty birdie, pretty birdie," Sophie imitated a parrot, bobbing her head up and down, sending both of them into peals of laughter.

The crowd shifted, closing in tighter. Sophie gripped her martini in one hand and her auction paddle in the other in a death hold. Feeling a light tap on her shoulder, she whirled around to find Grace standing beside her.

Sophie gaped. Dressed in an emerald green strapless sheath, black hair pulled back in an elegant ponytail, Jake's little sister radiated. Grace's beauty was enhanced with raspberry lipstick and smoky eyes.

"Oh Gracie," Sophie breathed. "You look so beautiful."

Grace smiled, dimples flashing on either cheek. "Thank you, but look at you two! Tally, you look like you've stepped out of a chic nightclub from some bygone era. And you, Sophie..." Grace paused, taking in the full effect of her friend. "You look stunning. Absolutely stunning."

"Hardly," Sophie answered, wrapping her friend up in a big hug. "My hair's starting to frizz and my butt looks totally flat."

"Ignore her," Tally butted in. "She's gorgeous, and so are you, Grace. The Little Twerps have grown up, haven't we?"

Sophie groaned. "Ugh. I hate that name. I don't think Brett ever called me by my real name until I was in college. He's always been such a brat. I hope some old granny wins him tonight

and makes him pick up doggy poo for a month.”

Tally let out a belly laugh. “That would serve him right. He keeps claiming he’ll be won by some hot chick and get free sex.”

“I’m definitely not bidding on him,” Sophie spoke emphatically.

“I’m not bidding on him either,” Grace chimed in. “Then again, I’m not bidding on anyone tonight. But Sophie,” she added, “If you’re not bidding on your brother, you have to bid on Jake. Remember Doris?”

Sophie nodded. Doris: the bane of her existence in high school. Three years older than Sophie, with perfect hair, perfect clothes, perfect butt, and breasts the size of mixing bowls; Doris had been Jake’s high school kind-of girlfriend for more than three years. She kind-of thought they were exclusive, he kind-of thought they were just dating. Whatever the arrangement, Doris kept all other girls far away from Jake—including Grace and her friends.

Sophie spent many nights hatching evil plots designed for Doris’s ultimate demise; or at least, the full and complete eradication of Doris from Jake’s life.

“She’s been telling everyone how she will win Jake tonight, no matter what. You have to save him—remember how ghastly she was in school?” Grace gripped Sophie’s arm.

Ghastly was an understatement when it came to Doris.

“Sure, I’ll bid on Jake.” Sophie hoped she sounded nonchalant, as though her heart and soul weren’t begging for some time, any time, to be with Jake; as though she hadn’t spent the last three months arranging this fundraiser just to get the chance to see him again. He’d been so understanding and patient when she called with her request. Not eager to be sold off to the highest bidder, he still wanted to support her and the American Playwrights Festival. Now he was here, just yards away, hidden somewhere behind the red curtain drawn across the stage.

“I’m sure Jake will be relieved to avoid Doris,” Grace said. “I don’t think she ever got over her crush on him.”

*She’s not the only one*, thought Sophie, tightening her grip on the auction paddle clenched in her fist, prepared for battle. She was getting Jake tonight.

No one else. Just her.

## Chapter Two

Jake never did like the roar of the crowd. What drew him to the stage had been the chance to escape into someone else's life; someone else's problems and successes. When he was in character, Jake didn't have to be himself. He could let go of everything that clung to him. But the public accolades, the lack of anonymity, the occasional harassing fans, these he happily left behind when he traded the stage for directing.

Now here he sat—a former Broadway star, one of New York's up-and-coming directors, known as a perpetual recluse—waiting his turn to prance on stage in front of a throng of horny women, all hoping for a chance at “The Big One,” as he'd been billed on the auction playbill. *The Big One* was the name of the musical he was currently directing; coincidentally, it was also the nickname given to him by his high school friend, Doris.

Of course, Jake mused, Doris really didn't have much to talk about, since Doris had never actually even seen his dick. Not that Jake minded, or tried to convince anyone otherwise. Doris had been fun to hang out with, and he loved every inch of her gigantic rack, but he never felt for her what he thought he should. Because of that, they never ended up in the sack.

The look Doris gave him earlier tonight after she snuck backstage to give him a “welcome back to town” kiss, and the way she rubbed her boobs against his chest while talking to him told Jake she was prepared to make the most of their time together if she won a date with him.

He shuddered. Doris wasn't a terrible person; but she was way too needy and determined for Jake's taste. And she was looking to snag him. Jake quickly downed the rest of his martini. *No buzz*, he thought. *Two martinis and still no buzz.*

“Mr. Muscat, sir,” an irritating voice nearly shattered his eardrum. He turned to see one of the backstage volunteers bending over him, cleavage in abundance. “Just want to make sure you know—we have five more men to go before you—you’re the showstopper.”

“Thanks for the update,” he replied. He couldn’t remember her name, something like Zari or Ziti, one of those made-up names by parents who had nothing better to do than embarrass their kids. When Jake met her earlier in the evening, she expounded on how she’d been a *giganticus* fan of his when she lived in New York, and how she *hated* her parents to *death* when they made her go to college in *California* because she wouldn’t be able to see him on *stage* again, and she just loved him *so* much.

Jake listened patiently before trying to explain that he was a director now, not an actor. She looked blankly at him, tears welling up in her eyes, and asked if he might change his mind and go back on stage just for her.

The call to line up in numbered order gave Jake the chance to excuse himself from what’s-her-name. But here she’d found him again, and she couldn’t stop staring. Or giggling.

One of the bachelors, looking as worried as a steer off to slaughter, bumped into the woman and she jiggled a bit, boobs bouncing in front of Jake as she chattered on. God, why had he been born a boob man? They were so damned distracting.

“I’m sorry,” he interrupted. “The music must be too loud—what did you say?”

“It’s going great,” she exclaimed. “We just auctioned off the fire chief for \$700. We expect you to bring in around \$1,000. I told you you’re our showstopper—even my *grandma* came out to bid on you!” To Jake’s amazement, she actually squeaked as she said the word “grandma.” An intense wave of relief washed over him when Brett stood up, cupped the volunteer’s elbow in his palm, whispered something in her ear, and motioned her away from Jake.

With a quick bounce of her boobs, she blew Jake a kiss and ducked out behind the curtain, leaving two men and one martini behind.

Brett handed Jake the cocktail glass. "Here, take mine, it looks like you could use a drink." He nodded his head in the direction of the disappearing volunteer. "Cute, but I was pretty sure she wasn't your type. I told her you needed to be alone to get into character."

"Gee, thanks, my savior." Jake said dryly. He plucked an olive out of the drink and ate it with relish. "Great rack, but she did seem a little . . . um. . ."

"Vacant?"

Jake let out a low chuckle. "Well, maybe immature. Besides, I'm not looking. Tonight's just to support Sophie—who, by the way, can be quite the persuader. Has anyone ever told her 'no'?"

Brett shook his head. "She has the tenacity of a bull when it comes to running the Festival. I've never seen her so determined to make something work. I always knew she had it in her; it just took Sophie a while to find her own way."

Hungrily, Jake pulled out another olive from the cocktail glass.

"Didn't you eat dinner?" Brett asked. Concern was etched across his forehead, but humor showed at the corners of his mouth as he watched his friend devour olives.

"Nope," Jake responded, washing down the brine with more vodka martini. "I was supposed to meet Sophie for dinner beforehand, but she had a delayed flight and some problem with her rental car. I'm starved, so I'm dumpster-diving in my drinks."

Sophie had called earlier, sounding stressed, letting Jake know she was running late and couldn't join him for dinner as planned. It had been years since he'd seen Brett's little sister, and he'd been disappointed to miss her before the auction. With his tux already on, Jake didn't want to draw attention to himself by going out to eat. Instead, he munched on a few peanuts left over

from his flight while strolling to the theater, enjoying the feel and sounds of the town he always thought of as home.

“Are you sure the food’s all gone?”

“Stop whining, you’ve had about eight olives,” Brett replied.

He *had* been whining, but eight olives didn’t really count as food; at least, not according to his stomach. Between strength conditioning and running, his body required fuel—and lots of it. Although he’d skipped his daily workout to catch a cross-country flight, his stomach didn’t care.

“Fine, no food,” Jake whined, then lifted his glass. “So how about another?” He handed the now-empty martini glass to Brett’s outstretched hand.

“We don’t have time,” Brett said, flashing his eyes toward the stage entrance where another volunteer waved frantically in their direction. “I’m up next.”

Jake’s shoulders slumped as he resigned to his fate. “No food, no cocktails, and my friend is abandoning me to be a sex slave. Life sucks.” At Brett’s laugh, Jake shoved him like old times.

Brett punched him back in the arm, hard. Jake flexed his bicep in a show of false prowess just as Brett’s name was announced. Jake pulled the curtain back and shoved his friend on stage, taking a moment enough to scan the crowd in search of the blonde.

He found her. She stood, tall and elegant, in the middle of what could be described as a single man’s heaven or hell, martini glass in one hand and auction paddle in the other.

Jake saw her look to the wings where he stood, and their eyes met. A strange throbbing sensation worked its way through his body; slowly at first, starting at his feet and fingers then gathering speed on its way to his belly, where it set his groin on fire.

A warm smile formed on her face. Her eyes opened wide and she looked at him hungrily with naked, blatant desire written all over her face. He could imagine her slicked with sweat

underneath him, blonde hair fanned out, bright eyes glazed over, hips raised to meet his. Jake wanted her. Without a doubt, he wanted her.

“Win me,” he mouthed. “Win me.”

\* \* \* \*

“Oh. My. God.”

It was a whisper, a prayer, coming from someplace deep.

There Jake was, in all his gorgeous glory, a bit broader in the shoulders but otherwise the same as he was 12 years ago. His black hair still had those delightful curls he twirled around his fingers, framing his lean face. His nose still had a slight leftward bend, caused by Brett’s elbow breaking it during a particularly lame skateboard stunt. His eyes, still a deep green, found contact with hers.

It wasn’t just that Sophie’s heart raced, or that her mouth went dry. This was more like having completed a sprint in the Olympics with a roll of paper towels shoved in her mouth. The visceral reaction of her body to a glimpse of Jake shook her.

With a start, she realized she’d been staring slack-jawed like a little kid with her eyes glued to a triple-decker ice-cream cone. Jake’s eyes maintained contact with hers, and he mouthed something—she couldn’t tell what— before a hand shot out and pulled the curtain back. Her staff of well-organized volunteers meant that she didn’t have to run around managing the evening and could enjoy the auction, but did they have to be so proficient?

What did he try to say to her? *Win me*? Was he asking her to bid on him? He certainly had been happy to see her, she could tell that by his smile. Maybe he just wanted her to save him

from Doris.

“C’mon,” Sophie said, let’s move closer to the stage.” She placed her empty martini glass on a cocktail tray precariously balanced by a costumed volunteer, grabbed Tally by the elbow and Grace by the hand, and shouldered her way toward the front of the stage. In the orchestra pit she found herself blocked by a throng of young women forming a solid barricade.

Unable to get closer, Sophie stood firm, unwilling to give up her heard-earned position. Tally and Grace flanked her, auction paddles at the ready. Sophie scanned the crowd, looking for Doris: her opponent, her nemesis, every since the sixth grade.

Doris stood in the front row, boobs smack-up against the stage. Sophie watched Doris tuck a naturally silky straight strand of hair neatly behind her tiny ear and flash a smile at her friends, straight white teeth shining.

“That’s what wearing your retainer gets you, straight teeth that stay that way,” Sophie mumbled under her breath, running her tongue over her crooked top incisor. Doris smiled at one of the volunteers, condescension written all over her face. *What Jake ever saw in that girl is beyond me*, Sophie thought. *Except, of course, for those boobs.*

“It looks like Doris is determined to get Jake back,” she shouted in Grace’s ear.

“That’s not going to make him happy,” Grace replied. “You *are* going to bid on him, aren’t you?”

“Hell yes!” Sophie answered. Doris wasn’t going to push her away from Jake again—certainly not tonight, not if she could help it. Not after being away from him for 12 years, fantasizing about him each and every night. And not after all the work she’d done to make this night a reality; bringing Jake to her, in person. No way would Doris win tonight.

In an instant, the sound of the crowd went from a dull roar to a volcanic eruption. Squeals,

screams and sighs mixed with cheers and catcalls as the auctioneer announced Jake would be the next and final bachelor.

\* \* \* \*

Before Jake stepped on stage, the emcee summed up his life in a few succinct sentences: moved to Quartzton in the Northern California foothills at 14, graduated top of his class at Harvard, starred in several Broadway productions, now a New York director; a local boy done good.

When summoned, Jake walked as nonchalantly as he could to the middle of the stage. He put one hand in his trouser pocket and flipped his tuxedo jacket over a shoulder.

What the announcer didn't mention was the tough childhood he and Grace lived through—how he raised her after their mother died, what a vicious drunk their father was, and how despite fame and money Jake still felt the weight of perpetual guilt for not doing more for his sister.

The auctioneer opened the bidding at \$250; immediately a throng of women waved their auction paddles and shrieked. Jake turned and paced down one end of the stage, treating it like a catwalk, shifting into a pose. If he was going to do this and put himself out there so publicly for Sophie, he at least ought to do it right.

Bidding shot to \$500. A flurry of activity between five bidders kept the auctioneer busy until the amount reached \$1,000. Just two bidders remained, with \$1,500 on the table.

Forgoing all ceremony, Jake stopped in the middle of the stage and looked into the audience to find the two remaining bidders. Bright stage lights blinded him as vapors from the dry ice swirled through the auditorium, blocking his view.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath. Doris practically licked her lips and purred, perched at the edge of the stage, waving her paddle hard and high. With all the crap she pulled tonight, he was sure she expected more than dinner, drinks and a play. Sex for the sake of sex just wouldn’t cut it for Doris. She would hang on like a leech, demanding commitment, a ring, marriage, children, and probably a damned golden retriever.

Jake turned to look at the other bidder, but couldn’t see beyond the first row of women. A few steps forward allowed a better view. He felt compelled with a strange need to determine if the blonde was the other bidder. The spotlight blinded him. Jake shielded his eyes and looked again.

*Oh dear God,* he thought. *I’ve died and gone to heaven.*

It was her. Jake’s angel of the auction smiled a vaguely familiar smile, radiating heat and lust right to him.

“Win me,” he whispered under his breath to her. “Win me.”

Someone in the back called out a \$2,000 bid. The blonde turned to glare. Even through the haze Jake could see her dress tied behind her neck, leaving her back completely exposed. Black silk glided over narrow hips and a hard, tight ass. An image of his hands sliding down that bare back, dipping lower, leaped to mind. *Not now,* he thought. *Not the time or place for a boner.*

Doris bid again. The angel stomped her foot and looked really pissed. *Damn,* he thought, *don’t want to get on the wrong side of that one.* Waving her auction paddle frantically to get the auctioneer’s attention, the blonde shouted: “Five thousand dollars!”

The crowd went silent. The auctioneer stepped forward and asked the blonde if she was sure. She looked perplexed, but nodded.

“Going once!” the auctioneer barked. The crowd held its breath.

“Going twice,” he cried.

Jake breathed in slowly, clenched his fist around his jacket, gaze glued to the blonde.

“Sold! To number sixty-five: a date with Jake Muscat for five thousand dollars!” The crowd erupted in cheers as the gavel pounded. Jake felt his face go red but held the blonde’s penetrating gaze. She stood still, beaming at him; a crooked top incisor added cute to sexy. Smiling broadly, he beckoned her to wait as he walked offstage to meet her.

Making his way toward his buyer, people stopped Jake several times to slap him on the back, shake his hand, or grab him for an unwanted hug. After squeezing past two rather large and excited women, he found himself standing in front of the woman who had paid five thousand dollars for one date with him. His sister and Tally had their arms wrapped around the gorgeous blonde’s back, smiles on their faces.

She shot him a dazzling smile, white teeth against pink lips, luminescent skin draped in black silk. Her hair flowed smooth and straight, like a river of gold trickling over her shoulders and between full, high breasts.

His heart skipped a beat. “Gracie!” he said, thrills shooting through his body. “Why don’t you introduce me to your friend?”

Shocked silence followed. A look of horror slowly replaced the smile on the blonde’s face. Jake backed up a step. His gaze slid to his sister, who glared at him with intensity. Shooting a quick glance to Tally, he could see even her face had gone white with anger.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “What did I do?”

### Chapter Three

Sophie stood in stunned silence.

That look they'd shared earlier tonight—he'd given it to a stranger, not her. Had she been *that* different 12 years ago? Sure, she shot up a few inches and grew boobs, but how could he not recognize her at all? She felt 13 again: gawky, frizzy and invisible.

Jake stepped forward, hand outstretched to meet her, a perplexed look on his face. Sophie took a step back. Her heart clenched. He hadn't recognized her. This wasn't the reunion she dreamed of for years. He didn't even know her.

Feeling tears well up, Sophie turned on stilettoed heels and pushed her way through the crowd. She had to get out of there. Behind her, she heard Grace and Tally berate Jake. Then she heard his voice, calling through the crowd.

It didn't matter anymore. Whatever she hoped to come out of seeing Jake again was gone. Blinded by tears, Sophie shouldered her way through the crowd, choking out numerous apologies while elbowing people out of her way. The heavy scent of perfume and stale bodies gagged her. She needed air.

One of the winning bidders excitedly pushed past her and flung open the emergency exit door. Sophie dashed through it, grateful to escape the crowd and for the cool rush of air on her face. Like a drowning woman, she gulped down deep breaths of the night air.

After stumbling down the steps, Sophie tugged off her heels. The pavement of the parking lot was warm and wet under her bare feet. She hit the ground running, crossing the parking lot in seconds.

Sophie ran toward home, sprinting barefoot on the grassy path that followed a meandering creek through town. Her lungs burned but the soft grass kept her feet from bruising. She jogged five miles every morning, never imagining a barefoot run through her hometown in the middle of the night.

A half mile later, Sophie reached her driveway and slowed to a walk. After stumbling her way down her pea-graveled driveway, she loped across her front porch. It was still slick from the earlier rain, and Sophie slipped. Her knee smacked hard against the heavy oak door.

“This night *sucks!*” she shouted, glad the neighbors’ houses were far away.

She limped up the curved staircase and made her way to her bedroom. Sophie still loved her old room—her sanctuary—with a warm chocolate piquet duvet on a bed facing a set of double-hung shuttered windows overlooking the 150-year-old rose and herb garden below.

Sophie opened the windows and lit some candles. The heady scent of lavender candles mixed in seconds with the fresh spring air, cleaned from the earlier rain. A gentle breeze billowed the silk curtains and made the glow of the candles wave and dance against the bedroom wall.

Comforted and slightly mollified, she plopped down hard on the bed. From between the mattress and box spring Sophie pulled out the advertisement for tonight’s auction, with Jake’s latest head shot prominently displayed.

“Jake,” she whispered, stroking his picture with her fingertips. What had she expected? For him to swing her up in his arms, claim he’d always had a crush on her too, then take her to bed? That was *her* dream, not his. He probably expected a good time with old friends, she included. It had been so long since the six of them had all been together as friends; and she’d run off in a pout.

*Some reunion you gave him,* she thought.

She ran her finger down Jake's picture again, one fingertip pausing at his lips. She bit her lower lip and drew in a breath. Sophie drifted away to the last time she saw him in person before tonight—the day he left for college.

*“Jake, hurry up! We have to be at the airport in two hours!” Sophie's brother Brett had been yelling all afternoon, full of excitement and energy.*

*Sophie sat on the wrought-iron swing at the edge of the veranda, watching three 18-year-old boys go crazy. Brett, Jake and Wyatt had all been accepted to Harvard. Brett was in a rude hurry to begin their undergrad life and couldn't stop bossing his two friends around.*

*She drew a finger along the condensation forming on the iced glass of lemonade and watched three gangly teenage boys gallop down the steps, headed for the limo parked on the drive. She appeared to watching all three, but her eyes were on one boy only: Jake.*

*He was almost five years older than her, 18 to her nearly 14 years. Jake's height was enhanced by silky, thick black hair that fell in waves over dark green eyes. He reminded Sophie of the Greek god, Eros. When he was happy his eyes glowed emerald; when he was mad they turned just a shade away from black. With sculptured pectorals and abs, he was wider than the lean lines of Brett; but his height made him seem regal, almost mystic.*

*The swing squeaked as Sophie shifted her weight. The sound caught Jake's attention. He stopped his flight down the steps to the limousine and turned to Sophie.*

*Her face grew warm under his gaze. Peripherally, she heard her brother yell again.*

*“I'll be there in a sec!” Jake waved to Brett, already jumping into the limo. “I need to say goodbye to Sophie first.”*

*She sat still, hoping Jake would stay far enough away so he wouldn't notice her trembling.*

*“Will you write me?” he asked, standing over her, his dark eyebrows forming a question.*

*She managed a whisper. “Yes.”*

*Jake leaned against the veranda railing, hooking one foot over the other. “You, Tally and Gracie may be the biggest twerps in the world, but you’re our twerps.” Jake’s eyes glowed.*

*“Don’t let anyone push you around, you hear?”*

*She nodded, unable to breathe.*

*Jake pushed himself off the railing to stand in front of her again. Raking a hand through his curls, he added, “Good. You girls hold a special place in my heart. Never forget it, Little Twerp.”*

*She froze as Jake leaned in closer. She could smell him—faintly musky—and feel his breath on her cheek. Time passed in slow motion. She saw Jake bend his neck, his lips coming closer to hers. His scent growing stronger. Then his lips were at the corner of her mouth and he was kissing her, not exactly on the lips, but not on her cheek, either. Her breathing stopped when his lips touched the corner of her mouth and did not start again until after he had patted her on the head, bounded down the stairs, and dove into the limo, crashing into Brett. The last thing she heard was Jake laughing and the beating of her own heart as the limo drove away.*

\* \* \* \*

Jake knew he’d been an idiot. How could he have not recognized Sophie? The poor thing had looked so bewildered when he asked his sister to introduce them. Here he’d thought this was one of his sister’s hot friends—one of the girls in the group photos around Grace’s house. But all along it had been Sophie, sweet, sweet Sophie.

That's why the blonde looked familiar when she smiled during the auction: Jake spent nearly every day from age 14 to 18 at her parents' house hanging out with her brother, having dinner with her family, spending nights in the spare room down the hall from hers, ditching her and the other Little Twerps when they got too annoying. Just because Sophie had grown up a little didn't give him the excuse to not recognize her.

Although his defense, she had actually grown up quite a bit. So much of had changed; her height, hair, boobs—well, one thing hadn't changed, he laughed to himself. When she stomped her foot and glared at the other bidders, she revealed her infamous Sophie attitude. At least she still had that.

Jake stepped slowly up the stairs to her front door. He watched her run from him at the auction and figured she went home. After apologizing to all their friends, he followed her path and walked the half-mile to The Cottage.

Built during California's Gold Rush in the 1850s by Brett and Sophie's great-great grandfather, a businessman who had made a fortune on gold mining, The Cottage had been deceptively named. On 10 acres at the edge of town, it was an opulent two-storied giant of a house with a full wrap-around porch and servants' quarters. Sophie and Brett grew up living at the estate, with its cultivated lawns, reflecting pools and fountains, a carriage house, and no fewer than five separate gardens. With a billiard hall, horses in the stable, an Olympic-style pool, outdoor dance pad, and the largest television set ever seen in Quartzton, The Cottage seemed to offer everything. At least to Jake, anyway, who hadn't a penny to his name and a father who spent what he did have on cheap alcohol. To Jake, Brett and Sophie had it all.

He knocked on the door. Silence.

"Sophie?" he called, peering in the mullioned windows adjacent to the oak door, looking for

signs of life. After ringing the doorbell and still hearing no response, he walked around the house to the side garden.

The glow of candlelight coming from opened windows on the second floor indicated Sophie was home, just ignoring him.

“Sophie!” This time he called out with more determination.

“Go home, Jake,” she yelled back, her voice choked with emotion.

“I just want to talk to you. Can’t you let me in for a minute?”

“I don’t want to talk to you, Jake. I just want to be alone.”

He could understand how miserable she felt, but he was beginning to feel like a bit of an ass screaming from under her window.

“Sophie, just let me in,” he pleaded.

“No.”

“Yes,” he demanded.

“Bite me.”

That was it. He flew out from New York to be in her stupid fundraiser, humiliated himself on stage, walked a half-mile in the middle of the night, and she was telling him to fuck off? No way was she going to get away with being such a brat.

Swearing to himself, Jake grabbed the thick trunk of ivy winding its way up the trellis adjacent to Sophie’s window and began the long trek upward.

The ivy made a faint scratching sound against the wall, bringing Sophie to the window. “You idiot. What are you doing?” she hissed.

Jake spat out an ivy leaf that had made its way to his mouth. “You won’t let me in and I need to talk to you. I don’t want to do it by yelling at you from your porch.”

“You’re going to kill yourself.”

“Nope, Brett and I used to sneak out this way to go party. This ivy trunk won’t go anywhere.”

“Oh great, you petty criminals used my room as an escape route.” Sophie’s sarcasm sounded loud and clear. “Where was I when you would sneak out?”

One more strong pull and Jake’s head and shoulders were in Sophie’s room. He grunted, and then responded to her question. “You were usually over at Tally’s, but sometimes you were here. You tended to sleep like the dead, so we never had to worry about getting caught.”

Jake inched his chest across the window frame, pausing partway through. “Here, give me a hand. I used to have a much smaller body.”

“Some cat burglar you’d make.” Sophie reached out, grabbed the back of his white linen shirt with both hands, and roughly hauled him the remainder of the way into her bedroom.

He bent and dusted off his tuxedo trousers, which had gathered enough leaves and detritus on his way up to start their own forest. A mess formed on her floor, but he refused to feel any more guilt this evening. She’d just have to vacuum it up.

“You were here when I was sleeping?” Sophie’s voice sounded small, a contrast to her earlier sarcasm.

Jake looked up and smiled at her, surprised. Vulnerability wasn’t something he associated with sassy Sophie. “Yeah, I used to watch you sometimes. Jake thought I was weird, but I thought you were cute. You were so feisty and fiery when you were awake, but like a little angel when you slept. You always had your cat curled up beside you and your headgear on—” Jake stopped when he noticed tears running down Sophie’s cheeks.

“Hey, what’s up, kiddo?”

She shook her head and spread her arms wide. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Jake sat down on her bed and pulled her down beside him. The tears ran full bore now, accompanied by sobs. He reached over and pulled her head onto his shoulder, gently rubbing her back. He wiped away the tears streaming down her cheeks. “Try me,” he said, his voice quiet.

“It’s just that, well—” she sobbed, then the words came out in a tumbled rush. “I haven’t seen you in twelve years and you didn’t even recognize me but I have your face forever burned in my memory, and I got soaked in a convertible, and I only got to have one martini, and I’m out of wine and batteries . . .” Sophie tapered off and hiccupped against his shoulder.

“Um, Soph? I’m really sorry I didn’t recognize you.” Jake put his arm around her, pulling her close. “You’ve got to understand, it was smoky in that room from all the dry ice, all I’d had to eat the entire day were peanuts from the plane, eight olives, and four martinis, so I was pretty buzzed. Besides, you had a mouth full of braces, a head of massively curly hair, and were a lot shorter the last time I saw you.”

Sophie choked out a laugh as Jake stroked her hair back behind her ears.

“Back then you were stick-skinny and with absolutely no boobs to speak of. And here you are now, with super straight hair, no braces or glasses, way taller, and you have such incredible boobs.” He moved his head to peer at her cleavage. “Are they real?”

She smiled and peeked at her boobs. “Yep, I grew them myself.”

“Nice,” Jake drawled out, wiggling his eyebrows, making her giggle.

“I know I’ve changed,” she continued. “It just never dawned on me that I changed so much that you wouldn’t even recognize me.” Little hiccups punctuated Sophie’s words as she spoke. “And even when you were at Harvard and then in New York, we’ve still been talking on the phone and e-mailing each other. I thought you’d be all happy to see me, and instead you walked

up like I was a complete stranger.”

Jake nuzzled the top of her head with his chin. “In a way you *are* a complete stranger. You went from cute little kid to absolute knockout and I wasn’t around to witness the transformation. Everyone said you’d grown up and come into your own, but I guess I never got what they meant. I thought you just got your braces off.”

With her tears finally at bay, Sophie smiled. “I think everyone expected me to lose the glasses and braces and get a good hairstyle, but what surprised people most were the boobs.”

Jake stole another appreciative look at her breasts, and then turned to face her. He cupped her chin in his palm and pulled her face to his. “What did you mean by the rest of what you just cried to me about?”

“Oh,” she paused. “Well, my plane was delayed, and then the uppy-downy thing on my convertible broke, so I drove all the way here from the airport in the rain with the top down and I got soaked. I hated that I had to miss dinner with you, and Tally sloshed one of my martinis all over the floor.”

“I should have given you one of mine,” he laughed. “Your brother force-fed four of them to me in about half an hour. Truthfully, I was just hungry. I was after the olives.”

“Yuck,” Sophie said. “A *real* martini. I like the girlie kind, the ones with sugar on top.”

“Yeah, that you would,” Jake said, shifting to get up, but pausing in mid-motion. What else had she said? “Batteries, Sophie. Tell me why being out of batteries made you cry.”

Sophie rolled herself back on the bed, fists covering her eyes. Even under the soft candlelight Jake could tell she blushed.

“Sophie?” Jake nudged her side. “Batteries?”

She cringed.

Resorting to tactics he'd learned from Brett, Jake started tickling her. "You can't escape. I won't stop tickling you until you tell."

Sophie squealed and writhed underneath him. "Damn having an older brother who shared all my secrets," she gasped out.

His fingers went wider and he began tickling harsher as she laughed and gasped for breath.

"Stop, I give, I give!" she managed to get out in breathless pants.

Jake lay down beside her, folded his arms over his chest, and said one word: "Tell."

## Chapter Four

Sophie bit her lower lip, watching the light from the candles dance on the ceiling. She took a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll tell you, but don’t tickle me again. I’ll pee.”

At Jake’s low laugh she rapped him lightly on the nose. “Don’t laugh! I’m nervous.”

Jake entwined her fingers with his. She watched his fingers stroke hers.

“You, nervous? That’s a surprise. You were always the assertive one—so confident, even demanding. In fact,” Jake said, squeezing her hand, “you could be a bit of a brat.”

A faint smile grew, teasing Sophie’s lips upward. “That’s how everyone sees me; at least, that’s how I want them to see me. But really, I’m not. I’m insecure as all get-out. You know how some women fake orgasms?” She watched as Jake nodded, his eyes still fixed on their hands. “Well, I fake confidence. I’m a big faker.”

Jake shot a glance at her. “Do you ever fake orgasms too?” he asked.

“Nope,” she giggled. “Just confidence.”

Smoothly, Jake shifted to his side, facing her. “Um . . . Sophie? What does this have to do with batteries?”

She blushed. “It doesn’t, not really. It has to do with something else.”

He held still, soft strokes of her hair his only movement.

She gulped air, preparing herself. “What I’m trying to tell you is that I’ve had a gigantic crush on you since the first day we met.”

Jake raised his eyebrows.

“Do you remember that day?” she asked.

He nodded. “Grace and I were out at the park for my first day of junior league baseball.”

“I saw you, leaning against a tree, a wild and scared look on your face. And you were beautiful.” Sophie paused. At Jake’s light touch on her hand she resumed her quiet confession.

“What drew me to you more than how beautiful you were, was that when you looked up and saw me staring with my jaw on the ground, you didn’t laugh at the ugly, frizzy-haired girl with the bucked teeth.”

Jake’s low laughs rumbled the bed, sending miniature shock waves through Sophie’s stomach. “You weren’t ugly or frizzy—you were really cute. But you *were* wearing some pretty gigantic glasses.”

Sophie whacked Jake on the shoulder. “Stop teasing me and concentrate—I’m trying to tell you something deep here.”

“I’m listening.” Jake placed a light kiss on the inside of the palm that had just smacked him.

“All you did was to say hello, but it was how you looked at me, with this open and caring smile, like I was *special*. At that moment you captured me.” She caught his eyes with hers as she lowered her head to the pillow.

Jake held her gaze for a moment, then shifted away. He fixed his eyes on the ceiling, giving no response to her confession. She held her breath, hoping he wouldn’t be disgusted, wouldn’t jump up and run out the door now that he knew how she felt about him.

“I remember that day,” he said slowly. Gracie and I had just moved to Quartzton: that was the year our mom died. Our dad hated Mom for being sick, hated the world for Mom’s illness, and hated her for dying and leaving him with two kids. He was miserable, and so were we.”

Sophie nodded, remembering Joe Muscat and his ever-pervasive stench of whisky; the empty bottles of booze strewn about the two-bedroom trailer, the cowed look on Grace’s face after he’d

go on a drunken binge.

“Dad took out his anger on me, usually with his belt. I did everything I could to keep him from hurting Gracie, but that day he’d gone after both of us right before the baseball game.”

Jake stopped speaking, his fingers a blur of motion as he twirled a lock of his hair. “I thought we were so alone, me and Grace. But then I met you, so open and sweet, and later that day your brother and Wyatt. That was the day I met you all, and your brother and Wyatt became my best friends.”

Shifting to his side, Jake ran his finger along her arm. His light touch stimulated her senses, sending goose bumps flying to the surface of her skin. “From then on, anytime I needed anything, I could turn to Brett and Wyatt. Your families welcomed Gracie and me, helped us out in ways you maybe never knew.” Jake took a deep breath, let out a sigh. “I remember that day, too, but I remember it for reasons different from yours. My life began on that day.”

Sophie turned and pulled Jake next to her body. Stroking his hair, both their heads on her pillow, she whispered, “I was so jealous when Brett came over and you two took off, leaving me in the dust.”

“Yeah,” Jake’s low chuckle vibrated against her chest. “Brett, Wyatt and Jake, the Three Musketeers.”

“You three were definitely a force not to mess with. ‘One for all and all for one!’” Sophie called out their infamous quote. “I remember hearing that call for the first time: you three were in the oak tree behind your dad’s trailer and the girls and I were catching crawdads in the creek. We wanted to join you in your tree fort but you guys kept pummeling us with acorns and shouting that ridiculous phrase.”

“Yeah, we were pretty full of ourselves.” Jake’s laugh delighted Sophie. She watched his

eyes crinkle around the edges as he remembered the scene. “But you three were real pests, which is why you deserved to be called Little Twerps.”

“Pests? We were downright brats,” Sophie laughed in reply as she shifted to make herself more comfortable. The slight change in position brought her breasts to his chest. The brush of her nipples against his chest triggered them to form hard peaks under her dress.

“Guess we’re not bratty little kids anymore though, right?” Focused on Jake’s face, Sophie saw a slight change in his expression, from amused to contemplative. Had she done something wrong?

\* \* \* \*

Jake didn’t think his cock could get any harder. Even though Sophie had finally settled down and stopped squirming against him, he was in an absolute state of arousal. He couldn’t help it: not with Sophie’s warm body next to his; her sweet breath on his face; and now her gorgeous breasts smashed up against his chest. How did Sophie—one of the pesky Little Twerps, someone he always considered a friend—turn out to be the same blonde bombshell he’d wanted at the auction? How could he have not realized the blonde was *Sophie*?

With her admission of a long-time crush on him, Jake felt another wave of guilt rush over him. He certainly wanted her, but knew he couldn’t give her what she needed. Commitment just wasn’t something he could do; not even for someone as beautiful, sweet and sassy as Sophie. He’d have to address her crush at some point, explain his inability to fulfill her needs. But there was a more immediate thought to consider, something Sophie had mentioned earlier.

With a start, Jake rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself up on his elbows. The

batteries. She *still* hadn't told him about the batteries, and she'd turned such a delightful shade of pink when he'd asked.

"Batteries...." he drawled, tapping her nose with his knuckles. "You can't get away with not telling me."

"Oh God!" She pressed her face into the pillow. "Okay, but you have to promise not to tell."

"Promise," he answered.

"The batteries are actually for BOB," she said, her face still buried in the pillow.

Jake bit. "And who is Bob, may I ask?"

"BOB, well, BOB is one of those particular kinds of friends that live off batteries. Without them, he, well, he doesn't really exist."

Understanding dawned. That little minx! No wonder she'd blushed. With a bark of a laugh, Jake sat up and reached around Sophie to her nightstand. He opened the drawer and peeked in. There, next to a bottle of lotion and a nail file, something metallic shone in the candlelight. He pulled out the silver orb with a long wire attached and held it up to Sophie. "BOB, I presume?"

Sophie removed the pillow slowly and looked at what Jake was holding. "No, that's not BOB."

Jake raised an eyebrow.

She stuck out her jaw. "That's BOB Junior. BOB, the real BOB, should be located behind him."

Jake again reached in to the drawer, felt around, and this time pulled out something in neon pink.

Sophie nodded, "That's BOB."

"Oh God, Sophie, I've never known a woman who named her vibrators." Jake rolled on top

of Sophie, examining the toy.

“It’s actually an acronym: B.O.B. It stands for ‘Battery-Operated Boyfriend’. But I do like the name. The sad thing about naming them is that I get attached, and occasionally they die and I miss them afterward.”

Jake’s eyes flashed to hers. “How do they die, Sophie?”

“Um,” she squirmed under him. “I kill them. Quite by accident, of course. The last one I had went up in smoke during a particularly good session. And when I say went up in smoke, I mean literally. I was scared to death!”

Jake laughed, dropped BOB back in the drawer, and buried his head in her hair. “This is all so weird, Sophie. Two days ago, I was e-mailing you a joke and picturing you reading it. But you damned sure didn’t look like this in my mind. You were still Sophie, the Little Twerp, Brett’s little sister—my friend.”

Jake paused and swept his hand down the length of her body before speaking again. “I’m so attracted to you right now I think my erection is as stiff as granite. But until a couple of hours ago, you were, at least in my mind, still a scraggly, boobless teenager.”

“But you know me,” breathed Sophie. “We’ve e-mailed and talked on the phone ever since you graduated from high school. I’ve told you everything about my life. You know me.” Her voice faded as she stared into his eyes, mere inches from hers.

Jake shifted and framed her face with his hands. “You may have told me all those things about yourself, but you never told me you grew up. That’s the difference.”

## Chapter Five

"But did I grow up enough?" Sophie twisted her hips, straining to press the head of his erection against her sex. She knew Jake wanted her—his rock-solid dick pressed up against her belly told her so. But could he reconcile the kid he'd known all those years ago with the woman she'd become?

Jake hitched a breath and stroked her cheek with his index finger.

"It isn't about how hot you are now," he said slowly. "I can't give you what you need. I just don't do relationships."

Jake's erection throbbed between Sophie's legs, his breath on her cheek, stroking her face with his fingers. All those years spent as a gawky kid, tagging after her brother, Wyatt and Jake, yearning for Jake to notice her; and now she was seducing him.

Beneath her bed was an old shoebox, decorated with tissue paper, ribbons, and lace, containing all things related to Jake. The day she met him, she ran home and found an empty shoebox in the back of her mother's closet. In it she'd placed the napkin Jake used to wipe mustard off his chin after eating a hot dog at the baseball field. She spent hours decorating the box, thinking of Jake.

Throughout the years she collected bits of his life: old wrappers from his Halloween candy, copies of newspaper articles about his high-school baseball career or him being crowned Homecoming king. Later, Sophie added Jake's graduation announcement from Harvard, followed by reviews of every theatrical production he had been in, and all the articles praising his directing abilities.

She kept her crush on Jake a secret from everyone, even her girlfriends. In high school, Jake always dated perfect girls with long legs, straight white teeth, and, like Doris, big boobs. Sophie deemed it useless to compete with perfection and never let on that she felt anything more for Jake than friendship.

Brett was the only person who knew how she felt. When she was a sophomore in high school, she came home from school one day to find Brett, back from college for the summer, sitting on her bed. Her shoebox was at his side and he was examining her Jake Collection. Sophie was ready to kill Brett for invading her privacy, but instead was shocked when her older brother carefully put the contents back in the shoebox, walked up to her, and put his arms around her in a comforting hug.

“Maybe he’ll wake up someday, Sis,” he whispered, and left the room.

And now Jake was here, on her bed, on *her*! Sophie wanted to taste him, feel his skin on hers, feel him deep inside her. His breath on her face and the heat from his pelvis set her on fire. She could have him at this moment: feel his body settle in to hers, taste his mouth, hear his moans. She shifted, twisting her body against his, and felt his sex throb.

“Sophie,” he whispered. “Tell me to stop.”

She shook her head.

“Please, tell me to stop,” he begged again. “I want you so much but I can’t give you what you need. I’m totally floored by what you told me but I can’t feel the same way.”

“Can’t, or don’t?” Sophie murmured. “There is a distinction.”

Jake dropped his forehead to rest on hers. “I don’t know. All I know is that a relationship just isn’t in the picture. Committed relationships and me don’t mix.”

Sophie tried to interrupt him, but Jake covered her mouth with his hot, wet lips and slid his

tongue deep inside her. A harshness overtook the kiss, leaving Sophie gasping for breath when he finally pulled away.

“You’ve got my mind and body beyond confused,” Jake said. “Here’s this person I’ve known and cared about almost half my life suddenly packaged up in a body I’m insanely hard for. I could have wild and amazing sex with you tonight, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

Sophie’s chest felt like a boa constrictor had closed over her. Her breath shallowed as Jake shifted to nestle his hard erection between her thighs, the fabric of his tuxedo trousers and her black silk dress a barrier to what she really wanted.

“Sweetie,” Jake whispered, stroking her face with his fingers, “what am I doing to you?”

What he was doing to her was fulfilling a dream. She’d wanted him for so long, and there was no way she would let this chance slip by just because he had some guilt issues.

Sophie wriggled her hands between their chests and began unbuttoning his shirt. “Apparently you’re turning me on. I need this, Jake—I need this night. I can’t go the rest of my life always wondering what it would be like with you. If we have sex, no matter what happens, at least there won’t be an unspoken question between us. If we don’t, every time we meet will be tense and uncomfortable. I don’t want to be resentful of a missed opportunity.”

“But won’t you feel bad if we do make love and I can’t give you a commitment?” he asked, concern sketched on his forehead.

“Did I ask for one?”

“No, but—”

“Shut up, Jake.”

\* \* \* \*

Jake's eyes closed as Sophie flicked first one nipple then the other with her tongue. She clawed at his shirt, struggling to take it off his shoulders. He reached up and snagged it off, cuff links hitting the hardwood floor with a clatter. She sat up on the bed and deftly pulled off his pants and black briefs until he lay naked underneath her. Jake felt his breath coming quicker and harsher as she licked and lathed his nipples, reaching up to kiss him open-mouthed, hot and wet. As he recovered his breath from Sophie's kiss, she resumed her work on his body, licking his chest. Her tongue traced a trail from Jake's nipples to his navel.

"Sophie, I think I'm naked," Jake breathed, watching Sophie kneeling at his knees. She bent forward and draped her corn silk hair over his erection, letting out a deep chuckle when he jerked in response.

"Yes, you are indeed naked." Her laugh was low in her throat. She flicked the tip of her tongue against the very tip of Jake, sending shock waves ripple through his core.

"This is your choice." He reached out and twisted his fingers in her hair. "You can stop now or go on: it's up to you."

"Here's my answer," she breathed, then took him fully in her mouth.

Jake jolted when her wet mouth surrounded his cock. His breath grew harsh and jagged. He tightened his grip on her hair with one hand and kept the other lightly on her head, keeping pace with her as she moved up and down in that instinctive, ageless rhythm.

Her hand came between Jake's legs, nudging them apart, and she reached to massage his balls. His body jolted again as she moved the pad of one finger in a circular motion just below where she held him.

"Oh God," he breathed. "You don't know how good this feels."

His cock jerked as Sophie intensified her motions, alternating swirling her tongue around his tip and sucking it as she gripped his erection with her hand. He began shifting his hips upward, matching her rhythm. Sophie's moans and shuddering body told him she enjoyed giving him a blowjob almost as much as he enjoyed getting one.

"Sophie, I need to stop, I don't want to come yet." He stroked her cheek as she rose to kiss him on his mouth. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?" he asked.

Sophie laughed. "Given that you continue getting harder and harder, I guess you liked what I was doing."

Jake pretended affront. "You *did* sound as if you were enjoying yourself down there."

"Mmm...guess I was, at that." Sophie teased back. Propping herself up on her elbow, she ran her finger down his chest, her eyes caressing his naked body.

She took a breath, paused, then spoke. "I'm on birth control and I've been tested. If, you know, you might maybe want to..."

Her hesitancy after such a powerful dick-sucking seemed such a cute contrast. Jake laughed. "You just gave me the blow job of a lifetime and now you're getting shy on me?" He brushed a lock of hair from her face. "Yes, I want to make love to you. Why do you think I stopped you when you were giving me head? I want to save it for you. And I've been tested recently because of the play's insurance; I'm healthy."

His nipples ached as she suckled one and used her fingers to toy with the other.

Jake caught her hand in his. He wanted her, wanted to slide himself into her, feel her vaginal walls squeeze around him. He craved to see her bare body in the candlelight arching toward his, reaching up to take him inside her wet heat. A wave of guilt washed over him, then was gone. He reached behind Sophie and fumbled to untie her halter top, watching her breasts spill out of their

confinement when he succeeded. Keeping their bodies together, Jake worked her dress and silk panties down her hips, then caught them with his foot and pulled the dress completely off.

“Now you’re just as naked as I am,” he whispered in her ear, following the whisper with a nibble.

Making his way down her neck and clavicle, kiss by kiss, he reached her breasts and watched her nipples harden as he blew a breath of air on them. Sophie arched her back, trying to get him to take her nipples in his mouth. Jake kept teasing her by breathing on first one hardened bud then the other, followed by quick swipes with the tip of his tongue. He chuckled when Sophie reached up behind his neck and pulled his mouth down to her breast. She breathed a sigh of relief when he took her fully into his mouth and latched on tight, sucking hard.

After lathing one breast until her nipple was pink and pointed, he tipped his head up to look at her.

Head nuzzling Sophie’s cleavage, his words were muffled. “As a true boob man, I really don’t have a problem with equal treatment, equal time.” He reached for her other breast and sucked it into his mouth. Her body bucked beneath him. She struggled to free her legs, pinned by his.

“I need you, Jake,” she moaned. “I need you in me.”

Jake gave her dusky red nipple, hard and pointed, one last swirl with his tongue. “Not yet,” he growled. He reached one hand between her thighs, fingers searching for her wet slit.

When he just toyed with her, covering her mons with the palm of his hand, she grabbed his arm, sliding her hand down to cover his, pressing his fingers against her swollen clit. At her aching cry, he swirled her nub with the pad of his thumb, then plunged two fingers inside her, reaching, twisting, caressing. She was wet, ready to take him inside. He wanted to taste her, to

lick her sweetness, but felt an overwhelming need to slide himself inside her.

He nudged her knees apart.

“You are some kind of wonderful, you know?” he whispered, stroking her body with his, ready to plunge inside.

\* \* \* \*

Tears came to Sophie’s eyes as Jake positioned himself between her. At the first tentative meeting of their sexes, she felt a sob beginning to build. When Jake gave a solid push and entered her, she felt the tears spill. When he began moving, the sobs came choking out.

Jake’s fingers stroked her face as he sought her eyes with his. “You’re crying. I’ll stop.”

Sophie sobbed harder and wrapped her legs around his hips, forcing him to plunge deeper into her. “Don’t you dare,” she ground out.

Her heels on his back forced him to thrust deeper. “It’s okay, sweetie, let it out. Let it all out,” he breathed, increasing his tempo.

As Jake continued to stroke her from the inside, Sophie alternately licked, sucked, and nibbled all parts of him she could reach while pinned underneath his long and lean body. When he straightened his arms and raised himself up to arch his back, she called out his name as his shaft probed a unique place within her.

He ducked his head down to catch her eyes with his and smiled broadly. “Like that, do you?” he teased.

Tears over and forgotten, seeking a release of another kind, Sophie smiled and arched her back to find the sweet spot again. When Jake plunged deep, her hips rocketed off the bed.

Stroking, plundering, touching, kissing, Jake brought her higher than she'd ever gone. His deep gasp and rocking thrust triggered her own reaction—heat built, muscles clenched, and a long shudder overtook her as she swirled about, unsure of where she was at in space, suspended, without gravity.

When her shuddering cry slowed and quieted, Jake let out a harsh moan, jerked hard into her, then collapsed, his full weight holding her down.

“Stay in me, Jake” she whispered. “Stay in me as long as you can.”

Jake shifted his weight and gathered her in his arms. “This was beautiful,” he spoke softly. “You are beautiful. You are truly beautiful, Sophie.”

Her head nestled next to his. Sophie felt a lone tear make a long path down her temple as she embraced him. Jake had called her beautiful.

For a fleeting moment, she even believed him.

## Chapter Six

The sounds of robins twittering outside the open window brought Jake slowly into consciousness. He woke with the knowledge he'd had great sex the night before, but it wasn't until he saw Sophie's golden blonde hair spread out over his bare arm that he remembered who he'd been with. He hoped the dawn wouldn't bring regrets and recriminations. She appeared satisfied last night with sex being a one-time event, but in his experience with one-nighters, he knew the next morning could bring changed expectations.

Jake stretched, loving the silky feel of her naked skin against his. Sophie stirred, her eyes still shut, a soft smile playing about her lips. When she opened her eyes and saw him, she immediately stopped breathing.

"Good morning," Jake said. "Think you could kindly start breathing again? CPR isn't exactly how I was planning on getting my mouth on yours this morning."

Sophie gulped a huge breath of air. "I used to do that when I was a kid—hold my breath when I was scared or excited."

"I remember. You used to scare me back then, too."

He shifted positions, bringing their faces together. "If I recall, I was the one who had to pick you up off the ground when you passed out after seeing the horse your dad bought you on your thirteenth birthday. I was just glad you were outside the damned arena: you scared the horse so bad when you dropped, it took off like a racehorse. You could have been killed."

"You would have saved me," Sophie teased.

"Yeah," Jake wrapped a curl of Sophie's blonde hair around his finger. "I would have saved

you.”

Sophie hitched a breath as Jake’s palm stroked the underside of her breast.

“You have such beautiful hair,” he said, brushing the curl against his lips. “I’m glad it went and got all curly. I miss your mass of curls.”

“You’re so sweet, Jake,” Sophie laughed.

“And you’re so beautiful,” he whispered, moving his lips across her shoulder and down her arm. “Everything about you is beautiful and perfect. Even the ankh tattooed on your butt.”

Sophie jumped and pulled away, throwing her pillow over her head. “I can’t believe you saw that,” she cried out.

Jake flung his head back and laughed.

“Not funny.”

“I think it’s adorable—a perfect little ankh, right on your cute ass. Do your parents know about it?”

Sophie pulled her head out from under the pillow, rolled onto her stomach. “Are you kidding me? My mom would be horribly embarrassed, and my dad would *kill* me if he ever found out I have the Egyptian symbol for eternal life permanently etched onto my rear.” Sophie plopped her chin down on crossed arms. “They’d probably disown me.”

When Sophie rolled over, Jake traced small circles across her belly with his fingers. He reached her breasts, then replaced his fingers with his mouth. His tongue made slow, undulating passes at her nipple. She began to quiver, and he knew she wanted him.

“Touch me, Jake.”

He growled out a semblance of a response, and reached down to touch the small spring of blond curls between her legs. Panting, she spread her legs wider so he could reach her inner core.

Instead, he stroked her parted lips lightly with the back of his hand, chuckling when she quivered. As if he had all the time in the world, Jake traced the outline of her dark blond hair in the shape of a “vee,” an arrow to her most sensitive self. He rasped his thumb over her clitoris, enjoying how her hips raised upward as she sought more pressure.

“Are you going to be a brat and just toy with me, or be a man and satisfy me?” Sophie growled out.

He threw his head back and laughed. Apparently, Sophie wasn’t one for long, drawn-out foreplay. He pressed harder on her clit, rolling it underneath the pad of his thumb. She groaned, then panted. She wanted more. And he had more to give. Much more.

Jake stood up. Sophie’s hands clutched at his arms, his hands, trying to pull him back to her. Instead, he placed an arm around each of her thighs and brought her hips to the edge. He kneeled before her, tenderly placing her feet on each of his shoulders, then allowed himself to do what he’d held himself back from the previous night.

He tasted her.

Sweet, like nectar from the gods, he thought. Even after their wild night of sex, she had a natural sweetness that left him craving more. He lathed her clit, circling it, sucking it, feeling it swell against his tongue. Her scent drove him beyond coherent thought; tasting her, licking her, feeling her shake underneath his mouth. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else existed except Sophie’s pleasure. Sophie wound her legs around his neck, pulling him in closer. Her hands wound through his hair, locking his head in place. The moment existed in an absence of time.

When he sucked her clit in his mouth and simultaneously licked, Sophie’s body bucked hard. He heard her gasp in a breath; then he paused, waiting for her to exhale.

“Sophie, you gotta remember to breathe.”

She rocked her hips upward to meet his mouth. “I won’t pass out, I want this too much,” she groaned.

Jake peeked at her face, could see how her eyes were closed, her teeth biting her lower lip. She was close. If he continued, she’d come in an instant. He wanted her to come with him inside her, wanted to feel her vaginal muscles clench him tight, milking his seed. He wanted to be inside Sophie when she came.

Jake teased her, an attempt to pull her back from the edge. “You know, I was thinking of maybe backing off a bit.”

Sophie pulled on his hair to bring his face upward, meeting his eyes with hers. “Backing off? You’ve got to be joking.”

He laughed, free and easy. He rose up onto the bed, nuzzled her nose with his.

“Not fair, Jake.”

He lay down on her so she could feel his erection between them. “Neither is this—see what you do to me?”

“You wanna do something about that, big boy?” she asked, a sly look on her face and a tease in her voice. “Last night you were far better than any of my BOBs have ever been. Think you can do it again?”

Jake laughed and took her in his arms, pulling her toward him so he could kiss her face.

“Better than BOB? Really?”

“So much better, and no batteries required.” Sophie laughed and wrapped her legs around his waist, bringing their bodies into exquisite contact.

Jake looked at her, a question on his face.

“Slide in me,” she whispered.

He shifted, began pressing the head of his erection into her, but froze when he heard banging on the front door.

“Expecting anyone?” he questioned.

“Oh no. Oh God. Oh damn.” Sophie shoved Jake off her and jumped up, dragging the sheet from the bed and wrapping it around her, covering herself from head to toe. “You have to go. Out the trellis. No, she’ll see you. Grab your stuff and go to Brett’s room. Pretend you slept there. She’ll never know.”

Sophie scrambled around the room, gathering Jake’s clothes and flinging them in his direction. The pounding on the door increased.

“Go! Just go!”

“Hey, slow down.” Jake tried to untangle his tuxedo pants from a stray blanket. Sophie looked so cute, all disheveled and flustered, scurrying around the room like a whirling dervish. “Who am I supposed to be hiding from, the maid?”

“No,” Sophie hissed loudly, “your sister!”

“Shit!” A loud thud accompanied Jake’s expletive as he hit the floor hard, having tangled himself up in blankets and bits of evening wear. Hopping on one foot as he scrambled to put his pants on, he made his way down the hall to the safety of his friend’s childhood room.

\* \* \* \*

Throwing on sweats and a hoodie, Sophie raced down the stairs, shouting loudly that she was on her way. Opening the door, she found not only Grace, Brett as well.

“Oh, great,” she moaned. “I’ve got company, and I look like hell.”

Brett shouldered past her. Decisively, he headed toward the kitchen, motioning for the girls to follow. “I’m looking for Jake. He’s not at his B&B, so I’m figuring he’s here.” He stuck his head in the refrigerator, scrounging for food.

Feeling her face turn red at the mention of Jake having spent the night, Sophie ducked her head forward, hiding behind a cascade of hair. Or what should have been a cascade of hair. Instead, the frizz was back, and to say she had “bed head” would be an understatement. More like “sex head,” she thought.

Pulling herself together, she answered with more calm than she felt. “Yes, he found me here after I took off in a pout from the fundraiser. He was too loopy—I believe that’s thanks to you, Brett—to drive to the B&B, and his car was about a half mile away, so I offered to let him stay in your old room.”

Head buried in her refrigerator, Brett started tossing breakfast items to the girls, not even bothering to look up. He tossed Sophie a mango, but she missed, right as Jake walked up behind her.

Rather surprised at having his head smacked by a mango, Jake nonetheless sauntered over to his sister, who he grabbed in a deep embrace. “Even after twelve years, some things remain the same. We’re *still* having food fights. Some homecoming this is.”

Grace snuggled her face against his wrinkled tuxedo shirt. “I’m just glad you’re home,” she said.

Sophie watched as Jake bent low to embrace Grace and quickly bury his face in his sister’s long, black hair. Sophie caught a look of pain in Jake’s eyes. The devastation of his little sister’s abusive marriage had long been over, but his expression showed that he still bore the unwarranted burden of guilt for not realizing how badly his little sister had been treated.

“I missed you, too, sis,” he whispered. “It’s good to be back.”

Brett interrupted the tender moment by shoving a bowl of chopped fruit at Jake and ordering him to make himself useful.

Grabbing honey, cinnamon, lemon, and basil from the refrigerator and kitchen cabinets, Jake proceeded to make what, he stated, was the best fruit salad dressing ever invented. When Grace laughed and told him that she’d e-mailed him the recipe, he waved her off, claiming he had to be good at something and that she shouldn’t steal his thunder.

Sophie edged closer to Jake, nudging her hip against his, and whispered so that the others couldn’t hear. “I know what your *true* claim to fame is, and it has nothing to do with honey.”

Jake nestled his head close to hers as he drizzled the mixture over the fruit salad. “I think honey could most definitely be incorporated into my claim to fame, don’t you think?”

Sophie’s loud snort of laughter caught the attention of Brett, who looked at her with questioning eyes. She ducked her head behind her mass of curls again, hoping no one would notice her red cheeks.

Once Jake finished drizzling an extra dose of his honey concoction, Sophie grabbed the fruit bowl from him and led the way to the outdoor dining patio, where Brett had set out breakfast dishes and bagels.

Sophie piled her plate high, swearing she’d do an extra workout later that afternoon. Although, given the workout she and Jake had done last night, perhaps she was ahead in the calorie burning count.

Under the sounds of her brother and Grace’s animated conversation about the auction, she turned to Jake and whispered, “How many calories do you think we burned during the throes of ecstasy?”

Jake immediately dropped a bagel onto his lap. Sophie giggled while he tried to wipe cream cheese off his tuxedo trousers.

“Not funny,” he hissed, swiping furiously.

“Want some help?” Sophie asked, a smile playing about her lips.

He glared at her as he dunked a linen napkin in his water glass and made another pass at his pants.

“Not on your life,” was his gritted reply.

Sophie leaned close to him, making sure her cleavage was fully visible. “Aw, why not, Jake?” she pleaded, a glint in her eye.

His response was guttural as he glared at her. “Because if you go near me, I’ll erupt like Mt. Vesuvius, and wouldn’t *that* be a thing to explain to our siblings.”

Across the table from Sophie and Jake, Brett raised a questioning eyebrow. “Got a story you want to share with the rest of us?”

“Nope,” Sophie was quick to interject.

“Yeah, right.” muttered Jake.

Brett leaned forward. “I’m sure it probably isn’t as interesting as the conversation I overheard Doris having with Jake at the auction last night.”

Jake sputtered and choked, piquing Sophie’s interest. “Do share,” she drawled, feeling the swell of envy over perfect Doris rise again.

Jake took a gulp of water, cleared his throat. “I was informed by Doris herself that not only did she have a nose job, but also fanny implants, a boob job, tummy liposuction, and had her bikini line permanently removed via electrolysis, which, according to Doris, is an incredibly painful procedure located in a highly sensitive area.”

Sophie stared at him blankly, then turned to look at Grace, who had an equally perplexed look on her face.

“Why on earth would Doris tell you something so utterly disgusting?” Grace asked.

Jake shrugged, took another bite. “I think she was trying to pick me up.”

At that, Sophie and Grace exploded with laughter, collapsing onto one another.

“That’s so like Doris,” Grace giggled helplessly, barely able to get her words out. “She thinks that to snare a man you have to be perfect. And I guess that she wanted you to know how ‘perfect’ she’s made herself: kind of like a Frankenbride.”

Sophie laughed so hard she started snorting, which sent Grace back into breathless spasms of laughter.

“The Little Twerps are at it again,” Brett sighed, nodding at the girls. “I need to get away from their insanity. Help me take these dishes in?” He gestured at Jake to gather up the Spode china. “We’ll leave you two to laugh yourselves silly,” he tossed over his shoulder as he sauntered off to the kitchen.

Reducing her laughter to mere gasps, Sophie watched Jake as he cleared their plates. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he picked up china and glasses.

“Frankenbride. . .” he muttered as he walked off, sending the girls into peals of laughter once again.

\* \* \* \*

Brett scraped plates while Jake cleaned countertops and put remaining food away in the refrigerator. From the open patio door they could hear the lilting murmur of the girls as they

chatted and laughed.

“Listen to our sisters,” Brett said. “Just like old times, out there giggling non-stop. Remember what annoying little brats they were when they were younger?”

“You know, as much as we teased them, I think we were probably just as bratty,” Jake admitted.

“Nah, we were awesome,” Brett shot back, an arrogant grin on his face.

Jake shook his head, smiling. “You are just as full of yourself now as you were back in high school.”

Brett flashed him a grin. “I keep my ego quite healthy, thank you. And our sisters were little twerps. But I do think they came out okay in the end.”

*More than okay*, Jake thought.

“Although,” Brett continued, drying a dish in his hands, “I can’t believe that not one of those three girls bid on me last night. I could have repaired Tally’s roof just as well as Wyatt, plus I would have taken off my shirt while I was up there so she could check out my pecs.”

Jake shook his head with a smile. “I highly doubt Tally would want you preening on her roof. We all got enough of that last night when you were doing your body-building routine on stage at the auction.”

Brett punched Jake on the arm. “Hey, Wyatt’s the Guy Next Door, you’re Mr. Mysterious, and I’m the Gorgeous Hunk—we all have roles to play.” He hopped up on the black granite counter, swung his feet, and watched Jake finish cleaning.

“And we each play them so well,” Jake answered quietly.

“So,” Brett kicked a foot out at Jake. “Sophie sure put up a fight to win you last night. You going to make good on the date she paid for?”

His stomach clenched, but Jake forced a relaxed air. “Yeah, I guess I’ll come back for a longer visit once this play I’m directing ends its run.”

“You like being back here.”

“I love being back. I love being so close to Grace. I always thought that by going away and making a load of money to send to her I was providing for her, but what she really needed from me was protection. I never should have left. Now it’s too late.”

Brett leaned forward, drawing Jake’s attention. “You being here or in New York wouldn’t have mattered. Grace was a victim, and hid it well. No one knew, Jake. None of us knew. I’m not saying it was her fault for covering up Duane’s abuse, but she was so scared of him she made sure we never knew. It was the only way she knew how to protect herself.”

He felt like punching a wall, breaking something with his fist, the way he dreamed of breaking Duane’s face after he found out about the abuse. But by then, Duane had been dead and buried, and he’d had no chance to seek revenge, to make up for not protecting his sister. He’d just crawled further into his shell.

“Stop beating yourself up over this. It’s over, done. Grace has moved on, and you should too. Enjoy these few moments you have with your family and friends.” Brett hopped off the countertop. “Besides, your flight to New York is in a few hours. Want me to drop you off at your B&B?”

Jake snuck a quick peek at Sophie out on the patio, her head tilted back as she laughed, the wind gently teasing her hair, curls waving around her face like a moving halo.

“I appreciate the offer,” he responded as he polished dry the last of the crystal goblets and placed it in the lead-paned glass cabinet. “But I think I’ll have Sophie drop me off. I feel like such a heel for not recognizing her last night. I need to make it up to her.”

Brett laughed. “She did do that Ugly Duckling/Swan thing pretty well. No wonder you didn’t recognize her if you hadn’t seen her since high school. I guess I didn’t realize that you’d been that out of touch for so long.”

Jake nodded. “I’ve been back to Quartzton a few times since I left for Harvard, but Sophie was always gone when I was in town. We’ve been e-mailing regularly for the last twelve years, but she’s never sent pictures. I can’t believe I was that clueless.”

Brett chuckled. “You should have seen the look on your face when you realized who she was. Your jaw dropped so far I could see your tonsils.”

Jake flicked the dishtowel and managed to catch Brett’s rear with a sharp snap. Brett jumped, clutching his butt with both hands.

“It’s true,” he yelped. “You looked like a complete idiot, a fool, a moron, a brainless dimwit standing there with your mouth wide open as you watched her storm off.”

Jake rolled his eyes. With a friend like this, he certainly didn’t need any enemies.

## Chapter Seven

With the dishes done and all the breakfast detritus cleared, Sophie hugged Grace goodbye, then sent Brett on his way, promising she'd return Jake to his bed and breakfast.

"You know, I *do* have to catch my flight back to New York in three hours." Jake's statement was blunt but kind as he searched Sophie's face.

"I know," she replied, reaching for him, "but you have some time, and I have a great idea how we could spend those three hours." Her fingers stroked the back of his hand.

Jake smiled, but pulled his hand away. "As much as I'd love to start back up where we left off this morning, don't you think we need to talk about what happened between us first?"

Sophie snorted. "The Talk. I don't want to have The Talk. Can't we play and say we had The Talk?"

Jake grimaced. "Sophie, I won't feel right if we don't talk about this, about your expectations."

"I have no expectations, except the one where I expect you to get naked so I can have my way with you."

"Sophie, you need to get your hands out of my pants when I'm trying to be serious," Jake feebly tried to fend off Sophie's reach for his zipper.

"There's no time for seriousness, Jake. You leave in three hours."

"Sophie—oh . . ." Jake stopped talking for a moment when Sophie's hand encountered his erection. "Really, I need to settle all this before we go any further. Can you be serious for a couple of minutes?"

Sophie pushed Jake down on the tall kitchen chair and straddled him, pressing her pelvic bone against his.

“Fine. We’ll have The Talk. Only I’ll do all the talking, that way it will save us on time. Here goes:

“Fact One: we did it. Fact Two: I’ve had a mad crush on you forever, but you’re unable to commit to a relationship, which makes you feel guilty because we just made wild monkey love last night and are about to again. Fact Three: I’m a big girl and can take care of my own heart and make my own decisions, so you by no means are allowed to feel guilty about the fact that you’re going to love me and leave me. And I think that about covers it.”

Jake pulled Sophie’s head to his and kissed her deeply. Slowly, and with just a slight amount of pressure, he moved his hands down her neck to her sides, then along her ribs, lightly brushing her nipples with his thumbs.

“Oh, Sophie,” he breathed. “What am I doing to you?”

“Making me tingle?”

He reached for her face again, cupping the back of her head and pulling her lips towards his. He hesitated for a brief second, then melted his mouth to hers. The kiss started out soft and fragile, yet increased its intensity and heat as he swept the tip of his tongue against hers. She shuddered and he responded by deepening the kiss. His tongue was strong and feathery soft as he made love to her mouth with his, nibbling her lips, clashing his teeth against hers, sharing her breath.

“Jake,” she whispered his name, noting how quickly he could move her from sexual silliness to heated passion.

He covered her face with light kisses: feather touches over her eyelids, cheeks, and nose.

“You’re really okay with this being a one-time thing?” Jake spoke with genuine concern.

“Yes, really I am, Jake. I won’t risk our friendship for anything, not even great sex.”

This time it was Sophie taking Jake’s head in her hands as she stroked the silken black hair from his forehead.

“You know how I feel, and I respect your boundaries,” she whispered. “Everything has been said that needs to be said. You’ll go back to New York, and while we won’t ever forget that this happened, we can hold it in a special place in our hearts and look back on it and smile.” Sophie’s voice held conviction; the message aimed more for her wildly beating heart than at Jake’s conscience.

Jake looked off into the distance as he wound his hands in Sophie’s hair.

She held her breath, waiting for him to come to a decision, stroking the side of his face with the back of her fingers, searching his eyes as he looked out her kitchen window.

After what seemed an eternity, he spoke. “Stand up.”

Sophie’s face fell as he pulled his gaze away from the window and met hers. He smiled and shook his head.

“No, not ‘stand up’ like I want to get rid of you. ‘Stand up’ like I want you to get off my lap so I can make wild monkey love with you.”

Her laugh was low and throaty as she stood up, allowing Jake to sweep her up in his arms. She squealed when he pretended to drop her on the stairs.

“Brat!”

“Little Twerp,” he teased back, then kicked open the door to her bedroom and unceremoniously dumped her on the bed, still rumpled and unmade.

\* \* \* \*

Dropping Jake off at his car had proved to be more difficult than Sophie anticipated. An awkward kiss on the cheek and one of those “patting” hugs were all she got from him. No long embrace, no face-sucking French kiss, no mention of their fantastic sex-filled night and morning. No comment about how beautiful she was, or how fantastic she made him feel in bed. Instead, it was like dropping off her brother, only emptier.

Arriving back at The Cottage, she put her red convertible in the garage and headed to the pool. She shucked off her summer dress and peeled off her panties, then sunk deep into the hot tub, completely submerging herself.

Holding her breath as long as she could, she tried to erase the naked images of Jake bombarding the inside of her brain. The pounding of her heart and pressure in her head forced her to come up for air before any Jake images were wiped clean.

Tilting her head back against the tile of the hot tub, she let her body drift to the surface and sway back and forth, buffeted by the roiling bubbles of the jets. An image of Jake, poised to penetrate her, washed over her mind, and tingles washed over her body.

“What have I done?” she whispered in the afternoon air.

For a moment, her mind was thankfully blank, then more images of Jake came pouring through, sending an electric jolt through her body.

“At least now I know what I’m missing,” she muttered to herself. “Wow, do I ever know what I’m missing.”

The fact that Jake had rung her bell in such an amazing way astonished her. No man had ever been able to make her climax before. Not that she hadn’t ever experienced an orgasm, but all her

climaxes had been achieved with a little help from vibrators named BOB.

With a soft laugh, she wondered if she should add a submersible BOB to her collection. But remembering Jake's body poised over hers, the slow, undulating way he entered her body and the exquisite bliss she felt when he erupted inside her, she knew that no battery-induced climax could ever compare to how Jake made her feel.

\* \* \* \*

The airplane shuddered, jolting Jake out of a sound sleep. The flight attendant's voice piped over the intercom, reassuring the passengers that the bumps and jerks they felt were just turbulence caused by a low-lying system over the Rockies.

Jake balled his jacket up against the window and tried to return to sleep. But between the jet bucking through the air and the little boy seated behind him gleefully yipping "Ride 'em cowboy!" Sleep eluded him.

His overly large neighbor let out a loud snore and shifted positions, invading what precious space Jake had secured. Scrunched close to the edge of his seat, Jake tried rearranging his long limbs. Height had its disadvantages when shoved in a flying tin box with 200 other people, Jake mused. With each rattle and roll of the airplane, his knees hit the back of the seat in front of him. He winced, wishing he were elsewhere.

Closing his eyes again, Jake imagined what Sophie was up to. In the car she mentioned her plans to sit in the hot tub. Jake smiled, imagining her naked, surrounded by bubbling, frothy water, her face dewy, breasts popping up above the water line. He could still catch a whiff of her perfume; it clung to his shirt when he hugged her goodbye.

Ever since spotting her at the auction, images of Sophie's radiant face and hot body remained burned behind his eyes. Earlier he thought he'd seen her at the airport, only to realize it was just another tall blonde with none of Sophie's charm.

Damn, he thought, a hard-on growing. Sophie's wet, naked body was definitely the wrong thing to be thinking about on a plane. He considered a trip to the bathroom until things cooled off, but his seatmates effectively trapped him in. Jake lowered his serving tray and draped his jacket over it, hoping to shield his lap from wandering eyes. With more than four hours to go before landing, and images of Sophie, naked and gasping, flickering through his mind, it was going to be a long, hard trip.

## Chapter Eight

Once again, Sophie was pissed. She flicked her Mont Blanc pen against the teakwood desk, watching a small ray of sunlight bounce off the pen's silver. Another interview, another disaster, she thought, tossing an overzealous resume in the "Rejection" pile.

She gritted her teeth at the sound of laughter coming from the street below her cramped office and thought about shutting the heavy iron-rimmed window behind her to block the sound of other people's happiness.

Why did she ever think having her office over the old, majestic theater would be a swanky idea? The location couldn't be beat—she was deep in the heart of California's cutest gold rush town—but the lack of air conditioning and having to share the entire upstairs with props and old costumes took its toll.

Sophie sighed. Her frustration had little to do with her cramped and stale office; this was about the disaster she currently faced.

Since taking over the role of manager for the American Playwrights Festival after her mother retired, Sophie grew to love the responsibility but hate pitfalls thrown in her path. This particular pitfall looked more like a canyon. When the artistic director turned in her retirement notice three months ago, Sophie knew she'd need a replacement soon—or watch the Festival collapse, Quartzton's economy suffer, and the respect of her parents wane.

The American Playwrights Festival provided an excellent opportunity for local and unknown actors, directors and playwrights, and brought in a sizable portion of city revenues due to a high percentage of tourists making the Festival a premier travel destination. Without an experienced

and well-known director at the helm, it could easily sink into disrepute.

Although the Festival had a national reputation, for some reason only idiots or the inexperienced responded to the open position. No one with the caliber required had turned in a resume thus far, and time was running out. The director made it clear she'd be gone by summer's end.

Sophie rummaged in her desk drawer and found two boxes of #2 wood pencils, all honed to a sharp point. After using the lever to lower her captain's chair, she tipped it back as far as it would allow and glared at the soundboard ceiling. She grabbed a pencil, closed one eye, took aim, and let the pencil fly.

*Thunk.*

With a smile of satisfaction, she grabbed more pencils and began rhythmically flinging them into the ceiling.

The sound of her door opening sent her scrambling to an upright position. She swept the remaining pencils from her desk into a drawer.

"Am I interrupting?" Grace stood in the doorway, picnic hamper in hand.

"No, but I'll warn you, I'm in a funk. Here, have a seat, and help jolt me out of my misery." Sophie gestured to the guest club chair in front of her desk.

Grace handed her the hamper, then sat down as one of the pencils came loose, fell on Grace's head, and ended its journey with a clatter as it hit the scarred vinyl floor. Grace picked it up and shot Sophie a quizzical look.

Sophie looked back, all innocence.

Eyes narrowing, Grace placed the pencil on her desk. "You didn't just toss that at me, did you?"

Sophie shook her head and raised her eyes to the ceiling, motioning with her head to look up.

At the sight of a dozen pencils dangling precariously from the ceiling tiles, Grace stood up and moved her chair several feet away from the overhead bulls-eye.

“No wonder you’re in a bad mood—you’ve been working way too hard.”

Sophie tried to look contrite, but broke out in a grin anyway.

When another pencil dropped out of the ceiling and landed loudly on her desk, Sophie and Grace burst out laughing at the sight of it rolling its way across the teak desk.

“Looks like another one’s making a break for it,” Grace giggled.

Sophie watched the pencil fall to the floor and roll into a corner. She wished she could escape, too.

Grace leaned in and grabbed Sophie’s hands in hers. “How’s your director search going? Any luck so far?”

Sophie shook her head. “None. I can’t find anyone I like to fill the position. Lots of people have responded, but none with the right experience.”

She rummaged around the wicker basket Grace had brought and started pulling out goodies. The scent of home-baked chocolate chip cookies caught her attention, but Grace slapped her hand when she tried to pull out the treats.

Sophie watched Grace pull out the healthier part of lunch. “We need a big name to draw in the season ticket holders. Those people have high standards, and I can’t afford to give them less than what they’re used to in terms of talent.”

Grace took a slice of ciabatta bread and spread brie across the rough surface. After handing it to a hungry Sophie, she made one for herself and took a large bite.

“What about calling Jake?” Grace asked around a mouthful of bread and cheese.

Sophie whipped her head up. She paused in mid-bite, her stomach clenching. Since the night of the Celebrity Auction, she and Jake traded e-mailed almost as often as they had before. At first, the exchanges were tenuous, not even hinting at that night. Now, a month later, the e-mails were filled with the same banter as before; but still, that night went unmentioned.

She swallowed. "Call Jake? To see if he knows someone who would like the position, you mean?"

Grace shook her head, her mouth too full to continue. Sophie waited with impatience. *Chew faster*, she thought.

"No, not for a referral," Grace said. "For the job."

Sophie felt her stomach contract and her mouth go dry. Jake as the Festival's new artistic director? Living here, in Quartzton, interacting with her every day?

"I thought he was busy becoming famous directing Broadway plays."

"He wants to come home," Grace replied. "Ever since he learned about how badly Duane treated me he's wanted to move back. He says he's homesick, but I think it's just a cover for him feeling guilty and wanting to be close to me. He thinks he can prevent me from being hurt again." She took another bite. "Whatever the reason, it would be great to have him here."

"Do you really think he'd be satisfied leaving New York?" Her throat tightened as she asked the question.

"Definitely. His agent is already looking for a West Coast position for him. His current play finishes its run in a few weeks, and he's open after that."

Sophie stared out the window, her brow furrowed. How would she feel working next to Jake after she'd slept with him? What would it mean to have him back; to work with him every day?

"Sophie," Grace continued. "He'd be great for the Festival. He'd bring that experience you

need, and he's certainly well-known in the industry. Ask him."

She knew Grace was right. Having Jake as the Festival's artistic director would be an incredible coup. He could save the Festival—save her.

It was a no-brainer. Really.

"I'll do it. I'll call Jake."

Her stomach formed a large knot as she spoke. With those words, she'd opened Pandora's box. There'd be no turning back. But could she handle what she just let loose?

\* \* \* \*

Sophie took a deep breath, bit her lip, and hit Jake's speed dial number on her office phone. He answered within seconds, sounding happy and excited to hear from her. After a few minutes of idle conversation, she took the plunge.

"Grace told me you're leaving Broadway." She twirled the phone cord as she spoke.

"I did —well, at least, I will be when I find a job on the West Coast."

"Have you been offered anything yet?" Her voice sounded high to her.

"Nope, not yet..." Jake paused. "Why? Have you heard of anything?"

"Um," Sophie began, pulling tight on the telephone cord wrapped around her finger. "Actually, weird as this may sound, *I'm* looking for an artistic director for the American Playwrights Festival. Linda Heintz wants to retire, and she wants to leave now."

A long silence followed. Out of the quiet, Jake spoke. "Are you asking me to apply for the job?"

"No." Sophie said.

“Oh.” Jake sounded puzzled. “Then why bring it up?”

Sophie took a deep breath. “I don’t want you to *apply* for the job; I’m offering it to you.”

All she could hear on the other end of the line was the sound of loud sputtering. “Jake? Did you hear me? Are you all right?”

A series of coughs followed by low laughter told her he was still alive.

“You know how in movies the guy gets some startling news and he chokes on his two fingers of single-malt scotch and sprays it everywhere?” Jake asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, that just happened to me.”

Sophie’s eyes crinkled. She leaned back as far as her executive chair would allow and felt the laughter begin to build.

“I’m serious. And that was an expensive bottle of scotch. I probably spit out a good ten dollars worth of booze.”

“I guess what I heard about you in college is true: you really can’t hold your liquor.” By this time, Sophie was laughing so hard her sides hurt.

“I can hold my liquor just fine,” he charged back. “But you have to admit; that was an amazing thing you just said. Do you mean it? Artistic director for the Huntsman Foundation’s American Playwrights Festival? For all the programs?”

Sophie struggled to sober up from her laughing fit. “Yep, Summer Stock, Fall in the Foothills, Winter in the Gold Country, and any other programs you want. The only catch is that I’d need someone soon, by the end of the summer at the latest. ”

Jake’s silence was deafening. Sophie held her breath. She had to nail this.

“Grace told me you wanted to work out here, that you wanted to be close to her.” Jake’s

silence had her on edge. The tapping of her nails on the hard wood of her desk echoed faintly throughout the office.

Before he could speak, she barged on. "This is a perfect opportunity for you. The salary is probably a little lower, but you can come back home again, be with all of us, with your sister. We want you, we need you. Now, say 'yes' before I keel over from anticipation."

"Can a person actually do that?" Jake asked. "Keel over from anticipation?"

Sophie's growl sounded much like the bulldog she'd owned when she was a kid. "You know what I mean. Now say yes before I crawl through the phone lines and strangle you."

"You'd really do that? Strangle me?"

"Jake."

"Yes."

"Please just give me an answer," Sophie begged.

"I just did," he said.

Sophie froze. *He did*, she thought. *He just said yes*.

"You said yes!"

"Yep," Jake said. "I accept the position. On one condition."

"Uh oh," Sophie pretended to groan. "There's always a condition. Okay, what is it you want: private jet, personal masseuse, a company car, what?"

"Sophie, you know me better than that." Jake's voice took on a more serious tone. "No, what I want has something to do with what you said earlier. That I could do whatever else I wanted."

"Yes," Sophie drew out her response.

"Does that mean I can develop any kind of program I'd like?" he asked.

"Sure you can. As long as it doesn't interfere with any of the traditional programs, you have

free rein,” Sophie said.

A moment of silence followed, then Jake continued. “I’d like to do a program for disadvantaged teenagers. Kids could do different parts of putting together a play, from writing it to performing, staging, lighting, the whole process. I want to—” He choked, stopped speaking.

“You want to give them what you were given,” Sophie said. “A place to belong, an identity. A way to get out of their painful pasts. A way to find hope for the future.”

“Yes,” said Jake. “You understand. You put it better than I could.”

Sophie nodded. She knew what her parents’ foundation gave Jake. Without the American Playwrights Festival, he might never have escaped his traumatic past. This would be his way to give back. “Consider it done. When you start, you and I can work out the logistics. I think it’s an excellent idea and I am more than willing to throw my backing behind it.”

“Thanks, Sophie, for everything.” Jake’s voice sounded low and soft.

“No, Jake,” she replied. “Thank you. I’ve been looking for months for someone I could trust to take this position, and was getting nowhere fast. We’re going to have an excellent program with you at the helm. Besides, Grace will love having you close.”

*As will I*, she thought. She rocked back in her chair and looked at a picture on her desk of the six of them, taken at the boys’ high-school graduation. They all looked so happy, so alive. The picture was taken poolside at The Cottage, with the group framed by lilacs and a 10-foot hedge background. The spring day had been balmy, with just a hint of a breeze. How perfect everything had been. How perfect everything could be again.

“And Jake?” Sophie smiled. “Welcome home.”

## Chapter Nine

“I can’t believe you killed another BOB.” Tally unhooked her long khaki skirt from a blackberry vine. “You need to stop wasting your money and find a man who isn’t battery operated. Oh, watch your step, there’s a big rock under those leaves.”

The girls hiked down a mountain path skirting the Maidu River. Piled with backpacks, coolers, beach towels and a radio, Sophie and Grace carefully followed Tally’s footsteps, eager to avoid stepping on a rattlesnake or brushing by poison oak.

For years, the three girls visited the same spot on the river. Although the trip involved parking a mile away and hiking to the beach, the pathway was fairly well traveled and gently sloped. Rockroses with their delightful scent, Manzanita bushes showing off their silver-dollar leaves, and heady California bay trees lined the trail, shading the girls from California’s oppressive summer heat. Along the riverbank wild grasses and mint grew, as well as non-native blackberry bushes, which the girls always stripped bare.

“Did it go up in flames?” joked Grace.

“Well,” replied Sophie, “not flames, exactly, just some smoke.”

Tally dropped dead in her tracks, the other girls bumping into her like the Three Stooges.

“Smoke? You literally made your BOB go up in smoke?” Tally swung around.

Sophie nodded. “Yep, smoke.”

“Are you all right?”

Sophie waved off Grace’s concern. “I’m fine. Anyway, it happened a couple of months ago. It did scare me a bit, though. I mean, instead of a smokin’ hot orgasm, I got a smoking piece of

plastic. I'm just glad it didn't catch on fire."

She paused, then giggled. "Could you see me trying to explain to some hunky fireman how a vibrator caught my house on fire?"

Tally groaned and smacked her hand to her forehead, accidentally knocking her pith helmet off to reveal her long, auburn hair. "I don't care when it happened or how it happened—you need to stop this BOB business and find a man. You're gorgeous, intelligent, educated and rich. Surely there's at least one guy out there who can satisfy your incredibly high standards."

"Ugh. I'm hardly gorgeous and the intelligent part is debatable. Besides, I don't see *you* with a boyfriend, so don't start in on me."

"*I'm* not the one with a battery problem. And I'm perfectly fine on my own. I have my business, great friends, and I'm surrounded by family. I don't need a man to define me."

"I don't need a man to define me, either," Sophie said, a frown in her forehead. "Just to satisfy me. And none of them seem to be able to do that as well as my BOBs." *None save Jake*, she amended.

Truth be told, Sophie had trouble even having the inkling to put her BOBs to use since Jake rolled through town. Having sex with him was so perfect; nothing battery operated could ever equal that satisfaction. She couldn't tell Tally she retired her vibrators—then she'd have to say why. She couldn't do that. She couldn't tell her friends about the most amazing sex she'd ever experienced.

A vision of Jake's thick and erect penis slid into her mind, its silky smoothness surrounding hardened muscle; something she could almost feel against the palm of her hand.

A sudden shiver took over her, jolting her out of her reverie. They reached their beach. She heard Tally mutter "batteries" under her breath and laughed as she flopped down on her towel.

“Move your rump over, Tally,” Sophie grumbled as she tried to position herself on the towel thrown over the sand. “You’re shading me and I’ll tan unevenly.”

“You shouldn’t be trying to tan, Sophie. With that pale skin you could get cancer,” Grace lectured.

Sophie rolled her eyes. “We don’t all have your gorgeous Native American bronzed skin, Grace. Some of us have to work at looking like we haven’t spent a year in Antarctica.”

“At least you don’t freckle,” Tally said. “I mean, look at me—I look like one of those Connect-the-Dots games we used to do as kids.”

Sophie squinted at Tally’s feet, swinging precariously close to her nose as she flipped herself around. “Do you even have freckles on your ankles?” she asked, her brow shooting upwards.

“Stop looking at my ankles and put some sunscreen on my back for me.” Tally reached behind her back and undid the strings of her blue, green and purple tie-dyed bikini, then threw the bottle of sunscreen at Sophie.

“I believe you are the only person I know who would ever wear a tie-dyed bikini. Where on earth do you get your clothes?” Sophie wrinkled her nose, but carefully spread sunscreen over Tally’s strong shoulders and muscled back. No one could ever describe Tally as fat; her luscious curves and well-formed muscles illustrated her radiant health, and provided a striking comparison to Grace’s petite, frame, her five-foot, two inches angular and planed.

“She shops at the thrift stores,” Grace butted in, earning herself a swat from Tally.

“I do not,” Tally’s head shot up. “I shop retro—I get everything at cute little vintage shops. Well, everything except for my favorite white cotton undies; I get those at the grocery store.”

Sophie adjusted the top of her black Lycra bikini to expose a little more flesh to the sun. “You dress like you can’t figure out what era you’re in. Like today, for example: you have on a

tie-dyed bikini that looks like it came straight from the Free Love era of the 1960s, yet you tromped down to the river in a full-length beige skirt, a white button up blouse, boots, and a pith helmet, looking like you were going on an archaeological dig back in the early 1900s. You need more style.”

“I have style,” Tally argued. “I just don’t dress like a fashion model like you do. And I like vintage: It’s eclectic.”

“Eclectic my foot,” Sophie said. “More like crazy.”

“Not all of us were raised with the Queen of Perfection, you know.”

Tally’s statement sent a shiver through Sophie. Her mom had been a former beauty queen, always polished and poised. Having a daughter called Frizz-for-Brains, Snaggle-Tooth, and The Boobless Wonder had been a constant source of embarrassment for her. Sophie’s inability to keep her clothes clean, free of grass stains, and not ripped drove her mother nuts.

Years after having fashion and ladylike behavior drilled into her by her mother, Sophie finally came into adulthood the young lady her mother had always dreamed she could be. Now her closet rivaled her mother’s with designer clothes, shoes and matching handbags. She even wore lipstick and could accessorize. And when she first tamed her wild hair with a flat iron, her mother had cried with joy.

“Just ignore me,” Sophie answered Tally quietly. “You *do* have your own sense of style, and I love it about you.”

“I’m going swimming,” Grace interrupted. The high-necked navy one-piece bathing suit seemed to swallow her up. She pulled her shiny black hair out of its ponytail, letting it cascade over her shoulders and down her back, its length reaching her hips.

Sophie noted that Grace’s hips and shoulders didn’t seem so sharp and pointy—over the last

two years since her husband died, Grace finally put on some weight. It suited her. Grace looked healthier than she had in years.

After a few more minutes of soaking up the summer sun, Tally and Sophie followed Grace's path by climbing up a 10-foot slab of granite and jumping into the deep blue-green pool. Within seconds, the gentle murmur of the river was interrupted by a shrill rendition of "Jingle Bells."

"Grace, your purse is calling you," Sophie cried.

"Get it for me?" Grace asked from upriver.

Sophie stroked hard. Breathless and dripping, she hauled herself out of the river and ran to Grace's bag. She quickly flipped the phone open.

"Grace's phone," she answered. "May I tell her Graceness who's calling?" Behind her, she could hear Grace laughing as she walked up the beach.

No one responded.

"Anyone there? You'd better not be a breather or I'll climb right in your phone and smack you one."

More silence met her greeting before a low voice finally answered: "Now that's a feat I'd like to see—a leggy blonde climbing out of my phone. Of course, I'd prefer to do without the smacking."

"Jake," breathed Sophie. Just yesterday she received a business e-mail from Jake and felt little emotion; but unexpectedly hearing his voice sent shivers down her spine.

"You do have a thing for climbing through phone lines, don't you?" Jake laughed.

"Sorry about that—I was just joking around. Here's Grace." Handing the cell phone to her friend, Sophie dropped down on her beach towel, her knees weak. She needed to get a grip—Jake was due in Quartzton in less than a month. She had to get over this crush, and fast.

On the phone, Grace exchanged pleasantries with Jake. He must have asked Grace how they were all doing, because the next thing Sophie knew, her name was being mentioned.

“Tally’s fine and Sophie’s okay too; however, she’s been practicing magic lately. She made her latest boyfriend, BOB, disappear in smoke.”

“Grace, no!” gritted out Sophie, sitting straight up, a look of horror on her face. “Don’t tell him anything about BOB,” she hissed through clenched teeth.

“He has no clue I’m talking about your you-know-what,” Grace hissed back, covering the mouthpiece with her hand. “He’ll think you dumped a boyfriend.”

If only, thought Sophie, her head buried in her folded arms. She could barely hear Jake’s muffled chuckle as Grace returned the phone to her ear. The sound of his laughter brought butterflies to her tummy. Those odd zinging pulses that shot through her core when she thought of Jake were back, too. Go away, she thought, willing her nerves to return to normal.

“He says to tell you he’s very sorry for your loss, and that he hopes you recover soon,” Grace relayed, still oblivious to Sophie’s distress.

“Oh, lordy,” muttered a mortified Sophie. She flopped straight back down on her beach towel and firmly resolved to toss out anything to do with batteries when she returned home.

\* \* \* \*

The wind ruffling Jake’s hair as he strode down the streets of New York brought with it the smattering of raindrops. He increased his stride, trying to make it home from his agent’s office before the summer storm hit. The meeting had gone overly long, with his agent Brian reminiscing with Jake over old times.

Brian began representing Jake as an actor during his senior year at Harvard. Before Jake even graduated, Brian had secured him a plum role in a Broadway musical hit. That role made Jake an overnight success; and for the next few years he was a headlining star. But being a star had its drawbacks: Jake grew tired of constant public recognition, and women crossing all boundaries to garner his interest. The incident that put Jake over the edge occurred after a closing performance, and proved to be the last time he was on stage.

Sitting alone in his dressing room, Jake was surprised by a knock on the door. He growled out for the person to come back later; but the door opened and in walked a young woman with a large box in her hands. Setting the box on the floor, she grabbed Jake and tried to kiss him. Before security could arrive, the young woman had undone the sash around her dress and completely exposed herself to Jake, begging him to marry her.

Security wrangled the woman out of his dressing room and into her clothes, and eventually returned to remove the box she left behind. Inside were dozens of panties, each marked with a different date of one of Jake's performances—along with a row and seat number. There were easily more than 200 pairs in the box, making it clear the woman had stalked Jake for some time.

Knowing Jake wanted out, Brian suggested directing. Although not as high-paying as being a Broadway star, it gave Jake the chance to escape fans while remaining connected to theater. Within a few short years, he found himself one of the most sought-after stage directors in New York. Brian guided Jake's career wisely, and Jake was forever grateful.

Now, tying up loose ends by bidding farewell to his agent, friends and all of New York, Jake felt nostalgic. He never truly felt like a New Yorker, but he would certainly miss the city. Thinking then of Quartzton, Jake's nostalgia was replaced by growing excitement. In just a couple of weeks he'd be home again. And while Quartzton couldn't offer the 24-hour excitement

of New York, it could give him his best friends, sister, and a great career.

And Sophie. With the new job came Sophie. Memories of their night together wouldn't leave Jake alone: her hot body the night of the auction before he knew she was Sophie; the way the candlelight cast a warm glow on her face the night they slept together; how cute she was the next morning, hair curly and lips red and swollen.

"Stop obsessing," he berated himself. Jake pushed his way through the crowd onto a less populated side street, picking up the pace to avoid the potential rain.

With 10 blocks to go, the skies opened up and fat raindrops pummeled the city. Jake joined a small crowd tucked under a shop's alcove to wait out the worst of the summer storm.

Two teenage girls in the crowd under the awning began giggling helplessly. Jake looked out of the corner of his eye at the kids. Hands cupped over mouths to suppress their laughter, their eyes kept rolling toward the store's display.

Jake swept his eyes to where one girl pointed. Directly in front of him, perched in the store window for all eyes to see, was a gigantic dildo. Taking a step back, he looked upward to see the sign above the store: "Girl Toys, Rated X."

An elderly gentleman noticed the window display as well, and dashed back out into the rain, throwing a disgusted look over his shoulder as he fled.

Jake looked back at the window display. A sign, strategically placed alongside the outrageously gigantic phallus, boldly stated "A Woman's Pleasure is a Woman's Right," and indicated there was no better place in the city to purchase devices for pleasuring women. In small type, it also claimed to carry all sizes of required batteries.

A smile slowly crept across Jake's face as memories of Sophie's lack of batteries and her "BOB" collection crept back. He chuckled to himself. Sophie had been so cutely embarrassed the

other day when Grace had spilled her secret into the phone.

Smiling widely, Jake swung open the shop door and walked in, listening to the teenagers' shocked gasps as the door swooshed shut behind him.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie collapsed on the leather couch in her living room. It was unusually warm out. Wyatt's offer to remodel the entire upstairs of the theater to make a functional office was contingent on her emptying the space so he could get to work. She spent three days hauling old props and costumes off to a storage container at the edge of town. Today she moved her office equipment from the theater to a makeshift home office in the heat, and she was wiped. Her loyal friends had helped, but Sophie still felt utterly drained. Succumbing to the sweltering heat, she laid one hand across her forehead and fanned herself with the other.

"Pretending to be Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire*?" asked Tally, hiking up her patchwork skirt and sitting cross-legged on the ottoman in the middle of the room. "Or would it be Scarlett O'Hara? Anyway, you look like one of those Southern belles."

"Definitely Blanche," Grace said as she walked into the room, carrying a tray of iced teas. "Sophie has far too much sex appeal for Scarlett. Although, she *is* just as beautiful."

Sophie stared out the bay window. Sex appeal and beauty weren't two qualities she'd ever used to describe herself, but she had friends who saw the best in everyone.

"You do seem to have an air of sexuality about you when you fling yourself on a couch and act all Southern belle-ish," Tally said.

Grace's peal of laughter sounded free and unencumbered. Sophie looked closely at her

friend. For a time, it had been all she and Tally could do to coach a smile from Grace.

For years, Grace held herself together so tightly, not even her best friends could encourage her to relax for a friendly hug or quick squeeze of the hand. Now, two years after Grace's abusive husband had permanently wrapped his Ford F-150 and himself around a tree, Grace had come back to life.

Sophie, still fanning herself, took a long drink from the sweet iced tea. "Well," she drawled, "Ah'm so glad to oblige ya'all in bein' the source of all ya'all's entertainment."

The girls' laughter almost covered the sound of a vehicle turning onto the graveled driveway.

"Can you see who's here?" Sophie asked Tally, who had a better view.

Tally peered out the window. "Delivery. Expecting anything?"

Sophie shook her head, puzzled.

"Wow," exclaimed Tally, leaping onto the couch framing the bay window. "I *love* that your delivery guy wears shorts."

"Let me see." Grace perched next to Tally, knees on the sofa and nose pressed against the glass.

Sophie sighed. "Knock it off, you two. Jim's married to a great woman and has two kids. Leave him alone."

"My delivery guy always wears long pants and looks like he has a squirrel head perched on a prairie dog's body," Tally stated, eyes still glued to the window as she watched the delivery man trot up the steps.

Grace snorted. "Guess you should be grateful for the pants, then."

Tally rolled her eyes.

When the doorbell sounded, Sophie languidly put down her iced tea and eased herself out of

the couch, wincing as her sweaty legs stuck to the leather.

“I’ll get it!” Tally leapt off the couch in one smooth move.

“No, I’ll get it.” Grace butted in front of Tally, attempting to make it to the door first.

“You two are animals—leave the poor guy alone.” Sophie followed her two friends into the foyer.

The deliveryman, Jim, seemed unruffled when three girls burst from behind the closed door, each clamoring for the package, two smiling widely at him.

“Sign here, Sophie,” he said, giving a polite smile to the other two grinning girls, each holding out their hands for the brown paper-wrapped parcel.

“Just give those two heathens the box, Jim, then ignore them, like how you’d ignore a kid who has her finger stuck up her nose.” Sophie signed with a flourish and flashed a nasty grin at her friends.

“Tell Lisa I said hi, and kiss those babies of yours.” Sophie waved to Jim as he jumped down the stairs, three at a time.

Walking back into the living room, she beckoned her friends to follow her. “You two acted as if you were five years old and he was a pony. You should be ashamed of yourselves.”

“He’s hunky, and in shorts,” said Tally.

“Eye candy,” added Grace. “There’s no harm in looking, is there?”

Sophie shook her head. “You weren’t just looking, you were actually salivating.”

“Knock off the pompous act,” Tally nudged her friend. “You think he’s hot just the way we do, admit it.”

Instead of answering, Sophie collapsed on the couch, prying at the package with a long fingernail.

“Who’s it from?” asked Grace.

Sophie shook her head, looking at the return label. “I don’t know. It’s a printed label, like from a computer.”

“What’s the zip code?” Tally leaned forward from her ottoman perch, twisting her head to get a better look at the label.

“It’s a New York zip code,” said Grace. “I recognize it because it’s the same as Jake’s. Did you order anything from New York?”

“No....” Sophie reached into the packaging materials and pulled out a brightly colored vibrator. “*This* I definitely did not order.”

“Gross!” Sophie and Tally winced at Grace’s shriek. “That’s disgusting. Put it away before I gag.”

“Are you sure you didn’t order that? I mean, how else would you get a vibrator?” Tally frowned, turning the box in various directions, trying to see if there was any identifying label. “People don’t just send people vibrators.”

Grace grabbed a piece of paper that fell out along with packaging peanuts. Her jaw dropped as she read the note. “Apparently my brother does.”

Sophie snatched the note from Grace’s hand and skimmed over Jake’s light handwriting.

*Sophie—heard you sent another B.O.B. to the mortuary. Saw this and thought of you. PS—I included batteries so you won’t have to cry again. Jake.*

“How does Jake know about your little hobby?” Tally asked, peering over her shoulder.

“What does he mean, ‘so you won’t have to cry again?’?” Grace’s face looked perplexed.

Sophie shrugged. How could she explain this without revealing too much? Damn it, Jake, she thought. When I said we should be friends, I didn’t mean *this* friendly!

“Sophie—“ Tally drew her voice out long and low. “I know that look on your face. You’re trying to hide something from us.”

Sophie’s hair, frizzed by the summer humidity, dangled in curls around her face, and bounced as she shook her head. She felt the heat begin to build and knew that in seconds her face would be bright red. No, forget seconds, she was already blushing as bright as Santa’s suit.

“It’s private,” she began. “It’s just that—well, he and I just—I mean...” Her voice tapered off.

Tally started to speak again but was silenced by Grace’s hand on her arm.

“Oh God, Sophie,” Grace’s voice was almost a whisper. “Did you sleep with my brother?”

## Chapter Ten

“What?!” Tally shrieked. Sophie covered her ears in pain. “Why on earth would you sleep with Jake?! Were you desperate? Had it been a long time? Were your BOBs not doing the trick? Have you gone insane?”

“No! I wasn’t insane, and I wasn’t desperate. I was—” Sophie froze when she saw Tally’s disapproving look. She’d disappointed them, let down her friends. She slept with one of the brothers.

The wave of reproach sent her reeling. She couldn’t even look at Grace, couldn’t bear to see the disappointment in her eyes. She jumped off the couch, heading upstairs. Her long legs took the stairs three at a time until she reached her room. After slamming the door hard enough to shake the upstairs, Sophie threw herself down on her bed.

Two contrite and sheepish best friends tiptoed moments later into Sophie’s room and sat on her bed. Snuggling next to her, Grace rubbed her back and Tally pulled off her sandals to give her a foot massage.

“I’m really sorry I gave you a hard time,” Tally said. “I was just surprised, that’s all.” Her words were as warm as her hands on Sophie’s feet, and just as comforting.

“I let you both down.” Sophie choked out the words.

Tally let out a laugh. “Is that why you’re crying? Because you think you betrayed us?”

“I slept with one of the brothers—I broke the code. I’ve been a bad friend.”

Grace joined Tally in laughter as the two lay down alongside Sophie. She felt a renewed calm.

“Neither of you are mad?” she asked. Her heart softened when Grace hugged her.

“No way, just astonished,” Grace said. “We never thought you had a thing for Jake.”

“I need to show you something,” Sophie whispered. “There’s a shoebox, under the bed.”

Surprised, Grace bent over, found the fabric-covered box, and put it on Sophie’s lap. Sophie flicked a finger at the lid and opened it.

“Wow,” Tally whispered, pulling out bits and pieces of Jake’s life. “This Playbill is from the first play he ever did, in eighth grade. Remember, he was the villain in *Way Way Off Broadway*.”

“And this,” Grace added, “What’s this?” She held up a candy-bar wrapper.

“Oh,” Sophie smiled. “He was eating that the day I got my braces. He was here playing with Brett and came over to say hello. I told him I was on my way to the orthodontist to get braces and I wouldn’t be able to eat candy bars for a while. He literally stopped in mid-bite and handed it to me. It took me half an hour to eat the darn thing; I wanted to savor the moment so bad. I kept the wrapper.”

Tally shook her head, eyes smiling. “You’re nuts, you know.”

Sophie nodded, fingering a Playbill with Jake’s face splashed across the front. “Yeah, nuts about Jake.”

Grace’s jaw line tightened. “Why didn’t you ever tell us you had a crush on him?”

“I knew he never felt the same way about me,” Sophie responded. “I didn’t ever want to jeopardize our friendship, so I kept my mouth shut.”

Grace ran a hand lightly over Sophie’s while continuing to pick through items in the box. “We would have supported you, honey, no matter how Jake felt.”

“Maybe I should have said something years ago—I guess I don’t really know why I didn’t. After a while, the secret seemed so locked in that there never seemed to be a right time to say

anything. Until now, that is.”

“Are you two an item?” Tally asked. “I’m assuming you slept together the night of the auction, since that’s the only time you’ve seen him in twelve years.”

“Yeah,” Sophie sniffed, fingering the flyer advertising the auction. “We hooked up that night. But we’re not an item—he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Why not?” Tally asked.

“He says he can’t give me a commitment, that he won’t do relationships.”

Grace nodded. “He’s always said he won’t ever settle down. I don’t know why—he’d be great husband and a terrific father. I always figured he wouldn’t do relationships because our parent’s marriage stunk so badly.”

Tally curved her arm around Sophie’s waist. “Did you know all this before you two played Package the Pickle?”

Sophie chuckled at Tally’s euphemism. “He wouldn’t have touched me if we hadn’t agreed there’d be no relationship coming out of that night.”

“That seems so raw,” Tally replied.

Sophie shook her head. “Not really. I knew what I was getting into. I’d wanted him for so long there was no way I could pass up the opportunity to feel what it would be like. Besides, I wanted to let go of the fantasy.” Her fingers flew nimbly over the papers and items, arranging them back in the box.

“Are you going to be able to deal with working next to him?” Tally asked.

Sophie let out a quick hiccupped laugh. “I’d better. He’s the one person who can save my sinking ship.” She flung herself back on the bed. But as she did, she caught the concerned look passed between best friends.

\* \* \* \*

Jake bent down and stuck his head in his near-empty refrigerator. Brett had shown up earlier, having flown out to New York for a business meeting.

After shaking vodka and vermouth until ice formed on the shaker, Jake poured two martinis, dumped in several olives, and brought them into the living room. Handing one of the drinks to Brett, he walked to the open window at the street five stories below. The scent of freshly baked bread rose up from the bakery on the first floor, sending his stomach rumbling. He pulled out the olives and ate them in one bite, turning to look at Brett as he chewed.

“You seem a little edgy tonight,” Jake observed. “Is everything all right? Any problems at work?”

Brett took a long drink, toying with the olive speared onto a toothpick. “Work’s going fine.”

Jake waited. He sensed Brett’s words hid something else, but knew better than to ask directly. “How are your parents?” he asked.

“Good.”

“And Sophie?” Jake felt a tightening in his chest, a quick thrust of electrical current running from his stomach to his throat.

Brett cleared his throat. “Yeah, well, I wanted to talk to you about her, actually.”

Jake’s stomach clenched.

“I love my sister,” Brett began. “And I want her happy. I also know she’s very capable of running her own life, and I don’t want to control her. I don’t even want to know about her love life. Unless,” Brett paused and looked straight at Jake. “Unless her love life involves my best

friend. Then I have a right to know.”

Jake looked down at his feet. He took a big gulp of his martini, fire burning down his throat, and waited for Brett to continue.

“What happened between you and Sophie the night of the bachelor auction?” Brett put his drink down and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes boring down on Jake. “Did you sleep with my sister?”

Jake carefully set down the crystal martini glass on the windowsill. Brett wasn’t going to like what he was about to hear.

“Yeah, I slept with Sophie.”

Although Jake saw Brett stand up and move toward him, it didn’t dawn on him why until Brett’s fist connected with his jaw. A moment of silence followed, marked only by the sound of the mantle clock ticking and the faint sound of traffic below.

“Shit,” Brett swore as he shook his wrist to ease the pain of bone meeting bone. “I hope that hurt you more than it hurt me.”

“Minimally,” replied Jake, cradling the side of his face in his hand. “You punch like a girl.”

“I’ll be happy to do it again,” Brett said, trying to clench his fist but wincing with the pain.

Jake backed away. “I think I’ll pass.”

Brett’s punch had lacked intensity, but it had served its purpose. It had been a warning: don’t sleep with Sophie again.

“Are you two an item?” Brett asked.

The tightness in his stomach increased. “No. We agreed it would be a one-night thing.”

“And Sophie’s okay with that?”

He certainly hoped so. She said she would be. And she hired him after they slept together. He

believed her at the time. Or had he just wanted to believe?

“I was crystal-clear I couldn’t do a relationship; I wouldn’t have slept with her otherwise. Hell, I won’t sleep with anyone unless they know the score, which is one reason I see so little action. Women want commitment, something I’m unable to give.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Brett’s voice held a thin layer of sarcasm. “Always playing the part of Mr. Mysterious, the lone wolf.”

Jake winced. He hated that nickname, hated his inability to know love, and hated the reason why. Brett and the others had never known his mother; she died right before Jake and Grace had moved to Quartzton. Her secrets remained behind in their former town; secrets Jake had no desire to expose, secrets that kept him from commitment.

“Look, it just isn’t part of who I am, all right? Sophie made a choice that night, based on all the honesty I could give her. She had her own reasons for sleeping with me, Brett, and I hope you can respect her decision.”

“She’s had a crush on you since she was twelve, you know.” Brett righted the coffee table he knocked over trying to get at Jake. “You think it’s going to go away just because you scratched her itch? Aren’t you concerned about working together?”

In two weeks they’d be thrown together every day, unable to avoid each other. When he took the job he made sure she would be able to put the past behind her. With memories of her flooding his body and mind daily, he just wasn’t sure he could do the same.

But that was his problem, not hers. He wouldn’t let his attraction to her get in the way of him performing his job. Not with so much was at stake.

“We’ll work out just fine,” he said.

Brett winced when he heard the crunch of broken crystal under his foot. “Sorry. I think I

broke one of the martini glasses I gave you as a graduation gift.”

Jake laughed softly. “Looks like you did.” In anticipation of Brett’s reaction, his eyes became hooded. He shifted uneasily. “So Brett, are we good?”

“Yeah, we’re good,” Brett sighed. “Just don’t go near my sister again, or next time I’ll get Wyatt to punch you.” Brett stuck out his fist and knocked knuckles with Jake. “One for all and all for one, remember?”

Jake’s laugh rang loud as Brett walked out the door, cradling his hand. “See you, Musketeer.”

## Chapter Eleven

At 8:30 on a Monday morning in mid-July, light spilled through opened shutters of the new American Playwrights Festival office, illuminating fresh bouquets of flowers, warming the teak and leather furniture, and covering an excited Sophie in a warm bath of sunshine. Jake would arrive any moment; and when he did, the start of a new chapter would begin.

Sophie ran her hands down her dress, straightening the white linen sheath. Wyatt had worked a miracle in the office in a matter of a few weeks: The three tiny offices and storage area had been entirely gutted and remodeled to create an appealing workspace.

Sliding her hand along the glossy white chair rail that neatly seamed the beadboard wainscoting to the wall, Sophie smiled at the craftsmanship. Hiring Wyatt to do the work was a brilliant decision. His crew's craftsmanship was perfect, and with Wyatt's understanding of the architecture and design of old buildings, he held true to the historic character of the regal theater in his design.

Sophie and Wyatt designed the office in a dynamic layout. Eight-foot windows with iron shutters lined three sides, allowing for light and an openness that made the space seem larger than its actual size. Wyatt hinged together six-foot, single-paned antique windows and hung them from the ceiling, breaking the space into thirds for an illusion of privacy.

Sophie's office took up the northern quarter of the space. She set Jake up in the southern office. She designed the middle of the space to be reminiscent of a study. A window seat along the entire bank of windows served a dual purpose, as the base was actually a file cabinet. An overstuffed leather sofa sat directly in front of a coffee table designed to house all the electronic

and computer equipment needed for the small office. An antique roll-top desk and other pieces provided a future workspace for a receptionist and assistant, if she and Jake ever needed one.

Her mind drifting to thoughts of Jake, Sophie straightened a drooping flower in its vase. She hoped he would appreciate the office, and not be offended that she set up his office for him. She even put a small photograph of Grace on his desk, a picture she'd taken at their high school graduation. Sophie also added a copy of the picture she had on her desk, of the six of them at the boys' high school graduation, the last day all six had been together until 12 years later, the night of the auction.

The sound of footsteps thudding up the carpeted stairs stopped Sophie's heart. She straightened her skirt and bit her lip, clenched her hands in front of her, felt butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

He was here.

"Wow, Sophie," Jake slid to a sudden stop as he took in his surroundings. He shoved both hands in his jeans pockets, casting his eyes over the space, taking in the hanging windows that served as room separators, the leather sofa and seats, the pieces of antique furniture. His eyes rested on Sophie. "I just don't know what to say. This place is stunning. You and Wyatt really pulled this together well."

She barely heard his words, had to will her mind to take in what he'd said. Her body tingled and her head felt fuzzy, seeing him like this. His scent wafted forward, catching her off-guard. For a moment she froze, forgetting to breathe.

Concentrate, she reminded herself. It's just Jake. You've slept with him and it was great. Now you're going to work with him and it will be great. Deal with it.

She pulled herself together, smiled at his praise, and patted him on the shoulder. "Thanks. It

felt good to be part of something so out of my league. Wyatt held my hand every step of the way. He did an amazing job keeping the historic details but blending in a contemporary feel.”

She grabbed his hand and tugged him toward his office. “Your office is to your right. It’s a mirror image of mine. I did a little decorating, but you can feel free to change things around.

“I have this awesome slasher movie poster I thought of putting up,” Jake responded.

“Oh, well...” Sophie groped for a polite response. “Maybe I could move the filing cabinets from the far wall and you could put it there.”

Jake’s laughter filled the space. “Sophie, lighten up—I’m teasing you. You look like you’re glued to the floor over there. I know this is going to be a little uncomfortable in the beginning given what happened between us, but I want this to work. I *need* this to work.”

Butterflies gone, Sophie shot Jake a quick punch in the arm.

“Brat.”

“Twerp,” he replied, flashing a smile.

Jake moved to the desk, running a finger along its length, then stopped. “Well, if you didn’t go and decorate for me,” he said softly. He reached back for her and pulled her close, circling her shoulders with his arm. His scent mixed with the lingering smell of laundry detergent on his light blue Oxford shirt.

“Those photos, Sophie, the ones you put on my desk, do you know what they mean to me?” She could feel Jake’s breath float through her hair.

She leaned against his shoulder, and gestured to the two framed photos she placed on his desk. “No,” she answered. “I guess I don’t know what they mean to you, just what they’ve meant to me.”

He shook his head, pressing his lips into a thin line. “The one of all of us at the graduation

party for us boys represents one of the happiest days of my life. The one there of Gracie at her graduation—God I love that photo. She’s so beautiful—it represents one of the saddest days of my life.”

The boys’ graduation day had been one of her happiest days, too, but why would Grace’s graduation have been one of Jake’s saddest? Sophie remembered how excited they felt, all three girls throwing their caps in the air at the same time, and a great pool party at her house afterward. The only thing missing had been Jake.

Reading her mind, Jake resumed. “I always felt awful leaving her with our dad while I went off to college. I kept thinking that if I worked extra hard then I could save enough money to get her into college and away from Dad.”

Jake stopped to step forward and pick up the picture of smiling Grace. “I saved enough money to fly home for that weekend. Then my agent called, and said they had a Broadway audition for me. I decided to take it, and that’s why I missed you girls at your graduation. Missed the chance to save Grace.”

Sophie stroked Jake’s arm. “I know Grace was so proud of you, Jake. She would have felt terrible if you passed up the opportunity to be on Broadway, when she knew that was all you’d ever wanted.”

“That *wasn’t* all I ever wanted, though,” Jake slumped into his new leather chair. “What I wanted most was for Grace to be safe. Instead, I wasn’t there when Duane proposed to her after the graduation ceremony. She accepted, thinking she could get away from Dad and unburden me.”

Sophie ached when Jake leaned forward, propping his forehead against his hands. “You know, Jake, Grace never blamed you for her troubles. I think she’d be hurt to know how much

you've taken this on. You were young, trying so hard to be a good brother, and did what you thought was right at the time. You weren't omniscient. You couldn't possibly have known what Grace would do or why."

Sophie looked down at Jake, still drooped in his chair, and felt her heart swell with love. "You're being too hard on yourself. Remember what you told me about forgiveness when I was thirteen?"

He lifted his face and chuckled. "Was that when I caught Doris hammering a bra on the school bulletin board with the note, 'Sophie—keep dreaming' on it?"

"Yeah," replied Sophie. "I wanted to commit bloody murder. I was in the eighth grade and furious with the Almighty for making me flat as a board. After you took the bra and note down, you walked home with me and told me something wise. You said that revenge can feel great for a while, but forgiveness feels great for a lifetime."

Jake's shoulders released some of the tension. He leaned forward. With one finger he traced Grace's profile over the glass in the frame. "You're telling me to forgive myself?"

Sophie nodded, quick and decisively. "Yep. You can hate yourself for a lifetime, or you can forgive and love yourself the rest of your life."

"Love myself," Jake repeated. "Not an easy task, Sophie."

"I know," she said. "Loving at all doesn't come easily for you. To really love you need to trust, and your parents and Grace's ex didn't give you any reason to trust anyone."

Jake's jaw tightened. "Out of everyone, I find it hardest to trust myself."

Sophie knew not to push the moment. Instead, she led him to the window and showed him the view of the town, with its gas lamps decorated by hanging flower baskets, wooden sidewalks, and cobblestone road.

“Just how I remember it,” Jake said.

\* \* \* \*

Later, after Jake configured his computer settings and set out a few more photos, he begged Sophie to take a break from her spreadsheets and tour the historic theater.

“I want to show you where I almost lost my virginity,” Jake said as he grabbed her hand to lead her down the curved stairs to the lobby.

“Whoa there, stud muffin. I don’t need a visual of some hot actress seducing you.” Sophie tried to pull her hand from his.

Jake’s eyes danced as he looked at her. Grabbing her hand more tightly, he pulled her through the lobby and into the theater itself, tugging her past rows of plush red velvet seats to the stage.

“I was in a play, you goof. I’m not talking about real life. At seventeen I thought I had it made when I landed that role—the actress cast as my seductress was totally hot. Then during rehearsal I discovered she had the most awful breath.” Jake hopped up onto the stage, reached down a hand to Sophie.

“I swear,” he continued, after helping Sophie onto the stage. “She must have believed in the supernatural and was eating garlic to keep the ghosties and ghoulies at bay. Every time I had to kiss her I thought her garlic breath would kill me and there I’d be, dead on center stage. My gravestone would be the only one in the history of time to read, ‘Died a virgin, killed by halitosis.’”

Sophie laughed as Jake led her across the stage. His long fingers wrapped hers up in a solid

grip. It wasn't the hand-hold of lovers, but the solid grip of a friend. This time no tingles accompanied the touch. She could do this, she thought. She could hold his hand and not react. All she had to do was put her mind to it.

"Here's where I got my first kiss, right behind this curtain." Jake let go of her hand to pull aside the heavy drape of the red velvet stage curtain.

"A stage kiss or a real one?"

"Oh, it was real, all right. I even tried to get to second base and grab the girl's boobs, but she kicked me, so I dropped that plan. Nice kiss, though."

"Please tell me it wasn't Doris."

"Jealous?" Jake teased.

"Of Dingbat Doris?" Sophie snorted. "Never."

Even though Jake's laugh was soft, it carried through the auditorium. "It wasn't Doris, and she's not such a dingbat as she makes herself out to be. She just has issues."

*Like I care*, Sophie thought. "I'm surprised it wasn't Doris. I always assumed she was your first kiss, and the one you lost your virginity to."

"No to both," Jake said. "I never slept with her."

Sophie blinked in surprise. Jake dropped the curtain back into position and beckoned for Sophie to follow him down a narrow set of backstage stairs. In the cramped and dimly lit stairwell she could see that the walls were covered with signatures—names of actors and the parts they'd played.

"Did you write your name on this wall, Jake?" she asked.

"Yep," he replied. "It's here somewhere, along with hundreds of other names. Supposedly the tradition got started back in the 1800s. It's rumored there's even a signature of Mark Twain

here somewhere, but no one's ever found it."

Sophie sighed, feeling the weight of her responsibility to Quartzton on her shoulders. She followed Jake the rest of the way into the "Pit," as they called the dressing room. Because the footprint of the theater's site was so small, little room had been left for makeup and wardrobe. One long room with mirrors and a counter along the wall occupied the space. A tiny bathroom jutted out from one corner, the room's only private space.

"I can see why we switched all musicals and large-cast productions to our outdoor Summer Stock and stopped doing them here in the winter," Sophie said. "The outdoor stage at the park has great dressing rooms and loads more room. Wasn't it crowded?" Sophie ran a finger down the counter, wondering how many people over the years had sat here, putting on makeup under the large bulbs framing each mirror, eager anticipation knotting their stomachs.

Jake nodded. "We'd sometimes drape a curtain across the area over there." He gestured to the back of the wall. "That was mostly done for the teenage girls who wouldn't change in front of anyone and the teenage boys who kept trying to sneak a peek."

"Gee, guess I could figure out who one of those boys was."

"Yep, totally guilty. I got to see more boobs than most guys my age." □ "You're bad," Sophie admonished.

"Hey, I was a teenage boy with raging hormones, and those actresses were hot."

Sophie felt a stab of jealousy. "Did you sleep with any of them?" She regretted the question instantly.

Jake ruffled her hair with his hand, laughing as he spoke. "Amazingly, I stayed a virgin until college. But I did have a load of fun with those older women, including the time I touched bare ass of the hottest leading lady on stage."

Sophie stopped suddenly. “Do tell,” she drawled.

Jake took one last look at the Pit, then headed back to the stairs. “She and I had to get completely nude during a costume change and it was cramped down here. We were standing back-to-back, and I bent over to pull on my pants at the same time she bent over. Needless to say, when our bare butts bumped together, I got a raging hard-on and couldn’t get my pants pulled up fast enough.”

Sophie let out a loud laugh. “What did the actress do when your bare butt hit hers?”

Jake’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “Well, she apologized sweetly, but I had to go on stage with a boner.”

Sophie couldn’t stop laughing even after they’d left the Pit and went back upstairs to their offices. For the rest of the day the image of Jake, at 17, walking onto the stage with an erection would pop back into her head, sending her into helpless giggles.

## Chapter Twelve

Sophie waked the next morning with a buzzing excitement in her stomach. The first day of work with Jake had gone better than she could have hoped. He'd made her laugh in such a free way, like a child. As she stepped into the steaming shower and felt the warm water stroke her skin, she also remembered how turned on she'd been in his presence. It wasn't just how he looked—though he certainly looked great in that white Oxford shirt and blue jeans—but how he smelled, how he sounded when he laughed, how his body accidentally brushed against hers.

Fortunately, the attraction didn't interfere with her work.. Together, she and Jake slogged through a pile of scripts and resumes, making headway in next spring's production schedule. The progress made with his help relieved much of the anxiety building since the former director resigned.

Shower complete, Sophie gazed at her blow dryer and flat iron. Ever since Jake mentioned he liked her big hair, she played with the idea of going back to au natural. Today she planned to use the product her stylist said would ease frizz. Sophie hoped Jake would like it.

"Great," she muttered. "I better not turn into the girl who changes everything for a man." But after styling her curls, Sophie found that the blonde corkscrew ringlets framing her face didn't look half bad. Not exactly the frizzy halo Jake remembered from her youth, but a more natural look softened her features while controlled ringlets added polish.

Sophie put on her makeup, slid on a pair of red linen pants and a white short-sleeved silk blouse. A pair of red heels and an oversized leather bag completed the look.

She raced downstairs, grabbed a cup of coffee and yogurt, and rushed out the door. Jake was

scheduled to arrive at the office in 15 minutes. *Keep a handle on this crush*, she admonished herself.

\* \* \* \*

“Jake!” Sophie’s shout reverberated throughout the empty theater. She arrived 20 minutes ago to an empty office, expecting Jake at any minute. When he didn’t arrive, it dawned on her that he most likely was in the theater. Sophie heard footsteps in the auditorium, but Jake was nowhere to be found. She cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled his name again.

“Hey, what’s all the fuss?” The suddenness of Jake’s voice, right behind Sophie’s shoulder, caused her to jump.

“Don’t *do* that,” she said, hand on her chest, feeling her heart pound against her ribcage.

“What did I do?”

Sophie shot him a glare and gave his arm a light punch. “Stop goofing off. I wanted to find you to see if you want to talk about your special project.”

Jake put his arm around her waist, pulling her close as he escorted her up the theater aisle to the stairwell. “Let me grab a few items and meet you at the coffee table.”

She nodded a quick acquiescence. “I’ll grab a cup of coffee and meet you there.”

Balancing her overly full mug, Sophie wandered over to the couch, eyes glued to Jake as she made herself comfortable on the leather sofa. Jake slid down beside her, his shoulder grazing hers. When he handed her a folder, their fingers touched. A shock of electricity shot from Sophie’s hand to her belly. It wasn’t even nine in the morning and she was completely turned on.

Jake, on the other hand, seemed unfazed. He opened his copy without looking at her. “The

folder contains all you need to know about the Youth Theater Academy to pitch it to the Huntsman Foundation's board of directors."

Sophie fanned open the folder, impressed with the formal presentation. "You didn't do this all yesterday, did you?"

He twirled a short curl on his temple between thumb and forefinger. "Nope. I started in on this the day you said I was hired. I put some finishing touches on it last night."

Although she only skimmed the pages, Sophie could sense the amount of work and analysis Jake put into the proposal. "This is impressive, Jake. I need to go through the budget with a microscope, but from what I can tell at first glance, this appears feasible and within a reasonable budget." She balanced her coffee cup on her knee as she leaned back.

Jake draped his arm along the back of the couch, not quite touching her. He smelled of something woody, a scent that wafted over Sophie like a warm blanket. She eased in a long breath, willing herself to remain calm. Yesterday she felt attracted to him, but not to this degree. What was different about today?

"There's only one difficulty," Jake said, leaning forward to spread open his folder on the coffee table.

How long would it take Sophie to get used to Jake's constant presence; for her heart to stop fluttering every time she saw him or felt him next to her? Given how strongly her body reacted to him, Sophie felt unsure. She was dripping wet and thinking of her vibrator. *It won't be easy letting him go*, she mused.

"Sophie?" Jake's voice pulled her back. She had to get a grip.

"Um, sorry. I didn't mean to drift off like that. You were saying there might be a hitch?"

Jake pointed to a page in the folder. "Because of the kids' school schedule, the program

needs to happen in the summer. But, it needs a venue—”

“And our outdoor theater and this one are both booked solid during the summer.”

“Yep, that’s it exactly,” he said. “However, I have an idea. I’m thinking we could reopen the plans to build the amphitheater out by the old quarry.”

Sophie nodded. A prime piece of property at the edge of town was purchased several years ago by The Huntsman Foundation, with the intent to build an amphitheater for the Festival. All preliminary development work was completed, including environmental analysis and plan approval. However, when an opportunity to build a larger stage in the park arose, the Festival committee dropped its plans for the smaller amphitheater. The lot sat vacant for 10 years.

“It could be possible,” she murmured, staring at the documents in front of her.

“I’ve already talked to Wyatt about reopening the plans for the amphitheater. He says they’d just need to get an environmental team out there to see if the site meets current standards. He has a company on retainer that could get us a report in a week.”

Sophie pursed her lips. “How could we afford the construction costs?”

“Here’s the great part.” Jake’s face lit up with an enthusiastic smile. “Wyatt said his company would donate their time if the Huntsman Foundation pays for supplies. That would cut the cost in half, which makes it a reasonable plan.” Jake swept his hand across the page to point at a line item. “Wyatt’s crew has a tight window to do this in, but he thinks his team can get it completed before the fall rains hit.”

Sophie smiled wide, tapping the edge of the folder against the tip of her nose. “You know what? I think you’re going to get your dream after all.”

Jake grabbed her in a bear hug, crushing her and the proposal to his chest. His sudden nearness sent a jolt into her heart.

“It’s not about *my* dream—it’s about the dreams of those kids who haven’t had anyone to believe in them before.” He pulled out of the hug and placed his fingertips at her brow, softly tracing a ringlet down its cascading path. “I think you really are an angel.”

“Complete with halo?” she joked.

Jake smiled. “You look beautiful in a halo.”

Beautiful. Her heart skipped a beat. He called her beautiful again. And she believed him, again.

“Alright, flatterer. Get back to work and let me read this proposal of yours.” She tried to force a nonchalant tone in her voice the same way she tried to force the flow of longing back down into her belly. Time to focus on work. But how could she when her heart was leaping about her chest like a hyperactive puppy?

\* \* \* \*

The evening air hung warm and thick as Sophie walked down the sidewalk to Le Reynard, the local martini bar. She loved this time of year, this time of day, when the summer’s setting sun dipped below the tree-rimmed horizon and the air began to cool down.

Sophie was running 20 minutes late to meet Jake and Wyatt. Her day had been long; she spent 12 hours at the office, barely stopping to eating yogurt at her desk in lieu of lunch. She was riveted by Jake’s proposal.

He exceeded her expectations. With Wyatt donating his company’s time, Jake’s entire project would come in just under the dollar amount allotted for special projects. Jake even garnered support of local families, who promised homes for students to stay in during the summer

program.

Loud laughter and music met Sophie at the doorway. She craned her neck to see into the darkened bar. A waving hand caught her attention. She pushed her way through the thick crowd to a small table crowded with beers.

“Want a girly martini?” Jake asked, his voice barely audible above the roar of the crowd.

“As girly as they get,” she replied, tossing her curls.

“Don’t let her taste for wimp drinks fool you,” Wyatt said to Jake. “Our Sophie here can actually pound a beer better than any frat boy.”

“She certainly is full of surprises,” Jake said with a drawl and a wink. Sophie felt her vaginal walls clench and her panties go wet.

By the time Jake got back with a round of drinks, Sophie and Wyatt were fully engrossed in discussing the development of the amphitheater. Eager as she was to talk to Wyatt about the project, it didn’t stop her from noticing that Jake took the seat next to her, instead of the empty one he’d been in before. When his shoulder grazed hers, they locked eyes.

What made her think sleeping with Jake would get him out of her system? Why had she thought she could get her body acclimated to his and would no longer want him? And why wasn’t he just as turned on by her as she was by him?

Grace entered, and Wyatt jumped up to offer her his chair and fetch her a drink. Jake stood to hug his sister tight, eyes closed. Sophie’s heart warmed. As difficult as it could be working with Jake, Sophie knew her decision to bring him on board was sound. She needed his reputation and expertise; he needed to be close to Grace. Everything would work out. All she had to do was wait.

## Chapter Thirteen

Jake carefully placed one foot in front of the other, cringing with each step. If he took the stairs slowly, her figured, maybe his head wouldn't rattle so much. Wyatt was right—Sophie *could* pound a beer faster than any frat boy; or at least, faster than this former frat boy. He wondered if she'd even come in today after all they'd had to drink during their beer-slamming competition the night before.

He reached the top of the stairs. Immediately, Sophie's chipper "good morning" resonated from her office space, jackhammering Jake's brain.

"Please... Don't... Talk." He knew he sounded grumpy, but at this point he didn't care.

Sophie's laugh greeted his pain. "Poor baby. You really are a lightweight, aren't you?"

"Not a lightweight," he muttered, cradling his head in his hands while stumbling toward the coffeepot. *Twerp*, he thought.

After several cups of coffee, some aspirin, and few hours spent reading in his office, Jake felt back to normal. Mostly back to normal, anyway. It had been a sleepless night, Jake lying awake drunk, consumed by thoughts of Sophie. The opportunity to be artistic director for the Festival gave him so much: an escape from New York, the chance to develop the Youth Theater Academy, and especially the ability to live near Grace. But he underestimated the effects of his night with Sophie. In fact, he underestimated Sophie altogether.

The way she ran the Festival didn't just impress him—it boggled his mind. She flew from one task to another, making phone calls, writing reports, conferring with members, all with an energy he couldn't match. Jake could see her determination to make the Festival a success, to

make her parents proud. And she did it all with the sexiest body he'd ever seen.

He'd taken to keeping rubber band around his wrist, snapping it each time he caught himself checking out Sophie's breasts. Or ass. Or calves, or thighs, or back, or gorgeous head of hair, for that matter. Memories of their night together flashed through his mind on a continuous loop: Sophie naked, underneath him, reaching her hips up to meet his, the slight copper taste of her nipples, her hair fanned out to frame her face.

Jake considered kissing her goodnight after walking her home from the bar the night before. She leaned against her front door, saying something cute and sarcastic, and he found himself bending close; his lips willing his brain to kiss her. Jake's dick readily joined the conversation, growing erect, trying to convince his brain to go for it—take her, there, on the porch. It was all he could do to say goodnight and walk away.

He walked home thinking about jacking off, but by the time he arrived it just wasn't in him. Somehow, even with great sex thoughts of Sophie playing in his head, Jake only wanted her to touch him. But he couldn't sleep with her again. He needed the Festival and the Festival needed him—*she* needed him. Without an artistic director it would sink, and sink big. And if it ever did sink, Sophie would sink with it.

"Lunch?" Sophie popped her head around the glass partition, surprising him.

Jake looked at her and blinked. Today she was wearing tight white pants and some kind of a see-through white lace top over an electric-blue tank top. With her hair in messy curls around her face, she looked sexier than hell.

He sighed. He needed to work on a news release about the Festival. As much as he'd love to ogle Sophie's cleavage over lunch, he'd better stay in and work. "Too busy. Could you maybe bring me back a sandwich?"

“Sure,” she said, adding that Wyatt would be coming by with the amphitheater plans. “Why don’t I bring lunch back for the three of us?” she asked.

*Boobs with lunch after all*, Jake thought with a smile, then gave himself a mental swat for allowing his mind to drift yet again.

By the time Wyatt arrived, Sophie had laid out sandwiches, fruit salad, and iced tea on the antique buffet.

“Where are the cookies?” Jake asked, grabbing a sandwich with one hand and an iced tea with another.

“Ungrateful brat.”

“Oh, I’m grateful, really I am. I just like cookies.”

Sophie’s lips pressed together. He loved getting her riled up—she looked adorable, almost like how she did as a kid, only now with a great rack.

The three discussed the project for a little more than an hour. On his way out Wyatt handed Jake a large cardboard cylinder, explaining it contained a set of new blueprints. With a wave, he was gone, leaving Jake alone with Sophie.

Sophie cleared off the conference table and motioned to Jake to lay the prints out.

Jake reached inside. When he pulled out the bundle of papers, the toxic scent of freshly printed blueprints wafted out of the container. Jake froze.

“What’s wrong?” Sophie’s voice held an edge of concern. His eyes glued to the blueprints, he could still see her move toward him out of the corner of his eye. He needed to shake himself out of this, but felt immobile, frozen, like a sheet of ice.

“Jake.” Her hand rubbed a small circle on his back. Through his shirt, he could feel the warmth of her body as she moved closer, standing steady behind him.

“It’s the smell,” he managed to get out. “My father always brought home blueprints from work to review. I hate the smell.”

Sophie met his statement with silence. She stopped her movement, but kept the flat of her hand pressed against his spine.

“Was he a contractor?” Her words came out low and tight.

“Electrician. When he could keep the work, that is. He kept getting fired for drinking on the job.”

Wrapping her arm around his waist, Sophie pressed her head against his shoulder, staring at the blueprints alongside him.

“How bad was it, Jake?”

Jake felt his whole body stiffen at Sophie’s soft question. With a fierce movement, he swept the blueprints off the table, into his hand. After rolling them up, he stuffed them back in the cardboard tube and tossed it aside.

“You know that scar on the back of my leg?” The scar was impossible to miss. At least a half-inch thick in places, it started at the back of his upper thigh and ran down the length of his calf. He felt Sophie nod.

“My mom had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder—OCD. Only back then, my dad just thought she’d gone cuckoo. She’d count things, odd things like broken crayons, or would wash her hands all day long. She even started using a ruler to make sure the blinds were drawn evenly throughout the whole house. She always did compulsive things, but I think it got worse when I was about twelve. At least, that’s how old I was when I got the scar.”

He squeezed Sophie’s hand, so warm and soft in his. She stood next to him, her head leaning on his shoulder, her body curved in toward his. Her hair shone golden in the soft afternoon light

filtering through the windows.

“He didn’t start off a raging drunk. When we were really little he could be a lot of fun. But when Mom’s illness got worse, he started drinking. Her obsessions fueled his anger, his anger fueled his drinking, and his drinking fueled his violence.”

Jake stopped, lost in his painful memory. He could never forgive his father for scaring his mother, for scarring him.

“One Saturday, Mom started counting each dish as she put them away. She’d done it before, but this time she was also counting each prong on each fork, and it was really driving Dad up the wall. He’d probably had a half-bottle of scotch by then and was already three sheets to the wind. He yelled at her to stop, but she couldn’t—just couldn’t. I was in the living room, and I knew he was going to blow. It’s like that eerie feeling of calm right before a lightning storm hits, you know?”

Sophie tipped her face up to his, her blue eyes opened wide. He knew her home life hadn’t been perfect, knew how distant her parents were and how much they expected of her, but he also knew she’d never seen violence before; at least, not like what he experienced at the hands of his father.

“Grace was outside, in the front yard. Whenever Dad got like this, I’d first make sure Grace was safe. I could have gone outside then, too, but something made me stay. It cost me, but it could have cost my mom even more.” Jake looked down, kicked the carpet, and shrugged his shoulders. “Dad started kicking things, then throwing furniture around. I could tell Mom was getting scared. I pulled her away from the kitchen and pushed her toward the front door. I wanted to get her outside, where she could be safe. But she had to count to one hundred. She couldn’t make herself turn the door handle until she counted to one hundred. Dad had just broken the

glass coffee table and she stood there, just inches from safety, not able to open the damned door because she hadn't yet counted to one hundred."

Jake swiped a hand across his face. The look of terror on his mother's face remained burned in his memory. Her compulsion had been so great she couldn't save herself.

"I slid my hand around hers and grabbed the door handle, turned it, then shoved her outside. I saved her from danger, but I was too late to save myself. Dad threw half the coffee table at Mom, but it hit me. It felt like a hot stick had been dragged down my leg, but it was the jagged edge of the glass, slicing me."

He shot a look down at Sophie, expecting to see horror on her face. Instead, he saw anger, raw fury as she glared at something unseen across the room.

"What happened after that?" she asked, her jaw clenched tight.

He let out a bitter laugh. "Well, Dad passed out, and a neighbor came over and drove me the emergency room."

"What about your mom, didn't she come?"

Jake kissed the top of her head. "She couldn't, Sophie. There were germs in the neighbor's car, and Mom couldn't drive her own car. She hadn't picked up the key in over a year. I think it was because she could never get the car to line up perfectly straight when she parked."

"Did anyone ever come to the hospital?"

He pushed away from her then, went and stood by the window, looking down on the cobblestone street below. A pair of middle-aged tourists, cameras dangling from neck straps, quietly argued with one another. Arguments hadn't happened at his house. His mom always remained silent during her husband's rages, knowing that she triggered him, that she was responsible for the tension and fear permeating the house. She never stood up for herself. But

until the day she died in a car accident, she tried to protect Jake and Grace from their father, usually at her own expense.

Jake tipped his forehead against the cool glass, staring through the leaves at the couple, who had gone from raised voices to a tender hug in mere seconds. Normal. It looked like a normal, everyday disagreement, solved without whiskey, insults, or fists. He let out a sigh, attempting to release some of the pent-up anger inside.

“No one showed up. I ended up getting major surgery to repair a sliced tendon without either of my parents there. My dad showed up a day later, long after I’d been released.”

Sophie walked past him and opened the tall window. Placing her hands on the sill, she leaned forward, ringlets dangling around her face. Jake had told few people about the incident. Everyone else had responded with sorrow and pity, but not Sophie. She radiated fury.

“You know, you didn’t deserve being brutalized like that. Neither did your mom.” Her jaw clenched once, then again.

“Yes, but I can’t imagine being my dad, watching the woman he once loved sink further into her illness, watching her change so drastically.”

At Sophie’s furrowing brow, he continued in a rush. “I’m not excusing him, Sophie. I’m just saying that it had to have been tough, and I guess the only way he knew how to deal with it was through the bottle.”

Sophie cleared her throat. “It’s no excuse, Jake. Your mom had something she couldn’t control. Your father dealt with it like a weak man.”

Jake tried to explain. “Mom’s compulsions drove him further than he could go.”

“But still,” Sophie added, “he could have handled it better. Your mom still was the same person underneath all her OCD stuff, right?”

“Not the way I remember it,” gritted Jake, walking away from her, needing to remove himself from her anger at his father, her attempts to understand, her compassion for his mom.

Before he walked out the office door, he turned and shot Sophie a hard, cold look.

“OCD is hereditary. I loved my mother, and I don’t blame her for her illness. But there’s no way I’ll ever risk subjecting any woman to the hell my family had to live through.”

\* \* \* \*

Jake avoided Sophie the rest of the day. After leaving work, he returned to his rented one-bedroom cottage. He went for a long run, showered, then ate a steak and salad alone in the empty dining room. Finishing his meal, Jake leaned back in his chair, wondering why he dumped so much on Sophie earlier in the day. He spilled so many family secrets to Sophie: his painful past, his mother’s illness, what could happen to him.

Jake dumped the dinner dishes in the sink, vowing to wash them in the morning, and poured a martini. He turned on the dim hall light and fished out a leather-bound album from a trunk in the entry closet. After fingering the covering for a while, he carefully opened up the album.

The black and white photographs of his mother and father on their wedding day showed a sweet and simple life. His mother’s long black hair, so much like his sister’s, was swept back in an elegant knot, partially hidden behind her veil. With her arm tucked neatly in the crook of Jake’s father’s, she looked at the camera with a serene and glowing smile.

“Not the smile I knew,” Jake breathed. The smiles he remembered were forced and stilted—pasted on by a woman desperate to make her children believe all was well.

But all was not well in the Muscat house, Jake remembered. Racing back home to make sure

the stove was off, checking the locks on all the doors and windows every night, pouring cups of milk for him and Grace that had to be exactly even. These were all annoying first symptoms of her illness. It was when verbal repetition and incessant counting started that Jake's father withdrew. Angered by something he didn't understand, the man sought oblivion in rotgut whisky served at the corner bar.

Jake's mother's life became consumed by measuring and re-measuring the blinds with a yardstick every morning to make sure each was in perfect alignment with the other. She counted to herself, and washing her hands so many times they bled. She stayed in the house and refused to leave, even to meet with her children's teachers.

The psychiatrist gave it a name: OCD, mixed with severe anxiety. The doctor also gave them little hope that it could be treated, and was clear it could not be cured. His mother held hostage by a disease she did not understand, Jake's father grew more frustrated, taking his frustration out on his wife and their children. On the day Jake's mother died, his dad had been too drunk to take her to a scheduled visit with her psychiatrist. She walked the 15 blocks, only to be hit by a drunken driver while crossing the street. She died alone, leaving behind a belligerent husband and two very confused children.

During a psychology course in college, Jake discovered OCD was hereditary and decided to stay out of relationships. Now, running a hand over his face and head, Jake anxiously spiked his silky black hair in uneven chunks. He stood and tossed the photo album in the general direction of the closet. Swearing under his breath, he flicked off the lights and walked down the hall to his bedroom.

After shucking his shirt, Jake ran a hand absently over his bare chest and reached to turn off a small lamp on his nightstand. His hand froze as he noticed the photograph tilted jauntily next to

the lamp. Sophie had given him the photo for his desk at work, but he enjoyed the memory so much he brought it home. The photograph was taken at the Huntsman's pool, at the party thrown for him, Brett and Wyatt after their high-school graduation. The boys were crowded in with their sisters, with everyone laughing and mugging for the camera.

For the first time, Jake noticed that Sophie—all frizzy hair and braces—wasn't looking at the photographer. Her chin was tilted up, her gaze directly on Jake. Even behind her Coke-bottle glasses Jake could see the intent and awe in her expression as her eyes fixed on him.

Overcome with a feeling he couldn't understand, Jake turned the light off and dropped onto the bed. He pulled off his pants and boxers, and lay back to stare at the shadowed ceiling.

Sharing his difficult past with Sophie had somehow been easy. She instinctively knew not to pity him; rather, she reacted righteous anger and compassion. Sophie saw his childhood differently than Jake ever had. Somehow, her different perspective gave Jake a feeling of release he couldn't name.

## Chapter Fourteen

Summer drew to a close. Jake watched, over the course of several weeks, a tree outside his window change color. The heat and stale wind dried the leaves, turning them brown and brittle. The air coming through his office window—dry as it was—reminded him he was home.

Visits with Grace happened almost daily, and Jake could see changes in his little sister. Like a bud on an apple tree, she was dormant for so long; and now blossomed into something beautiful, fresh and alive. Moving back to Quartzton gave Jake the opportunity to be there for her, providing protection if she ever needed it again.

Results of having Jake as the Festival's artistic director were evident. Revenue was up; season-ticket sales for the winter productions climbed 10 percent. With these successes, it appeared Jake may never have to move away from Grace again.

His personal project, the Youth Theater Academy, gained national attention after Jake appeared on a national daytime talk show featuring programs for disadvantaged youths. Support for his academy from Sophie and her parents' foundation made him even more determined to give his all to his new position.

Jake and Sophie sat together on the leather couch, the breeze of an overhead fan providing some relief from the heat. Sophie stirred next to him, flipping pages of a script he gave her earlier. Sophie's bare feet sat in Jake's lap. He loved looking at her toes, nails painted in a light apricot. He noticed one of her pinky toes had a freckle. For a moment Jake imagined licking it—another reminder of how much he still wanted Sophie.

It took time for Jake to get used to working alongside someone he had slept with. Knowing

Sophie had such a long-term crush on him gave Jake a sense of guilt sometimes. But she never talked about what happened after the auction, and never alluded to her crush. Mostly, Jake simply enjoyed the process of working with her.

But sometimes, like today, he was overwhelmed with desire. He worried she was becoming an obsession.

“Jake,” Sophie interrupted his thoughts, “this kid is awesome. Where did you find someone with such a gift for writing?”

“His teacher e-mailed me his work. This kid, Jemiah, had been a gang-banger, but found his way back to high school and into a great drama program. He seems to have a lot of potential.”

Sophie skimmed down the page, chewing on her pencil as her eyes flew across the text. “Potential? I’d say he’s already there. This script only needs mild tweaking to make it stage-ready.” She held the pencil in her teeth and twisted her curls into a bun. A quick flip of her wrist and the pencil secured her hair in place. Jake thought she never looked cuter, or sexier: a pencil in her wild mop of hair, bare feet, and that freckled little toe.

“I’d like to use it for next year’s Youth Theater Academy production,” Jake said, struggling to keep his mind on the conversation. “What do you think?”

Sophie nodded. “Absolutely. The play will appeal to a younger crowd, but will still draw a more mature audience with its commentary on family dynamics. There are plenty of roles to go around, three set changes, and multiple lighting changes. The costumes are mostly just street clothes except for his nightmare scene—costuming will have a blast designing for some of the images in his nightmare.”

She flipped back through several pages, then nodded to herself. “I think we can pull in almost one hundred kids if we include positions in advertisement and graphics.”

Jake leaned over Sophie's shoulder. He was pleased to note this position gave him a prime view of her cleavage, supported by a black lacy bra under her black silk blouse. "Check out how he describes why the allure of the gang was so intense for him. It's on the next-to-the-last page."

Sophie flipped through pages to the passage Jake highlighted, where the protagonist spoke to his father:

*Dad, the gang made me feel like I meant something. They saw me. Every time you looked at me I felt unseen. Not just that you were looking through me, or looking past me, but like your eyes stopped short of where I stood. I felt like you couldn't be bothered to look the extra few feet or even inches to see me. The gang saw me. They were right there, in my face, staring right into my eyes. I was somebody to them.*

Jake watched Sophie read her way through the section. He wondered if she would see herself in Jemiah's words. Growing up with Brett, Jake spent plenty of time at the Huntsmans' house; and saw over and over the way Sophie's parents looked at her, as though she was invisible; as though they couldn't quite see her. Mrs. Huntsman, the ice-queen of perfection, found fault daily with her scrawny, frizzy-haired tomboy daughter. Jake remembered walking into the house once to find Mrs. Huntsman arguing with Sophie, a wad of cotton balls in her hands. Jake felt disgusted he realized the woman was trying to force her 13-year-old to stuff her bra.

With a start, Sophie tossed the script onto the table and stood up.

"That hit a little close to home," she murmured.

"Your parents?" he asked, certain of her reply.

"Yep." Her response was clipped and cold. "Brett was the model child—straight hair, straight

teeth, straight A's. I was an embarrassment."

"Not to anyone but them," Jake answered. "You were never an embarrassment to anyone else. Never."

Sophie walked over to him. "You're sweet, Jake. But it's true, I was an embarrassment. And thank God for you stepping in to fill the director position; I would have let my parents down once again if the Festival had failed under my leadership."

"Sophie—" Jake interrupted himself. He felt the anger at Sophie's parents building and willed himself to remain calm. "You need to see who I see, not who you think your parents see. You're brilliant, an amazingly hard worker, determined, a wonderful friend, and you are absolutely beautiful. You always have been. It's your parents' fault they couldn't see who you really were, and are. They missed out on knowing someone wonderful. I feel sorry for them."

Jake reached up for her hand. Lightly, he placed a kiss on the center of her palm. "Believe in yourself, Sophie."

He watched her eyes narrow. It didn't matter how much he believed in her, he realized. The only way she would trust her own worth was if the knowledge came from her.

She pulled away. "It's just not that easy, Jake. It never will be."

## Chapter Fifteen

Jake leaned against the window frame and watched Wyatt walk away. The news his friend brought to the office was a shock. After all Jake did—all the hopes he raised in kids around the country, each eager to find their niche in theater—his vision crumbled because of a pile of gold-mining residue.

Wyatt was appropriately apologetic, understanding Jake's attachment to the Youth Theater Academy. He patiently explained the environmental analysis done years earlier on the amphitheater site didn't include a full soils analysis, as required by law. When the analysis was finally performed, just a week shy of the planned groundbreaking, it revealed that the only place available for a parking lot had an old mining dump on it. The soil was contaminated. The County had been unwilling to explore treatment options, and declared that portion of the site off-limits to construction.

The amphitheater site needed a parking lot; it was as simple as that. No parking, no amphitheater. No amphitheater, no Academy. Those kids needed a place to rehearse and perform, and in a town as small as Quartzton, there were no other venues. There were other locations to build on, Wyatt assured Jake, but it would cost more and take longer, probably a year or two. Even if the Huntsman Foundation Board would approve an increase in the budget, the whole program would still have to be put on hold until they had a viable venue.

Jake smacked his hand against the wall. Putting off the Academy for a year or two was easy for Wyatt to say, but it meant something quite different for the high school seniors already accepted into the program. For them, the delay meant that a retracted opportunity. The program was designed for 14- through 18-year-olds. By the time the Academy got underway with its new

venue, it would be too late for many of them, including Jemiah, who probably would never see his play performed on stage.

Three weeks earlier, Jake selected 90 students who would make up the first Youth Theater Academy. Sending out the notifications of acceptance, he felt a swelling in his heart. These kids could *be* somebody because of this program. The e-mail Jemiah sent back, so full of excitement, thanked Jake for giving him hope, for giving him a belief he'd have a future.

Today the office space, usually so inviting, felt oppressive and depressing. Jake slammed the tall window shut, closing out cheerful noise made by the local harvest fair in the street below. Sophie already left for the day—he'd have to go over to The Cottage and let her know. Better to deal with this head-on, as it would affect her, too.

A throbbing ache grew at the base of Jake's spine. The weight of having to explain to Sophie how he'd screwed up bore down like a yoke around his neck. When pre-season sales for the entire Festival had increased so dramatically due to the promotion of Jake's academy, she happily danced around the office until collapsing on the couch, dizzy and laughing. Losing the academy from the Festival's line-up would hurt sales, and could possibly even damage the Festival's reputation, putting a black mark on Sophie that she hadn't earned and didn't deserve.

Jake's head filled with angry recriminations. He failed himself, he failed Sophie, and he failed all those kids eager for their shot. By not planning accurately, he opened them all up to disappointment and pain. He knew, also, that Sophie would immediately take the. The worst part would be seeing Sophie's face when he told her the bad news. He didn't think he could stand to watch her crumble.

Jake arrived at The Cottage in a full-blown foul mood. When Sophie didn't answer her doorbell, he pounded on the door, taking some of his anger out on the solid block of oak. Her

cherry-red convertible sat in the driveway, indicating she was home. Jake cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled her name several times. No response.

Blinded by the darkened mood surrounding him, it took a while for Jake to realize Sophie could be out for a run or swimming. He followed the 10-foot hedge, guided by the sound of splashing, and marched up to the edge of the pool, watching as she performed a kick-turn at the other end, a flurry of white froth and waves.

Jake gasped. “Oh, God. Sophie.” He could see she was naked. Her long hair streamed along her back, and the musculature of her legs rippled as they flutter kicked. He knew he should walk away, but he was frozen in place.

He watched Sophie stop to catch her breath at the edge of the pool. She pulled her head and shoulders out of the water, could see his deck shoes directly in front of her. His long shadow blocked the evening sun.

“Oh God. Jake,” she gasped, water streaming down her face.

“Yeah, that’s what I just said about you,” Jake gritted out. “You’re nude.”

“And you’re rude,” Sophie snapped back. “Get me a towel and turn your back. You gave up all rights to look at my naked body, remember?”

Jake didn’t move. Instead, he bent down and held out a hand. “I did no such thing. I said that we wouldn’t have a relationship, something you agreed to.”

“Fine. Look all you want. But it’s my pool, so don’t expect me to apologize for skinny-dipping.” Sophie reached up for his hand. As he helped haul her out of the pool, she slipped on the Italian tile. Grabbing her to keep her from falling, Jake ended up with her wet, naked body pressed against his.

“This is not good,” he muttered.

“You’re a big boy, you can handle it. Now stop acting like a caveman and let me go. I’m dripping all over you.”

“I think I can handle a little water, you Little Twerp. It’s you I’m pretty sure I can’t handle.” Jake’s hands tightened their grip on her arms, pulling her closer. He couldn’t shake this black mood, knew he was taking it out on Sophie. He just couldn’t find it in himself to care.

Sophie twisted in his grasp but was unable to break his hold on her arms. “Let me go, Jake,” she demanded.

Everything seemed to blur out of focus except Sophie, who stood in front of him completely clear, surrounded by the late afternoon haze. He released his grip on her arms but slid his hands up to her shoulders and pulled her in even tighter.

“Please, Jake, let me go.” A plea, not a demand this time.

“No.”

“Jake.” Sophie’s body trembled.

Jake slid his arms even further around her shoulders and swayed his hips forward to connect with hers. He fit the hard shape of his erection into the soft hollow of her stomach. She bent her head and tucked it neatly beneath his chin, her cheek resting on his chest, just below his clavicle. He dropped soft kisses on the top of her head.

Sophie’s fingertips traced an outline on the front of his black t-shirt, following a pattern made by water dripping from her hair. With a sigh, her body relaxed into his. She sent her arms upward to wrap around his back. That subtle shift, that release of tension, was all he needed. With a groan, he ran a hand up her side, cradling a breast with his palm as he took her mouth with his.

She tasted sweet; her lips cool from the pool water, her tongue hot against his. The scent of

chlorine and late-blooming lilacs slid into him, insidious, persistent. He couldn't shake the scent any more than he could shake his desire to taste her mouth, her body.

Jake crushed her to him, cupping her butt with one hand as the other massaged her breast, pulling her in tighter, closer. He clashed his mouth to hers, taking her air, feeding off her.

Sophie broke her mouth free from his, gasping desperately. She moved her mouth to his neck, covering it with hot, wet kisses, biting her way up his jaw line.

"I need you," he grated.

Sophie's sharp intake of breath aroused him further. Her body quivered under his hands, against his frame, giving him the answer he sought. Jake slid his hands down her back, following the curve of her hips with his hands. He shoved one khaki-clad knee between her legs, raising it high until her hips were spread around his, her toes barely touching the ground.

"Take these clothes off me."

Sophie's hands shook as she grabbed Jake's T-shirt from behind. She ripped it off over his head, then dropped her hands to unbutton the fly of his pants. He could feel his erection break free as she undid the zipper and hurriedly pulled his pants off, until their bare bodies stood together, one wet and soft, the other dry and hard.

"The cabana," Sophie whispered. "There's a bed in the cabana."

In a smooth motion, Jake swept her up in his arms and made his way to the cabana, only a few feet away. The gauze curtains swirled and billowed in the late afternoon breeze, beckoning, inviting.

Her body glimmered with drops of pool water, but Jake made no attempt to dry her. Instead, he placed her on the bed and followed her down, melding his body with hers. One hand stroked her face as he looked deep into her eyes. The other swirled around her clitoris, using the lightest

of touches until she bucked her hips upward and his index finger plunged inside.

Sophie arched her back as he stroked her from the inside; thumb sliding up and down against her swollen nub.

“Jake.” He heard her whisper his name between pants and gasps. “Take me, please take me.”

His response to her plea was to take one nipple in his mouth and suck hard as his fingers continued to trigger shockwaves throughout her body.

Her low moan sent him reeling. He knew he should stop, should stand up and walk away. Sophie deserved better than this, deserved his loyalty to the Festival, to her. But he couldn’t tear himself away—something held him tight to her, blended him with her in a way he couldn’t name. He could feel the difference in their lovemaking this time compared to their encounter in the spring. It wasn’t just his body that ached for her; somehow, his heart had become involved.

\* \* \* \*

In the back of her mind were whispered warnings, but as the roar of passion grew, the warnings faded into silence. She hungered for him, needed him. This was no longer her schoolgirl crush—this was more, immensely more.

Jake’s mouth left hers to take her breast. Sophie bent her neck forward until their heads were touching, her wet blond hair tangling with his dry black locks. He twisted his hand, pulling out then entering her again, this time spreading her wide. Shivers tore through her, ripped from her by his forceful entrance. She curved her core, trying to keep her face next to his, sucking in his jagged exhales.

Jake’s mouth left her breast as his hand pulled away. Cool air brushed over her, tempering

the molten heat. She sobbed and pulled at Jake's shoulders, willing his body to come back to her, to cover her, to heat her—to bring back the volcano.

The sudden shock of Jake's mouth on her velvet tore a sob from Sophie's throat. He pressed her knees further apart, widening her for his mouth. She shivered at his touch, at his breath. He swirled his tongue around her engorged clitoris, then resumed licking the petals of her labia, wetting her, readying her for his entrance.

When Jake reared up before her, she saw her own feral heat reflected in his eyes. With one solid stroke he plunged into her, lubricated by his saliva and her own natural juices. There was no playful banter this time, no offer to back off if she wasn't ready. Jake was taking her, and taking her hard.

Sophie followed his lead, matching thrust with thrust, craning her head upward to bury her face in his neck as his hips pounded hers. Jake changed the tempo and began rocking his pelvis, the head of his erection stimulating Sophie's G-spot with each plunge. As she felt her body tighten and shake, readying for the ultimate release, a wave of warmth flowed over her, different from a climax, something unknown.

Jake kissed Sophie deeply, holding her eyes with his, communicating something more profound than words. The wave of warmth flooded her again as she peaked. She realized as she climaxed that this warm flowing river washing over her was love.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie coming brought Jake to the edge. When she cried out that she loved him as she climaxed, his body and mind reacted instantaneously. He came with such a force it shocked him.

He pumped once more, harder, going as deep as he could, lifting both their hips off the bed as he released his seed with a guttural cry.

He couldn't stop, not even then. Not even after coming so hard. Her scent filled his head, erasing thought. With eyes half opened, he watched her lips tremble, watched her take unsteady breaths. Still, his body kept rocking, kept pumping into her, pushing deep. Finally, after what seemed to be a lifetime, on its own accord his body slowed.

Gasping for breath, he collapsed his weight on Sophie's lean frame. Still locked together, they kissed. Jake ducked his head, pressing his forehead against hers, eyes closed. His breath steadied.

As the whirling world slowed, Jake's awareness returned. He'd done it again—slept with Sophie—only this time it hadn't been two friends having fun. This time it had been primal, instinctive—a coming together out of need, desperation, want and desire. She loved him. She said she loved him.

Immediately the regret began. He screwed up. Sophie was going to get hurt.

Jake rolled off her and watched her struggle to gather her composure. Sophie stood, and strode naked to the small cabana closet. The sudden loss of her warm body next to his brought a feeling of loneliness foreign to him since experiencing the loss of his mother. Jake longed for Sophie to come back, to wrap her body around his, to ease this growing ache in his chest. In the depths of his mind he could hear her name being repeated, over and over again, a faint whisper—*Sophie*.

The whisper sounded more and more in the last few weeks—just her name, just the one word, *Sophie*.

She tossed him a white terrycloth robe that he caught with a snap of his wrist. She shrugged

on a matching robe and came to sit next to his naked frame.

“Why are you here?”

He sat up and swung on the robe, covering his nudity as she’d covered hers. “I came to tell you bad news, but this wasn’t the way I planned to deliver it.”

Sophie let out a rueful laugh. “I guess it’s a new take on the phrase ‘Don’t kill the messenger.’ Sleep with him instead.”

“I’m sorry,” Jake said.

“For what?”

“For not leaving when I saw you naked. For staying when I should have walked away. For taking you so hard.”

Sophie snorted, her gaze fixed on something far away. “So it was a nice break from battery-operated sex. Let it go.”

“I can’t, and you know it.”

“Let it go, Jake,” Sophie gritted out.

“You said you loved me.”

She shrugged. “Hell, I tell my vibrators I love them. It’s just something triggered by orgasm. It doesn’t *mean* anything.”

“It means something to me.”

His last statement silenced her. Her jaw clenched and her eyes blinked rapidly, chasing away tears.

“Just tell me why you’re here.” Her eyes dropped to her hands in her lap.

Jake sighed, then launched into the discussion he had with Wyatt. He watched Sophie as he outlined the detail of the ground contamination, the lack of a parking area, how the program

would be stalled for a couple of years. She listened quietly, occasionally interrupting to ask for more detail. When he finished, she let out a long, slow breath.

“I’ll write up a report and go before the board at the end of the month, informing them of the significant delay. I’ll petition to get them to increase the funding for a new amphitheater site, but it will be tough.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jake said. “I really screwed up here.”

Sophie turned to him. “But it wasn’t your fault—you didn’t do anything wrong.”

Jake felt like exploding. “But I *did*. I got a national program started before I had a venue secured. That’s going to cost the Festival, and you’ll take the hit. That was my fault, not yours, but now you’re the one in the bad position. I should have made sure every part of the project was locked in before I submitted that proposal to you.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself.”

*Sophie. Sophie.* Her name whispered through Jake’s head again, reverberating against the sides of his skull, inescapable. Images of her flashed through his mind like photographs: *Sophie* laughing at the bar with Wyatt, her head tilted back; *Sophie* in the office, hauling a heavy file box on one shoulder while pretending to be a weight lifter; *Sophie* underneath him, her eyes dreamy as they looked into his, trusting, loving. The images and her name wouldn’t leave his mind, wouldn’t leave him alone.

He couldn’t let go, couldn’t escape.

Jake looked at her then, ducking her head to hide behind her hair. Too late, however, to keep him from seeing her jaw tremble and her eyes fill with tears.

With a hint of hidden violence, Jake stood up, swept off the robe, and pulled on his pants. He zipped them as he spoke, anger clouding his mind.

“This can’t work—” he swept a hand out, indicating the wrinkled bed cover. “We can’t just sleep together and act as if it didn’t happen. You love me, and I can’t ever give you what you deserve—a husband, kids, the works.”

He turned his back to her but still the image of her face burned into his mind. The voice inside his head wouldn’t shut up—God damn it, why wouldn’t it shut up?

*Sophie, Sophie, Sophie.*

A fleeting memory stirred at the back of his mind, a memory of his mother repeating the same word. Was this how it had started for her? Jake shoved a hand through his hair. “I can’t do this to you anymore. I can’t be with you, day by day, knowing you love me, and not being able to do anything about it.”

When Sophie placed her hand on his arm, he whirled about, facing her. He had to walk away—from her, from the job. He had to. It was the only way to keep her from being hurt even more.

“I have to quit.”

At his words, Sophie’s chin dropped. Her shoulders caved. He thought he heard her say something, but he turned and walked away, no longer able to see what devastation he brought.

Jake knew she wouldn’t understand, that she would blame herself. He wished to be more honest with her about why he had to walk away. But how could he tell her the OCD had started? That he was becoming an obsessive just like his mother, and that Sophie had become the subject of his obsession?

## Chapter Sixteen

Sophie watched Jake storm away, nausea racking her body.

He quit.

He quit the American Playwrights Festival. He quit the Youth Theater Academy. He quit her. He even quit Grace.

Sophie watched, eyes clouded by tears, as Jake paused at the corner of the pool. His silhouette was framed by muted pinks and purples of the evening sky. Sophie held her breath, willing him to come back. Instead he strode forward again, walking out of sight. The she heard the roar of his Jeep and knew he was gone.

She knew Jake was trying to be honorable, a good guy, by protecting her from what he thought would be a horrible existence. Although she hadn't seen any signs of obsessive or compulsive behavior in Jake, she realized it could possibly come.

After his confession in the office, Sophie researched the condition. As Jake said, OCD could be hereditary, but literature she read suggested the odds of inheriting it were remote. Besides, even if Jake were to inherit his mother's condition, there were now many medical treatments available. Jake didn't need to be bound to the fear that he'd become like his mother.

Twilight had almost completely taken over the evening sky. Sophie fumbled around for the light switch, hampered by the growing darkness. When she finally flipped it on, the sudden bright light flooding the pool and cabana shocked her. Everything suddenly seemed real. And the crying came.

Sobs wracked Sophie's body. Waves of self-pity, desperation and loss pounded her mind like

wild surf against the shore. She cried until there were no more tears; then she walked toward the house. At the door, she caught her reflection in the glass door.

*What a mess*, Sophie thought. She looked beaten: slumped over, shoulders hunched, eyes scared. *Pitiful*, she thought, *just pitiful, like a lost puppy that needs to be saved*. But this time there was no one to save her.

“How could Jake say he believes in me?” she whispered in the dark. This ugly, frightened woman she saw in front of her couldn’t hold a candle to the person Jake said he saw—what had he called her? Hard working, beautiful, amazing, determined. . .

Jake’s words echoed in her mind, rocketing around, waking her. Almost as if she were watching a movie, Sophie saw the image of herself reflected in the glass door stand up and unfurl like a flag. She saw her shoulders being thrown back, her chin lifted high. Her eyes stared back at her, bold and strong.

*This*, she thought, *this* is the woman Jake sees when he looks at me. *This* is Sophie.

With a sudden laugh, she blew a kiss to her image.

\* \* \* \*

When Brett’s fist plowed across his nose a second time, Jake’s first thought was that this time he hadn’t hit like a girl. Through a haze of pain, he watched blood drip onto his carpet, creating a mosaic of spatters on the white wool. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Brett cradling his hand. Jake gingerly felt along the ridge of his nose to make sure it hadn’t broken. He pressed a wad of tissues against his nostril to stem the flow of blood.

“I take it you just saw Sophie,” he mumbled.

“Yep,” Brett glared at him. “I just got back into town and went to see her. She was in the backyard, burying a box of vibrators, her flat iron, and crying.”

Jake let out an involuntary bark of laughter. At Brett’s glare, he apologized. “I’m sorry—it isn’t funny. It’s just so Sophie.”

Rummaging around in his freezer, Jake found two bags of peas. One he pressed against his nose; the other he handed to Brett for his hand. After awkwardly flipping caps off two beers, Jake motioned for Brett to follow him outside to the porch swing. Night had fallen. The men sat silently, listening to the raucous cacophony of frogs and crickets.

“How is she?” Jake asked. Hurt, devastated, in pain—these were the answers he expected.

“I asked her what happened, and she said you two had slept together again, you’d quit, and she was burying her vibrators because nothing could ever make her feel the way you do.”

At Brett’s statement, Jake dropped his head and swore under his breath. He knew that feeling: He felt the same way about Sophie.

“I blew it,” he told Brett. “I let everyone down. I promised something I couldn’t produce, and it’s going to upset a lot of people.”

“Yeah, Sophie told me about the amphitheater problem. That’s a stupid reason to quit. So you messed up—it’s not the end of the world, you know. You’ve messed up before but you’ve never quit anything until now.” Brett stopped speaking.

Jake looked up from his beer to see his friend staring at him, a look of intense study in Brett’s eyes.

“This has something to do with Sophie, doesn’t it? You wouldn’t hurt her by leaving now if you didn’t think you’d somehow hurt her worse by staying.”

Quitting seemed to be the only way out to Jake. He would help her find a replacement before

he left so the Festival wouldn't go under. If he stayed, Sophie would only end up angry and resentful, just like all the others. Some of them believed Jake when he said he wouldn't make a commitment. Others were determined to snare the lone wolf, only to be devastated when reality crashed in.

For the first time in his life, Jake truly felt the heavy burden of regret for the decision he made so many years ago. He wanted to give Sophie more—he wanted to give her him.

“She mumbled something else,” Brett said, “about how you have a secret but it's not hers to share. I pried, but she wouldn't say a word—only that it's something you think renders you incapable of being in a relationship.”

Jake nodded. After a moment, Brett elbowed him. “That was your opening—you're supposed to come back with something like, ‘Yeah, Brett, I fathered an illegitimate baby,’ or ‘I'm secretly married,’ or ‘I'm gay,’ not just sit there in silence.” He paused. “You know, you never did seem to be the playboy type. It makes sense if there's some deep, dark secret lurking in your past, keeping you from commitment.”

Jake knew Brett wanted answers. He carried all this alone for so long—not even Grace really understood how bad things had been for his mom. Somehow telling Sophie about it released some tension he felt around his mom's condition. And her response made him feel less ashamed and afraid.

“You're right—it is a deep, dark secret.” Jake stopped and took a breath before continuing. “I never told you guys what was wrong with my mom before she died.” He fell silent again, listening to the sweet evening hum.

The sound and scent of the night brought a bittersweet feeling in the pit of Jake's stomach. He would miss living here among the crickets and frogs, and his family and friends. A rival

theater company contacted his former agent the other day, wondering if Jake had interest in working for them. If he took the job, he would only be three hours from Grace—close enough to have her come visit, but far enough away from Sophie. He hoped the distance apart could clear his mind of her.

Jake cleared his throat. “Mom had OCD—obsessive compulsive disorder. She had it bad—the hand washing, fear of germs, counting everything, repeating words. It completely messed up our family. When it started to get severe, my dad got frustrated and started drinking more. The more she’d obsess, the more he’d drink. His drunken rages made her compulsions worse. Just before she died she got to the point where she could hardly function.”

Brett took a long draw off his bottle. “So your mom had OCD. What’s that got to do with you breaking Sophie’s heart?”

Jake hadn’t wanted this. He didn’t intend to break her heart, or hurt his friend. He would have rather inherited his mom’s small stature or weak heart. But not this—never this.

“I’m getting OCD—it’s hereditary. I already have all the signs. And as I told Sophie, I’ll never put anyone through what my family went through.”

Brett sat in silence, rocking the porch swing forward and back. The creaks of the swing mixed with the sounds of the nighttime symphony. After a long pause, he asked, “What makes you think you’re starting to have OCD?”

Jake shrugged. “I’m getting obsessive thoughts running through my head. The same word repeats itself in my head, non-stop, like a record with the needle stuck in a groove. I have the same images haunting me, like my brain is carrying them around and won’t let go.”

“What’s the word being repeated?” Brett asked.

“A name.”

Brett shot him a glance, eyes narrowed. “And the images? Are they connected to the name?”

“Yeah, it’s all about the same person.”

The swing whipped sideways when Brett stood up, bringing a light wave of nausea to Jake’s stomach. Brett paced the porch, turned, and faced Jake. “And I’ll bet anything that this person you’re obsessing over is Sophie.”

At Jake’s nod, Brett just rolled his eyes. “Dude, you’re an idiot.”

Jake glared. Some friend. Here he’d just bared his deepest, darkest secret and Brett was calling him an idiot.

Brett stood there, silent, staring at Jake. He shook his head twice, as if in amazement, then the laughter came. He leaned against the porch railing, holding himself up with one hand until his knees gave out and he slid to the ground. After slapping his knee several times, he finally was able to speak around bursts of laughter.

“That’s not OCD, you brainless jerk. That’s *love*.”

## Chapter Seventeen

The next week passed by, slow and painful, dragged on by the tension between Jake and Sophie and exacerbated by the hot Indian summer enveloping the town. Jake stayed out of Sophie's way, although with the open office environment he couldn't help but to see her almost constantly.

Today she wore an emerald-green halter dress, in deference to the heat. It was one of those wrap-around dresses, Jake realized when she'd sat down on the couch and crossed a one leg over the other. The skirt slid off her knee to her upper thigh, almost exposing her panties. Jake felt a lunge in his loins at the sight. After Friday, his body ached for her even more than before.

He was surprised by Sophie's reaction on Monday, when they both had a couple of days to cool down. Jake expected anger, tears, or for her to convince him to stay. Sophie surprised him by arriving at work Monday with the same dynamism, cheerfulness, and spunky attitude as usual. Her only reference to the resignation letter he left on her desk was to send him an e-mail stating she would present his letter to the board at the end of the month.

Jake promised Sophie he would find his own replacement, but so far hadn't found anyone satisfactory. After making numerous phone calls and sending hundreds of e-mails, he was surprised at the lack of response. A few people had contacted him, but they were without the experience or name draw the Festival needed. No wonder Sophie had jumped at the chance to have him fill the vacancy—no one else was out there to take it.

Sophie was busy on a project of her own. Whatever it was, she kept it under wraps: lowering her voice on the telephone, switching off her computer screen when Jake entered her office

space, and even standing by the shared printer to grab print-outs she sent from her computer before he could sneak a peek. He was curious, but knew he lost all right to knowing what was going on—with Sophie or the Festival. Jake's job at this point was simply to tie up loose ends.

"Hey Jake," Sophie called from the conference area, motioning for him to come. She sat on the couch with her face buried in a report folder and her legs crossed tailor-style, the wrap skirt widening almost to her crotch.

Jake sat down beside her. His arms stuck to the leather of the couch, glued there by perspiration and heat. A faint scent rose up from her—lavender—and he leaned closer to draw in a deeper breath.

"Are you smelling my hair?"

Jake forced a wry grin. "I can't help it. You smell good."

"Keep your nostrils away from my hair, would you?" Her words sounded harsh, but she spoke with a playful tone.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't 'ma'am' me, I'm five years younger than you."

"Yes, Little Twerp."

Sophie glared. "You're getting on my very last nerve. Now focus. I need to tell you something."

"I'm listening."

Sophie sat silent for a while, gathering her thoughts. When she finally spoke, her voice was low and steady. "I know you're not leaving because you messed up with the amphitheater. Your decision has to do with something much bigger."

*Good God*, Jake thought. Brett and Sophie were mind readers. Had he been so transparent?

“I realize you’re worried about becoming a severe obsessive-compulsive like your mom and that’s why you chase away any woman who gets close. But I’ve done my own research, and I don’t see any signs of it in you. I know—” she broke off when he tried to speak, shushing him with a finger on his lips. “I know it’s hereditary, I know you could someday have it as severe as your mom. But I also know that only in *your* mind does this mean you can’t have a relationship.”

Her finger brushing against his lips distracted him for a moment. He watched her jaw clench, her mouth thin.

With a shake of her head, Sophie resumed speaking. “Why do you think everyone else would be destroyed by the effects of this illness just because your dad was? Did you ever stop to think that he was a weak man, and that he may have been an alcoholic before your mom got worse?”

Sophie bit the side of her lip and stared straight ahead. “Your dad wasn’t strong—maybe he didn’t even know how to love. It sounds like he blamed your mom for something she couldn’t help—and that he used her illness as an excuse to drink. But just because your dad was a failure at loving a person with OCD doesn’t mean that everyone else will be. You’ve allowed others to be close, to lean on you—your sister for one, Brett and Wyatt also. Why won’t you let in a woman, someone who loves you? Why won’t you allow yourself to love?”

He looked down at his feet. He didn’t want to hear this—didn’t want her to try to talk him into something he’d talked himself out of a long time ago.

“This hasn’t been an easy decision for me.” He paused. “Walking away from you will be the toughest thing I’ll ever have to do.”

Sophie blew out a breath of air. “The walking away part, Jake, it’s your choice. I’m not going to twist your arm to make you stay. But I want you to hear me out, at least. Will you do that for me?”

Jake watched Sophie's face grow dewy from the heat. The humidity did a number of her hair; today it was close to how it looked when she was a kid—wild, puffy, a halo around her head. Leaving her would create a hole in his heart he knew he'd never be able to fill.

Jake reached for her hand. "Yes, I'll listen," he said.

Sophie jutted out her jaw, readying herself. "For the first time ever I feel loved by someone other than my brother or my two best friends. I feel admired, respected and cared for. I see myself through your eyes—a competent, intelligent, beautiful woman. I can look in the mirror and see who you see."

She spoke passionately, moving him, forcing him to look beyond the walls he built. Jake wanted to speak, but she plunged on.

"I can tell you," she said, "that if you did have OCD and were with someone who truly loved you, they'd just set their clock ahead so you wouldn't be late going to the movies if you had to count to one hundred before opening the door. They'd keep hand sanitizer in their purse, and would leave rulers strategically placed around the house so you could measure the lengths of the blinds.

"From the little I know of OCD, I don't think you have it. But even if you did, I love you enough, value you enough, and think highly enough of you that I'd risk all to be with you. And if that means I'd have to get a bigger purse to carry around hand sanitizer and a ruler, I'd do it."

Jake knew he was squeezing her hand too tight, but he felt frozen. Sophie didn't know what she was saying; couldn't understand what she offered.

"I know you think that now," Jake said, "but if it starts happening, you'll feel differently. I won't risk putting you through that."

"Don't think for me, Jake. Don't decide for me which risks I'm going to take. Don't you dare

tell me what I'm capable of handling." She reached over and grabbed his chin, forcing his eyes to hers.

"You told me once to believe in myself, but it's hard to take advice from someone who won't believe in his own value as a person—flawed *or* perfect. But I did listen to you; I did take your advice."

Her fingers stroked his temple, easing the wrinkle between his brows. "I looked to you to save me when the Festival was floundering. Because you taught me to believe in myself, this time I looked to myself to solve the problem."

Jake watched Sophie stand. She handed him the folder she'd been looking at a few moments before. "This is for you. If you change your mind about leaving the directorship after you read this, let me know. If you're still determined to 'save' me from a life I see as beautiful and you see as potentially flawed, there's nothing I can do besides let you go. You leaving the Festival, leaving me, isn't what I want—by no means. But I want more to see you happy. I really, truly want to see you happy."

He watched her walk away, his chest squeezing tight, like iron gates closing over his heart. The muggy heat muffled the thud of the heavy door. When he realized he could still smell the lavender of her hair, he swore. It should never have been this way.

\* \* \* \*

It wasn't until later that evening that Jake read her report. He'd finished a lonely meal of grilled salmon, salad and steamed broccoli, and had settled down on his porch swing with a glass of California cabernet sauvignon and Sophie's report.

It didn't take long to realize what she meant when she said that this time she saved herself. She'd done it—Sophie solved the amphitheater problem. Jake let out a sharp laugh, his smile growing wider by the second. He read further, engrossed in her plan, amazed at how clever she'd been in getting around the parking problem.

There would be no parking at the amphitheater. It was that simple—no parking.

Sophie petitioned the local high school to allow use of its parking lot during performance nights. Patrons would park at the high school and be shuttled to the amphitheater in cushy tour buses. The local bus company donated its busses and drivers for rehearsals and performances in return for free advertising.

Jake put the report down. He stared at the deep red liquid in his wine glass, turning it slowly, watching it catch the light spilling from his window. Sophie had done this—and in doing so, she kept alive the dream of Jemiah and the others, Jake included.

He heard something—a slight sound breaking through the cacophony of crickets and frogs. The sound came again and again, until he realized what he heard were raindrops. The heat wave had broken. A light wind brushed by, cool, carrying the strong scent of wet grass and leaves. Jake walked to the middle of the lawn, flung his arms open, and tilted his face to receive the cool, wet drops clearing the sky, the earth; clearing his mind.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie tried to gauge Jake's mood the following morning when he arrived at work. He didn't look particularly happy, but he didn't seem in a fury, either. Her stomach clenched. When Jake came to stand in front of her, she felt like she would throw up. She was brave yesterday, but

somehow this morning fear had crept in.

“I have a play I want you to read.” Jake tossed a thin script on her desk.

Sophie gritted her teeth. Was he really prepared to act as though nothing happened?

“I’m busy,” she said, looking back down at the other scripts on her desk.

“I’d like you to read this one, though.”

“I don’t have time; put it at the bottom of this pile.” Sophie motioned to the stack, at least 20 high.

“I really need you to read this now,” he replied.

She sighed. Was this some new game he was playing? Ignore declarations of love and boss her around?

“No.”

“Damn it, Sophie! You are one hell of a twerp, you know that?” Jake’s explosion caught her off guard. “Would you *please* just read the damned thing?”

She could tell he was doing his best to calm himself down—his fingers were flying through his hair, twirling a lock of it on high speed.

She snatched the script from his hand and snarled. “Fine, I’ll read it, since it obviously means so much to you.” Setting herself down on the couch, she fanned the pages, realizing there were only a few.

“Who wrote this?” she asked.

Jake leaned against the credenza, facing her. “A new local playwright,” he mumbled.

When she saw the title, *No Batteries Required*, she shot him a cockeyed look. Was he making fun of her? Jake stared back, an unreadable expression in his eyes. She flipped to the first page and began to read.

It didn't take long to finish. Once done, Sophie sat silent, immobile, every bone in her body had frozen in place. Jake stood in front of her, arms folded, ankles crossed, chin tucked to chest.

"Aren't you supposed to be on one knee?" she asked.

"Didn't think I had to; thought writing it was the equivalent."

Sophie hitched a breath. "There's no ending written—the play stops after the main character asks his question."

He nodded. "I meant this to be a collaborative project. The ending is yours to write."

A sob began to build in her throat. "Can I write in a couple of kids and a Golden Retriever?"

Jake let out a sharp laugh. "You can write in a white picket fence, for all I care. I just want you happy."

She hiccupped the sob away. Sophie gazed long and hard at the script, watched a tear fall on it, running the ink. With precise motions, she stood and walked to Jake, coming to a stop in front of him.

He looked so sweet, a delicious mix of strength and vulnerability. She grabbed him by the wrists, unwrapped his arms from their crossed position, and placed them around her waist, wrapping his arms back up around her.

"The ending only needs one word," she whispered, nuzzling his neck.

"What word is that?"

"Yes."

In an instant, Jake swept Sophie up into his arms and crossed the office space in a few short steps. He dropped her onto the couch, then followed her body with his, sinking his weight, his heat, onto her, melding with her as he took her mouth with his. A few opened buttons, unzipped zippers, and kicked-off shoes allowed them the prize they each sought—a complete union with

one another; heart, mind, body and soul—a union they knew would last forever.

## Epilogue

Sophie's entire body tingled. A strange lightheadedness swept over her. She looked down at her four-inch heels, the toes just peeking out from underneath the hem of her dress, making sure her feet were still under her. She shifted. The light in the family room sent warm, glowing tones over her dress, making the white silk appear brushed with iridescent gold dust.

"How's my ass look in this tux?" Brett asked Tally, pulling up his tuxedo. His comment earned him a quick smack from Tally, but sent Sophie laughing.

Outside by the cabana, a harp and violin sounded the first hauntingly beautiful notes of the processional. With a flourish, Brett kissed the top of her head, then grabbed Tally's arm and hauled her off through the patio door to a petal-strewn path. Fortunately for Tally, she'd slipped off her shoes earlier, or else Brett's euphoric pace would have knocked her off her feet.

Grace moved to stand beside her for a moment. "You are so beautiful," she whispered, entwining her hand in Sophie's, bringing a brilliant smile to her friend's face.

"C'mon, Twerp," Wyatt's low voice sounded as he pulled Grace from Sophie's side. "Time for us to go."

Sophie brushed a few invisible folds from her dress, a sheath draped with filmy lace and delicate seed pearls. When the music changed tempo, she picked up her bouquet and stepped outside. The rose-petal-and-lavender-strewn path wound its way from the patio to the fountain at the far side of the lawn, leading straight to Jake.

The crowd parted. At the end of the path Sophie could see her friends standing in the dappled sunlight. When Jake stepped out from the shadows, their eyes caught and held. Sophie began her

walk to the altar.

Jake caught her hands in his and the tingles disappeared, replaced by that warm wave she knew now to be love.

“This is just the beginning,” he whispered, leaning forward to touch her forehead with his.  
“Just the beginning.”