

Ties That Bind

by: Heather Huffman

Smashwords Edition

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To my parents, Dwayne & Carol. There are no words to express how much I love you. Thank you for surrounding me with love and for molding me into the person I am today. You should be proud of the family you've created. We love you!

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Chapter One

In the thirty-two years Kate Yager had been on this planet, she had never once met another person with quite the same shade eyes as hers. Until now. Her tongue suddenly thick, she struggled to make a good first impression on her new boss. Somehow she managed to tell him she was pleased to meet him. Somehow she exchanged pleasantries about her move, her apartment, the weather, the office décor. Somehow she managed to do all this without telling him he was her father.

"Have you met your team yet?" A deep voice with a perpetual smile asked.

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. She'd met a dozen people this morning, but couldn't remember any of the names now. "I am, however, well aware of the dangers of climbing file cabinets."

"Are we still showing those?" the smile in his voice moved to his face, faltering for the briefest of moments when Kate smiled back. He abruptly dismissed whatever caused his features

to cloud. “HR says the safety videos are necessary, although I’m not sure I believe them. Sorry about being tied up in meetings all morning.”

“That’s okay,” Kate looked closely at him, trying to learn the secrets not divulged by the pictures she’d seen. She saw a strong man, obviously charismatic and confident. There was nothing in his sandy hair or muscular build that seemed to enlighten her, nothing familiar about his smile or voice.

“Let’s take you around to meet the girls and drop your things at your desk, then we’ll grab some lunch to talk about the launch party.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kate was relieved to not be eating lunch alone with Jack. She didn’t want to mention her suspicions until she was sure what to say and couldn’t trust herself not to blurt out the wrong thing if they were alone.

“Well, the whole team isn’t here yet. We still have one member missing. Gavin Nichols is our new photographer. He’s flying in from London next week. We’re really excited to have him.”

“Is that so?” she wondered what was special about Gavin.

“He’s an amazing talent,” Jack answered her unspoken question. “Absolutely the best. I’ve been trying to convince him to join us since we decided to launch this division. Just look at this portfolio.” Jack picked a packet up from the desk he was passing and tossed it at Kate.

“Then I can’t wait to meet him,” Kate agreed before opening the envelope’s clasp. Once she did, she was immediately taken. Gavin Nichols was an artist.

In picture after picture, vibrant color danced with light and shadow. Each picture told a story, captured the essence of the moment perfectly. Kate came to a stop at a black and white of a little girl with her nose in a gerbera daisy. Long, sooty eyelashes brushed cherubim cheeks and Kate’s heart tripped an awkward beat. No matter how many years passed, it seemed little girls of a certain age always made a “what if” flit through her mind. Kate quickly replaced it with “what is” and handed the photos back with a smile.

“If this is the new photographer, I’m even more excited about this opportunity than I was before.”

“Wonderful,” Jack beamed his approval and motioned for Kate to follow him into a large office with a computer in each corner. “This is your new home.”

“Kate!” A young woman with honey hair and a bright smile approached – welcoming Kate as if the two were already the best of friends. “I’m Jessica, this is Liz. We’re so happy you’re here.”

A dark-haired beauty with an equally kind smile and the hint of a dimple joined the honey-haired angel, her own welcome equally friendly, if less emphatic. Kate felt like hiding behind Jack in the face of these two young beauties, keenly aware of her plain wardrobe and her hair pulled back into a practical but boring ponytail. She withstood the temptation and instead returned their smiles.

“How long have you been with the San Franciscan?” she asked politely.

“Since our internships,” Jessica answered for both of them.

“We just love Jack too much to leave,” Liz shrugged prettily.

“Flatterer,” he accused.

“I started as a fact-checker,” Jessica added.

“And quickly moved up to features writer. She’s the best we have.” Jack’s voice practically radiated with pride. “And Liz here is the best creative designer in all of San Francisco.”

“Just San Francisco?” her blush belied the words.

“And now we have the best event planner on the west coast,” Jessica announced. “Aren’t we quite the formidable team?”

“Yes, quite...” Kate wasn’t so sure she believed her own words, but Liz and Jessica so quickly swept her into the welcoming arms of friendship, she didn’t have time to wallow in her faltering confidence. Kate didn’t bother to analyze the twinge she felt watching Jessica and Liz interact with Jack, but it felt a bit like jealousy.

Together, the four of them ambled down the street to a little coffee house to grab a sandwich before claiming a table on the sidewalk. It was a sunny afternoon and they wanted to soak up every minute possible. Plans for the upcoming division flowed freely and Kate’s tension slowly gave way to the encroaching excitement.

“And that’s where events come in,” Jack motioned to Kate as the conversation came back around to her. “At least once a quarter, we’ll be the absolute very best San Francisco has to offer.”

Once a quarter? Had she really been paying that little attention in her interview? Granted, it had been over the phone, but she thought she’d paid attention. How was she going to pull off a

major event four times a year with no real staff? Kate smiled back at him, hoping her sheer terror didn't show.

"Any thoughts on the venue for the launch party in September?"

"We can help you brainstorm when we get back to the office," Liz offered helpfully, sensing the panic she was trying to hide.

"Definitely," Jessica assured Kate.

"Pressure forces creativity," she nodded with more confidence than she felt.

Jack nodded with another charming smile and Kate could easily see how her mother had fallen for him. What had happened between the two? Why had she never mentioned him? Had he beat her, cheated on her, left her at the altar?

Somehow Kate couldn't picture any of those scenarios. Or did she just want to like him? Should she even tell him her suspicions until she knew more about him? Did he know he had a daughter? Had he wanted her? What if announcing who she was cost her this job? Suddenly the thrill of the upcoming challenge outweighed her desire for answers, so she shoved the questions aside for later.

The rest of the day was a blur. Kate drifted home almost grudgingly, consoled by the knowledge that Liz and Jessica had promised to spend the next day helping her find a venue for the first event. In September. Yikes.

Kate deliberated stopping in a salon on her way home to get her hair cut, but decided against it. She'd spent most of the money from the sale of the house on the move. It could be months before any life insurance came in. Things would be a bit tight for a while.

But she would need to update her wardrobe just a bit.... Kate chewed her lower lip in thought and let herself in the door. As she looked around her empty loft, loneliness descended. It seemed oddly silent without the steady beeps and hums of hospital equipment. Her home now smelled of citrus, not antiseptic. For some reason, that made her incredibly sad. With no one to tend to, her night stretched out before her unendingly. Just a few outfits wouldn't hurt.

Her mind made up, she turned right back around and headed to Union Square. Several hours later, she found herself at a restaurant on the marina. Her bag-laden arms had made hopping cable cars a bit tedious, but there was a thrill in it all the same. She sat alone at a table for two, her treasures taking up the spare seat. Her fingers itched to take out her prize of the day—a pair

of violet high heels that were far and away the most expensive shoes she'd ever owned. But the purple pumps with the pretty little curves had beckoned her.

She ate fresh seafood because she could and treated herself to a glass of a fruity white wine. The waiter sniffed when she ordered, and she knew he didn't approve of her choice of beverage. Maybe one of these days she'd get around to developing a classier palate. For the moment, she was pretty content sticking with whatever tasted good. All in all, it was a good night and by the time she made her way back to the silent loft, she collapsed into her bed too tired to do anything besides sleep.

When the next day came, she bounded out of bed anxious for a day exploring the city with newfound friends. After making her bed and running through her yoga routine, Kate stood in front of her closet, debating which outfit to debut first. On the one hand, there were the purple heels—on the other, the Elie Tahari black stretch jacket with the incredibly adorable silk sash tie at the waist. Kate stood staring at the two for several minutes before throwing her hands up in disgust.

"This is ridiculous," she grabbed the jacket and turned to the shoes. "Mommy is going to wear the black pumps today, but that doesn't mean I love you any less."

Crisis averted, it wasn't long before she was headed out the door. It wouldn't hurt to grab a pastry and coffee on the corner before work just this once. Besides, she was ready to show off the outfit. It was tailored and stylish and she felt ready to conquer the world in it.

Surrounded by truly trendy twenty-somethings diminished her confidence just a bit, but not enough to dampen her mood. The warm smiles of her little team banished the haze of loneliness immediately. After morning chatter to catch up on each others' evenings, the three settled in at their computers in amicable silence.

"Jack, I can't calm down. The wedding is so close—how could he just walk out on us like that?" A shrill voice cut through Kate's morning. Jack's reply was muffled in comparison. Despite her intention to not be nosey, her head popped up to look for the source of the commotion. For some reason, the sight of the leggy blonde cliché bickering with Jack set her teeth on edge.

"That's Tara," Liz whispered knowingly. "She's Jack's fiancée. I think their wedding planner walked out on them with two months to go."

"I don't understand how anyone could do that," Jessica frowned. Kate got the impression Jessica would have trouble understanding any selfish act. "What are they going to do?"

"I don't know. If it's left up to Tara, the whole thing will be a disaster. She's an artist, definitely not a planner."

"She's an artist?" Kate wondered aloud.

"She has a little gallery down off Geary," Jessica answered before continuing. "And they have the Ritz Carlton on Nob Hill, too. It was going to be so pretty. We wanted the Ritz for ours, but the price tag was just too hefty."

"How long have they been engaged?" Kate couldn't quite shake her irritation.

"Two years," Liz answered that one. "Jack can't help, not with the launch coming. I'd offer to help, but I'm trying not to panic over my own wedding. That reminds me, is anyone interested in assembling invitations?"

"When are you picking them up from the printer?" Jessica leaned forward excitedly.

"Two weeks."

"Count me in."

"Sure, sounds fun.... How old is she?" Kate's frown deepened. Jack had to be 50. This pretty blonde was definitely not 50.

"Thirty-five, I think."

"I thought she was thirty-six," Liz shook her head.

"Isn't that a little young for him?" Kate shifted uncomfortably. That was only four years her senior.

"They are so in love, I'd forgotten the age difference, honestly," Jessica shrugged.

"Huh," Kate practically snorted, earning her surprised glances from her officemates.

"Kate," Jack barked her name and she jumped guiltily.

"Yes sir?" She hopped up and headed to his office.

"Don't call me sir," his face softened to a smile as he gestured for her to have a seat. "This is my fiancée, Tara."

"Pleased to meet you," the lie nearly burned her lips.

"I've heard so much about you, I'm sorry we're meeting with me in such a foul mood," Tara clasped Kate's hand warmly.

"No worries," Kate shrugged self-consciously.

“Kate, I know I’ve really put you in a bind with the launch party being so close,” Jack began, to which Kate waved him off dismissively. “But I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you.”

“A favor?” Her throat went dry. Surely he wouldn’t.

“Do you think you could help Tara wrap up our wedding plans? It seems our planner has taken a job in Paris.”

He would. He did. Panic clawed at Kate. She couldn’t possibly. Thoughts of her mom, living and dying with no one but Kate to care swirled through her mind. Why hadn’t Danielle Yager deserved a wedding at the Ritz? She couldn’t possibly plan this viper’s perfect day. There would be no justice in the world.

“Kate?” Jack’s brow furrowed just a bit, confused by her hesitation.

“I’d love to,” Kate lied yet again, realizing this man’s charm could very well be the reason for her own existence.

Chapter Two

Somehow Kate had managed to leave the office without being struck down by a lightning bolt for the lies she’d told. Somehow she’d answered the curiosity that met her in her office. She’d even managed to lighten her mood once she’d escaped the office to search for open venues with Jessica and Liz.

Their first stop was the Julia Morgan Ballroom in the Financial District. Kate had instantly fallen in love with the dark, old-San Francisco cigar club feel. Being on the fifteenth floor of the Merchant Exchange building meant it had an amazing view. Its perfection also meant it was booked solid for months. Kate used her shiny new company credit card to put a deposit on it for the Christmas party she was sure she’d be asked to throw, and they headed out in search of other alternatives for the event they were supposed to be booking.

They visited four more places that weren’t quite right. Either the lighting was off, or the acoustics weren’t great, or she just plain old didn’t like the manager. Jessica and Liz kept up their enthusiasm and emphatically assured her that they didn’t mind another stop. The last place on the list for the day was the Bubble Lounge. Kate knew the second she crossed the threshold

that this place was what she wanted. With its lush red couches and floor-to-ceiling mahogany bookshelves, it was the perfect blend of sexy and chic. She knew Jack would love it.

“I don’t suppose you could take a peek at your schedule to be sure you don’t have an opening?” She pleaded with the event manager.

“We really do fill up quickly,” the woman shrugged helplessly, her face displaying more sympathy than she felt.

“But couldn’t you just check? Maybe there was a cancellation.”

“I would know if there was a cancellation...” the woman hesitated.

“Come on, Leila, please?” Kate wheedled. She really didn’t want to take no for an answer.

“Huh. I don’t believe it,” Leila nearly stuttered. “We do have a cancellation. The company went belly-up. I have an opening that Monday.”

“We’ll take it,” Liz and Jessica chimed in with her. Kate wasn’t sure if they liked the venue as much as she did or if they were just tired of looking. Either way, they wandered off to order themselves a glass of sparkling wine while Kate filled out paperwork and put another deposit on the credit card. She was pretty pleased, if she did say so herself. Two venues in one day—not half bad. She was too antsy to have a glass of wine with them just yet; she wanted to tell Jack about her accomplishments.

With the workday over, her companions would be heading home from the Bubble Lounge. Of course, they both had lives to go home to. Kate tried not to feel sorry for herself, but the feeling still hovered for the briefest of moments. She decided to head back to the office alone once they parted ways. Maybe she’d catch Jack before he went home for the evening.

The sleek white space was empty when she let herself in, though. Even Jen had cleared out for the day. With a sigh, Kate went to drop the paperwork off at her desk. There was an accordion file sitting in her chair. Apparently the previous wedding planner had at least been nice enough to leave his files and she’d inherited them.

“Great. Just great,” she blew her bangs out of her eyes and snatched the offensive brown package off the chair.

Back in her loft, she tried sorting through the meticulous files while waiting for her microwave meal to finish cooking but couldn’t seem to concentrate. A few bites into the tasteless chicken and vegetables, she tossed it in the trash and went to take a hot bath.

She tried sinking into the bubbles to relax after shaving her legs. It took her about fifteen ticks of the clock to realize she was bored. With a little sigh of frustration, she wrapped herself in her favorite robe and went back to the files but the clock and its incessant ticking followed her.

Irritated, she went to stand at her window, looking down at the street below. Even though it was Tuesday, the night still pulsated with music and lights. San Francisco apparently didn't have the same rules about going to bed early on a work night that the rest of the country did. She toyed with the idea of dressing up and going out. The longer she watched people coming and going, seeming so happy and... alive, the more she wanted to be down there with them.

Temptation won out. With the decision made, she scurried back to her room to get ready as if afraid the party would end before she could get there. She found some slimming black slacks somewhere in the back of her closet. They were remnants from the days when her size eight was closer to a six. She added a clingy black knit top with a scoop neck that she normally would have supplemented with a tank top underneath. With the philosophy that it was better to feel like a tigress than a fool propelling her forward, she didn't allow herself to think too hard as she hurried through her makeup routine.

She practically skipped down the four flights of stairs, the gravitational pull of the music growing stronger as she stepped out of the rehabbed warehouse and onto the street. It was obvious the crowd was a little younger than she, but Kate didn't care tonight. She just wanted to lose herself. The bouncer smiled and nodded her in. She flashed a smile back at him, the vibrations from the music seeping up from the soles of her feet and overriding all sense of caution.

Once inside she paused briefly, wondering what to do. She didn't want to dance alone and didn't want to stand at the bar like a loser. That's when she realized this was an art gallery and she was saved. She ordered a martini and contented herself to amble along the walls, peering at the familiar photographs. Although some of the pictures were new to her, the style was definitely Gavin Nichols. She could see why Jack was so taken with his work.

She felt the weight of someone's stare and self consciously peeked over her shoulder, startled to confirm there was indeed a man watching her from the far side of the room. He was surrounded by a crowd, mostly female, and his face was tilted down and to the side as if he was listening to the woman at his left. But his eyes were definitely on Kate.

Why? Everything in the room seemed to slow down under the heat of his gaze – everything except her heart rate. It was thundering like a runaway train. A blush flooded her cheeks when his lips twitched into a smile and she turned quickly to study the next group of photos.

She took a long sip of her drink to cool her cheeks. She tried to focus on the art, but her mind's eye kept conjuring the image of messy brown hair and dark eyes. She wondered just what color those eyes were.

"Do you like them?" A husky voice asked close to her ear.

"Very much," Kate murmured, turning slightly towards the man who had materialized at her side. She looked up and thought fleetingly – his eyes are gray.

"Are you a fan of Gavin Nichols? I don't think I've seen you at any of his other shows."

"Oh Gavin and I go way back," Kate joked flippantly, taking another drink in hopes of calming her nerves. The man's eyebrows shot up in question and the corner of his mouth pulled into a slow smile but he said nothing. "What about you?" Kate couldn't for the life of her think of something better to say.

"I never miss a show," he grinned in earnest then. "Which is your favorite?"

"It's hard to say," she bit her bottom lip in thought. "The intensity of the color on that one is almost painful, in a good kind of way. But the sepia tones in the picture of the homeless man make it quite beautiful. And the black and whites of the shoreline make the rocky crags so much more dramatic. I have a hard time choosing a favorite."

"Interesting," he seemed thoughtful. "I like how you put that."

"Thank you," Kate felt her cheeks heat up again. Maybe it was the British accent. Maybe it was because his nearness invaded her every sense. She could feel the warmth of his breath when he spoke; it caressed her neck and made her heart trip a funny beat. He smelled amazing, too; she had to resist the urge to reach out and touch him.

"You're not from here," he stated. "What brings you to San Francisco?"

"Work." It was partially true.

"Ah, work. And where do you work?"

"The San Franciscan," she answered, as she waved to the waiter to bring her another drink.

"Really? That's interesting."

"Is it? I just started this week so I really don't know that much about it yet." She shrugged and paid the waiter for the martini.

“Thirsty?” He eyed the empty glass she handed the waiter.

“It’s awfully warm in here... I’m sorry. I should have asked if you wanted something.”

“Shouldn’t I be offering to get you the drink?”

“I don’t know, should you?” She paused thoughtfully. “You’re not from around here, either.”

“What gave it away?” He arched an eyebrow in mock-surprise.

“What brings you to San Francisco?”

“Work.”

She meant to ask him where he worked, but he’d said the word so close to her ear it sent a new wave of sparks skittering through her nervous system. Instead something along the lines of “Mmm” was all that found its way to her lips. She took another long drink, wondering off-handedly when was the last time she’d consumed this much alcohol this quickly.

“Is this your first time in San Francisco?” He asked politely.

“Yes.”

“And what do you think so far?”

“It’s fascinating.”

“Truly,” his eyes met hers and the thought crossed her mind that there was another layer to his answer.

“More fascinating every minute,” she took another drink.

“Have you seen the upstairs gallery yet?”

“There’s more?”

“Come on. I want to get your take on the Urban Art series,” without thinking, he placed his hand on the small of her back, guiding her through the crowd. It was hard to concentrate on much with the heat radiating from the small of her back. She was fairly certain she made coherent conversation as they navigated the winding stairs.

Even after they reached the gallery, both seemed reluctant to break contact so he held her fingers loosely in his. The conversation flowed freely between them; Kate likened it to being on a raft being pulled deeper out to sea. It was too effortless and enjoyable for her to muster the ability to worry about how quickly it was happening.

Kate wasn’t sure how much time slipped by as they debated the merits and downfalls of each portrait in the upper gallery. She was particularly drawn to the artist’s unusual take on

graffiti, capturing images of others' art and playing that off the beauty of nature in the same shot. It made for an interesting contrast.

"This one feels a little pompous," she motioned to a cityscape that stood in stark contrast to the rest of the work.

"Pompous? How so?"

"Maybe that's not the right word. It seems like he's trying too hard."

"Really?"

"It's the sellout shot. Good for postcards but not for art. But then, I'm not an artist," she shrugged, feeling a little self conscious at her sudden outburst of opinion. "I guess it just doesn't fit with the other pieces. I wonder what he was thinking when he shot it."

"One does have to wonder," the man eyed the piece as if seeing it for the first time before turning to Kate again. "Want a drink?"

"Sure," Kate swallowed and took a deep breath. Any rational thoughts scattered when he gave her that lopsided grin. As a teenage girl, Kate had whiled away summer days by the pool reading historical romance novels. She'd wondered then what exactly rakish good looks meant. She was beginning to understand.

"Come on," he opened an office door and motioned for her to follow. She hesitated briefly, but reassured herself that if he intended to kill her, he wouldn't choose a room with giant windows overlooking the lower gallery.

Tossing the last reservation to the side, she followed him into the sprawling space. Her heart hammered wildly in her chest when the door clicked shut behind her. His nearness was much more palpable now.

Here it was easy to imagine they were the only two people at the party. His presence left little room for her attention to drift elsewhere. Sure, she was vaguely aware of the scenery—the low slung couch in the corner, the mini bar along the back wall. But she was acutely aware of the man pulling her into a kiss.

A long, deep and almost fierce kiss. The kind that made her toes curl. When he pulled away, he gave her a devilish grin.

"Have a seat; I'll get us a drink."

Kate nodded numbly and sank into a large leather sofa. Her heart rate slowly returned to normal as she listened to him rifling through cabinets. One of her long fingers rested on her lips; they were still throbbing from his kiss.

“I could have sworn there was more wine than this,” he called from the behind the bar.

“Whatever’s fine,” she called back distractedly. Reality was settling in and it made her a little uneasy. She allowed her eyes to drift around the room. They came to rest on a large print still visible from the main galley. It was the black and white of the little girl and the daisy.

Her breath caught. She was vaguely aware of the man saying that he was running down to the bar and would be right back. Her mind didn’t really register it, though. She was carried back to a memory from her wild and reckless youth.

College. A boy. The boy. The first time Kate had learned that if there was a consequence to be had for an action, it would happen to her. A summertime fling. A baby. How completely livid her mother had been.

And then, the pain. The baby was gone. People assured her it was for the best but she couldn’t bring herself to believe them. Her mother was even more furious. It was almost as if she didn’t believe that Kate had a miscarriage. Her relationship with her mother was torn and had taken years to repair. Kate vowed to color within the lines from that point on.

She glanced around the room. This was way outside the lines. With a gasp, the scale of what she was about to do splashed over Kate like cold water. She knew nothing about this man. He could be a freaking mass murderer for crying out loud.

Or he could break her heart all over again. She jumped up and scurried out the door. That’s as far as she got before the sight of several pairs of angry eyes stopped her short. Of course, his fan club must have seen that kiss.

She hadn’t thought about that. Her lips were still tingling from said kiss; she could still feel the sandpaper of his five o’clock shadow on her chin. It burned her as deeply as any branding iron now, under the heat of their glares.

Kate eyes darted between the women and the bar. The man was chatting easily with the bartender as he opened a bottle of wine. It occurred to her she had to get down the stairs and out the door without him seeing her, and she had one cork to do it. With a last look at the angry mob, she took a deep breath and began the trek, sticking as close to the wall as possible to avoid detection. In her mind’s eye, the stairs stretched on forever, the door loomed far in the distance.

Her eyes cut back to the bar. The cork was out of the bottle. He started to turn her way, only to be intercepted by one of his earlier companions.

Kate stopped, her mouth dropping into a little O. That woman certainly hadn't wasted any time to seize the opportunity. Kate allowed herself a fleeting satisfaction that he seemed to be trying to extract himself from the hyena's grasp, then remembered her original goal and picked up the pace. She stole another quick peek at him only to realize he'd been waylaid by another from the pack. She was fuming so intently she missed a step, causing her to slide down the last three. She managed to right herself on the landing, albeit with the assistance of a concerned elderly gentleman.

"Thank you, sorry sir," Kate whispered before practically running to the door that was now tauntingly within reach. She hadn't remembered the lower gallery as being this crowded. An expletive ran through her mind when she bumped into the first person. One escaped her lips when she got caught in a small group that actually started moving her in the wrong direction.

She had a sudden great empathy for salmon. Only she was swimming really hard upstream to avoid mating. Poor, stupid salmon. They either got eaten by a bear trying to get to the rendezvous or they died shortly thereafter. She'd debate the irony of that one later. For now, she ducked under a waiter's arm nearly knocking the tray out of his hand and made one final push for the door.

Kate sucked in the night air, feeling a sense of victory. She closed her eyes for just a second, allowing her breath to return to normal before crossing the street to her apartment building. It wasn't until she was safely inside her own apartment, leaning against the heavy wooden door that the tears came. She didn't even know his name.

Chapter Three

Kate didn't sleep much that night. Guilt and regret wrestled in her mind and robbed her of rest. How could she have done something so careless and stupid was replaced with why on earth had she left that beautiful man?

When her alarm went off, she was tired and cranky and felt every one of her years. A shower did little to improve her mood. Neither did the new clothes. She didn't even bother with the purple heels; they deserved better. She barely troubled herself with make-up and swept her hair up carelessly. Kate just had to get through this one day and she could slink back home to hide in the dark like the freak she was.

She left the wedding file on her kitchen table and had to go back for it. That meant passing the now-quiet gallery twice more. If buildings could laugh, she was pretty sure this one was mocking her. On her third trip by the doors, she noticed the sign in the window. The exhibit would be up through the next week. Kate would be happy when the outward reminders of her encounter would be gone.

She was so rattled she almost walked right by her coffee spot without stopping. By some miracle she made it to work on time, pleased to have a whole hour to collect her thoughts before the morning meeting. She spent her time leaving messages for caterers and rifling through the wedding file. Everything seemed to be in place there. She'd have to keep everyone on schedule and make sure nothing slipped off the radar, but most of the legwork was done.

She updated her Outlook calendar with reminders for fittings, taste tests and mailings while she waited for cheerful receptionists to transfer her to voicemail boxes. Once that was done, she began the process of figuring out which reporters in town mattered. She'd long since learned that the key to a successful event went beyond careful planning and ventured into well-thought out public relations.

She was soon joined by Liz and Jessica. If either noticed her bedraggled appearance, they were too kind to mention it, at first anyway.

"Long night?" Liz could no longer resist.

"To say the least," Kate closed her eyes only to quickly reopen them when his face danced across her mind.

"Oooh, sounds interesting," Jessica decided not to reprimand Liz for her poor manners when she realized there might be a good story involved.

"Yes, do tell."

"Temporary insanity is all I can say," Kate threw her hands up in the air. "I have absolutely no idea what came over me."

"What did you do?" Jessica leaned forward.

“I met a guy at the Gavin Nichols showing last night and almost did something really stupid,” Kate whispered breathlessly, unable to believe the words even as she spoke them. “When he went to grab a bottle of wine, I came to my senses and left.”

“Did you...” Liz started.

“No,” Kate jumped in quickly. “But I’m not sure if I’m relieved about that or not.”

“I’ve only known you for two days and just can’t picture you doing that,” Jessica shook her head.

“I’ve known me for thirty-two years and can’t picture it either,” Kate mimicked Jessica’s head shake. “I can’t even begin to describe the pull this guy had on me.”

A throat cleared nervously just as Liz and Jessica’s eyes widened. Kate’s heart sank and she could only guess who’d just overheard that statement. She fixed a smile on her face and turned to greet the bemused face of Jack Cooper. It was the smiling eyes next to his that made her blood run cold and her face heat up at once.

“Ladies, I’d like to introduce you to Gavin Nichols. Turns out he had a show here yesterday so he’s here even sooner than we expected,” Jack couldn’t keep the pleasure out of his voice. Kate rose mechanically to join the others in shaking Gavin’s hand. Jack was motioning to each of them. “Gavin, this is Jessica Reid, Liz Bellinger and Kate Yager.”

“Oh Katie and I go way back,” Gavin’s eyes sparkled with mischief and his lips seemed to twitch ever so slightly as he took her hand in his. She resisted the urge to yank it back at the electric current his touch created. “How have you been? It feels like ages since we last met.”

“Peachy,” Kate practically glowered at him. “And yourself?”

“Peachy,” at that he did chuckle. “You left a little abruptly at our last meeting.... I hope everything is okay.”

“Just fine, thanks,” she ground through her teeth.

“Looks like everyone else is ready for the meeting,” Liz came to her rescue. She might not know what was going on, but she could sense Kate’s need to be rescued.

“Just let me grab my notebook,” Kate motioned for the others to go on without her. Gavin looked ready to hang back but Jack was ushering him towards the conference room.

Jessica’s wide eyes demanded an explanation to which Kate simply shrugged helplessly. “It’s him,” she mouthed. A giggle escaped Liz and her hand flew to her mouth. Confusion

clouded Jack's eyes but Gavin's lips were twitching again. Kate made a mental note to ask him if he had a nervous tic or something.

Kate wasn't sure if it was fate or Gavin's maneuvering, but she found herself squeezed in next to him at the meeting.

"You could have told me who you are," she whispered fiercely as she sat down.

"That seemed less fun somehow," he shrugged with another smile.

"Weren't you supposed to be here next week?"

"Because I had the show this week... but I woke up this morning with the sudden urge to report to work early."

"Stop grinning like the village idiot," she snapped, wishing she hadn't been so quick to tell a stranger where she worked.

"Ouch, that was harsh," he winced a little but his smile didn't diminish.

"Sorry," she apologized out of habit before turning her attention to Jack. He began the meeting the moment everyone was in their seat and quickly dove into the status of the upcoming launch. He seemed pleasantly surprised that Kate had booked a venue for the next two events and she flushed with an odd pleasure at having made him happy with her.

The interchange wasn't lost on Gavin. But then, Kate thought ruefully, nothing seems to be lost on him today. It was hard for Kate to concentrate with him so close, too. He might be infuriating, but he still smelled the same as he did last night. The same heat rolled off him, its long fingers licking at her skin. She struggled to make sense of the words people were saying but they all came across as incoherent as Charlie Brown's teacher. She just hoped no one turned their attention to her any time soon.

Her wish was granted and she was eventually free to seek fresh air. She was making a bee line for the door when she was intercepted by Tara.

"Kate, I'm so glad I caught you," Tara smiled warmly as she reached for Kate's hands. Kate wanted to pull away, but allowed herself to be held hostage. She smiled patiently and waited for Tara's next words. "I got a call from the caterer and they wondered if I could swing by with my new wedding planner. They have some shrimp concoction they want us to try.

"Oh I don't know; I really want to get a start on the launch party...." Kate hesitated.

"Nonsense, we can talk about the wedding on the way. You need a break from this place."

While Kate wanted to argue that she barely got to spend any time in this place, the thought occurred to her that it would get her away from Gavin.

“I’ll go get my purse.”

“Great!”

Kate grabbed her purse and waved a quick goodbye to Liz and Jessica.

“Oh don’t do this to me,” Liz protested.

“Lunch?” Jessica called out hopefully as Kate scurried off.

“Yes, let’s all do lunch,” Gavin called gleefully behind her. “Don’t worry though; I’ll pass the time catching these two up on everything.”

Dang it. She hadn’t thought about that. Surely he wouldn’t. Right? She spent the first part of the drive worrying about what Gavin would say. Kate had exactly two friends in this world at this point and she wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of losing them.

The more Tara chatted excitedly about the wedding, the more Kate’s thoughts shifted to how much she didn’t like her soon-to-be step mom. She didn’t feel like trying to sort out whether that was a fair assessment or not. The fact that the woman was her age—or in her age group at least—and getting ready to marry Kate’s dad was enough.

Kate just found him, she wasn’t ready to share. She was just now coming to accept that he was her father. She wondered off-handedly what Tara would think if she knew who Kate really was. Would it shatter Tara’s fairy tale? Probably. That realization made Kate feel a little dirty. She didn’t want to be the person to ruin someone else’s happily-ever-after.

Kate made the decision right then to keep her mouth shut until after the wedding. Better yet, until after the honeymoon. Besides, how could she be sure Jack was her father? Maybe the fact that he was a moss-green eyed boy from her mother’s past who’d haunted her for more than 30 years was just a coincidence. Sure, that had to be it.

“You okay today?” The pretty blonde eyed Kate for a minute after they’d parked the car.

“Yeah. Just a little tired.” Well, it was sort of true anyway.

“Are you ready for this?” Tara’s eyes lit up. “These caterers are amazing!”

“Lead the way,” Kate climbed out of the little blue BMW and stretched.

It didn’t take her long to agree with Tara’s assessment. These caterers were amazing. With the wedding menu settled, Tara offered to spend the rest of the morning introducing Kate to some of her favorite caterers. Tara had impeccable taste. Kate found herself not hating her quite

so much as the morning wore on. What would have taken days on her own was accomplished in hours, and Kate felt her spirits lifting. In fact, her heart felt almost light as they made their way back to the office.

She was in such a good mood, she promised herself not to allow Gavin to get the better of her. He would not determine the tenor of her story. Eventually his effect would wear off and they could become friends. She just had to outlast her hormones. It could be done. She wasn't a teenager, after all.

He was lounging in her chair, chatting easily with Liz and Jessica when Kate walked back into her office. His feet were propped on her desk. Kate glowered. Something about those feet propped on her spotless, orderly desk caused little red dots to dance in front of her vision. She knocked them to the side with a disdainful look.

"Your foot rest is over there," she pointed to his already-messy desk. "This is where I do something called work."

Liz and Jessica exchanged meaningful looks and Gavin just chuckled.

"Where are we going for lunch?" he reminded her.

"I'm not hungry," she deleted an email with more force than necessary.

"Nonsense, we have to take Gavin to lunch on his first day," Jack declared as he entered the office at precisely the wrong time.

"Silly me, what was I thinking?" Kate smiled prettily at Jack, clamping down firmly on her annoyance.

"Who wants vegetarian?" Jessica offered brightly.

"Not me – is there anywhere to get a burger in this town?" Gavin's stomach growled as if to emphasize his point. Kate thought wistfully about the good old days – back before she turned thirty and her metabolism shut down – when she could eat things like burgers. At that moment, she could have easily hated Gavin for his lanky form that seemed untouched by the fact that he still got to eat things like bacon cheeseburgers. Wherever they went, she knew she'd be ordering a salad. Oh, she'd tried to fight it, to ignore the fact that her diet needed to change. At first anyway. Then she'd packed on twenty pounds that had been excruciating to take back off. So now she ordered salads and dreamed of burgers. When had she become that girl?

She was careful to sit across from Gavin. It made it harder to ignore his eyes never leaving her, but easier to ignore his scent and the jitters caused by his close proximity.

“So the question is,” Jack began around a mouthful of bacon cheeseburger. “What angle are we taking with this first issue?”

“What about working the launch party in?” Liz suggested.

“The launch party that won’t be happening until after the magazine is written?” Jack teased.

“What about the preparation process, though?” Liz persisted.

“Yeah, we could write about Kate tasting the flavor of the town to plan the party,” Jessica added excitedly.

“Oh I don’t know...,” Kate didn’t like the direction things were heading.

“No, I like this,” Jack chewed thoughtfully.

“You know, I think it’s great. I can follow her around to get the photos,” Gavin offered helpfully. “I’ll never leave her side.”

“I don’t think that’s...,” Kate’s protest was cut off.

“I really like it. We could carry this through several issues – San Francisco firsts and all that.”

“Don’t you think people would get tired of seeing my face?” Kate suggested miserably.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Gavin responded quietly.

“Well, I think it’s settled, then,” Jack added happily.

“This should be good,” Liz couldn’t help the glimmer that had come to her eye.

“Just great,” Kate agreed miserably.

Chapter Four

The nights were always the worst; they stretched aching before her. No amount of organization could make them move any faster. Never one to waste time on television, Kate tried to watch an old movie but lost patience with it halfway through.

She wound up sorting through the menus she’d gotten from the caterer over her own meal of Chinese takeout, consoling herself with the knowledge that Jack would be pleased with her progress. She took the batteries out of the clock on the wall – its incessant ticking was slowly driving her crazy. That helped. A little.

And then blessedly, it was morning. She'd been in too sour a mood the day before to give the purple pumps a proper inaugural run. Today, she determined, would be different. She donned her new charcoal slacks, violet silk cami and the matching deep gray fitted jacket with piping. Almost reverently, she slid the heels on, taking a moment to admire them before heading out the door.

Her contentment at being in her cozy little office surrounded by a steady hum of activity dissipated briefly when Gavin ambled in. He greeted her with a wink. She greeted him with a stiff nod.

"You know, you could stand to loosen up," Gavin cocked his head to the side and sized Kate up.

"You could stand to tighten up," she retorted.

"How so?" His eyes widened innocently.

"Your hair looks like you just rolled out of bed," Kate blurted out the first thing she could think of.

"Yours looks like it should be covered by a habit," he countered. Her hand flew instinctively to her neat ponytail before she could stop herself.

"I haven't had much time to do anything with it lately," she offered feebly.

"Me either. Completely swamped."

"You know, you've gotten a lot done for the launch party," Liz began innocently. Kate froze, her eyes locked with Jessica's in a silent plea for help. Jessica's head dipped to hide a grin. "You two could totally take some time this morning and go together to get haircuts."

"That's not funny," Kate shook her head. "In fact, it's absurd."

"I'll do it if you will," Gavin challenged defiantly.

"Really, Gavin, this isn't third grade."

"You know, I think she gets kind of mean when she's cornered," he whispered noisily to Liz and Jessica.

"He'll just keep teasing you until you do it," Jessica told her.

Kate hesitated. Jessica did have a point. And hadn't Kate debated a haircut just two days ago? Why make this more painful than it had to be? "Fine," she finally caved in. "We'll go after the morning meeting."

"So do I get to choose your hairstyle?" Gavin could barely contain his anticipation.

“Do I get to choose yours?” Kate arched an eyebrow and waited for a response.

“Sure,” he leaned back abruptly. “Why not?”

“Alrighty then. Why not?” Dang. She hadn’t counted on that.

For the second day in a row, she had a hard time concentrating during the morning meeting. She had been right; Jack was pleased with her progress on the launch party. It was already taking shape and there was no excuse to not begin her San Francisco excursions with Gavin.

After the meeting she drug her feet through checking messages and returning emails, only to have Jessica remind her that she could always do that later. With one last look at the traitors who were barely suppressing their giggles, she followed Gavin out of their office. Defeated, her shoulders slumped as she trudged out the door, every bit the lamb being led to slaughter.

“So, what exactly do you have in mind?” She was almost afraid to ask.

“Haven’t decided yet.”

“Would you tell me if you had?”

“Nope.”

“Figures,” Kate sighed heavily. Come to think of it, what would she do to Gavin? She toyed briefly with the idea of having them give him a mullet, but quickly tossed the idea aside for two reasons. Retaliation was one, and more importantly, she couldn’t bear to ruin her own view like that. Not that she was about to admit that second reason to anyone.

The idea of retaliation made her realize that there was a certain amount of strategy to be employed here. If she let him off the hook too soon, then he might not be encumbered by anything as noble as fair play. He might be free to give her hot-pink spikes. Well, spikes at least. She hadn’t agreed to have her hair colored.

“Careful,” he cautioned, humor tinting his voice. Kate was dismayed to realize that she had been so intently debating her strategy she had nearly smacked into the glass door he was now opening for her.

“Thanks,” she nearly winced at the harshness of her own voice. Since when had she become such a shrew? He didn’t seem to notice, he was busy sweet-talking the receptionist, trying to garner them an appointment. Kate held her breath, hopeful that he wouldn’t succeed. When he sauntered back towards her, his smile was much too triumphant for her liking.

“They can get us in at six o’clock,” he proudly informed her.

“That’s almost eight hours from now,” she looked at him as if he were insane.

"It usually takes weeks to get in," he grabbed her hand lightly and tugged her out the door.
"Besides, this is perfect. I have a few ideas for how to spend the day."

"Is that so?" She narrowed her eyes, unsure if she trusted his ideas.

"Come on, you're going to love it."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"Spoil sport."

"Flip nut."

"What?" He paused, unsure if he'd heard her correctly.

"Flip nut?" She repeated.

"I'm telling myself that's an American term of endearment."

"That's exactly what it is," she patted his shoulder patronizingly.

"We're here," he stopped abruptly as the road ended.

"Why are we at the pier?" She eyed him nervously.

"Well, I know we were supposed to start with things having to do with the launch party, but you've come so far on that already. It wouldn't hurt to get started on the next issue..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Okay, okay, you caught me. This just looks fun."

"What looks fun?"

"Kayaking," he dazzled her with his smile. "Come on. But you have to promise not to tip; I have my camera with me."

"No way." Kate dug her heels in and shook her head firmly. "Absolutely not."

"Are you scared?"

"This isn't third grade," she reminded him for a second time that morning.

"Seriously, I understand if this kind of thing is just way too spontaneous for you. I get it."

"What do you get?"

"You don't brush your teeth without scheduling it on your Blackberry, do you? What about showers?"

"I am perfectly capable of tending to personal hygiene without the assistance of my handheld."

"So, where's the line?"

"What line?"

“We’ve established you can be spontaneously hygienic... but you won’t get on a boat without proper notice...even if it’s part of your job. I’m just wondering where the line is.”

“This isn’t for work.”

“Sure it is,” he’d moved even closer to Kate; his nearness was driving her to distraction.

“No it’s not. It’s for your own sadistic enjoyment. Nice try,” Kate could feel her face heating up.

“You’re right; should we call Jack and ask his opinion?” The look he gave her was pure innocence. The one she bathed him with was something else entirely – more like loathing. She toyed with the mental image of using one of her heels as a weapon.

“That’s fighting dirty,” she muttered.

“True,” he agreed, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

“Really dirty,” she folded her arms across her chest.

“Yep.” He began to dial the phone.

“Fine,” she heaved a sigh and stalked passed him. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Daddy’s little girl,” he triumphantly pocketed his phone.

“Excuse me?” She stopped dead in her tracks and turned to face him.

“Oh come on, it’s pretty obvious you want to please Daddy. I get it with the last names – don’t want to show nepotism and all that.” He strolled towards the door.

“What makes you think Jack Cooper is my father?” She moved to catch up with him.

“Please tell me you haven’t told anyone that.”

“Sorry,” he seemed taken aback by her distress. “The mannerisms, the eyes.... I just assumed it was common knowledge everyone pretended they didn’t have.”

Kate sank onto a nearby bench, leaning forward and sucking in great big gulps of air. So this is what a panic attack felt like. Did Jack know? Jessica? Liz? Were they all playing her stupid little game out of kindness? Tara? Tara couldn’t know.

Gavin stood in front of her, unsure how best to proceed. He finally settled on sitting quietly next to her and rubbing her back gently. The light touch was enough to reignite the electric currents in her veins. Maybe not his intended response, but it diverted her mind from its crazy ramblings nonetheless.

Calmer, she reassessed the situation. Surely Jack would have confronted her had he known. What about Liz and Jessica? Was her confession of an almost one-night stand enough to

engender that kind of loyalty? Someone would have said something. But this did present a new dilemma – if Gavin noticed, someone else was bound to. Could she really keep the secret until after the wedding? Should she just slink away and hope they all forgot her?

The thought of leaving her new home was even more revolting than the thought of being discovered. She took a deep breath and whispered, “He doesn’t know.”

“Oh,” Gavin blinked, not sure what to make of that. “Well that explains a lot.”

“At least I think he doesn’t,” Kate amended.

“Oh. How did you....”

“So are we going to kayak or what?” She jumped up abruptly, effectively closing the conversation. He obliged by following her quietly. By the time they’d reached the vendor, he’d regained his train of thought enough to procure them a boat.

“No kayaks left,” he told her apologetically. “But I know how much you wanted to go out, so I got us a canoe.”

“Wow. That’s a relief,” she told him dryly.

“Don’t worry, we’ll stay in the family fun zone – it’s perfectly safe.”

“I’m not scared,” her chin jutted out just a bit. Okay, maybe she was just a little. Were there sharks in the bay?

“I even got you a plastic bag for your purse,” he proudly produced an airtight container, dropping his wallet in it before handing it to Kate. “Just in case.”

“I can’t believe you’re making me do this,” Kate muttered, immensely proud when she got into the boat and away from the pier without tipping. She couldn’t help eyeing his camera nervously. How much would it cost to replace that thing if it did end up in the bay?

He still blessed her with silence, although it was somewhat unnerving because she got the impression he was sizing her up or maybe just processing it all still. But even that couldn’t keep her from appreciating the sheer beauty of the bay. There was something magical about being out here, a part of it all, instead of just watching from a distance. She was startled by the click of his camera.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” she frowned.

“As pretty as you are when you pout, it’s ruining my shot. Try not to scowl at me so much.”

“I’m not pouting,” she protested, her mind vaguely registering the fact that his accent could make an insult sound seductive. He could tell her that her family was comprised of three-headed

pigs and she would think it sounded sexy if he said it in that accent. “Okay, maybe I am just a little bit. But you really shouldn’t ruin this beautiful moment taking pictures of me.”

“It’ll be kind of hard to do a photo shoot of you experiencing San Francisco if I can’t take pictures of you. Besides, there was a youthful innocence in your face just then that was quite captivating.”

“Youthful? Ha,” she practically snorted. Sore subject these days – being surrounded by beautiful twenty-somethings was making her feel really old.

“Yes, youthful. Why, how old are you?”

“You’re not supposed to ask a lady her age.”

“Ladies aren’t supposed to snort.”

“Fine, I’m thirty-two,” Kate shuddered a little when she uttered the words aloud. When had she become a salad-eating, burger-dreaming woman who feared growing old? Her self-perspective was changing so fast she could hardly keep up these days.

“How have you managed to stay out of the home this long?” he tried to be serious but couldn’t help laughing.

“Oh shut up,” she snarled then straightened. “Wait a second, how old are you?”

“Twenty-five,” he stretched his legs out in front of him, not a care in the world. Kate stared at him in horror. Was cradle-robbing genetic? She was this worked up over a guy who was barely out of college?

“What?” he eyed her warily when the shock didn’t quickly dissipate.

“I didn’t realize. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize...” she stammered.

“What?”

“I... You’re so young.”

“Well you’re not exactly ancient,” he reminded her.

“What does the name Rick Springfield mean to you?”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry, wrong answer – Jesse’s Girl.”

“Have you completely lost your mind?”

“Quick, name the first Aerosmith song you can think of.”

“Pink.”

“Really? Pink? That’s the first one?”

“You pressured me!”

“It’s not only a wrong answer; it’s a bad wrong answer.”

“You’ve totally lost me.”

“We are from two different generations. I’m X, you’re Y.”

“There’s a joke in there about chromosomes, but I think I’ll just hold onto it for now.”

“Do,” she leveled her gaze on him, confident that this new knowledge would strengthen her resolve to stay away from this particular bad boy. Then he cocked his head to the side and gave her that crooked little grin and her heart went on another rampage while her stomach completely erupted with butterflies.

“So Grandma,” he began slowly, waiting to see if she’d take the bait and continuing only when he was sure she wasn’t. “Why haven’t you told Jack he’s your father? How long have you known?”

“That again? Can’t we talk about this later?”

“You evade a lot.”

“True,” she pondered that, acknowledging the truth in his statement. “I suspected it when I came here. I didn’t know for sure until I met him on Monday... the eyes and all. It’s uncanny.”

“So why don’t you tell him?”

“What would that do to his relationship with Tara? What if he didn’t want me around after that?”

“Do you think he won’t want you?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted in a small voice. “Maybe he didn’t want me before. Maybe that’s why my mom left.”

Gavin sensed the pain her words caused so he let the subject drop, for the moment. “I don’t know Grandma; you’re pretty cute... for a grandma that is....”

“That’s it.” Kate pulled her oar in and lunged for him. She wasn’t sure what she’d do with him when she got there, but visions of her hands and his neck danced through her head.

“Kate, the boat,” he warned.

“Should have thought of that,” she retorted even as she felt the boat tip. A split-second later she felt the jolting cold of the bay surround her. She came up sputtering. Gavin was soaked through but somehow managed to hold his camera above water. Together they righted the boat.

She noted with a certain amount of relief that the bag with their things was still securely tied in place.

He set the camera on the seat and hopped in – how he did so without tipping again was a wonder to Kate. Following suit was a more daunting task than it seemed. He grabbed her hand and leaned back, preparing to balance the boat as she clambered aboard. Once there, she sat down and contented herself to glare at him for a full minute before she realized she was only wearing one purple heel.

“My shoe!”

“Excuse me?” That infernal lip-twitch nearly drove her to violence.

“My brand new shoe... it’s gone,” Kate stared in disbelief at her bare foot.

“Hey, you lunged.”

“You called me grandma.”

“Because I wanted you to see how ridiculous you were being.”

“You said Pink.”

“You’re crazy. Fortunately for you, I have a thing for crazy women. Especially old ones.”

She debated pouncing on him again but he held his hands up in surrender.

“Sorry, I couldn’t pass that up. It wasn’t fair,” he admitted.

“Or nice,” she added. “Do you have any idea how much of my grocery budget I spent on that shoe? Go get it.”

“You go get it,” Gavin tossed back, and then quickly amended. “Kate you’re not going to find it. It’s at the bottom of the bay by now.”

“Maybe it’ll float back to the surface,” she was getting desperate.

“Yeah, I’m not waiting around for that one.”

“That’s two-hundred dollars worth of shoe!”

“Why did you spend four hundred dollars on a pair of shoes?”

“Because I was being frivolous. Why do you care how much I spent on my shoes? You and your stupid ideas. Canoeing. Really. Who does that?”

“Only the insane, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Kate leveled her fiercest gaze on him. He ducked his head too late to hide a smile.

“Should we go back so we can get some dry clothes?” He suggested.

“Probably. You look pretty bad,” Kate surprised herself with a giggle.

“You’re kind of bedraggled yourself,” he chuckled. Their eyes met for a moment then they both laughed out loud – and kept laughing the entire way back to the pier. By the time she clambered out of the boat, her sides ached from the giggling and the cold.

She did pout a little when she had to take off her lone shoe to walk evenly.

“Sorry about your shoe,” Gavin tried to look sincere.

“No you’re not,” Kate rolled her eyes. “But it was a really good shoe.”

“Come on, my place is right around the corner and you’re barefoot.”

Chapter Five

Kate was curled up on Gavin’s couch, sipping a cup of hot tea and waiting for him to reappear. He’d allowed her the first hot shower. Now she sat in his sweatpants and tee-shirt while he did the same. She had been happy to note that she swam in his clothes and had to admit she’d be a little sad when hers were dry.

His building looked a little like hers, but definitely had a heftier price tag. His loft was easily three levels and the entire back wall was windows. The ceiling seemed to soar above her. It was bright, clean and sleek where hers was darker with exposed brick and wood. Artwork and photographs hung on the walls. It was obvious this immaculate room didn’t get much use. The kitchen and bedroom seemed to tell a different story. Kate could see the clutter from her vantage point. She couldn’t begin to imagine functioning in that kind of mess. Even dwelling on it now made her a little claustrophobic.

And then Gavin reappeared to lean casually in the doorframe of his room. He seemed to be contemplating something. The possibilities made Kate’s stomach do a flip-flop.

“Where are we going for lunch?”

Ah, so it was his stomach on his mind. Just as well.

“Now that you mention it, I’m starving,” Kate sat down her cup and stretched lazily.

“Nothing like a good swim to work up an appetite.”

Her temporary absence of a scowl earned her a bright smile from Gavin. “Well we can’t let you starve. How about I make us some omelets?”

“Have you perfected your breakfast skills for the ladies?” She smirked.

“It’s not a revolving door you know,” he rolled his eyes.

“You seemed pretty accomplished the other night,” she wanted to wince at the memory of what she’d almost done.

“Do you often follow guys up to their studio?” he asked pointedly.

“Certainly not,” she gasped. “I never do that kind of thing. Why do you think I came to my senses and high-tailed it out of there?”

“That wasn’t very nice of you to sneak out like you’d just lifted the family silver, by the way,” he scolded gently. “But if it was a first for you, why do you assume it wasn’t for me?”

“I saw the crowd around you,” she reminded him.

“Ah, them,” he actually blushed. “They didn’t want me. They wanted the version of me created by their imaginations. It’s a little lonely, actually.”

“Oh,” she pursed her lips in thought. “Do I believe that?”

“I can’t tell you that. But it is what it is,” he ducked his head in his fridge and reemerged with some eggs and bacon. “I promise you those women could care less that I’m the youngest of four boys, I’m crazy about my nieces and nephews, and I still shudder with fear when my mother says my middle name because I know it means I’m in trouble.”

Kate realized that she hadn’t even thought about his family once in the past few days. Was she as bad as the crowd of admirers? Now that he’d mentioned it, she knew that she did care – very much so. She padded barefoot over to the island in his kitchen and found a perch on a stool.

“Tell me more.”

The corner of his lip pulled into a smile and he nodded once.

“Want some coffee?”

“Please.”

“Gabriel is the oldest. He has three girls – the youngest is the little girl in that black and white with the daisy.”

Kate nodded, well aware of the picture he spoke of. “I love that one. What’s her name?”

“Emma.”

“Very pretty.”

“Gabriel and his wife have been married for almost ten years now and they’re obnoxiously happy. Devon is second. He and his wife have two sons. Their relationship is a bit more... tumultuous but I think they like it that way.”

“Tumultuous can be entertaining,” Kate acknowledged, her eyes tracing the contours of his back through the tee shirt he’d thrown on after his shower. It still clung to him from the moisture. Her fingers itched to follow the path of her eyes.

“At times,” he turned to meet her gaze. “But comfortable like a favorite pair of jeans is good, too.”

“So who is number three?” Kate smiled dreamily; his stare was like a drug.

“Darrin,” he impulsively reached out and touched her cheek lightly. “He’s the family daredevil. He and his wife are too busy climbing mountains and going on safaris to have kids. It’s driving my mum crazy. With Jill’s fiery red hair, Mum was really hoping for a redheaded grandbaby.”

“Then what does she say about you being single? Sounds like your brothers were all paired off by your age.”

“She wants me to be happy,” he smiled ruefully. “And to find someone already.”

“Does she realize twenty-five is still young by today’s standards?” Kate returned his smile.

“Do you realize thirty-two is?” he countered. “She does, really. And your lunch is ready.”

“About time,” she teased, gratefully accepting the plate he handed her. “This smells amazing.”

“You smell amazing,” he dipped his head to graze her ear with his lips. Her heart rate spiked again. She wondered if it would ever stop doing that. She hoped not.

“You’re incorrigible,” she accused lightly, dipping her head to concentrate on her food. Maybe she should go back to being angry at him before things got out of hand. After lunch though; she was enjoying this too much to give it up just yet. “So I almost hate to ask, but what’s next on today’s agenda?”

“I’m still thinking about it. I have a few ideas. It might be a good idea to retrace the steps you’ve already taken to get some photos to go with the story Jessica is writing.”

“She’s not writing about me, is she?” Kate’s eyes widened.

“Well, she’s writing about you experiencing San Francisco for the first time. You should read it, it’s very good.”

“Everything Jessica writes is very good. She’s amazing.”

“You guys have quite the mutual admiration society going on there, don’t you?” Gavin observed.

“Yeah, we kind of do. I’ve never liked people so thoroughly and so instantly as Jessica and Liz. I think that’s part of why I don’t want to tell Jack... my suspicions. What if he sends me away? I don’t know where I’d go, to be honest.”

“So your mom...”

“Died,” Kate choked on the word. “She had cancer.”

“And she never told you who your father was?”

“No. Or why he wasn’t around. She muttered Jack’s name one night, when the morphine was really kicking. I started trying to figure out who he was and long story short, here I am.”

“Any other family?”

“Not worth mentioning. A self-absorbed aunt and uncle. No brothers or sisters. Just little ole’ me,” she tried to shrug off the crack in her voice.

“Friends?”

“This is just embarrassing now,” she shook her head, unwilling to answer.

“So you keep everyone outside the wall, not just me?”

“It’s not like that. I had friends. They just sort of drifted away the longer my mom’s illness wore on. I didn’t do much but work and take care of her.”

“Then they weren’t friends.”

“Maybe I was just in the wrong spot. It feels different here.”

“And precariously balanced on Jack’s mood,” he frowned. “I think we should look into that. Let’s see if we can find out why they split up. Maybe he’ll be really happy to find you.”

“I’m four years younger than his bride-to-be,” she reminded him. “Somehow I doubt he’ll be thrilled about that.”

“And he might not care,” he argued. “And for the record, we aren’t them.”

Kate bit her lip. There was no denying the thought had crossed her mind – her father’s young bride made her feel that much guiltier about the age difference between her and Gavin.

“Do I have to be in any of these pictures today? Please tell me no, I don’t have a stitch of makeup on.”

“Maybe one or two,” he played with a lock of hair that slipped over her shoulder.

“When we walk out that door, the spell is broken and you have to keep your hands to yourself again,” she eyed him warily.

“Then I’d better do this while I have the chance.” In one fluid motion, he stood and pulled her to her feet and to him. His lips claimed hers hungrily. His arms held her tightly to him, her own hands held his shoulders as if clinging for dear life.

The need grew with the kiss, swelling to a painful, all-encompassing wave of emotion. With an almost-pained expression on his face, he ended the moment, resting his forehead against hers. Their breath came in great heaves at first and they stood there quietly, waiting for equilibrium to return.

“I shouldn’t have given you the heads up,” her eyelashes fluttered.

“Do you wish I hadn’t done that?” his voice was gentle as a feather.

“No. Heaven help me, I don’t wish that,” her eyes met his.

“If you don’t want this to go further because it goes against your moral code, I’ll respect that,” he stroked her cheek with his thumb. “But don’t put me outside a wall I can’t climb because you’re scared. That’s not fair to either of us.”

“Is it really that easy? Do you expect me to say ‘Okay then’ and just forget years of hard-wiring?” She wanted to laugh. She wanted to cry.

“I know it’s not that easy. I’m just saying give me a fighting chance. I think I’m falling for you.”

“You can’t possibly know that,” she shook her head. “You barely know me.”

“Don’t dismiss me like a schoolboy with a crush. If you really believe that, then let me get to know you. If you’re right, then I’ll get bored and go away on my own.”

“I’ll think about it,” she promised. It was all she could give. What if he got bored and she didn’t?

“That’s all I’m asking,” he stole another quick kiss and stepped back before his will power slipped. He busied himself tossing dishes in the sink for later while Kate studied him thoughtfully. It was amazing how his smile could take his face from dark and brooding to boyishly earnest in an instant. She wanted to believe him. Wanted to, but wasn’t sure she dared. With a start, she realized that he was walking away from the pile of dishes in the sink.

“I can do those,” she jumped to her feet and offered.

“Don’t worry about it,” he waved them off.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” she admitted.

“You’re joking, right?”

“No, not really. How can you just walk away from a pile of dishes like that?”

“Quite easily, actually,” he grinned at her.

“It’ll only take me a minute to wash them,” she urged.

“You want to wash my dishes for me?”

“You cooked for me.”

“Somehow I don’t think that really matters. It’s really bothering you that much?”

“Kinda, yeah. Besides, I did something reckless earlier. You sort of owe me this one.”

“So I owe it to you to let you wash my dishes?”

“You can help if it means that much to you,” she shrugged, moving to grab a dishcloth before he could protest.

“So this is like tit for tat? I do something responsible, you do something reckless?” His eyes brightened.

“I don’t know if I’d say that.”

“No, I’m pretty sure you did. You could be on to something here.” The tone in his voice made her nervous. “What do I get if I clean my room?”

“From what I can see, that’s worth something big,” she giggled in spite of herself.

“It’s a deal,” he announced.

“Wait, I...”

“Nope, a deal’s a deal.”

“Oh forget it.”

Chapter Six

Once they’d swung by Kate’s apartment so she could drop off her lonely purple pump and grab a new pair of shoes, it had been an entertaining afternoon, popping in and out of San Francisco hot spots. It had been fun.

Maybe Kate thought Gavin would lose his nerve about the haircut. Maybe she'd managed to forget the six o'clock appointment looming before her. Either way, now that it was a quarter after six and she found herself leaned back uncomfortably with her head being washed in mango shampoo, her surly attitude returned with full force. She didn't want to take it out on the hair stylist, so she sat in silence. When she heard another stylist asking Gavin how he'd like his hair cut, she sat up so fast she bumped heads with the woman leaning over her.

"Sorry," she winced and rubbed her head. "I get to decide that question."

"Fair enough, since I get to decide yours," he leaned back against the sink, folding his hands casually across his stomach.

"Shoot, I shouldn't have reminded him," she muttered.

"Don't worry, I didn't forget."

"So how does he want his haircut?" The stylist focused her question on Kate.

"I don't want to say. Strategy," Kate told her apologetically.

"Not sure how this is going to work, then," the woman frowned.

"I'll tell you after he tells her," Kate shrugged. "Sorry."

"And wind up with a mullet? I don't think so," Gavin added from his sink.

"How about we show you pictures?" Kate suggested.

"Whatever," the woman rolled her eyes. Gavin chuckled. Kate settled back in the sink, belatedly remembering she still had shampoo in her hair. It wasn't fair, he seemed much too relaxed. Either he didn't really think she'd stick him with a mullet, or he didn't care. How infuriating. Much subterfuge later, the hairstyles in question were underway. Gavin's continued easy demeanor only served to further rattle Kate's nerves.

"So I've been thinking about your parents," he struck up a conversation with her.

"And?" she asked hesitantly, unsure if this was the best venue for this discussion.

"I think maybe Devon could help out there. He's good at tracking things down. I bet he could get us on the right path anyway."

"I don't want to put anybody out." She kept her eyes firmly shut, refusing to look until it was over.

"He won't mind. It'll be like a game to him, a puzzle to solve. Do you mind if I ask him to start digging?" He posed the last question quietly and waited for her response.

"I guess not," she allowed. "I don't have any idea where to start."

“Almost done,” Gavin’s stylist got out the hair dryer. Kate ventured to open one eye, hoping for a sneak peak. All she could see was the stylist’s back. The blow dryer started on her own hair and she clamped her eyes shut again. And then the moment came. She tried to gauge how much lighter her head felt, but couldn’t tell a difference. She opened her eyes and couldn’t stop the bubble of laughter that erupted.

“Well that was rather anti-climatic,” she looked from her reflection to his and back again.

“A trim. We went through all those theatrics and gave each other a trim,” Gavin added his own chuckle.

“We shaped it, too,” one of the stylists scowled.

“Oh, I’m sorry – you did a wonderful job. I really love it,” Kate assured her genuinely. She did like how her hair framed her face, how it laid in somewhat messy layers now. It was her hair, just better. Just like his was his, just a little shorter, a little less mad-scientist.

They paid, tipping well, and left the salon still laughing about their chosen hairstyles.

“So I guess this is goodnight,” Kate sighed as they stood on the sidewalk.

“You’re not getting off that easy,” he tapped the end of her nose playfully. “We’re meeting the girls at John Collins. I’ll grab a few more shots; we’ll grab a few drinks.”

“Oh. Won’t I be the oldest person there?” Kate frowned.

“Just leave your walker with the door guy and no one will know.”

Kate made a face at him, but allowed herself to be pulled along behind them. She should be running back to the safety of her apartment. But it wouldn’t be so dangerous with the girls there, right?

Except that with the girls and their significant others there, suddenly it made her feel more like she was part of a couple and Gavin was the other half. It didn’t help that everyone treated them that way. As much as she wanted to relent to the ease of it all, she just couldn’t seem to.

Kate had a really expensive shoe sitting alone in her closet as evidence for how things often turned out when she acted impulsively. It never ended well. Her responses became stiffer as the evening wore on and she realized she was putting more and more distance between herself and Gavin. When it became awkwardly evident to the entire party, Kate excused herself miserably and made for the door. To her surprise, or was it dismay, he let her go.

She cursed herself for being so broken, but couldn't see a way past it. To make matters worse, the person she most wanted to talk to about the confusing jumble that comprised her thoughts was her mother, and her mother was gone.

So she dealt with the confusion the way any rational person would, she shoved it to the side and sat down with a takeout pizza to catch up on email. Then she killed some time shopping online for reporter gifts. She wanted to get her name out there as a good experience before she needed them to run her stories about the launch party. She knew it was past time to start taking her selected reporters to lunch.

The next morning she worked from home until it was time for the morning meeting, did her absolute best to ignore Gavin during the meeting, and called Tara to arrange wedding planning for the entire day. The looks Liz and Jessica gave her as she flew out the door said that they were going to want answers. The only problem was she didn't have any.

Kate was very proud of how well she avoided Gavin over the next week. Maybe it was luck, maybe it was skill, or maybe he was giving her space. Any way you looked at it, she practically skipped home Friday evening.

She'd survived that first weekend by wandering around China Town on Saturday and taking the bus over to the Pacific Coast on Sunday. There was so much to see, she barely felt the twinge of loneliness.

When she was back at work, she'd not only expertly ignored Gavin—she'd even done a pretty good job of staying out of the same room as Jack. Maybe the similar mannerism thing wouldn't be as noticeable if they weren't standing right next to each other. That did make it harder to learn much about who Jack was, but she had a surprising resource in Tara. Once she got over the weird-factor, she found Tara to be an eager and useful fountain of information.

She'd done so much work on Jack and Tara's wedding in the past days, she found herself behind on the launch party. Now it was Friday and she was home. She took a deep breath, savoring how clean and orderly everything was here in her haven. Then she quickly changed into her comfiest pajamas and sat down at her computer, determined to at least catch up on email – again – and proof the launch party invites that should have been sent to the printer already. Liz would never complain, but still Kate felt guilty.

With that done, she issued her first lunch invitations to the local reporters that seemed to matter most to her cause. Liz and Jessica had helped her line up the best restaurants to take them to. If all went as planned, she'd have lunches set up for the next couple of weeks and some really good contacts to show for it.

When she'd completely caught up on work, she decided to nose around the Internet a little to see what she could learn about either of her parents that might link one to the other. She wasn't sure if Devon would still be helping her since she'd been avoiding Gavin like the plague.

A knock at the door startled her and she glanced at the clock on her computer. Eight o'clock. That's odd. She looked around the apartment briefly for a weapon, her search interrupted by Jessica's voice.

"Kate it's us."

"Yeah, let us in," Liz added.

"What are you guys doing here?" Kate wondered aloud when they filed in past her.

"Some welcome," Liz teased.

"You know you're always welcome," Kate rolled her eyes.

"We're taking you out," Jessica announced, handing her a hanger with a bag over its contents. "Put this on."

"Why?" Kate eyed them suspiciously.

"Because I can promise you that not one thing in your closet is fit to wear to this place," Liz shoved her gently towards her bedroom.

"Not sure how to take that."

"Be sure to put on makeup," Jessica called after her.

Kate wasn't sure she liked the sound of that, but it was hard to argue with those two women when they set their mind to something—even harder when you didn't feel like arguing all that much. With the new little black dress in place, her makeup carefully applied, her hair freshly styled, and Liz incessantly tapping on her door, Kate could procrastinate no longer and reemerged from the bedroom.

"Perfect," Jessica smiled, quite pleased with herself. "We'd better go or we'll miss our reservations."

"Reservations?" Kate's anxiety renewed itself.

"No questions. Just follow us." Liz handed her a small black purse.

Kate started to protest that the bag wasn't hers, but realized that Liz had put her things in it. Of course they'd thought of everything. Her curiosity was piqued as she followed them into a cab. What was really starting to make her antsy was their complete and total lack of questions. The looks they'd been giving her for the past few days were those of women dying of curiosity. Now they had her alone, they chatted about the guest list for Liz's upcoming wedding. That scared her. A lot.

"Her guest list is up to 200 people," Liz threw her hands up in despair. "The reception hall only fits 300. I have five aunts and uncles. Apparently Justin and I don't get to invite anyone we know. You will not believe who she invited yesterday."

"Who?" Jessica leaned forward eagerly.

"His third grade teacher! Apparently she ran into her at the store. Who does that? Really?"

Kate tried to hide the grin she felt creeping up. That was one perk of having no family; she'd never have to worry about runaway guest lists.

The cab ride was short. Jessica paid the driver and Kate found herself standing on the sidewalk with her friends in front of a white building with shiny gold doors and the words supperclub all lowercase above them. Kate felt her heart rate return to normal. They were taking her out to dinner. How very thoughtful. With a renewed sense of adventure, she followed them through those shiny doors.

Kate was so instantaneously caught up in the surreal nature of her surroundings she paid little attention to Liz as she whispered instructions to the man at the door. Otherwise, his smile and knowing nod would have put her on edge.

She was too wrapped up in all-white surroundings, odd lighting and even odder people to take in much else as she followed the man towards her.... Bed? White beds lined the walls where there should have been chairs. Dinner in bed?

Even as her mind tried to process this, a chocolate-covered woman wearing a snake slid passed with a pleasant "excuse me". Kate wasn't sure she could be this trendy, this... decadent. The part of her that craved order looked longingly back towards the exit. That's when she realized with sickening clarity that Jessica and Liz were no longer with her. The traitors.

She knew in an instant what they had done—even before she turned around to find Gavin stretched out lazily on the bed, his long frame dressed in black and creating a rather striking image against the white linen. And he was smiling like the cat that just ate the canary, obviously

pretty proud of this one. Kate hesitated briefly, deciding that a royal temper-tantrum would probably just make him laugh. So she settled on the bed with as much dignity as she could muster, silently cursing her friends for the dress.

He studied her for a moment and she blushed in spite of herself.

“You look amazing,” he finally broke the silence between them.

“So do you,” she grudgingly admitted. “But I’m not sure I’m going to forgive you that easily.”

“Understood,” he acknowledged.

“You really need to do something about that nervous tic in your mouth,” she snapped. The way his lips twitched when he was trying not to laugh might have been sexier if it hadn’t been for the fact that she knew he was trying not to laugh at her.

“I hired a maid,” he ignored her last statement.

“Not the same as doing the cleaning yourself, but making sure you don’t get dysentery is still a good thing.”

“Somehow I don’t think I was quite to the stage of acquiring dysentery.” His lip was twitching again.

“So this is my end of the deal?” She arched an eyebrow and gestured at a grown man walking by in what looked like a diaper.

“No, sorry; you’re not getting off that easy.” He paused to thank the waiter who was setting their first course in front of them. “This is Jack’s idea.”

“Jack’s idea? Really? And he didn’t have any help at all coming up with this idea?”

“Well, maybe a little guidance.”

Kate shook her head and took a drink from the glass in front of her. The alcohol content immediately burned her throat and she made a mental note to sip rather than gulp. The man in the diaper and the chocolate-covered woman began what Kate assumed was the evening’s entertainment. She ignored her mental edict and polished off the drink.

“Could you please take whatever pictures you need to?” She whispered when she finally regained the ability to speak.

“Why is that?” he leaned in towards her, curious.

“Because I’m about to run screaming from the building.”

“But what about the other three courses?”

“I’d be really happy with a burger from the diner down the street,” her eyes pled with him to have mercy on her.

“Then I guess I should tell you I actually staged the pictures earlier, before they opened,” he whispered against her ear.

“You... insufferable... BEAST,” she seethed.

“Probably, but you’re really cute when you’re angry.”

With one last indignant cry, she stood as quickly as her skirt would allow and swept from the room. She knew he was right behind her but did her best to ignore that fact.

“You really shouldn’t be out roaming the streets at night alone,” he grabbed her elbow gently. “Not dressed like that anyway.”

“Fine, then take me home,” she demanded, practically stamping her foot with outrage.

“Can I at least feed you that burger first?”

She paused. His eyes were impossibly beguiling. Had it only been two weeks that she’d stubbornly been refusing to even look at him? She’s missed his face. He could sense her relenting.

“Please?”

Ugh. How was she supposed to say no to that? “Fine.”

“Wonderful,” his expression instantly brightened as he hooked her arm through his. “I know a great place overlooking the water. I’ll drive.”

And just like that she found herself sucked back into a comfortable rapport with him. All that hard work to distance herself was undone. She laughed with him and enjoyed a truly decadent cheeseburger.

She didn’t pull away when his leg brushed hers or he reached out to touch her face. She only stiffened for the briefest of seconds when he took her hand in his. She knew better, but she’d just missed him so much. He was like a slice of chocolate cake; once she’d tasted just a little it was really hard to leave the rest on the plate. All the while he filled her with stories of his family back in London and she soaked in every word.

“You miss them,” she stated.

“Yeah, I guess I do,” he agreed.

“Then why did you take a job so far away?”

“This was an amazing opportunity for me, for my career. I didn’t know how long I’d stay at first.”

“Oh,” Kate frowned. She hadn’t thought of that. “Are you planning to stay now?”

“I guess that depends,” he leaned forward.

“On what?” her breath caught. He answered with his intent stare. She blinked, trying to comprehend that. She wasn’t sure how long they sat there watching each other. This was too fast. She could feel her life careening out of control.

“I think I’d better go home now,” she swallowed. He merely nodded. Kate couldn’t be sure, but it almost seemed like he didn’t trust himself to speak. They rode home in silence, each lost in thought. Despite her protest, he walked her to the door and waited as she fumbled with her keys. She knew she should have protested a little more sternly when he followed her inside but there was a morbidly curious side to her that couldn’t quite muster it.

“Kate,” his voice was silken as he wrapped one arm around her waist.

“Hmm?” was the only sound she seemed capable of.

“You know how you said I had to keep my hands to myself?” His lips were achingly close to hers.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“I think I’m about to break your rule.” And then the space between them was gone. She was wholly his for just that one instant, all fears scattered at his kiss. She found herself yearning to stay in this place where she was warm and happy and utterly connected to another human being. And then he was moving away, breaking that connection and she felt the desolate cold seeping in even before he was gone. She wanted to pull him back to her, to hold him in her arms and never let him go.

“Why do you do this to me?” She groaned softly, resting her head against his shoulder.

“I’m afraid you’ll hate me later if I don’t stop now,” he whispered, his cheek resting on the top of her head. He knew her too well. She probably would hate him for it later. Heck, she might hate him for this later, too.

“But why do you persist in even starting this? Are you trying to make sure I stay addicted to you? Are you trying to drive me completely insane?” She railed at him.

“You’re addicted to me?” He grinned stupidly. “I like the sound of that.”

“Forget I said that,” she ordered hopefully.

“Nope. It’s out now.”

“Fine, have it your way,” she sighed. “Not like that’s a good thing anyway. Addictions are bad for you.”

“But fun.”

“And they leave you broken and no good for anything else.”

“Little miss sunshine.”

“Go home,” she growled and half-shoved him away.

He obliged, but only after planting a quick kiss on her forehead. She swatted at him but he easily dodged her. As she leaned against the door, she could hear him whistling down the hallway.

Chapter Seven

That night Kate dreamed of endless hallways and locked doors. Occasionally she’d find an open door and would peer inside, only to be cruelly shoved back into the wintry and desolate hallway by uncaring hands. She could hear the steady beep of a heart monitor somewhere in the distance, counting down the beats of her mother’s heart. She could hear the clock thundering out an unchanging rhythm of minutes looming ahead, or were they passing her by?

With every door, her desperation grew. She needed to find her solace. She needed to find the path to a gentle summer breeze and the warmth of the sun. The cacophony was deafening. She awoke in a cold sweat, certain that Gavin Nichols truly would be the death of her.

She padded around her loft, not really accomplishing much but not in the mood for sightseeing, either. She was restless, but nothing sounded appealing. The silence had grown so deafening that when the phone rang, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Hello?”

“Hey! Are you still speaking to us?” It was a very nervous Jessica.

“Barely,” Kate teased.

“We were just so desperate to get the two of you in the same room,” Jessica pleaded her case.

“I know,” Kate sighed but didn’t offer up any of the details she knew Jessica was waiting to hear.

“You know you really are impossible,” Jessica declared after a moment of silence.

“So I’ve been told.”

“I’m actually calling for Jack. He wants us all to go to the symphony with him tonight – he has a box. Well, Tara has a box. You’ve been avoiding us so much at work; we thought maybe you’d like to meet for lunch and shopping today, too.”

“So you can try to get the dirty details.”

“Only if you want to share them,” Jessica promised.

“Don’t tell her that,” Liz protested in the background.

“Lunch sounds nice,” Kate laughed. “And we’ll see about the symphony.”

“We’ll pick you up in an hour,” Jessica hung up the phone.

Kate was happy to have something to do with her day and hurried to get ready. It was a good day. She bought herself a dress for that evening. She’d found a new favorite salad at the coffee house they went to for lunch. It even felt good to discuss Gavin with her friends.

“I really don’t see what you’re worried about,” Liz declared. “He’s British – they’re more mature than American men. A 25-year-old British guy is easily the equivalent of a 30-year-old American man.”

“Oh. Well then,” Kate threw her hands up. “Problem solved. Seriously, though. It’s not just the age. I can’t explain it. I just don’t think I’m in a good place for this right now.”

“Isn’t that when it happens?” Jessica observed. “Who falls in love when they’re expecting it? I certainly never saw Ryan coming.”

“Hey, watch it with the L-word,” Kate shuddered. “I’m not there yet.”

“Let us know when you get there and put us all out of our misery – especially Gavin,” Liz shook her glass of tea, watching the ice settle.

“I haven’t known him long enough for that.”

“I’m not suggesting you elope,” Liz qualified. “Just let the poor guy in.”

“I don’t think I can,” Kate admitted miserably.

“Who needs shoes?” Liz switched topics all together.

“Define need,” Jessica smiled. The rest of the afternoon passed with lighter topics of conversation. Jessica filled them in on her adventures in car shopping and Liz regaled them with

stories of the crazy IT guy who was trimming his toe nails the last time she'd walked by his office. The guy creeped her out and since Jack had hired him, there was never a shortage of stories.

They dropped her back off with two hours to get ready and the promise of a car coming by to pick her up. She took her time primping, indulging in a bubble bath and painting her toe nails, too. She wanted to feel pretty, classy and sophisticated.

After she clasped her necklace in place, she checked her reflection in the full length mirror. The sapphire blue dress clung to her curves, ending just above the knee. Delicate high heels made her long legs even longer; her reddish hair was swept up with wispy tendrils framing her face.

She wore simple jewelry and her skin had a healthy honey glow from the recent sunshine. She approved. That left her little to do besides wander around the clean apartment searching for things to straighten until her cell phone chirped to announce the arrival of her ride.

She was careful not to bound down the steps despite her anticipation. Her doubts about attending the symphony had long since given way to excitement. The distant soprano of the violin played in the back of her mind, the memory calling to her like a long-lost friend.

She was duly impressed by the sleek black limo that waited at her curb and only mildly dismayed to realize that she and Gavin had been treated as a couple for the evening. He was, of course, breathtaking in his suit. He treated her as if there were nothing unusual between them and she realized he hadn't been privy to her nightmares and was completely unaware that she'd determined to put him right back where he belonged – at arm's length.

"Do you enjoy the symphony?" Tara asked her politely.

"I love it," Kate couldn't contain her excitement and, after a moment's hesitation, decided it wouldn't hurt to put at least a piece of herself out there. "I miss it, actually."

"Miss it?" Gavin cocked his head to study her. "Did you play?"

"Violin," she nodded with a shy smile. "I went to college on a music scholarship."

"Really?" Liz leaned forward. "I'd love to hear you play sometime."

"Oh I don't play anymore," Kate shook her head.

"You haven't played since college, have you?" Jessica guessed immediately.

"I intended to," Kate reached back to a memory she had locked away. "My business degree was only plan B. I'd actually accepted a position with the San Francisco Symphony."

“What happened?” Gavin asked gently.

“The music went away,” she smiled sadly, unable to think of the words to succinctly describe that time in her life.

“How very sad,” Jessica breathed.

“Oh not really,” Kate smiled brightly. “If I had followed that road, I wouldn’t be sitting here with you guys tonight. I don’t regret the choices I’ve made. But I am looking forward to tonight. Very much.”

“Absolutely fascinating,” Gavin clasped her hand in his and brushed his lips across her knuckles, a gesture that was not lost on Jack. His eyebrows shot up in question as Kate tried unsuccessfully to reclaim her hand. Kate was grateful when the topic turned from her to the wedding, which was quickly approaching. She was happy to realize that it didn’t even bother her anymore. Tara was growing on her. Other than the distracting heat caused by Gavin’s hand enclosed around hers, Kate was fairly at ease.

“Oh, I didn’t tell you guys what happened yesterday,” Liz giggled, earning an irritated glare from Derrick. “Gerard ate one of the guest lists.... Do you want to guess which one?”

“It isn’t funny. That dog eats everything,” Derrick grumbled.

“He didn’t eat my mom’s guest list,” Liz informed him sassily.

“You get to ask my mom for a new one.”

“Or thank Gerard for editing the old one and leave it at that.”

“Liz...” The exasperation was clear in his voice.

“Derrick...” She tried to mimic his scowl. Kate couldn’t help grinning along with Gavin.

The limo pulled up along a side door to let them out. It was strange to have someone hold the door for her like that. She felt a little like a movie star as she descended from the car to Gavin’s waiting arm. As they entered the building, she caught sight of one of the violinists scurrying to the back.

He appeared to be late and a smile flickered across her face. If she were playing here tonight, it would be her and her best friend Gaston scurrying to the back together. She’d been a little less structured in those days. With the memory came recognition and she called out before she could remember her manners.

“Gaston!”

The hurried violinist stopped in his tracks and turned, searching out the one who'd called his name. Kate waved and quickly covered the ground between them.

"Gaston, it's me, it's..."

"Katie!" His face lit up and he pulled her into a one-armed hug. "Wow, look at you!"

"I wondered if I'd see anyone I knew," she beamed at him. "And I'm lucky enough to find you."

"Can you get together after the show?" he asked her eagerly, clearly torn between visiting and reporting for work.

"As long as you don't mind a group – there's several of us here tonight."

"I'd love to meet your friends."

"It's a date, then," she couldn't help that she was still smiling at him.

"I've missed you Katie," he smacked a loud kiss on her cheek and headed for the stage door. "After the show – don't you disappear on me again."

"I won't," she promised.

"Should I be worried?" Gavin slipped up behind her, wrapping a protective arm about her waist and pulling her to him.

"Only if I were a six-foot blonde male," she giggled. "Gaston was my best friend back in the day. I bet if you bought him a martini or two he'd spill all kinds of dirt on me."

"Well then, point us to the after-party."

Kate instantly wished she hadn't planted the idea in Gavin's head. Gaston knew the dirt no one else did. Maybe that's why she'd disappeared on him in the first place. He'd been a painful reminder of a life she had been trying to put behind her. When he'd moved to Chicago, it had been a little too easy to lose touch.

They had to catch up with the rest of their party in the box. Kate was eager for the music to begin. She wasn't at all surprised to learn that Gaston was the first chair. He'd always been the best. Her fingers itched all the way through Beethoven's ninth. How she missed it.

She could almost feel the bow gliding across the strings, leaving a white mist of rosin in its wake. Her fingers would trill with the vibrato, the music would swell and ebb, building an energy of its own until the intensity was palpable in the air.

Hearing it now, something seemed to shake loose within – maybe just a little. When the last note hung in the air, a single tear wound its way down her cheek. She went to brush it aside but

Gavin beat her to it, gently wiping it away with his thumb. His eyes seemed to be trying to bore into her soul in attempt to divine its secrets.

Kate tried to even her breathing as she stared for a timeless moment at the man she so badly wanted to lose herself in. The rustle of the others leaving their seats brought her back to reality and she turned to them with a smile fixed in place. “Who’s up for a party?”

Of course they all were and Kate went in search of Gaston. He was waiting for her at the stage door where she’d first seen him. After brief introductions, he gave Gavin directions to the nightclub he’d agreed to meet the others at.

“Kate,” he grabbed her hand and pulled her back to him as she moved to walk away. His expression was suddenly serious.

“If I tell you something, do you promise to still show up?”

“What is it?” She frowned.

“He married one of our cellists. He’ll probably be there tonight.”

“Please tell me this is a bad joke,” her frown deepened to a full-blown scowl. There were some ghosts she preferred to leave in her past... Peter was at the top of that list.

“Sorry. I know; it’s a small world.”

“Freakishly small.” She considered backing out now that she knew.

“We could go somewhere else if you want,” he offered suddenly. “I’ll just call Jason so he knows I’m not lost.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll be okay,” Kate lied. It was obvious Gaston wanted to be with his other friends. She felt like she owed him at least that much. She could feel the question in Gavin’s gaze as they rejoined the others, but he held his tongue.

Kate was quiet on the ride there, trying to quickly build a mental wall around her emotions required all of her attention. Gavin absentmindedly stroked her arm, his own arm thrown protectively over her shoulder. God help her, she leaned up against him, grateful for something solid and warm to protect her.

By the time they arrived at the noisy little club, she’d almost convinced herself he might not even be there. So naturally, he was the first person she came face-to-face with once they were through the door.

“Hello, Peter,” she smiled sweetly, the hand behind her back nearly crushing Gavin’s.

“Kate.” He blinked twice. “Kate. Um. You look good. It’s good... Kate.”

“It’s good to see you as well,” she nodded her head demurely. “Now if you’ll excuse me, the rest of my party is waiting.”

She turned and walked away with as much dignity as she could muster.

“You aren’t going to introduce us?” Gavin rumbled low in her ear.

“I have absolutely no intention of doing that.”

“Why not?”

“Well because either you’ll rip him apart in some misguided burst of chivalry that will land you in jail, or you’ll be perfectly civil to him and I’ll be mad at you for not ripping him apart in some misguided burst of chivalry. There’s really no way for you to win that one.”

“Makes sense,” he agreed. “And I won’t even ask you who he is... yet.”

“I really appreciate that,” she closed her eyes for a second to compose her happy face.

“Katie! You came!” Gaston pulled her away from Gavin to sweep her into a twirling hug that lifted her off the ground.

“Please stop calling me Katie or you’ll get him going on that again,” she nodded towards Gavin, laughing in spite of herself.

“I make no promises. So tell me about yourself,” he set her back on the ground but didn’t relinquish his hold on her waist.

“Let me introduce you to my friends first. You’ll love them.”

And he had instantly liked them. The evening was a happy little dream for Kate, her old friend here in the midst of the new. The only thing keeping her from total euphoria was the pair of eyes that never seemed to leave her back. What was his problem? Hadn’t he done the leaving?

“I don’t think he’s ever really forgiven himself,” Gaston whispered, noticing the direction of her scowl.

“Poor baby.” There was venom in her voice.

“Just throwing it out there,” Gaston shrugged and rejoined the lively banter between Liz and Jack.

It wasn’t until night turned to early morning that the little group finally disbanded for home. When the limo pulled away from Kate’s curb, it didn’t surprise her to find she wasn’t standing alone on her sidewalk. Gavin gave her a lopsided grin and wordlessly followed her to the fourth floor. Kate wasn’t sure how she felt about that. She was dangerously close to being a blubbing

idiot and she didn't want him to witness that. On the other hand, would it be all bad to have a shoulder to cry on?

Without much fanfare, he busied himself making them some tea while Kate went to change into some pajamas. She was beyond the point of pride. She needed to submerge herself in comfortable at the moment. Besides, they both knew why he was here tonight and she didn't need a pretty blue dress for that.

When she was seated cross-legged on the couch facing Gavin she began her story.

"I met Peter in college. He was there on a basketball scholarship. I thought I was hopelessly in love with him for years. Some days he would notice me, some days he wouldn't. But then we ran into each other just after graduation. It was summer. We were both feeling very adult. I'd taken the job at the San Francisco symphony. He'd taken a job with a tech company in Silicon Valley.

"That had to be a sign, right? It was amazing – like something right out of a storybook. He always told me I had a very pretty smile," she paused, a smile playing upon her lips as she was lost in a memory. Gavin was hardly breathing, his fingers wound through hers and a stony expression covered his face.

"But then I realized I was pregnant. At first, he wanted to get married. He was really mad when I didn't say yes right away. And my mom," Kate closed her eyes to the pain. "It was like I'd ripped her heart right out. The next couple of months were a blur. I called San Francisco and told them I couldn't take the job. Then...I lost the baby. She was gone. "

Kate stopped for a moment, her arms instinctively pulling free to wrap around her stomach. It had hurt so badly. The memory of the physical and emotional trauma seared her like a branding iron and it took her a minute to regain her composure.

"Peter left me after that. Maybe he'd been hurt because I wouldn't marry him in a shotgun wedding. Maybe I'd changed too much. Either way, he was gone. My mother couldn't believe I'd lost the baby. She was convinced I'd had an abortion and she was so... livid. Absolutely furious. It nearly tore us apart. In fact, I don't know if things were really right again between us until the day she got the diagnosis. Everything else seemed to melt away then." Kate finished her story with a faraway look of sadness. It had been a long time since she'd really thought about all of that pain.

"That's when you stopped playing."

“The music was just... gone after that. I can’t explain it.”

“I understand,” he reached for her.

“Don’t,” she shook her head. “I don’t think I can keep it together if you do that.”

“Then let it go,” he urged, pulling her to him successfully that time. And so, after all of those years, she did let it go. Ever-so-gently he lay back, bringing her with him as he went. Curled in his arms on her couch, she buried her face in his chest and cried herself to sleep. His protective embrace shielded her from the cold of the world and that night she dreamt of warmth and sunshine.

Kate peeked up at Gavin from her cozy spot. She was careful not to move much so she wouldn’t wake him. She liked watching him sleep. She liked doing so from his arms. Part of her wanted very badly to wake him with a kiss. Part of her was even more resolved to repair the barrier between them.

If last night taught her anything, it was that she was still very broken and in no place for a relationship. As she lay there listening to the even cadence of his heart, she realized he had already worked his way into hers. It was too late to keep that from happening. But she could perform damage control.

She could tell when he woke up by the subtle change in the rise and fall of his chest. She peered up at him, suddenly nervous and very aware of everything she had shared the night before.

“Hi,” she was afraid to move.

“Hello,” he gave her a lazy smile that eased her fears. “I’m a little hesitant to ask, but where do we go from here?”

“What do you have in mind?” Kate pulled herself up and he frowned at the obvious withdrawal.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you let me sweep you off your feet? We can fall madly in love – this could be the beginning of our story.”

“Everything is happening so fast,” Kate shook her head. “I can’t even begin to process it all. I just don’t work that way.”

“Anymore,” he amended.

“That’s right, anymore. Not since I grew up.” She winced at her own words.

“Right then.” His face darkened as he stood.

“Wait, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I just need more time to figure things out... maybe a little space.”

“Time? Space? Do you have any idea how bloody excruciating this is for me? I do work that way, Kate. I want to spend every waking minute of every day with you – not be your yo-yo on a string.”

“I don’t mean to treat you like a yo-yo,” tears sprang into her eyes, making her even angrier at herself. “I want to spend every waking minute of every day with you, too. But then I sort of panic and I can’t explain it but I need more time to process.”

“Don’t do that,” he dropped to his knees before her. “Don’t cry.”

“I...can’t...help...it.” Kate buried her face in a pillow to avoid his worried eyes. She hated herself for doing this in front of him – twice no less.

He sat beside her, pulling her back into his embrace and stroking her hair as he crooned nonsensical words of comfort. His voice was a soothing balm and the flood of tears soon subsided.

“I’ll do my best to give you time. And even as much space as sharing an office will allow. But I can’t promise I’ll like it or always be good natured about it.”

She wanted to grab him by the shirt collar and beg him to never leave her. She wanted to immerse herself in the feel of his touch and his scent and the sound of his voice for the rest of her days. But she knew that sometimes leaving wasn’t a person’s choice. The harsh reality was that one way or another he would leave her and Kate wasn’t sure she was strong enough to love him more only to lose him. So rather than appeals to stay, she stood and brushed herself off with a small nod.

“I can’t ask for more than that.”

He nodded his response, and strode out of her apartment without another word. And just like that, she felt winter descend anew in her soul.

Chapter Eight

It was an odd kind of truce they seemed to be negotiating over the next couple of weeks. They spoke few words between them. And although polite, it was always superficial. She wanted to tell him that she'd had her violin restrung and the bow re-haired so she could begin playing again but he had a certain distance in his eyes; it was almost as if he'd given up trying to scale the walls she'd erected between them. So there was no one to hear the tentative music she was creating with her violin. It was excruciating and a little bit of a relief.

Kate had begun taking the reporters to lunch. Her lunch calendar was booked solid as she endeavored to get to know the San Francisco media-makers. She knew their opinion of her would make or break her events. More than that, she enjoyed getting to know people outside of the little circle of friends she'd developed. There were a few she'd even venture to call friends. She enjoyed the easy camaraderie and at least their questions about Gavin Nichols were limited to his ability as a photographer... for the most part anyway.

The launch party and the wedding were coming together. She couldn't avoid taking Gavin with her for the occasional photo shoot, but they always rode in silence and were usually accompanied by Tara or Jessica. There were times Kate wanted to reach out and touch Gavin so badly her hand almost ached because of it. If he felt the same, he didn't show it.

But sometimes she did feel his eyes on her. Or at least she thought she did, she never caught him at it. Trying to keep her distance meant she was always fully aware of his presence. Trying not to think about him meant he was always somewhere in her mind.

When she played her violin at night, his face seemed to drift before her. There was no escaping him. To make matters worse, he'd started getting calls several times a day and his response to them was always the same – he'd ask the caller to hold on a minute then take the call outside. Kate was burning with curiosity. Had he found someone else that quickly? She had asked for space and time. Most men would take that as a green light to look elsewhere.

The more calls he got, the more masked his face became. The more guarded his expression, the more certain she was that he was seeing someone. She didn't want to ask Jessica or Liz. It wasn't fair to put them in the middle like that. But she really wanted to.

"Invitations are in," Liz broke the silence one afternoon.

"Really?" Jessica perked right up at the announcement.

"Can you guys still help me assemble them?"

"I'd love to." Kate meant it wholeheartedly; that was one less night to fill.

“Great, come by after work. I’ll feed you dinner.”

Having something to do for the evening that wouldn’t entail a stony silence between herself and Gavin was exciting. Kate found that for once, she was looking forward to the evening. Liz’s apartment was adorable, although Kate did think it a little odd that the front room was a vibrant orange spice while every other room was stark white.

“Derrick doesn’t like color on the walls. I’m working on him one room at a time,” Liz explained, accurately reading Kate’s expression. “Next I think I’m going to shoot for eggplant in the dining room.”

“Oooh, that sounds pretty.”

“I know, doesn’t it? I mean who’s ever heard of a creative designer with no color in their home? It’s just not right.”

“You have a point,” Kate smiled, tempted to go home and paint her walls because she could.

Derrick had gone out with friends for the night, leaving the three women alone in the apartment. The invitations were spread out on the living room floor and each friend took a stack to work on. Liz had very specific instructions for them and Kate got the impression it pained her to not be able to see to each and every detail completely herself. If she could have cloned herself, Liz probably would have. Kate was genuinely looking forward to the wedding. From what she’d heard of the planning, it promised to be an event to remember. That, and Kate was dying to see who won the invitation wars.

“Oh, get this,” Liz shook her head. “She totally went off on me yesterday for not having kids.”

“You’re not having kids?” Kate wondered. No one had to ask who she was; the tone of voice implied Liz’s mother-in-law.

“No, we’ve decided we’re too selfish to have children. We kind of want to keep it all about us.”

“Makes sense to me,” Kate thought about it for a second. “I can think of a lot of couples who should have made that decision.”

“I don’t know how you can say that,” Jessica frowned. “You don’t want babies even a little?”

“Anything that needs its diaper changed is not my idea of fun.”

“So Derrick’s in trouble if he winds up in diapers before you?” Kate pointed out.

“Ew. I don’t want to think about that.”

Kate shrugged.

“Well I, for one, am looking forward to having children,” Jessica declared.

“I can see that,” Kate nodded. “I think you’ll be an amazing mom.”

“Really? You think so?” Jessica seemed to light up at the compliment. Kate couldn’t fathom why her opinion on the subject mattered.

“I know so,” she emphasized her words with a smile.

“So what are your plans for the Fourth?” Liz asked Kate, changing the subject.

“You know, I hadn’t really thought about it,” Kate paused. Time was moving so fast.

“Figures,” Liz shook her head, counting Kate as a lost cause. “Some of us are going to check out a local Irish punk group that’s playing at the Mezzanine that night then we’re watching fireworks over the bay. Wanna come?”

“I don’t know—are you going to ditch me with Gavin again?” Kate eyed her warily.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Liz promised, her face the picture of innocence.

“Mmm-hmm. Jessica, is Gavin going to be there?” Kate was skeptical.

“I’m hurt.”

Kate didn’t take that statement to heart. They all knew Jessica was the moral compass of their little group. And she was the one person you could always count on to tell the truth. So when she confirmed it wasn’t a set up, Kate happily agreed to go.

That night, she called Gaston and he agreed to be her “date” for the evening. He was a very convenient friend to have in many respects. The day after they’d seen him at the symphony, he’d made use of the business card she’d given him and called her for the scoop on Gavin. He’d also offered up the juicy tidbit that Peter had been crazy jealous all evening. That knowledge alone had been enough to soften the blow of seeing him.

By the time the Fourth of July rolled around, Gavin was out of the office more than he was in. Jack seemed unperturbed by that fact and Kate told herself she should be grateful for it. Jack took off the day before to spend a few days with Tara’s parents, who apparently had a rather large estate in Malibu. Knowing the price tag that must have entailed, Kate wondered if maybe she’d been wrong about where the money came from in that relationship.

The more she was around Jack the more she got the feeling he wasn’t from money the way Tara was. She was rich, she was pretty and she was talented. There was no earthly reason for her

to be with Jack – except that maybe she really did love him. And because of that, Kate was glad she seemed to be making the wedding plans go more smoothly for Tara. She wasn't quite the pit viper Kate had assumed. Sometimes it was good to be wrong.

Kate was nearly ready when Gaston knocked on her door. She let him in and ran back to her makeup case.

“Almost done. Sorry,” she called behind her.

“No problem,” he smiled at her. He was devastatingly handsome with his sandy blonde hair and bright blue eyes, but she noticed his looks the way one would admire a pretty sunset. They were hard not to admire, but didn't have the power to render her senseless the way Gavin did. But then, Gaston was like a brother, always had been. “Where's the guy?”

“Don't ask,” Kate frowned a little, giving herself one last inspection in the mirror.

“What did you do?” he demanded.

“How do you know it was me?” She scowled in earnest now.

“Kate,” he crossed his arms and waited for her response.

“I said I needed space,” she hung her head.

“What is wrong with you?” he threw his hands up at that. “I liked this guy.”

“I don't know,” she turned her light off with more force than necessary. “I liked him, too.”

“Then call him up, see if he wants to come tonight.”

“I think he's already moved on,” she told him miserably.

“Are you sure about that?” He was doubtful.

“He gets several calls a day that he won't take in front of me. And he hasn't even tried to speak to me since the night at the symphony.”

“You mean, the night when you asked him for space?” He asked pointedly.

“Yeah, that would be the night.”

“Oh my dear sweet girl. Don't worry your pretty little head about it tonight. It'll all work itself out,” he held his hand out to her. “And we're already late so come on.”

Kate paused briefly over her shoe collection, her eyes misting when her gaze tripped over the lone purple high heel still sitting in her closet. Memories of that day with Gavin flooded her like a tidal wave. She blinked a few times, grabbing the first pair of heels she saw and closing the closet door firmly. Rational thought told her to get rid of the shoe. Something altogether different made her keep it. Kate grabbed her house key, her money, and her ID on the way out the door.

She slid them in her pocket, thinking life was so much easier without a purse. They were met on the sidewalk in front of the Mezzanine by a very anxious Jessica and Liz.

“I promise we didn’t know,” Jessica blurted out before they’d even said hello.

“Excuse me?” Kate was baffled.

“When we said he wouldn’t be here, we had no idea. He didn’t tell any of us, although I guess he doesn’t have to report his every move but still, you think he would have mentioned this somewhere along the way,” Jessica seemed to be getting agitated with someone and Kate could only assume it was Gavin.

“Jessica, breathe honey. Let me take over,” Liz placed a calming hand on Jessica’s shoulder. “Apparently Gavin sometimes fills in for a buddy of his, who is the lead in an Irish punk band. Go figure.”

“And he’s playing here tonight?” Kate surmised.

“Pretty much, yeah.” Liz nodded.

“Pretty much?”

“Okay, just yeah.”

“Okay,” Kate took a deep breath and looked at Gaston as if he would have some answer to her dilemma.

“You can’t avoid him forever, Katie. He’s part of your world now. Suck it up and get inside.” He nudged her towards the door.

“Not what I was looking for,” she pouted, but obediently pulled out her money to pay. “Alright, let’s do this.”

“Oh thank goodness. Ryan and Derrick refused to leave. They really like Gavin,” Jessica breathed a sigh of relief. She hated conflict.

“Awesome. He’s really good, you know,” Liz clapped and led them to the rest of the little group.

As much as Kate didn’t want to admit it, he actually was very good. His voice was soothing if not clearly intelligible. It was a little reminiscent of the tender crooning he’d done when she was crying. And there was something undeniably sexy about a man on stage singing.

At first she was able to watch him unnoticed. He was busy, the girls had gone to dance with their boyfriends and Gaston had gone to get them cocktails. So she was free to drink in the sight of him. And then their eyes locked. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. A flush heated

Kate's face. The band moved into a livelier number and Kate welcomed the opportunity to whisk Gaston onto the dance floor.

Dancing with her best friend from a time when she was a much freer spirit, it was almost possible to forget that it was Gavin singing words of love, yearning and redemption on that stage. Almost. When she closed her eyes, the music would pour over her and nearly carry her away. It was exquisite bliss.

"We've got time for one more," his accent seemed thicker now. Was it for show or from exertion? "So I'd like to dedicate this next song to an old friend of mine who thinks I don't know enough classics."

Kate froze. Somehow she didn't think he meant long-time friend when he said old. Classics? What was he about to do? He ducked his head, but not quickly enough to hide the smile. The opening guitar riff was instantly recognizable, even with the somewhat folksier feel it had been given. Kate sank into a nearby chair, completely transfixed on the man whose eyes were now looking into hers. Her heart twisted as he played an Aerosmith song that would have been a much more acceptable answer that day in the canoe. Only it was more than that now. She knew he was telling her everything she wouldn't allow him to say.

He was tired of the walls. He'd suffered. He wanted her to save him. She was his Angel. It was one of those moments that seem to last an eternity. She wanted to run away. She was completely rooted to her spot. All of the what-ifs wound around the never-to-bes and both got twisted up with the words he sang. Her breath started to come more quickly.

Was that pain her heart breaking again or just another panic attack? Either way, the safest course of action seemed to be flight. Just as Gavin hit the last chord, she was out the door. She'd go back later to tell them where she was. For now, she just needed some fresh air. She ignored the looks she got when she burst through the front doors, instead finding a spot to lean against the wall and take in great gulps of night air.

She didn't get the chance to find equilibrium since he was there right behind her. Her muddled brain wondered if he'd darted off the stage as he placed an arm firmly on either side of her. He'd effectively trapped her but that didn't seem to be enough torture because he was leaning into her as well, pressing his body against hers and keeping his head within a breath of hers.

"That's not the reaction I was hoping for," he grinned.

“You should be used to that by now,” she suppressed a small grin of her own.

“Should I have played Crying instead? Or maybe Crazy. Both would have fit pretty well.”

“You’re not helping your cause by calling me crazy,” Kate pointed out.

“True,” he acknowledged. “But it’s fun to watch you heat up.”

“Are you going to let me off of this wall?” Kate tilted her head to look up at him.

“In a minute, I have something to say first.”

“Then say it,” she tried to wriggle free but only succeeded in making herself more keenly aware of his proximity so she held really still.

“Your mom changed her name. It used to be Danielle Williams. That’s why Jack doesn’t recognize your last name.”

“Thank you,” Kate closed her eyes briefly and leaned her head against him for a moment.

“I want to gather you in my arms and tell you that time is up. I want to whisk you back to my loft and tell you no more space between us,” he growled, catching her chin with his hand and tilting her face up so his lips could claim hers. There was a need that seemed newer, fresher, edgier than it had been before. She almost wondered if he would do just that – whisk her home and declare an end to her time and space. But he didn’t. As usual, just when she was completely and thoroughly his to do with as he pleased, he pulled away.

“Now isn’t the time for that, though,” he said with great effort. “I have to leave for a bit, next week.”

“Excuse me?” Kate stiffened in an instant.

“I’m going back to London for a while. I can’t really say for sure how long I’ll be gone...” he seemed to be choosing his words carefully. Had Kate been in a more stable frame of mind, she might have heard the pain etched in his voice. As it was, she trembled with fury – or was it fear? He was leaving her. Before he could finish his explanation, and before she could embarrass herself further by crying in front of him yet again or begging him to stay, she stomped his toe with all the force she could muster and used his reaction as her window of escape. When she was safely in a cab on her way home, she called Gaston to let him know why she’d bailed out on him. She’d feel worse about it but was certain he could find better entertainment for the evening anyway.

Kate spent the rest of her holiday weekend holed up in her apartment. After a day of being nearly-catatonic, she began to play the violin. It was a mournful sound full of pain—but it was

beautiful music nonetheless and it flowed through her as if it had a life of its own. Kate found some amount of solace in that. By Sunday evening, she was starting to scare the drivers that delivered her sustenance. When Monday rolled around, she forced herself to shower and put on makeup. She would not allow Gavin to see her looking like this.

Their little office was morosely quiet that morning. If Jack questioned the stony silence, he didn't do so aloud.

"Kate, maybe if you'd let Gavin explain why he's leaving," Liz ventured the suggestion after several hours of silence.

"I'm done with this lunacy," Gavin growled. "I'm not explaining anything... and neither are you."

With that decree, he stormed out of the office leaving three startled women in his wake.

"Liz, I'm so sorry. I don't like that he's taking this out on you. I'm so sorry," Kate blinked back tears. What was her problem lately?

"No big deal," Liz shook her head firmly. "He didn't mean it." With that, she put her ear buds in and went back to the page she was laying out.

"Hey, I'm on my way to have lunch with last year's marathon winner. We're following his story for this year's race. He's a fascinating guy – you should come," Jessica offered.

"You know what? I think I will," Kate agreed quickly. Anything to get her out of there.

It wasn't far to the café so they walked. Kate found she was immensely grateful for Jessica's calming personality. Kate was pleasantly surprised when Justin from the Chronicle stopped by their table to say hi and asked her if she was free for coffee in the next week.

Jessica had been right, Tom was a fascinating man. He worked in IT, one of the companies to survive when the tech bubble burst. He'd been a marathoner for several years.

"The first marathon I ever ran was in Memphis. It was kind of funny and scary when I realized I would be running the next day longer than it was taking me to get there." He leaned forward, his eyes lighting up at the memory.

"It was cold that morning, colder than most years – 29 degrees – but that didn't really concern me much because it wasn't raining or anything and I knew that a few miles into it I would warm up. I felt great right from the start. Of course, that ended up being part of the problem. I actually ran my best 10K and then Half Marathon time ever. It is funny—everyone I asked for advice told me, 'Don't go out too fast' but that is exactly what I did." He chuckled.

Kate found herself riveted by his story. The idea of running for pleasure was completely foreign to her. She much preferred her morning yoga routines.

“The thing is,” he continued, “at the time I didn’t feel like I was going out too fast because it was pretty easy. I was well rested and ready to go and had hit that pace a lot in training. But then at about mile 15 ½, it became hard to hold that pace and at 18 it became brutal. Miles 20 on were pretty miserable, to be honest. I kept telling myself ‘Just go another half mile and then you can rest for a minute.’ I had a blast for the first 16, but everything after that was not fun. It didn’t feel like a race, more like survival. When I was done I was so happy it was over, it was almost more relief than joy.”

“I can’t even imagine doing that,” Jessica shook her head. “It’s amazing.”

“I’m impressed,” Kate agreed. “The discipline that must take...”

“Yeah, well,” he blushed. “I remember in the last five miles that this strange silence came over me – even though every mile there were these annoyingly loud bad bands playing. I went to this quiet place inside my head that just said ‘keep going.’”

Kate felt like she could relate to that. Gavin was nearly gone, she could focus on work and Jack again. She needed to find the quiet place inside her own head. Just keep going.

“Oh, and the soreness for about six days was something else.... Stairs felt like Mt. Everest,” Tom added with another smile. Kate and Jessica both winced a little. They could only imagine what that must have been like.

Kate walked away from the lunch thinking she would pay attention to the outcome of this year’s marathon for a change – and she’d root for Tom to win again.

Chapter Nine

That quiet place in her head that urged her to just keep going did the trick. The day came when Gavin got on a plane for London and she could breathe again. Well, after spending the morning sobbing she could breathe again. She’d even met Justin—the reporter from the Chronicle—for the coffee she’d promised and made a lunch date with Alicia, a D.J. from the

adult alternative station in town. She'd intended to work late that first day, but the longer she stayed, the more agitated Liz got.

"You really should go home now," Liz finally threw her hands up in the air, exasperated for some reason Kate could not fathom.

"But I wanted to get a little more done. The wedding is right around the corner," Kate frowned, leaving off the fact that she didn't want to go home to a ridiculously silent apartment yet again.

"You might need to go just to keep Liz from hyperventilating. I think she's worried about you spending too much time here," Jessica intervened. "Why don't Ryan and I swing by for dinner later?"

"Okay," Kate hesitantly agreed, a little confused. They rose to leave when she did. She looked from one to the other and they sat back down quickly. Kate narrowed her eyes. Might as well go home and see what they were up to.

She heard it as soon as she got off the elevator on her floor. Surely they hadn't. This was worse than the supperclub incident. Oh no, surely not.

She opened her door to stare at a crate in complete disbelief. It wasn't the crate so much as what was inside that bothered her. The animal let out another plaintive yip as she closed the door behind her. Why had anyone thought this was a good idea? She approached the cage to snatch the envelope off the top.

"Dearest Kate," the note read. "I was wondering if you could do me a favor and take care of this little guy for me. I've already paid your pet deposit and the pet rent for the remainder of your lease. His food is in the kitchen, along with the leash and some toys. He's just a pup – ten months – and really needed a home. I thought of you. Hope you don't mind. Love, Gavin."

Hope you don't mind? Who does this sort of thing? Kate eyed the beast warily. He put his massive head down on massive paws and sighed heavily, looking back at her with soulful eyes. She supposed he would need to go for a walk. She could do that much while she decided what to do with him. She retrieved the leash, setting aside the scary looking collar that was attached to it. Surely she wouldn't need that.

As soon as she opened the cage, he exploded from it. Kate somehow managed to snap the leash into place as he jumped and twirled around what now seemed to be a small apartment. As soon as the lead was attached, he took off for the door, pulling her along like a rag doll.

“Alright, hold up.” Kate dropped the leash and went back to the kitchen to retrieve the training collar. Maybe it was a good idea after all.

The beast practically quivered with anticipation as Kate put the collar on him and transferred the leash over. Kate noticed the shiny tags hanging from his collar and read the one shaped like a bone. “Tyler. So, he thinks he’s funny, eh? Fine, he can name you Tyler but I’ll call you Ty for short.”

The dog looked at her impatiently. She shoved a plastic bag in her pocket and they were off. With the training collar in place, Ty was a perfect gentleman. After all business was taken care of, she decided it wouldn’t hurt either of them to wander around a bit more. He was a cute dog. Huge, but cute.

He was yellow with white paws and a white muzzle. His ears hung forward in little triangles but perked up when he found something interesting. His long tail happily thumped her in the leg when they waited to cross the street. His friendly, inquisitive nature completely won her over by the end of the walk and she knew Gavin had won this one. Why on earth had he done it, though?

That question was the very first thing she asked when Jessica and Liz showed up on her doorstep that evening with Ryan and Derrick in tow.

“He said dogs are amazing healers of the soul,” Jessica made a face that plainly said “Isn’t that the sweetest thing you’ve ever heard?”

“Who does that?” Kate wondered for the third time that night.

“I know, isn’t he so sweet?” Liz smacked her fiancé on the arm as she asked the question. Kate ducked her head to hide the grin.

Ty followed her everywhere. He was her shadow already. There was something very comforting about it. He got a little pushy when the pizza was delivered, but backed off at Kate’s stern reproach. His perpetual smile made it hard to stay angry at him. Or perhaps it was more a well-timed smile, like Gavin. The thought of him made her heart twinge and she wondered how long it would be until it got easier.

“Why did he leave?” She asked very suddenly, her fingers absentmindedly scratching Ty’s ears. Liz and Jessica exchanged meaningful looks.

“This is crazy. He said you couldn’t tell her. He didn’t say a thing to me,” Jessica declared. Liz shrugged at that logic. Jessica took that as her cue to go on. “His mom has breast cancer.

She's having a mastectomy in two days. He went to be with her. He was planning on coming back once he knew she was better. Jack gave him leave of absence."

How had she not known this? Because she hadn't given him the chance to explain. She'd been so wrapped up in her own pain it made her oblivious to his. And now he was gone, facing this big scary disease with his mother.

That brought the memories of her mom, eaten from within by bone cancer, boiling to the surface. Watching her caregiver so helpless had been hell. And it had been terrifying, too. To be so out of control, so at the whim of something other than her own will. Those memories were the ones that haunted her dreams and tainted her waking actions. She had to really concentrate to conjure the sound of her mother's voice or to remember the smell of the rose lotion her mother always used. The memories she wanted to cling to were fading so fast.

Part of Kate wanted to be sick. She knew she didn't have any tears left to cry – she'd used those up on Gavin. Instead calm settled over her. Her eyes lifted to look around the room.

"Who can dog-sit Ty for me?"

"Already?" Liz grinned, pretty sure she knew where Kate was headed. "I can do it. Ty and I will have a grand ole' time messing up your place."

"I'll take my chances."

"Are you?" Jessica brightened.

"Yeah, I'll talk to Jack tomorrow about getting a few days off. I think I'm needed in London," Kate decided, ignoring the triumphant look Jessica and Liz exchanged.

The guys turned on a game while the girls helped Kate pack. Ty kept pulling her things out of the suitcase and running through the house with them. It was kind of cute the first time. Really irritating the fifteenth. With her friends gone home and her flight booked, Kate walked Ty one last time and climbed in to bed. She didn't expect to go to sleep any time soon thanks to nerves. But then Ty stretched out beside her, tucking his head by her arm. There was something very soothing about that.

The next thing Kate knew, Ty was bathing her face in kisses. It was morning. This walk was less fun. Her hair was a wreck and she was in jeans and pajama top without a bra. Too bad his bladder wouldn't wait for her to get a shower and grab a cup of coffee. She called Jack when she got back to the apartment.

“I was wondering if I could take a few days off,” she’d begun hesitantly. “I’ll stay in touch through email, though, and I promise I won’t let the party or the wedding get behind.”

“Jessica and Liz were in my office first thing this morning.” She could hear the smile in his voice. “Take all the time you need. Well, as long as you’re back by the next meeting with the Bubble Lounge anyway.”

“I completely understand. Thank you so, so much,” she was nearly breathless. She was actually going to just pick up and fly to London on a moment’s notice to be with a man who was kind of furious with her. But he had gotten her a dog – to heal her soul, no less. So there was still something there. It was terrifying and exhilarating. She realized with a start that she’d better get a shower or she’d miss her flight.

A flurry of activity later, she was seated on the plane waiting for it to taxi and trying not to panic. His whole family would be there. What would they think when she came strolling in? What if he didn’t want her there? This was such a personal time, she shouldn’t intrude. She very nearly unfastened her seatbelt to get off the plane when she felt the wheels start to roll beneath her. For better or worse, she was on her way to London.

The flight was excruciatingly long; the flight from New York was delayed and put her behind schedule. By the time she stood in Heathrow with her bags, she was exhausted and bedraggled and wondering about her own sanity.

She looked at the clock on the wall. It had taken so long to get there Gavin’s mother would already be in surgery. She was so tired she could hardly put one foot in front of the other, but sleep would have to wait. She was this close to the finish line, she had to keep going. In her sleep-deprived state, she envisioned herself a bedraggled marathoner nearing the end of a race. She giggled, earning herself a few odd stares.

“London Bridge Hospital,” she told the cabbie after her bags had been loaded and she’d sunk into the back seat. She resisted the urge to close her eyes for even a moment because she knew she’d fall asleep. Instead, she brushed her hair and put some lip gloss on. It felt a little like using a band-aid when a tourniquet was needed, but there wasn’t much she could really do about that in the back of a cab. Maybe he’d consider the big black circles under her eyes endearing.

The taxi pulled to a stop in front of the hospital. Kate took a steadying breath as she stepped onto the sidewalk. It was the moment of truth. She stood there for a moment after the cabbie pulled away, bag in hand and staring at the entrance. Another hospital flashed through her mind.

Another mom. Her throat felt thick and she tried to swallow down the lump. A few more deep breaths and she was as ready as she'd ever be.

Different country, same smells – that was the first thought Kate had as she stepped through the doors. Sick smelled the same here as it did in Albuquerque. She glanced around and found the information desk.

“Ellen Nichols please,” she felt the need to speak in hushed tones. Hospitals and churches both had that effect on her. She committed to memory the directions to surgery and set off to find the family waiting room. She could hear his hushed voice from outside the door. Her stomach fluttered and her chest tightened. She'd soon know what he thought of her appearance. For better or for worse.

Staring at the door wasn't doing much to calm her nerves so she clasped her bag even tighter and stepped through the entrance. She half expected the world to come screeching to a halt. She was a little disappointed when conversation continued without anyone looking up. She set her bag in a corner, then stood there uncomfortably for a second, listening to them debate how best to divide the shifts at the hospital. Should she wait for a break in conversation? Should she say his name?

“May I help you?” a woman with hair the color of a coffee bean asked pleasantly enough. Kate blushed furiously, her tongue tied the second her eyes met his.

Kate thought for a second she saw tears well up. He blinked a few times and wiped his eyes with the back of his hands, standing with an odd little laugh – which she matched.

“Hi. I'm so sorry to bother you. I'm Kate,” her tongue was suddenly free. “I'm...” What? What was she?

“She's my girlfriend,” Gavin crossed the distance between them quickly now to engulf her in a hug. It was clear from the collective gasp that Gavin had never brought a girl home before.

“Well mum's got to make it now. She'll want to see this,” one of Gavin's brothers whispered loudly to another.

“I can't believe you're here,” he ignored his brother. He seemed so absurdly happy to see her, Kate had never been happier to be anywhere.

“I am so sorry,” she whispered against his neck, standing on her tiptoes to hug him closer again.

“No worries,” he stood back to drink in the sight of her, his hands holding her face. His family might have assumed she was offering condolences for the situation, but Kate knew he’d understood her apology for what it was. “Come on, meet the whole clan.”

Kate was suddenly nervous again, and very aware of how she must look.

“Da, this is Kate. Kate, this is my dad, Garrett,” he pointed to an older, stouter version of himself, and then on to his brothers and their wives. She tried to keep the names straight – Gabriel and his wife Sarah, Devon and Nicole, Darrin and Jill. It didn’t help that the men were all varying versions of Gavin. Each had the same angle to their jaw, the same murky gray eyes, the same easy smile. One was slightly taller, two were slightly shorter; all three seemed slightly stockier. She felt like she knew them a little from her conversations with Gavin. She tried quick mental associations to help her remember names – like that Sarah reminded her of Tara with her pretty blonde hair and soft brown eyes.

“We sure are happy to meet you,” Garrett surprised her with a hug.

“I’m glad to meet you as well, sir,” Kate returned the hug awkwardly.

“Did you hear that boys? Sir. You could learn from this girl.”

“I still can’t believe you’re here,” Gavin shook his head, grinning from ear to ear.

“Believe it. Liz is dog-sitting,” she informed him pointedly, folding her arms across her chest.

“You like him?” he did his best to look sheepish.

Kate tried to look stern but lost the battle. “I’m crazy about the brute already. He was ticked when I left though. Liz says he’s eating my apartment in retaliation.”

“You have a dog?” Nicole asked politely. At least, Kate was fairly certain the petite brunette was Nicole.

“Some might call him that,” Kate grimaced. “Or moose, or couch-eating machine. He was a gift from Gavin.”

“You got her a dog?” Gabriel nodded sagely, as if reading something into the gesture.

“Yeah,” he rubbed the back of his neck. Was he embarrassed? “I was at the humane society for a photo shoot and I don’t know; there was just something about him. It was kind of a whim.”

Kate just shook her head. She couldn’t fathom making that kind of decision on a whim. There were pro/con lists to be made for that kind of thing. Conversation centered on Kate and

Gavin for a little while. Kate was under the impression that everyone was happy to have something new to discuss.

“Kate, don’t let me forget when we get back to the house – I have a file for you. I was going to send it back with Gavin, but since you’re here we can cut out the middle man,” Devon winked at her.

“Oh, thank you,” Kate had almost forgotten that Devon was trying to unravel the mystery of her family for her. She smiled warmly at him. “I really appreciate the help.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m enjoying it,” he shrugged sheepishly. Kate liked him, probably because he reminded her the most of Gavin.

Since she’d come all this way to see him, and since she liked the way “she’s my girlfriend” had rolled off his tongue, she saw no reason to try to maintain the distance between them. At least for now. She’d figure the rest out later. Now, she was going to curl up next to him and be incredibly content with his arm wrapped around her. It was so right there in his embrace, so deliciously comfortable, she dozed off. She vaguely recalled discussing the magazine with Darrin but she didn’t remember the conversation ending. Her next hazy moments of awareness were of being the topic of conversation.

“Liz said she left day before yesterday – she got hung up in New York,” Gavin was telling them. When had he talked to Liz? Had she been that out of it? Lord help her if she’d snored or drooled.

“Poor thing. She’s been up for two days,” Kate thought it was Jill who murmured that.

“She loves you Gavin. Don’t you mess this up,” Sarah ordered. Really? Did she love him? Wasn’t it a little soon for that?

“Really? You think she loves me?” Gavin seemed to read her thoughts.

“Oh come on, brother. A girl spends nearly two days on a plane to sit in a hospital with you? What do you think?” Gabriel had a point. Kate now had two problems. One, it was going to be really hard to keep Gavin at bay after this. Any hope of walking away from this unscathed now seemed to be gone. Second, she couldn’t open her eyes now or they’d wonder how much she’d heard. There would be an awkward moment all around.

Someone’s phone chirped softly and it gave Kate the excuse she needed to “wake up.” She purposely yawned and sat up slowly, doing her best to look groggy. When her eyes met Gavin’s, she couldn’t help the momentary blush that crept across her cheeks. She ducked her head into his

shoulder but it wasn't fast enough. The corner of his lip was twitching again and she knew he realized she'd been awake for that conversation.

"Even if they're right, that doesn't mean I'm any less neurotic, you know," she whispered against his ear. "I'm still perfectly capable of flipping out again."

"I'll take my chances," he turned his head to look at her. The expression on his face made her heart trip that funny little beat it had the first time she'd seen him.

"Ellen Nichols family?" A man who Kate assumed to be the doctor stepped into the waiting room.

"Yes?" Everyone sat up straighter in their seat.

"She came through the surgery just fine. We feel confident we were able to remove the cancerous tissue. We'll of course want to follow up with treatment..." Kate didn't hear much more after that. Her heart soared for Gavin. This was good news. Maybe he could be spared the pain. She watched his face as he took in the rest of what was being said. He seemed so serious, but the joy was still evident.

After the doctor had assured them that they could see her after she was out of recovery and left, there was a collective sigh of relief. There were hugs all around.

"All right, you kids go get some food. I'll wait here," Garrett ordered them all.

"No way Da," Gabriel shook his head. "Sarah and I will wait here; you go with the others to get some food. We can eat later and I'm sure you won't leave to."

He looked ready to protest but conceded at Sarah's firm command of "Go."

Kate was happy to stretch her legs, and even happier at the prospect of food. She'd been too keyed up on the plane to eat. That fact was apparent now as her stomach grumbled loudly.

"When was the last time you ate?" Gavin eyed her speculatively.

"I had pizza with the girls the night before I left," she frowned defensively.

"Come on then," he held her elbow as if she needed assistance. "Let's get some food in you."

"I can wait here while you guys go eat. I promise to call if they come for you," she shook her head in protest.

"We had breakfast this morning Kate. And dinner last night. And lunch yesterday. And breakfast yesterday..." Gavin pulled her along behind him.

"You don't have to be snarfy about it," Kate grumbled, following obediently.

“Kate?” Gavin stopped suddenly, halfway down the hall.

“Yes?” She bumped into him, not expecting his change of pace.

“I love you,” his arms caught her waist and he leaned in closer to her.

“I love you, too,” she admitted. And then he stole a quick kiss. Something in his expression said the kiss would have been much different had they been standing just about anywhere else. Kate didn’t pay much attention to the rest of the trip down to the restaurant. Had she really just told a man she loved him?

Chapter Ten

Kate felt almost human again with some food in her belly. She marveled a little at this new creature she had become – a woman who could fall head over heels in love with a man after only six weeks. Truth be told, maybe it had really taken six minutes and then six weeks to admit it. That sounded more like her. Where that left them would have to wait until Gavin’s mom was better, until Kate knew where she stood with her father.

When Gavin’s phone vibrated to signal that they were cleared to see Ellen, Kate’s nerves went haywire again. He seemed pretty intent on her meeting his mother now. Kate was sure that was one of those things that should wait for a more suitable time and place. Gavin insisted nothing would make his mother happier.

He didn’t even give her time to put on makeup or brush her hair. He just tugged her right on into the room and right up to Ellen’s bed. He did release her hand long enough to lean over his mother to kiss her tenderly.

“How are you feeling, Mum?” he smiled tenderly. His touch was so gentle it was as if he was afraid to break her.

“I’ve felt better,” she admitted, weariness and pain etched in her blue eyes. “But that’s not important now. I want you to introduce me to this American beauty by your side.”

Kate nearly looked around to see who else was standing beside Gavin. She smiled nervously at Ellen, reaching out to take the hand that had been extended to her. Gavin had straightened and now stood at Kate’s side, his hand reassuringly on the small of her back.

“It’s so nice to meet you, ma’am and I’m glad your surgery went well.” Kate felt bolstered by his touch.

“Oh dearest, we are so happy to meet you,” Ellen beamed up at her. There was a certain warmth and vibrancy that emanated from her even in her weakened state. Even fresh out of surgery, Kate could see that she was the type of woman with a natural beauty, someone at ease in her own skin. Kate liked her. She was still a little terrified of her, but she liked her.

“You have a wonderful family.”

“I think so, too,” she patted Kate’s hand. “And I hope to get to visit with you more before you leave. Will you be staying long?”

“A few days, then I have to get back to work.”

“Good. Good,” Ellen’s eyelashes fluttered, reminding them all she needed her rest. One by one, the boys filed back by to kiss their mother’s cheek before being shooed out by their father.

“My bag’s in the waiting room still,” Kate realized with a start after they’d reached the parking lot.

“No, it’s in my dad’s car,” he reassured her. “Darrin took it down for you earlier.”

“Oh. That was sweet of him.”

“What can I say, we’re good people.”

“I don’t have a hotel. I wasn’t sure where I should stay,” Kate told him. “I didn’t know where you’d be and I wanted to be with you.”

“You’re making me dizzy with the sudden turnaround,” he crooked his arm around her neck and kissed the top of her head, the gesture softening the words. “Dare I ask what caused this change of attitude?”

“A few things,” she answered thoughtfully, pausing long enough for them to get into the car. “First, when you left I realized it was already too late to keep myself from getting hurt. I already cared too much.”

“Who says I’ll hurt you?” He asked softly, his eyes grazing hers before returning to the road ahead.

“Precedent.”

“In general or me specifically?”

“In general.”

“And I can’t reassure you that I’m different? How can you really love me if you think I’m like that Peter idiot?”

“Sometimes people don’t leave by choice,” she stared intently at her hands. “Either way, I don’t feel strong enough to lose someone else I love.”

“What about Jessica and Liz? You love them, I can tell.”

“True, but that didn’t smack me right between the eyes the way you did.”

“I smacked you between the eyes? I don’t know if I like the sound of that,” he teased.

“You know what I mean. Being around you is like being sucked under by a riptide. Maybe it is better to swim with the current, but instinct tells you to fight it.”

“Have a lot of riptides in Albuquerque, do you?” The side of his mouth ticked up a little.

“You’re impossible, sometimes, you know that?”

“But you love me.”

“Do you want to hear the other reasons or not?” She crossed her arms and gave him an irritated look.

“I would,” he assured her.

“The second reason was Ty,” she began.

“Ty?”

“Yes I call him Ty. I refuse to acknowledge you using my dog’s name to poke fun at me.”

“Did I do that?”

“Tyler. Steven Tyler of Aerosmith? Somehow I don’t think that’s a coincidence.”

“I just wondered – if I were a child of the 70s, what would I name my dog?”

“Impossible,” Kate reiterated.

“You were saying…” he reminded her of the original conversation.

“Well it might sound silly, but dogs die.”

“True.”

“A lot more often than people do.”

“Also true,” he tried to follow her logic.

“But we love them anyway. And the time we have with them outweighs the grief of their loss.”

“It’s better to have loved and lost and all that,” he surmised.

“Something like that,” she murmured, repositioning herself so she could study him better.

“So are those your reasons? Or are there more?”

“One more. When I heard about your mother, all that mattered was that you were in pain. The need to be with you completely overshadowed anything else. ”

“I’m glad you came,” he reached out to stroke her cheek.

“Me too,” she tilted her face into his hand. She hoped his touch would always have this same electrifying yet calming effect on her.

“We’re here,” he announced. “This is my parent’s house.”

“It’s very pretty.” Kate took in the tall, narrow white home sandwiched in between two more just like it.

“I grew up here.” He slid out from behind the wheel and came around to open her door but she’d beat him to it.

“You make it very difficult to be a gentleman,” he accused.

“Sorry,” she shrugged. “It feels weird just sitting there waiting for someone to open a door when I’m perfectly capable of it.”

“When you put it that way,” he frowned at her.

“Don’t pout. I still appreciate the gesture,” she assured him. “And I’ll let you carry my bag for me.”

“Thank you,” he accepted the concession. “And you might want to brace yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kate eyed him warily.

“Just don’t be nervous and you’ll be fine.”

“You’re making me nervous.”

Kate heard the deep rumble that she assumed was a bark, followed by another. Ah. His parents had dogs. She wasn’t afraid of dogs, why would she be nervous?

And then the door opened and she watched two of the largest canines she’d ever seen greet Gavin enthusiastically before turning to greet her warily.

“The blue one is Samson. The gold one is Delilah. They’re Neapolitan Mastiffs,” he introduced her to the great brutes that made Ty look like a Chihuahua.

“Wrinkly little guys, aren’t they?” She held her hand out to allow them to smell her.

“Very. And watch the drool.”

“Lovely.” Kate wrinkled her nose.

“They have towels by their dishes in the kitchen. If it gets too bad, you can wipe them off.”

“Good to know.”

“Come on,” he grinned at her reaction. “Let’s get you set up in the guest room.”

“Do you still have a room here?” She asked, blushing when she realized what he was probably thinking. “I’d like to see it, I mean. Not to stay in or anything.”

“Of course not.” She could tell he was biting the inside of his lip to keep from laughing. How rude. “And my room is this first one on the right.”

They’d climbed a flight of stairs and he opened the door to a small room that was what Kate would consider a disaster area.

“How do you function?” She marveled as she stepped through the door. “I’d be completely claustrophobic in this.”

He ignored the question, choosing to instead study her in silence while she took in the mementos scattered around the room. He seemed to be almost trying to get inside her head to gauge her reaction as she soaked in pieces of his past.

“You live a very full life,” her eyes flicked across his and she gave him a little smile. “And you have a very happy family.”

“That’s a good description,” he agreed. “Now can I feed you some dinner or do you just want to go to sleep?”

“Sleep,” she answered instantly. “Actually, shower then sleep.”

“I can arrange that,” he held his hand out for her. “Come on, then.”

The shower felt delicious, better than any shower Kate had ever experienced. Her cotton pajamas felt even better. The cool sheets furthered her bliss.

“You get some rest,” he went to kiss her on the forehead. “We’ll go back to the hospital tomorrow after breakfast.”

“Stay,” she caught his hand as he turned to go. “Hold me while I sleep. Just for a little while.”

Kate couldn’t explain why but she was suddenly near panic at the thought of him walking out the door. Without realizing it, she held her breath waiting for his reply, her eyes beseeching his.

He nodded once, then kicked his shoes off and climbed into the bed with her. Had she any energy left, it might have been a dangerous proposition. As it was, the warmth of his embrace and the gentle lullaby he sang in her ear carried her quickly into a deep sleep.

Kate woke up the next morning and was instantly aware of two things. First, Gavin was no longer beside her and his absence left a void. Second, someone had made bacon. She quickly dressed and scurried downstairs, her stomach protesting loudly the absence of dinner.

He looked up when she entered. Their eyes met and they broke into simultaneous smiles. Kate felt like they were in on a secret the rest of the world just wouldn't understand. She wanted to throw herself into his arms and greet him with a passionate kiss – the kind that made all sorts of promises. Instead, she offered a soft, "Hello."

"Good morning," he finished serving up the eggs in the skillet, setting it aside so he could grab her for just such a kiss. He didn't let her go until her head was spinning; then he reinforced the message with his eyes.

Why did this man love her so? It was surreal. Had she ever felt so irrevocably linked to another human? What would her mother have said about him?

"When did you abandon me?" Was the first coherent thought she could voice.

"Only to make breakfast," he promised. "Not that you would have noticed. You were sound asleep."

"Sorry," she blushed, accepting the plate he handed her.

"Don't be. I'm glad you got some rest."

"Thanks for making breakfast."

"It's the least I can do – the plan is to spend the whole day at the hospital." He looked a little apologetic.

"I hadn't planned on sightseeing," she assured him. "I'm here to be wherever you need me for the next couple of days."

"What did Jack say?"

"I missed his initial response; the girls beat me to it. But he told me to take my time – as long as I was back by Wednesday anyway."

"About that," Gavin frowned thoughtfully.

"Yes?" Kate eyed him warily over a forkful of eggs.

"I don't suppose you'd be interested in sticking around for a while?"

"You know I can't do that to Jack," she shook her head.

"It was worth a shot."

"You are coming back to San Francisco, aren't you?" A touch of panic laced her voice.

“Absolutely.” He must have sensed her panic, because his voice became soothing and he stopped eating to take her hand and place a kiss on the back of it. “You are completely and totally stuck with me now.”

“But you’ll be staying for a while?” Kate guessed.

“A while. I want to be sure Mum really is okay.”

“I understand,” Kate nodded. She did understand, but that didn’t stop her heart from aching just a little at the thought of his prolonged absence.

“I was supposed to be their wedding photographer; I’ve arranged for a friend of mine to take over. Jack wasn’t happy, but he’ll get over it. I did promise to be back by the launch party, though.”

Kate mulled that over for a minute. September. Two months. She could handle two months of anything.

“You know,” she flashed him a reassuring smile. “I think this will be really good for us.”

“Really?”

“It’ll give us a chance to get to know each other better without all of this pesky chemistry getting in the way.”

“I happen to like the pesky chemistry.”

“I didn’t say I don’t like it. I’m just trying to look at the bright side.”

“A regular Pollyanna,” he shook his head.

“We’ll be like pen pals,” she went on enthusiastically, ignoring his last comment.

“Oh, why not?” He caught on to her playful mood.

They ate the rest of their breakfast and were soon on the way back to the hospital. Kate wondered how she’d spend a whole day talking to a virtual stranger. Or was she expected to sit in silence?

She wished she had a book or her laptop to keep her busy. She figured she could kill half an hour calling Jessica and Liz for updates. Maybe more if she called them separately. Maybe once at 10 o’clock and once at 2 o’clock. But what time would it be in San Francisco then? She tried to do the math but couldn’t remember. She’d just have to hope it wasn’t something obnoxious like 2 a.m.

It turned out that she didn’t need to find ways to occupy her day. Ellen drifted in and out of sleep, the rest of Gavin’s family came and went, and Kate spent most of her day with her feet

propped on Gavin's lap talking to him about anything and everything. They had a lifetime to catch up on and an entire day to do it.

"He was such a cute kid," Ellen joined the conversation. "That saved his life often."

"Mum, she doesn't need to hear about that."

"Oh, I think I do," Kate disagreed quickly. "Do go on."

"I don't even know where to start," Ellen began with a smile that hinted at a dimple. "He was always into something, always pushing the boundaries."

"Some things never change," Kate smirked. "He's still doing that. Then using his mouth to get himself out of trouble. It's astonishing, the things he can do with that mouth of his."

Gavin's eyebrow shot up and Kate blushed.

"Oh. I didn't mean that how it sounded. I meant the lip twitch or the lopsided grin or the pout," she hurriedly explained. "He's completely mastered them all and I fall for it every time."

"Good to know," he rewarded her with the lopsided grin in question.

"Like you didn't already," she made a face at him.

"I know exactly what you're talking about. Heaven help the person he decides to use the pout-puppy dog eyes combo on."

"Oh, I know that one. It's brutal," Kate agreed enthusiastically. "I've had good luck countering it with the 'You've got to be kidding' glare. I throw in an eyebrow arch for good measure."

"You're a natural. It took me years to come up with the eyebrow arch."

"Thanks," Kate acknowledged with a flush.

"This is dangerous, isn't it?" Gavin eyed them warily.

"I think it's delightful," Ellen smiled at him, reaching for his hand.

"Then it's worth every trick I lose," Gavin took her hand and kissed it gently. His eyes glowed with such love and devotion, it made Kate want to cry. Being around Gavin and his mother made her miss her own so much it felt like her heart was in a vise.

"Excuse me for a second," Kate said softly, leaving as unobtrusively and quickly as possible. She couldn't worry about Gavin's concerned gaze now; she was too close to losing her grip on her emotions. When she reached the bathroom, she let the tears go.

Sitting on the bathroom floor, her back to the wall and tears streaming down her cheeks, she let the memories come flooding back. It was odd, here in a setting so close to the memories she'd been trying to repress, the ones she'd longed for rose to the surface.

Suddenly she could hear her mama's voice again – the way it was before. Like when she would assure Kate it had been just a dream, or one failed test wouldn't end her high school career, or that she would love again.

She remembered the sound of her mother's laughter, gentle as a brook. She remembered the smell of roses that seemed to cling to her mother's soft skin. And that smile, that smile that had been a ray of sunshine able to pierce the darkest cloud over Kate's life.

Most days, it had been okay that she didn't have a dad because she had always been wrapped so securely in the cocoon of her mother's love. Sure, there were times like the father-daughter dances or Dad's Day at school where his absence smacked a bit. But even then, her mama had always found a way to compensate.

Now, having fallen in love herself, Kate began to get a sense of how much her mother had given for her. Knowing her mom's moral standings, she never would have gotten pregnant if she hadn't at least thought she loved Jack. What had made her leave? Why had she never even tried to date again? Had she loved Jack that much, or was it something else? Either way, her sweet mama had bravely faced the world alone and created a world for Kate to flourish in. How very evil of cancer to tear that world apart.

So it was there, in the bathroom of the oncology floor of London Bridge Hospital, that Kate mourned her own lost battle. She couldn't be sure how long she'd been in there when Nicole poked her head in the bathroom.

"There you are. Gavin's beside himself worrying about you."

"Sorry," Kate stood and busied herself trying to look presentable. "It just hit me all of a sudden. I started missing my mom so much."

"I'm surprised you made it this long." Nicole hugged Kate, taking her a bit by surprise. "It hasn't been that long since you lost her."

Of course Gavin had told his family her story; Kate assumed as much, but it seemed strange to be sharing this personal moment with someone she barely knew. Gavin seemed determined to break down all kinds of Kate's walls.

“Can you tell him I’m okay, that I’ll be out in a minute?” Kate gave her what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Sure, sure,” Nicole nodded and went to relay the message. Kate washed her face and ran her fingers through her hair. There wasn’t much else she could do with no brush and no makeup. It would have to be enough.

She walked right into Gavin when she left the ladies’ room. He instantly engulfed her in a protective embrace and wouldn’t let her go. She thought of protesting out of embarrassment, but the truth was, it was right where she wanted to be.

“I’m sorry, I’m not trying to make today about me,” she wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face against his chest.

“No one thinks you are,” he promised. “I’m sorry to put you through this. A stronger man would send you home rather than expect you to sit in the cancer ward of a hospital.”

“No, this is where I want to be. And I’m glad it all bubbled up to the surface like that. I remember her now,” Kate lifted her face so he could see she meant it. “It’s not just a nightmare haunting me, I remember her. The good stuff. The sacrifices she made so I’d be happy. I think wherever she is now, she’s really happy about us.”

“Good. Because I’m crazy in love you with. I’m glad I have your mum’s approval.” He brushed his lips across hers. His eyes said he’d love to do more than that. An irritated cough disrupted their moment.

“Excuse me,” a woman gestured to the door behind them, the look on her face not a happy one.

“Whoops, sorry,” Kate couldn’t help the giggle that escaped as they scooted to the side as one.

“I’ve created a monster,” Gavin shook his head woefully. “Breaking social mores left and right.”

“Quite the rebel,” she agreed solemnly. “Should we go back?”

“Nah, Dad’s back. Let’s grab a bite to eat and give them some time alone. We’ll come back for a bit later.”

Kate realized she was hungry. She had no sense of time, but she did know breakfast was long gone.

Chapter Eleven

Devon and Nicole joined them for dinner. Kate ordered fish and chips because it seemed the thing to do. Devon and Nicole appeared to be having a dispute amongst themselves.

“I say we let Kate decide,” he finally announced, earning a kick under the table.

“Let Kate decide what?” She looked at Devon expectantly.

“Do you want to know what I’ve found out about your family so far?”

“I told you today isn’t the day,” Nicole hissed.

“But she won’t be here much longer,” he argued.

“And you can’t email her?” Nicole persisted.

“I could, but I’d rather tell her in person.” He met her mutinous glare with one of his own. Kate couldn’t be certain, but she had the feeling that if they weren’t in a crowded restaurant, this would be the point at which they tore each others’ clothes off.

“I’d very much like to know what you’ve found,” she gave Nicole an apologetic look. She felt a little traitorous, but she did want to know.

“Fine,” Nicole shrugged, letting go of it just like that. Devon pulled a file out of Nicole’s bag and tossed it to Kate, who opened it with trembling fingers.

“Your grandparents were Francis and Isabelle Williams. Your mother, Danielle Williams, was their oldest daughter. Joan Williams was her younger sister. Have you met your Aunt Joan?”

“A couple of times. She and my mother were estranged. I saw her briefly at the funeral.”

“You haven’t asked her what happened?”

“It didn’t seem right. Not without knowing why they were estranged or what she knew about Jack. I guess I didn’t know how to approach her, really.” Kate admitted. It did sound silly that she hadn’t even tried asking her aunt for information before moving to San Francisco.

“Your aunt moved to Albuquerque after your mother did. Your family was originally from San Francisco. Well, Napa anyway.”

“Really?” Kate frowned.

“The only thing I can figure is Joan wanted to be near her sister. Or maybe you.”

“Then why would Mom keep her away?”

“You’d have to ask Joan that,” Nicole interjected.

“She’s back in Napa now,” Gavin told her quietly. “I can go with you when I get back if you’d like.”

“Thank you,” Kate nodded in a haze. Did she want to wait that long? She’d decide that later. “Why did she move back?”

“Well, you’re in San Francisco now,” Nicole suggested.

“She’d really uproot her life just to follow me?”

“You’re family. And you’re the only family she has now,” Devon shrugged. Kate could tell that to him, it was all the explanation needed. That was a view foreign to Kate. Family meant her mom, and her mom was gone. Until Gavin, she’d never known anyone else she’d walk through fire for.

“Does that mean that my grandparents are gone?”

“They died six months apart, about five years ago,” Devon confirmed.

“So they were alive for most of my life and I never got to meet them,” Kate was saddened at the knowledge.

“Another question for Joan, I’m sure.”

“So who were they?”

“Your grandparents? Apparently quite the socialites. That could be why she moved. Young single mother wasn’t good for social status.” Devon looked apologetically at Kate.

“True,” Kate agreed. It had never dawned on her before that her mother had given up more than Jack all those years ago. “I wonder—should I be angry with her for robbing me of a family, or grateful to her for protecting me from something?”

“Hard to say without knowing the whole story. Still, from what you’ve told me I think that whatever she did, it was for you.” Gavin mused.

“Thank you,” Kate closed the file with all of the phone numbers and addresses she’d need to fill in some of the pieces of her past. “I really appreciate all you’ve done.”

“It was nothing,” Devon shrugged off her gratitude. “There’s some information about Jack in there, too. I think it might explain some of the conflict in the family – he worked for your grandfather thirty-three years ago. He was a field hand, actually.”

“Excuse me?” Kate had a hard time picturing that.

“His family was poor. He took a job harvesting grapes for Francis. Apparently he wasn’t invited back the next harvest. He just worked there the one season.”

“Grapes?”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? Your family owns a vineyard. Good label, too.” Devon grinned, knowing full well he hadn’t mentioned that.

“Owns?” Kate couldn’t seem to spit out more than one word at a time.

“Well, it belongs to you and your Aunt Joan now.”

“What... How... I...” Kate managed three words that time. Apparently she was capable of either volume or coherence, not both.

“About 95 acres in the Los Carneros of Napa.” Devon’s grin widened. He was enjoying this.

“Who’s been running it?”

“Joan hired a manager. His information is in there, too. She moved back into the family estate after you moved to San Francisco.”

“Wow.” Kate blinked a few times, trying to process it all. She looked at Gavin, “Did you know this?”

“Of course. I’m totally with you for the money,” he winked at her. “I just found out a couple of days ago. But I wasn’t about to rob Devon of his glory.”

“This is completely overwhelming.” Kate looked at him helplessly.

“What do you think you’ll do?” Nicole asked.

“I have no idea,” she said after a moment’s hesitation. It would be nice to have somewhere to go once Jack booted her out of his life.

As surreal as it all seemed, it did shed some light on who her parents had been. She could see Jack as someone who’d created himself from nothing. It made her respect him more. Why hadn’t he taken the opportunity to marry into money, though? What happened? Or had the opportunity never been presented? Surely a poor son-in-law would have been better than an unwed, pregnant daughter to people like the Williams.

After the restaurant, Kate and Gavin spent some more time with Ellen before returning to his parents’ house. When the dogs had been walked and they’d both showered, Kate and Gavin curled up in front of an old movie with the dogs sprawled on the floor beside them. Kate spent part of the movie mentally debating the alternatives for sleeping arrangements.

The debate turned out to be moot because they both fell asleep on the couch halfway through the movie. Neither was in a hurry to move when they awoke, knowing that once they acknowledged the new day, they would be forced to acknowledge the fact that Kate had a plane to board.

“I don’t want to let you go,” his warm breath caressed her neck, sending sparks skittering down her spine. She was suddenly very awake. In that moment, before things like right and wrong and the worries of the day had a chance to settle in, all Kate was aware of was how badly she wanted him.

The need to be closer to him snaked through her, more potent than ever. It wove around them, nearly tangible in the morning air. His breath became ragged, matching her own. And then his lips found hers and the desire flashed, going from a slow burn to a raging inferno in an instant.

She couldn’t touch him enough. The muscles in his arm, his incredibly inviting hair, his sculpted back—they all cried for her fingers to greedily find them. His hands were everywhere at once. His mouth never left hers. She could feel the room spinning around her while her belly turned to butter. Every nerve ending felt electrified by his hunger, his need. For her. The entire world dissolved from being. It was just Gavin, taking up her every sense.

Until the sound of the front door brought reality crashing back around them. For a wild-eyed moment, Kate considered hurting whoever had walked through that door. Or begging Gavin to send them away. Something, anything. She didn’t want to let him go. Not yet. Her chest heaved as she tried to regain control of her emotions. Two months ago, a maelstrom like that would have terrified her. Now she craved it. What had this man done to her?

“Gavin?” Garrett’s voice cut through the morning.

“Yeah Da?” Gavin dropped his head, his forehead resting on Kate’s collarbone. He seemed to be having as much trouble switching gears as Kate.

“Where are you?”

“I fell asleep in the living room. I’ll be right there.”

“Oh, hello there,” Garrett appeared in the doorway, instantly assessing the situation.

“Hello sir,” Kate did her best to hide under Gavin. Great. This would be his last memory of her—the harlot fooling around with their youngest son on their couch.

“Good morning, dear. You two had better get to moving if you plan to get Kate on that plane.” Garrett kindly pretended Kate wasn’t underneath his son. Still, she thought she saw the hint of a smile as he turned to go.

“Great timing, that,” Gavin chuckled, pulling Kate up with him as he sat. “Just as well, though. I’d promised myself I was going to go about this the right way.”

“How so?” She happily snuggled against his chest.

“I don’t want you to have any doubts about my love—and I don’t want any little voices in the back of your mind convincing you this is lust talking. I want to take the physical part slowly. I want to do this right.” He seemed almost embarrassed by that declaration. His fingers never stopped stroking her hair. Kate almost wondered if it was out of nervousness.

“Then it’s a good thing we’ll be half a world apart,” she reached up to stroke his cheek. “Because it’s getting harder and harder to keep my hands off of you.”

“I have created a monster,” he teased.

“I’m going to miss you.”

“It’ll be like a month without air,” he kissed her forehead. Just one more minute, then they’d go.

It was finally Garrett’s reminder bellowed from the kitchen that got them moving and even then, they had to scurry to get Kate to the airport on time. She insisted on stopping by the hospital to say goodbye to the rest of Gavin’s family.

The goodbye at the airport was excruciating. They touched until the moment she passed through the gate. Then he stood and watched her go. She knew, because she turned every few feet to get one last look at his face. Somewhere in the morning, a fear had gripped her heart that he wouldn’t return to San Francisco and now she sought to memorize his every feature.

When she was in her seat and the plane’s wheels lifted off London soil, she allowed herself the luxury of silent tears. Each month loomed before her as insurmountable as a thousand years.

The flight itself was a blur. She dozed off some, tried to watch a movie, studied the file on her family, and mostly just closed her eyes and let Gavin’s face float through her mind. Jessica, Liz & Gaston were all waiting for her at the airport, their excitement contagious. She rushed into their welcoming hugs, so very grateful for them. They grabbed takeout and went back to Kate’s apartment; she was anxious to see Ty. He greeted her with such exuberance it literally bowled her over.

They piled up in the living room with a smorgasbord of vegetarian dishes spread out around them. Ty seemed to know there was nothing interesting there, so he contented himself to lie with his great head in Kate's lap. Although Liz had warned her, Kate had been a little sickened at the sight of her perfectly matching couch and loveseat with their coordinating chew marks. Her favorite rug was gone, apparently in Ty's stomach.

As they ate, she filled them in on the whirlwind trip that had irrevocably changed her life. Kate omitted any mention of Jack, but did ask Jessica and Liz to go with her to find her grandparents' graves. It felt like the right thing to do.

Kate would have liked to have spent the day taking Ty to the park and sleeping. Since she had a one o'clock appointment with Jack and the caterers, she settled for sleeping in and an extra walk around the block. Gavin called and she almost made herself late for the appointment.

They met the caterer at the Bubble Lounge. Jack greeted her with a warm hug and Kate found herself wishing that he knew and still greeted her so warmly. It was the first time she'd spent alone with Jack since arriving in San Francisco. She rather enjoyed the chance to sit here in the relatively empty lounge, sampling food and chatting with the father she'd never known.

With a couple of month's perspective to it, she realized that Gavin had been right. She was very much like Jack. She wondered if he ever looked into her eyes and saw his own. How did he not look at her and remember a girl from his past?

"So... you and Gavin, eh?" he smiled mischievously at her.

"Yeah, boy I fought it, though," she blushed and sipped the wine in front of her. She noted with a hint of pride that it was her label, and it was very good.

"Why did you fight it?" He studied her curiously. "Most people are looking for love, not running from it."

"I don't know," she focused on the wine glass in front of her. It was easier than looking Jack in the eye. "People I love have a way of, well, leaving. And then there's the age difference. It bothered me at first."

"I can relate to that," he chuckled.

"I'm sorry," Kate's cheeks flamed red. How could she have forgotten?

"Don't be. I had a much bigger problem with it than Tara did. It never seemed to bother her."

"How did the two of you fall in love?"

“Tara hasn’t told you that story?” He seemed surprised.

“Actually, she has, but I’d like to hear your version.”

“Well, I went into a little art gallery on Geary Street, looking for a present for my mother,” he began.

“Your mother?” Kate vaguely recalled something in the file about her paternal grandparents. It hadn’t occurred to her before just then that she might meet them soon.

“Yes, she loves paintings with vibrant colors and strong brush strokes so I was on the hunt. I wound up in Tara’s gallery. She was there that day, getting ready for a new show. She wound up helping me pick a print. I couldn’t bear the thought of not seeing her again but couldn’t afford to keep buying paintings, so I asked her if she wanted a cup of coffee. We’ve seen each other every day since then.”

“You make a beautiful couple,” Kate meant it. Maybe Gavin was turning her into a big softie.

“Thank you,” he nodded. “As do you and Gavin.”

“Thank you,” Kate nodded. She thought for a moment, wondering if she should ask the question burning her lips. “So, was there ever a love before Tara?”

“Was there a love before Gavin?” He tossed back.

“Yes, well I thought there was anyway. His name was Peter and he broke my heart badly enough it took ten years for me to let someone else in.” She answered with startling honesty hoping to inspire the same kind of candor.

“To hell with Peter, eh?” He tipped his glass to her then grew serious. “There was one, many years ago. But she disappeared from my life one day and never came back. I never knew what happened to her. She broke my heart badly enough it took me about thirty years to really let someone else in.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kate murmured, unable to bring herself to the same pronouncement he’d made on her behalf.

“So, are we ready to put on a wedding in two weeks?” Jack brightened. He knew the answer; he just didn’t want to spend any more time remembering the past. Kate almost felt bad for bringing it up. Almost.

“It’s going to be magnificent,” she promised with her most winning smile. Jack cocked his head to the side, studying her for just a moment – his face frozen as he tried to connect the dots between a memory and the present.

“So, have you decided what your favorite is?” The caterer interrupted. Kate had forgotten them.

“Yes. Absolutely the crab and mango canapés, the grilled fontina and wild mushroom, oh... and the smoked salmon.” Kate picked the first things that came to mind.

“I liked the candied walnuts,” Jack seemed to pout.

“And the cheese assortment with candied walnuts,” Kate added dutifully.

“Yes ma’am,” he nodded and went to write up the order.

“I need to go sign this contract,” she stood. “See you back at the office?”

“Why don’t you take the rest of the day off? I think Tara has a full day planned for you tomorrow.”

“I assumed she would be going into planning-withdrawal by now.”

“It’s horrible, but you didn’t hear that from me.”

“My lips are sealed.”

Kate was glad when he was gone. Since she’d brought memories of Danielle to the surface, she worried that he would notice just how similar Kate was to the woman from his past. With the rest of her afternoon free, Kate made a beeline to her computer to email Gavin. Once she’d asked about his mother and caught him up on the conversation with Jack, she took Ty to the park.

Spending the day with Ty made Gavin seem closer. She called him after dinner, only to feel really bad for waking him since it was about 4 a.m. in London. He assured her it was fine and returned the favor when he was on his way to the hospital the next morning – which translated to about 1 a.m. her time.

She checked her blackberry every couple of hours, looking for email updates from Gavin. Luckily Tara was feeling pretty romantic and only laughed. She surprised Kate by insisting they go shopping together to pick Kate’s dress for the wedding. She hadn’t really thought much about it, but Tara was insistent. They wound up picking a moss green dress that matched Kate’s eyes exactly. It was sleek, with a halter-style top and a single strap in the back. Kate had to admit she looked pretty dang good in the dress. Hanging out with health-nuts had been really good for her figure. She just wished Gavin could see her in it.

That night she called him just before bed when she figured he would be getting up anyway. He let her sleep through the night, opting for email instead of a late-night phone call. Kate was happy to be back into her routine at work. Missing Gavin became as much a part of her as the mole on her left foot. It was just there and there was nothing to do about it except live with it. Email certainly made it easier to focus on his words and not wonder what it would be like to kiss that spot at the base of his throat.

The music was coming more easily now. It was less angst-filled and more passionate. She could feel it flowing through her each night as she sat to purge all of the feelings swirling around inside. Kate realized it was like a dear friend and she'd missed playing more than she could begin to say. Just as easily as she fell back into joking around with Gaston, her fingers seemed to remember exactly what they were supposed to do, even after years of absence.

Each night, after she had tucked her violin away, she spent her time learning as much as she could about the Williams family and the Blue Valley Vineyard. There was a part of Kate that wanted very much to have a place to call her home. Visions of a Gone with the Wind-worthy dedication to her ancestral home flickered through her mind. When she saw the visiting hours on the website, she immediately called Jessica and Liz to see if they were game for a trip to the winery.

Once the plans had been made, Kate felt a twinge of guilt. It felt a little like she would be swooping down out of nowhere to claim something that wasn't really even hers. Did Kate Yager really have any stake in the Williams family home? Hadn't her mother gone to great lengths to keep the existence of Blue Valley from her? What if her mother had been running from the Williams and not Jack? What if it was Joan who had not wanted Kate? Questions chased each other round and round in her mind, keeping Kate awake long hours into the night. Kate finally found some measure of peace in the decision to relinquish her share of the vineyard. Maybe if Joan knew Kate wasn't a threat, she'd be more likely to talk to her—to trust her.

Sunday rolled around and they went to the marathon together. Jessica needed to finish her article on Tom, and the others just wanted to cheer him on. In typical San Francisco summertime fashion, the morning fog clung to the city, not yet ready to relinquish its grip to the sunshine.

Kate met Jessica, Ryan, Liz and Derrick on the pre-determined corner, coffee in hand. The plan was to cheer Tom as the marathon began and then reassemble at various points along the way. Having never been to a marathon, Kate had no idea if her plan was feasible or not, but it

seemed the thing to do. They chatted easily while they waited for the marathoners to assemble. Kate spotted Justin and waved. Had it really only been weeks since she'd taken him to lunch? It felt like a lifetime had passed since she'd paid much attention to her publicity campaign. His face brightened and he wound his way through the crowd over to her little group.

"Hey-a Kate!" He greeted her with a half-hug.

"Hey Justin. What brings you out this way?"

"Covering it for the paper," he sighed and looked around. "I have to say I'm looking more forward to your party."

"Thanks," she smiled at him. "I hope we don't let you down."

"I don't think that would be possible," he gave her a look that Kate thought might be trying to say something. It made her a little uncomfortable and she nearly jumped when her phone chirped.

"It's Gavin," she tried to keep the relief out of her voice. "I'd better take this. It was good seeing you, Justin."

"Hello love," she answered even more brightly than usual.

"Well top of the morning to you," she could hear the smile in his voice. "What has you so chipper this morning?"

Kate filled him in on the plans for the day, deciding to leave out her unease about Justin's intentions. That conversation could wait for later. She saw Tom in the distance and waved excitedly. There was a feeling of anticipation building in the air and Kate wished Gavin was there to capture this day with his camera. Liz was standing in as the photographer for the day. Her style was different but impressive nonetheless. While Kate thought mixing up the styles might be interesting, she still missed Gavin's presence. She hung up in time to watch the start of the race.

Following the marathon from point to point was a great way to tour the city. They started near the Bay Bridge, did some shopping with the street vendors near Fisherman's Warf, explored the Presidio, got some great shots of the Golden Gate Bridge as Tom crossed back over, played with Ty in Golden Gate park, meandered along the bayside and planted themselves back at the Bay Bridge in time to cheer Tom onto victory. She sent Gavin a text when Tom crossed the finish line a full 10-seconds before the second place marathoner.

At each stop, they ran into Justin. By the second or third, it was painfully clear to Kate that she had a sticky situation on her hands. She hadn't tried to lead Justin on, certainly none of her other contacts had taken her attention the wrong way. Liz and Jessica ascertained the situation and started running interference. Kate felt like she gushed over Gavin even more than usual, trying to get the point across that she was in a relationship. By the fourth stop, they started actively avoiding Justin. As much as Kate hated to lose a perfectly good contact at a major paper, she was determined to rectify the situation somehow. Maybe it could wait until after the launch party, though.

Monday they played hooky and loaded up in a rented car to head for Napa, eager to help Kate in her quest to uncover the past and even more eager to get a peek at the vineyard she was a fifty percent partner in. Kate knew that she would have to tell Jessica and Liz who Jack was after this or they'd unwittingly give her secret away.

They stopped at the cemetery first and Kate placed flowers on the graves of two strangers who shared the same blood as she. Kate's nerves started acting up the nearer they got to Blue Valley. She wished she had waited for Gavin. His voice had a way of soothing her. She told herself that the odds of running into Joan were slim. She was almost convinced—until they walked through the front door of the immense wine-tasting room and she came face to face with her aunt.

Chapter Twelve

Kate froze, belatedly realizing she should have put more thought into what she was going to say. She could see the shock on Joan's face, and that she was trying to decide just what Kate knew and why she was there.

"Aunt Joan," Kate put on her happiest face. "It's good to see you."

"You too." Though Joan smiled, Kate was pretty sure she was lying.

"I want you to meet my friends...." As Kate introduced Liz and Jessica, they enthusiastically greeted Joan in turn, adding to her wary confusion.

"Have you taken the tour yet?" Joan asked for lack of anything else to say.

“Not yet, we plan to though. I was actually hoping I could maybe speak to you first.”

The wary confusion turned to sheer panic but was quickly masked by a fixed smile.

“Sure. Why don’t we take a walk?”

Jessica caught Kate’s hand to give it a quick squeeze before she followed her aunt out the door. Kate caught Liz’s smile of encouragement and felt bolstered by the love of her friends.

“I know about Jack,” Kate began once they were out of earshot. She took only a moment to let her aunt absorb the shock before diving headfirst into the story of the past two months. She left nothing out – not Gavin, the trip to London, or her conversation with Jack just a few days prior. When she was done she stopped and held her hands up as if to say “and that’s all I got – help me from here”.

“Wow.” Joan bit her bottom lip in a gesture that reminded Kate of herself. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“I don’t want to take half of your vineyard away from you,” Kate blurted. “It’s beautiful and I hope you’ll allow me to be some part of it someday, but it’s rightfully yours.”

“Okay,” Joan replied slowly. “What do you want to know?”

“Tell me the story of my parents,” Kate pleaded.

“It wasn’t an unusual story,” Joan smiled a little ruefully. “Jack was so good looking, and so carefree. We lived in a world of cotillions and starched dresses. It was easy to see why Danielle fell head over heels in love with him. Of course our parents didn’t know.”

Kate tried to picture this version of her mother and Jack. She could almost see them in her mind’s eye.

“When she found out about the baby, about you I mean, she went straight to Jack. He was so worried Daddy would fire him. He begged your mother to have an abortion. He said they’d get married after he finished college. He knew he’d never finish with a baby to support and no job.”

“Oh,” Kate tried to process that fact. Jack had wanted her aborted. Kate wasn’t sure how she felt about that. It stung a little. Actually, it stung a lot.

“Danielle wouldn’t hear of it, though. She already loved you so much. So she left. Didn’t tell any of us where she went, she just left.”

“Oh your poor parents, they must have been beside themselves.”

“They were, but she was right to have left. They wouldn’t have taken her situation well at all.”

“Oh,” Kate repeated.

“She started writing to me from time to time, so I knew she’d ended up in Albuquerque. When I graduated from college, I followed her there. I just missed her. She got mad because I led Mother and Father to her. It was terrifying when they first saw you. Brutal.”

“How old was I?” Kate tried to remember any scary old people from her past.

“Seven. We were at the state fair. You were playing with friends and ran up to ask for more money. You ran off again before anyone said a word. You probably missed the whole blow up that ensued after that.”

“I remember that fair. I thought I’d hit the jackpot when Mom handed me a ten.”

“I always felt stuck between two worlds. I wasn’t able to cut Mother and Father out like Danielle could, but I couldn’t just ignore her like our parents could. So I just kind of existed somewhere in the middle of the two.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kate hugged her impulsively. “I always just assumed you didn’t like us very much. I never knew.”

“You lived in a safe little bubble created by your mom, who had the best of intentions. I don’t really blame either of you.”

“Is there any way I could come again sometime?” Kate hesitated.

“Anytime.” This time it was Joan who hugged Kate. “I’ll give you the real tour of the grounds. I’ll even show you where your mom’s room was.”

“I’d like that.”

“You look very much like her you know.”

“I’ve been told that before.”

“Except you have your father’s eyes.”

“I know.”

“How do you think he’s going to react to you not telling him?”

“It seemed like a good enough idea at the time. Then it just sort of got out of control,” Kate stared intently at her hands.

“Why don’t you hang on to your fifty percent of the vineyard just in case that doesn’t end so well?” Joan grinned a little.

“Maybe that’s a good idea,” Kate agreed quickly. She really had intended to give back her share, but this place was just so peaceful, so idyllic, she couldn’t seem to part with her claim to it.

“Come on; let’s go find your group. There will be plenty of time for us to catch up. Maybe you can come back next weekend.”

“I’d like that,” Kate agreed. She hugged Joan before they parted ways. Everywhere she looked, she was amazed that her story had led her here. It was like something from a fairytale.

Hours later, Kate sat across the table from her friends. They’d toured the grounds and she’d shared the story of two young lovers kept apart by circumstance. She’d told them everything, except her father’s name. And now it was time to do just that.

“I have a confession to make,” she began softly. “I took the job at the magazine because I suspected Jack was my father. Now I know it’s true.”

“Oh. Wow,” Jessica processed that information. “You know, I can see that.”

“It certainly explains why you cared about the age difference between him and Tara.” Liz smiled then paused. “Wait a second, Jack doesn’t know about this, does he?”

“No, and I don’t want to tell him. Not now, with the wedding so close. I didn’t know about Tara when I came here; now I don’t want to come between them.”

“You’ve got to tell him,” Liz argued.

“He’ll be furious if you don’t,” Jessica agreed with her.

“But he doesn’t need this right now. And what if he still doesn’t want me? What if he sends me away? I don’t want to leave you guys yet.” Kate panicked a little.

“Okay, we’ll wait until after the wedding,” Liz assured her.

“But you have to tell him as soon as he’s back from his honeymoon.”

“The week after the wedding,” Kate promised, her stomach in knots. Knowing for a fact that he had rejected the very idea of her once wasn’t helping her confidence that he would welcome her now.

Kate was suddenly anxious to get home to Ty. She made herself wait to call Gavin. She really was trying to be a functioning human being without him. Sometimes she wondered what she did before he came along.

“It wasn’t you personally he was rejecting, Katie,” Gavin assured her that night on the phone. “It was the disruption of his plans.”

“And I wouldn’t be disrupting his plans now?” She countered, absentmindedly scratching Ty’s belly.

“Yes, but you’re a person now. I mean, one he can see.”

“I hope you’re right. Jessica thinks he’ll be mad I didn’t tell him sooner.”

“Probably. If anyone can convince him not to be, it would be you.”

“I think you’re biased.”

“There’s no good way for me to answer that.”

“True,” Kate smiled. She could almost see his facial expressions on the other end of the line. “How’s your mom?”

“Doing really well. I mean, the treatment is rough, but she’s been amazing.”

“Tell her I’m thinking of her,” Kate couldn’t imagine going through all that Ellen was. At least she was surrounded by an adoring family. That had to help, and it was that knowledge that kept Kate from begging Gavin to come back to resume their love story. Even though every fiber of her being ached to be back in his arms again.

“I miss that electrified feeling I get whenever I’m about to touch you,” he said suddenly, as if he could read her thoughts. “And I miss smelling you. And seeing you flush when you’re mad at me.”

“I miss you too,” Kate murmured. “I don’t know how I thought I could avoid falling for you.”

“I wondered that myself,” he teased. “I’ll be home soon.”

“I know it’s selfish to say, but I’ll be glad when you are.”

Kate had a new routine. Work filled her days. Ty filled her home. Gavin’s sweet voice came to her each evening over the phone. Saturday she drove herself up to Napa for an overnight stay and brought Ty with her, much to his delight. She stayed in her mom’s old bedroom and spent two days wandering around Blue Valley. She even braved a horseback ride with her aunt Joan, figuring Gavin would be proud of that one. For the first time in her life, she spoke more than two words to her uncle Mason. He seemed an affable enough guy, if not effusive.

Her routine took her right up to the day of the wedding. She was up at 5:30 to walk Ty and take him to Gaston’s for the day before heading to Nob Hill. She hated to impose, but she knew this was going to be a long one.

The Ritz was eerily quiet when Kate arrived, coffee in hand. She enjoyed a quiet walkthrough before workers started to trickle in. It was an early wedding, which meant an even earlier set up. She was soon deeply embroiled in directing dozens of workers as they came and went. Kate still remembered the first event she had ever coordinated, the panic that had set in when she found herself peppered with a hundred different questions at once. She had long since learned to juggle the melee.

Tara greeted Kate with an enthusiastic hug, which she happily returned. It was hard not to feel her excitement.

“Don’t forget to get yourself changed before the wedding,” she half-sang.

“I won’t,” Kate promised. “I’ll be up in a bit to check in on you.”

Her phone chirped and she smiled, shooing Tara away.

“How’s the big day?” Gavin’s smooth voice made her stomach flutter.

“So far so good. I have to go make sure the chairs are set up right then I’ve promised to be a good girl and get myself dressed.”

“Don’t tell me you’re running around in your skivvies and I’m missing it,” Gavin gasped.

“My wedding clothes, silly. I happen to be in jeans and a t-shirt right about now.”

“Which t-shirt? That could be almost as good.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“And you love me.”

“Yes, I do love you.”

“I never get tired of hearing that.”

“And I never seem to get used to saying it,” she admitted.

“Give it fifty years or so,” his voice grew husky with promise.

“Don’t go making me all starry-eyed right now. I need all my faculties to pull this off.”

“Ah, you’ll be grand. I’m sure of it.”

“Kate! The groom needs you. There’s a problem with the tux.” Jack’s younger brother Sam—her uncle, actually—grabbed her hand and began pulling her along.

“Gotta go. I’ll call you later,” she hung up the phone and obediently followed.

“Kate, I don’t think they altered this correctly. I can’t get it to button right,” Jack looked at her in a pathetic plea for help. Sam took that as his cue to leave, eagerly handing the problem over to Kate.

“They’re the best tailors in San Francisco. They did a fine job. Either you’ve had too many cappuccinos or you’re doing something wrong.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Just hold still,” she ordered, suppressing a laugh. He’d made quite a mess of his tux. “I have no idea how you got this so twisted up.”

“It’s harder than it looks.”

“Mmm,” Kate eyed him speculatively. “Okay, here we go.”

Less than five minutes later, she had him reassembled properly. She stepped back to take stock of the finished product, and moved back in to straighten here and there, making a slow circle around him. He held perfectly still, allowing her to work her magic.

“See how handsome you are?” She came to a stop behind him, turning his body so he could see himself in the mirror. She studied his reflection with him, brushing the shoulders of the coat smooth. It took her a few seconds to realize that his frigid stance was no longer one of compliance. An incredulous look was carved on his face.

“You...” he whispered.

“Jack?” She asked quietly, cautiously, like one might speak to a wild animal they were trying to calm.

“Who is your mother?” His whisper was harsh.

“Danielle Yager... I guess you probably knew her as Danielle Williams, though.” Kate’s eyes never left his in the mirror.

“Who?” He took a ragged breath. “Who is your father?”

“You are.”

The world seemed to slow down agonizingly for a heartbeat. Kate gulped in a breath. Jack closed his eyes, the pain etched into every line of his face.

“Jack, I,” Kate began softly. Jack held up his hand and she stopped short. The moment seemed to drag on for an eternity.

“Come,” he finally barked, grabbing Kate by the hand and dragging her out the door.

Kate tried to smile at the people they passed to assuage the confused expressions on their faces. Still, she was filled with a certain amount of fear. The look on his face was murderous. She’d never seen him so furious.

He all but tossed her into his car before stalking around to climb in. She wanted to ask where they were going. Maybe he'd just leave her beside the road in the country like an unwanted puppy. People didn't usually kill the unwanted puppies; they just left them for nature to take care of. If he did that, she stood a chance. She did have her cell phone after all. She could call... someone. Gavin wouldn't be much help from London. Jessica? Liz? Gaston? Surely one of them would come to her aid.

Her musings were interrupted when he parked the car and stalked around to jerk her to her feet. He stood there for a moment, staring at her as if he were trying to form the words only to come up empty. He finally turned and walked away. It took Kate a second to realize they were at Huntington Park. There were enough witnesses she was fairly certain he wouldn't kill her. That was a plus. She hurried to catch up with him, sure he would eventually find the words.

"Why are you here?" He stopped abruptly in front of a large fountain, speaking over his shoulder as if he couldn't bear to face her.

"That's kind of complicated."

"Give me the simple version."

"I wanted to know you."

"I'm not wealthy, you know. It's all Tara's. There's nothing for you."

"I'm pretty well set without you, pops," she snarled. How dare he assume that's what she was after?

"Why now?"

"Because I only found out about you a few months ago. When my mother died," she told him softly, very aware of his sudden intake of breath at her words.

"I always wondered what happened to her," he hung his head.

"She lived a good life," Kate took a tentative step towards him.

"I wondered if she went through with it—having the baby. Wondered if it was a boy or a girl."

"It was a girl," Kate tried to smile.

"She just left, you know. She didn't even say goodbye. She chose it over me."

"I have to admit I'm kind of glad she did," Kate scowled. "It would have been nice if she hadn't had to make that choice at all."

"What do you know?" He growled.

“More than you realize,” she growled right back.

“Why have you been in my life for this long and not said a word?” He looked at her like she was a parasite to be loathed, not a daughter to be cherished. “You know what? I don’t have time for this today. I’m supposed to be married in an hour.”

Kate opened her mouth to explain but he’d begun to walk away. She took a step to follow him but was brought up short by his harsh command to leave him be. She stood there alone in the park, her lip trembling ever so slightly, wondering what to do next.

Chapter Thirteen

Kate allowed herself a few minutes to collect her shattered emotions, letting the sound of water spitting from the mouths of cherubs calm her nerves. Then she began the half-mile walk back to the Ritz. However furious she might be, however heartbroken, she would not let Tara down. Halfway there, she picked up a jog. She still had to get dressed for the ceremony.

“Where have you been?” Tara demanded cheerfully when Kate burst through the door of the bride’s room.

“Your silly groom had made a mess of his tux,” Kate smiled as brightly as she could and shook her head.

“Well get in here and get dressed. We can’t have you looking like that at the ceremony,” Tara smiled in a way that made Kate wonder just what she knew that Kate didn’t.

“Sure, sure. Just let me step into the washroom to freshen up first. And Tara, you are stunning.” Kate ducked into the other room to wash the sweat of her jog off before shimmying into the most beautiful dress she’d ever owned. Kate almost hated that the color so perfectly matched her eyes, Jack’s eyes. It felt like she’d be shouting, “hey Jack, remember me, your daughter?”

Still, it clung perfectly to her body. Her honey-gold back was obstructed only by a single strap just under the shoulder blades. The wide neckline stopped just short of being immodest and the halter-style top was fitted perfectly to her curves. The floor-length dress swirled prettily when she walked. If it were any other day, she would feel like a fairy tale princess in this dress.

She made small talk with Tara and her bridesmaids as she brushed on a hint of makeup and swept her hair into a simple up-do. With one last kiss to Tara's cheek and a wish for good luck, Kate went back to her duties of event planner. She'd deal with Jack when their paths crossed.

The longer she went without their paths crossing, the more nervous she became. What if he bailed on Tara because of her? Kate was too busy to do much about it, except hope that he wouldn't do something that heartless. Well, not to Tara anyway. He'd shown himself quite capable of being heartless where Kate was concerned.

Kate surveyed the fairy tale she'd helped create. Maybe this was a fitting place for her dress, after all. The building was magnificent, the golden ballroom glowed in the light of the candles and chandeliers, and the white decorations lent the surroundings an angelic quality. Breathtaking bouquets of white orchid sprays graced the center of each table.

Guests were filling the neatly-lined seats in the terrace courtyard. A massive white tent had been set up to a backdrop of sculpted boxwood hedges and a flawlessly groomed garden of roses, lavender and ivy. White rose petals had been scattered along the brick walkway.

The music began and Kate noticed with a certain amount of gratitude that Jack was right where he should be, looking as charming as ever. Her eyes misted as she studied her father, so handsome and proud on his wedding day. She allowed herself only the briefest second musing before ducking out of the courtyard undetected. No sense marring the groom's face with a scowl because he'd spotted his pesky offspring.

Kate busied herself with the kitchen staff during the ceremony. The reception would be immediately following, so there was no time to be melancholy. Just as the final touches were being put into place, the wedding party was forming a receiving line. Kate knew guests would begin filtering in any moment now, so she quickly issued last reminders to the servers.

Dinner was soon underway. Tara found her long enough to crush her in yet another hug and to whisper heartfelt thanks. Jack's parents stopped her to tell her what a bang-up job she'd done on the wedding. She'd resisted the urge to hug them and instead bowed her head and offered a humble "Thank you." Maybe one day she could meet them as she truly was – their granddaughter. Maybe not, she thought ruefully when she caught Jack's glare.

There was an entire side of the family she was meeting today. She wondered what it would be like to have grown up with cousins her own age. For years, she had watched Rachel Cooper

on television, admiring the young reporter's tenacity. It was a little strange seeing her now and realizing they were cousins. Would they have been friends?

Kate took a moment to sneak a strawberry decorated in a chocolate tuxedo, content to watch the sun sink over the city in solitude.

"You know, someone as breathtaking as you really shouldn't be alone." A voice she'd know anywhere whispered low in her hear. Lightening shot through her veins and she whirled to face him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh please don't tell me you want me to go. It took me twenty-two hours to get here just to dance with you at this wedding."

"You shouldn't have done that. Oh I'm so happy you're here," she threw herself into his arms.

He chuckled softly, trailing kisses along her ear, her neck, her jaw. She threw caution to the wind and caught his lips with hers, kissing him as if her very soul depended on the connection.

"I missed you, too." He whispered, his lips continuing on their journey across her cheeks, her eyelids, her forehead.

"You have no idea how much I needed to see you today." She wanted to tell him everything but knew she'd start crying if she did. So she left it at, "It's not been my best day ever."

"You going to tell me why later?" He guessed the reason for her hesitancy had something to do with the current setting.

"Promise," she nestled closer to him. "So why are you here?"

"I'm Tara's present to you. Her way of saying thank you for all you've done."

"I knew I liked her." Kate smiled and took a deep breath. Man he smelled good.

"You look amazing, you know."

"So do you. I like the tux."

"I love the dress. I might ask you to wear it again when it's just the two of us."

"I was sad you wouldn't be able to see it."

"So now you can be happy."

"You have that effect on me," she murmured contentedly. His lip curled into a smile.

"Would you like to dance?"

“I would love to.” She allowed herself to be led to the dance floor. He pulled her into his embrace, effortlessly leading her in a waltz. Through the fog of joy and desire, Kate was vaguely aware of Jessica and Liz’s smiles and waves. She met Tara’s grin with a mouthed, “Thank you.”

If there were other details of the wedding to be seen to, Kate missed them. All that mattered for the rest of the night was Gavin and the fact that he was there, in her arms. If only for this one night. She didn’t even want to ask when he was going back or for how long. Those details could wait for reality. This was her fantasy.

“Do you want a drink?” Gavin grazed her neck with his lips as he asked.

“A glass of wine would be lovely,” Kate followed him to the bar. “Blue Valley, please. It’s all I drink now. Anything white.”

“I’m so glad that’s going well,” he tossed his arm over her shoulders and pulled her closer to him. “Hey Jack, congratulations, sir.”

Gavin’s smile at the sight of the groom quickly faded when he saw the look Jack was giving Kate. He immediately assessed the situation and nodded as if to say, “So that’s how it is.”

“Thank you,” Jack acknowledged stiffly.

“You know, it’s probably not as sordid as you think,” Gavin addressed the issue head on. “Why don’t you set it aside for now and the two of you can talk when you get back?”

“You knew.” It was an accusation. Jack transferred his glower to Gavin.

“That’s it,” Kate growled low, stepping in between the two men who formed her world. “You have two choices Jack. You can mind your manners or you can see to the clean-up yourself. Or have you forgotten that I am your wedding coordinator?”

Kate could see Jack mentally tabulating the bill from the Ritz if it wasn’t left in the right shape. Or maybe he was trying to imagine Tara’s reaction if Kate disappeared now. Either way, he gave them a terse nod and walked away.

“Not your best day?” Gavin arched an eyebrow, his lip twitching. “My dear, I think you understated it.”

“Yeah, he didn’t take it so well.” Kate gratefully accepted the glass of wine he offered.

“Why on earth did you tell him today of all days?”

“The son of a gun figured it out. I think he saw my reflection next to his and it just clicked into place. It was kind of scary actually; I thought he was having a stroke or something.”

“Would have served him right.”

“I’m trying to be more gracious than that.”

“Are you succeeding?”

“Not really.” Kate quickly changed her frown to a smile at the sight of their friends approaching.

“Gavin!” Liz stood on tiptoes to kiss Gavin on the cheek. “How long are you gracing us with your presence?”

“Only a few days, unfortunately.” Gavin answered Liz, but his eyes were on Kate. “But I promise to be back in three weeks, tops.”

“Gavin! You should sneak Kate up to Napa while you’re here. It’s unbelievable up there.” Jessica also had to stand on tiptoe to wrap her arms around Gavin’s neck.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Kate agreed. “You would like it.”

“I’m yours to do with as you will,” he twirled Kate playfully before tucking her back up next to him.

The rest of the night passed in a blur and Kate soon found herself in the thick of cleanup. Luckily, she had an amazing crew, which included her group of friends. They were cleaned up and out of there in short order. Gavin had rented a car and drove them to go pick up Ty, which he took care of so Kate wouldn’t get caught in a long conversation. She worried a little about him driving, remembering how thoroughly exhausted she’d been after her own flight. He seemed to fare a little better than she had and managed to get them back to her loft safely.

He walked her to her door. She wearily unlocked the door and kicked her heels off the second she’d crossed the threshold. It took her a second to realize he hadn’t followed her in. She turned to question him with her eyes.

“Should I go?”

“I’d like to think we have a certain amount of self-control,” she pulled him through the door by his jacket front. “But either way, there is absolutely no way I’m letting you out of my sight while you’re on this side of the globe.”

“Fair enough,” he grinned devilishly, kicking the door closed behind him, dipping his head to kiss her. Ty practically quivered with excitement. It was obvious he remembered the one who’d sprung him from doggie jail. Gavin pulled away from Kate long enough to kneel before Ty. He seemed to be asking for something as he caught the dog’s head in his hands, scratching

Ty's face with his thumbs. Ty trembled at his touch. Kate could sympathize. Gavin had that effect on her, too.

"Now go on, you silly beast. I'm going to ask my girlfriend to dance." He put on a CD with an ease that made her wonder how he knew his way around her stereo so well. Come to think of it, that wasn't her CD.

"Do you keep your own music here?" Kate tried to remember how he'd even gotten a key to her apartment.

Gavin gave her a devilish grin and merely held his hand out in an unspoken request.

"But we have danced all evening."

"That was one kind of dancing. This is another." With that, he pulled her into his arms, their bodies melding together as they swayed gently to the slow songs in the background. She realized he was right. A waltz in public was certainly different than this. For instance, she was now free to run her fingers through his hair. Her hands could choose to cling to his shoulders or even rest on his arms, relishing the feel of each muscle in them. There was no pretense of formality now and she could nuzzle his neck without fear of reprimand.

A part of Kate could have danced with him all night. Another part wasn't sure she could take much more. Every move was slowly stoking the fire growing in the air between them. A third part was so tired she wasn't sure she could stand on two feet much longer. She knew if she was tired, he must be even more so.

"Do you have clothes in your car?" She finally asked.

"My suitcase is actually in your room," he admitted sheepishly.

"Presumptuous much?"

"Just hopeful. I mean, I still intend to not rush things. I just don't want to leave you alone for one second."

"Good. Because I don't think I could let you go right now."

Kate had meant it. Letting him go long enough to brush her teeth and change into pajamas had felt like too long. When she scurried back into her room, it was to find him stretched out on top of her bed fully dressed and sound asleep. There was such a beauty and peace about him she stood there for a moment just drinking in the sight of his face.

She gently took his shoes off and found a blanket to cover him, then snuggled under that blanket with him. Ty did his best to wedge himself in between them like a good chaperone

should. The angry glare of her father seemed to dissipate in this safe little cocoon and Kate fell asleep very happy.

She awoke to the sensation of being watched. Gavin was stretched out beside her, still in his tux and watching her with a contented smile. She went to snuggle closer to him, but Ty sensed that she was awake and bathed her face in kisses.

“Alright, alright. Go get your leash.” Kate grumbled and got out of bed to slide on some jeans.

“Look at that. He actually got his leash.” Gavin marveled.

“Of course he did.”

“I get you an unruly mutt to liven things up a bit for you and instead you turn him into a perfect little gentleman.” He shook his head ruefully.

“That’s not true. He ate my couch. And my rug. And he makes me go out in public before I’ve showered in the morning.”

“Shocking.” Gavin stood and stretched lazily. “Come on; let’s get this over so I can get out of this monkey suit.”

“You’re going with me, dressed like that?” She eyed his rumpled suit and wild hair.

“Sure. I told you, I’m not letting you out of my sight for the next two days.”

“I’m showering alone.” Kate stated firmly, the thought of not showering alone nearly leaving her in a puddle on the floor.

“Okay, with few exceptions I’m not letting you out of my sight for the next two days.”

“Better.”

They enjoyed a few stares while they walked Ty, her in a pajama top and jeans, him in a rumpled tuxedo, Ty bouncing happily along at his side. It was very clear to Kate that if she and Gavin didn’t make it, Ty would be as devastated as she. Kate was shocked to realize that she didn’t mind the odd looks. In fact, it was kind of liberating.

When they got back, she let Gavin grab the first shower and tried her best not to think too much about the mental picture of him in the shower while she called her aunt to see if they could make an impromptu visit.

“You know, Kate, you don’t have to ask permission to visit,” Joan had told her. “This is your home, too.”

Kate had awkwardly thanked her and set about making a quick breakfast.

“You’re not going to leave those dishes in the sink, are you?” Gavin feigned shock when he ambled into the kitchen.

“Only until after my shower, smarty pants.” She stuck her tongue out at him. By the time she’d finished her shower, the dishes were done and Gavin seemed very proud of himself.

There was a knock at the door that startled them both. Gavin answered and Kate strained to hear the whispered conversation. She couldn’t have been more surprised when it was Tara who shoved her way past a worried-looking Gavin.

“Kate,” Tara rushed to throw her arms around Kate’s neck. “I’m so sorry Jack is being such a royal jerk about this.”

“Oh. Thank you,” Kate awkwardly returned the hug. “I’m sorry to throw a wrench into everything.”

“By what, existing? I totally get why you didn’t tell him. Once you found out about me, I mean. That was it, wasn’t it?”

Kate nodded. “The timing just seemed wrong. I figured I’d wait until you guys were settled in and then figure out a way to tell him.”

“I can understand why he’s struggling to adjust and all. I’m not happy about the fact that I could be a grandmother before I’m a mommy, but it is what it is. Being upset won’t change it.”

“Oh don’t say that,” Kate winced, earning an odd look from Gavin.

“Still, it’s possible. But it doesn’t matter. Jack should be thrilled you turned out so well and to have you in his life. He’ll come around to that. And don’t worry about your job. He wouldn’t dare chase you off.” Tara promised her with a fierceness that implied the subject had, in fact, come up and she’d won that argument.

“The thought had occurred to me,” Kate acknowledged. “I’m glad you won that one.”

“Me too,” Tara flashed her a pretty smile. “Now I’d better get back. We have a flight to catch; I just didn’t want you worrying about this for the next week.”

“Thank you.” Kate really was grateful to know where Tara stood. “And thank you, for bringing Gavin back for a few days.”

“Oooh, I almost forgot. Were you surprised?” Tara’s eyes lit up.

“Yes, it was amazing.”

“Your flight...” Gavin reminded Tara when she appeared ready to insist on every detail.

“Oh right. Fill me in when I get back.”

“Have a safe trip,” Gavin opened the door for her.

“You just want her all to yourself,” Tara accused as she rushed passed him.

“True.” Gavin admitted with a smile. The second the door was closed he turned to Kate. “Do you want children?”

“Excuse me?” She choked on her coffee.

“Just then, when you were talking to Tara, I got the impression it was the furthest thing from your mind.” He seemed concerned by that fact.

“Well, at the moment, it kind of is. I would imagine I’ll want children someday. I haven’t really thought about it. Why, do you?”

“Absolutely,” he said without hesitation.

“How many?” She asked warily.

“I don’t know. A couple I guess.” He shrugged.

“I can live with that.” It occurred to Kate that they were discussing this as if the other person’s opinion on the subject would have a definite impact on their own future. Kate wondered if that should frighten her at all.

“I’m glad,” he smiled crookedly at her as he pulled her into his arms for a lingering kiss. Any fears scattered.

“We’d better go before I find another way to spend the day,” she finally pulled away when Ty wedged himself between them with a plaintive whine. As Ty’s excitement grew, Kate’s apprehension did. Her relationship with Joan was just blooming. It was suddenly very important that Joan and Gavin like each other.

As Kate tried to share a seat with Ty in Gavin’s Audi TT, she wished she’d rented a car like she normally did. Ty’s breath was hot and smelly in her face, a fact Gavin seemed to find incredibly amusing. Stinky breath and all, Kate couldn’t help basking in the playful banter that passed the time. The warmth of it bathed her like a sunny day and she laughed until her face hurt.

His eyes danced merrily and she knew he was enjoying himself as much as she. There wasn’t much room left for nerves by the time he walked around the car to open the door for her. He took her hand to help her out of the car and then held it, allowing their clasped hands to swing between them as they walked the short distance from the parking lot to the wine tasting room, where Kate knew she’d find her Aunt Joan.

Any fears she might have had about the two not getting along were quickly put to rest. It was obvious they clicked instantly. Watching Joan with Gavin, Kate realized how similar her aunt was to her mother. A little more daring maybe, a little less reserved, but definitely cut from the same cloth. It felt a little like having her mother back. Still, there was a piece of Kate that couldn't help wishing her mother could have been standing here, laughing with the man she loved.

They had dinner with Joan and Mason that evening on the veranda with Ty lying at Kate's feet, his tongue lolling and a doggie-smile on his face. It was pleasant, peaceful. This was easily Kate's new favorite place to be. Well, not counting curled up in Gavin's arms with the first sunbeams of the day playing across his skin.

"Why didn't I get to see you more as a child?" Kate wondered aloud. "Did my mom hold a grudge that long?"

"Your mother was afraid if you spent too much time with me, you might find out more than she'd intended about Jack and our parents." Joan's smile faded.

"Why was that so important to her? Was she that afraid for me to find out she'd been human once upon a time? For the record, it was difficult growing up in the shadow of someone so... perfect."

"No, she wasn't afraid of you finding out she wasn't perfect," Joan chuckled at the thought. "She actually assumed you thought she was a moron for most of your teen years. She didn't want you to ever feel like you were anything other than wanted."

Kate sat silent and thought about that. "She gave up a lot for me, didn't she?"

"And never regretted it for a second," Joan assured her.

Chapter Fourteen

Joan was an infinitely more insistent chaperone than Ty. Kate's room was on the opposite side of the house from Gavin's, with Joan's situated in between. That didn't stop Gavin from slipping through her window to give her a heart-stopping goodnight kiss. But either fear or respect kept him from staying. They even went with Joan to the Sunday service at the little

country church she attended. After a picnic lunch, Gavin and Kate ambled around the grounds, holding hands and exploring.

“Want to?” Gavin got a gleam in his eye when they came upon a lake with boats for two lined up along the dock.

“Do you remember the last boat ride we took?” She looked at him like he was crazy.

“Just don’t lunge at me this time and we’ll be fine.”

“Don’t call me grandma and I’ll try to restrain myself.”

“Come on, please?” he gave her a look he knew she couldn’t resist.

“I never should have told you my weakness.”

He was headed for the boats before she’d finished her sentence.

“You know, you’re going to wind up owing me quite a bit,” she cautioned.

“How’s that?” He held his hand out to help her into the boat before settling in his own seat.

“Well, I’m being much more reckless than you are responsible.”

“You think so?”

“I flew to London on a moment’s notice. I crashed a wedding. I’m in a boat with you again.”

“Hey, I’m respecting your virtue during the whole courting thing,” he countered proudly.

“But that’s your idea.”

“Two of the last three things you mentioned were your idea.”

“I’m still ahead of you.”

“I went to church with your family today,” he informed her.

“Still ahead of you.”

“You’re not getting out of what I have planned for you since I hired a housekeeper.”

“Why are you making me wait so long for that?”

“Because I can’t take you before September,” he shrugged lightly.

“The plot thickens. I have to say I am curious.”

The only response she got was a mischievous smile. Thunder rumbled low in the distance and Kate realized just how far from the shore they had gone. Gavin’s mischievous smile turned absolutely wicked.

“You might get a two-for-one today,” he said with a wink. “I think we’re going to play in the rain. That’s not very responsible at all.”

She just shook her head and leaned back, content to let him row them back to shore. She liked watching the muscles in his shoulders and arms while he worked.

“What did I ever do to deserve you? You’re amazing.”

“You do know you’re completely adorable, right?” He paused rowing as if to emphasize his point.

“Never mind,” she waved him off with a furious blush, surveying their surroundings rather than meeting his eye. “You know, this place is incredible. I wonder what my grandparents would have thought about me inheriting half of it. All those people whose opinions they worried about, they know about me now. I’m out there, sullyng the Williams name.”

He resumed rowing as lightening streaked across the sky, his jaw set furiously. “Men like Jack or your grandfather—boys like Peter—they don’t determine your worth Kate. You have got to stop letting other people tell you whether you matter or not.”

“If you don’t matter to anyone but yourself, does it count?” She teased, trying to poke holes in his logic.

“First of all, you matter to more people than you realize. Second, you have to know that by virtue of being you, your life has worth, my darling. It happens to mean the world to me.”

Kate just shook her head. “I don’t know; I certainly seem to cause enough problems by existing.”

“Stop it.” He growled softly. “Ten years ago, when I was awkward and gangly and shy and no one noticed me, do you honestly believe I was somehow worth less than I am now? I was the weird, quiet guy who took pictures just so I’d have something to do with my hands, a reason for being a part of things. Then one day my pictures got picked up by a local magazine. Suddenly I was booked for a show and people were interviewing me and women were chasing me because I was mysterious. The only reason no one knew anything about me was because, until about three years ago, no one cared to ask. Am I somehow worth more because the women who had ignored me now think I’m the answer to their problems?”

“Of course not,” Kate folded her arms across her chest and pouted. He was taking the fun out of watching him row.

“Then why do you act like you are worth less because Jack’s a fool?”

“It’s not just Jack,” she scowled at him and climbed onto the dock.

“Fine. Peter was an idiot, too!” He was beginning to shout in his frustration.

“Says who? Maybe it was me who was the idiot!”

“By not wanting to get married until you were sure? That’s called not compounding the issue, Kate. Peter was a moron!”

“Why are you shouting at me?” she glared at him.

“Why are you shouting at me?” he glared right back at her.

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to acknowledge that none of this is your fault. Jack and Danielle made their choices. Your grandparents were stubborn old fools. You had a right to the choice you made. Stop wondering why I love you—or at least listen to me when I tell you.”

The first fat raindrop landed on Kate’s face and she knew they’d spent too much time arguing to not get soaked. They stood there staring each other down, their breath coming in great heaves. Kate wasn’t sure when that stopped being out of anger and turned into desire. She just knew the moment they stepped forward and into each others’ arms.

She couldn’t remember why they’d started fighting anymore and it all seemed silly anyway. The heat caused by his proximity collided with the chill of the rain, creating a delicious paradox. Kate would have gladly stood there in the downpour with him all day in an unending kiss, but she could hear Ty’s bark and her aunt’s call somewhere in the distance.

“Should we make a run for it, then?” He finally pulled away from her.

“Are you afraid you’ll get wet?” She teased; they were well past wet.

“So your aunt doesn’t worry.”

“Alright, come on.” After the initial slipping and sliding, Kate took off in a sprint towards the house. It actually felt wonderful to race through the driving rain. She could feel each drop that splashed her face. She burst onto the veranda, skidding to a halt just before she hit the door; Gavin was right behind her. She was pretty sure, given the seven inch difference in height, he’d let her win that one. Her suspicion was confirmed when he wrapped his soggy arms around her and pulled her back into him, nuzzling her neck.

“It’s pouring out here,” she reminded him.

“And we’re already wet.”

“But my aunt....”

“Can see through the window that we’re fine. Just close your eyes, stand still, enjoy the moment.”

She obediently closed her eyes, allowing her other senses to take over, allowing them to experience the moment. He was right. It was inexplicably pleasurable standing in the pouring rain with his arms wrapped around her, her back to his chest. She didn't even care that she knew her uncle was looking at them like they were insane. It was Ty's incessant whine and increasing insistence he be included that finally caused her to reluctantly end the moment.

They dried off in the mudroom before changing for dinner. They'd decided to stay for one more meal to see if they could wait out the storm. Kate wasn't looking forward to the prospect of riding home with a wet 80-pound dog in her lap. She really was insisting on a larger car next time.

For the next twenty-four hours, Kate and Gavin were each others' shadow. Gavin called to check on his mother. Kate called to check in at work. Otherwise, they soaked up every possible second of being together. Every smile, every laugh, each look and touch, they were all to be treasured. Kate was trying to store up enough sweet memories to carry her through the next three weeks—especially knowing two of them would entail Jack scowling at her at every possible opportunity.

Kate couldn't help the fact that the closer Gavin's departure was, the more she feared she wouldn't see him again. On some level, she knew that clinging to that fear meant she was taking away from the joy to be had in the moment. But she couldn't seem to help herself. And he knew it.

"Alright, go get dressed." Gavin finally demanded.

"Why?" She was instantly wary. She could tell by the look on his face, he was about to owe her another act of responsibility.

"Because we're going out."

"Where?" She didn't budge.

"It's a surprise. Now go get dressed. I'll call Jessica and Liz to see if they want to meet us," he promised.

That allayed her fears enough to get her moving. He refused to tell her what to wear, so she went with a cute little ruffled dress with a bow that tied above the waist. She chose strappy high-heeled sandals to show off her pink toe nails. All in all, she felt pretty good about herself. And in five-inch heels, she and Gavin made a striking couple. By the time she declared herself ready, he had walked Ty and changed into jeans and a gray button up. When she slid into his sleek, black

roadster she was feeling downright powerful; it was a heady experience. He was parking the car so quickly Kate wondered why they'd taken it. Of course, he could have been taking pity on her in the heels.

"What is The Mint?" Kate wondered, reading the sign on the building.

"Can't even wait two more minutes to find out?" His eyes danced merrily. "One would think you would have developed patience by this stage in life."

"Are you calling me old?" She demanded. "Do you want me to start obsessing about our age difference all over again?"

"Kate! You look great," Liz greeted her with a quick hug.

"So do you," Kate meant it. She couldn't help being just a little jealous of Liz. She had that perfect mix of pretty and sultry down pat.

"Derrick, how is life treating you?" Gavin extended his hand to greet the other man.

"My fiancée has my mother not speaking to us. Other than that, things are great."

"Ouch, that's rough. What did you do, Liz?" Gavin turned to her.

"Why do you assume it's Liz's fault?" Kate slapped him on the arm and turned to Liz.

"What did she do now?"

"She didn't listen when I told her to cut back on the invites, so we went with Gerard's edits." Liz shrugged daintily.

"As long as no one like Derrick's grandparents were victims to Gerard's edits, I see nothing wrong with that," Kate declared.

"We should probably elope, shouldn't we?" Gavin winced, picturing his own mother's reactions if Kate had done that.

Kate just stood there, trying to process what he'd just said. Did it terrify her, or was her heart tripping that strange little beat out of joy at the thought of spending forever with him?

"Hey guys!" Like the ray of sunshine she was, Jessica interrupted what could have turned into a bickering match. A new cycle of hugs and handshakes went around.

"Whose idea was karaoke? I haven't done this in forever," Ryan opened the door for everyone.

"You dork," Kate laughed at Gavin's amused expression.

"They did have this back in your day, didn't they?"

“Stop it,” she slapped him on the arm again. Right then and there, she decided that if he was going to make her sing in front of strangers, she knew exactly what song she’d choose. She’d just need a beer or two before she’d have the courage to sing Abba in front of anything besides the mirror.

“I’m not singing,” Liz announced firmly as she stepped into the bar.

“Okay,” Gavin smiled at her.

“I mean it,” she reiterated.

“That’s like throwing the gauntlet down, Liz,” Kate warned.

“Hey, I’m all for a certain amount of cheesy in life. But I do not sing.”

“Duly noted,” Gavin threw his hands up in surrender. The look on his face said there was only one woman he would get on that stage if he had to carry her. Kate headed straight for the bar—best to start building up courage right away.

They spent the first round of drinks alternating between making fun of the people who were singing and cheering raucously for them. Gavin was the first from their group to hit the stage, but everyone agreed he was kind of cheating since he was the only actual singer. Jessica and Ryan sang a duet and won the cutest couple ever award. Derrick pulled Liz up on stage, who spent the entire song giving Derrick a look that very clearly stated “I hate you.”

And then there was no avoiding it, Kate’s turn had come. Gavin didn’t strike her as the type to listen to Abba, so it took him a few lines of the song “Does Your Mama Know” to get the joke. The song had originally been sung by one of the men in the group, so Kate had to remember to change the gender references, but it was worth the work.

About the time it dawned on Gavin that the song was about an older woman trying to warn off the young innocent, a bark of laughter escaped. Kate batted her eyelashes prettily and sang that sure, she’d dance with him if he wanted... but did his mama know he was out? She smirked a little and sang that he seemed kind of young to be searching for that kind of fun.

By the time she’d reached the middle of the song, he was laughing so hard there were tears rolling down his cheeks and the rest of the table wasn’t too far behind him. That—and the beer—gave Kate the courage to really ham it up. The enthusiastic applause took her completely by surprise and she flushed with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. Gavin couldn’t seem to stop laughing as he stood to wrap his arms around her.

“I love you, crazy girl.” He kissed her temple, his lips still curled into a smile.

Kate had to admit that it was an all-around fun evening. She wasn't even going to charge him a responsible act for that one. The night came to an end all-too-soon, and their time together came to an end just as quickly. Gavin insisted she keep his Audi with her after she drove back from the airport rather than rent a car each weekend. Kate was a little giddy at the thought of driving it. If driving that car didn't make you feel young and alive, nothing would. Besides, it smelled like Gavin and it would be like having a piece of him there to keep her company.

"Just don't get a ticket," he'd teased her with a wink as he handed her the keys.

"No promises," she answered honestly.

Chapter Fifteen

"I just don't understand why Jack is acting like this," Jessica shook her head in frustration. "It's not like him at all to yell at someone for voicing an opinion."

"Don't worry about it. He was right; I'm not part of the creative team. It wasn't my discussion," Kate sipped her tea, hoping she sounded more flippant than pathetic.

"Don't act like that," Liz immediately reprimanded her. "He was being a jerk in that meeting. You are part of our team and Jessica and I like hearing your input. Don't let him make you feel unimportant."

"Not all of us are as put-together as you, Liz," Kate envied her friend's self-assurance.

"Don't let appearances fool you. I'm a total wreck inside," Liz told her around a bite of salad.

"I don't believe you," Kate nearly dropped her fork.

"Total façade," Liz reiterated.

"It was so rude of him to say that in front of everyone," Jessica couldn't let go of her consternation.

"I'll give you that," Kate winced a little at the memory of all those eyes on her. "But it's over now. Let's talk about something else. Oh, I didn't tell you what happened yesterday. Some girl called Gavin on the car phone. He swears he didn't give her the number, but I thought that was like the bat phone, so I'm not sure I believe him."

“That’s not good—the seeds of distrust,” Liz predicted, eyeing a piece of cake being served at the table next to them.

“I want to trust him,” Kate frowned. “But she sounded really cute. I would have understood if he’d said he gave her the number before we met. What do you think?”

“I think he’s crazy about you,” Jessica weighed in on the topic. “I think he’s telling the truth. If some girl was determined enough to meet him, I bet she could find a way to get his number.”

“You’re probably right,” Kate toyed with her straw.

“Stop thinking he’d rather be somewhere else,” Liz guessed Kate’s hesitation. “He worked hard to get you. He’s right where he wants to be.”

“She has a point,” Jessica agreed.

“Hey, how’d the follow-up with Tom go?” Kate changed the subject again.

“Nice deflection,” Liz smirked.

“Really well,” Jessica happily filled them in on the details of the interview. Tom was a good guy; they were all excited to see how the spread on him turned out. The rest of their lunch the topic stayed on the magazine and the launch.

Aside from the slight creepiness with Justin, who’d taken to showing up at random times uninvited, Kate’s public relations efforts were going really well. There was already a buzz around town about the upcoming party. Somehow Kate managed to get through the rest of her day without crying or calling Gavin for comfort. Although, she had been tempted to crawl under her desk when she realized Liz was in Jack’s office to read him the riot act for his treatment of Kate in the morning meeting.

“I wish she wouldn’t do that,” Kate considered interrupting the pair to apologize for any inconvenience.

“Don’t worry about Liz,” Jessica assured her. “Jack’s used to her voicing her opinions rather plaintively.”

“What’s it like?” Kate asked wistfully.

“What’s what like?”

“I don’t know, having that kind of relationship with him? He’s so crazy about you and Liz.”

“You two will get past this,” Jessica predicted.

“Sometimes I don’t know. He seems to like me less the more time passes. I think I remind him of ghosts from his past.”

“You probably do,” Jessica acknowledged. “But he’ll get over it. He’s a better person than this.”

“Hey ladies,” Tara breezed into their office, her face bright. “What did Jack do to set Liz off?”

“He was a real jerk to Kate in the morning meeting—in front of everyone.”

“It was no big deal,” Kate blushed.

“I was embarrassed, and he wasn’t even talking to me. It was a big deal.”

“I can make him sleep on the couch tonight if you want,” Tara offered.

“No,” Kate gasped.

“Please do,” Jessica grinned at the exact same moment.

“Oh hey, I just got off the phone with a little birdie who told me tomorrow is Miss Kate’s birthday.”

Kate gritted her teeth. Could the day get much worse? “How? How did you find that out?”

“I guess your aunt called Gavin who called me, since he can’t be here to do the honors. So, clear your schedules tomorrow evening. I already called Gaston. We’re thinking Absinthe.”

“Great,” Kate sighed; so much for turning another year older in peace.

Kate tried to slink into work the next morning undetected, but her office had been filled with balloons and flowers, apparently the work of Gavin. Kate took the time to run a load of both home on her way to meet her aunt for lunch. Kate had told Joan not to bother driving into town just for that, but Joan had been insistent. Maybe she knew that Kate’s first birthday without her mother would be tough. Maybe she was anxious to build a connection to the sister she missed. Either way, she had been determined to spend part of the afternoon with Kate.

Truth be told, Kate was glad Joan was there. She did miss her mom, and she missed Gavin, and she really didn’t want to be turning another year older. She was also really happy to be getting away from Jack. Something about her birthday seemed to be making him crankier than normal.

“So things seem to be going well between you and Gavin,” Joan observed. “He’s a good guy.”

“Thanks,” Kate smiled slightly. “And yes, things do seem to be going well. Sometimes I still panic a little, but I’m trying not to be too neurotic.”

“You’re a smart girl, Kate. You’ll be okay.”

“You know, sometimes, I feel like this is all just a dream. It’ll all go away; he’ll go away,” Kate admitted in a whisper.

“You have been thrown a few curve balls, haven’t you sweetie?” Joan patted her hand sympathetically.

“Oh no, I’ve become pathetic, haven’t I?” Kate realized with a start. “I didn’t mean to sound like Eeyore. Let’s talk about something else.”

Joan had obliged, chatting about anything and nothing in particular. They rounded out their afternoon together with makeovers. Kate grudgingly went back to the office afterwards, determined not to slink around as if she’d done something wrong by being born.

“More flowers came while you were out,” Jen informed her with a slight eye roll the second she was through the door.

“I’m so sorry,” Kate needed to speak to Gavin about overkill. She glanced at the card and frowned. The flowers were from Justin. She really was going to have to remind him that their relationship was a professional one. Today was not that day, though. She tossed the card in the trash and set the flowers in the conference room.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. Her mind had drifted to other birthdays, all the ones she’d celebrated with her mom, while she played Frisbee with Ty at the dog park. She hadn’t been able to dwell long, because Gavin had called to sing Happy Birthday.

“How’s your day been so far?” He seemed wistful, as if he were sad to be missing it. Kate struggled to understand why being another year older than him was a thing to be celebrated.

“You mean, other than people making too big a deal out of it? Other than swimming in flowers?” Kate’s tone belied her words. “It’s been okay. Isn’t it the middle of the night in London?”

“I wanted to catch you before your girl’s night out to remind you not to do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Gaston’s going too,” she reminded him.

“Like I said... have a grand time with the girls.”

“You really aren’t a nice person when you’re feeling threatened.”

“But you love me anyway. What’s that say about you?”

“Good point,” Kate laughed. “Now go get some sleep.”

“Yes mum.”

Kate had let that one go. She'd just tell herself he was referring to her bossy nature, not her age.

Dinner had been fun. Jessica wasn't feeling well and went home early. Kate wished she could do the same. Still, she survived the evening and was able to wake up in time for both her yoga routine and to play her violin before work.

The next several days were a montage of meetings and press lunches that seemed to blend together. The only thing that distinctly stood out for Kate was an unexpected visit from an old friend from Albuquerque. Veronica dropped in from nowhere with her perfect husband in tow, only to disappear again a couple of days later. Playing catch-up was a good distraction, and it gave her an excuse to go out dancing with the girls.

Other than the brief reprieve of Veronica's visit, Kate was a whirlwind, putting finishing touches on the launch party and making great strides on the Christmas party. Whatever faults Jack saw in her, he couldn't complain about the job she was doing for his magazine.

Maybe a piece of Kate was still trying to please him. A lot of the motive behind her productivity was a desire to stay busy. The busier she stayed, the faster the time without Gavin would go. She missed him beyond reason. When she stopped to acknowledge that, it always gave her a mild panic attack.

She'd made the mistake of working too late one night and came home to find pieces of violet satin strewn about her apartment.

"Ty... what did you do?" Kate gasped. He hung his head in shame. Kate knew without checking the closet that her lonely purple shoe was lost forever and that made her incredibly sad. That pump had reminded her of happy days with Gavin, and now it was gone.

Of course, even visiting her aunt brought memories of Gavin that danced through her mind. Mason had to ask her the same question three times at dinner because she couldn't look at the veranda without conjuring the image of Gavin holding her in his arms while the rain christened them.

It was maddening. By the time Kate got in the Audi to drive home, she was practically vibrating with agitation. The engine hummed happily at her touch. A grin tugged at the corners of Kate's mouth. So what if some bimbo was calling him on his car phone? She was in his car. She was the woman he'd chosen. Power flowed through her. The road ahead beckoned. She hit the accelerator, a thrill racing down her spine as the roadster instantly responded.

Chapter Sixteen

Kate let out an expletive at the sight of the red and blue lights in her review mirror. Gavin was going to have a field day with this. But the engine had purred like a kitten when she'd accelerated and the sound was almost hypnotizing. Surely he'd understand that.

"Ma'am," the officer nodded at her.

"I'm so sorry officer," Kate dutifully handed him her license and Gavin's registration.

"This isn't your car," the officer stated.

"No, sir, it's my boyfriend's car," Kate's voice shook just a little. One would think this would get easier with experience.

"I clocked you going 85 in a 70," he told her sternly.

"I'm so sorry, it's this car," Kate shrugged apologetically. "I guess it's a good thing it's governed at 155, eh?"

Kate realized it was the wrong thing to say when he asked her to step out of the vehicle. The next series of events was kind of a blur. Somehow Kate found herself sitting in a cell in the Pinole City Jail with Gavin's car towed to the Contra Costa County impound.

Kate leaned her head against the bars, wondering how it had come to this. One minute she'd been rolling down the highway in that amazing machine, rag top down and Poison cranking from the speakers... and the rest was history. Kate was fairly certain she was entitled to a phone call. How long could they hold her? She suddenly wished she'd watched more cop shows.

"Alright, it looks like your story checks out," an officer who'd brought her in opened the cell and stood to the side. "It's your boyfriend's car."

Kate very dearly wanted to remind him that she had said that, but remembered the last time she hadn't filtered her thoughts. Instead she said "thank you," collected her dog and keys and trudged out the door.

She turned her phone back on once she was seated back in Gavin's car. It immediately began chirping at her and she groaned. Ty cocked his head in question.

“It’s your daddy. Either calling to yell at me or laugh at me,” she explained as the car roared to life. “I’ll answer it when I’m further away from the police station.”

Kate tried to put off the inevitable, but when she didn’t answer her phone, the phone in the car started beeping at her.

“Hello?” She finally answered as innocently as possible.

“Do I want to know why I just got off the phone with the Costra County sheriff’s office?” The amusement was thick in his voice.

“Probably not.”

“I don’t know, I think I do.”

“It’s a long story.”

“You can tell me all about it over dinner tonight,” he assured her.

“Well I’m home now. Let me get inside and I’ll call you back for our dinner date. Although I guess it’s breakfast for you.”

“No, it’s dinner.”

“Okay. Call you back.” She hung up the phone and grabbed Ty’s leash. It had been a long day and tomorrow she had to face Jack again. Usually the standing “dinner date” with Gavin was the highlight of her day. Tonight she wasn’t so sure about that.

Tyler began to prance and whine at her side and she looked down at him with dismay. She had absolutely no desire to walk him at the moment. He’d just have to wait – hadn’t he spent the whole day running free at Blue Valley?

“You goofy mutt. What is your problem tonight?” She crabbed at him as she fished for her keys.

“Maybe he’s just excited to see me.” Kate looked up in surprise to find Gavin leaning casually in the now-opened door frame. With a squeal she flew into his arms, knocking him backwards. He wrapped his arms around her, obviously pleased with her response.

“When did you get in?” She stood on tiptoe to pepper his face with kisses.

“A couple of hours ago. Are you surprised?”

“Yes! I wasn’t expecting you for days. When you got the last of the photos to Liz, I was sure you would be back just in time for the party.”

“I was just throwing you off the trail,” he winked. “So, do you want some dinner? I took the liberty of ordering for us when I heard you were in the slammer.”

“Oh don’t remind me,” she groaned.

“So just what did you do?”

“I was fuming about... Jack...and might, maybe, have been speeding a little...”

“A little?”

“Okay, 85 in a 70. And climbing. So anyway, I of course got pulled over. Then I said something really stupid and he decided the car was stolen and...”

“Whoa, whoa, I have to hear this... What did you say?”

“Something about the car being governed at 155.” She shrugged.

“Lovely. I bet he really liked that,” Gavin chuckled.

“And I have the criminal record to prove it,” Kate grimaced. “So I guess they called you to verify I was your girlfriend?”

“And I said ‘Kate who?’” He teased.

“Not funny. That guy would have loved to book me for something. You would have been reduced to conjugal visits in a trailer.” Kate shuddered.

“Not a pretty picture at all,” he agreed. It was silent for a moment while he served her a slice of pizza, then his laughter was reverberating off her 14-foot ceilings. “You don’t do things halfway, do you Katie?”

“This is all Jack’s fault, really.” Kate sniffed indignantly. “I just get so mad at him I can’t even see straight. You know, I think he’s just waiting for me to mess up so he can fire me no matter what Tara wants. Too bad for him I have no intentions of messing this up. Well, assuming the whole Justin thing doesn’t blow up in my face.”

“Poor sap. He can’t seem to figure out that you are most definitely taken.” Gavin’s expression hinted that maybe he felt less pity for Justin than his words implied. “And Jack’s not going to fire you.”

“You haven’t been around these past two weeks. It’s been pretty bad. If he’s not yelling at me, he’s pretending I don’t exist. Anything he needs to tell me, he has Jen say. It’s embarrassing. The whole office is talking.”

“Let them talk. Jack’s the one who should be embarrassed, not you.”

“I didn’t tell him I was his daughter. It’s a little weird.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. And you don’t have to be perfect to earn his affection. Either he’ll come around and love you just exactly the way you are like the rest of us do, or he’s an idiot.”

“I missed you,” Kate impulsively hugged him.

“I missed you, too... my little jailbird.”

Gavin left much earlier than Kate would have preferred. Still, she understood that he was tired. She’d had a pretty long day herself. Kate went to bed feeling relieved that she’d have Gavin at her side tomorrow when she had to face Jack again. She’d no sooner turned out the light when her cell phone rang.

“Hello?” Kate answered.

“Kate? I hope I’m not calling too late,” Jessica’s voice was filled with an enthusiasm that made Kate sit up in bed.

“Not at all. What’s up?”

“I couldn’t wait until morning to tell you... I’m pregnant. Four weeks. We just found out tonight.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s wonderful!” Kate couldn’t believe her ears. She knew Jessica and Ryan wanted children, but it had been a distant possibility—a someday kind of thing.

“I’ve only told you and Liz. I think I’m going to wait to tell everyone else. Oh, you can tell Gavin when he calls, of course.”

“Gavin’s back,” Kate interjected. She’d forgotten to call Liz and Jessica to tell them.

“Really? That’s great! It sounds like you’ve had quite a day.”

“To say the least,” Kate smiled a little bit at that. “Wow, Jessica, I just can’t get over it... you’re going to be a mom. A really amazing mom. I am so happy for you.”

“Thank you. You’re going to be a wonderful Aunt Kate... oh... I have someone beeping in. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Kate agreed. She sat there for a minute after she got off the phone, not entirely sure why her eyes were suddenly filled with tears. Jessica and Ryan were two wonderful people who were madly in love, married, and financially stable. If ever two people should be having a baby, it was them.

So why was she crying now? Was it because the circumstances surrounding her own birth had been so messed up? Was it the baby she’d lost? Was it that being with Gavin made her want

things she'd never considered possible for herself? Ty whined and nudged her leg. Kate gratefully accepted the offer and curled up with him, letting the tears come. She'd be happy tomorrow.

Kate woke up early to spend some time playing the violin after her yoga routine. There was something cathartic about that habit. She even allowed herself a dollop of whipped cream on her nonfat mocha. She was very nearly smiling by the time she walked through the doors at work where she stopped short. The all-white interior had been decorated with black streamers. She looked around in disbelief. Everyone was dressed in either black and white or bright orange. Suddenly the quiet overhead music was replaced with a blaring Jailhouse Rock. She was going to hurt Gavin Nichols.

She found him sitting in their office, his feet propped on his desk and an amused smile on his face. Of course, he was wearing black slacks and a white button up. Liz was in orange. Jessica was wearing black and white. Both were trying not to giggle; their shoulders seemed to shake with the effort.

"Very funny, all of you." Kate scowled at them.

"I can't believe you didn't tell us about this one," Liz shook her head reproachfully.

"I can't believe you did," she stuck her tongue out at Gavin.

"Oh, hey, we have a copy of the newest issue of the magazine," Liz changed the subject. Kate grimaced when Jailhouse Rock ended and Chain Gang began.

"Great. I want to see it." Kate was genuinely enthused to be changing the subject. It was a little surreal seeing her picture in a magazine and looking at a polished, professional product created right here in this office. Kate hadn't realized how prominent her little section would be in the magazine as a whole. She wondered if that was an ongoing thing or for the launch issue only.

Pride swelled within her—her friends had done a truly amazing job. Kate flipped through the pictures, each conjuring a memory that included Gavin. How quickly their lives had become intertwined. Too bad hers and Jack's had not blended quite as smoothly.

"Hey, what's all this I hear about you being a jailbird?" Tara poked her head in the office.

"Not you, too," Kate groaned.

"Someone really went to a lot of trouble to commemorate the event," Tara smiled.

"I thought about taking her to Alcatraz today but decided that might be over the top," Gavin winked at Kate who silently fumed.

“Seriously, are you okay?” Tara seemed truly worried about Kate.

“Never better,” Kate tried to smile at her. There wasn’t much Tara could do about Jack’s behavior. If it weren’t for the other people in this office, Kate would have long since told Jack where to stick it. They tethered her to this place.

“He’s such a stubborn man,” Tara frowned. “I just don’t understand why he’s acting this way.”

“Don’t let it upset you,” Kate urged her. “It’ll all work out the way it’s supposed to.”

Kate was surprised to realize that she truly meant that. She might be frustrated with Jack, she might be hurt, but she knew that whatever the outcome, she didn’t regret the choices she’d made. Six months ago, she’d been alone in this world. Now she was surrounded by friends who loved her, a family. She was going to be Aunt Kate. How could life get much better?

The rest of the day passed uneventfully enough and the one after it as well. Wednesday Gavin was at her door before she’d finished playing her violin.

“Very pretty,” he motioned to the violin after giving her a good morning kiss.

“Thank you,” she flushed at the compliment.

“I don’t suppose you’d play something for me?”

“You know what? I would. It’s really more of a piano piece, but I love it so much....” Kate smiled a little, gesturing for him to have a seat on the couch. It was speculated that Für Elise was Beethoven’s work for lovers everywhere. It just seemed fitting. So she sat cross-legged in the middle of her coffee table, closed her eyes as she played for him. And when she was done, they seemed to find their way into each others’ arms. To Kate’s dismay, he pulled away from her much too soon.

“We have an appointment to keep,” he explained.

“You mean work?”

“Nope. Not the office anyway.”

“The event my job hinges on is next Monday. You’ve got to be joking.”

“I know you. It’s all in place. You can check email on your Blackberry if it makes you happy. Now get dressed – and wear something warm.”

Curiosity piqued, Kate did as she was told. He drove them to the marina and ushered her onto a large white boat with blue trim. Kate noticed he’d brought his camera. She wasn’t sure

that boded well for her. There were about ten other people on the boat she didn't know. Kate could sense their excitement. It was catching. That is, until she caught part of their conversation.

"Did I just hear them say...?"

"Don't worry. I just booked us as topside observers."

"Excuse me?" Kate swallowed as the boat roared to life.

"I thought expecting you to do a cage dive might be pushing it. Of course, when I booked this you weren't a convicted felon. Maybe you could have taken it," he teased.

"I am not a felon," she whispered fiercely. "We're going looking for sharks?"

"Not just any sharks. Great whites."

"This is totally not a fair trade for hiring a maid," Kate protested.

"Maybe not, but Jack thought it was a great idea. Don't worry; you're on the clock today."

"Don't bring Jack up right now—I'm feeling murderous enough as is. Come to think of it, are you trying to kill me? Did he offer to give you a pay raise if you got rid of me?"

"So dramatic," he tsked and shook his head. "Relax. Have some breakfast—they have a continental breakfast you know—and if you keep your eyes open, you'll probably see some porpoise or whales."

"I don't think I want to play anymore," Kate pouted. Gavin simply laughed and pointed at some porpoise that had either shown up to swim in the boat's wake or prove Gavin's point. He draped his arm over her shoulders and pulled her to him and Kate felt herself relax. Occasionally Gavin released her to take pictures of her or the marine life around them. Otherwise, she spent the day wrapped in his arms.

She was terrified when four of the other passengers on the boat voluntarily got in a large metal cage in the water with the great sharks. Her heart stopped the first time she saw one of the creatures break through the choppy water. Having only seen them on the Discovery Channel before, she'd never realized just how massive the Great White was. There were so many of them in the water, and they were so huge, Kate found herself wishing they had a bigger boat. The mental Jaws reference made her giggle nervously, which seemed to amuse Gavin.

They had lunch on the boat and Kate enjoyed the wine, even if they served the wrong label. It was hard to believe this untamed, rugged place with its jagged islands was so close to the city. Kate wasn't sure if Gavin had booked the trip as an over-the-top way to get her to loosen up, or because he'd known how breathtakingly beautiful it was out there, but she was glad he'd done it.

“Your stunning right now, you know that?” Gavin’s eyes seemed to devour her.

“I’m probably a complete and total mess right now,” she corrected. There was no escaping the wind that whipped her hair about her face and had assuredly turned her cheeks bright red.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you more exquisite. And I didn’t think that green dress could be topped.” He brushed a wild hair out of her eyes and caught her lips with his. “I love you more than I could ever possibly convey.”

“You have my heart, Gavin. I think you have since I first laid eyes on you.” She closed her eyes, relishing the feel of the salty spray on her face, mingled with his breath, the smell of the sea, the beat of his heart so close...

“I hadn’t meant to do this here. Now. Like this. I have reservations at a little French restaurant later.”

“What are you talking about?” She opened her eyes to meet his. There was something in the tone of his voice.

“Marry me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Marry me.” His jaw was set, as if he was ready to argue his case. But his eyes were tender, hopeful.

“You have turned my whole world upside down,” Kate stated softly. “You seem completely determined to forever alter my way of thinking.”

He took a breath, as if to say something before thinking better of it. He watched her quietly instead, seeming to know that she needed to talk through this.

“You have become everything to me, Gavin. It scares the hell out of me.” She bit her lip for a second, an almost pained look flitting across her face. “But it’s too late to come out of this unscathed, isn’t it? Yes.”

“Yes it’s too late to come out unscathed or yes... yes?” He seemed hesitant.

“Yes... yes.” She smiled.

“You’ll marry me?”

“Yes.” She told him for the fourth time. He finally seemed to begin to believe it. A grin completely took over his face and lit his eyes. And then he kissed her. Cheers erupted all around them. Kate and Gavin looked up to see what everyone was applauding only to realize it was them.

“Do you have a ring?” someone asked.

“I don’t know, do I?” Kate couldn’t help smiling ridiculously.

“You do,” Gavin pulled a velvet pouch from his pocket, producing a delicate gold ring with a perfect, round diamond set in the middle.

“It’s so pretty.” Tears filled Kate’s eyes. He’d really put some thought into this.

“Do you really like it?”

“I love it. I love you.” And then she kissed him. More cheers erupted. Kate hid her face against Gavin’s chest while he accepted the congratulations. As if to share in her joy, a whale breached the water in the distance, flying gracefully through the air before returning to his watery world.

Kate was exhausted by the time the twelve-hour trip was through, but Gavin insisted they shower and dress up for their dinner reservations. Instead of proposing as planned, they talked about the details. Part of Kate wanted to elope the next week to put an end to his run of chivalry before she imploded. Gavin was pretty insistent that his mother would have both their heads if she couldn’t be at the wedding. Kate wasn’t about to start off on the wrong foot there, so she agreed to plan an actual wedding.

“So, are we getting married in London or San Francisco?” Gavin asked.

“Can we have the ceremony at Blue Valley?” Kate knew instantly that’s where she wanted to get married. “We can keep it small so we can fly your family in. Heck, let’s just invite Jessica, Ryan, Liz and Derrick. There. Guest list done.”

“No one else?” Gavin arched his eyebrow.

“Do you think Tara would leave Jack at home? If so, let’s invite her, too.”

“We’ll figure that one out later. What about a date?”

“I think Jessica is due in May. We’ll want to plan around that. Let’s get married soon so she can be in the wedding.”

“Due?” Gavin furrowed his brow and it dawned on Kate that she hadn’t told him yet.

“They’re having a baby,” she explained.

“Good for them,” he brightened. “You’re right, let’s not wait too long then.”

They tossed around possible dates for a while before giving up. After dinner, they drove to Jessica’s to share their news with her, then to Liz’s to share the news and pick up Ty. Kate called Tara, dismayed when Jack answered the phone. After a few terse words between them, Tara was

on the phone and giddy with excitement. After Kate called her Aunt Joan and Gaston, she curled up on the couch to listen to Gavin's end of the conversation when he called his mother then brothers. It was a happy, dreamlike evening. It didn't seem real at all. She was sure that at any moment she would wake up to the knowledge the entire day had been an illusion.

"Sing my song for me," she pulled him to her.

"Your song?" he smiled.

"The one you sang last Fourth of July," she reminded him.

"Ah," his grin deepened. She snuggled up against him and let his deep, gentle voice sing her to sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

Despite Gavin's confidence that Kate had things well in hand, the next few days were a flurry of activity and phone calls as Kate saw to the last details of the launch party. She knew Gavin would tell her that there was nothing to prove, but her nerves seemed to be screaming otherwise.

Still, despite all of the hubbub, she occasionally paused to stare at her left hand. Whenever Jessica or Liz caught her in the act they would give her a knowing smile. Whenever Jack did, his scowl would grow even fiercer. Kate wondered if it was because even if he fired her, he'd never get rid of Gavin. That meant she was now a fixture in his life whether he liked it or not. Whatever the cause of it, she was growing weary of his scowls. Every other person in the place seemed to understand the choices she'd made, so why couldn't he?

Friday night, Gavin declared that she needed a break, so he took her to dinner at Foreign Cinema. Located mostly in an interior building courtyard with classic films projecting on one wall and drive-in speakers at the tables, it was exactly what Kate needed to get her mind off of the event for a few hours. Gavin only had to remind her of his "no work tonight" policy twice.

Monday was a scary blur. Gaston was enlisted to Ty-sit again since Kate had put Gavin to work for the day. She'd finally pried herself away from preparations to change clothes when her phone chirped yet again.

“Hey Justin,” she answered warily. His constant calls were getting on her nerves. Gavin’s eyes narrowed at the name.

“Hey Katie...”

“Kate,” she reminded him curtly, earning a grin from Gavin.

“I was just wondering if you need any help tonight, before the event. Or after. I could stay after too, if you needed.”

“I really appreciate that, but Gavin’s here with me. We’ve got it under control.”

“Are you sure? It’s no trouble,” he tried again.

“Eight o’clock should be just fine. Thanks. Gotta go.” Kate hung up the phone before he could try a third time.

“If that guy doesn’t back off, I can’t be held responsible for my actions.” Gavin’s jaw was set, his eyes like granite.

“Not tonight,” Kate pleaded. “Just don’t start anything tonight.”

“I know how much this night means to you,” was the closest he came to a promise. “I have to run home to change. I’ll pick you up here in an hour.”

He was back in 45 minutes, as stylish and handsome as ever. Kate envied his easy good looks. She’d spent every bit of the 45 minutes cleaning, shaving, buffing, and polishing and she still wasn’t done. It simply wasn’t fair. Still, Gavin’s low whistle of appreciation when he saw her in the frilly little eggplant dress was worth the effort.

They were the first to arrive for the evening, but Liz and Jessica weren’t far behind. Larger-than-life prints of various pages of the magazine were scattered throughout the room. The lights were low and candles glittered like stars. The hors d’oeuvres were ready; things like spicy tuna sushi and crabmeat and wasabi infused caviar sushi sat prettily on their trays, awaiting their turn to tempt guests. Chocolate fondue drizzled with white and dark chocolate was set out for the lush red strawberries. The Irish punk band Kate had hired warmed up downstairs. She’d gone that route mostly for sentimental reasons; she felt justified in her choice, though, the group played a wide assortment of music that was easy to dance to.

“This place is amazing,” Liz looked around with genuine appreciation.

“You helped me find it,” Kate reminded her with a smile.

“But you put this together,” Jessica reminded her. “It’s perfect. Even Jack will have to admit you’ve done a great job.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll find something... besides, you guys did the real work of getting the magazine ready. It’s not much of a launch without the product.”

“It’s been fun,” Jessica grinned.

“It has,” Liz agreed. The three women surveyed the room. Everywhere they looked reminded them of all they’d accomplished in their short time together.

“Your guests are arriving,” Derrick nodded in the direction of the door as people started to pour in.

And just like that, the place filled to capacity. The downstairs, open to the public, reverberated with the sounds of a party. The upstairs, with its appetizers and lush ambience, was open by invite—press, magazine staff, San Francisco’s celebrities and trendsetters only.

The staff at the Bubble Lounge was amazing. Kate flit back and forth mostly out of habit. Nothing appeared to really need her attention by this point. She spent a lot of time mingling upstairs, as did the rest of her friends. The bash downstairs was solidifying their reputation for throwing a great party. The upstairs was slightly more subdued to allow for the networking that would be absolutely vital to their success. Every now and then, Gavin would catch her gaze from across the room and the promise in his eyes would fill her with a new heat that radiated from the very core of her being. It never failed that whomever she was speaking to when his eyes caught hers would have to repeat themselves.

Justin had tried to catch her attention a few times. She’d always smiled politely, waved, and ducked in the other direction.

“Funniest thing,” a reporter from one of the locals caught Kate’s attention. She smiled in invitation for him to continue while she tried to remember his name. It was Terry. “The Pinole police blotter has something about a Kate Yager being arrested for stealing an Audi TT. She was picked up speeding on Highway 80...”

“Wow, the police blotter huh?” Kate grimaced.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” he laughed.

“Yes,” Kate admitted. “But I didn’t steal the car. It was Gavin’s.”

“Oh yeah, I heard you and Nichols are an item now.” He picked up another glass of sparkling wine and offered one to her.

“We’re engaged, actually,” she accepted the flute, her ring sparkling prettily in the candlelight as if on cue.

“Then congratulations,” his warm smile backed his words.

“You’re engaged?” Justin’s voice was thick with an emotion Kate couldn’t quite place. Was that hurt? Disappointment? Anger? She’d been so caught up in her conversation with Terry, she’d completely missed Justin’s approach.

“Yes, we’re engaged,” Gavin materialized behind her to lay a protective hand on her shoulder. He glowered at Justin for a minute before turning his attention to the other reporter, who seemed to be trying to interpret the scene unfolding before him.

“Gavin,” the reporter nodded slightly. “Congratulations, my man.”

“Thanks Terry.” Gavin returned the nod with a friendly smile. “Are you enjoying yourself tonight?”

“It’s great. I love this place,” he returned Gavin’s smile and the two were soon chatting easily about what a grand party Kate had thrown and the future of the magazine. Kate slid closer to Gavin without even thinking about it, the weight of Justin’s glare made her skin crawl. There was an awkward moment where everyone knew Justin had been dismissed from the group, issued the unspoken decree to leave, but he seemed disinclined to listen. Kate didn’t know where to look or what to say that would make the situation any less uncomfortable. Suddenly Liz and Derrick had joined their little group, their bodies creating a barrier between Kate and Justin’s stare. But she could still feel it.

With military precision, Jessica and Ryan were there as well. It was obvious to Kate that they’d intentionally created a wall around her. Terry seemed more comfortable now that the cause of the tension was out of sight and Kate was glad for that. She didn’t want her stalker becoming the talk of the evening. She realized with a start that was exactly what Justin had become. His reaction tonight solidified his transition in her mind from nuisance to scary.

Jessica stifled a yawn, which earned the worried gaze of her friends.

“You should go home,” Kate frowned.

“I’m not missing this,” Jessica shook her head.

“At least get off your feet for a while,” Liz argued.

“Come on, I could use a break,” Ryan tucked her arm into his and with a wave to the rest, guided her to a secluded little table. Once he’d seated his protesting wife, he scurried off to get her a bottle of water and a plate of strawberries.

“I’m not ready for her to be having a baby,” Liz confided in Kate once the men had moved off to answer Jack’s beckon.

“It is strange, isn’t it?” Kate mused. “The dynamics in our little group certainly are changing.”

“Have you guys set a date yet?”

“No. We’re kind of thinking something like February because we’re both impatient. But I want to get married at Blue Valley and his mother won’t be able to travel that soon. So that leaves us with getting married in London or pushing the wedding back.”

“You do realize most engagements are a lot longer than five months, right?” Liz reminded her pointedly. “And that if you pushed it back, you could at least tell people that you knew him for a year before you got married.”

“True,” Kate acknowledged with a little grin. Had Gavin changed her that thoroughly? A year ago, such impulsivity would never have occurred to her. A memory of the wild youth she had been crossed her mind and she realized that Gavin hadn’t changed her—he’d just helped her unlock the passionate spirit Kate had tucked away years ago. She met Liz’s eyes and her grin broadened. “But I’ve never been so sure of anything and I don’t want to miss a minute with him.”

“Don’t forget to enjoy the engagement, too,” Liz cautioned. “Don’t be so focused on the next phase you miss this one.”

“Point taken,” Kate nodded, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. “Speaking of enjoying your engagement, how’s the guest list war going? Do you know who’ll be at your wedding next weekend?”

“That’s not nice,” Liz made a face at Kate. “That’s just not nice at all. I think jail hardened you.”

“Ouch,” Kate laughed out loud at that. “If you’re going to get vicious, I’m going to go see how things are going downstairs.”

“I’m going to grab another glass of champagne. See you in a minute?”

“Yeah, I’ll be right back.”

Kate made her way downstairs, the pulse of the band growing with each step. The party was going strong; the dance floor was full and the band was obviously a good choice. She made her

way over to the bar to see if they needed anything and to order an amaretto sour. She went with a classic, her mind too full to try to sort through any of the trendier options.

“Seeing you with him makes me wish I were blind,” Justin was suddenly behind her, causing Kate to jump.

“Don’t you think that’s a little drastic?” Kate turned and scowled. “Considering I’m really nothing to you?”

“Don’t say that,” he tried to clasp her hand but she yanked it away. “You don’t know how much you mean to me.”

“You’re a business acquaintance,” she reminded him. “And that’s all you’ve ever been.”

“Why are you saying these things?” His hand reached out to touch her cheek. Warnings were sounding in Kate’s brain and she started inching her way towards the stairs. She no longer cared about damaging her relationship with the Chronicle; she just wanted to feel safe again.

“Justin, I’m sorry if you misread something, but I have absolutely no interest in you.” Kate polished off the drink she’d just ordered and made a break for it. She could almost feel him following her as she made her way to the stairs, the crowd forcing her to move along the wall. She didn’t dare look behind her out of the fear she’d see him right on her heels and let out a scream or something embarrassing. The rational part of her brain told her he was just misguided, not dangerous. Instinct told her to run. She tried to balance the two by walking quickly.

“Where do you think you’re going?” His hand grabbed hers and he pulled her back. Kate tried to push him off but found herself pinned to the wall, her hands caught as his mouth greedily made its way across her collarbone. Kate struggled against him in vain. Her legs couldn’t even get the range of motion needed for a good knee to the groin. If anyone noticed her distress, they didn’t come to her aid. There was too much noise, the lights were too low. It probably looked like she was enjoying it, Kate realized in a moment of stark terror. What could he do to her against this wall with no one the wiser?

“Let me go,” she ground through her teeth, venom lacing her voice.

“So you can run back to that little boy?” He growled at her. Kate narrowed her eyes, wishing looks could, in fact, kill.

“I will find a way to make you pay for this,” she promised as he rubbed his body against hers. She tried to fight but was too thoroughly pinned. With the unmoving wall behind her she couldn’t build any momentum. It was pure hell to be so helpless.

“I’ll help.”

Relief washed through every pore of Kate’s body at the sound of Gavin’s voice. Even through the din, she could have sworn she heard him growl as he lifted Justin from his feet and away from her before his fist connected with her assailant’s face. Gavin seemed ready to kill Justin right there in the Bubble Lounge, but the fight got the attention of security, and he was pulled off of him. Justin scrambled to his feet and disappeared as Gavin strained to free himself so he could finish what he’d started. Now that her brain was registering the fact that she was safe, she began trembling. Soon, tremors racked her entire body.

“It’s okay baby,” Gavin was gathering her in his arms. “It’s going to be okay now.”

They were following a security guard somewhere quieter. It looked like the office. Gavin laid her gently on a couch. The door was closed, blocking some of the noise outside. Gavin was soothing her hair back, his worried eyes trying to assess the damage. Kate tried to smile reassuringly but tears sprang to her eyes instead. She just felt so... dirty. She wanted to take a long, hot shower to wash away the slime from Justin’s touch. Her stomach roiled and Kate worried for a second that she was going to throw up.

“The way he was talking was scaring me,” she tried to explain to Gavin. “I was trying to get back upstairs to you. I knew I’d be safe if I could find you.”

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t there sooner.” Gavin’s eyes were filled with anguish. Kate reached up to stroke his temple, willing away his pain.

“Our security cameras caught the whole thing if you’re interested in pressing charges against the man,” the security guard spoke. “The police are on their way.”

“I would like to file charges. And have a restraining order issued. I don’t want him hurting someone else because I didn’t speak up.” Kate sat up a little straighter.

“Whatever you want,” Gavin promised her, pulling her into his arms. She gladly rested against him, the tremors still rippling through her no matter how much she wished them away. There was a knock at the door and Jack entered.

“What on earth is going on down here? I heard there was a fight.”

“Kate was accosted...,” Gavin began only to be interrupted.

“Are you trying to destroy me? Is that what you’re after?” Jack demanded.

“That’s not it at all,” Kate sputtered, taken aback.

“It certainly looks that way!”

“Kate didn’t do anything wrong,” Gavin was on his feet, ready to take Jack on.

“Not in here, guys,” the security guard stepped in between them.

“You know what, Jack? Why don’t you go back to your party, we can hash this out later.”

Kate stood.

“There’s nothing to hash out. You’re fired. I’m done with this game.” He turned on heel and stalked back out the door.

“He didn’t mean that,” Gavin promised, gathering her in his embrace. “We’ll talk to him later.”

“No,” Kate shook her head. “I’m done. I’ll talk to him later, but not to get my job back. He’s done hurting me.”

“Jessica and Liz won’t take to that too well,” Gavin pointed out.

“They’ll still be my friends. They’re part of me now,” Kate told him with more conviction than she felt.

The security guard listened to the voice in his ear then instructed whoever it was to “Send them on back.” Kate assumed it was the police.

It hadn’t taken all that long to give her statement. Gavin gave his—he’d gone looking for Kate when she hadn’t returned right away and had seen her struggling against Justin. He’d practically flown down the steps to pull Justin off of her. The police were given copies of the security feed to back up the story. They promised Kate they’d keep an eye out for Justin, but she knew there were much bigger crimes to solve. The only thing she really hoped to accomplish here was to get word out that he was scum so other women would know to worry less about manners and run faster.

After the police had left, they profusely thanked the security guard and went to find Jessica and Liz, knowing their friends would need some reassurance—after a stop by the ladies room so Kate could try to straighten her appearance. All Kate really wanted to do was go home and get that shower. As soon as they’d spoken to her friends, they made one last round of pleasantries and left.

“I’m going to set the food out. You go get that shower you wanted.” Gavin offered as he hung Ty’s leash up.

“I’m not hungry,” Kate shook her head.

“I’d feel better if you ate something. Besides, we’ve already picked the food up. At least try to eat.”

Kate nodded absently, not really acknowledging the bags of food he’d insisted on picking up from the 24-hour diner they’d passed on their way to get Ty. Gavin went about getting plates. Kate locked the door and kicked off her shoes before padding to the bathroom. Gavin paused to watch her go, casting a worried glance at the shoes left carelessly by the door.

All Kate cared about was the hot water beckoning her. Justin’s touch clung to her skin like a bad smell. She had to get rid of it. She left her clothes in a crumbled heap on the floor and stepped into the steamy shower without bothering to test it. The heat seared her skin but still the unwanted touch lingered. She poured a healthy amount of mandarin-scented soap on her loofah and began to scrub her skin. When that didn’t work, she tried her exfoliating sponge. She was vaguely aware of Gavin knocking at the door. She heard him tentatively calling her name but ignored it. His voice, worried now, seemed so far away. He was on the other side of the wall. On the inside, feelings of helplessness replayed in her mind like the scene from a bad movie. The kind she turned off. But she couldn’t turn this off. She scrubbed harder. The pounding at the door became more incessant. The door handle moved. Kate closed her eyes. It was locked, she knew. If he was that hungry, he could just eat without her. She was going to scrub until Justin’s touch was gone.

There was a crash. Gavin’s voice was closer now.

“Kate? Kate? What have you done to yourself baby?” His voice was thick, worried. His arms were around her now. He was in the shower with her, holding her.

“Why are you in the shower with your clothes on?” Kate blinked in her stupor, the sponge and soap still clutched in her hands.

“What are you doing?” he asked again, his voice gentler now as he reached down to turn off the water. “Your skin is raw.”

“I can still feel him touching me,” Kate scrunched her face up, trying to focus her mind on Gavin. “I just wanted him to go away.”

“You can’t scrub your skin completely off,” Gavin grabbed a towel to wrap around her.

“You’re soaking wet,” she frowned at him.

“You scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I didn’t mean to snap.”

“You didn’t snap,” she assured him. “I’m just sorry I scared you. I’m a little foggy still.”

“Can you get dressed or do you want me to find you some clothes?” he offered.

“I can get dressed,” she smiled at that. He was being very sweet. And he was very wet.

“Why don’t you leave those clothes in the tub? I think some of your clothes are in that laundry basket in the corner.”

He looked like he didn’t want to leave her alone again, but knew she had regained her senses enough to not let him drip water everywhere. He quickly stripped out of the wet clothes and wrapped a fresh towel around his waist—hurrying to be sure he was in the same room as her.

“Don’t worry,” she assured him. “I’m feeling a little better now. I won’t make you break down any more doors.”

“Good,” Gavin rubbed his shoulder gingerly. “It’s not as easy as it looks.”

Kate ducked into her closet for a second to shimmy into her pajamas, reappearing in time to watch Gavin retrieve the clean clothes she’d left folded in the laundry basket for him. Lord help her, despite everything that had happened, she couldn’t help drinking in the sight of him. He really was breathtaking. Kate knew that one day in the very near future she would be free to trace each and every bare muscle with her fingertips but today was not that day. She didn’t want the memory of her first time with Gavin to be in any way linked to Justin.

“What kind of food did you get us?” She turned her thoughts down a safer path.

“Burgers. Not sure how good they’ll be cold,” he answered apologetically.

“I’ll toss them in the oven to warm them up.” Kate left him to change in privacy, although she was secretly glad he hadn’t donned more than boxers and a t-shirt. She might be fresh off a trauma, but she was still human and there was something very comforting about padding around in this relaxed state with him. They ate piled up in bed. Once she’d begun to eat, Kate realized she was starving. She fell asleep that night curled up tight in Gavin’s protective embrace.

Chapter Eighteen

Sunbeams trickled through the curtains, playing merrily across Gavin's features. Kate watched him sleeping, sure the archangel Michael could not be as beautiful as her Gavin—could not have features as perfectly carved. If she already planned to marry him, was it wrong to do so sooner so she could feed this yearning for more of him and still honor their decision to wait until they were married?

It seemed silly. Certainly everyone assumed they were sleeping together already. But then, Kate knew why he was so adamant. It was the same reason she played along. Neither wanted to be completely swept away by the physical side of their relationship, and the pull was strong enough she was sure it would overtake them both if they gave in. She'd never wanted someone so badly; she'd never felt so wanted. By waiting, it somehow seemed more special. She seemed more special. He treated her like she was the most valuable treasure on earth.

In the past, Kate had rushed headlong into relationships, feeding her passion with little heed to anything else. Kate blinked and sat up suddenly, realization hitting her like a lightning bolt. In her reckless youth, she'd always chased love. She'd jumped into bed with boys like Peter because, if only for a moment, she'd felt like she was worth something in their eyes. But she wasn't worth any more to the Peters of the world than she had been—or still was—to Jack.

When she'd burned herself a little too badly playing with that fire, she'd carefully constructed her self worth by being the best at whatever she did. And she avoided love at all costs lest another loss remind her.... Had Gavin been right? Had she been trying to prove to Jack that he should love her?

"Where are you right now?" Gavin's voice interrupted her reverie.

"Lost in my own crazy head," Kate smiled at him, curling back up at his side. "I think I know my next step."

"Do you?" He twirled a strand of her hair in his fingers. "What is that?"

"Well it's more of a vague inkling than a solid plan," she hedged. "But I do intend to talk to Jack today."

"I'll go with you."

"I think you should go to work." Kate shook her head. "Every office is made out of glass, you'll get to see it all anyway."

"I'd planned on quitting today."

“Are we both going to live on our good looks?” Kate teased. “I mean, I know I’m ravishing, but that’s still a lofty expectation.”

“Goofy wench,” He tickled her side. “I think I could find another job.”

“But you wanted this job. And you work so well with Jessica and Liz. The three of you are an amazing team. This Jack thing will settle down and then you’d be sorry.”

“It feels disloyal,” he scowled.

“Don’t make a decision today,” Kate persisted. “At least cool off first. Then decide.”

“I’ll give it a couple of days,” he finally promised. Ty whined to remind them he still needed to be walked.

“Come on,” Kate stretched, suppressing a wince when she realized her chest was still sore from having scrubbed the skin raw the night before. “Let’s go walk our dog together.”

“Only if you let me doctor up those scratches when we get back,” Gavin’s brow furrowed as he nodded to the angry red skin peeking out from under her pajama top.

“It’s not that bad,” she argued.

“Really?” he went to touch her above the heart and she couldn’t stop the wince. “That’s what I thought. We’ll stop in and buy some gauze at the corner drugstore.”

“Fine,” she conceded. “Then you have to stop and buy me a bagel and coffee, too.”

“Whatever you want,” he promised. Ty whined again and they both moved a little faster to slide on some jeans.

Gavin didn’t want to let go of Kate the entire walk. They’d stood outside the drugstore for a full two minutes with her assuring him that she and Ty would be just fine while he bought whatever he felt was necessary to bandage her scrapes. Over and over, his fingers grazed her cheek tenderly. Time and again, he kissed her forehead or tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. It was Kate’s turn to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from chuckling at him. Some poor sap jostled Kate at a busy light and Gavin nearly growled, his arm encircling her protectively.

“You do know that at some point, you’ll have to let me function on my own again?” She touched his face lightly as they stopped at her door.

“At some point. I’m not there yet.”

“I’m okay,” she reminded him. Truth be told, she didn’t want to let Gavin out of her sight anytime soon, either. But the longer he refused to leave her alone, the harder that would be. And

she'd spoken the truth—at some point, she would have to function without him. He couldn't be her personal bodyguard forever.

She ate her bagel while he got dressed for work, then sat quietly with a towel wrapped around herself while Gavin bent over her, brow furrowed in concentration, to clean and medicate each scratch along her chest and neck. He insisted on wrapping the wounds in gauze. Kate felt ridiculous but had to admit it did feel better, less raw, when he was done.

"I'm going to have to wear a turtleneck to cover all the gauze," she frowned in the mirror.

"Then wear a turtleneck." Gavin kissed her cheek lightly.

"I don't like turtlenecks."

"Then don't wear one. Maybe it'll heighten Jack's sense of guilt."

"You're not really helping anymore," Kate nudged him playfully. "Go to work."

"Yes ma'am."

"I'll be there soon."

"Be careful."

"Yes sir."

She finally shooed Gavin out the door, locking it behind him when he was gone.

"You're going to have to toughen up into a guard dog," Kate informed Ty. His tail thumped the floor happily. "That's encouraging."

Kate studied her closet for a while before finding a tailored button-up that looked like it would hide the gauze best. The blue fabric looked good with her skin tone. She carefully picked out her favorite steel gray slacks to go with them then went in search of her best bra and panties. Even though no one was going to see them, she needed every confidence boost she could scrounge.

With that in mind, she carefully applied her makeup and spritzed her favorite perfume in the hallway, walking through it to allow the mist to settle on her. She found her Nancy Sinatra black walking boots—which conjured a childhood memory of prancing around singing into a wire whisk—and finished the outfit off with her long, black leather duster. She could take over the world without breaking a sweat in this outfit, or at the very least face down her father without running away in tears.

She glanced at the clock. The daily meeting would be over by now. They'd all be in their offices. It was as good a time as any. With one last goodbye treat for Ty, she marched out of her

apartment and made her way to the part of SOMA that butted up against the Financial District. She went straight for the older building wedged in between the much larger modern ones. She didn't pause to admire the brick exposed walls or big steel architectural retrofitting for earthquakes that had been so fascinating and so very... San Francisco the first time she'd seen them. She waved Jen off when the girl had tried to run interference and stalked straight back to Jack's office. He looked up in surprise when she let herself in without so much as a knock.

"Kate. You're here," he seemed distracted, tired.

"Yes, I am," she acknowledged the obvious. "We need to talk."

"Of course, have a seat," he was more courteous than he had been in a while and Kate was instantly wary.

"I'd prefer to stand."

"Very well," he didn't seem pleased by her response but didn't argue. "The Chronicle sent you flowers. A lot of people sent flowers."

Kate looked around the office, noticing that vases of flowers covered many of the surfaces in both Jack's office and her own across the hall. "Why?"

"Mostly well-wishes. The Chronicle wanted to assure you they've fired Justin and that they would make any necessary restitution."

"Oh," Kate wasn't sure what to say to that.

"Kate," Jack took a deep breath. "They were very dismayed to learn you no longer worked here."

"Were they?" she raised an eyebrow.

"More than a little put out, actually. I promised them I'd do what I could to convince you to stay."

"Is that so?" Kate wasn't sure she could accommodate that.

"My phone's been ringing a lot, actually. Word spread pretty quickly of your departure it seems," Jack glared across the hall at the three employees who very quickly busied themselves with something else.

"Oh," Kate stifled a grin. She should have known they'd do something. "Don't worry, Jack. I don't want the job."

"What? Why?" Worry creased his brow. "I don't know that these people will take no for an answer."

“I’ll call the dogs off,” she promised. “Your precious magazine will be fine.”

“But what about the Christmas party? Who’ll finish planning that... it’s only a few months away.”

“Stop it,” Kate held up a hand. “Stop talking and just listen for a minute.”

Jack took a deep breath as if to say something, but merely nodded instead.

“You reacted really poorly when my mother chose to have me. You made her choose between her baby and the man she loved and that was a heartless, selfish thing to do.”

“I couldn’t have a baby then. I had school, no money...” Jack protested.

“No, it’s my turn to talk.” Kate slapped her hand down on the desk in front of her. “Mom put herself through college with a baby. It wasn’t impossible. She chose to have me and still make it work. You didn’t even hear what she wanted; you never stopped to think about anyone but you. You broke her heart and left her to raise a baby on her own and you know it. You know you left me without a father.”

“Kate, I...”

“I used to let people like you, like Peter, tell me what I was worth. I used to wonder if I was the reason my mama didn’t have the things other mom’s had. I used to feel so guilty for... existing. I tried to balm the pain. I tried to fix it. But all I was doing was tightening the binds.”

Kate paused, looking around the office she’d come to love over the past months. Heads suddenly ducked back to work as people realized her focus had shifted from Jack. She smiled half-heartedly and turned to look at Jack again.

“I came because I wanted to know you. I guess part of me hoped you just hadn’t known about me, that some merry mix up had kept us from being a family. And God help me, Jack, I actually started to get attached to you—started thinking of you as my father. But you’re not. You’re a sperm donor and nothing more.”

She let the bite of her words hang in the air for a moment, hardening her heart to the tears that hovered in the moss green eyes on the other side of the desk.

“I don’t deserve the way you treat me Jack. I can’t help that looking at me makes you feel guilty. I love Jessica and Liz and—obviously—Gavin, but they’ll be part of my life even if I don’t work here. You’re not a part of my life, though. You made that choice, repeatedly. Now I’m making the choice to not let you hurt me anymore. Tell Tara I’ll find a way to still be friends with her, just give me some time.”

With that, Kate turned and walked out of his office. Gavin was leaning in the door of their office, his eyes speaking volumes as they caught hers on the way past. She knew he'd be home soon, probably with Jessica and Liz not far behind him. Kate gave them all a little grin as she passed. She just had to get out the door without cracking. It wasn't far at all, really.

Kate was quite impressed with herself when she made it all the way down the street before the great, heaving sobs came. She'd meant what she'd said. Jack wasn't her daddy in any of the ways that counted. She knew it and she would come to terms with it. But the dream of having a father to fill some of the big gaping hole left by her mother had died today and that hurt like crazy. The pain seemed to be clawing its way out of her soul and she struggled to breathe through the tears. She ignored the stares of strangers on that long walk home.

Her life mattered to Ty. To Gavin. To Jessica and Liz. Her life had mattered very much to her mother. To Joan. This rejection would not end her. Still, a little tiny piece of her tucked away the hope that maybe someday, somehow, things would be right between them.

Kate let herself into her apartment, greeting Ty with a hug. She fell to her knees before the large black trunk that acted as a coffee table and lifted the heavy lid. She took the photo albums out and spread them around her on the floor, shifting to a more comfortable position before opening the one nearest her. Now she had a face to put with the third person her mind saw every time she'd looked at these photos. Page after page of pictures of just her, or just her mother, or the two of them. She'd led a full life. A good life. But there had always been a hole. Kate had known it even if they'd never spoken the words.

A piece of Danielle had always been reserved for the person missing from the pictures. Kate squeezed her eyes shut, willing away the image of Jack. So what if his eyes were like hers? So what if their mannerisms were the same? He didn't want her and she couldn't keep treating the memories of her life as incomplete without him.

Kate opened her eyes, determined to see the pictures through a new lens. There was more than loss and empty spaces in front of her; there was love and laughter, too. Her mom had seen to that. And now she had Gavin promising her a future that would be anything but lonely. Kate could almost hear her mother now telling her, "Live it for all it's worth, Katie girl..."

Kate wasn't sure how long she sat on her floor reliving memories. She must have dozed off, because one minute she was looking at a picture of her mother holding a birthday cake, the next

Gavin was gathering her into his arms and reassuring Jessica and Liz that Kate was merely sleeping.

“Hey, you,” she peeked up at him.

“Hey, you,” he smiled tenderly at her. “You were great today.”

“Really?”

“Really,” he kissed the tip of her nose before helping her stand.

“Oh, Kate, we’ve been so worried about you,” Jessica took that as her cue to step in for a hug.

“We wanted to come over sooner, but Gavin said you’d be mad.” Liz hugged Kate the second Jessica released her.

“He was right. I don’t want you guys doing anything rash because Jack and I can’t see eye to eye on this.”

“It just feels wrong being there without you,” Jessica protested.

“You’re expecting your first child. Liz is about to be a newlywed. You both need your jobs. I will be okay. I really will.”

“Alright, enough of this for now. Go get freshened up. We’re going to Medjool tonight,” Gavin declared.

“Should I know what that means?” Kate asked.

“Great tapas. Middle Eastern flair. You’ll love it,” Liz reassured her.

“I don’t think I’ll hang out for dancing,” Jessica told them. “But I’m in for dinner.”

“Or we could just go to Foreign Cinema and you could get your nap in during dinner...” Liz teased.

“Do you not like Foreign Cinema?” Kate wondered.

“I can’t seem to stay awake during movies,” Jessica made a face at Liz. “I have no idea why.”

“Like movie-induced narcolepsy?” Gavin grinned.

“It’s not funny,” Jessica tried not to laugh along with him.

“Wear a jacket,” Gavin urged. “I’ll try to get us a spot on the Skydeck.”

Gavin was one of those people who usually gets what he wants. Kate was glad for that when she got her first 360-degree view of San Francisco from the Skydeck. It was breathtakingly beautiful. As Kate drank in the sight, she knew that come what may, this was her hometown. She

had come to love this place that was like no other on earth. With Gavin's hand on the small of her back and the city stretched out before her, the troubles of the past twenty-four hours seemed to fade.

"So I've been thinking," Kate struggled to put the random thoughts that had been dancing through her brain into coherent sentences to share with her friends.

"Always a good idea," Gavin teased as he poured her another glass of wine.

"Anyway," she paused to make a face at him. "I'm going to call Joan tomorrow. She'd mentioned needing some help with events at Blue Valley..."

"You can't move an hour away!" Jessica protested.

"I'm not planning on going anywhere—unless Gavin wants to go back to London, but I had hoped to stay."

"I assumed we'd stay here," he assured them.

"Good," Kate breathed a sigh of relief. "Anyway, I think I'm going to take up some contract work. I'll be able to go on Gavin's health insurance soon. I'll tell Jack that if I can report to Tara, I'll work the San Franciscan in as a client. I had a message from Alicia that her radio station is looking for an event planner... I know a certain photographer that I could probably stay busy planning shows for."

"I think that photographer would love for you to plan his shows," Gavin scooped her hand up to kiss her knuckles.

"You guys are too cute," Liz wrinkled her nose prettily. "I mean it. Stop it."

"Sorry," Kate yanked her hand away. "This week should really be all about you guys."

"Don't remind me. I'm trying not to panic," Liz rolled her eyes.

"Who was telling me just last night to enjoy the engagement?" Kate reminded her pointedly.

"You know it'll be amazing," Jessica reassured her. "And no matter what happens that day, when it's all said and done, you'll be married to the man you love. Remember that."

Chapter Nineteen

“Remind me again why I’m doing this,” Liz fanned herself in a feeble attempt to not hyperventilate.

“Because you love Derrick,” Jessica placed a firm hand on either of Liz’s shoulders and looked her in the eye.

“And when this is all said and done, the two of you get to spend a week in Hawaii,” Kate reminded her hopefully.

“You have worked too hard to let her derail you now,” Jessica’s jaw had a firm set to it Kate hadn’t seen before.

“It’s just a few extra people,” Kate put another bobby pin in Liz’s veil. “Gavin’s setting out extra chairs now. I’ve already spoken to the caterer.”

Kate left off that Gavin had written the caterer a rather hefty check to convince him to add roughly 50 people to the count the day of. He’d called it a wedding gift no one really needed to know about.

“I can’t believe she just called people and invited them.” Liz’s breathing picked up again. “I mean, who does that?”

“That was pretty low,” Jessica agreed sympathetically. “But don’t let it ruin your day. You’re too ravishing for that.”

“This day is about you, not her,” Kate added, putting the final pin in place. “And you look amazing.”

“You think?” There was a hesitance in her voice that Kate couldn’t understand.

“Are you looking in the same mirror as me?” Kate laughed. “Look at yourself. You’re perfect.”

And she was perfect. Her dark brown hair was pulled back loosely, escaped ringlets framing her face prettily. Her dark eyes shone bright; her alabaster skin was flawless. When she smiled shyly at the reflection, her dimples appeared to complete the picture. The sleek dress hugged her perfect form. She was the woman the rest of womankind loved to hate—curves where she needed them, slender where she was supposed to be.

“I’d better go get my seat,” Kate gave her one last hug and scurried out the door to find Gavin. Jessica, the matron of honor, stayed at Liz’s side.

“How she holding up?” Gavin tucked Kate’s arm in his.

“I think she’ll make it,” Kate leaned her head against his shoulder. “She’s pretty ticked at the monster-in-law, though.”

“That’s not nice,” Gavin’s lip was twitching again.

“But it’s true,” Kate scowled. “I can’t believe she did that.”

“Now probably isn’t the time,” he reminded her with a grin.

“Maybe not,” Kate shrugged and took her seat next to Tara.

“Crisis averted?” Tara asked.

“Dealt with, anyway,” Kate left it at that.

“You do know how to save the day, don’t you?” Tara smiled prettily at her.

“Gavin did all of the heavy lifting,” Kate waved off the compliment, grateful when the music started so the conversation would stop. Tara had been thrilled at Kate’s suggested working arrangement. Jack had gratefully accepted and seemed to be sending less hate-vibes her way in the past few days. Kate still felt odd being around him but knew it couldn’t be entirely avoided.

Even though Kate had seen Liz in her dress, she was struck again by what a beautiful bride she made as she floated down the aisle at her father’s side. Suddenly, Kate’s throat felt thick and the tears began to flow. Why hadn’t she remembered this part of the wedding sooner? How stupid would she look walking down the aisle by herself? She cast a glance at Jack before she could stop herself. He was staring at her intently. Why weren’t his eyes on Liz like they were supposed to be? As one of his beloved protégés, she was more his daughter than Kate. Why did his eyes bore into hers now? With a small, frustrated shake of the head, she forced her gaze back to Liz.

She could tell by the look on Liz’s face that she only had eyes for Derrick. His mother couldn’t touch this moment between them. Kate took heart. It didn’t really matter who, if anyone, walked her down the aisle as long as Gavin was waiting at the other end of it. She felt him squeeze her hand, as if reassuring her of that truth.

The ceremony was probably the shortest Kate had ever been to. Fifteen minutes after she’d sat down, the minister was introducing the crowd to Mr. and Mrs. Harrison and telling them where the party was.

In true Liz fashion, the reception was larger than life and completely amazing. Where Tara had gone for subtle and understated, Liz had embraced warm, vibrant color. What Kate enjoyed most was the idea of being at a party she hadn’t put together and had no obligation to tend to.

“Ma’am,” the caterer approached Kate as if on cue. “We’ve added the extra place settings you’d requested.”

“Thank you. The wedding party should be here any moment. You can plan on serving the food in about half an hour.”

“Just can’t help yourself, can you?” Gavin teased.

“Hey, he came to me.”

By the third time the caterer had approached Kate for instruction, she realized she was glad for it. She got a little antsy without anything to do but chit-chat, especially when she was sharing a table with Jack. Liz had warned her that the place settings had been set before things had gotten so sticky. Kate knew it was coming. That didn’t make the evening seem any shorter.

“So Kate,” Tara tried yet again to strike up a conversation. “Gavin tells me you’re working at your aunt’s vineyard part time now?”

“Actually, it’s my vineyard, too,” Kate corrected without thinking.

“Really?” Jack’s brow furrowed.

“I inherited my mother’s fifty-percent ownership when she passed away. I chose to stay in San Francisco because it’s home now, but I did agree to help out more at Blue Valley... pull my own weight and all that.”

“I had no idea,” Tara kept trying. “Could I see it sometime?”

“I’d love that,” Kate smiled genuinely at her. “We’re planning to have the wedding there, so you’ll see it then if not before.”

“So we are going to be invited?” Tara couldn’t help asking. “I wasn’t sure...”

“Of course you are invited, Tara. I can’t imagine getting married without one of my best friends there,” Kate hoped she hadn’t overemphasized the word “you”. The look on Gavin’s face suggested maybe she had. There was an uncomfortable moment of silence.

“How is Joan?” Jack asked finally.

“Doing well,” Gavin finally answered when it became apparent Kate wasn’t going to come out of her shocked stupor long enough to.

“That’s nice,” Jack nodded. Silence fell again.

“So Gavin, how’s your mother?” Tara brightened at the prospect of a safe topic.

“Doing better every day.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“We’re certainly happy with how she’s responding to treatment. I mean, it’s been hard on her and Da, but she really seems to be improving. The doctors are optimistic.”

“Good, good,” Tara seemed to be searching for a way to extend the conversation. Everyone seemed grateful when the couple shared their first dance. Silence was okay then. They were even more grateful when the invitation was issued for others to join them on the dance floor. Kate nearly jerked Gavin out of his chair in her haste to escape the table. She stubbornly danced every dance, finding another partner when Gavin insisted on getting a drink. She did stop dancing long enough to give Liz and Jessica a hug and to congratulate Derrick. Gavin came to reclaim her when she was doing the twist with Liz. Jessica had grudgingly sat that one out at Ryan’s insistence.

“Come on my little dancing queen. It’s time to go home.”

“Spoil sport,” she accused.

“Tell that to your dog,” he countered. “He’s probably eaten your couch by now.”

“My dog?” She asked pointedly, but conceded nonetheless. After making the rounds of goodbyes, she followed Gavin out to his car.

“Did you have fun tonight?” Gavin asked. Kate couldn’t tell if he was teasing her or genuinely wanted to know.

“Don’t walk so fast, my feet hurt,” she hopped along, trying to remove her heels as they went.

“Imagine that,” he took no pity on her.

“You’re a cold, hard man—you know that Gavin?”

He scooped her into his arms in response and carried her, protesting the entire way, back to the car. She nearly dozed off on the ride home, the weight of the past week settling in once they were in the quiet calm of his car with only the purr of its engine to intrude upon her thoughts.

While she was still fumbling to get out of the car in her sleepy state, he materialized at her door to carry her up the stairs to her apartment. He set her down long enough to open the door, grabbing Ty by the collar before he could make a break for it.

“Give me your keys, we left my purse in the car,” Kate held out her hand.

“They’re in the door. Give me a second,” Gavin tried to wrestle Ty back into the apartment. “Calm down you goofy mongrel.”

“Got ’em,” she snagged the keys from the door and headed downstairs.

“I’ll get his leash on him and we’ll be right down,” Gavin called after her, shoving the dog back through the door and closing it soundly behind them.

Kate shook her head. She’d expected Ty to be restless after being alone that long, but this was ridiculous. She pushed the button on her key fob and the little Audi beeped a friendly response. Kate reached for the door but stumbled as a blinding pain cracked the back of her skull. She reached behind her to feel the source of the pain, sickened by the warm sticky mess she felt in her hair. She stared at her fingers through a confused haze. What had happened? Was that blood?

Someone grabbed her by the hair and slammed her head into the doorframe of the car. She could hear Ty in the distance, barking madly as she was shoved into the Audi. She fumbled with the door, trying to let herself out, but couldn’t seem to make the handle work.

There was someone in the car with her now. She tried to focus on what they were saying, to understand what they wanted.

“I will not let you marry that boy,” a hateful voice growled at her.

“Justin?” Kate struggled to come out of the fog.

“I would have loved you forever. I would have kept you safe. The boy didn’t keep you safe. Look at you now.”

“But you did this to me, not him,” Kate held her throbbing head in her hands.

“SHUT UP. Just shut up. We’re leaving this stupid town and your stupid boy. You’re mine now.”

Kate didn’t try to speak again as he ranted and rambled at her. Were her chances of survival better if she threw herself from the car now or if she waited until he stopped to make a break for it? She tried to ascertain where they were, and realized with a sinking heart that the time for flinging herself from the car had passed. The car was gaining speed now as he pulled on the highway. Had they crossed the bridge already? How had she missed that? The engine was roaring now, the road flying beneath them. Kate groped for her seatbelt.

This time Kate was grateful to see red and blue lights swing in behind them. She might still die, but at least it wouldn’t be alone on some forgotten coastline. Gavin wouldn’t have to spend years wondering what had happened to her. The thought of him sliced through her. She closed her eyes and breathed his name, willing her love to him. Wishing more than anything that he

might know just how passionately and fully she did love him. She was so very glad she had not held out, that she had given up the walls.

She was vaguely aware of the loud string of curses Justin was spewing. Another police car fell in line behind them. Justin blamed Gavin for their presence. Kate wondered if that were true. He was pushing the car harder now. Kate knew this car could take way more than Justin could handle. He would lose control long before he hit 155 miles per hour.

As if in response to her dire prediction, Kate watched as a large, jagged rock materialized before them. It all seemed to slow down then. She was tossed to the left when he jerked the wheel, trying too late to veer with the road. The car's back end swung out. The driver's side slammed into the boulder with such force the entire car bounced back. Someone was screaming. Was it her? There was so much blood. Glass everywhere. And... pain.

Then there were voices. Three men? Four?

"It's leaking fuel."

"Is she alive?"

"Get her out of there."

"There's no way the driver lived."

Hands were grabbing her. Big hands. Rough, but gentle. Why couldn't she move? Why didn't her legs work? She met the worried brown eyes of a stranger. They were kind eyes. They wanted her to live. She licked her lips and swallowed, tried to speak. Nothing came out.

"Come on honey, I've got you now." The stranger was tucking her in his arms, running. Why was he running?

"Get down!" Another voice shouted just as an explosion rocked the earth behind them. Tongues of fire licked the sky. She and the stranger were tumbling now. He'd wrapped his body around her, protecting her. A cry of pain ripped from his lips. She wanted to tell him she was sorry. And then the blessed black claimed her.

Chapter Twenty

"You are not pulling any damn plug."

Kate was confused. What plug was Jack so averse to having pulled? Why was Jack here? She struggled to open her eyes but they wouldn't cooperate.

"It's still too soon to say, of course."

Whose voice was that? Kate wondered what it was too soon for.

"Why are we talking about this anyway? She will wake up."

Gavin. And he was in pain; she could hear it etched in his voice. Open, just open. She willed her eyes but the darkness was so deep, pulling her back under. And it was quiet again. So quiet.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Get some sleep, Gavin."

Kate could hear Jack's voice again. Why was he here? Was Gavin sick? She fought harder against the darkness.

"You shouldn't even be here," Gavin's voice was ragged. "Just leave me with her."

"You need rest. You don't even have to leave the room. Just get some rest. She'll need you more if she wakes up."

"But you have to talk to her. They said it helps to talk."

"And you've talked yourself hoarse. Let me do this. Please."

"I'm right here."

"I know, I know. Just lay back. Rest."

Kate clawed at the darkness now. Gavin needed her. Something was hurting him. She had to win this time.

"Katie... I have to admit this feels a little strange... talking to you like this. I don't know what to say. I guess I should start with sorry," Jack began awkwardly.

Kate's mind stilled. She no longer clawed at the dark, content to float along in it for the moment. She must be dreaming, dreaming of a time before Jack looked at her with contempt. His voice was soft, smooth as butter. It reached out and wrapped around her like a gentle embrace now.

“Katie, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry it took this for me to see. I’m sorry I was so stubborn. You were right. Every time I looked at you, it reminded me how badly I failed Danielle. How I let you down. You didn’t do anything wrong. You didn’t deserve any of this. I love you, Katie. And I’m proud of you. I know I don’t deserve you. But you can tell me what a jerk I am when you wake up. You’ve got to wake up, though, so I can spend the rest of my life trying to make this up to you.”

Whatever held her bound to the darkness snapped, and Kate’s eyelids fluttered open. She looked around the room, trying to put the pieces together. She was in a bed—with rails. Jack was at her side; his head bent low over her hand. He was clutching her hand tightly in his own. There were the familiar beeps and hums of hospital machinery. Kate took in the tubes coming from her arms, felt the irritating plastic in her nostrils. The machinery was for her. She placed her free hand on Jack’s head, patting it awkwardly in an attempt to comfort.

“It’s not fair apologizing when you think I can’t hear. It’s cheating.”

“Katie,” his head lifted, hope flickering in his eyes.

“Hey Jack,” her voice sounded strange in her own ears. “Is Gavin okay? I was worried about him. He sounded hurt.”

“He’s not hurt,” Jack assured her, straightening in his chair. “He’s just been worried about you.”

“Gavin,” Kate called a little louder, needing to see him for herself.

He was at her side immediately, a thousand emotions at once playing across his face. He stroked her hair with one hand and held her hand with the other. He looked like he wanted to gather her in his arms but was afraid to break her.

“Hello love,” he smiled tremulously.

“Are you okay?” worry creased her brow.

“I’m fine now,” he laughed softly. “I’m just fine now.”

“What’s going on?”

“You were in an accident,” even the words brought him pain. “You’ve been asleep for awhile.”

“The man with kind eyes. He saved me, didn’t he?” Kate closed her eyes, images playing through her mind like a montage. “Is he okay?”

“Officer McKinsey is going to be just fine. He’s just down the hall. They say he might even get out this week.” Gavin’s lips brushed her hand as he spoke.

“Really? Tell him I’m so sorry he’s hurt because of me.” She opened her eyes, meeting Gavin’s and holding on to his gaze like a lifeline.

“It wasn’t your fault, Kate,” Gavin shook his head.

“But I didn’t move. I heard them saying the fuel was leaking. I wanted to move, but I didn’t.” She frowned, angry with herself anew.

“Honey, the car had completely collapsed on you. You couldn’t move.” Gavin stroked her cheek and she leaned into his touch.

“Liz and Derrick... are they in Hawaii?” Kate tried to sit up.

“They postponed their trip...,” Gavin paused when Kate began to look panicked. “What’s wrong baby?”

“I can’t feel my legs, Gavin.” Kate’s chest was heaving now from exertion and terror.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” he tried to sooth her, tried to keep her from seeing the concern in his eyes. “The doctor said that might happen. There’s a lot of swelling on your spine.”

“What? What are you saying?” Kate wanted to rip all of the stupid tubes from her body, to run out of this horrible place screaming. Her grip on Gavin’s arm became viselike.

“Jack, could you go get some help please?” Gavin cast a glance his way.

“Sure, sure. I’ll be right back.”

“No,” Kate sobbed. She wanted to wake up from this dream. She didn’t like it at all. “Gavin, please no.”

“Oh baby, oh my darling girl,” he crooned, his accent thick as tears choked him. He leaned over her, trying to hug her without moving her. “It might not last. When the swelling goes down...it might not last. You’re awake. That’s what matters, my girl. That’s all that matters now.”

“I don’t want this, Gavin.” She buried her face in his chest.

“I know love. I know,” he continued to stroke her hair. The hospital staff descended and Kate tried to pull herself together. Gavin was always close. He refused to leave of his own volition when the doctors asked for the room to be cleared so they could examine Kate. Jack had to drag him from the room. Kate wanted to ask questions, but her brain still hurt too badly, the fog was still too thick.

So she lay still, following orders when necessary and doing her best to tune out the commotion around her. She reached back in her memory, trying to see if there was anything she'd done to deserve this. Had she caused Justin's insanity? In some way encouraged it? No, she finally decided. This was just one of those stupid, freak things. He was gone now, so they might never know what it was about her that had caused his obsession. She remembered that much. How could she forget? The sound of the impact echoed in her ears even now. The sight of his vacant eyes. So much blood.

Kate squeezed her eyes tight, trying to picture her stupid, loveable dog to block out the nightmares. Ty. Of course. Ty had known Justin was there. That's why he'd been so worked up that night. Kate concentrated on the image of his ever-smiling face. It was so much more pleasant a thought than blood; death.

"Ms. Yager?" The doctor was leaning over her again. "Do you feel like talking for a minute?"

"Can Gavin come in first? I want him here," Kate struggled to sit up again.

"Sure, but I need you to lie back, okay? I'll raise your bed a little bit but that's it. You have to lie still."

Kate nodded. Something in his voice required obedience. Gavin was at her side again, taking her hand in his, lending her his strength.

"We're very happy you've rejoined us," the doctor smiled kindly at her. She tried to return the smile. "There's still some swelling in the spinal cord. The MRI didn't show any damage, so we're pretty confident the feeling will return to your legs as the swelling goes down, but we won't know for sure until it does."

Kate nodded, inadvertently squeezing Gavin's hand tighter.

"In the meantime, you have got to lie still. Give your body time to heal. You seem to have full use of your upper body. That's a really good sign. All we can do now is wait and see."

"Can I see my friends?" Kate wondered.

"Certainly," the doctor turned his attention to Gavin. "Try to keep the number of guests at any given time limited, and don't let them wear her out too much."

Gavin nodded quietly.

“We’ll be checking in every couple of hours. See if you can eat something light. Once you’re keeping food down, we can remove one of the IVs. Let us know if anything changes at all.”

“Thank you,” Gavin nodded again.

“Thank you,” Kate whispered, her eyes meeting Gavin’s. Neither moved, seemingly holding a conversation without words.

“Kate, oh thank God you’re awake,” Jessica was the first through the door.

“Oh you poor thing,” Liz was right on her heels.

“Hey guys,” Kate brightened at the sight of her two best friends. “Sorry for all of the drama.”

“Give me a break,” Jessica took her free hand. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Go get something to eat, Gavin,” Liz wedged in between Kate and Gavin. “You look awful.”

“You really do look like you could use a break,” Kate agreed when Gavin went to protest. “I’ll still be here when you get back.”

“Very funny,” he rolled his eyes, but conceded. “I’ll be right back. Don’t let her try to move or get worked up.”

“They’ll be model babysitters,” Kate promised on their behalf.

“We were trying to listen from the hall,” Liz admitted. “Stupid HIPAA, the doctors wouldn’t talk to us.”

“Are you okay?” Jessica fretted.

“Yeah, I think so.” Kate filled them in on the prognosis so far. Other than the swelling on her spine, Kate had escaped the accident with only a few cracked ribs and her fair share of cuts and bruises. She was actually very lucky.

“Can we do anything?”

“Yes, tell me about you. I don’t want to think about this anymore. How are you feeling Jessica? How’s married life, Liz? When do you leave for your honeymoon?”

“I feel fine,” Jessica assured her. “Tired, hungry, but fine.”

“We postponed our trip for a little while,” Liz tried to play it down, but Kate knew why.

“Please go. Promise me you’ll call your travel agent and reschedule it right away. I’m so sorry to disrupt your plans.”

“Would you stop apologizing?” Liz was exasperated. “Derrick and I don’t mind at all. We’ll go once you’re home. We want to wait.”

“Hey, can we have a turn?” Tara poked her head through the door. “Joan’s out here, too.”

“Okay, okay,” Jessica frowned. “We’ll be back tomorrow. We’ll chase Gavin home to shower and change.”

“Please do,” Kate smiled. Tara and Joan assumed the positions that had been held by Jessica and Liz. Gavin resumed his sentry position. Gaston stopped by and Joan relinquished her spot. Jack poked his head in, and Gaston gave up his place. As touched as Kate was by their concern, she was also exhausted. Before she could voice the need, Gavin shooed everyone from the room and pulled up a chair so he could hold her hand as she slept.

“Kate?”

“Hmmm?”

“Don’t sleep too long, okay?” He seemed so hesitant, so vulnerable when he asked it nearly broke Kate’s heart.

“Not too long,” she promised, her eyelids sinking shut.

Kate didn’t know how long she slept, but she was vaguely aware of the concern in Gavin’s voice as he instructed someone to just leave the broth on the table.

“Did I sleep too long?” Kate squeezed his hand to let him know she was awake.

“I just worry too much,” he admitted with a grin.

“You should take care of yourself, too. Have you slept at all since this happened?”

“A little,” he hedged.

“Eaten?”

“Not really,” he shrugged.

“If I eat, will you?”

“Stop worrying about me.”

“No.”

“Fine, I’ll eat. You first,” Gavin raised her bed the slight amount allowed by the doctor and positioned the tray so he could feed her a spoonful of broth.

“Ugh, that’s awful.” Kate swallowed the tasteless brown water.

“I’ll smuggle you in a cheeseburger just as soon as I can,” he promised with a laugh.

“Gavin,” Kate grew serious.

“Yes love?”

“Did you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“When he had me in the car, and the police were behind us, I was pretty sure I was going to die. I just thought over and over how much I loved you. I wanted you to know that, more than anything. Could you feel how much I was loving you at that moment?”

“Mostly I felt terror, helpless terror,” he closed his eyes briefly as if trying to ward off the memory. “But yes, I suppose I did feel it.”

“Good,” she smiled, satisfied. “I guess I’d better finish the brown water if that’s what the doctor says I need.”

“I guess so.”

Time lost all meaning for Kate. Sometimes the blinds were open and sunlight poured in. Sometimes she could see the moon peeking through. People came and went. She drifted in and out of sleep. Gavin did finally leave to shower and eat a real meal. At least, he promised he would eat while he was gone. He refused to sleep anywhere but the recliner in Kate’s room. Mostly he sat and watched her breathe. Of course, that’s mostly what she did, too.

She dreaded the sleep, it almost always brought nightmares. She was afraid one of these times she’d close her eyes and have to fight the blackness to return to him. He seemed to share her fear, even if neither of them voiced it.

“You poor man,” Kate stroked his cheek and frowned. He looked so very tired, like he’d lived 100 lifetimes in the past week. “What was it like for you, once I walked back down those stairs?”

“I told you—terrifying,” he gave her an odd smile. “Do you really want to talk about this?”

“I want to know,” she nodded. “All of it. Why were the police following us? Justin blamed you. I wondered if it was you, or just his crazy driving. It’s all so...disjointed in my mind.”

“Ty went nuts right after you were out of sight.”

“I heard him.”

“I think half of San Francisco heard him. It took forever to get his leash on. He dragged me down the stairs once I did, despite his training collar. But you were gone. The car was gone. Ty found the blood on the sidewalk.”

“I’m so sorry,” she caressed his face with her hand. He caught her hand and kissed it.

“Stop apologizing. I called the police. The car had GPS, so finding you wasn’t a problem. The police tried to keep their distance; they didn’t want to push him. He must have been completely out of his head by that point.”

“Yeah, I could see that,” Kate agreed. “It all seemed so odd, like I was watching a movie in slow motion or something. I felt so... detached from it all. Did you say the police officer who saved me is here?”

“John? He’s just a few rooms down. He asks about you every day.”

“You’ve seen him?”

“I visit him when they chase me out of here.”

“You’re a good man.”

“I owe him my world,” Gavin seemed to blush at that.

“I’d like to meet him. To thank him.”

“He’d like that.”

“How badly was he hurt?”

“He broke his arm in the fall. His back was burned pretty badly. It’s all healing really well, though.”

“Does he have a family?”

“A wife and two kids,” Gavin nodded. They sat in silence for a moment, contemplating all that John McKinsey had risked to save Kate. She was very thankful that there were men like John McKinsey in the world, and she wondered if she could ever properly convey her gratitude to him.

When she finally got to meet her hero face to face, the first thing she noticed was the eyes. They were the same kind, warm brown eyes that had calmed her the night of the accident. He was a little shy of six feet tall with a somewhat stocky build and light brown hair. By all accounts, he was an average guy. But to Kate, he was Hercules, Spider-Man and Superman all rolled into one.

“Officer McKinsey,” Kate brightened the moment he walked into the room.

“Call me John, please,” he stood awkwardly at her feet.

“Thank you seems too insignificant to suffice,” she searched for the words.

“Your fiancé here has been thanking me for the past two weeks,” he seemed to blush under the attention. “I’m just glad you pulled through okay.”

“Getting there,” Kate smiled. “How are you? Healing well, I hope?”

“I get to blow this popsicle stand today, in fact,” he smiled at the thought. “But I’d like to check in on you again, if that’s okay.”

“I’d like that,” she nodded.

“Be sure to tell Vicky and the kids hello for us,” Gavin shook John’s hand and walked him to the door.

“Vicky and the kids?” Kate smirked when they were alone. “How much time have you been spending with him?”

“A lot,” Gavin admitted. “I think you’ll like Vicky.”

“What if she hates me, for putting her husband in danger?”

“You didn’t do this, Justin did,” he reminded her again.

“There’s another MRI scheduled for tomorrow,” Kate changed the subject.

“I know,” he nodded.

“Of course you do,” Kate smiled.

“Still nothing?” His eyes seemed sad.

“Still nothing,” she sighed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kate was rarely lonely; there was always a steady stream of loved ones in and out of her room. But that didn’t stop her from being restless. The MRI showed the swelling was going down. The doctor reassured them that soon they would know one way or the other. Kate begged Gavin to bring her laptop. He’d tried to argue with her, but relented when tears of frustration brimmed.

He couldn’t seem to deny her anything. Kate often wondered why. She had nothing to give, nothing of value to bring to the table. Their relationship had been mystifying enough to her as it was. She couldn’t begin to fathom why he was so devoted now. The look he gave her when she finally asked him about it was one of complete disbelief.

“Why are you here?” She rubbed her temple in frustration.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I won’t be mad if you leave. No one would blame you.”

“Did they overmedicate you again?” He growled.

“Stop it, I’m serious.”

“No, Kate. You stop it. When will you figure out that I love you—not something that you can do for me? I love you, Kate.”

“But I can’t do anything now. I don’t even get good wireless reception here. I can’t even do my job. I don’t know if my light bill’s been paid. I can’t feed myself because the stupid doctor won’t let me sit up. I’m just a big fat drain—on you, on Jessica and Liz, on Joan... What if we can’t have kids because of me? You want kids.”

“I don’t want any random kids, though Kate. I want kids with you. I want a little girl whose nose wrinkles when she laughs, just like yours. I want a little boy with your tenacity and those uncanny green eyes. I want a kid that’s smart and funny and that has a big heart.”

“Liz is smart and funny and has a big heart,” Kate pointed out.

“Liz is taken,” Gavin reminded her. “Besides, her nose doesn’t wrinkle when she laughs.”

“Jessica’s does. And she has the biggest heart of anyone I know.”

“Yeah, well neither of them are old or insane, and I happen to like those qualities, too.”

“Now you’re just being mean.”

“I just wish you’d get it. You are exactly and perfectly the woman I love. I’m sorry you’re in a situation beyond your control, but you’re just going to have to trust that I’ll love you through it. And you know—you can control how you handle this. The Kate I love wouldn’t just let this roll right over her. She’d grab this mess by the tail and whip it into shape.”

Tears filled her eyes and she set her jaw petulantly. What did he know? She couldn’t even roll over to dismiss him. She just laid there like a useless lump with a set jaw and an angry glare.

“Fine. Be angry. But you know I’m right. I’m going to walk our dog and get a shower. I’ll be back later,” he kissed her on the forehead and walked out of the room, leaving Kate alone for the first time since waking up. That left her with two choices. Sleep or cry. She opted to try to sleep. Her mind was in too much turmoil to accomplish that so she wound up lying there, eyes closed and memories of happier days with Gavin replaying in a mental movie reel.

She heard Jack talking to a nurse before he entered the room. She debated keeping up the pretense of sleep but decided it would just feel weird.

“Hey Jack,” she gave him a tired smile.

“Hey sweetie,” he tossed a package at her. “Brought you something.”

Kate caught the little pink package easily, her curiosity piqued. “What’s this?”

“Open it,” he seemed pleased with himself. Kate obliged, a genuine smile playing her lips when she did.

“A new Blackberry.”

“Liz mentioned that yours went up in flames with Gavin’s Audi. And that your laptop doesn’t like the hospital so much.”

“Thank you,” Kate’s grateful gaze met his. “Thank you so much, Jack.”

“Do you think you’ll ever want to call me Dad?” He asked the question so quietly, Kate wondered at first if she’d heard him correctly.

“I’ve never really thought about it. To be honest, I’m still not entirely used to you not scowling at me.”

“That one hit me where I live,” he started to scowl then caught himself. “But I guess I’m due a few of those.”

“I’m not trying to be mean. Just honest,” Kate softened. “You know, I bet we’ll get there. Just give it time.”

“Forget I mentioned it.”

“No, don’t say that. I want you to tell me what you’re thinking. How will we ever get past the weird if we’re not honest?”

“Good point,” he patted her foot through the blanket. Kate frowned. He instantly tensed. “Are you okay?”

“Do that again.”

“What?”

“Pat my foot.”

He awkwardly obliged. Kate’s face lit up. “I felt that.”

“Really?”

“Oh, Gavin’s going to be pissed. You got two firsts. I definitely felt that.” Kate giggled. “Pull the sheets back.”

Jack did as she asked, his eyes darting from her face to her feet. Kate stared intently at her feet, chewing her bottom lip in concentration.

“Katie, I’m so sorry,” Gavin’s apology burst from his lips the second he entered the room.

“Shhh,” Jack put a hand on Gavin’s shoulder to hold him in place, whispering an explanation. “She felt something.”

“Bloody hell. Why do you get all of the firsts?”

“Shhh,” Kate hushed him that time. Three pairs of eyes watched her toes intently. They watched them long enough that when her big toe moved ever so slightly, they all looked at each other to be sure they weren’t the only one to have seen it.

“Do it again,” a grin split Gavin’s tired face.

“Okay,” Kate nodded enthusiastically. And she did. This time all five toes on her left foot wiggled on command. She beamed triumphantly at Gavin and Jack. They laughed and clapped each other on the shoulder.

“You’re going to walk down that aisle yet, Katie girl,” Gavin knelt at her side to grab her hands in his.

“I will,” she promised.

“I’ve got to call the girls,” Jack excused himself to the corner of the room, where he began speed dialing to share the news that Kate had wiggled her toes.

“What’s this?” Gavin noticed the present still on Kate’s bed.

“Jack brought me my sanity,” Kate teased. “And I’ve missed it so.”

“If I’d known it was that easy to reclaim, I’d have brought you one of those a while ago.”

“Thank you.”

“I was teasing.”

“No, thank you Gavin. For loving me. For loving me enough to tell me to stop feeling sorry for myself. For sitting by this bed. For all of it. Thank you.”

“Oh. That makes way more sense. You’re welcome?”

“Do you remember how you looked at me when we first met? Like you wanted to eat me alive or something? Do you think you’ll ever look at me like that again?”

“Most assuredly.”

“Hello... father in the room.” Jack called from his corner.

“Sorry,” Kate apologized then turned her attention back to Gavin. “Good. Because I don’t want this to be how you see me from now on... this helpless... thing.”

“Helpless? What do you mean? You can wiggle your toes like nobody’s business,” Gavin winked. “Come on; do it again.”

“Okay,” she giggled conspiratorially and wiggled the toes on both feet.

Every visitor that day got to see the toe wiggle. Gaston declared that toes getting that much attention needed a pedicure and later that day, saw to it himself. Kate was a little surprised at how grateful she was for it, to have something about her that felt pretty.

Gavin and Kate were both taken aback when Darrin and Jill walked through the door that evening.

“We’d have been here sooner, but thought it would be boring just watching you sleep. The toe movement Gavin called about seemed much more exciting,” Darrin teased her with a wink.

“Don’t listen to him,” Jill hugged Kate then Gavin. “We’ve all been sick with worry. Ellen had a bit of a setback, so we waited to be sure she was fine before coming. We’re sorry we weren’t here sooner.”

“Mum had a setback?” Gavin’s eyes sharpened. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“You had enough going on. It was just a little reaction to the medication they put her on. She’s right as rain now,” Darrin clapped Gavin on the shoulder.

“She is,” Jill promised, knowing Gavin wouldn’t believe Darrin. He seemed to relax at her words.

Kate enjoyed their visit. It was good to hear how everyone was doing and to talk about something other than toes, spinal injuries and psychopaths for a change. They agreed to stay at Kate’s for the remainder of their visit so they could help Gavin by taking care of Ty.

The downside to the movement was the beginning of physical therapy or, as Kate had ordained it, hospital-sanctioned torture sessions. The upside was the doctor ordered another MRI and declared her fit for the sitting position. Gavin, Darrin and Jill showed up with her reward the evening after her first session.

“As promised... one burger from Barney’s,” Gavin smiled charmingly as he began to set the food out on her tray. “I even brought fries and a shake. Live it up, Kate.”

Food had never tasted so good. At least, the two bites Kate had of each thing before her stomach revolted and she’d had to lie back down until the nausea subsided. By then, the burger had lost its appeal.

“Sorry,” she’d apologized immediately. “I’m not the best company these days.”

“No worries. Three weeks with no real food, that was probably shooting for the moon anyway.”

Kate tried to sleep when Darrin and Jill were gone, but nightmares plagued her. Justin’s face floated through the darkness, his empty eyes haunted her. She tried to run, but was rooted to the spot. The long fingers of darkness pulled her down as she struggled to be free. She’d awaken, disoriented and panicked when her body still refused to move. Gavin was at her side in an instant, wrapping his arms around her as he gently lay on the hospital bed beside her.

“It’s okay, love. I’m here. I’m here,” his gentle voice was a salve to her troubled spirit. She tried to stay awake after that but as he sang her song, she found her eyelids getting heavier and heavier. When they fluttered open again, it was to the first rays of dawn and Gavin had resumed his post in the chair beside her bed, undoubtedly chased out of the bed by a nurse.

The next day Kate greeted visitors from the recliner and began catching up on email. It was a slow process from a handheld, but she didn’t mind. It felt good to be reclaiming even a little bit of control over her life. She tried to look at physical therapy that way—her way to retake control of her life. Each day, she did manage to regain a little bit more. She was growing stronger, always pushing herself further, harder.

Kate had never cared less about weight in her life, so naturally the pounds just melted away. Between the physical exertion of the daily torture sessions and the fact that she still ate very little, keeping her weight up was the new concern. Kate only regretted that she couldn’t fully enjoy the turn of events. She almost didn’t recognize the hollow-cheeked person in the mirror.

Darrin and Jill came to visit every morning and evening. Kate eagerly anticipated their visits. Gavin seemed to liven up when they were around, not that it was hard to see why. They had a vibrancy that radiated from them. As individuals, they were both fascinating people in their own right. As a couple, they were positively magnetic. Kate could listen to them for hours and not get bored. Although she knew the day would come, she was still sad to see them return to London.

After the toe-excitement, things started to progress rapidly. Kate worked hard with her physical therapist, trying to keep just how hard from Gavin. She wanted to surprise him with the results. She wasn’t disappointed at all by the look on his face the first time she came back from a therapy session shuffling along with a walker instead of in a wheelchair. He could have lit the darkest night with his smile, and it made every bead of sweat worthwhile. Gavin celebrated the

accomplishment by getting Kate a pair of violet pumps that exactly matched the pair lost to the Bay and Ty's stomach.

Not a moment too soon, the day came when the doctor came to talk to her and Gavin about making arrangements for her to continue her rehabilitation from home. Kate hadn't expected the fight that would ensue, but she should have.

"What do you mean you're going to stay with Jack and Tara?" The hurt was evident on Gavin's face.

"I'd planned to stay with Joan, but that's so far. I wouldn't see you much. Tara offered..."

"But I told you I was letting the lease on my loft lapse... I thought we'd agreed."

"It absolutely makes more sense for you to move into my place," Kate assured him quickly. "But you have to work. Tara can work from home. Besides, there are just some things she's better suited to help me with."

"Do you think you two will have this worked out by Thursday?" The doctor interrupted.

"Absolutely," they both promised, not taking their eyes off of each other.

"Good," he left them to it.

"It's just until the wedding," Kate reached for his hand.

"I told you I'd sleep on the couch," he scowled, not so easily consoled.

"You're six-foot-two. I don't see you getting much rest that way," she pointed out. "But it's not about that. Have you considered who's going to help me shower?"

"Me. I can take care of you."

"Can you take care of me and there still be any amount of mystery or anticipation come the wedding night?" Kate demanded. "I get it; I'm not in control of this. I have to trust others, blah, blah, blah. I have to have someone supervise my trips to the bathroom. But that person can't be you. Please Gavin, give me this much."

"I don't like it," he hesitated. "It should be me taking care of you."

"And there's lots of ways you can. Damn it, Gavin, I was dead inside when you met me. I was completely used up by life. It's like I'd forgotten I was a woman. You made me remember what I was, what I am. It's killing me that you've seen me as this weak creature that smells like a hospital and looks like she belongs in a Tim Burton movie."

"And I've told you time and again that's not going to change because of this. I love you more than you give me credit for."

“To be honest, I’m more worried about how I feel about me,” Kate lowered her gaze. What she didn’t tell him is that she was terrified to face the nights without him at her side. Sometimes she wondered if she’d ever stop seeing Justin’s face or fighting the darkness that chased her. But restoring her relationship with Gavin was more important than that right now. No matter how many times he assured her that his love would not let her down, Kate was desperate to reclaim some of the way they once were.

“Ah,” he sat down and thought about her words. “I guess I can understand that. Just until the wedding, then?”

“Hey, I didn’t tell you the most exciting part,” Kate forcibly brightened. “They live right down the street from the Spreckles Mansion. I can totally stalk Danielle Steele.”

“Well that makes it all better, then,” he said wryly. “I can visit you in jail instead of at Jack’s.”

“No spirit of adventure,” she shook her head woefully.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“So, have you set a date?” Liz eyed Kate pointedly over a cup of coffee.

“Not yet,” Kate frowned a little. “And I think it’s bothering Gavin.”

“I don’t blame him. It’s bothering me and it’s not my wedding.”

“How was Hawaii?” Kate arched an eyebrow.

“Totally different.”

“Really? How so?”

“If Liz schedules her honeymoon, will you set a date?” Jessica suggested a compromise.

“Why is everyone suddenly so keen on me setting a date?” Kate demanded.

“Because you’ve been home a month,” Jessica set her cup down and leaned towards her.

“You’re walking with hardly any help. You’ve even been in to the office a couple of times. It’s time to move on with your life.”

“Don’t let some creepy guy ruin your fairy tale,” Liz urged.

“I don’t want Gavin worrying about breaking me on our wedding night,” Kate frowned. “I want to be better. I mean, really better.”

“And you will be,” Jessica assured her. “But if you don’t start planning, you’ll be getting married in a drive-thru chapel.”

“Oh, don’t do that,” Liz wrinkled her nose in distaste. “That’s bad.”

“The Christmas party is right around the corner,” Kate argued feebly.

“No one’s suggesting you get married in January,” the tone of Jessica’s voice left little room for argument.

“Gavin’s mother had that set-back, though.”

“And she’d doing much better now. Gavin said she should be okay to travel by spring,” Liz crossed her arms and waited for the next excuse.

“I don’t know....” Kate bit her lower lip in thought.

“Come on. You know it’ll make Gavin so happy if you just set a date,” Liz leaned forward eagerly; she could tell Kate was faltering.

“It is his birthday,” Kate frowned. The waterproof camera bag she’d ordered online seemed pretty underwhelming now that the day was here. She looked at Jessica. “Do you think you could fit into a bridesmaid’s dress by mid-June?”

“Yes!” Jessica clapped excitedly.

“Don’t you go getting pregnant between now and then,” Kate sternly informed Liz.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Liz held her hands up.

“So, will you go on your honeymoon now?” Kate leaned back in her chair and fixed her eyes on Liz.

“Fine, I’ll go, I’ll go,” Liz conceded.

“So how are you going to tell Gavin?” Jessica’s face lit up. “You have to do something special.”

“You know what, you’re right. I should treat him to something special... what do you think?”

“Jardinière,” Liz answered without hesitation. “Get all dolled up and take him to Jardinière.”

“That’s good,” Jessica agreed enthusiastically.

“I don’t think I have anything to wear,” Kate hedged.

“We’ll go pick something up for you. I’m sure Tara would loan you the limo for the night. Call him now. I’ll make the reservations,” Liz picked up her phone before Kate had time to argue.

True to their word, they’d returned a couple of hours later with a new dress for Kate. They’d found a green Calvin Klein satin baby doll dress that Kate could never have pulled off before the accident.

“Did you call Gavin?” Jessica asked eagerly as she handed Kate the dress.

“He’s worried about taking me out in public. He’s afraid I’ll get hurt.”

“When he sees you in this dress he’ll stop thinking you’re breakable,” Liz predicted. “Come on, we’ve only got a few hours. Let’s get you ready.”

“A few hours? How depressing. It takes a few hours to make me pretty now?” Kate hated being petulant but couldn’t seem to help herself.

“Oh, did we forget to mention we made appointments at Bliss?” Jessica held her hands up innocently. “Just don’t tell Gavin. He’ll yell at us for wearing you out.”

“Deal,” Kate reached for her canes. She was more than ready to leave this blasted house.

Her friends seemed to understand how very sick of herself Kate was. They talked about Jessica’s pregnancy over pedicures, about Liz’s mother-in-law over manicures, and about the magazine over facials. By the time Kate stood anxiously waiting for the car to arrive so she could get Gavin, she felt human—and almost attractive at that. There wasn’t much to be done about the two canes she still walked with. Gavin wouldn’t hear of her leaving those behind, she was sure. Maybe she could stow just one in the trunk and use Gavin for support on the other side, though....

“You’re going to make him a very happy man tonight,” Tara smiled reassuringly at Kate.

“I hope so,” Kate hesitated. “Do you think he’ll ever treat me the way he used to?”

“Give him time,” Jack answered. “It nearly killed him that night. Watching you suffer after... He’ll adjust.”

“Thanks,” Kate smiled at him. She was enjoying the easy relationship that had developed between them. It wasn’t quite a typical father-daughter thing, but they were becoming friends. Kate knew she had Tara to thank for that. She wondered how hard it had been for Tara to share her new husband with his grown daughter.

“The driver’s here,” Tara handed Kate her purse. “Come on, Jack will help you down.”

“Thanks,” Kate accepted the help with only the slightest twinge. She was getting better at that.

It was a short drive, but that didn’t stop Kate from working up a good case of nerves. When the limo pulled up outside her apartment, Kate called Gavin to let him know his chariot awaited. She stared longingly at her door, wishing she could see her little apartment. It had been hard, not being there when Gavin moved his belongings in. For someone who had always been in control, not even knowing how the furniture was arranged in her home was driving her nearly mad. But more than the home, she missed Ty. Maybe she could convince Gavin to at least bring Ty for a visit.

“Hello there,” Gavin slid into the car beside her “Are you doing okay today?”

“I’m fine,” Kate tried to stamp down her irritation. Those weren’t supposed to be the first words out of his mouth. “Happy Birthday! You look nice.”

“You said to dress up,” he shrugged. “So you’re not too tired for this? I’d planned on running by Sunflower. You love Vietnamese takeout.”

“I wanted to do something special,” Kate interrupted.

“Oh,” he paused. “I could have gone somewhere else.”

“I wanted to go out to somewhere special,” she tried again. “The girls even brought me a new dress.”

“That is new,” he finally noticed. “It’s nice.”

“Thanks,” Kate couldn’t help it if her voice was a little curt.

“Is something wrong? Do you need to lie down for a bit?”

“I do not need to lie down,” the words were more guttural growl than anything.

“Kate, what on earth is wrong?” he seemed bewildered.

“I miss you, Gavin. That’s what’s wrong,” she was angry with herself for the tears that brimmed.

“Do you want me to take off work tomorrow? I thought you wanted me to work my normal schedule, but I could take off.”

“I don’t miss my caretaker,” Kate spat. “I miss the man I love. You know—the slightly dangerous one who bribes me to do crazy things and considers it one for the win column when I get arrested. I miss the man who looks at me like he wants to devour me. I miss the man who

makes me laugh and assaults my senses with desire and always pushes me to be a better Kate. Where did he go? Did Justin kill him in that stupid crash, too?"

"Are we going to make the driver stand there awkwardly all night, or should we go eat dinner?" Gavin's eyes were dark, his jaw set stubbornly.

"By all means, let's go eat," Kate hated the fact that she needed his help to get out of the car. She wished she hadn't tucked away the other cane as she was now forced to walk at his side as she clumsily made her way to the door.

Once inside, Kate could almost forget how horribly awry the evening had gone thus far. The dimly lit interior exuded warmth and elegance. The twinkling lights and marble floors added to the romance of the place. Jessica and Liz had chosen well. Once they were seated, she took a deep breath and looked Gavin in the eye.

"Can we start over? The night wasn't supposed to begin like this."

"Oh?" A hint of amusement touched his voice. "And how was it supposed to begin?"

"Well," she fought a blush. "You were supposed to tell me how beautiful I was. And then you were supposed to kiss me—passionately. By the time we arrived here, we were both supposed to be completely wrought with desire and immersed in our love for each other."

"I did muck that up, then, didn't I?" his lip curled into a rueful smile.

"Yeah, you really did," the corner of her mouth tugged into a smile as well.

"Can I make it up to you by saying that you look amazing tonight?"

"I don't believe you now. It doesn't count if I have to ask for it," Kate shook her head firmly.

"Oh come on. Don't be that way."

"That's not me. It's a pretty firm rule. Ask any woman."

"That seems pretty harsh."

"Hey, I don't make the rules," she shrugged daintily, happy at the sparkle that seemed to have come back to his eyes, if even just a bit. He ordered them a bottle of wine and they turned their attention to the menu. Once the food was ordered, he seemed eager to resume the conversation.

"So, had we made it this far successfully, what was the next step for the evening?"

"Ah, are we to that already?" Kate took a deep breath. "I'd almost put it from my mind."

"Is something wrong?" he nearly came out of his chair, itching to be at her side.

“No, no, just a case of nerves,” she sought to calm him. “It’s just that it occurred to me today—with a little help—that I’ve been living as if life shouldn’t move forward. Anyway, I wanted to ask you tonight if, well, what do you think of the third weekend in June for our wedding?”

“You want to set a date?” He seemed to be holding his breath.

“Yes. That would give me six months to plan after the Christmas party, and would give Jessica time to fit into a bridesmaid dress.”

“I think June sounds perfect,” he broke into a grin. “I’d like that very much.”

Gavin’s mood was much lighter after that. Kate’s was, too. There was another moment of tension when Gavin suggested canceling dinner with John and Vicky rather than have Kate out two evenings in a row. He quickly backed off of that one.

When he would have tucked her into bed and gone home, Kate insisted he stay with her. Just as he’d done what seemed so long ago, he stretched out beside Kate on her bed and held her close.

“You really were beautiful tonight,” he whispered against her temple.

“Thank you,” she conceded. “You really are devastatingly handsome.”

“Devastatingly?”

“Don’t question my adjectives.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And no cracks about me being old.”

“Should I just be quiet now?”

“I do have a favor to ask...”

“Anything.”

“Good...”

“Almost anything,” he quickly corrected.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t catch that...”

“The favor?”

“I miss my dog.”

“No.”

“Gavin...”

“Too dangerous.”

“I miss him. You were the one who said dogs were amazing healers of the soul. And I bet he’s worried about me. Please, Gavin?”

“He’s so big and unruly, he could hurt you still.”

“And I could get hit by a bus tomorrow. So what? I want to see my dog.”

“I’ll think about it,” was all he would promise. “I really should go.”

“Since when are you the responsible one?” Kate teased. “Don’t worry, Dad’s sound asleep...”

“I was more worried about your dog than your dad.”

“Right, right...” Kate frowned. “I want to move home.”

“Nice try. You do remember it’s on the fourth floor, right?”

“Then leave Ty here when you bring him tomorrow.”

“I said I’d think about that.”

“Right. So anyway, bring his dishes and leash when you bring him tomorrow. I’ll talk to Tara, but I doubt she’ll mind.”

“We’ll see.”

“And then sometimes, just sometimes, you can stay stretched out with me like this. You won’t always have to get up and leave.” Kate missed him beside her at night more than she could say. The nightmares were always worse without him. No matter how many times Jack rushed to her bedside, it wasn’t the same as having Gavin there. Not to mention she felt horribly guilty about waking Jack and Tara up virtually every night. But Gavin was in her arms now, and that was worth the effort of shoving unpleasant thoughts out of her mind.

“The idea has merit...” his voice trailed off as Kate began to trace his jaw line with feathery kisses and the occasional flick of the tongue.

“Don’t you miss this just a little?” she whispered against the base of his throat, her hands finding their way under his shirt to stroke his bare skin. At his sharp intake of breath, she knew she’d somehow managed to rekindle the fire. He gathered her in his arms with the urgency she’d so desperately missed, kissing her until the world dissolved again and there was nothing left but the two of them and the heat that clung to the air around them.

His lips broke from hers to trace their own path along her throat; his hands hungrily explored her body as if they’d starved for the feel of her skin under his. Satin under burlap.

Kate knew she'd missed his desire. What she hadn't realized was how much she missed her own. Now, the need for him curled its way around each and every fiber of her being. Of its own volition, her body arched into his. Her hands sought to pull him even closer as he ravaged a trail of kisses along her skin. His lips had just reclaimed hers when the moment was shattered by the harsh overhead light.

"Oh, wow... sorry," Jack flipped the light back off and sprinted from the room.

"What is it with us and our fathers walking in at inopportune times?" Kate closed her eyes in frustration. Gavin chuckled ruefully.

"You're going to be the death of me," his voice was ragged.

"Same here," she wanted to pick up right where they left off, but could hear Jack rustling around in the kitchen.

"June?"

"June." It suddenly seemed very far away.

Chapter Twenty-Four

In the light of day, and without the rush of desire fueling her thoughts, Kate knew that June wasn't so very far away at all. Now that she was confident she could walk down the aisle at her wedding, she began adding goals to the initial one. For starters, she would dance. Maybe not the electric slide, but she would dance with Gavin at their wedding. And she would be free of her canes.

For the moment, the thing most pressing on her mind was the fact that Gavin had called to say he was on the way with Ty. She sat in the great bay window that graced the front of the mansion, watching for Gavin to pull up. She still wasn't used to seeing him in the dark gray Audi Q7. It was pretty, and the engine hummed just as happily as the Roadster's had, but he'd gone from their smallest car to their largest. Because—as she'd heard many times in the past weeks—it was safe. As the shiny new SUV was pulling up, Kate could see that Ty had his nose to the window as eagerly as she did.

His entire body quivered with excitement when he saw Kate, but he seemed to know instinctively to be gentle. It took Gavin about half an hour and a hundred reassurances before he relaxed his grip on Ty's leash.

"Are you sure you're up to going out tonight?" he pursed his lips when he noticed the circles under her eyes. "Why don't we see if John and Vicky would be willing to come over for dinner instead?"

"Sure," Kate conceded quickly, mostly because she didn't want to leave Ty so soon. "Are you going to let me help cook?"

"I could. Or I could ask Jack's cook to do it and we could find another way to pass the time," he twirled a strand of her hair around his finger, his eyes seeming to drink in the sight of her.

"I like that option," she flushed under his gaze. "But I'm going to regret letting myself get so lazy after the wedding when I have to go back to taking care of myself."

"Well, we do have a housekeeper," Gavin reminded her. "So you can still be a little lazy."

"Good to know."

Gavin took care of calling their guests while Kate went to see if Tara and Jack would be joining them and to speak to the cook. Gavin's plans for Kate might have been less than saintly, but Ty kept crawling closer and closer to Kate and she didn't have the heart to make him get down, so they wound up lying there talking. To Kate, life didn't get much better than being snuggled in between Gavin and Ty. The poor dog seemed like he couldn't be close enough to her and she felt bad for not pushing the issue sooner. She couldn't remember the last time Gavin wasn't trying to take care of her or see to some need, when he last just spent time with her. She had missed him so much; she wasn't at all ready when the McKinseys pulled up.

After warm greetings all around, they joined Tara and Jack in the dining room where a veritable feast waited for them. Conversation flowed and Kate realized that somehow she and Jack had seemed to have found their balance. In fact, she was actually enjoying his company again. They were even acting... like father and daughter. He didn't even scowl at the mention of Blue Valley when Vicky thanked Kate for the fourth time for treating them to a weekend there.

"It was the least I could do," Kate reassured her again. "The offer is a standing one. I'll even baby-sit for you one of these times."

Gavin merely arched an eyebrow at that one and a grin tugged the corner of his mouth. He was undoubtedly picturing a two and four-year-old in Kate's pristine apartment.

"You know, you really don't have to fuss over us so much," John nearly blushed. "I was just doing my job that night. I mean, well, you don't have to keep trying to repay me. I'm happy I was there to help."

"I know we don't have to," Kate frowned a little. "We want to. We don't mean to embarrass you, though."

"I think she's just trying to get out of babysitting now," Gavin whispered loudly to Vicky.

"I can't say I'd blame her," Vicky shook her head at the thought of her children.

"You are so rude to me," Kate stuck her tongue out at him.

"That's classy," Jack scolded Kate.

"Sorry, it's genetic," Kate shrugged prettily and batted her eyelashes at him.

"You know, John's right, though. You don't owe us anything," Vicky assured them.

"Well, we see it differently. And we like you; we enjoy doing things for you," Gavin said.

"I don't know how you do it, Vicky," Kate pursed her lips in thought. "You've always been so calm about the chance John took in saving me. I don't even want to think about Gavin being in that kind of danger. I'm too selfish."

"The way I see it, being a police officer is as much a part of John as his brown eyes," the look Vicky gave her husband spoke of her unending love for him. "If he's going to be good at what he does, he's going to be in danger sometimes. I can't let the thought of losing him someday waste one minute of the time we have now. So we just grab hold of this life we've been given with both hands and if tragedy strikes, we'll take it one day at a time."

"Live it for all it's worth, eh?" John flashed his dimples at his wife and gave her a wink. Kate found Gavin's gaze. He seemed to be thinking the same as she—they both could learn something from John and Vicky.

The evening ended early since Vicky still had to drive the babysitter home. Not that Kate minded; she was more tired than she was willing to admit to Gavin. Jack and Tara headed out for the evening. Kate wondered if they were really restless or just trying to give her and Gavin some privacy. Either way, she was glad to have the house to themselves.

Kate changed into pajamas, glad that the days of needing help for basic hygiene were behind her. Gavin took Ty for a walk. She missed her walks with Ty, but realized it wouldn't be long

now. She knew they were back before she saw them; Ty's nails were loud on the marble floor of the foyer. Kate smiled to herself and finished brushing out her hair before joining them in the front room.

She stopped short at the door, blinking back the tears that had sprung to her eyes. One of her favorite CDs played softly in the background. The room was lit by candles and a fire that crackled merrily. Gavin stood in front of the fireplace, a bouquet of gerbera daisies and roses in his hand.

"What's all this?" Kate moved slowly towards him.

"I guess what John and Vicky said just got me to thinking," Gavin handed her the bouquet of flowers. "All those days, watching you so lifeless in that hospital bed, something in me just kind of snapped."

Kate buried her nose in the flowers, inhaling their sweet perfume and looking up at Gavin with expectant eyes.

"When you woke up, I was so grateful. I felt like... I don't know... like I had to be sure to protect you, to not squander the gift I'd been given."

Kate gently set the flowers on the mantle so she could take Gavin's hands in hers.

"But I think I wound up, well, squandering the gift I'd been given."

"It's easy to go on autopilot in a crisis situation," Kate spoke from experience. "Lucky for me, I had this incredibly sexy photographer to bring me back from the brink."

"Do you think the incredibly sexy event planner in my life could do the same for me?" He pulled her to him.

"I don't know who she is and if I see her I can't be responsible for my actions..." Kate teased. Gavin growled low in his throat, his mouth silencing her. He kissed her in a way that made the rest of the world melt away again, and Kate wanted to weep with relief. By the time he tore his lips away from hers, her entire body was trembling from the currents that ran through it.

"You crazy girl, when will you ever realize how much I love you?"

"Lucky for both of us, we have forever for you to convince me," she kissed his chin lightly. "And I will always be here to pull you back from the brink."

Epilogue

Kate resisted the urge to bang her head against the wall as Jessica, Liz and Tara fussed over her. Hadn't she tried to avoid the big to-do? Her nerves couldn't take much more of this.

"Is there anything on the radio besides Hootie and the Blowfish?" she blew a stray strand of hair out of her eyes and glared at the radio.

"Just commercials," Jessica shrugged apologetically. "I have to feed Elizabeth. I'll put a CD in on my way by."

"Thank you," Kate wanted to hug her but knew she'd get yelled at if she moved. She breathed a little easier when the Pogues filtered through the speakers overhead.

"I can't wait until you see Gavin," Liz smiled knowingly. "He looks completely dashing. Of course, Gaston's been fussing over him all day. He seems very determined that you have the perfect groom."

"That's what's getting me through this torture session," Kate made a face at Liz, which instantly earned a rebuff from Tara, who was trying to powder her nose.

"Look who I found outside," Jessica returned with Elizabeth in her arms and Ellen, Sarah, Nicole and Jill in tow.

"We won't stay long," Sarah promised.

"We just wanted to wish you luck," Nicole added.

"And tell you that you look stunning," Jill beamed at her.

"Thank you," Kate smiled at the women, almost wishing that she and Gavin had more time to stay in London than the month they would be spending there in the fall for Gavin's photography exhibition.

"I am so happy for you two," Ellen squeezed Kate's shoulders.

"I'm so happy you could be here," Kate gave her an impulsive hug and Liz sighed heavily in disgust.

"You know the wedding is starting soon," Liz reminded her. "Could you please hold still so I can finish your hair?"

"I'm the bride; they won't start without me," Kate reminded her playfully.

"There's always a first time," Liz teased back.

"We'll go now," Ellen patted her hand. "And you do look beautiful."

Kate thanked them again and did her best to hold still. They had done a good job, and the ivory and silver dress was stunning. The halter-style top fit her curves perfectly and the skirt formed a graceful bell. The beadwork was simple, the low back adorned with a line of tiny buttons. As Tara pinned the veil in place, Kate felt the last pieces of her fairy tale falling into place.

Tara, Jessica and Liz each took one last look in the mirror, making last minute adjustments to their raspberry chiffon dresses. The empire waist and tea length A-line skirts were chosen in case little Elizabeth had arrived too late for Jessica to wear a closer-fitting dress. Of course, they hadn't been necessary but Kate liked the light, airy look they lent the day. Jessica disappeared to take Elizabeth to Ryan while Tara and Liz ushered Kate to meet Jack at the door.

"You're a beautiful bride," he took her arm in his. "I'm only sorry your mother isn't here—I guess it's a little unfair, isn't it? That I am."

"There's no time for that today, Dad. I'm just happy to have you walk me down the aisle," Kate rested her head on his shoulder for a moment.

"Katie," he tipped her chin up with his finger. "I'm glad Danielle didn't listen to me."

"Thanks," Kate smiled a little ruefully at him. And then the music was playing and her friends were walking down the aisle between the rows of white chairs that lined the immense lawn.

Kate's breath caught when she first saw Gavin. Dashing was exactly the word she would use to describe him in his gray cutaway tuxedo. But it was the look in his eyes that took her breath away.

She knew in that moment and without a doubt that she was his entire world just as he had become hers. The crowd seemed to be waiting for her to move. She'd been so captured by him she'd forgotten it was her turn to walk. His mouth twitched into a grin. She smiled back and took the first step into a future of love and laughter.

###

About the author:

Heather Huffman lives in Missouri with her husband and their three sons. In addition to writing, she enjoys spending time with the family horse and their pack of rescued dogs. A firm believer that life is more than the act of taking up air, Heather is always on the lookout for an adventure that will become fodder for the next novel.

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Acknowledgements

Michael Plaut, thank you for the wonderful descriptions you provided to help bring Kate's world to life!

Emily Cain and Elaine O'Brien, thank you once again for your amazing proofreading services, your support, and your encouragement. You're both wonderful!

Steve Stark—you've made my life brighter. Thank you for that.

Bob Kilzer—thank you for getting it. Your support and encouragement mean the world to me.

Emily Stoltz, thank you for being my photographer yet again. You are talented and so kind!

Erica Fitzgerald, thank you for being my cover model. Your patience with walking barefoot on the pavement in the blazing heat says a lot about your angelic nature.

And to all the other people who've encouraged me, been a test reader, or helped me market this novel, thank you!