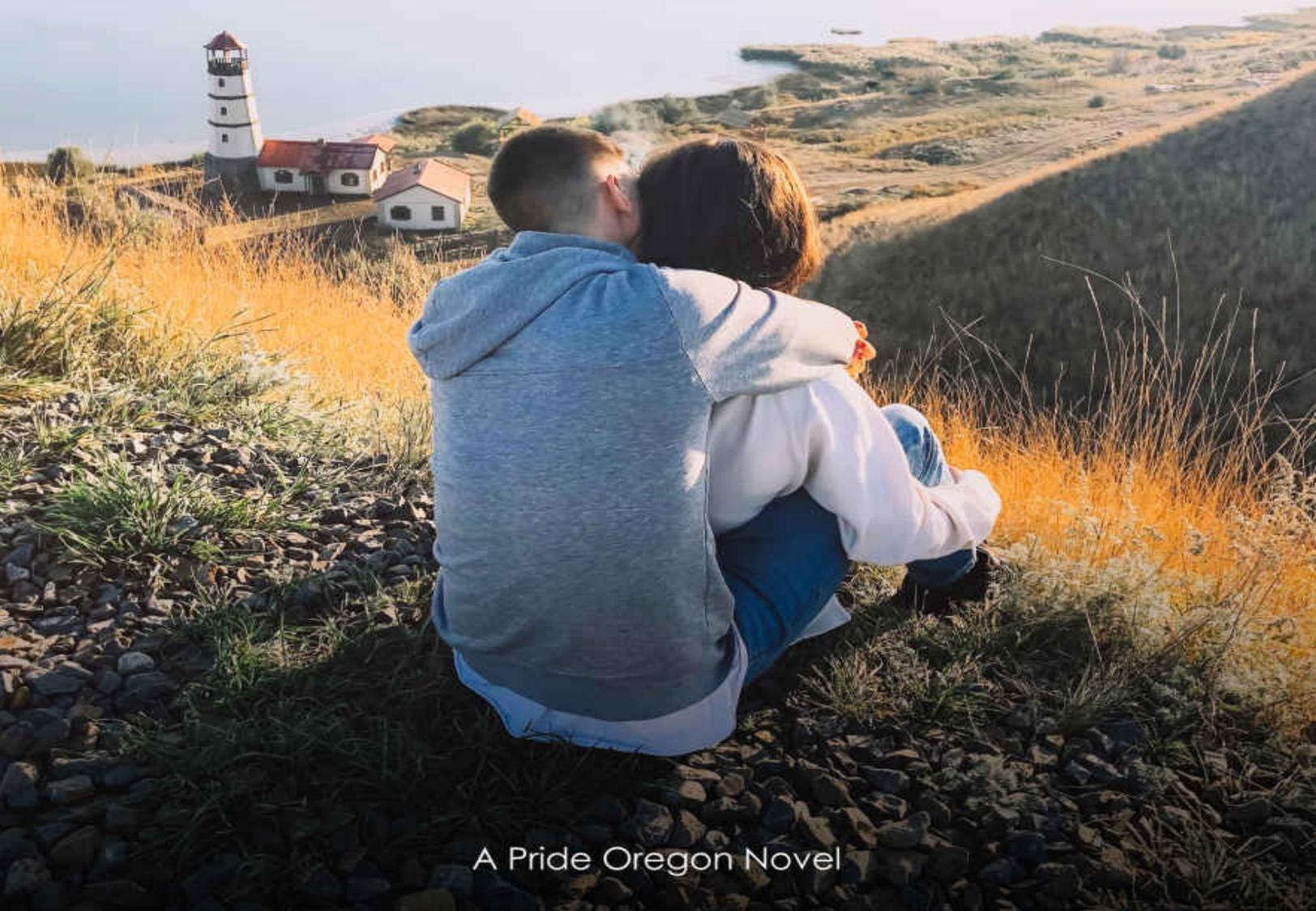


NY TIMES & USA TODAY bestselling author

JILL SANDERS

Written with Love



A Pride Oregon Novel

Written with Love

Pride, Oregon
Book 18

Jill Sanders



GRAYTON

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Summary

Sometimes, the greatest love story begins with a leap of faith... and a lighthouse.

Juliette has always known Pride, Oregon, was her home—her roots run as deep as the tides that crash against its shores. But when a mysterious, irresistible stranger rolls into town, everything she thought she knew about love, life, and destiny is thrown into question.

Max Wilson, a famous screenwriter known for his blockbuster hits, never imagined his heart would be stolen by a place—or a woman. From the moment he set eyes on the crumbling lighthouse, he was hooked. His first love? That dilapidated structure perched on the cliffs. But then came Juliette. And before he could even process it, he blurted out the unthinkable: a marriage proposal.

The bold move of buying the lighthouse was only the beginning—Max was sure of one thing: Juliette was the best decision he'd ever made. But will she embrace his sudden love and the wild gamble he's taken and trust that he really has found his place in the world?

In a place where the ocean hides its deepest secrets, love might just be the most unpredictable one of all.

Prologue

“Hurry up, JuJu!” Nate cried out, waiting on the edge of the cliff for her.

As far as older brothers went, Nate Elliot was the best. Then again, since she only had the one sibling, she supposed it wasn't a fair assessment.

Climbing the last stairs from the beach, she finally reached him, feeling a little breathless. As she glanced out over the horizon, she felt her entire essence breathe and settle. This was it. This was the view she dreamed of every night.

“Do you think it's really haunted?” Nate nudged her shoulder, getting her attention.

Her eyes turned from the vastness of the Pacific Ocean crashing on the dark rocks and beach below them to the white spire that was perched on the edge of the rocky cliffs. The largest building on the lighthouse property was an old barn off to the side of the spire. There was also a large two-story house attached to the spire, which had obviously been built much later. A garage and a few other small out-buildings were scattered around the property. There were many buildings near the lighthouse, as well, including a massive house called Ocean View that sat adjacent to the lighthouse property.

The Ocean View mansion was currently empty, just like the lighthouse property was.

“No, I don't believe in ghosts.” She jutted her chin up slightly as she hid the shiver that raced over her skin.

More than a dozen ghost stories about the lighthouse circulated throughout the town. Old and young alike spread them.

There was no way she was going to let her brother see her fears about things that went bump in the night.

“Then,” Nate continued, “do you think there are really diamonds hidden in there somewhere?”

She paused. There were rumors about an heiress who had lived there long ago and had lost a bunch of diamonds. The stories dated back so far, they had to be true.

“Yeah.” She nodded, her eyes going soft. “Yeah, they're in there somewhere.” She could feel it deep down in her bones.

“Come on then.” Nate took her hand, and they rushed across the field towards the lighthouse together.

“Where do we start looking?” she asked once they reached the massive front doors. “We're not going inside, right?”

“Right.” Nate nodded. “Besides, its locked.” He motioned to the thick chains and large padlocks holding the two iron doors shut. “We'll start here,” he said, shifting some of the bricks that had crumbled from the foundation.

She bent down and started looking through the rubble.

An hour later, they were both covered in dust and dirt, and she was sure Nate's stomach was grumbling louder than the waves crashing far below them. Besides, their folks would be wondering where they'd gone off to. They were supposed to be exploring the beach below, not the abandoned property.

“We should have brought sandwiches,” Nate complained.

“You're always thinking of food,” she shot back.

“Hey,” Nate said suddenly, “what's this?” He was sitting in the middle of a former rose garden. It was early spring, so the bushes hadn't turned green yet. When she looked, he was holding up something shiny.

“Is it a diamond?” she asked, growing excited. She rushed to his side.

“No.” He frowned. “It's just a stupid necklace.” He handed it over to her.

The metal was old and tarnished and had a layer of dirt caked between each link.

She sat next to Nate and wiped as much dirt away as she could with her shirt.

“It looks like gold,” she said under her breath.

“Who cares. If it's not diamonds, you can have it,” Nate said. “I'm going to go look over there.” He got up and moved towards a small shed.

Juliette continued to clean the necklace. She realized it wasn't just a necklace, it was a locket.

On the top was an etching of a single rose with its petals still closed. It took some doing, but she finally got her fingernail under the clasp and opened the lid.

Inside, on the opposite side of the cover, was another rose, this one with its petals fully opened.

Where someone would have put an image of a loved one sat a small fold of paper. She pulled it out, unfolded it, and read the tiny print.

“Where the tides carry our laughter and the wind holds our secrets, love will always remain—tucked away where the earth meets the sea. Love H.”

Juliette’s twelve-year-old heart fluttered at the thought of a boy writing something so sweet to her.

Someday she’d find someone who was this loyal, this in love with her that he’d make her such a promise. Someday, she thought. She sat among the dead roses and watched the sun set over the ocean.

Chapter One

“Hurry up, Juliette,” Sophia said as she put her hands on her hips. Sophia had been her very best friend since high school, “I’m hurrying.” She gave her bag one more yank to free it from the back seat of the car. The bag sprang loose and almost sent her falling backwards. This seemed to give Sophia a great deal of joy, and she burst out laughing.

“Thanks for helping me,” Juliette said dryly as she threw the bag over her shoulder and fell into step with her friend.

One of the main reasons she and Sophia had hit it off was their love of art and film. Sophia had shocked everyone in their class that first week when she’d arrived as a new student with her bright blue hair and matching Doctor Marten’s. Well, just the tips of her hair had been colored. Sophia frequently changed the color of the ends of her longer hair and the matching streaks she added. Today’s color was bright red.

“Can you believe it?” Sophia locked arms with her. “I’m going to be an aunt.”

In the past few months, her friend had returned from New York, where she’d been attending film school, to be there after her mother’s sudden death.

Juliette had seen the pain in her friend’s heart those first few weeks. But then something had changed. The old spark between Sophia and Palmer Clark had reignited. Sure, they were still tiptoeing around one another at this point, but she could tell it was only a matter of time before true happiness found them. It was obvious to everyone who saw the couple flirting all over town.

Today, they were in Edgeview shopping for party supplies for the baby shower Sophia was throwing that weekend for Avery, her sister-in-law.

They had hit almost every arts and crafts stores in town and had enjoyed a nice lunch together. It had been a few years since she’d enjoyed such a wonderful day out with a girlfriend. Thinking about it, she realized that it had been before Sophia had moved away.

It wasn’t that she didn’t have other friends. She did. Well, a few. But she wasn’t as close to them as she and Sophia had always been.

She had her work to keep her busy though. Taking the job at Sophia’s brother Lucas’s restaurant, Pride Pueblo Cocina, had been the best decision she could have made.

She had been working directly under Emily, Sophia and Lucas’s mother, before her death. Now that Sophia was back in town, she was working under her friend.

The job wasn’t hard, and it allowed her to focus on the online classes she’d been taking since graduating from high school. She’d gotten her associate’s degree in art and had taken a handful of business and marketing classes along with a few film and digital editing ones since. She wasn’t one-hundred percent sure what she wanted to do but figured with a broad stroke, she’d hit on something she loved.

So far, she’d found out that she enjoyed digital editing and photography. She was good at it. Strangely good. She always had been. Finding that best angle was as easy to her as reading children’s stories.

In high school, she’d hidden the talent and only allowed a few to know of her abilities. Sophia was one of those few, which is why she had invited her to work on her own film projects. And she had made her a manager of the restaurant after she’d worked there for two years.

While they shopped for the last final touches for the party, Sophia brought up that her friend, the famous screenwriter Maxwell Wilson, had moved into the house attached to the Pride lighthouse a while back. The place she dreamed about even to this day, even though she’d never stepped foot in there before.

She was intrigued. Everyone knew who Max Wilson was. You couldn’t call yourself a movie lover if you didn’t know him. The man had written some of the best screenplays and books in the past decade. Many of them were her favorites.

“Do you think he’s going to stick around town or is this just a fix-it-up-and-make-a-profit or rent-it-out type of deal?” she asked. “You know, kind of like how Brook and Ryder rent out parts of Ocean View when they’re going to be traveling.”

Brook was a local who had met James Ryder back before Sophia had moved into town. The couple had snatched up Ocean View, the massive mansion that was the closest home to the lighthouse. It had taken them years to remodel the old place and

now it was often used as a seasonal rental property since the couple had another home in the Seattle area and one in Europe. Not that they ever stayed in one place very long. The couple always seemed to be traveling to exotic places. She'd never been outside of Oregon, but she tried not to be too jealous. Well, she'd been to Seattle a few times when she was really young, but she couldn't remember it so it didn't count.

Sophia shrugged. "Max says he wants to stick around. I think he means it. Besides, his mother and sisters live close by."

"Yeah, but he's... Max Wilson." She waved her hands as if that explained everything.

Sophia chuckled. "Yeah, but he doesn't let that get to his head. Trust me. He's pretty down to earth."

"If my memory serves me right, he's not bad looking." Juliette wiggled her eyebrows and had Sophia chuckling.

"Yeah, he's pretty great." Her friend's eyes grew distant, and she could tell she was thinking about someone else.

"You have it really bad for him don't you?" she teased

"Who?" Sophia asked. "Max?" She shook her head.

"Palmer Clark." Juliette laughed. Her friend managed to look embarrassed for a second.

"Yeah, he's...something." She smiled.

"I've never really witnessed a love triangle before," she teased.

"There is no love triangle." Sophia rolled her eyes. "Trust me. I've told Max that I'm not... that we're... just friends."

"You and Palmer or you and Max?"

"Me and Max," Sophia answered quickly. "After Palmer kissed me..." She shook her head. "There is no one else."

"Oh, Sophia and Palmer sitting in a tree..." she started to sing, but she stopped when the clerk in the store shushed her.

They both giggled.

After they were done shopping, Sophia dropped Juliette off at home, where she showered, changed, and then headed into work.

She walked through the back door of the restaurant an hour later to find her boss, Lucas, joking around with the kitchen staff while they bustled around the kitchen.

Lucas Jenkins was one of those bosses you just loved to work with. The man was always laughing and having a good time and yet was very responsible. The kind of guy that was easy to respect, and you didn't have to work hard to find things to like about him.

He and Sophia and a few other employees were why she had been happily working at her job for years. Besides, she almost had enough money saved up to move out of her parents' place and purchase her very own home. Almost.

"Good evening," she called out as she rushed to drop her purse and coat in her locker by the back door.

"Hola!" several of her coworkers shouted out in unison. Her smile grew.

Two hours later, her feet ached, her neck had a kink in it, and she had almost a hundred dollars in tips in her pocket, which added a happy bounce to her step as she glided around the room delivering orders.

She had just refreshed the drinks at table twelve when she turned and bumped solidly into someone.

"Sorry," she said automatically. But the word died in her throat when she looked up into the most mesmerizing silver eyes she'd ever seen in her life.

The man was a few inches taller than her. His dark sandy hair was cut short, almost buzzed in places. He had the two day's growth of stubble that was so popular among guys these days, and it made him oh so sexy. Her eyes went straight to his lips and chiseled jawline.

Words dried up in her throat. Her mind literally stopped working while her heart raced in her chest. Could he hear it? Could he see her pupils dilate with want?

"I, uh," he started and then blinked as if just remembering something. "I'm looking for Sophia." He broke eye contact to glance around the dining room.

"She's not working tonight," Juliette said in a small voice.

Of course this sex god standing in front of her was looking for Sophia. Sophia was, well, perfect inside and out. She was sure of herself in everything she did. She dressed in splashy fashion and bright colors, and always looked fucking amazing.

Right now, Juliette was positive there were at least three food stains on her shirt and dark pants. Her mousy brown hair was probably frizzy and knotted, and she doubted any of the makeup she'd applied before coming to work was still there.

The man's eyes returned to hers, and suddenly her mind cleared from the fog of attraction.

"You're Sophia's Max?" she blurted out before thinking her words through. Her face instantly heated. "I mean, Max." She shook her head when the man chuckled.

"I am. You must be Juliette," he said with a sexy grin that had her heart skipping.

"I am. Now that you've come in, you might as well grab a seat. I promised Sophia that if you stepped foot in Pride Pueblo Cocina for the first time when she wasn't here, I'd treat you to her brother's famous tamales and a margarita." She motioned to an empty table.

"I'd..." He glanced around and then she heard his stomach loudly complain. She smiled.

"You'd better sit." She nudged his shoulder towards the table. "I'll grab your drink and put your order in."

“Yes, ma’am.” He willingly moved towards the table.

Smiling, she walked over to the bar and made his drink herself after punching in the order for the tamales.

When she set his drink down, along with a fresh bowl of hot corn chips and salsa, he glanced up from his phone.

“Thanks.” He smiled up at her. “Got a minute?” He motioned to the chair opposite his.

She nodded and motioned to Claire that she was going to take her break before sitting down.

After taking a sip of the drink, he dipped a chip in the salsa and took a bite.

“Sophia wasn’t joking. This is really good salsa.” He smiled and leaned back as his eyes locked with hers.

“Sophia doesn’t joke when it comes to good food.” She smiled.

“Or friends, I’m hoping.”

She arched her eyebrows. “Meaning?”

“From the moment I met her, Sophia has gone on and on about her bestie who helped her develop her stories, plot film scenes, design backdrops and costumes, and, most importantly, edit footage. I’m hoping all those stories are true.”

“They are.” She leaned forward. “Having writer’s block?” she teased, and he chuckled.

“Some,” he admitted. “Most importantly, there’s a mystery I’m trying to solve.”

“A mystery?” She began to laugh. “You’re not seriously trying to find the diamonds are you?”

He frowned at her. “What diamonds?”

She sobered as he ate some more chips. “What’s the mystery?” she asked after shaking her head slightly.

He took another sip of his drink and then leaned closer and lowered his voice. “How serious is it between Sophia and Palmer?”

She sighed. “Everyone in town knows that Palmer has had it bad for Soph since he first laid eyes on her. Sophia, well, it took her a while, but I’m pretty sure she is mad for him too. Sorry,” she added. “Did she break your heart?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s okay. Really. I’m... it’s more a brotherly concern at this point. He’s a good guy? Palmer?”

She nodded. “One of the best. I had hoped...”—she shook her head lightly again—“his eyes would land on someone else.”

“Like you?” he interjected.

“Small towns.” She shrugged. “Most of the kids we went to school with left after graduation. We do have an influx of new stock”—he chuckled at her use of words—“thanks to the Coast Guard school. But, yeah, Palmer Clark has been at the top of the bachelor stock in Pride for a few years now.” He nodded and took another sip of his drink. “That is, until you moved into town.” She placed her chin on her fists and chuckled when he almost choked on his drink.

While he recovered, she stood up and grinned down at him.

“How does it feel being the most eligible bachelor in town?” she asked softly.

He shook his head and glanced around. “I didn’t move to town for attention.”

“Really?” She frowned at him. “You do realize you quite literally moved into a light house. You know, a tall building that shines a very bright light out over this town every night.”

He smiled. “She’s a beauty.”

“I wouldn’t know.” She started to turn around to go grab his food.

“You’re welcome to come look at her, if you want,” he called out.

She stopped and glanced back at him. “I’ll take you up on that. Soon.”

Chapter Two

Damn. Max was in trouble. Why in the hell hadn't Sophia told him that her bestie was smoking hot? Like, really, really hot. The smoldering look she'd given him as she'd left his table had taken hours and a very long walk in the chilly night air to finally leave his system.

Somehow, her hazel eyes had bored into his soul and had left a mark. When he fell asleep that night, her voice haunted his dreams.

Over the course of the next few weeks, he continued to clear all of the old furniture from his new property. The back-breaking work cleared his mind and was oddly satisfying. He worked with Palmer daily on the plans for the remodel and got to know the man more and more.

Juliette was right. Palmer and his brother Parker were from good stock. The brothers were closer than Max was with his sisters, Ally and Faye.

In the following weeks, it was obvious that the brothers were also hardworking.

Every day that he worked to get his new property ready for its makeover, he hoped it would be the day that Juliette would take him up on his offer.

The Monday after Palmer had been attacked on his land by his and Parker's parents, he stood back and watched the brother's destroy his old well house and dig a new well closer to the barn. When the brothers' crew left at the end of the day, his property was worse off than it had been before. Still, he had a new well that was already hooked up to the plumbing in both the house and the barn. All the new pipes would be buried tomorrow after they were tested and proven watertight.

"You've got to break some eggs to make an omelet," Parker told him, slapping his shoulder. "We'll see you in the morning."

It was an improvement. When he showered next, the water sprayed from the shower head with a force that he hadn't felt since moving onto the property.

He rode that excitement from the shower into the kitchen to make some coffee. When he turned the faucet on, the water sprayed in his face, soaking his shirt and the countertop.

He tried to stop the water flow, but the faucet handle came off in his hand, and more water sprayed in his face. Quickly, he opened the cabinet under the sink and turned the knob on the plumbing. With a groan of the pipes, all of the water stopped. The pipes shook slightly, but at least the water spray was over.

Lying on the floor with his head half under his kitchen sink, he heard someone knocking on his front door.

When he moved to stand up, he hit his head on the cabinet and fell back down.

"Hello?" someone called out as they stepped through the front door.

"Back here." He groaned through the pain.

"Oh no!" Juliette rushed to kneel beside him. "Are you okay?" She took the towel from his countertop and pressed it to his forehead. "You're bleeding."

His eyes locked with hers and, for some reason, maybe the pain in his head, he blurted out the first thing he felt. "Marry me."

Juliette's laughter shook him from his stupor.

"I think you're concussed." She helped him sit up.

"My plumbing burst," he said, still in a stupor. She helped him stand up and move over to his makeshift kitchen table. "Old pipes."

"Hold this, Romeo." She took his hands and wrapped them in a towel. He sat there while she rummaged through his cupboards for something.

"Don't you have anything? A first aid kit? A Band-Aid?" she mumbled to herself while she looked.

"Second door." He pointed. "Bathroom. Under the sink." He groaned and rested his head back, letting the towel slip.

When something cool landed on his face, he opened his eyes. Juliette was leaning over him, her eyes locked on a spot on his forehead. She looked even more beautiful than the first time he'd seen her in the restaurant.

"Marry me," he said, a little clearer this time.

Instead of laughing, she narrowed her hazel eyes and looked into his.

“I almost believe you were serious that time.” She touched his forehead with something that stung and he hissed.

“I am.”

“Well, I might just take you up on that offer, if I wasn’t pretty sure that you had a slight concussion. I think I need to drive you to see Dr. Stevens.”

“No.” He shook his head to clear it and managed to only groan slightly at the pain. “I just bumped my head. How bad could it be?”

She pulled the towel away and the amount of blood on it made him wince. He sobered.

“Yeah, probably best to have that checked out,” he admitted.

An hour later, Juliette helped Max back through his front door, her arm firmly around his waist. He leaned into her slightly, still feeling a little off-kilter, though he’d never admit it.

“Well, at least it’s not a concussion.” He sighed dramatically, pressing the ice pack to his forehead like he was nursing a mortal wound.

“Yeah, I’m just thankful I decided to stop by after work,” Juliette said, shaking her head. “I’d hate to imagine how long you would have waited to get that looked at.”

“I was fine,” he muttered, though even he wasn’t convinced.

Juliette shot him a knowing look and squeezed his arm. “You were sprawled on the floor when I found you.”

He opened his mouth to argue but closed it again when he realized he didn’t actually know how long he’d been there before she showed up. Or was it her arrival that had thrown him off guard and made him injure himself in the first place? Those lines were blurred now with pain.

He sighed and pulled the ice pack away to poke at the bandage on his forehead. “I’ve never had a stitch before.”

She chuckled. “You still don’t. Dr. Stevens glued your skin together. Remember?”

“Right.” He frowned, rubbing a hand over his face. “Feels like I should’ve gotten something more impressive for all that suffering.”

Juliette smirked. “You want a trophy? Maybe a sticker?”

“A sticker would be nice,” he muttered as he shuffled towards the couch, sinking into it with a groan. She followed, hovering a little, as if afraid he’d tip over again.

“Oh man,” he sighed, glancing around the room. “I promised you a tour.”

“It’s okay,” she said gently, sitting beside him. “I can take a rain check.” Her fingers brushed his forehead. “How about I scrounge us up some food? You’ll need it for the pills Dr. Stevens gave you.” She shook the bottle lightly for emphasis.

“Right.” He nodded, pleased that his head didn’t spin. “I have some frozen dinners…” He pushed off the couch and made his way towards the kitchen, but he skid slightly on the floor.

Juliette was there in an instant, gripping his arms. “Whoa. Easy, big guy.”

He blinked down at the floor. Right. The water. He’d meant to clean that up.

Juliette sighed and steadied him. “Sit. I’ll clean this mess up and make something.” She guided him to a chair at the kitchen table before planting her hands on her hips. “Stay.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he murmured, resting his cheek against the cool table with a sigh.

He must have dozed off, because the next thing he knew, a plate was set down in front of him, and the smell of something warm and rich pulled him from his haze.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, rubbing at his mouth quickly to make sure there wasn’t any drool.

Juliette smiled. “It’s okay. Dr. Stevens said you’d be drowsy.” She slid into the chair across from him and placed another plate in front of herself. “I found some chickpea pasta and whipped up some spaghetti. No garlic bread, though—you were out of bread.”

“I’m trying to cut out carbs,” he said, rubbing his face.

She gave him a flat look. “That’s why these noodles took a while to cook?”

He twirled some around his fork and took a bite—then stilled.

“What’d you do to this?” he asked, frowning at the plate.

Juliette hesitated. “Is it bad?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head as he shoveled another forkful into his mouth. “It’s amazing.” He took another bite, then another. “The best spaghetti I’ve had in years.”

Juliette laughed softly, watching him in amusement. “It’s just spaghetti, Max.”

“No it’s not.” He groaned in appreciation, shoveling more food in. His head felt clearer with every bite. By the time he finished his second plate, the dull ache in his skull had faded, and the room didn’t feel like it was tilting anymore.

Juliette propped her chin in her hand, watching him. “Feel better?”

He sat back with a satisfied sigh. “A little.” He rolled his shoulders. “Pretty sure your spaghetti has healing properties.”

She smirked. “Good. Because I’m not carrying you back to the doctor’s office if you pass out again.”

“I didn’t pass out,” he pointed out, and then he asked. “Would you at least call me an ambulance?”

Juliette pretended to think. “Depends. If I can show myself around your place and have a look?”

And just like that, the ache in his head was almost worth it.

“I think I feel good enough for a short tour.” Max stretched with caution and ignored the slight ache in his skull. Standing, he held out his hand to Juliette, palm up. “You up for it?”

She smiled as she took his hand. “Are you sure you’re feeling up to it, tough guy?”

“Positive,” he murmured, curling his fingers around hers as he led her forward.

The air shifted as they moved through the house, the salty tang of the ocean drifting in through unseen cracks. The distant crash of waves against the cliffs hummed beneath their footsteps.

“Did you know that one of the first lighthouse owners was a young couple who met right on this spot?” Max began, glancing down at her as they stepped into the base of the lighthouse. “Rummaging through all the stuff that was left behind, I found a lot of documents. After they married, they were put in charge of the lighthouse. Not the original lighthouse. That one sat closer to Ocean View mansion.”

Juliette’s eyes widened with curiosity. “Really? I knew there was an old lighthouse on their property that was much smaller. I always thought that it was just for show. Like a garden feature.”

He chuckled. “No, that was the original lighthouse. Almost immediately, however, they found out that the lighthouse was far too small to fit the needs of this part of the coast. There was a massive storm in the eighteen-fifties that hit this area, and the light wasn’t strong enough to help a ship named *The Lincoln*, which sank off the coast.” His voice dipped slightly, carrying the weight of history.

“I didn’t know about the shipwreck,” she admitted, running her fingers along the cool brick wall as if she could feel the past in its rough texture.

Max continued, leading her towards the doorway that would take them to the lighthouse and all those stairs that would guide them upward. “After the storm, the town rallied and had this one built up here, higher on the cliff, hoping to keep it safe. It’s almost a hundred feet high and stands at ninety-three feet tall.”

When he pushed open the door, she stepped in and whispered, “Wow,” as she looked up into the darkness of the spire.

He flipped a switch and the flood lights on the stairs turned on. He thought she said *wow* again, but in here the sound of the waves below was even louder than in the house section.

Juliette tilted her head as they started their climb. “What happened to the couple?”

Max glanced over, catching the flicker of curiosity in her gaze. “They moved in to the property shortly after they married. They weren’t the first to live on the grounds, but they were the first to live in the home portion after it was built. Then, shortly after they moved in, the husband was shipped off to war... and never came back.” His grip on the railing tightened slightly as they reached the first landing.

She paused, turning to face him. “Wait... is this the woman with the diamonds?”

He chuckled. “Diamond. Singular. The rumors claim there was a treasure chest of diamonds. The facts that I have found state that there was only one. Apparently, one of the rarest in the world.” He continued upward, the metal stairs creaking faintly beneath their steps. “After her husband was lost at sea on his way home from the war, she waited for a miracle. She kept the lighthouse running for nearly a full year after his ship went down off the coast of Africa somewhere, still hoping.”

Juliette swallowed. “That’s heartbreaking.”

Max nodded. “The story goes that exactly one year to the day after his ship sank, she fell ill and passed away. The lighthouse was automated not long after, and no one else has lived on the property full time since.”

As they climbed higher, the wind outside whistled softly through the cracks in the structure, adding an eerie weight to his words. “How do you know all this?” she asked.

“I’ve found some interesting papers while cleaning the property up. Her name was Karnia Bergman,” he continued, casting a glance at Juliette. “She was Swedish royalty—third in line for the throne. Apparently, she came here on vacation with her family and met Harry Rothschild, a local seaman, and fell instantly in love. They married soon after, and, because she broke with her family’s wishes, she was left penniless.”

Juliette’s grip on the railing tightened. “That’s awful.”

He nodded. “The only possession she was allowed to take with her was a gift given to her on her sixteenth birthday—an engagement present from an arranged marriage to an English earl.” Max paused as they stepped onto the final landing. “The diamond was called the Ocean’s Heart.”

Juliette gasped softly. He didn’t know if it was from the details about the diamond or the view that they had just stepped into. The great glass light rotated behind them, casting slow-moving beams across the dark horizon. Every now and then it illuminated their silhouettes with its rhythmic flashes.

“This is...” She trailed off and stepped forward, placing her fingertips against the cool windowpane. Below them, the town of Pride glittered in the darkness, the lights reflecting off the ocean like scattered stars. “...amazing,” she finished.

Max didn’t answer. He was too busy watching her—the way the light kissed her skin, the wonder in her eyes, the way her

breath fogged up the glass ever so slightly.

And for a moment, just a moment, he thought maybe he understood why Karnia had stayed and hoped for what had never returned.

Chapter Three

Juliette had never seen Pride the way she was looking at it now. About the only thing that could make the evening more magical was if Max kissed her.

Seeing the bandage on his forehead again had her realizing that probably wasn't going to happen.

"I don't think I've ever been up this high." She turned towards him.

He was standing close to her, watching her instead of looking at the view outside the window.

"If it was a warmer night, we could go outside. But I think it's a little too windy right now," he said.

She could hear the wind outside the glass and the waves crashing far below them. She even smelled the salt water in the cool breeze.

"I'm fine just looking out the windows for now." She turned after the light passed them. "So this is all automated?" She turned back around before the light hit them again.

"Yup." He nodded as he glanced out over the Pacific. "Can you imagine having to turn this bad boy on or light it each night with a flame like they had to do in the past?"

"I bet a lot has changed since they stood here." She sighed.

"The town is probably a lot bigger now." He motioned to the lights in the distance.

She chuckled. "How did they manage without internet?" She shook her head.

"No television," he pointed out.

"Right." She snapped her fingers. "You'd be out of a job." She turned and tilted her head as she looked at him.

"I'd have to revert to my first job," he joked.

"Which was?" she asked, curious.

"Busing tables. Half of my paycheck used to go to paying back for all the broken dishes." He leaned a little bit closer to her. "I'm a bit of a klutz."

"Noooo." She dragged the word out. "I wouldn't have thought." She smiled and touched his forehead. "What about your writing?" He shrugged and didn't respond. "How are you doing?" she asked, concerned.

"The stairs caused my heart to pound, which of course is sending blood pumping to my head. It feels sort of like I have a huge melon up here." He smiled at her and suddenly she knew exactly what he meant. Her own heart was racing, making her head spin, but it wasn't from the climb. It was from how close Max was and the way his eyes slowly locked with hers.

He turned back around after a slight silence and said. "How about we head down? I'm feeling a little dizzy."

"Oh, sure." She took his arm as they started down the spiral staircase, guiding him and taking in the details of the place as they went. "You know, I bet it would be a pretty popular project if you filmed the remodel of this place. You know, make it into a thing," she suggested.

"I had planned on it," he admitted. "Then, well, things just got so... big." He shrugged.

"I could help you, maybe, on my time off?" she offered.

He glanced at her. "You'd do that?"

She chuckled. "Yeah, if it meant I'd get a front-row seat to watching the work around here and seeing what you have planned."

"Deal," he said eagerly, leaning on her a little more. She could tell he was really tired now. His eyes were droopy, and he looked a little paler than before.

She'd enjoyed working in the older kitchen earlier and could already see some of his vision for the place. Most of the cupboards were bare and several had already been removed from the walls. The appliances were older and she assumed they'd be replaced. He had the kitchen table and two chairs pushed up against the wall, and the large dining room sat empty.

The living room only had a sofa, which sat in the middle of the floor close to the fireplace, and a television on a low stand in the corner. She wondered if the rest of the home was as empty.

She really wanted that tour but knew that he was tired. Just looking at him, anyone would be able to tell he was hurting.

"Oh," she said once they reached the last landing, "we forgot your medication."

“What?” He frowned down at her.

“Your medication. I forgot to give it to you when you ate.” She helped him down the rest of the stairs. “Here. Now that you have some food in your stomach, these will help with the pain.” She half-pushed him into the first chair she saw and then ran into the kitchen to get the bottle of pills and a glass of water.

She watched him swallow the pills.

“Help me back to the sofa?” he asked, standing up. He swayed slightly and she wrapped her arms around him.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m just tired now.”

“Don’t you want to go to your bedroom?” she asked, glancing towards the stairs.

He chuckled. “The sofa is sort of my bedroom for now.”

“Right.” She helped him to the sofa. “Do you want anything before I leave?”

“A kiss,” she thought she heard him say. But then he was lying back on the sofa and his eyes were closed. A moment later he was snoring softly.

She placed a soft kiss on his forehead before letting herself out.

It had taken all her willpower not to sneak around the place and look in every room before going. As she drove back down the hillside towards town, she called Sophia.

Her friend answered on the third ring and sounded a little breathless.

Sophia had pushed her to take Max up on the offer to see the lighthouse. Maybe it was the way she’d described their first meeting in the restaurant, or maybe Sophia had seen the spark in her eyes when she talked about Max, but she got the idea that Sophia knew that she was attracted to him.

Either way, Sophia had encouraged her to go see the lighthouse. Not that she’d needed much convincing. She’d been dying to look around. It had been years since she’d been out to the property, and she’d never been inside.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?” Juliette asked.

“No, we were just coming back from taking Loki for a walk on the beach. What’s up?”

“I just wanted to tell you that I finally stopped by the lighthouse for that tour Max offered.”

The phone shifted and Sophia whispered, “And?”

“And, I found him almost unconscious after knocking himself out and putting a knot on his forehead from the kitchen cabinet.” She smiled.

“What?” Sophia’s voice raised. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, I took him to see Dr. Stevens. He has a clean bill of health. I made him dinner and then he took me to the top of the lighthouse.”

“Ooooh,” Sophia chimed in. “And?”

“And then we talked for a while about the town before we headed back downstairs, where he practically passed out on the sofa.”

“I did warn you that Max moves very slow,” Sophia said.

“It’s not that.” She sighed. “I was really hoping for a full tour of the property.”

Sophia laughed. “Trust me, you’ll get it. Isn’t tomorrow your day off? Why don’t you go see how his head is doing and maybe then get the tour? Palmer and the guys will be there working, so it’s sort of a good opportunity anyway. You can bring them all food or something.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said, remembering her proposal to Max about helping him film and his statement about wanting to kiss her. Which had pretty much turned her knees to jelly.

“Well, I’m going to go hose Loki off. He rolled in something that smells like my brother’s locker.” Sophia chuckled.

“Okay, night.” She hung up.

When she arrived home, her parents were sitting in the living room watching sports with their two dogs fast asleep between them on the sofa.

“Who’s winning?” she asked, sitting beside her dad and grabbing a handful of popcorn from the bowl in his lap.

“It’s tied,” her mom said. “How was your date?”

“It wasn’t a date.” She rolled her eyes. “I was just going to get a tour of the lighthouse from Sophia’s friend Max, who purchased the place.”

“Right, Max Wilson.” Her dad wiggled his eyebrows. “The big-shot Hollywood writer and producer.”

“He lived in New York last,” she corrected.

“Right.” Her dad held the bowl of popcorn towards her, and she took another handful.

“So, how was the tour?” her mother asked, not missing a beat.

“I only got to see the lighthouse itself. The view from the top is amazing.”

“What happened?” her dad asked.

“Max bumped his head, and I had to take him to Dr. Stevens.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s resting. Dr. Stevens glued the cut. It was pretty cool to watch,” she admitted.

“You were always chill around that sort of thing.” Her dad nudged her elbow. “We thought you’d end up a doctor.”

“Not that we are pressuring you.” Her mother nudged her dad hard on the side.

“No, of course not.” He smiled at her and then wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close.

“Right, well.” She got off the sofa and, feeling slightly annoyed, took the entire bowl of popcorn from her dad and walked away.

“Hey,” her dad whined.

“That’s what you get for not knowing when to shut your mouth,” her mother said with a chuckle.

“Damn,” her dad added as Juliette climbed the stairs to go to her room.

Okay, so she was twenty-two years old and still living with her parents. A lot of people were in the same boat. Right?

After she locked herself in her room, she set the bowl of popcorn down and looked around. Not much had changed in the room outside of her bed growing to a queen shortly after she’d graduated high school.

What was she doing with her life? She plopped down on her bed. She stared up at her ceiling as she ate the rest of the buttery popcorn and thought about her next move.

It wasn’t as if she had intended to stay in her parents’ house this long. After all, her brother had moved out right after high school when he’d gone to school in Portland.

The thought of leaving Pride had scared her enough back then that she’d decided to take online classes from the community college in Portland. She’d gotten her associates degree in art last year and had taken a few more classes after, but then she’d taken a break after the last semester. She’d wanted to save up the money for a down payment on her very own place.

Privacy was becoming more important to her the older she got.

When the bowl of popcorn was empty, she rolled over and pulled out her diary and wrote everything down in it.

One of the first gifts her parents had gotten her was a diary. Her parents were half-owners of the Brew-Ha-Ha bookstore in town. They split ownership with her two aunts, Cora and Alice. She spent a lot of her childhood among the stocked shelves of those books and had learned at an early age that writing down her feelings helped.

Dear Diary,

Tonight, I learned two very important things:

Max is stubborn as hell.

Chickpea pasta has magical healing properties. (I mean, that’s the only explanation for how he went from half-comatose to leading me up a million stairs like some kind of lighthouse tour guide.)

Let’s rewind.

I found Max on the floor of his house today, looking like he’d lost a fight with gravity. Turns out, he hit his head and just... decided to exist in that state until I showed up. Because obviously, seeking medical attention is for other people. After much eye-rolling (mine) and some minor medical intervention (thank you, Dr. Stevens and your miracle glue), I got him home, fed him, and somehow—somehow—he convinced me he was well enough to take me on a “short tour.”

Which, apparently, meant climbing the thousands of stairs to the top of the lighthouse. No complaints from me.

Did I think this was a good idea? No. I was worried about the golf-ball-sized knot growing out of his forehead. Did I let him do it anyway? Well, I asked him if he was sure, because I wasn’t, but did he listen? Not even a little bit. So there I was, practically spotting him like a toddler learning to walk as we made our way up what felt like one thousand steps while he told me this heartbreaking love story about Karnia, the woman who spent a year waiting for her husband to come home from war. She never saw him again. And, oh yeah, there was a legendary missing diamond involved.

(Which, let’s be honest, is the kind of thing you hear and immediately go: Yep, totally cursed.)

This, mind you, is the same diamond Nate and I used to sneak up to the property and look for.

I never knew it had a name before—the diamond, not the lighthouse.

The Ocean’s Heart.

Sounds even more romantic than I used to dream of.

By the time we reached the top of the lighthouse, I was out of breath, and he was miraculously still standing. And the view? Absolutely worth it. The lights from Pride sparkled like stars, and for a second, I totally forgot that I’d spent the evening playing babysitter to a concussed man-child.

Would I do it again?

Sigh. Yeah. Probably.

But next time, I’m bringing a helmet and getting a proper kiss at the end.

–Juliette

Chapter Four

Someone somewhere was banging on something way too loud. Max wanted to yell for them to stop, but he was afraid his head would explode if he spoke at the moment.

Groaning, he shifted to pull the throw blanket further over his head. In the process, he took a deep breath and stilled. His body was being attacked with a new sense. Smell overruled sound suddenly.

The scent was sweet. A hint of spring flowers mixed with sweet caramel, honey, cinnamon, and brown sugar.

“Is that bacon?” he mumbled but kept his eyes closed for fear of pain resurfacing again.

The flower scent he knew very well. He’d dreamed of it for weeks since he’d first run into Juliette at the restaurant. Just the hint of it had his body reacting instantly. The other sweeter smells had his stomach instantly desiring.

“And coffee,” Juliette practically hummed. “All you have to do is open your eyes,” she added sweetly.

He assessed his physical health and then slowly opened his eyes. His head did not explode like he assumed it would as his vision came into focus.

Juliette was hovering above him, holding a mug and a plate with a smile on her lips. He could tell that she had run her eyes over his head before he’d opened his eyes, as there was a look of concern in them.

The banging noises continued outside. Instead of asking her how and why she was there, he sat up slowly and took the mug from her and downed half of the cup in one gulp.

“Your forehead looks better,” she said, sitting beside him as she set the plate of food in his lap. There were a couple of pieces of bacon on it and a cinnamon roll the size of his fist. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” He took a bite of bacon. “Much better. Did you make this?”

“No.” She chuckled. “I stopped at Sara’s Nook before coming over here. I also grabbed some donuts and coffee for the workers outside.” She leaned closer. “Parker let me in.” She got up and disappeared into the kitchen, and came back with another plate for herself and cup of coffee.

“I’m thankful he did,” he said after finishing the cinnamon roll.

“I was going to bring lunch, but I figured you’d be hurting this morning, and Sophia told me that you’re a coffee snob. So I asked the ladies down at Sara’s Nook, and they hooked me up with your jam.”

He smiled and somehow felt even better. “I’m sorry that I pretty much passed out on you last night.”

She shrugged and took another bite of her roll. “It’s understandable. How is the pain level this morning?”

“About a two,” he said, remembering that Dr. Stevens had asked him to rate his pain on a scale of one to ten the night before. Before he’d gotten the pain pills, it had been an eight. Last night, when he’d walked Juliette up to the top of the lighthouse, he’d been at a four.

“That’s good.” She smiled. “Nothing a few aspirin or Tylenol can’t handle.” She sighed and then glanced at him sideways. “They’re really making a mess of your yard out there.”

He chuckled and then winced slightly at the spike of pain. “You have to break a few eggs to make an omelet.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just the recent rains have made your driveway almost impassable. I parked down the hill a ways and walked for fear of getting stuck.”

“I plan to pave it when they’re done.” He set the empty plate on the coffee table.

“That’s good.” She set her plate down too.

“Did you just come here to feed me or for that tour?” he asked.

She surprised him by laughing instead of being offended. “To be honest, I already snuck around while I was heating the cinnamon rolls in your oven. But I really came to check up on you.” Her eyes landed on the bandage on his forehead. “I’d like to take a look under that. If you’re okay with it.”

He nodded and then sat still while she leaned closer and gently removed the tape and gauze Dr. Stevens had put on the bump the night before.

“There’s a smaller bandage now,” she said after removing the large white square.

“Go ahead. I have more Band-Aids I can put on it.” Once she removed it, she hissed. “Is it that bad?” he asked.

“No, honestly, it’s just bruised. I think Dr. Stevens was right. You won’t have much of a scar.” He relaxed slightly and noticed she did as well.

She really was worried about him. That made a wave of heat rush through him.

“You probably want to shower and start your day.” She glanced at her watch.

“Do you work today?” he asked when she stood up and gathered the plates.

“No.”

He followed her into the kitchen. “I can take care of those later,” he suggested.

“It’s okay. I made the mess, I’ll clean it before I head out.” She started to rinse the plates.

“If you...” He started but stopped, suddenly feeling stupid.

“What?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

“If you hang out for a while, I’ll give you an official tour after I shower.”

She smiled. “Sounds good. I’ll finish these.”

He nodded and quickly disappeared down the hallway towards the main bedroom. The space was empty now, but the bathroom still held all his toiletry items for now.

He took a little longer showering than normal since he had to get the dried blood out of his hair. After pulling on a fresh pair of jeans and a sweater, he stepped out to find Juliette standing outside talking to Palmer.

Since he wanted to check on the crews working outside on his electric, he pulled on his darkest sunglasses and headed outside into the bright morning.

He greeted Palmer with a handshake as the man’s gaze zeroed in on his forehead. Since it wasn’t bleeding, he hadn’t put on another bandage.

“Juliette told me what happened. How are you holding up?” Palmer asked him.

“I’m better today. I guess I’ll leave the plumbing to you and your crew,” he joked.

“I’ll head inside and take a look at the sink,” Palmer said. He nodded to them as he turned and walked towards the front door.

“How about that tour?” he suggested. The air coming up the cliff side from the beach was chilly, and he realized he’d left his coat inside.

“Sure.” She wrapped her arm in his as they walked back.

Max pushed open the heavy front door and stepped aside to let Juliette in first. “Welcome, officially, to my home,” he said, sweeping his arm dramatically. “Where the floors are uneven, the walls have seen better days, and the furniture has staged a rebellion,” he joked. He enjoyed hearing her laughter.

Juliette stepped inside, her gaze sweeping over the stacked furniture, the cracked tiles, and the faded walls like she hadn’t already been inside the night before and earlier. “It’s... definitely got character.”

He chuckled. “That’s a polite way of saying it needs a lot of work.”

She chuckled. “I was trying to be nice.”

He led her forward into the kitchen, the scent of cinnamon and sugar lingering in the air. The massive arched windows in the small dining area overlooked the water, the sun just beginning to set in the distance.

“This view is really incredible,” she murmured, stepping closer. “You get to wake up to this every day?”

“I do.” He leaned against the old wooden counter, watching her. “Makes up for the lack of cabinet doors and the fact that the stove is probably older than my grandfather.”

“And you need new plumbing under here,” Palmer added.

“It was always part of the plan,” he reminded the man.

“Right. For now,” he said, standing up and shutting the cabinet doors under his sink, “you only have cold water in here.”

“That will work.” Max sighed.

“I’ll head back outside so you can continue your tour,” Palmer said to Juliette.

When they were alone again, Juliette glanced at the towering standalone stove. “I used your microwave earlier to heat the rolls and bacon. That thing belongs in a museum.”

“Or a horror movie.” He grinned. “I swear it makes noises at night.”

She laughed as he guided her past the outdated cupboards towards a small closet off the kitchen. He pulled open the door to reveal a cramped space still filled with boxes. “I’m planning to turn this into a butler’s pantry. There are stairs at the back that supposedly lead to a cellar. I’m hoping for some old wine racks down there. Or at least a decent place to store whiskey. I haven’t been down there to assess anything yet.”

Juliette shot him an amused glance. “Priorities.”

“Exactly.” He shut the door and motioned for her to follow him into the long, narrow room leading through the formal dining area.

“This will be my office.” He stepped inside, surveying the large space with its tall windows and broken fireplace mantel. Half of it lay on the floor, a testament to the building’s many years of wear. “It even has its own bathroom.”

Juliette ran her fingers lightly over the rough wood of the mantel. “Are you going to fix this?”

“Eventually. But first I need to make sure the house doesn’t fall down around me.”

She grinned. “Good plan.”

He led her out and into a small bathroom near the living room before guiding her up an old wooden staircase to the second floor. The steps creaked under their weight, the sound echoing in the quiet space.

“I’ve finally got all the furniture off of this floor,” he said when they were in the first bedroom on that floor. “Once Parker and Palmer assure me all the plumbing and power are shut off to this part, I’m going to help out by demo-ing the bathrooms up here myself.”

“Wow, you’re doing it yourself?” She ran a finger over the green countertop in the bathroom they stood in.

“Yeah, shouldn’t be too hard. A sledgehammer and jigsaw.” He shrugged.

She narrowed her eyes. “After your luck with simple plumbing, I’d be cautious.”

He chuckled. “I’ll make sure to wear a hardhat.”

They moved to the other side of the hallway, where an identical bedroom and bathroom sat. The pink tiles had Juliette laughing.

“I guess the interior was redone in the fifties?” she asked.

“Yeah, probably. The color choices are…”

“Retro.”

He nodded. “No one lived here back then. I think it was just a museum. At least I haven’t found any record of someone staying here full time.”

“So how do you get into the lighthouse from this floor?” Juliette asked when they reached the landing again. “Last night, we used a door at the end of the hallway downstairs. I would assume…” She walked over to a door and frowned when she opened it to find a linen closet.

Max smirked and walked to the other end of the hallway, where he placed his hand on a doorknob. “There’s an outside entrance as well as this entrance and the one downstairs.” He pushed open the door and motioned for her to step through.

She followed him into a narrow hallway leading directly into a circular staircase. The air felt different here—cooler, tinged with the scent of aged wood and the faintest hint of salt.

Juliette placed her hand on the smooth railing and peered upward to where the spiral of stairs disappeared into the shadows. A slow smile spread across her lips.

“I’d love to see the view this morning with the clear skies.” She glanced over at him. “Race you to the top?” she challenged.

Max groaned. “You just want to see if my head injury slows me down, don’t you?”

She laughed. “Maybe.”

Shaking his head, he followed her up, knowing that despite the house’s flaws, despite the endless work ahead of him, in this moment—with Juliette by his side—this place felt like an actual home for the first time.

Chapter Five

Standing once more on top of the lighthouse, Juliette looked out over her town and the great Pacific. There wasn't a cloud in the sky today, but the strong wind blowing up from the cliff's edge cut their outside time short. She had removed her jacket earlier when she'd been working in his kitchen to heat up their breakfast.

"You're very lucky," she told him once they were back behind the thick glass walls. "To have this view. It's... unique." Her eyes ran over Brook and Ryder's property off to the side. Ocean View was one of the prettiest homes around Pride. It was original in design and the fact that it had almost the same view as the lighthouse property made it a sought-after commodity.

"It is," he agreed. "And I am *very* lucky."

She turned away from the view and looked at him. "You need more sleep. In a proper bed. From what I saw there are plenty of rooms for you to choose from."

He shook his head. "They're going to start sanding and staining the floors next week. After that, it's patching and painting walls and checking and replacing all outlets and fixtures. Not to mention the mess knocking out all the tile will cause."

"And you're going to film it all? Why aren't you outside now?" she asked. She felt stupid when he touched his head. "Right. I can help, like I said?" she suggested, needing a reason to stick around. When he gave her a look, she sighed. "Listen, my favorite pastime is watching those remodeling videos online. What can it hurt? You get some more rest and if what I shoot sucks..." She shrugged. "Delete it."

He rolled his shoulders and took a deep breath. "If you're sure?"

She smiled and pulled him back down the stairs. "Leave it all to me."

An hour later, she stood in the mud holding a camera that was probably worth more than her car. It had taken her a few moments to figure out the best angle and then set up the tripod for the shoot.

Palmer and his men were using a large piece of equipment they called a Ditch Witch to dig long ditches that criss-crossed the land between the house and the barn.

She asked why they were going through the trouble for a barn, and Palmer informed her that Max wanted power and plumbing to the building so he could turn it into a workshop.

After finding that out, she set up the camera and strolled through the barn. It was stacked with what appeared to be every piece of furniture that had been in the main building. Some of it was barely more than splintered pieces of wood, while other pieces were in wonderful shape.

She could imagine the massive barn being turned into a film studio but wanted to talk to Max about his vision.

She wondered about his plans for the rest of the property as she filmed. It was fascinating to watch, and she thoroughly enjoyed filming the progress.

When it was time for lunch, she drove into town and grabbed some food from the restaurant and brought it back for the guys. She sat out on an old picnic bench with everyone and ate lunch in the sunlight. Max had woken up while she'd been in town and had joined them outside. He looked better than he had before. His coloring was back and he actually joked and laughed with everyone as if the pain was gone.

When the men went back to work, he helped her set up the camera again and even walked her through the barn, filling her in on his vision of splitting up the massive space. Half of the building would remain a barn, where he could house a couple of horses, some hay, and tractors or mowers. The other half he wanted to turn into a studio with a space for writing and also a film studio for the stop-motion work he wanted to do. He was hoping Sophia would want to collaborate on a project with him.

"If you're interested, I was wondering if you'd be interested in joining in on the fun around my place full time?" Max said while they watched the men work, surprising her.

"Full time?" she asked. "Like filming?"

"Sure. I have a few other projects in mind, but they'll have to wait until this"—he motioned to the mess of his yard—"gets a little more stable."

She leaned against the barn door and enjoyed the sun on her face for a moment.

"What kind of projects?"

"I have a few ideas have been brewing in my mind for later." He leaned against the door next to her. "But to start with, I want to do what we talked about, filming the construction progress around my place and then posting it on social media."

She nodded. "If you want, I can start a few new social media pages. I'll edit what I've filmed today and post it, along with a walk-through of the place. I'll want to take before-and-after photos, if you're okay with that?"

He nodded and her interest spiked.

"If you want to take charge of this project..." He smiled and then he surprised her by switching the topic of conversation. "My younger sister, Faye..." He took a slow, deep breath. "We almost lost her when she was less than a year old."

"Sophia mentioned she had health issues," she said when he didn't continue. "Was she in some sort of accident?" She couldn't remember any details Sophia had given her.

"No." His eyes moved to hers. "She was almost killed by our father when she was just a baby."

"I'm so sorry." Her heart broke for him and her anger spiked. Anyone who abuses another was scum in her book.

She'd been lucky enough to be raised by parents who hardly ever fought. Love had filled every part of her and her brother's lives.

"When she was a few months shy of her first birthday, she was rushed to the hospital. It took a while to figure out what had happened, but after the second surgery, they realized it was abuse. She'd been left in his care while our mother had been at the store, and they put two and two together."

"What happened?" she asked, only wanting more details if he felt comfortable talking to her.

His eyes moved away from the workers and scanned the horizon, as if he was looking for answers there.

"He was arrested. He adamantly denied any wrongdoing, but the bruises on her body and statements from me and my older sister sealed his fate. My parents divorced and, after a year behind bars, my father was released and he disappeared." He turned back towards her. "Faye has had more than two dozen surgeries in her life. She's slowly losing her hearing, among other health issues, and at this point, there's nothing anyone can do about it."

"I'm so sorry." She touched his arm.

"She's damn strong." He nodded his head a few times, as if trying to convince himself. "Stronger than my older sister, Ally. Last year she went through a divorce after giving birth to my niece, Charlotte. Her husband decided he didn't want a woman whose body wasn't perfect after childbirth." He rolled his eyes. "I still want to punch the man, but I've made several promises I won't. Anyway, Ally took things hard and moved back in with my mother and Faye. It's been a year and she still hasn't managed to recover. I know that some women go through depression after childbirth, and being abandoned would only add to that. But Ally..." He shook his head. "There are days she won't even get out of bed. My mother and Faye are currently caring for Charlotte."

"Depression can be debilitating," she offered.

He nodded. "She refuses to seek counseling. We're not sure what else to do for her. I know I shouldn't, but it's hard not to compare the two of them. Faye is losing her way of life forever and continually struggles with health issues and still manages to hold down a full-time job, while my other sister refuses to change her own daughter's diapers." He let out a long slow breath.

"She'll recover."

He nodded. "I was hoping she'd come visit here, after it's ready. Maybe a change of scenery will be helpful."

"That's a wonderful idea." Juliette smiled. "With this many bedrooms and all this space, you could open up a bed and breakfast," she joked.

He chuckled. "I have too many plans already. I doubt I'd have enough time to run a B&B."

"Oh?" She stood up and nudged his shoulder. "Plans like marrying me?"

He groaned and rolled his eyes. "I was hoping I'd hallucinated proposing to you."

"Twice." She held up two fingers and smiled at him. "You proposed twice."

He laughed. "Well, maybe next time I ask you, you'll surprise me by answering with a yes." He nudged her back playfully.

By the time she drove home that evening, her skin was warm with the beginnings of a sunburn, and her hair was a tangled mess from the high winds that had crossed the yard.

After a long, hot shower, she slipped into her favorite flannel pajamas and headed downstairs to have dinner with her parents. Watching them together, she was struck by how lucky they were, and how lucky she was to witness the kind of love they shared.

She had heard the story of how they met more times than she could count. Her mother had been on the run, fleeing the weight of her own guilt after a tragic accident. She had been behind the wheel the day that her younger brother, Nate—the namesake of Juliette's older brother—had lost his life. Though the accident hadn't been her fault, she had never forgiven herself for letting the young boy sit in the front seat. In her mind, he had been too small, too fragile, and that decision had played a part in his death.

Overcome with grief and convinced the police were after her, she had taken off, desperate to disappear. She had dashed into the Brew Ha-Ha to hide—and ran straight into the arms of Rafe, the man who would mend her heart and claim it for his

own. Juliette's dad.

They both said that it was love at first sight. She'd never really understood what that meant. Until she'd bumped into Max at the restaurant.

The following morning, with the sun streaming through her window, she groggily rolled out of bed, still replaying her thoughts from the night before in her mind. Love at first sight? It sounded ridiculous, but the moment she'd met Max, something had clicked.

Then she remembered the other night at his place. How he had proposed to her. Of course, the man had been practically concussed at the time, so maybe his feelings were more head trauma than heartfelt sentiment.

Shaking off the thought, she got ready for her shift at the restaurant. What she wanted to do was head to Max's place and film, but she hadn't worked out her schedule yet.

The moment she stepped inside, the scent of sizzling meat wrapped around her like a warm hug. The late-morning rush was already in full swing, and Sophia was balancing three plates while expertly dodging a rogue toddler who had escaped his booster seat.

"You're late," Sophia sing-songed, setting down the plates and spinning towards Juliette with a knowing grin.

Juliette scoffed. "I am not late. I'm just not as disgustingly early as you."

Once her table was served, Sophia walked over and leaned against the counter, eyeing her suspiciously. "So, rumors have been swirling."

"About?" Juliette held in a yawn.

"Oh, not much. So, how's your fiancé this morning?" Sophia chuckled.

Juliette rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on. How in the hell did that one get around? I haven't told anyone and it was just the two of us there when he blurted it out—"

"What? He really did propose—twice?"

"Yes, but only because he had a head injury! That does not really count," she countered.

"I don't know..." Sophia smirked. "Maybe the universe was just skipping ahead. Saving you both the time and the trouble."

Juliette groaned but couldn't help the smile tugging at her lips. "Okay, enough of that. I actually wanted to talk to you about something real."

Sophia's eyes lit up. "Spill."

Juliette leaned against the counter, lowering her voice as she grabbed a bottled water. "Max offered me a job—kind of." She frowned when she realized she had no clue if she was going to get paid. "He wants me to help film the construction crew's progress on his lighthouse project. And then, when it's all finished, do another project he says he's working on."

Sophia's mouth dropped open. "Shut. Up. That's amazing!"

Juliette grinned. "Right? I mean, it's totally up my alley. And, honestly, I'm really into watching the progress on the place. I think he wants you to help with the later project too."

Sophia grabbed her hands, squeezing them excitedly. "Girl, you have to do this! Don't even worry about your schedule here—I can move things around however you need. You wanna film all day and only work weekends? Done. You need mornings off to chase my man and his men around with a camera? Say no more."

Juliette laughed. "You're seriously the best."

"I know." Sophia smirked. "Now, tell me—has he proposed again? Because if he does it a third time, I think you're legally required to say yes."

Juliette rolled her eyes but couldn't stop the blush creeping up her cheeks. "I swear I'm never confessing anything to you again."

"Oh, please," Sophia said, waving her off. "I'm your bestie. It's literally my job to be up in your business."

Juliette chuckled, shaking her head as she tied her apron around her waist. Despite Sophia's teasing, excitement bubbled in her chest. This project with Max—it felt like the start of something big.

Chapter Six

Within two weeks of Palmer and his men beginning work outside, he had running water and decent water pressure everywhere and electricity in the barn. Some of the old pipes in the building groaned when he showered, but he was assured nothing like the pipe bursting in his kitchen would happen again. Palmer had looked over each exposed connection personally.

Every day that the men worked, Juliette was there to film with him. He spent some time teaching her all he could about his cameras and equipment. By the end of the first week, she was fully capable of finding the best angle and took over most of the filming and editing while he got to work demo-ing the bathrooms and all that tile.

Of course, she set up a few cameras on his project. Every evening, she would splice the videos together and post them on his new social media pages, which they were calling Saving the Light.

She was good, damn good, not only at editing the videos together but at making them tell a story. Sure, they were just construction videos, but Juliette had somehow turned them into something that dragged you in and kept you glued to the screen.

There were instructional videos that she got Palmer or Parker to make about the more technical sides of things and a ton of time-lapse videos showing the progress.

He was surprised at how quickly the profiles had gotten to almost a million followers.

“I told you, people like me eat this shit up.” She had laughed when they hit more than a million views on the video of him destroying the pink tiled bathroom. “Plus, you’re eye candy.” She nudged him with her elbow. “I bet if you took your shirt off next time, we’d hit two million views.”

He chuckled. “Trust me, they’re not watching these because of me. I think they just enjoyed seeing that pink tile be destroyed.”

She shrugged. “Maybe, but the comments say differently.” She leaned closer and showed him some of the comments.

To be honest, he didn’t really read any of the text since the sweet scent of her perfume filled his senses and made him want to lean in closer to her.

“Once we’re a little further along in the process, we can splice some scenes together to show progress in each space,” she continued.

“You’re really great at this. All of this. The social media aspects as well as filming and edits.”

“You’re pretty good at it too, I hear.”

He shook his head. “I’m a storyteller. I let the directors do the rest.”

“Well, you’re pretty good at the telling then.” She smiled.

“What about rolling up your sleeves tomorrow and helping me out in the blue bathroom?” he suggested.

Her eyes lit up. “You think I could? I mean, I know I can physically. I helped my parents remodel their kitchen a few years back and have spent too much time painting walls.” She chuckled.

“Oh?” He smiled, enjoying the way her face glowed with humor.

“My mother can never settle on a color. I swear she repaints her rooms once a year. If you were to cut a chunk out of the walls in their place, it would probably look like one of those gobstoppers you break in half.”

He chuckled. “Okay, so when we start painting inside, I’ll put you in charge.”

She glanced over at him, her smile slipping slightly. “I’d really enjoy that. Just don’t tell me you’re going to paint the walls in here sea-foam green.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Why?”

“It’s impossible to work with. No matter what I painted over it, you could always see streaks. And I walked around for a week looking like I had foam green freckles. I swear that color was impossible to clean off my skin.”

He was smiling. “No, I haven’t picked colors for the walls yet. Since you’re such an expert, maybe you can help me decide.”

“I thought you’d never ask.” She jumped up from the table and then motioned for him to follow. “Come on, we have to look at each room.” And then, to his surprise, she rummaged in her purse for a moment and pulled out a paint color wheel.

“Do you carry that in there all the time?” he asked, following her over to stand in the middle of the room.

She glanced at the color wheel and chuckled. “Not really, but my mother wanted me to stop off and get a can of Osprey White for her powder room. She plans on painting it next week.”

“Okay.”

She held up the wheel and fanned some colors out.

“What color cabinets are you putting in here?” She suddenly turned towards him.

“I... haven’t decided.”

She turned back and squinted at the kitchen.

“This room is difficult. If you plan on moving the cabinets...” She pulled a pad and pen out of her purse and quickly sketched a drawing.

“Oh!” He snapped his fingers. “Palmer worked up something.” He picked up his iPad and flipped to the designs that Palmer had emailed him. “Here, this is what he came up with for cabinet locations..”

She held the iPad and nodded. “Just what I thought.” She motioned to her drawing. “It’s really the best design. So, if you go with cream colored cabinets, a darker color for the island would be good.” She tilted her head as she looked at the sketches. “Something in natural wood colors. This would go nicely.” She tapped the color wheel on a light honey color.

“Okay.” He nodded.

She turned to look at him. “Okay?”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “What next?”

She shook her head slightly. “Just okay?”

He chuckled. “Something tells me I’m not as particular about wall colors as your mother.”

She rolled her eyes and wrote the color code in her notepad. They moved into the dining room. After scanning the designs Palmer had sent him, they chose colors for each room on the main floor, then went upstairs to the bedrooms and did the same.

Shortly after Juliette left to go home for the night, he stepped out of the shower, kicking himself mentally for not kissing her. He should have made his move.

He’d never moved fast when it came to attraction. Hell, he’d pussy-footed around in New York with Sophia and had only ever kissed her once. Well, twice if he counted the quick peck he’d given her the night she’d told him she was in love with Palmer.

This time, he had no intention of letting Juliette lose interest and fall for someone else. He knew that the attraction was there. The way she looked at him assured him of her interest.

Since he wasn’t tired, he sat on the sofa and worked on the project that he’d started the first night he’d moved into the place.

At some point, he must have drifted off, and he woke in the dark with his head at an odd angle. His laptop still sitting opened on his lap, but now the screensaver was the only light in the room. It flashed the time and he saw it was almost half past three in the morning.

He closed the lid and froze in place when he heard a floorboard creak somewhere in the house. He knew that old places settled. Hell, he’d been living in the building for a few months now and had almost memorized all its groans and settling noises. This was nothing like those. This was caused by someone walking on the old floorboards, most likely the ones on the stairs or in the hallway.

“Darling, is that you?” A soft voice fluttered into the room with a chill. “Darling?” The voice echoed again.

Max’s eyes were glued to the dark empty doorway. His entire body was rigid, and he held his breath.

“Darling?” The word echoed in the icy night air.

A loud bang woke Max from the dream, and he spilled his laptop from his lap onto the floor.

“Sorry.” Juliette winced as she stepped into the room balancing a large bakery box and a tray of coffee cups. “The door got away from me.” She set the items down on the coffee table.

He ran his hands over his face and tried to shake the dream. He’d been researching the couple who had lived here and was pretty sure the dream was a manifestation of his research. Still, it took a few minutes for his heart rate to slow.

The coffee and sugary donuts did not help. Juliette’s company did.

By the time the construction crew arrived and started the repairs on the foundation on the outer walls of the basement, he was back to normal.

That day, he and Juliette were working in the kitchen, tearing out all the old cupboards and cabinets. They would haul all of the rubble out and into the large dumpster that had been placed just outside his front door.

Palmer hadn’t been joking when he said that the place would get worse before it got better. It looked like a war zone.

Due to Juliette’s work, however, they currently had more than a million followers on the YouTube channel alone. She’d filmed Palmer and Parker explaining the intricacies of the electric and plumbing work and planned several more videos like that as the project went on.

By far, the most watched video was the one where she climbed the stairs of the lighthouse and explained the history of the building as she went. The video ended with a panoramic view from the very top on a bright and sunny spring morning.

The majority of comments had been people asking if he would open the place up to tourists after they were done with renovations, something he was thinking about deeply. After all, he wanted to keep the history of the building alive and to share it with others.

He'd changed into his work clothes—worn jeans, a flannel shirt over a T-shirt, and work boots. He looked ever the part of the construction worker. The only difference between him and the crew outside was that they knew what they were doing.

Rolling his shoulders, he surveyed the kitchen and wondered where to begin.

“Ready to do this?” he asked as he turned to Juliette, who was already holding up the camera, recording him. “Are you getting my good side?” he joked.

She smirked, tilting her head. “That depends. Which side is your good side?”

He pointed at himself with the sledgehammer. “All of them.”

Juliette snorted but kept filming as he took a solid stance in front of the first set of cabinets. “Alright, first strike, let's make it cinematic,” she teased. “Give the people what they want.”

He chuckled. “You mean raw, untamed strength?” He lifted the sledgehammer dramatically, flexing a little more than necessary.

“Oh, absolutely,” she said, her tone dripping with amusement. “I mean, those followers are here for the... construction progress.” She aimed the camera at his biceps.

He rolled his eyes, unable to hide his grin, and swung the hammer, smashing into the cabinet door with a loud crack. Wood splintered, and Juliette let out an exaggerated gasp.

“Oh no,” she teased. “I was going to sell those on Marketplace.”

Max barked out a laugh. “Right. And how much were you gonna list these fine relics for?” He kicked at the broken cabinet door, and it collapsed into pieces.

“Priceless,” she said with mock seriousness. “An authentic, weathered, nearly hundred-year-old cabinet, touched by the hands of every lighthouse keeper.”

He leaned on the sledgehammer, looking at her. “Oh, so now I'm a lighthouse keeper?”

“Well, what else do you call someone who lives in a lighthouse?”

Max thought for a second, then shrugged. “A handsome, rugged, slightly wounded contractor?” He motioned to his bruised forehead.

Juliette chuckled. “Yes, yes, that too.”

She shifted the camera just as he took another powerful swing, shattering a cabinet into pieces. “Okay, that was actually impressive,” she admitted. “Let me get a slow-mo shot of you doing that to the next one.”

Max smirked. “You just want more footage of my muscles.”

“I do not!” she said, but the way she bit her lip and angled the camera slightly lower made him chuckle.

Deciding to give her something worth filming, he ripped off his flannel, leaving just his white T-shirt underneath. Besides, he'd already worked up a sweat. “Ready?” he asked, flexing just a little. When she nodded that she was ready, he took another swing.

Juliette let out a laugh behind the camera. “Max, if you flex any harder, this is going to turn into a thirst trap instead of a renovation video.”

“Gotta keep engagement up,” he teased as he continued to work.

They worked together for the next hour, knocking out cabinets, prying up stubborn old countertops, and dodging flying debris. At one point, Juliette attempted to take a swing with the hammer, but it was almost as heavy as she was. Max stood behind her, guiding her hands, his chest brushing against her back.

“Okay, steady, now swing,” he murmured.

She did—sending the hammer straight through the plaster wall instead of the cabinet. Dust rained down, and they both froze.

Juliette turned, eyes wide. “That... was not a cabinet.”

Max blinked at the hole, then back at her, before bursting into laughter. “No, no it was not.”

Juliette gasped, smacking his arm. “You're laughing at my destruction?”

He grinned down at her. “Babe, this whole thing is about destruction.”

She groaned, but a smile tugged at her lips. “Okay, fair. But you're patching that.”

“Palmer's guys will patch it.” He looped an arm around her waist, pulling her close. “We'll call it a happy accident,” he murmured, their noses almost touching.

Her breath hitched, her eyes flicking to his lips.

The moment stretched between them—then suddenly, a loud crash echoed through the kitchen. They both jumped as one of the remaining upper cabinets gave out and hit the floor with a splintering thud.

Juliette clutched his arm. “Well, that was ominous.”

Max sighed. “Maybe the house is jealous.”

She laughed. "Or maybe it's just telling you it's past time for this remodel."

He smiled, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. "Then let's give it what it wants."

She grinned and lifted her camera again. "Round two?"

Max swung the hammer onto his shoulder and winked at her. "Let's do this."

Chapter Seven

She was completely covered in dust and sweat when she stepped into the house later that night, but she was happier with her accomplishments than she had been in years.

“Mom? Dad?” she called out.

“Back here,” her dad called out from their back deck.

Her parents were sitting in the swing that her dad had built a few years ago. Her dad’s arm was wrapped around her mother’s shoulders, and they each held a beer.

“You look like you got into trouble today.” Her dad chuckled when she sat across from them.

“We demolished a kitchen,” she said with a smile. “It was probably the most fun I’ve had in years.”

“We’ve been watching the progress online.” Her mother leaned her head back against her dad’s shoulder. “It’s going to be beautiful once it’s done. You’ll have to persuade Max to have a grand opening so everyone in town can see what has been done.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” she agreed, her mind racing with new ideas.

Technically, Max owned the lighthouse and the land it sat on from the beach below it to the hillside that overlooked the property. But just beyond the fence line, the property bordered the national park. On the other side was the Ocean View property.

Still, enough people stopped and took photos of the lighthouse that it was easily one of the biggest draws for tourism in the area. At one point the entire property had been owned by the park, and they’d turned it into a museum of sorts. When funding ran out, it had been sold, which is how Max had gotten his hands on it.

He had told her that he wished to preserve its heritage. Yet he hadn’t explained exactly how he intended to do so. At least not yet.

“Well, I’m going to head up and shower.” She kissed her dad on his forehead and squeezed her mother’s shoulder gently. “Good night.”

“Night, sweetie,” her parents called after her.

She climbed the stairs and ran through plans in her head as she stripped to shower. When her phone chimed, she glanced at it and then stilled as she scanned the article that Sophia had just sent her.

Sophia’s message sat above the newspaper clip. “I didn’t want to be the one to show you this, but figured it would sting less coming from me. Don’t pay attention to the trolls. Love you.”

Hollywood Heartthrob Max Wilson: Hiding Out in Small-Town Oregon with a Nobody?

Is Max Wilson, the award-winning screenwriter behind some of Hollywood’s biggest blockbusters, really spending his days knocking down cabinets in the middle of nowhere? According to his recent social media posts, it sure looks that way.

Wilson, once engaged to A-list actress Gabriella DeLuca, has taken a sharp turn from the red carpets and high-end parties of the Hollywood and Broadway elite to flannel shirts and budget renovations. Fans were shocked to see him getting his hands dirty—literally—on a rundown lighthouse project in the small town of Pride, Oregon. Even more shocking? The unknown woman he’s been spotted with in his videos.

Sources say Wilson was last seen in New York a few months ago, where he brushed off questions about last year’s breakup with Gabriella. It appears that the industry golden boy has gone off-grid to lick his wounds and cozy up to a local nobody.

His latest social media posts show him shirtless, flexing his muscles while playing handyman—a far cry from the high-profile world he once ruled. And who’s behind the camera? Some mystery woman, grinning up at him like she just won the lottery. Insiders speculate that she’s a small-time waitress, though no one seems to know much about her.

The real question is: What is Wilson doing with her? Is this just another short-lived escape before he returns to Hollywood? A PR stunt to shake off the engagement scandal? Or has Max really lost his mind and fallen for a small-town fling?

One thing’s for sure—his fans aren’t buying the whole blue-collar romance act.

“Max Wilson remodeling a lighthouse? Please. He probably doesn’t even know how to hold a hammer,” one commenter wrote.

“Gabriella and Max were perfect for one another, no one can convince me of anything else. Wait and see, he’ll go running back to his perfect woman soon enough,” another joked.

As speculation grows, so do the theories. Is Wilson just lying low, waiting for the Gabriella drama to blow over after her parents’ death and her younger sister’s rehab stint? Or has Hollywood’s most sought-after screenwriter really downgraded his leading lady?

Stay tuned—because if we know anything about Max Wilson, this fairy tale won’t last long.

She read the article three times as she sat on the edge of the bathtub, her eyes burning and her heart breaking.

She remembered all about Max dating Gabriella. They’d met during the filming of *Never Enough*. The movie had made Gabriella a household name and had been Max’s third hit.

They’d been spotted around town together, and rumors had turned into an official engagement announcement. Less than three months later, rumors swirled that they had called the wedding off in a mutual agreement. The drama started when Max moved to New York and started teaching at the New York Film Academy. Gabriella’s younger sister had been placed in a rehab facility and their parents had died in a skiing accident shortly after. Then Gabriella had started posting that Max had dumped her for some other woman in New York and, after everything she’d gone through, everyone took pity on Gabriella and shunned Max.

At the time, she hadn’t believed the rumors. She’d been in close contact with Sophia and cheering on whatever relationship would come of their friendship. Now, however, she wondered if there was something they had missed.

“Let’s talk tomorrow,” she texted back to her friend.

“I’m here. Just…” There was a long pause between messages. “Don’t listen to anything they say. Trust me on this. There is more to the story about Max and Gabriella. Night.”

Juliette sent a thumbs-up emoji, then stood under the shower spray until all her worry and fears disappeared.

The moment she opened her eyes the next morning, however, they were all back. Rolling over, she sent a text message to Sophia to see if she wanted to meet her for breakfast.

“Great minds think alike,” Sophia shot back. “Sara’s Nook in half an hour?”

“I’ll see you there,” she replied and quickly got dressed.

When she walked into the bakery, Sophia was sitting in a corner booth, sipping a cup of coffee.

“I already ordered for you,” she called out, waving her over.

There was a second cup of coffee sitting across from her.

“Thanks,” she said as she sat down and took a sip of the latte macchiato. Her friend knew her well.

Sophia’s eyes ran over her face quickly. “You don’t look like you lost sleep over the article.”

“I didn’t. I was too tired after yesterday’s work, but with the sunrise the worry is back,” she admitted.

Sophia reached across the table and touched her hand. “There are reasons Max left her. They’re not my secrets to tell. You’ll just have to trust me on this. Remember, first and foremost, Gabriella is an actress.”

Juliette nodded and took another sip of her drink. “I’m not a nobody.” She was appalled that tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Oh sweetie.” Sophia surprised her by jumping up and rushing to her side of the booth and hugging her. “Compared to the Hollywood elites, we’re all nobodies.”

“It’s just…” She shook her head and rested back in the booth. “I’ve never really known what it was that I wanted to do in life. I’m not like you.”

“No one is.” Sophia chuckled and nudged her ribs lightly before sobering. “You have such amazing talent for seeing the whole picture. When I struggled putting my scenes together, you thought of every background detail, the right angle for the cameras, those extra edits you did that brought everything together. Nothing I did had felt fully finished until I met you.”

“Okay.” She realized she was starting to feel better about herself. Maybe it was the caffeine? Or maybe it was the friendship. “So self-pity trip is almost over.”

“Look,” Sophia started but stopped when Brook delivered their biscuit sandwiches and cinnamon rolls. She moved back over to her side of the table before she continued. “Compared to Gabriella, I looked like a rejected doll in a potato sack.”

“That’s not true,” Juliette broke in.

“It is, we both do. And you’re fucking sexy as hell.” She took a bite of her food. “Trust me when I say, what’s pretty on the outside can be rotten on the inside. Remember Leslie Timons?”

Juliette nodded. “She was a bitch.”

Sophia chuckled. “Still is.”

Juliette took a bite of her breakfast sandwich. “I think I was just hungry and in need of caffeine.”

“There is one thing I want to warn you about.”

“Shoot,” she said, straightening her shoulders and bracing herself.

“Max comes with some… baggage. No matter what he does, he will always be in the public eye. There will always be

articles like this, filled with hate towards anyone he gets close to.”

Juliette nodded slowly. “I get it.”

“Good, because I think it was the number one reason that he moved so slowly with me. Looking back, I realize that he had a reason for trying to keep what was between us a secret. I thought that it was due to him being with someone the press would see as his student. After all, he was there to teach us.” She shrugged. “Now I realize it was to protect me from things like that article.”

“I can be strong,” she said, to assure herself more than her friend.

“Oh, I know it.” Sophia smiled. “Now, let’s change the subject to something good. Like, my wedding plans.”

Juliette laughed and relaxed into the conversation as they planned her best friend’s wedding.

Now that she was helping Max out every day, her work schedule at the restaurant had slowed way down. She spent most of the day at his place filming and most of the evening editing and uploading the videos to social media platforms.

When she finally drove up to Max’s, she was in a slightly better mood than earlier. Planning her best friend’s wedding had cleansed her soul.

But then she saw the rows of media vans camped just outside his gate. As she drove by, cameras flashed and people screamed for her to stop and answer questions. She didn’t.

When she parked next to Palmer’s truck, Max was there waiting for her.

“I see you met the press,” he grumbled. “Thankfully, they’re too far away to get a clear look.”

“Yeah.” She shut her car door. “I guess after the article yesterday, they made the trip from Portland to spy on the bunch of nobodies you’re hanging with.”

He frowned and then touched her elbow to stop her from walking away.

“Not a single word of that article was true.” His eyes scanned hers.

“You weren’t engaged to Gabriella?”

He shifted slightly. “I never proposed to her.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, but just then Parker walked over with a bunch of questions he needed Max’s attention on.

Now that the weather was warmer, the men had been able to finish up the exterior work. They had been working inside for the past few days, mostly on electric or plumbing upgrades. They were replacing all the light fixtures and checking every outlet’s wiring.

Today, if all went well, they were going to start work in the kitchen. Boxes of cabinets had arrived a few days before. First, however, she was told they had to patch some spots on the walls—like the hole she’d made—build a new wall, and tear one out.

She was eager to watch and film the process and, since Max was busy, she headed inside to gather the equipment and set up.

When she stepped into the house, the scent of sawdust and fresh lumber was already thick in the air, and she sneezed. The kitchen was a disaster zone—exactly what she had expected. Boxes of new cabinets lined the far wall, stacks of drywall leaned precariously near the back door, and the plans for the room were taped up on a bare wall.

As she walked over, her gaze swept across the changes. The wall separating the living room was set to be torn down, while a new one would go up at the back of the kitchen. An exterior door in that space which led out to the back of the house and was close to the stairs that descended to the beach. This new room would function as a mudroom, providing a place to store boots and wet clothes after coming in from the shore. That room would also connect to the walk-in pantry, which housed the door leading down to the cellar—soon to be Max’s new wine cellar.

This was going to be fun.

The camera, tripod, and light were right where she’d left them in the dining room, and she arranged them for the best angles, well out of the way of the work.

Juliette had just set up the first shot when Max strolled in, but he wasn’t alone. Palmer and his crew followed, their presence instantly filling the space with an air of efficiency and controlled chaos.

Palmer glanced around and nodded towards her after spotting her cameras. “I’ll let you know if you need to move anything,” he told her. “Everyone else, let’s get to work. Parker’s team will start on tearing out that wall. My crew will focus on prepping the walls for the new cabinets.”

Juliette quickly adjusted the camera to capture the action as the men got to work. Within minutes, the sounds of drills, hammers, and the occasional curse word filled the space. Parker’s crew used sledgehammers to knock down the old dividing wall, and dust turned the room smokey.

Palmer’s guys measured and marked where the new walls would go and started hauling in lumber that had been cut to size outside. She could hear the saw working every so often between the crashes of the sledgehammers.

Max eagerly helped when asked. Currently he was using a crowbar to loosen part of the window frame while trying not to damage the glass.

She filmed as Max pried the piece free, grinning as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “Not bad for a screenwriter, huh?” he called over to her.

Juliette smirked. “I’ll admit, you look pretty convincing. But let’s be honest, we both know Palmer’s crew is doing most of the real work.”

Palmer let out a chuckle as he walked by. “That’s what we get paid for. We’ll make sure this place doesn’t come crashing down around him.”

Max rolled his eyes good-naturedly and went back to pulling nails from the frame. Juliette found it endearing—the way he threw himself into something so outside his usual world of scripts and glamour.

She kept the camera rolling, capturing the transformation of the kitchen piece by piece. The wall came down, leaving a wide-open space that immediately made the room feel bigger. The patched-up spots on the drywall started to take shape, and the stack of new cabinets waited for their turn to be installed.

At midday, Max ordered pizzas from Baked Pizzeria in town for everyone, and the crew took their lunch outside, leaving Max and Juliette alone to eat their own lunches inside.

“So, how does it feel to get your hands dirty?” she asked, pretending her soda bottle was a microphone.

Max stretched his arms, wincing slightly. “I feel like I’ll need a long soak in the tub later. If I had a tub.” He laughed. “But honestly? It’s kind of fun.” He shot her a grin. “Maybe I should quit writing and take up construction full time.”

Juliette snorted. “Please. You’d last a month before running back to Hollywood.”

He smirked, leaning in slightly. “That depends. If you were here keeping me entertained, I might last longer.”

Her cheeks warmed and then she remembered the article for the first time since earlier.

“Sophia hinted that there was more to the story between you and Gabriella,” she said, taking a sip of her soda.

Max shrugged. “What did she tell you?”

“Nothing, other than that.”

He nodded. “I went out on three dates with Gabriella. Most of them were arranged by her agent and my people.”

“You have people?” she broke in, trying hard to sound shocked, then shrugged when he rolled his eyes.

“I *had* people,” he corrected. “After what went down, I fired them.”

“What did go down? Exactly?” She took another bite.

He glanced around, almost as if he was making sure no one was filming or overhearing them. Then he leaned closer to her and lowered his voice.

“Gabriella arranged to publicly trap me into marriage. For almost three weeks, she convinced the media that we were engaged. She even purchased a ring for herself.”

“Seriously?” Juliette was shocked. “It was all fake?”

He nodded and leaned back. “It took a while to figure out my next move. We had several more events to attend together for the premiere of *Never Enough*. I was told to let it ride until all the hype for the movie died down.”

Juliette thought for a moment, trying to remember the timeline.

“Two weeks after the movie was out, I circulated a statement that she had called the wedding off. I figured it would be best for her reputation and hoped that she wouldn’t come back and act like she was the victim of some sort of…”

“Abuse?” she offered.

He nodded and took another sip of his drink.

“Then word got out about her little sister going into rehab. I hadn’t met her.” He shrugged. “When her parents died, I thought I was off the hook. But then she started posting all that stuff about how we were getting back together. I was in New York and she was still in California. Honestly, I had moved on.”

“With Sophia?” she asked with a smile. “She told me you kissed.”

He nodded. “Now that you know the truth, do you understand why articles like the one yesterday don’t faze me?”

She nodded and avoided his eyes. “Surely you’re going to do more interviews in the future?”

He shook his head lightly. “I moved to New York since I had committed to teaching the class for a friend. Once that commitment was over, I purchased this place.” He smiled suddenly. “Sophia had gone on and on during one of our dates about her hometown. When my real estate agent told me about the lighthouse, well, I was hooked.”

She chuckled, but before she could respond, Palmer came back inside. “Break’s over! Let’s get this place ready for the cabinets.”

Chapter Eight

By the time the men hung the drywall on the new walls, the other crew had demolished the one wall and cleaned up and patched all the walls that would stay. Shortly after those tasks were done, the crew left for the night.

He wanted to see if Juliette could stick around a little longer, but she had disappeared without him noticing. No doubt she'd left along with everyone else.

Once the house was quiet, he stood in the kitchen, assessing the day's work. The cabinets were still in their boxes, unopened, shoved against the dining room wall, along with the new appliances he'd ordered. He'd been told they'd be opening the cabinets and putting them together in the coming days. He couldn't wait.

He could just imagine how the room would look months from now—the warm honey color on the walls, the rich color of the wood cabinets, the sanded wood floors gleaming. There'd be bread baking in his new double oven. Maybe cookies? The smell of spring would be gently blowing through the windows. The sound of laughter and music... he stilled and cocked his head to the side a little as he frowned.

Was that "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" playing softly from somewhere in the house?

"It looks amazing," Juliette said beside him. He jumped and covered his heart with his hands. "Sorry." She chuckled. "I forgot my bag." She held up her bag and waved it at him. "Gosh, you look like you saw a ghost."

"No," he said quickly, but he was pretty sure he'd just heard one. He'd never believed in ghosts before. Why now? Something about this old place had him questioning his sanity. He must be overworked, sleep deprived, and under sexed.

But he wasn't afraid of whatever was there. After all, the only feelings he'd gotten around the property were love and excitement.

Maybe it was the young couple that had lived here before? Maybe an old lighthouse keeper?

Whoever or whatever was lingering, it was obvious they meant no harm.

He shook his head to clear the stupidity from his foggy mind and then, without thinking, driven by some unknown force, he took two steps towards Juliette until he was less than a breath away. Then he leaned down and kissed her.

The moment she melted against his chest, he knew he was a goner. She tasted like he'd imagined she would. Sweet, sensual, full of heat. He knew in that second he would do whatever it took to keep her right there.

They jumped apart when a door somewhere in the house slammed shut.

"What was that?" she asked, her eyes wide as she glanced down the now dark hallway.

"I'm guessing one of the guys is still here." He narrowed his eyes at the darkness.

"No," Juliette said slowly. "Everyone is gone. I walked out with them. My car is the only one left." She took a step behind him. "Go check."

He chuckled. "Not alone." He took her hand and flipped on the lights as they went. They checked every single room and closet. When they headed up to the top of the lighthouse, she assured him that it was probably the wind that had shut an almost closed door, though she was chatting nervously.

"That happens all the time at my parents' place. Their bathroom door slams shut every time one of their windows is cracked open."

Since he didn't want to worry her, he agreed. Hell, if it meant keeping her here a little longer so he could enjoy her company, he'd agree to anything.

They stood once more looking over the town lights as the last rays of sunshine disappeared over the horizon, and he turned to her.

"I was going to head into the Golden Oar for food. I still don't have a working kitchen. Do you care to join me?"

She glanced at her watch and then bit her lip. "I was going to try to pick up a shift tonight. My bills don't pay themselves," she joked.

He frowned. "Oh! I..." He cursed himself under his breath. "I meant to talk to you about that."

"About? My bills?" She frowned.

"No, about your pay."

“My...” Her frown increased. “What?”

“Here, I have...” He patted his back pocket and came up empty, then remembered he’d put the envelope with the check he’d written earlier that morning in his shirt pocket. Smiling, he pulled it out and handed it over.

“What is this?” she asked, holding the envelope like it was going to bite her.

“Your cut of the first month’s revenues.”

“What revenues?” She glanced up at him.

“From the videos you’ve been making. Ad revenues. I just got the first check a few days ago.” He nudged it towards her and waited as she opened it.

When her eyes went wide, he smiled.

She glanced up at him in disbelief. “This is more than I make at the restaurant in two months, working five days a week.”

He chuckled. “I was shocked too. And since then, we have even more followers. I’m expecting this to double next month. If you keep up the videos.”

She laughed. “I guess this gives me enough reason to head to dinner with you.” She tucked the check into her bag and then wrapped her arm through his. “Lead the way,” She motioned towards the stairs, then froze. The look on her face had him once more shielding her from whatever was obviously scaring her. His eyes moved to where she’d looked, but he didn’t see anything. They’d left the lights on as they’d gone, so the landing below them was fully lit.

He could see that there was no one there and certainly nothing that would have caused her face to go as pale as it had.

“What?” he asked, still ready to protect her.

“I... I thought I saw...” She shook her head.

“What?” he asked when she didn’t finish. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.” He took her in his arms and held her. He felt her shiver once and then straighten up.

“I thought I saw a young man there.” She motioned to the landing.

“Young? Like a child?” He frowned down at the landing, instantly worried some kids had broken into the place.

The first few days he’d lived there, he’d watched a few local kids climb up the stairs from the beach and cross his property. He hadn’t thought much about it, just as long as they didn’t mess with the buildings.

“No, it... he was about my age, I suppose. He was dressed in all black, with one of those old caps that men used to wear on his head.” She blinked a few times and then shrugged as she looked at him. “He looked like he’d stepped out of a black-and-white movie.” She sighed. “I suppose I’m just jumpy after getting spooked.” She took his arm again. “And very hungry from all the work today.”

“Well then, shall we?” He led them back down the stairs.

When they reached the first landing, he felt her shiver next to him. But after a quick and very thorough glance around, they both knew they were alone.

After shutting off all the lights and locking the house up, he followed her back into town and parked beside her at the Golden Oar. The place was packed, as usual.

The second Max stepped into the Golden Oar with Juliette beside him, he felt the weight of half the room’s attention land squarely on his shoulders. He was used to that, sure—but this was different. Pride wasn’t New York or Hollywood, and these weren’t reporters or producers looking to schmooze. These were locals, with curious eyes darting between him and Juliette, no doubt piecing together whatever small-town theories they’d cooked up.

And damn, he didn’t hate it.

Juliette brushed against his side as they made their way through the crowd. “Please. Don’t mind us small-town folk. I’m sure everyone here was hoping to catch a glimpse of you sooner or later, Mr. Hollywood.” She grinned at him.

“You’re the real star here.” He leaned closer to her and whispered, “Lead the way. I’m just your humble plus one.”

She shot him a look, but there was color rising in her cheeks, and it made him grin like an idiot.

They approached the bar, where Iian Jordan was wiping down glasses. Iian spotted Juliette and immediately lit up, signing something Max couldn’t quite catch until Juliette responded.

Max hung back, watching her hands move effortlessly as she used ASL to communicate. God, she was something else. Smart, funny, beautiful—and clearly full of surprises.

Juliette turned, introducing him. “Max, this is Iian. He owns the place.”

Max offered his hand, signing slowly, “Nice to meet you. Love your restaurant.”

Iian gave him an approving nod. “Your videos are all anyone talks about lately.”

Max smirked and looked over at Juliette. “See? Told you. They didn’t even read that stupid article.”

She rolled her eyes. “I regret bringing you out in public.”

But she didn’t really mean it. He could tell by the way her lips twitched that she was fighting a smile.

Iian pointed them to a corner booth, promising drinks on the house, and Max followed Juliette through the maze of tables, her ponytail swaying, her laughter trailing back towards him as someone called out her name.

She stopped a few times and introduced him and quickly caught everyone up on the progress of the lighthouse. Which is all

anyone wanted to talk about, it seemed. Still, it was nice.

Yeah, small-town life wasn't so bad.

Once they were settled, he stretched his arm along the back of the booth behind her, more to feel close than anything. "So," he said, "how does it feel to be locally famous?"

She snorted. "Oh, please. You're the one slumming it with the small-town nobody, remember?"

He remembered the article's words and winced. He hated that they'd called her a nobody. She wasn't a nobody. She was the most amazing person he'd ever met.

He let his gaze linger on her. "Honestly? Feels like an upgrade," he admitted truthfully.

She ducked her head, pretending to study the menu, but he caught the smile she was trying to hide.

"Just so we're clear, I'm not hiding out here after the Gabriella fiasco. And I can assure you, I am not slumming it now." He touched her arm lightly and felt her relax against him.

She blinked, then laughed. "I know. I can't decide if I should be honored or insulted?"

"Definitely honored. They have no idea you're the one actually running the show. I'm just the guy holding the hammer."

She smirked. "Speaking of which, maybe we should post a video of you actually working. Just to silence the haters." She nudged him in the ribs.

"Ouch. After today's work, I'm counting the days until my new shower is installed. Dreaming of it, actually."

"You can always head down to the Boys and Girls club. The showers there are good."

"Not a bad idea. Beats using the hose outside like I did last night."

She shivered. "That must have been freezing."

"It was. My toes are still numb," he joked. "You know sign language. How?"

"I worked here a couple summers in school, before I moved over to Pride Pueblo Cocina. Since almost everyone here knows it in order to work efficiently with Iian, I took a night class. How about you?"

"My family took a class together with Faye." He felt the darkness seep in about his sister and all that she was losing.

Before Juliette could ask him more, their drinks arrived. She wrapped her hands around the glass, cheeks still slightly flushed from laughter. God, she was... radiant. He hadn't realized how dark things had felt before her.

"You know," he said, taking a sip of his cider, "in some cultures, the fact that I have proposed to you twice makes us basically married."

She nearly choked but recovered as she glanced around as if to see if anyone had overheard him.

He shrugged, grinning.

Juliette laughed so hard she had to set her drink down. That sound? He could live on it.

"Wow. That explains why you've been getting so handsy lately," she teased.

He leaned in, voice low. "Just embracing tradition."

A few people waved in Juliette's direction, and he watched her wave back, fully aware that the town was probably dissecting every look and smile they shared.

But honestly? For the first time in years, Max didn't care what anyone thought.

Sitting there beside her, hearing her laugh, watching her eyes light up...

Yeah.

This felt like exactly where he was supposed to be.

Chapter Nine

Juliette couldn't count the number of times she'd eaten at the Golden Oar in her lifetime. Tonight was completely different than any time before.

Sure, she'd gone there on dates with other men, but the comparison was laughable. There was just something about sitting across from Max Wilson—famous screenwriter and the most distracting man she'd ever shared a meal with.

It wasn't just that he was handsome. It was the way he leaned in to listen when she spoke, how his gaze stayed on her like there was nowhere else he'd rather be. It was dangerous, really. How easy it felt to just... fall.

Between bites of hamburgers and sips of cold beer, they chatted about all of the videos they had posted so far, which had taken on a life of their own online.

"I still can't believe how many people are watching," she said, shaking her head. "I think they're only watching to see you."

Max grinned. "No, it's not just me. It's the remodel. I mean, who doesn't want to see an old lighthouse turn into something amazing. Plus, it's you. You make it fun. People like watching you boss me around," he joked.

She snorted. "Please. They're there for you and your 'famous hands.'"

He flexed his fingers dramatically, making her laugh. "Hey, these hands did actual work today. Sort of."

She smiled over the rim of her glass. "You're not half bad with a sledgehammer, I'll give you that much."

His grin softened and, for a moment, he just watched her, like he was memorizing the moment. Then his gaze drifted out the window towards the dark water of the Pacific outside.

"My sister would love this place," he said quietly, his gaze turning back to her.

Juliette tilted her head. "Faye, you mean? The one losing her hearing?"

He nodded. "Yeah. She's struggled her entire life. She just had another surgery, actually. It's been tough. She's younger than me by two years and stubborn as hell. Refuses to let it slow her down, but..." He shrugged. "It's hard watching someone you love go through that."

Juliette placed her hand on his across the table. "I'm sorry. That's a lot."

He glanced down at their hands and flipped his palm up so their fingers linked. "And then there's Ally, my other sister. Her divorce has gotten so messy. That's been a whole different circus. Her ex is... well, let's just say I've had to stop myself from driving over there more than once."

Juliette smiled gently. "Charlotte's her daughter?"

"Yeah." He perked up at just the mention of his niece. "She's two. Smart as hell and completely fearless. My sister says that she spent the weekend sketching out ideas for the kitchen remodel. She sent these photos." He pulled out his phone and showed her the photo of a bunch of circles and lines in every color in the crayon box. "I can't understand her colorful lines, but my sister tells me it has to do with adding a slide in the living room. I love them." He laughed.

"That's adorable," Juliette said. "You're really good with her."

He shrugged like it was nothing, but the pride in his eyes was obvious.

She hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Do you want kids of your own?"

The question felt heavier than she'd expected, hanging there between them.

Max didn't hesitate. "Yeah. As many as any woman I'm lucky enough to convince to marry me wants."

She laughed, but there was heat crawling up her neck. "Wow. That's quite the sales pitch."

He winked. "I'm full of those."

For a second, she imagined what that life might look like. Kids. Holidays. A house full of laughter and chaos. And Max. God, she was in so much trouble.

"Better keep those videos going then," she teased, squeezing his hand once before pulling away to finish her drink. "You're going to need the extra income if you plan on funding a slide in the kitchen."

"Deal," he said, smiling like he'd just won something.

And honestly?

Maybe he had.

She lost track of how long they'd been sitting there enjoying one another's company, and when she glanced around she realized they were the last people in the dining room.

"Gosh, I think they're going to lock us in here soon." She laughed and stood up.

He glanced at his watch and stood as well. "Time got away from us. I'll pay and then walk you out." They moved over and she stood by as he paid.

Then, to her happy surprise, Max reached for her hand, threading his fingers through hers as they strolled out of the now quiet and dimly lit restaurant together. The spring night air was crisp and carried the faintest scent of salt from the ocean. The soft glow of the streetlamps painted golden halos over the sidewalk. The sound of their footsteps echoed in the near-empty parking lot, and, for a moment, everything felt perfect. Simple.

She snuck a glance at him, marveling at the easy way he held her hand, like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like they'd been doing it forever.

When they reached her car, he tugged her gently towards him, wrapping her in his arms without hesitation. The warmth of his body seeped into hers as he leaned down, his lips brushing close to her ear.

"This has been the best night," he murmured, his voice low and rough. It sent a little shiver down her spine.

She nodded against his chest, taking a deep breath, and the familiar, intoxicating scent of him surrounded her—clean and woody, with that faint musk she was starting to crave more than she cared to admit.

God, she wanted to stay here forever, locked in this moment. Just the two of them.

But then she felt it. A sudden tension in his shoulders. His arms around her stiffened as if someone had flipped a switch.

Before she could ask what was wrong, she heard it—clicking sounds, rapid and sharp like insect wings snapping in the dark. Then came the blinding bursts of white light.

Flashes. Cameras.

Her stomach dropped.

"Go. Go home," Max whispered urgently, his mouth still close to her ear, but his tone had shifted. Protective. Serious. "I'll deal with them. See you tomorrow."

Before she could protest, he was already guiding her towards the driver's side door with surprising force. The next thing she knew, she was inside the car, her hands gripping the steering wheel as another series of blinding flashes went off directly in her face through the windshield.

It was chaos.

Voices shouted out from the shadows. Questions she couldn't quite make out. The harsh strobe of camera flashes flickered like fireworks, making her vision spotty.

Then, mercifully, Max stepped between her and the pack of photographers, his broad back blocking most of the view. He stood there like a shield, his hands raised slightly as if warning them back.

Juliette's heart pounded as she started the engine. She tried to ease away from the curb, but it wasn't easy. Two of the paparazzi moved as if they owned the road, one of them standing directly in front of her car and snapping picture after picture like she was some kind of spectacle.

Why? Wouldn't the shots all be the same? Her staring like a frozen deer in headlights? Probably looking haggard and very un-Hollywood.

She wanted to scream. Or cry. Or both. But instead, she gritted her teeth and focused on not hitting anyone as she inched forward.

Max appeared again at the front of her car, his hand gesturing firmly for the photographer to move aside. There was a brief exchange—Max's voice low but clearly displeased—before the man finally gave up and stepped back with a scowl.

Juliette didn't wait another second. As soon as the space cleared, she pulled out and drove down the street, her hands trembling around the steering wheel.

In the rear-view mirror, she caught one last glimpse of Max standing there, still facing them down, still protecting her from the onslaught of flashing cameras.

And somehow, that made her heart ache even more than the chaos itself.

By the time she got home, Max had texted her to make sure she'd made it home okay.

"Yes, home safe. You?"

"Just pulled in. Thanks again for going to dinner with me. I was really hoping to end the night with a kiss."

"Next time. See you tomorrow." She smiled for the rest of the night.

She woke early the next morning to Sophia's text messages. There were a few links to articles with images of her and Max from the night before.

Images of them embracing. Of her in the car looking confused and a little annoyed. There were some head-shots of Max that were used a lot in the media. Images of the lighthouse and of their social media pages. She smiled thinking about all the free publicity. After a quick glance at the number of followers, she confirmed that was the case. They had an additional three

hundred thousand followers on each platform already.

Smiling and feeling lighthearted, she thought about the day's projects as she got ready.

Thankfully, none of the articles had taken a nasty tone like the previous one. Every single one mentioned her by name.

By the time she rolled up the driveway and parked in her usual spot, everyone she knew in town was messaging her about the articles.

"Did you see it?" she asked Max when she stepped into the already busy kitchen area.

"What?" he asked, turning to her.

"All the new followers." She did a little happy dance, and he and a few workers chuckled.

"Okay, yeah, I guess our run-in with the media last night helped." He wrapped an arm around her. "So, let's not disappoint our viewers. We're all set to finish the cupboards today." He motioned. "Cameras are all set up and ready for you."

After setting her things down in the other room, she jumped right into setting up the best angles for recording the workers. Max was helping Palmer shift some of the plumbing to prep for the cabinet installations, and she had a stationary camera on them. She used the handheld camera to follow Parker's team, which was finishing the drywall work on the new walls.

Juliette adjusted the camera strap around her wrist as she moved through the space, careful to stay out of the workers' way while still capturing the best shots. The rhythmic sounds of hammers, drills, and occasional laughter filled the unfinished kitchen, giving the space a heartbeat of its own.

She crouched down near Parker's team, filming as they smoothed the last coat of joint compound over the seams in the drywall. The transformation was incredible—just days ago, this part of the kitchen had been nothing but a skeletal frame of wooden studs, and now it was starting to look like a real, livable space.

Switching angles, she zoomed in on the putty knife gliding over the wall, the creamy white plaster blending seamlessly. The footage would be perfect for a transition clip. Maybe she could do a before-and-after montage, showing the kitchen's progress over the past few days.

Across the room, Max and Palmer worked on repositioning the plumbing, their voices low as they discussed the next steps. The stationary camera she had set up was catching everything, but she still snuck a few close-up shots of Max's hands as he tightened a pipe fitting.

Even when he was covered in dust and sweat, he looked ridiculously good. It was frustrating, really.

She shook her head and refocused.

After another hour, the drywall crew packed up their tools, and the real fun began—cabinet building and installation.

The building portion of the process was done in the other room to make space for the installation. She set up a camera on a time-lapse mode so viewers would be able to watch the work's progress quickly.

Then she perched on a step stool to get a wide-angle shot of Palmer's team as they secured the lower cabinets in place. Max grabbed a drill and helped hold one of the cabinets in place while Palmer lined it up.

"Hey, boss, don't scratch my work," Parker teased as he passed by, tossing a rag at Max.

Max caught it effortlessly and smirked. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Juliette grinned as she panned the camera over to capture the exchange. These were the kinds of moments people loved—small glimpses of personality and teamwork that made the renovation process feel personal and real.

After a few hours of work, the lower cabinets were all in place. Before they started on the upper, everyone took a lunch break.

When the scent of fresh tacos wafted through the air and hit her, her stomach growled loudly—loud enough that Max turned to smirk at her.

"Hungry?" he teased, handing her a plate.

She gave him a playful shove before grabbing one. "Starving."

The crew had gathered around a weathered picnic table on the edge of the hillside, the view stretching out before them in rolling green and blue. The high sun warmed everything, confirming that summer was almost there. A cool breeze rustled the trees. It was the perfect spot to take a break.

Palmer cracked open a soda and leaned back against the table. "Not a bad way to spend a workday, huh?"

Parker nodded as he bit into his taco. "Beats being stuck inside an office, that's for sure."

Juliette glanced over at Max, who was watching the horizon with a thoughtful expression. She nudged his arm. "You okay?"

He blinked and turned to her, as if snapping out of a daze. "Yeah, just thinking."

"Dangerous," Parker joked, earning a round of chuckles from the table.

Max rolled his eyes but smiled. "I was just remembering the last time I did a big project like this. I helped my sister Ally renovate a bathroom in her first house. It was a disaster at first—wrong measurements, missing materials—but somehow, we pulled it together."

Juliette rested her chin in her hand, intrigued. "Sounds like a fun memory."

He chuckled. "It was. Charlotte was a baby, she'd sit in her little bouncer and 'supervise' while we worked." His smile softened. "Now she's all attitude and glitter."

Juliette grinned. “She sounds like a handful.”

“She is, but she’s the best.” He took a sip of his drink before glancing at her. “You’d like her. She’s got this big personality, always chattering on about everything. Even if you don’t understand a word of it, she keeps you entertained.”

Juliette imagined a mini-Max running around, full of curiosity and mischief, and the thought made her heart warm.

“How’s Faye doing?” she asked, shifting slightly.

Max’s expression dimmed slightly, but he nodded. “She’s doing okay. Still recovering. My mother claims she’s annoyed at having to stay with her but since Ally and Charolette are there as well, she’s sticking it out.” His fingers drummed against the table. “She’s been learning new ways to adapt. Since we all learned sign language, that has been a huge help, but it’s been an adjustment for her.”

Juliette reached out and gave his arm a gentle squeeze. “She’s lucky to have such a caring family.”

He looked at her, something unreadable in his gaze, then he smiled. “We’re lucky to have each other.”

For a few moments, they sat in comfortable silence, watching the view as the rest of the crew laughed and joked around them.

“Do you think you’ll ever return to the bright lights of the city?” she asked finally when her curiosity got the better of her.

“And leave all this behind?” He smirked slightly. “The quiet is so... healing.”

“Sometimes it’s a little too quiet.” She glanced out and watched a seagull swoop down towards the water.

“I don’t think there is such a thing,” he said with a frown. “Not like Faye...” He dropped off and suddenly she felt foolish for her statement.

Of course, Faye was losing her hearing and here she was complaining about quiet.

“I didn’t mean...” she started, but Max’s hand reached out and took hers.

“I know.” He smiled. “No, I don’t plan on ever going back to the city. Last night’s run-in with the paparazzi assured me of that. It’s the one thing I hate about this job.”

“Yeah, but the lights, the attention?” She nudged him in the side with her elbow. “The women.” She wiggled her eyebrows and had him laughing.

“Right now, I’ve got everything I could ever wish for.” He pulled her a little closer. “Well, almost everything.” He winked at her and she grew warm.

“Now I know just how you got all those women.” She laughed, shaking her head. But as she looked at him, watching the easy way he smiled, she realized just how dangerous this was becoming.

When lunch was over, everyone went back inside to work.

She aimed the camera and moved in closer as they lifted the first of the upper cabinets into place. They had put in braces to hold the cabinet up while a worker secured each to the wall with long screws.

By the time they were done with the last cabinet, the golden hues of the late afternoon sun streamed through the windows, making the fresh wood gleam.

“Hold it there,” Palmer directed, stepping back to check the alignment.

Juliette adjusted the focus, catching the way Max braced the cabinet with his forearms, his muscles flexing slightly as he held the weight steady. He looked up, catching her watching him through the lens, and smirked.

When they were done, the men rushed around and cleaned up their tools and the trash left behind.

Juliette let the camera rest against her hip as she took in the transformation.

“Wow,” she breathed. “It actually looks like a kitchen again.”

Max wiped his forehead with the back of his hand as he stood next to her. “And it’s gonna look even better once we get the stone countertops in.”

Palmer clapped him on the shoulder. “Not bad for a day’s work. Soon you’ll have one finished room in this monster of a house.”

Max chuckled and shook Palmer’s hand.

Juliette lifted her camera one last time, capturing the moment—the exhausted but satisfied crew, the golden light spilling in, Max standing in the middle of it all, looking proud and completely in his element.

This was exactly why she loved doing this.

And maybe, just maybe, it had something to do with the man at the center of it all.

Chapter Ten

While Juliette sat at the table in his destroyed dining room, editing the footage from the day, he headed outside to hose off the layers of dust and sweat. When he came back inside refreshed, she was still bent over the laptop and was chuckling to herself.

“I wasn’t that bad was I?” he asked, pulling up a chair next to her.

She glanced over and shook her head. “No, Palmer just dropped the hammer on his foot. Some of the curses are just... Well, here, watch.”

Max leaned in, watching the screen as Juliette replayed the footage. The camera had caught the exact moment Palmer lost his grip on the hammer, sending it straight onto his foot. A string of colorful curses followed, some of which Max was fairly certain weren’t even in English.

“Damn,” Max muttered, shaking his head. “I didn’t know he could even put words together like that.”

Juliette snorted. “Neither did I.” She rewound it again, letting it play at half speed this time.

Max chuckled as Palmer’s face contorted in pain just as the hammer made contact. The man stumbled back, hopping on one foot as Parker and one of the other guys burst out laughing in the background.

“Well,” Max said, smirking, “at least we know his foot’s not broken if he could still jump around like that.”

Juliette leaned against him slightly as she adjusted the camera settings. “I should edit this into a blooper reel.”

Max cocked his head. “You planning on publicly humiliating the guy?”

“Only a little,” she teased, grinning up at him. “Think of it as motivation for him to be more careful.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Remind me to never get caught doing something dumb on camera around you.”

She smirked. “Oh, it’s too late for that. I’ve got plenty of footage.”

Max groaned playfully, dragging a hand down his face. “Great. So, what’s the damage?”

Juliette tapped her chin, pretending to think. “Hmm... a few times where you forgot the camera was rolling and talked to yourself. One moment where you absolutely butchered the measurements for the cabinets—”

“Hey, in my defense, that was Parker’s bad math,” he interjected.

“Sure it was,” she said with a wink.

He exhaled dramatically. “I’m doomed.”

She laughed and turned her focus back to the laptop, adjusting clips and cutting together the next segment of the video. Max watched her for a moment, admiring the way her brows furrowed slightly in concentration, the soft way she bit her lip when she was deep in thought.

“You’re really good at this,” he said after a beat, nudging her lightly.

She glanced up, a little surprised. “At what?”

“All of it. Filming, editing, making this whole project come to life.” He nodded towards the screen. “It’s not just a bunch of construction shots—you make it feel like a story. And people love that. You’d do great in Hollywood.”

A faint blush crept up her neck, and she ducked her head. “Well, it helps when you’ve got interesting subjects.”

He smirked. “Flattery will get you everywhere, you know.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Oh, trust me, I know.”

Max glanced out the dark window, then into his kitchen. They’d made good progress today, and with the upper cabinets in, they were one step closer to finishing the space.

But right now, sitting here next to Juliette, watching her work, he realized something.

This—these quiet moments, the teasing, the way she made the chaos of this project feel like something more—was just as important as all the renovations they were doing.

And if he wasn’t careful, he was going to fall for her even harder than he already had.

“Stay here tonight,” he blurted out quickly.

Her head jerked towards him, and her eyebrows arched as her eyes met his.

“I mean, if you want,” he added, suddenly feeling stupid. He opened his mouth to say something else, anything else, but

before he could, she rushed towards him and placed her lips over his.

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said against his mouth. “Max?”

“Hmm?” he mumbled against her neck as he rained tiny kisses over her heated skin.

“Take me upstairs.”

He stilled at her words. “I still don’t really have a bed.” He frowned at her.

She chuckled and shrugged. “Then take me to the sofa.”

“I should have thought—” he started, but she stopped him by placing her lips over his.

“Stop thinking,” she whispered. “I don’t need a bed. Honest.” She proved it by moving over him and straddling his lap while her mouth brushed over his. “All I need is you,” she added as his hands moved over her hips and then further up, slowly. He held onto her.

The force of what she was doing to him almost knocked him down. So many times in his life he’d chased this exact feeling, with so many disappointments. Now, here, with her, he knew that he’d found that missing piece that had been so elusive.

Her nails scraped against his skin as she pulled his shirt from him. Then she ran her fingertips over his skin, exploring every muscle slowly.

He explored her as well, running his hands up and down her sides, her hips, enjoying her curves and the soft feeling of her body rubbing against his.

The speed quickened. The desire doubled. Neither of them could move fast enough.

When his patience ran out and he wanted—no, needed—more, he hoisted her up and carried her to the sofa with her legs wrapped around his hips.

He laid her down on the sofa, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her. This time, her kiss was soft, tender, and spoke of her wants.

The last thing he wanted to do was disappoint her. Keeping their lips connected, he started removing her clothes as she continued to tug at his.

Her shirt disappeared, then their shoes, followed by their pants, until they were lying together in just their undergarments. The sexy, soft pink material that covered her made his mouth water.

Dipping low, he ran his mouth over it, wetting it, enjoying the way her nipples puckered underneath. When he nudged the material aside and took her into his mouth, she arched as her fingers dug into his hair.

When he cupped her, she cried out his name and stilled.

He’d never experienced anything like it before in his life.

“Max,” she sighed, and pulled him back up to her mouth. “Don’t make me wait.”

“No,” he agreed and then felt around for his jeans and the condom he kept in his wallet. She leaned up and quickly removed her bra and panties while he sheathed himself.

Then he shifted lower and settled between her thighs, his lips covering her pussy. Her nails dug into his shoulders, pulling him down towards her. He took his time, enjoying the taste of her, building her back up, enjoying the soft sounds she was making as she rubbed her body against his.

His fingers were slick as he slid in and out of her slowly. Her hips circled with each thrust.

“Juliette,” he growled against her skin, “you’ll be the death of me.” He shifted up to cover her again and she laughed.

“You make me feel alive,” she said, pulling back and locking eyes with him. “No one has ever made me feel like this before.”

He nodded in agreement, too consumed by what she was doing to him to string words together. Fear of saying the wrong thing spiked.

He’d never been at a loss of words. This was the first time. Yeah, no one had ever made him feel like this before either.

When her nails dug into his hips, forcing him closer to her, he went willingly, slipping into her like they were meant for one another.

He could have sworn the earth shifted and slowed. With each heartbeat, every breath, every moan of delight, he drew closer to the edge of no return. Then he felt her convulsing around him and with a burst of bright light and a cry of freedom, they both fell over together.

“I am never moving again,” he groaned softly.

“You’d better. Soon,” she said against his shoulder. “There may be enough room on this thing for you at night, but I doubt I’d make it through an hour with your weight pinning me down.”

He rolled over quickly until she was spread out on top of his chest, making sure they didn’t land on the floor.

“Better?” he asked, running his hands slowly over her soft curves.

“This will do for a while. Until we get hungry and remember your kitchen isn’t fully put back together.” She sighed and laid her head down on his chest. “Then I suppose we’ll have to head somewhere for dinner.”

“I’m working on the bedroom tomorrow. So that next time we do this, I’ll have a proper bed for you to enjoy,” he promised. “And I’ll make sure to move the new refrigerator and at least the microwave into the kitchen as well.”

She shifted and then looked down at him. "Don't forget a shower." She smiled and he felt his heart kick hard in his chest.

"Right." He cupped her face and gently ran his thumb over her cheek. "I should have..."

She shook her head. "It's like camping. I've roughed it plenty of times with my family over the years. I'm not like those Hollywood starlets that snap in half if someone doesn't open a door for them."

"No, you aren't," he said, grinning up at her. "It's what first drew me to you." He reached around and gripped her backside. "And this."

She laughed. "You're an ass man?"

He chuckled. "You make a pretty package in your work outfit."

She rolled her eyes. "I had salsa all over my top."

"I bet you would have tasted as good as you looked." He leaned up and kissed her. "Just like now."

She laughed but then his mouth covered hers and her laughter died and turned into a low moan.

"We'll order delivery," he said against her skin as she shifted above him and nodded in agreement. "Later."

Heat. Passion. Juliette.

So many different things flooded his mind and his senses, and when she slid onto him, whispered his name, and melted around him, nothing could have held him back from falling completely.

Chapter Eleven

There were only a few times in Juliette's life when she could honestly say she'd lost control of herself. One time was in grade school, when she'd pitched a perfect softball game and had jumped and celebrated like a mad woman.

Or the time her grandfather had died and she'd cried herself to sleep for weeks.

The moment Max had claimed her had now been added to that short list. It was as if the man knew exactly what her body wanted. The way he'd touched her, kissed her, did things that no other man had done to her—her mind went over it on repeat and dreamed of when he'd do it to her again.

She didn't want her time with him to end. Even after they'd eaten the delivered sandwiches from the Golden Oar on the sofa they had just gotten naked on, she still wanted him.

Once their food was gone and they had returned to the table and finished editing and uploading the videos from the day, she made some lame excuse and packed up and headed home. Max probably thought that she didn't want to rough it out on his sofa for the night, but in truth, she needed some time to think things through. To test the waters and make sure she wasn't just overreacting about her feelings when she was around him.

Her dreams that night assured her that what she was feeling was true. By the time she walked into his place the next morning, she was determined to tell him how she felt.

Only, she came up short when she saw Max with his arms wrapped around a petite woman with sandy blonde hair.

Without thinking, she turned around and headed towards the front door, only to stop when Max grabbed her hand. "Easy tiger. It's Faye," he whispered and wrapped his arms around her. "Come meet my sister and my mother."

She relaxed. Of course it was his sister. What in the hell had she been thinking? Her face heated as embarrassment overtook common sense. Why had she jumped like that? She'd never been the jealous type.

Then she remembered what she'd been so eager to tell him, how she felt for him, and realized why. She was in love. Plain and simple.

The moment they stepped back into the kitchen, she saw what she'd missed the first time. There was an older woman sitting at the table watching her, and Faye stood in the middle of the room with hair and eyes that looked so much like Max's that it was obvious who she was. If she had looked for more than a second, she would have realized it herself.

"Mom, Faye, this is Juliette," Max said, signing along for Faye.

"Hi," she said and signed as well. "This is a surprise visit," she added after they both greeted her.

"We decided on a day trip to get out of the city and enjoy some beach time, and of course to see how Max's construction project is going firsthand," his mother answered.

"I've been glued to all the videos the two of you are posting," Faye said as she motioned to the kitchen. "It's so much better already."

She glanced around and noticed that Max had already installed the microwave and refrigerator. He must have gotten up early and moved them himself.

Even though there still weren't countertops, a sink, or a stove, things were coming together. In the morning light, she could just imagine how things would look once it was finished.

"Yeah, it's coming together nicely," she agreed.

"Soon we'll be able to eat here," he joked. "I'm having half of the team start in my bedroom today." He motioned towards the staircase. "I plan on sleeping in a bed, a real bed, by this weekend." He chuckled. "I've given them a quick tour of the changes," he told her.

"Everything looks a lot cleaner, at least," Faye said. "The last time we were here, the place was packed with old things. Now I think I can finally see the potential."

"You came down for the day from Portland?" Juliette asked.

"Yes," his mother answered. "Just for a little while before we head to..."

"My doctor's appointment. There's a specialist I'm seeing after lunch." Faye tapped the side of her head.

"I hope it all works out. Your brother has told me a little about what you're going through. Did you know that one of Pride's

famous residents, Iian Jordan, lost his hearing at eighteen?"

Faye looked surprised. "Iian Jordan lives in Pride?" She glanced at Max. "I've seen him on that episode of *Kitchen and Cocktails*."

Juliette chuckled. "He only did that episode because we all begged him to. I used to work at his restaurant, the Golden Oar. You should take them there while they're here," she said to Max.

"I'd love that." Faye sounded excited.

Just then they heard some of the workers knock and call out and then come in the front door.

"We can get out of your way," his mother said standing up.

"Why don't we head into town and have some breakfast at the Golden Oar?" Max suggested. "The guys can get along without me for a while."

His mother nodded and then stepped out of the way as the men started setting up for that day's work. Faye seemed very eager and excited at the possibility of meeting Iian.

"Juliette?" Max turned to her.

"Go, I'll get started on filming." She smiled.

He nodded and then, to her surprise and she was sure his mother's, he bent over and kissed her. "Can I bring you back anything?"

"I wouldn't say no to a coffee and a sticky bun." She smiled. "They know how I like my coffee."

He nodded. "See you soon."

"It was nice meeting you," she signed to Faye and his mother.

"You too." Faye smiled and then followed them out.

Before they had driven out of the driveway, Juliette shot Iian a text message.

"Are you at the restaurant?"

His reply came back quickly.

"Yes, why?"

"VIP guest heading your way. Max's sister Faye. She's going through a lot right now. Losing her hearing. She is eager to meet you."

"I'll keep an eye out for them and give them extra attention. Sure miss having you work for me. But we're glued to those videos you keep posting about the lighthouse. Let us know when we can come for a tour."

"Will do. Thanks."

She absolutely loved living in Pride. Loved that, with a quick text, she could ensure that Max's family had a great experience before they set off to what she assumed would be a difficult appointment.

For the next two hours, she followed Palmer's team as they worked on the backsplash tile in the kitchen. Parker's team was busy working in the bedroom, replacing the windows with what would be massive French doors that would step out onto the new deck that another team was currently building outside. Yet another team was working on the dining room walls and floors.

She had cameras set up on those locations for time-lapse videos and kept checking them and adjusting them for the best angles.

When Max returned from breakfast with his family, he seemed preoccupied with his thoughts. She assumed it was because of his sister's health, and so she kept busy and gave him space.

He took over filming the deck work outside while she remained inside.

By the end of the day, she had barely spoken to him alone. On the plus side, they had enough footage that she was thinking of posting the deck scenes later that weekend when the workers had a few days off.

As everyone was packing up for the day, Max disappeared while she sat at his kitchen table and worked her magic with the edits. When he came back, his hair was wet and he was dressed in a clean shirt and pants.

"How's it going?" he asked, looking over her shoulder at the laptop screen.

"I finished today's posts. I'm working on this one to post on Sunday." She glanced over at him. "Have you heard from your mom or Faye?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not yet." He sighed.

She laid a hand over his. "Take a walk with me?" she suggested. "The sea air always helps when I'm worried about something."

He nodded and she shut her computer screen and grabbed her jacket.

Even though it was only weeks away from summer, the nights still had a bite to them.

They walked in silence until they hit the stairs leading them down to the beach.

Max stopped as his eyes scanned the horizon. "This is why I purchased the place." He motioned with a nod towards the bright colors of the sky as the sun disappeared behind the Pacific.

"It's easily my favorite view too. I used to love coming up here when I was a kid."

"You came up here?"

She chuckled. "What kid that grew up in Pride didn't sneak onto this property and look for missing diamonds?"

He took her hand in his, and they stood there for a moment, breathing it all in. Then he squeezed her hand and started down the stairs.

"Thank you," he said halfway down.

"For?"

He stopped a stair below her and turned to gather her in his arms before answering. "For reminding me I have a center. I spent the day worrying about Faye. Consumed by it, really." He leaned back slightly. "No news is good news. They will call when they get home."

"Thank you," she returned.

"For?" She saw a hint of a smile curve his lips.

"For giving me an opportunity." She motioned back to the house. "I'm really enjoying myself and making more money than I would waiting tables."

"Without you, we never would have gained such a following." He took her hand and continued down the stairs.

When they reached the bottom, they headed off to the right instead of the left towards town.

She let the cool evening breeze wash over her as they walked side by side, their feet sinking into the damp sand. Other than the rhythmic crash of the waves, there was silence, but it was a comfortable one. The kind that didn't need filling.

She glanced over at him, his expression thoughtful as he looked out at the water. The last of the sunset painted the horizon in streaks of deep violet and fiery orange, reflecting off the ocean like a moving painting.

"I know you're telling yourself no news is good news," she said gently, giving his hand a squeeze. "But that doesn't stop you from worrying, does it?"

Max let out a slow breath. "Not even a little." He chuckled, but there was a tightness to his voice. "Faye's been through so much already, and I hate feeling helpless. I can't fix this for her, you know?"

Juliette nodded. "It's hard watching someone you love go through something like this."

He looked at her, searching her face. "You get it."

She smiled softly. "Yeah, I do."

He squeezed her hand back. "I just keep thinking about how different things must be for her now. She's been adjusting to the hearing loss for a while, but this last surgery was a big one. Even though she acts tough, I know she's struggling."

"She's lucky to have you," Juliette said.

Max huffed a small laugh. "Yeah, well, Ally would argue that."

Juliette tilted her head. "How's she holding up?"

His jaw clenched slightly before he sighed. "Not great. Her ex, well, it's messy, and she's exhausted. Charlotte is the only thing keeping her sane right now. Mom says she's doing better this week but still." He shook his head slightly.

At the mention of his niece, his face softened.

Juliette smiled. "You light up when you talk about your niece."

"She's a bright spot in all of this," Max admitted. "Charlotte's got this way of making everything seem simpler."

"Sounds like she takes after her uncle."

"I prefer to think she gets the best of us all," he said, his voice full of affection.

Juliette watched him for a moment, admiring the way he spoke about his family. He was so steady, so devoted. It was one of the things she loved most about him.

Not loved, she corrected quickly. Liked. She liked that about him. She had to slow herself down. Love was a step often taken too quickly, and she didn't want to fall into that trap. What did she really know about him? Sure, there was a ton of physical sparks between them. That much was obvious. She knew he loved his work. Knew that he loved his family. He was an amazing storyteller. She loved his movies and the few books he'd published were some of her favorite re-reads.

She also knew that he made her laugh, that he listened—really listened—when she spoke. That he challenged her in ways no one else had. But was that enough?

She let out a slow breath, the salty air filling her lungs as they walked along the shore. The cool breeze played with the hem of her jacket, and she hugged herself as she glanced over at Max.

"What happens next?" she asked, her voice barely audible above the sound of the waves.

Max slowed his steps, turning his head to study her. "With what?"

She gave him a knowing look. "With us."

He stopped walking entirely, and she followed suit, shifting to face him. The fading light cast a soft glow over his features, making the warmth in his eyes stand out even more.

"I was hoping you'd tell me," he admitted as he pulled her close. "I know what I want, but I don't want to push you."

She shifted and rested her head against his chest and swallowed. "And what is it you want?" she whispered.

He leaned back until their eyes locked. He smiled but there was something serious in his expression. "I want to see where this goes. I don't want this to be just some fling or something we look back on as a 'fun little thing' that happened while we

were working together.” He reached up, tucking a strand of hair that had been blowing in her eyes behind her ear. “I want you, Juliette.”

Her heart slammed against her ribs. He always spoke with such certainty, like he wasn’t afraid to say what he felt. She envied that.

She took a breath. “I just... I don’t want to rush into something we aren’t ready for.”

Max nodded. “I don’t either. But that doesn’t mean we have to pretend like this isn’t happening.” He gestured between them. “Because it is. And it’s real.”

She bit her lip, torn between the part of her that wanted to throw caution to the wind and the part that whispered reminders of past heartbreaks.

He must have sensed her hesitation because he took her hands in his. “I’m not asking for forever right now,” he said gently. “I’m just asking for a chance to see where this goes. Together.”

Juliette let his words settle over her, warmth spreading through her chest. Maybe she was overthinking things. Maybe she didn’t need all the answers right now.

Maybe, for once, she just needed to take a chance.

A small smile curved her lips as she looked up at him. “Okay,” she said finally. “Let’s see where this goes.”

Max grinned, then pulled her into his arms again, wrapping her in a hug that felt like home. She closed her eyes, letting herself sink into the feeling, into him.

Chapter Twelve

Over the course of the next days, they stayed so busy, there was no chance of a repeat of that first night together.

His mother had called him that next morning and filled him in on how the appointment had gone for Faye.

“Nothing but another disappointment,” his mother had claimed. “This doctor wants to remove the cochlear implant. He thinks it may be the cause of her headaches and the reason her vision is starting to blur.”

“Then do it,” he suggested.

“It’s not that simple. Faye has gotten used to having that part of her hearing back. If they remove the implant, then she goes back to hearing...”

“Nothing,” he finished for his mother.

“It’s a price she’s unwilling to pay at this point.” His mother finished with a deep sigh. “We’re in a holding pattern until she decides.”

“Keep me posted,” he had said before hanging up.

That conversation played over in his mind while he kept himself busy. The conversation he and Juliette had had on the beach also replayed. He told himself it was good that neither of them were ready to commit to anything long term, but in truth, he kept dreaming about it. About what life would be like if she moved in with him. If they committed to one another longer than, well, short term.

Since his kitchen was almost completely put together now, he’d gone shopping and had filled his fridge and new cupboards. He was planning on asking Juliette over for a proper date and cooking for her that weekend.

He’d picked up some fresh salmon and locally grown vegetables for the occasion, hoping to impress her with his cooking skills. His bedroom now held a newly delivered king-size bed complete with new sheets, pillows, and a comforter.

Today, the men were finishing up on the deck that now sat off his bedroom as well as working in the bathrooms.

They had finished his dining room, which sat empty because he had yet to purchase a table and chairs for the space.

His shower now had marble tile walls, a newly built bench, and even a niche that would hold his shampoo bottles. They were still waiting on the glass wall and doors to be installed, but he’d used the thing last night and was thankful he no longer had to shower outside with the hose.

Max stood at the edge of the new deck, staring out at the view he hadn’t quite let himself appreciate from this spot yet. The ocean stretched out endlessly before him, the rhythmic crash of the waves below blending with the sound of hammers and drills behind him. The men were hard at work, moving in and out of the house as they finished the bathrooms and put the final touches on the deck.

Juliette was in full work mode, setting up her cameras in different spots to capture time-lapse footage of the construction. He watched as she adjusted the angle on one of the tripods, her bottom lip caught between her teeth in concentration. Damn, she was sexy when she got like this—completely lost in her work, oblivious to everything else around her.

She must have felt him staring because she glanced up, catching his eye with a smirk. “You’re supposed to be working,” she teased.

Max chuckled and crossed his arms. “I am working. I’m supervising.”

She snorted. “Supervising? Is that what we’re calling standing around and looking pretty?”

“Absolutely.” He leaned against the new railing. “Gotta make sure everything’s up to my very high standards.”

Juliette rolled her eyes but grinned. She gave her camera one last check before moving closer to him. “Okay, so tell me what’s on the agenda today.”

He gestured behind them. “The guys are finishing up the bathrooms, and the deck is just about done—just need to seal it and make sure everything’s solid. And your favorite—plumbing work.”

She groaned dramatically. “I swear, every time I come here, there’s something to do with plumbing. I should start charging extra to crawl around under cupboards with Palmer’s workers.”

Max smirked. “I’ll give you a bonus this weekend.”

Juliette raised an eyebrow. “What kind of bonus?”

“How about a home-cooked meal prepared in a new kitchen?”

“Tempting.” She smiled and leaned closer. “We never discussed if you could cook.”

“I can.” He straightened, suddenly feeling a little nervous, which was ridiculous. “I’ve had zero complaints. Both of my sisters claim I’m the best in the family.”

She tilted her head slightly. “I’m better than my brother but my mom is by far the best.”

Max exhaled and rubbed the back of his neck. “So, I figured this weekend, I’d make dinner, something official.” He hesitated before adding, “Like a real date.”

Juliette slowly smiled. “Like... a for-real date?”

“Yeah.” He wrapped his arms around her waist. “A good meal, some wine, some good company.” He met her eyes. “Maybe a sleepover?”

She studied him for a moment, and he could practically see the wheels turning in her head. Then, a slow smile spread across her lips. “As long as you include dessert,” she said, “then I’m in.”

Relief washed over him, though he played it cool. “Oh, I’ll definitely have dessert. Just wait—you’re about to be seriously impressed.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “I already am, Max.”

The rest of the week zipped by. They finished work in his bathroom, including the glass wall and door for his shower, and had moved on to the other bathroom and bedrooms.

Then they hit a major pipe that brought in the water, soaking the bathroom and bedroom that it was attached to, and it took them two whole days to repair the mess.

Even that setback couldn’t dim his excitement for Friday night when it finally came. The water in the house was back on and he’d even decided on the dessert he was going to make with the salmon.

He’d never made a crème brûlée before but seriously, how hard could it be?

After the workers left Friday, Juliette headed home to shower and change. He had three hours before she would return expecting food, wine, dessert, and him.

First things first, he’d showered off the dirt and sweat from the day’s work before conquering the dessert. That way he could have plenty of time to chill it before they dug in after dinner.

Unfortunately, he burned the first batch and had to toss the entire pan out. The second one had been too runny. By the time his third try was chilling, he had less than fifteen minutes to prep the food and set the scene.

Running around the house, he quickly tossed the tablecloth on the table, which he had moved into the formal dining room, and set his new dishes and silverware on each placemat. Then he put the new candles he’d purchased from Classy and Sassy that week in the middle of the table and lit them. He got the salmon, which he had pre-seasoned, into the oven.

The veggies he put in his new air fryer, along with seasoning and butter.

He cooked up a box of rice while watching the salmon and veggies so they didn’t overcook. He didn’t have extra salmon and if he burnt it, the night would be ruined.

When he heard his doorbell ring, he smiled and pulled the salmon out of the oven and shut off his air fryer. Everything was done. All he had to do was plate it, and he figured he’d do that after she had arrived.

Wiping off his hands, he straightened his shirt and went to open the door with a huge smile on his face.

His eagerness for the night fell away quickly when he saw Gabriella standing there in a skimpy summer dress, looking fresh and eager.

“There you are.” She threw her arms around him and kissed him square on the lips before he could jerk away.

Just then, he heard someone clear their throat and, to his horror, he realized that Juliette was also standing on his front stoop.

Seeing the questioning look on her face freed him from his stupor. The sexy blue dress she was wearing hugged her curves and had his mouth drooling.

Pushing Gabriella back a whole step, he cleared his throat.

“Juliette.” He took her hand and pulled her closer to him. Seeing her smile slightly, he realized she knew what was up. Thankfully. “This is, um, Gabriella.”

“Yes,” Juliette said softly, “we met before you opened your door.”

“Juliette, that’s the one helping you with all your wonderful films that you’re making while working on... this place?” She glanced around slowly.

“She is,” he agreed, knowing full well Gabriella was trying to get invited inside.

That thought, the possibility of his evening with Juliette being ruined, had him trying desperately to figure out how to get her to leave quickly without being too rude.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t see any chance of that happening, not when she wrapped her arm around his and purred.

“So, why don’t you deal with whatever Juliette needs from you and then let me in? I’d simply love a tour of your new place.”

Juliette's smile grew strained as she waited for him to speak. "Yes, Max, why don't you deal with me first."

He knew she was egging him on, but at that moment, he couldn't think of anything better to do than laugh.

"Are you okay?" Gabriella asked with a frown.

"I think he's just taking it all in," Juliette supplied.

Max sobered and then straightened.

"Gabriella, your visit is unexpected. Juliette's is not. She's here by my request for a romantic dinner. For two." He pulled Juliette closer to him.

He watched the expert actress instantly hide her annoyance at his words. Gabriella's perfectly glossed lips curved into a smile, but Max wasn't fooled. He knew her too well. That little flicker in her eyes. Annoyance, frustration—maybe even a little jealousy.

"Oh, Max," she sighed, shifting her stance to lean in just slightly. "You were never so quick to draw lines." She let out a soft chuckle and slid her hand down his arm before finally stepping back. "I didn't realize you were serious about... all this." Her gaze flickered towards Juliette before landing back on him.

Max tightened his hold on Juliette's waist, making his stance clear. "I am."

Juliette didn't say anything, but he could feel the tension in her body. She was holding herself still, watching the interaction unfold like a silent observer, but Max knew she wasn't unaffected.

Gabriella tilted her head, her expression unreadable. "Well, then. I suppose I shouldn't keep you." She let out a dramatic sigh, smoothing down the tiny dress that barely covered her thighs. "You'll call me, though? We have so much to catch up on."

"I doubt it," Max said flatly.

Juliette bit her lip, suppressing a laugh, and he could tell she was enjoying this more than she was letting on.

Gabriella's eyes narrowed just slightly before she smiled again, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Fine," she said breezily. "Enjoy your little..."—her eyes moved over Juliette as if she was unimpressed—"project. You know where I am when you grow bored of all... this."

She turned on her heel and strutted down the steps, the picture of effortless confidence, but Max could tell from the way she didn't glance back that she wasn't pleased. He waited until her Lamborghini disappeared down the driveway before exhaling and turning to Juliette.

"Sorry about that," he muttered.

"You have no reason to apologize. She practically attacked you the second you opened the door."

He huffed out a laugh. "Yeah, she has a habit of doing that."

Juliette's eyes twinkled with amusement. "I don't think she liked me very much."

Max grinned. "That's because you're competition." He took both of her hands in his, his voice turning softer. "You look amazing, by the way." Her smile deepened. "You ready for dinner?"

Juliette looked up at him, something warm and knowing in her gaze. "More than ready."

With that, he led her inside, shutting the door on any lingering ghosts from his past. Tonight was about the future. Their future. And nothing—not even Gabriella—was going to ruin that.

Chapter Thirteen

Juliette had believed she was nervous before she pulled into the driveway and saw Gabriella walking up to Max's front door. The outfit the woman wore probably cost more than Juliette's car. Then she noticed the Lamborghini that Gabriella was driving and shook her head as she glanced down at her simple blue summer dress and cringed.

Still, she wasn't about to let the woman walk into Max's life and take over.

Gabriella stopped and watched her park. When Juliette climbed out, Gabriella arched her eyebrows.

"You're that girl helping Max, right?" she asked in a sweet voice.

"Yes," she answered and stepped up to her. "Juliette Elliot." She shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"Right." Gabriella ran her eyes up and down her, and she instantly felt judged.

"Was Max expecting you?" she asked. The woman ignored her and took a step up towards the front door.

"Max just loves surprises," she purred as she continued up to the door. Juliette followed and stood off to the side.

She was interested in seeing just how much Max liked this surprise.

Watching the range of emotions cross his face had her grinning.

She was surprised at how well he handled the diva, and by the time Gabriella had left and they were standing alone just outside his front door, she had fallen even more for the man.

Then he pulled out the chair for her at the table and expertly plated their dinner, and she knew without a doubt that there was no turning back.

Juliette Elliot was in love.

When she took a bite of the salmon, she groaned with pure pleasure. It was the best salmon she'd ever had.

"Wow," she said, taking another bite. "This is really amazing." She took a bite of the vegetables and rice. Everything tasted amazing.

"Thanks." He took a bite of his own food and then poured her a glass of wine.

"I bought this the last time I went to France. Try some." He poured himself a glass too.

She sipped the wine and closed her eyes. "Very nice."

Max watched her reaction, a small smile playing at his lips. "I figured you'd like it. I picked it up in Bordeaux a few years ago while filming. I have a few cases I'm going to store in my new wine cellar when it's finished."

Juliette let the wine linger on her tongue before setting her glass down. "Filming in France... sounds glamorous."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "It was, and it wasn't. Long hours, demanding schedules, and a director who changed his mind every other day. But I won't lie, the food and wine made up for it."

She leaned her chin on her hand, studying him. "You've lived such a different life than me. New York, Hollywood, filming in different countries... it must've been wild."

Max swirled his wine, considering her words. "It was," he admitted. "At first, it was exciting—constant movement, big cities, people recognizing you on the street. But after a while, it all starts to feel... empty."

Juliette tilted her head. "Is that why you moved here?"

He exhaled, looking down at his plate for a moment before meeting her eyes. "That was part of it. Hollywood, especially, is a machine. It chews people up and spits them out when they're no longer useful. I saw too many people lose themselves trying to keep up."

Juliette traced the rim of her glass, absorbing his words. "Gabriella seems like she's still in the thick of it."

Max let out a short laugh. "Oh, she thrives on it. She loves the attention, the cameras, the chaos. It's one of the reasons why we didn't work. She wanted someone who would always be in that world with her. She thought that was me, but I realized I wanted something different."

Juliette watched him carefully. "You've mentioned how things went with her, but... she acts as if you broke her heart?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "No. I don't think she was in love with me. Deep down, I believe she knew there wasn't anything between us. I'm sure she used me to get more attention. I went along with it since I didn't want to jeopardize the film's success. I think for her, it was easy to get swept up in it all, the lies, the story. The red carpets, the exclusive parties... my

entire time in Hollywood felt like a dream. You wake up one day and realize none of it is real.”

She nodded, understanding in her eyes. “And now?”

Max reached across the table, his fingers brushing over hers. “Now I want something real. Something solid. I want a life that actually feels like mine, not just a role I’m playing.”

Juliette squeezed his hand. “Well, I’d say you’re off to a great start with this place.”

He smiled, warmth filling his chest. “Yeah, I think so too.”

“I’ve never been outside of the state,” she admitted. “Well, actually, I went to Seattle when I was a kid.” She shrugged. “So technically I have been to two states.”

He set his glass down and frowned. “Seriously?”

She nodded. “I’ve dreamed of traveling, but something always keeps me from doing it.” She shrugged and took another bite. “God, this really is amazing,” she said, wishing she’d kept her mouth shut about her lack of worldly travels. She felt like a child now, especially after the recent comparison to Gabriella.

“That settles it. Next time I’m needed anywhere, I’m taking you with me.” He lifted his glass. “If you want to go.”

She held up her glass. “I won’t say no.”

He chuckled and tapped her glass. “You say that now, but my next trip could be somewhere... not so appealing.”

“Like?” She waited.

“New Jersey.” He chuckled.

She smiled. “We can head into New York City.” She suggested. “The Big Apple.”

He smiled. “Positive side of it.”

“Gabriella seems to think you like surprises,” she said, changing the subject. “Do you?”

He shrugged. “Not the kind she springs on me.”

“My brother always liked scaring me. I think he felt like it was his duty as a big brother. Did you ever scare your sisters?”

“Maybe Ally, but never Faye. She’s had enough fear in her life.”

“Right. Has she made up her mind to have the last surgery?”

“Not yet.” He took another sip of his wine. “I think meeting Iian Jordan helped her realize that, even if she loses her hearing completely, she can still do amazing things.”

Juliette watched as Max absently swirled his wine, his expression thoughtful. The way he spoke about his sisters always touched her. His love for his family was so unwavering, so steady.

“Iian’s incredible,” she agreed. “It must’ve helped her to see someone thriving, even with the challenges.”

Max nodded. “Yeah. But it’s still a huge decision. No guarantees. She’s scared.” He exhaled slowly, leaning back in his chair. “And I hate that I can’t fix it for her.”

Juliette reached across the table, resting her hand over his. “You’re already doing what you can—being there for her, supporting her. That’s more important than fixing anything.”

His gaze softened as his fingers brushed lightly against hers. “I hope so.”

A comfortable silence stretched between them as they continued eating. The sound of the ocean outside, the warm glow of the candles on the table—it all felt so perfect, like a moment she’d want to tuck away and keep forever.

She grinned slightly, remembering the new sexy underwear she was wearing under her dress. Then, breaking the quiet, she said. “Okay, so you don’t like Gabriella’s surprises. What about good surprises?”

Max narrowed his eyes. “That depends. Are you planning one?”

“Maybe,” she teased, taking a slow sip of her wine.

“Should I be worried?”

Juliette grinned. “Not at all.”

They lingered at the table long after their plates were empty, talking about everything and nothing—his childhood summers at the lake just outside of Portland, the places she still wanted to visit, the best and worst movies they’d ever seen. It was easy, effortless. Then Max stood and offered his hand, pulling her up from her chair.

“Come on,” he said, his voice low. “Let’s eat dessert out on the new deck. You take the wine, I’ll grab the dessert.” He handed her their glasses, which he had just filled again.

Then he grabbed two containers from the fridge, and she followed him outside while trying not to spill their wine.

The warm night air wrapped around them when they stepped outside. She was surprised to find two chairs and a gas fireplace sitting on the deck.

“I didn’t see these arrive,” she said, admiring the cozy spot.

“They came a few days ago. I had the guys put them together in the barn and then bring them up after you left.” He smiled. “I plan on putting a rug down and maybe hanging some string lights.”

“This is so cozy and, wow, look at the sunset.”

“Best view in the world. Without climbing a bunch of stairs.” He motioned to the lighthouse beside them. “Sit.”

She sat and set their wine on a small table between the two chairs. Then he handed her a container and a spoon. “Bon

appétit,” he said, sitting beside her. The sun had disappeared and Max reached up and turned on the fire pit. “I know it’s probably warm enough, but I want to test this bad boy out.”

“It’s perfect for tonight.” She removed the lid from the little glass container and held in a gasp. “You made crème brûlée?” She smiled.

“I hope it’s as good as it looks.” He removed the lid from his own dessert.

She used her spoon to crack the hard shell top and then scooped a mouthful into her mouth. Closing her eyes, she moaned. “How did you know that crème brûlée is my favorite?”

“I didn’t. Lucky guess, I suppose.” He smiled after he took a bite of his dessert. “Okay, adding this to my favorites. Third times a charm.” When she looked confused, he added, “My first two tries were not as successful.”

“The first time I made chocolate chip cookies, I added a cup of salt. To my defense, my mother’s cookbook pages were stuck together and the print had faded.”

He chuckled. “I bet you make great chocolate chip cookies now.”

“You know it,” she teased, and finished off her dessert. “I make batches of them for Christmas and gift them to my friends every year.”

“Lucky friends.” He set his bowl down and reached for her hand.

“I’m sorry about earlier with Gabriella,” she said, feeling the need to soothe whatever feelings were swirling around in him. “I didn’t want her to spoil our evening. If she was really in love with you.”

“Don’t be.” He squeezed her hand gently. “She has a line of men waiting for her call.”

“Yeah, but none of them are you,” she pointed out and instantly felt stupid. “What I mean is…”

His chuckle stopped her. “I think I get it. I don’t have a big head. Gabriella likes attention and, right now, we’re getting a lot of it with this place. Plus, she wants what she can’t have.”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “Exactly.”

“Juliette?” He turned towards her.

“Hm?” She shifted and watched the firelight wash across his face, enjoying his features in the dancing light.

“I really want to take you inside. To be with you, not just tonight.” He frowned slightly. “Every moment you’re here, I wish time would stand still. Then, when you leave, I spend every waking moment thinking about you.”

She smiled. “Me too.”

She stood up and pulled him to his feet. “Max, turn off the fireplace and take me inside.”

He kissed her first, a kiss deep and so filled with passion she swayed. He turned off the fire, then he took her hand and led her inside.

She’d seen the new furniture in his bedroom when he’d led her outside to the deck. The new king-size bed, nightstands, and dresser were all sturdy looking antique models that fit perfectly in the environment.

Just inside the doors, however, he turned to her and pulled her into his arms. Passion and heat. That’s what he made her feel the moment his lips touched hers.

His hands moved over her skin as she tugged his shirt over his head so she could explore those sexy muscles she’d been filming for other women to drool over. Now was her time to enjoy and explore all of him. While his hands made their way up her skirt to her thigh, she traveled down his shoulders, his arms, his chest, until she reached the button of his jeans.

His hands stilled and moved to cover hers.

“I wanted to go slow this time,” he groaned against her mouth. “To take my time enjoying every inch of you.” He started walking her back towards the bed as he removed her dress in one quick motion. “Wow.” He stilled as his eyes ran over the new undergarments that she’d bought with this moment in mind. “For me?” he asked. She nodded and smiled. His fingers trailed over the lace softly.

“Surprise.” She chuckled nervously. “I’m not sure I can do slow,” she admitted. She lifted her hands to his chest, and he lowered her down to the bed.

“Hold on to me,” he said and moved down to trace the lace with his mouth.

Keeping her hands still while he covered her and kissed her everywhere was probably the most difficult thing she’d had to do in her life. She needed to explore him and enjoy every minute of being with him again.

Then his hand moved up her thigh and his fingers brushed under her new underwear and her last bit of willpower to go slow faded. Her body jerked under his, aching for him to touch her.

“Max,” she moaned, reaching for him. “Please.”

He chuckled and she wanted to scream. Wanted to flip him over and straddle him and ride him like she did last time. But his hands moved up and gripped her wrists, holding her firm to the mattress.

“Mine,” he said as he brushed his lips across her collarbone. “My turn to send you over.” He held her down, trailing his mouth over her skin, leaving trails of goose bumps.

When his fingers brushed against her pussy, she arched into his touch. Then he slipped a finger underneath and dipped it slowly into her and a scream burst from her lips.

How did he have such power over her body?

Would it always be like this?

How in the hell was she going to tell him that she'd already fallen deeply in love with him?

Chapter Fourteen

Waking up with Juliette's body wrapped around his as the sunlight streamed through the new French doors was possibly the best feeling in the world.

Max lay there for a moment, soaking it in—the warmth of her pressed against him, the soft rise and fall of her breath, the way her fingers rested lightly on his chest. He didn't want to move, didn't want to break the spell. But when she stirred slightly, her lashes fluttering against her cheek, he brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"Morning," he murmured, his voice rough with sleep.

She blinked up at him, a slow smile spreading across her lips. "Morning."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead before stretching. "What do you say to breakfast in town?"

Her stomach grumbled in response, making them both laugh. "I think that's a yes," she said, pushing herself up. "After I pay you back for last night's torture."

He wanted to point out that the torture had been mutual, but then she lowered and put her mouth to him and all thoughts of talking disappeared.

An hour later, after showering together in his new shower, they strolled hand in hand through the doors of Sara's Nook. The moment they stepped in, the scent of sweet treats, bacon, and freshly brewed coffee hit them. The place was already buzzing with locals, the first real morning of summer bringing everyone out.

"Looks like we're not the only ones who had this idea," Juliette said as they stepped inside. "Morning, Sara," she said when they finally stepped up to the counter to order.

He'd met Sara, the owner of the small café, a few times. He knew that she was Brook's mother and married to Allen Masters, one of the men who oversaw the Coast Guard training facility just outside of town.

"Well, look at this!" Sara smiled at them. "The pair of you walking in together like a fresh breath of air."

Juliette laughed and he saw her cheeks heat. No doubt because the gossip of them being together this early in the morning on a weekend would probably spread like wildfire around town.

"What's the special this morning?" Juliette asked.

"Brook just pulled out some fresh sticky buns or I can heat you up one of those spinach quiches you love. Your choice."

"How about sticky buns *and* a quiche, and coffee of course."

Max ordered his usual coffee and a stack of blueberry pancakes, and then they found a small table near the window with a view of the waking town.

As they ate, they talked about everything from the latest work being done on the house to the upcoming summer events in town. Every now and then, someone would stop by to say hello.

His focus was entirely on Juliette, on the way she laughed at his dry humor, the way she stole a bite of his pancakes with an innocent look that didn't fool him for a second.

When they finished, they took more coffee to go and wandered down towards the beach. The town had come alive. There were kids running towards the water and families setting up blankets and umbrellas.

"Looks like summer is officially here," Juliette said, slipping off her sandals to walk barefoot in the sand.

Max did the same, the warm grains pressing between his toes as he matched his steps to hers. "Hard to believe a few months ago this place was covered in snow."

As they walked, Juliette suddenly slowed. Max followed her gaze and spotted a familiar pair up ahead—her parents, sitting on a weathered wooden bench, two dogs at their feet while they chatted with a group of townspeople.

He hadn't officially met the couple yet but had seen them in passing several times.

Juliette groaned softly. "I knew this was bound to happen sooner or later." She turned to him. "They haven't seen us yet, we could..." She nodded with her head back the way they had come.

Max chuckled. "You act like they're terrifying."

She shot him a look. "You try growing up with a town that reports everything you do to your parents."

"Fair point." He took her hand and started walking towards the couple where they were lounging near the water's edge.

The dogs spotted Juliette before her parents did and bolted towards them.

“That’s Uno and that’s Tres,” she said as Max pet the dogs.

“No Dos?” he asked.

“He died a couple years back.”

When they reached them, her mother beamed. “Juliette! Max! What a lovely surprise.” The dogs instantly settled at her feet, as if done with the attention.

“Morning, Mrs. Elliot, Mr. Elliot,” Max said, shaking her father’s hand after he stood up to greet them.

Her mom’s sharp eyes darted between them, her lips twitching as if she wanted to say something but held back. “Did you two enjoy your breakfast?”

Juliette sighed. “Mom—”

“It was great,” Max cut in smoothly, shooting Juliette a grin before looking back at her parents. “Nice to see the town so lively this morning. I guess summer is finally here.”

As they chatted, a few more locals passed by, stopping to exchange pleasantries. Eventually, her parents excused themselves, leaving Max and Juliette alone again.

She let out a breath. “That wasn’t so bad.”

He smirked. “Told you. Parents love me.”

She rolled her eyes but laced her fingers through his, tugging him back towards the shoreline. “Come on, let’s keep walking. I’m not ready to head back just yet.”

A few hours later, as they were walking through his front door, her phone chimed with a message. His phone followed a second later.

Max barely had time to glance at the screen before another notification followed. Then another.

“What the hell?” he muttered as he looked at his phone.

Juliette was already reading hers, her expression shifting from confusion to disbelief. “Max…”

His phone buzzed in his hand as he unlocked it, but before he could read the flood of messages, a notification popped up with a link to a live press conference. And there, standing in front of a row of microphones, was Gabriella, her perfect blonde waves blowing in the breeze, a knowing smile painted across her lips.

“…Max and I have always had an undeniable connection,” she was saying in that soft, practiced voice of hers. “We may have had our ups and downs, but the truth is, we always find our way back to each other.”

Max felt his stomach drop as the cameras flashed, reporters hanging on her every word.

Juliette exhaled sharply, her grip on her phone tightening. “What is she talking about?”

Gabriella continued, tilting her head just slightly, as if she were sharing an intimate secret with the world. “He’s been working so hard on the house for us—our future. It’s really beautiful, isn’t it?” She gestured and he realized they were holding the press meeting on the beach entrance just down from his property.

Juliette gasped. “She’s still in town.”

The image zoomed out to showcase a shot of his house, taken from a distance, capturing the newly built deck and the stunning ocean backdrop.

Max’s jaw clenched. “How the hell did she—”

But Gabriella wasn’t done.

“And, of course,” she continued, her voice dropping to something softer, more sentimental, “he promised me something special this time in way of an engagement present. A token of his love, one that means everything to us.” She sighed wistfully, then looked directly at the cameras. “The Ocean’s Heart diamond.”

Juliette gasped. “No.”

Max’s blood ran cold. “How in the hell did she know about it?”

“The Ocean’s Heart diamond?” one of the reporters asked.

“Did Max find the lost diamond?” several reporters shouted.

Gabriella smiled coyly. “Not yet. But I’ve heard that the rare blue diamond lost on the property will be all mine when he finds it. He told me it belonged to me, that it was always meant to be mine. As a symbol of our forever love.”

A murmur swept through the reporters, some of them scrambling for details while others whispered excitedly.

Juliette turned to Max, her expression unreadable. “Okay, I think this has gone a little too far.”

Max’s pulse thundered in his ears. “I agree,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Why would she do this?” she asked. “Is she trying to force you into something again? Do you think she’s after the diamond or the attention?”

Max dragged a hand through his hair, trying to control his rising frustration. “She’s always been manipulative, but this…” He gestured to the screen, where Gabriella was now taking questions. “This is next level.”

His phone vibrated again—this time a call. His agent.

Max let out a sharp breath and turned to Juliette. “I need to fix this.”

She nodded, but something in her expression made his stomach tighten. This wasn't just another media circus—this was personal. And if he didn't get ahead of it fast, he stood to lose more than just his reputation.

Gone was his plan to spend the rest of the day with her. Instead, after he took the first call, she packed up her things and went home while he took the next wave of calls.

That evening, he lay alone in his bed cursing Gabriella and her manipulative ways and dreaming of holding Juliette again soon.

The next morning, he was woken by his phone again. Deciding not to answer his agent's call, he stripped and stepped into the shower. He planned to finish painting his office to release some of the frustration and anger.

His phone was still ringing when he stepped out of the water and dressed.

Glancing to make sure it wasn't Juliette calling him, he took his phone into the kitchen with him and made himself some coffee.

When someone rang his doorbell, he thought about ignoring it. It could be Juliette, though, so he went to answer it.

"I thought you could use a pick-me-up," Juliette said, holding a box of donuts in front of her. "And I figured you'd avoid heading out in the fray since the swarm is still lurking around town." She stepped inside.

He kissed her, almost tipping the box of donuts in the process.

"You are a godsend," he sighed.

"It's a circus out there." She motioned behind her as they stepped into the kitchen. "There are actually a line of cars at the end of your driveway. Normally, I'd assume the summer crowd was hitting the area, but every single car is from a TV station."

"Right. Gabriella strikes again." He groaned as he sat down. He opened the box and took the biggest chocolate donut in the box and bit into it.

Juliette sat across from him and grabbed one of the maple bars. "I had an idea that might smooth things over."

His eyebrows shot up. "I'm all ears."

"While we're filming, we let it slip about us." She motioned between them. "Then let the internet decide what the truth is instead of Gabriella."

Max leaned back in his chair, watching Juliette take a bite of the maple bar. His chest tightened with unease but also admiration.

"You want to let the internet decide?" he asked, rubbing his jaw. "Have you met the internet?"

She smirked. "I have. And right now, it's eating up Gabriella's lies like it's prime-time television. Our followers have almost doubled since she made her claim. We need to give them something real for once. Something they can't twist into her fairy-tale narrative."

Max exhaled, considering it. His whole life had been a careful balance of keeping personal matters private while still maintaining enough presence to keep his work relevant. Something Gabriella had used against him the first time. But this... this wasn't just about him anymore. This time a woman he really cared about, possibly even loved, was in harm's way.

He met Juliette's steady gaze. "You're sure about this?"

She took another bite, chewing thoughtfully before answering. "Look, I'm not saying we put on a whole show. But while we're filming, if we don't hide anything—if we act like ourselves—it'll be obvious to anyone watching that Gabriella is full of it."

Max ran a hand through his hair. It wasn't a bad plan. In fact, it was probably the smartest way to shut this thing down without feeding Gabriella's need for drama.

"I don't want this to backfire," he said finally. "People are ruthless online."

Juliette's lips quirked. "I appreciate that, but I can handle it." She paused. "Can you?"

His stomach did a slow, measured flip.

She wasn't just talking about internet trolls. She was talking about the reality of making this—whatever it was between them—public.

Max let out a slow breath and nodded. "Yeah. I can."

A slow smile spread across her face, and damn if it didn't make his pulse spike.

"Good," she said, standing and brushing crumbs off her fingers. "Then let's give them something real to talk about. I know you had plans to paint today, so I'm here to help or to film. It's up to you."

Max sat there for a beat, watching her, knowing with absolute certainty that this wasn't just about proving Gabriella wrong.

It was about proving to himself that this—Juliette, the life they were building, the way she made him feel like he actually had a home again—was something worth fighting for.

Chapter Fifteen

Juliette was not just fighting for Max's future, she was fighting for her own. Which is why she'd decided to fight dirty like Gabriella was.

An hour later, she tied her hair up into a messy bun and eyed the cans of soft navy-blue paint they'd picked out for Max's office. The small powder room would get a fresh coat of a lighter gray-blue paint to complement it.

She turned on the camera and positioned it on the tripod to capture their progress.

For the first hour, they taped off the ceilings, which would be painted in a soft white color that would match the crown molding and baseboards Palmer and his crew would be putting in soon.

"Since we don't have the scaffolding to paint the ceilings today, we will stick to just painting the walls." He handed her a work apron to put over her own clothes. "I'll roll if you do the detail work around the windows and doors," he said, standing beside her, stirring one of the cans with a wooden stick.

"My specialty," she joked. She dipped her brush into the can of deep blue paint and watched the rich color coat the bristles. Then she smoothed it over the first wall. The color was bold, striking, just like him.

She could imagine what the space would look like when they were done. He had a large oak desk stored in the barn, along with some chairs and a sofa.

The crews had finished installing four massive built-in bookshelves on the longest wall, which would take extra time to paint.

She knew he planned to put his desk in the center of the room, facing the newly refurbished fireplace, its back to the bookcases. They had taped the mantel off as well, as it too would be painted white.

He would want a couple chairs sitting close to the fireplace and a rug or two for the space. Maybe a sofa and a table by the windows.

Across the room, Max rolled paint onto the longest wall, his long strokes efficient and steady as she dreamed of what painting would hang above the fireplace.

Maybe one of Alison Jordan's paintings of the lighthouse?

"You know," he said without looking up, "I think I missed my calling as a painter."

"Oh yeah? Gonna quit filmmaking and start rolling walls for a living?"

He glanced over his shoulder, eyes glinting with amusement. "If it means I get to see you in paint-splattered clothes every day, I might consider it."

Juliette rolled her eyes but couldn't stop the smile that crept onto her lips. She turned her attention back to the trim she was working on, humming softly as she went. The steady rhythm of painting combined with the easy conversation she and Max had ensured that the task didn't feel tedious.

As they worked, the office was transformed, the walls turning rich and bold under their combined effort. Max took over with the brush to get the edges while she rolled on the second coat.

Once they finished in the office, they moved on to the attached powder room. It was small but had beautiful natural light streaming in from the frosted window. They had decided on a soft blue-gray color for the space, something classic and moody.

Max worked on the upper portion of the walls while Juliette tackled the lower half, their movements synchronized, comfortable. She reached up to film him as he stretched to reach a high corner, his shirt lifting slightly, revealing a sliver of toned stomach.

"Nice view," she teased, grinning as she panned the camera over him.

Max smirked and turned, splattering a tiny drop of paint onto her nose with his brush. "Better now?"

She gasped, touching her face. "Oh, you're gonna regret that."

Before he could react, she swiped her own brush against his forearm, leaving a streak of gray. He stared at it for a beat before chuckling darkly. "Oh, it's on."

What started as a lighthearted moment quickly turned into an all-out war. Small streaks of paint landed on their arms, faces, and clothes as they laughed and dodged each other's attacks. The camera still recorded from its stand, capturing every second.

Breathless, Max finally caught her wrist, pulling her close. Their bodies pressed together, paint-smudged and grinning. “I think we’ve officially ruined our clothes,” he murmured, voice husky.

Juliette swallowed, suddenly all too aware of the warmth radiating from him. “Worth it.”

His gaze dropped to her lips, then back to her eyes. “Yeah,” he murmured. “Definitely worth it.”

Before she could second-guess herself, she closed the small gap between them, pressing her lips to his. The kiss started slow, teasing, but quickly deepened, the paint all but forgotten.

When they finally pulled away, both breathless and grinning, Juliette glanced at the camera still rolling. “Well,” she mused, “that should make for an interesting shot.”

Max chuckled, brushing a smudge of gray from her cheek. “I don’t think we’ll have to worry about convincing anyone we’re together now.”

She laughed, resting her forehead against his. “No. I think we just painted the perfect picture.”

He chuckled.

“This is looking good,” she commented, stepping back to admire their work.

“So are you.” Max grinned, eyes dropping to the splatters of paint on her arms and cheek.

Her breath caught at the heat of him so close, his hands firm and steady on her waist. She glanced up at him, catching the flicker of something deeper in his gaze.

“I’ve never told anyone this before,” he said, using his fingertips to brush a droplet of paint from her cheek, “and I know you’re the last person I’ll say it to.” He brushed his lips across hers. “No better time than to admit”—he leaned back and met her eyes—“I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Her heart did a flip. Not one of those little bumps you get when you ride a carnival ride but a full on twist-in-her-chest kind. The kind that left her breathless and light-headed.

She’d never felt like this before. Never.

“I love you too.” She practically whispered it.

His smile caused her heart to fall into its normal pattern again and, suddenly, he was picking her up and spinning her around in the small bathroom.

“This has quickly become my favorite room in the house,” he joked as she laughed.

Juliette clung to Max, laughing as he spun her around in the tiny bathroom, their bodies still speckled with blue and gray paint. The confession of love had left her dizzy in the best way possible. She had never imagined feeling so light, so free—so completely and utterly his.

When he finally set her down, he cupped her face, his thumbs brushing along her jaw. “We should probably clean up before we ruin any more of the house with paint.”

She glanced at the handprint he’d accidentally left on the doorframe. “Too late.” She grabbed the camera and turned it off. “We should edit and post this today,” she said, her voice laced with excitement.

“After a shower.” He took the camera from her and set it down.

“Shower,” she agreed, her stomach flipping again at the heated look in his eyes.

They took turns washing off the paint, laughter filling the bathroom as they scrubbed stubborn streaks from their skin.

When their laughter died away, replaced with moans of delight, she fell even further in love with him as he showed her how gentle he could be with her and how much he meant those words he’d confessed.

Her knees shook after, and she sat on the bench in the shower. Max got out and wrapped a towel around his waist before tossing another at her. “Take your time finishing up. I’ll go make us some sandwiches.”

She did a happy dance internally when he left the room, then finished rinsing off. Stepping out of the shower, she combed her hair and braided it before putting on a fresh pair of shorts and a tank top.

She met him out on the deck. He had already laid sandwiches, chips, and two glasses of iced tea on the outdoor table, the ocean breeze cooling the midday warmth.

“This,” she sighed, sinking into her chair, “is perfect.”

Max reached for her hand, lacing their fingers together as he took a bite of his sandwich. “Only because you’re here.”

“I figured we could edit this while we eat. Then we can post it.” She set up her laptop and inserted the camera’s drive.

As they ate, Max peered over her shoulder, watching as she edited a short clip of them painting—complete with the playful brush battle and the moment they admitted their love for each other. The ending was just them, foreheads pressed together, covered in paint but completely wrapped up in one another.

“You sure?” he asked, his fingers tracing lazy circles on her back.

She met his gaze. “As long as you are.” When he nodded, she finished. “Gabriella wanted to control the narrative. Let’s take that away from her.”

With a deep breath, she hit post. Within minutes, notifications flooded in, the video spreading like wildfire. Fans commented in real time, swooning over their chemistry, congratulating them, and—thankfully—drowning out any mention of Gabriella’s ridiculous press conference.

Max grinned as he set his phone down. "You're brilliant, you know that?"

She shrugged, trying to play it cool, but inside, her heart was soaring.

After their meal, they took a slow walk along the beach, the waves lapping at their feet as they strolled side by side.

"So, I have one more item I wanted to discuss with you," Max said, turning towards her and wrapping his arms around her.

"Oh? You need help painting the rest of the house and since you've seen firsthand how much better at it I am than you, you've decided to ask me to paint the rest all by myself?"

He chuckled. "True, but not what I wanted to say." He kissed her and then rested his forehead against hers. "I wanted to ask you to move in with me. The place seems empty. Without you."

She felt her heart flip again in her chest, only this time it was a warm sort of feeling.

"It already feels like home," she admitted. "You feel like home." She kissed him.

Just then she felt Max tense. She heard the clicking of cameras and understood why.

Before she could even see the cameramen, Max turned and sheltered her and they started walking quickly back towards the stairs leading them home.

"Wait," she said, stopping him. "We wanted this, right? After all, we just went public."

He sighed and then nodded before glancing around. "As long as you're sure."

Juliette took a steadying breath and squared her shoulders. "Yes, let's do this." This was exactly what they had wanted—what she had wanted. To take control of their story. So why did the flashing cameras still make her stomach twist?

Max's grip on her waist tightened protectively as he scanned their surroundings. The photographers weren't aggressive, but they were persistent, calling his name, asking for a statement, snapping endless photos. She turned to him, her hand still clasped in his.

His eyes softened. "Okay, just remember this was your idea."

She smiled at him. With a bright, confident smile, she leaned up and pressed a lingering kiss to his lips. She felt him smile against her before pulling her even closer, deepening it just enough to make sure there was no doubt in anyone's mind.

The cameras went wild.

When they finally broke apart, Max exhaled a laugh. "That should do it."

"Think it's enough to get Gabriella off your back?" she asked, amused as they started walking up the stairs leading home.

"If not, I don't know what will." He grinned, giving her fingers a squeeze. "But I don't care. As long as I have you."

The warmth in her chest spread. "You have me," she promised.

When they reached the top of the stairs, she glanced over her shoulder. The paparazzi were still there, some reviewing their shots, others making calls. But instead of feeling overwhelmed, she felt free.

She had spent so much of her life hiding, hesitant to let anyone in. But here she was, standing beside Max, choosing to be seen. Choosing to be his.

"Come on," he murmured, leading her inside. "Let's celebrate moving in together. I have some more crème brûlée or there's mint chocolate chip ice cream. Your choice. We can watch a movie together and enjoy the rest of the evening."

"You had me at crème brûlée." She kissed him again.

She laughed as he pulled her towards the house, already knowing that no matter what craziness the world threw at them, they'd face it together.

Chapter Sixteen

Juliette needed time to move her things, so he was in charge of filming the following day while she went back to her parents' place and packed. He'd asked her if she needed help, but she'd assured him all she was bringing over were some clothes and some necessities.

He spent a while setting up the cameras where the workers would be that day and adjusted the last camera settings, making sure everything was in place before he left the top floor.

The workers were scattered throughout the house, hammering, drilling, and moving materials up and down the stairs as they worked on finishing the second-floor renovations. The sounds of construction filled the space—familiar, almost comforting.

Would the place be too quiet once they were gone? He doubted it. There was still the soothing sound of the waves below them.

Max took a moment to check in with Palmer, who was standing near the base of the stairs, studying a blueprint while one of the workers measured along the railing.

"Hey," Max called out over the noise of drills and hammers.

Palmer looked up. "What's up?"

Max motioned towards the plans. "I was thinking about changing the design for the tile in the upstairs bathrooms. The tile I originally picked for the third bath isn't sitting right with me. It's a little too modern for the rest of the house."

Palmer scratched his beard. "Got a replacement in mind?"

"Yeah, I saw some hand-painted tiles from a company out of Portland. They're a little more classic, a little rustic. I'll send you the link."

Palmer nodded. "Sounds good. We haven't ordered the tile for that bathroom yet, so it's an easy swap."

Max gestured towards the staircase. "While we're at it, can we fix a few of these rungs? I noticed some of them feel a little loose."

Palmer tapped the wooden banister. "I had that on my list. We'll get them secured before the end of the day."

Max gave a satisfied nod, then took a last look around before heading to set up the last of his cameras.

Shortly after lunch, he decided it was time to conquer decluttering the basement. If the men were going to start on his wine cellar the following week, they needed access to the space. They'd already been down there working on electric, plumbing, and even the foundation, but they hadn't needed full access like would to build walls.

Moving through the kitchen, he made his way to the pantry closet, where the entrance to the basement was. There were a lot of items to move out of the space and into the barn so the next phase of work could be done.

He stepped inside and flicked on the dim basement light.

The air grew cooler as he descended the creaky wooden stairs, which probably needed to be rebuilt. He knew that there was another entrance to the space from the outside that was padlocked shut.

He thought there might be another way down to this level, but so far he hadn't found it. Then again, there was so much clutter in the space that it was hard to get a full assessment of the area.

The scent of old wood and dust filled his nose, and he sneezed once or twice as he descended the stairs.

This part of the basement was massive, stretching almost the entire length of the house. There was another side of the basement, under the lighthouse, that wasn't attached to this portion. It was filled with all the mechanicals and replacement parts for the lighthouse.

His plan for this part was to convert a large section into a wine cellar, keeping the rustic charm of the old stone walls while modernizing the storage. For now, though, it was cluttered with forgotten furniture, stacks of dusty boxes, and an eerie stillness that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

He switched on the single overhead bulb at the base of the stairs, which barely cast enough light to cut through the shadows. Palmer and his crew would be installing new lighting, plumbing, climate control, and shelving for the section he was going to store his wine in.

He walked towards the far wall, where he planned to install the wine racks, mentally going over measurements.

Then he heard it.

A floorboard from the stairs creaked.

He turned, expecting to see one of the workers. "Hey, do you need something?"

No answer.

His pulse ticked up a notch as he peered through the dim light. The space was too dark, too quiet. Maybe someone had just stepped inside but hadn't heard him.

Then, before he could react, pain exploded at the back of his head.

A sharp, blinding agony overtook him, and his knees buckled as the world spun. He barely had time to process what had happened before everything went black.

Minutes or hours later, the distant sound of voices pulled him from the darkness. His head throbbed, and as he tried to move, he realized he was lying on the cold basement floor, half-covered in dust.

"Max?"

Juliette's voice. Urgent. Worried.

He blinked against the dim light, wincing as he tried to sit up. "Here..." he croaked. His throat was very dry.

Then she was there, dropping to her knees beside him, her hands on his face, checking for injuries.

"Oh my god, we've been looking everywhere." She hugged him.

He reached up, feeling the back of his head. His fingers came away slightly damp, and when he looked, he saw the smear of blood.

"Someone was down here," he muttered. "I—I didn't see who."

Juliette's face paled. "We need to get you upstairs."

As she helped him up, the realization settled deep in his chest. Someone had attacked him.

And whoever it was... could still be there.

With her help, he climbed the stairs and sat in a chair at the kitchen table. When she rushed over to grab the towel for his head, he glanced out the window and realized that it was almost dark outside.

"How long was I down there?" he asked.

She glanced at her watch. "It's almost five now. When did you go into the basement?" She handed him the towel and then rushed to the freezer to get a bag of frozen peas. "I'm calling Doctor Stevens," she said after he placed the cold bag on the bump on the back of his head.

He groaned. "No, I'm..." He stopped when she gave him a look, the kind that said he'd better shut up and not argue the fact that he was going to be seen by a doctor no matter what.

He sat and waited as she talked on the phone.

"There you are." Palmer came into the kitchen. "Dude, are you okay?" He sat across from him. "We've been looking for you for almost an hour."

"Basement." He motioned and then felt his head spin.

"What happened?" Palmer asked.

"Someone hit me over the head," he answered, closing his eyes.

"What? Seriously?"

"Yeah. Right after lunch, I went down there to start hauling all that stuff out so your men can begin work down there next week and then wham." He sighed. "I guess I've been down there since then."

"We only realized you were missing about an hour ago, when Juliette showed up. We thought maybe you'd gone to help her move her things over."

He shook his head. "Was there anyone else in the house today that you saw? Besides your crew?" he asked. He kept his eyes shut since it helped settle his stomach.

This wasn't like the first time he'd hit his head on the cabinet. This time the pain had easily reached a ten out of ten.

"No, but I can ask around and see if any of my crew saw anyone else," Palmer said, and then the room went quiet.

Juliette was back and took his hand. "Dr. Stevens is on his way. He thinks you should go to the hospital and have some scans." He opened his mouth to argue, but she stopped him. "I convinced him to come over here instead."

"Thanks." He leaned his head back.

"Did you see who hit you?" she asked, touching the side of his face with a wet cloth. "I'm just cleaning up some of the blood."

"No, they snuck up behind me. It was dark."

"Do you think it was one of Palmer's men?" she whispered.

"No," he said after a moment of thinking.

"But you didn't see them?"

"No," he said again.

"None of my guys saw anyone else on the property," Palmer said, coming back into the room. "But we had a few men clock

out early. I've sent them text messages asking. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks," he said.

"Are you sure you didn't just bump your head on something?" Palmer asked.

"Pretty sure." He motioned to the spot on his head and heard Palmer wince. "Yeah, that doesn't look good." He heard him move closer. "Looks like you were hit with something. I'll head to the basement and check it out. Where did you find him?"

"Along the side wall. To the left of the stairs," Juliette answered. "Behind a row of boxes by an old dresser."

He remembered falling against the dresser before hitting the ground and glanced at his elbow. There was a large dark bruise in the spot he'd hit.

"That doesn't look too bad," Juliette told him as she took his arm and looked at the bruise.

"It's from the dresser. I remember hitting it before passing out."

Just then Dr. Stevens walked in, one of the workers showing him the way.

"Thanks, Brian," Dr. Stevens told the man and then moved over to check on him.

For the next half hour he was examined and, to his surprise, stitched up with four stitches.

"I'd like it better if you went to the ER in Edgeview," Dr. Stevens said. "For now, I'll settle for you being watched very closely for the next twelve hours."

"I'm not going anywhere," Juliette chimed in. "I technically just moved in." She smiled at the doctor, who nodded.

"Fine, but call me if anything changes. You know the drill. After all, this isn't your first bump on the head."

Max chuckled. "This time it wasn't my fault."

"Right," Dr. Stevens said. "You should call Aiden. Report it officially."

He nodded in agreement.

"I've already called him," Juliette said. "Right after I called you." She touched his hand.

Palmer had come back up from the basement and had been standing across the room waiting.

"I found what you were hit with," he broke in.

"What?" Juliette and Max asked at the same time.

"A pipe wrench." He nodded towards the door. "I left it there for Aiden in case there are prints or other clues he can use to find out who hit you."

"Yeah, a pipe wrench would fit the bill," Dr. Stevens said, moving over to the sink to clean up. He dumped the bloody gauze into the trash.

"Why?" Juliette whispered.

"Well, it's all over the news about that actress telling the world there's a missing diamond in this place. All anyone has to do is beat you to the punch." Palmer sighed. "FYI, my men have a bet going on who will find it." He shook his head. "Trust me, if they did, you'd be the first to know. Finders are not keepers in this case."

"Thanks," Max said absently.

"I guess we need to bump up our security around here," Aiden said from the doorway. "Show Nick what you found," he said to Palmer. After the two men disappeared back through the pantry, Aiden jotted down everything that had happened as he and Juliette explained.

Max sat, his head still throbbing despite Dr. Stevens' earlier assurances that he didn't have a concussion—just a nasty lump. Juliette hadn't left his side since she'd found him in the basement, and he was grateful for it. Her presence kept him grounded, even as frustration gnawed at him.

Dr. Stevens packed up his bag and stood, giving Max a pointed look. "Take it easy for the rest of the night. No sudden movements, no heavy lifting. If you feel dizzy or nauseous, get checked out at the hospital."

Max nodded. "Got it. Thanks, Doc."

The man gave him a curt nod before heading for the door. Aiden stepped aside to let him pass, then turned back to them. "Alright, let's go over this again. From the beginning."

Juliette sat close beside Max, her hand still resting lightly on his arm. "I'd just arrived around three thirty and went looking for Max to help me carry my things in. When I couldn't find him, I asked around and when one of the workers realized they hadn't seen him in a while, we started looking. It took almost an hour before I finally found him in the basement, unconscious." Her voice trembled slightly, and Max hated that this had shaken her so much. "I almost missed him. If I hadn't seen his shoes sticking out from behind the dresser..."

Aiden nodded, jotting notes. "And you didn't see or hear anything before you got hit?"

Max exhaled slowly, replaying the moment in his head. "I'd just walked in, was checking out the old furniture and boxes, trying to decide what to move out first, when I heard someone come in behind me. I figured it was one of the workers—then bam, lights out." He frowned, flexing his fingers. "Whoever it was didn't take anything. My wallet, phone, everything is still on me."

Aiden's jaw tensed. "That's what's bothering me. If it was a thief, why not at least take something? And if it was someone trying to find the diamond, as Palmer pointed out..."

Before Max could respond, Palmer returned with Nick. Nick looked grim, holding up a large red pipe wrench in a bag. “This was underneath the old dresser. Hard to tell, but it appears a few boxes were gone through. Max, you’d know better if things were moved around down there.”

“Any idea who this belongs to?” Aiden asked Palmer.

“Sure do, it’s mine. I have my business initials etched in all of my tools so they don’t walk off a job site.” He motioned to the tool. “But any of my workers, or anyone else for that matter, could have picked it up from one of the toolboxes while we weren’t looking.”

“Right.” Aiden nodded.

Max leaned forward, ignoring the way his head protested. “So what’s the next move?”

Aiden tucked the tool into a black bag. “First, let’s make sure we lock everything up tight at night.” He shot Max a pointed look, “And yeah, it might be time to step up security. Palmer knows how to install a pretty nice security system, if it’s within your budget.”

Max sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Already on our list.”

“I’ll start first thing in the morning,” Palmer said.

Juliette squeezed his hand, her expression firm. “We’ll figure this out.”

He met her gaze and found himself believing her. No matter what—or who—was behind this, they weren’t going to let it ruin everything he’d just gained. Her. Here with him.

Chapter Seventeen

Hearing Max's breathing and watching his chest rise and fall soothed her worries.

After everyone had left and she'd made sure every door and window in the place was locked, they ate a light dinner before settling down on the sofa and watching TV until Max fell asleep.

Juliette glanced down at Max sprawled across the sofa with his head resting against her thigh. His breathing was steady, his features relaxed, despite the events of the day. She ran her fingers lightly through his hair, careful not to get near his bump or wake him just yet. He needed the rest after what had happened in the basement. But they couldn't stay on the couch all night.

"Max," she whispered after the show was over, brushing her fingers along his jaw.

He let out a soft, contented sigh but didn't stir.

Smiling, she leaned down and kissed his forehead. "Come on, let's go to bed."

He hummed in response, blinking his eyes open slowly. For a moment, he looked confused, but then he focused on her and a sleepy smile curved his lips. "Mmm, best wake-up call ever."

She chuckled. "Let's get you in bed before you fall asleep on me again."

He stretched and groaned before finally sitting up. "Fine, but only if you come with me."

She chuckled as she stood and took his hand, leading him down the hallway, up the stairs, and to the bedroom. The house was quiet, a stark contrast to the chaos from earlier in the day. The only sound was the rhythmic crash of the waves outside, steady and soothing.

Max sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing a hand over his face. "You okay?" he asked, watching her as she moved around the room.

"I should be asking you that." She pulled a small bag from the chair and unzipped it, taking out a few of her things. "But yeah, I'm fine. Just glad you're okay."

He nodded and yawned as he fell back onto the bed, watching her. "You know, I never really thought about what it'd be like to have someone else's things in here."

She paused, looking over her shoulder at him. "And?"

His lips tilted into a lazy smile. "I like it. Is the closet big enough for you?"

She chuckled and motioned to the massive walk-in closet. Max's things took up only a quarter of the space. "I think I have less clothes than you do. There's going to be more empty space in there than either of us can fill."

Warmth spread through her chest. She turned back to the dresser and placed a few folded shirts in an empty drawer before moving to the bathroom to put away her toothbrush, makeup bag, and hair products. It wasn't much, but it was a start—one that felt bigger than she'd expected.

When she returned, Max had shifted under the covers, his arm stretched out towards her. "Come here," he murmured, his voice thick with exhaustion.

She slipped in beside him, and he immediately pulled her close, tucking her against his chest. "Feels right," he mumbled against her hair.

She smiled, pressing a kiss to his bare shoulder. "It does."

Within minutes, his breathing evened out again, his body warm and solid next to hers. She let out a slow breath, letting the exhaustion of the day finally take over.

As she drifted off, she realized something. Despite everything that had happened, despite the threats and uncertainty, she felt safe. Because she was here, with him. And that was all that mattered.

The following morning, she woke to a text message from Palmer that his men were there and ready to work. Dressing quickly and leaving Max to sleep more, she opened the door for them and went about making breakfast.

When she was done, she set two plates down on the small outdoor table on the deck. The morning sun was still casting a golden glow over the ocean, warming everything and making her glad that summer was finally there.

The air was still a little crisp this early but warming quickly, the salty breeze carrying the distant cries of seagulls and happy people enjoying the beach below them.

Max stepped out and stretched his arms over his head before plopping down in the chair across from her. His hair was still messy from sleep, and the faint bruising on his temple from yesterday's attack made her stomach twist.

"I could get used to this," he said, grabbing a slice of bacon off his plate.

She smirked. "What, waking up to the sound of hammers and saws?"

He chuckled. "That, and already made breakfast."

She took a sip of her coffee. "It's just eggs, bacon, and toast, nothing fancy."

"Still better than my usual protein bar." He shot her a grin before digging in.

They ate in comfortable silence for a while, watching the waves roll in. The town was waking up, boats already heading out to sea, and the occasional distant voice carried up from the beach below.

"I'm gonna grab a quick shower before we start the day," Max said once he was done eating. He pushed his chair back.

She nodded. "I've already set up the cameras but figured that I'd start going through yesterday's footage while you shower. I want to post the video soon."

He leaned down and pressed a lingering kiss to her lips before heading inside.

Once she cleared the table and grabbed her laptop, she settled onto the outdoor chair, pulling up the footage from the day before. The videos loaded smoothly, and she started trimming clips, focusing on the shots where the workers hadn't blocked the view.

Then she scrolled through the footage from the second camera, where the workers' were working at the base of the stairs, and froze.

Her stomach twisted slightly as she watched Max walk down the hallway towards the kitchen. The camera set up at the far end of the space captured him disappearing into the kitchen. Alone.

She nearly skipped to the next clip when something in the corner of the frame caught her eye.

Frowning, she rewound the footage and hit pause.

A shadowy figure was following him from the living room.

Her breath hitched.

She leaned in closer, eyes locked onto the grainy corner of the shot. A small person, dressed entirely in black, their face obscured by the lighting, moved across the hallway, following behind Max. And in his hand—

A pipe wrench.

Juliette's heart pounded as she hit play again, watching in horror as the figure followed Max into the kitchen just moments before he had been attacked.

Her stomach dropped.

This wasn't just some random accident.

Someone had been watching him.

Someone had attacked him on purpose.

And they were still out there.

Juliette paced the deck while she waited for Max to finish getting dressed, her fingers tapping anxiously against the back of her phone.

She'd sent a text to Aiden and he had responded almost immediately, saying he was on his way. She'd watched the footage at least five more times, each viewing making her stomach twist tighter. Someone had followed Max. Someone had been waiting for the right moment.

The thought sent a shiver through her.

When Max finally stepped outside, his damp hair tousled and his brow furrowed from her urgent request to talk, she wasted no time.

"You need to see this," she said, sitting down on the bed and pulling up the footage on her laptop.

Max sat beside her, leaning in close as she played the clip. She felt him stiffen beside her the moment the shadowy figure appeared in the frame.

"Son of a—" His jaw clenched.

She let the video play through once more, pausing just as the figure stepped into view, the pipe wrench clearly visible in his grip.

"It wasn't just some random break-in, they weren't looking for the diamond," Juliette said quietly. "Whoever this is, they wanted to hurt you."

Max exhaled sharply, scrubbing a hand down his face. "We need to take this to Palmer and Parker. If this was one of the workers, they might recognize him."

She nodded, already closing her laptop.

They moved quickly, finding the brothers in the middle of a discussion about materials in one of the upstairs bathrooms. The second Palmer saw their faces, his expression darkened.

"What's wrong?" Parker asked, setting down a clipboard.

Juliette opened her laptop again, turning the screen towards them. “We caught something on the footage from yesterday.”

Both men leaned in as she played the clip, their gazes sharpening when the figure appeared. Palmer muttered a curse under his breath while Parker crossed his arms.

“Any idea who that might be?” Max asked, his voice tight.

Palmer exhaled through his nose. “Give me a sec.” He pulled out his phone and scrolled through a list, then exchanged a glance with his brother.

Parker nodded. “We can put together a short list of guys who match that build and were working yesterday.”

By the time Aiden arrived, the brothers had narrowed it down to three potential suspects.

Aiden listened as they explained, his expression growing graver by the second. “Alright,” he finally said, jotting down notes. “I’ll need their names and contact info. If they’re here working today, we can question them, if not, we’ll bring them in for questioning.”

Juliette stole a glance at Max, the tension in his posture unmistakable.

“Why don’t the two of you go take a walk while we handle this?” Aiden suggested.

“I have a better idea,” Max said, taking her hand. “I have a few errands to run in Edgeview. I need to pick up a few things. We’ll be back after lunch.”

“We’ll keep you posted,” Aiden assured them.

“I’ll grab my purse,” Juliette said, and disappeared.

In all the excitement, she’d forgotten to hit publish on the posts and did so before they left, making sure to exclude the scene where Max was followed.

As they pulled out of the driveway, Juliette kept sneaking glances at Max. Since his head was still aching, she drove his car.

“You okay?” she asked softly, reaching out to rest a hand on his arm.

He exhaled slowly, forcing a small smile. “Yeah. Just trying to keep my head straight. It’s one thing knowing someone attacked me, but seeing that guy actually following me…” He shook his head. “It’s unsettling.”

Juliette squeezed his arm gently. “We’ll figure out who it is. Aiden and the guys won’t stop until they do.”

Max nodded but didn’t say anything else. She turned onto the highway that would lead them towards Edgeview, the larger town about thirty minutes away.

“So, what are these errands?” she asked, trying to lighten the mood. “You’re being all mysterious, it almost makes me think you’re either picking up something completely boring like light bulbs or something ridiculously extravagant.”

He smirked, the tension in his face easing just slightly. “What if I told you it was somewhere in between?”

Juliette raised an eyebrow. “Interesting. Okay, I’ll play along.”

They spent the next few miles chatting about little things—the upcoming work still needed on the house, the posts she’d uploaded, and the fact that they now had over two million views on their latest video.

By the time they reached Edgeview, Max had fully relaxed, and Juliette was feeling more at ease too.

Their first stop was a small specialty store tucked between a coffee shop and a bookstore. Inside, Juliette immediately caught the scent of leather and aged paper.

Max led her to a glass case where a variety of cameras were displayed.

“Ah-ha,” she said, crossing her arms. “Now it makes sense.”

Max grinned. “I wanted to surprise you, but since we were already coming into town, I figured we’d pick one out together.”

Juliette’s heart squeezed. “You want to get me a camera?”

He shrugged like it was no big deal. “You mentioned that you’d been thinking about getting something of your own for a while. Consider it a housewarming gift.”

She stared at him, speechless for a moment. No one had ever done something like this for her before.

“Max…”

“Pick one,” he said, nodding to the case. “I want you to have something special.”

Juliette swallowed past the lump in her throat and focused on the cameras, her fingers brushing over the cool glass.

He was making it impossible not to fall deeper in love with him.

And somehow, that scared her more than the man who had attacked him.

After the camera shop, where she’d picked out a used Olympus Pen-F complete with several lenses and a case, they headed to the hardware store and grabbed a few items he needed along with a couple of cases of backsplash tile they’d picked out for the kitchen.

Before heading back to Pride, they found a burger place and ate lunch.

It was there, when they were almost done eating lunch, when the report on the television caught Juliette’s eye. She tapped Max’s arm and pointed to the screen just as the words “Gabriella DeLuca found dead in hotel room” scrolled across.

“What the…” Max pulled out his phone and quickly searched for the report.

“What happened?” Juliette asked, glancing at his phone.

“They aren’t saying.” He glanced at her. “She was found early this morning by her agent. The first reports say that she was attacked.”

Juliette swallowed. “What are the chances that someone would attack you and her in the same twenty-four hours?”

“We need to get back home.” He glanced around. “Quickly.”

She nodded and followed him out to the car.

When they pulled up to his driveway, the number of cars parked outside his place had easily doubled.

Cameras flashed as she drove quickly by while people yelled at them. There were a couple of police cruisers parked there along with all the construction workers’ trucks.

“This is going to be a very long day,” he said before they got out.

“We’ll deal with it, together.” She took his hand in hers.

He lifted it to his lips and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. “This is not how I expected things to go.”

They had talked on the trip home about Gabriella. He’d skimmed through all the articles he could find about what had happened. So far, all that the press knew was that she’d been attacked and most likely murdered sometime the day or night before and then discovered by her agent, Mariam Collins, early that morning.

When they walked in, Nick was standing in the living room talking to Parker.

“You heard?” Nick asked them.

“Yeah, what do you know?” Max asked.

Nick shook his head. “Not much more than what they’re saying on the reports.” He motioned to the TV, which was muted but playing the news channel.

“We’ve been asked by the local police handling the case to question you. Aiden has already confirmed that you both were here all yesterday and last night.”

“Thanks,” Juliette said, sitting down on the sofa, suddenly exhausted by everything. Max sat next to her and took her hand in his.

“Your folks wanted me to let them know when you returned,” Nick said, waving his phone. “I texted them when I saw you making your way up the drive.”

“Thanks,” she said again and rested her head back. “Between staying up late watching over Max and the early morning wake-up call, I’m tired.” She felt a headache spreading.

“Let me go get you a soda.” Max stood up and, before she could say anything, he disappeared into the kitchen.

“What now?” she asked Nick.

“Well, Palmer and his crew have finished installing the new security system with the help of Josh Williams.” He motioned when she heard Max talking to someone in the kitchen.

“Right, Internal Security. I forgot they also do high-end home and business security systems.”

“He’s probably showing Max the ropes now,” Palmer said as he came back into the room. “For now, if you have your phone, you can install the app. I’ll give you the login information.” He sat next to her.

For the next few minutes, he ran her through the basics while she sipped the soda Max had gotten her and waited for her parents to show up and worry over them.

When her parents did arrive, they carried a couple boxes from Baked. They all sat around the living room as a handful of people chowed down on pizza and the beer and wine that Max pulled out. Aiden and Nick had left to go on another call.

Later, she sat curled up on the couch, Max’s arm resting protectively around her shoulders as they listened to the low hum of conversation around them. The scent of fresh pizza from Baked filled the living room, but her stomach was too twisted with tension to eat much more.

Her parents sat across from them, exchanging glances every so often, as if they were debating whether to say something. Eventually, her mother was the first to speak.

“Honey, I know you’re exhausted, but are you sure you two are safe staying here tonight?”

Juliette sighed, setting her half-empty soda on the coffee table. “We just had a brand-new security system installed, Mom. Plus, we have cameras everywhere. I think we’re as safe as we can be.”

Her father nodded but didn’t seem convinced. “And what about you, Max? How are you holding up?”

Max rubbed his hands over his face before dropping them into his lap. “It’s been a hell of a day.” He exhaled, shaking his head. “First the attack, then Gabriella... It’s a lot to process. My head is dull and my pain level is about a two.”

Juliette reached for his hand and squeezed. She could feel the tension in his fingers, his usual calm and confident demeanor cracking under the weight of everything happening.

Her mother gave her a soft, knowing look before standing. “Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find us. We’re only a call away if you need anything.”

Juliette smiled appreciatively. “Thanks, Mom.”

Palmer stretched his legs out and cracked his neck. “I’ll make sure everything is locked up tight before I head out.”

Two hours later, after everyone had left for the day, the living room had been cleared, and the leftovers stored away, Max

let out a long breath and leaned against the kitchen counter. Juliette could see the weight of the day pressing down on him like it was on her. His shoulders were tense when she ran her fingers over them and even his jaw was tight when she brushed her lips across it.

“Come on,” she said softly, reaching for his hand. “Let’s go up to the bedroom. You need some sleep.”

She led Max up the stairs. Once they were in the bedroom, Max sat on the edge of the bed and ran a hand through his hair. “I still can’t believe Gabriella’s dead.”

Juliette sat beside him, resting her head on his shoulder. “I know. It doesn’t make sense.”

For a moment, they just sat there silent. Then Max turned, brushing his fingers along her cheek. “You’ve been incredible through all of this. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

She smiled softly. “You don’t have to know, because I’m not going anywhere.”

That seemed to be all the reassurance he needed. He kissed her—slow and lingering—before pulling her fully onto the bed with him.

He tossed off his pants and shirt and she did the same, and they curled together as tightly as they could. They lay tangled, warmth and exhaustion settling over them.

As Max drifted off, Juliette tried to think of any reason why someone would be after Max and Gabriella. None of it made any sense to her tired mind.

The diamond was the only thing that was possible. And she was pretty sure that if it could be found, someone would have found it by now.

In his sleep, Max instinctively pulled her closer, and she let herself finally sink into sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

The next few days flew by quickly. While Juliette spent her days focused on filming the crews, he worked on emptying the basement with the help of Palmer.

In the evenings, while Juliette edited footage, he continued to work on his project in his newly put together office.

All he was missing was a comfortable sofa and a large rug.

Juliette had surprised him with a painting of the lighthouse in oil by Alison Jordan, Iian's famous wife. Her paintings were highly sought after and, from the looks of it, this one was one of a kind. It fit perfectly above the new mantel.

Juliette had helped him turn every newly remodeled space into a home. She hung some other paintings that she'd found in the barn on the walls. Magically, somehow, most of them matched the colors they had picked out.

They had dragged the nicer furniture into each room when it was completed and had even gone shopping for new mattresses for the bedrooms.

Since he wasn't sure what he wanted to do with the rest of the basement, he used it as storage for the furniture they planned on using in the rest of the place.

Some of the more distressed pieces they had sold to Lilly and Riley down at Classy and Sassy. He'd traded a few pieces for other items they needed, like a very large mirror that he hung in their bathroom above the double sinks.

Juliette had moved one of mirrors they'd replaced into the powder room and another to the top of the stairs.

She even filled a couple old vases she found with fresh flowers from the flower garden he hadn't known was tucked behind the barn.

The place not only looked like home but it smelled like it. Even now, as he worked on his laptop, the warm, rich smell of baking cookies floated into his office.

A half an hour later she walked in with a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a large glass of almond milk. After the first bite, he blurted out, "Marry me."

She chuckled and then placed a kiss on his lips. "Okay."

"Really?" He perked up.

"Sure." She squeezed his shoulder. "I will the moment you find me the Ocean's Heart." She looked at her hand and sighed. "Or did you forget that you promised someone else you'd find it?"

He pulled her into his lap and kissed her. "For you, anything."

"What are you working on?" she asked when she pulled back.

He quickly shut his computer screen before she could get a look at it. "Something I don't want to share with you just yet."

"Okay." She pouted slightly. "When it's done?" He nodded in agreement. "When will that be?" she asked.

"Soon." He kissed her again and then took another bite of his cookie. "Best cookies I've ever had."

She laughed. "I told you. Oh." She pulled back and pulled a locket out from under her shirt. "I found this in my things the other day."

He looked down at it and ran his fingers over the gold locket. "It's pretty."

She shifted on his lap and opened it. "I found this when I was twelve." Her eyes met his. "In the rose garden just outside that window." She motioned to his windows. "Read this. I thought you could use it for... whatever." She smiled as she opened the locket and handed him a very small piece of paper.

He read the text out loud.

"Where the tides carry our laughter and the wind holds our secrets, love will always remain—tucked away where the earth meets the sea. Love H."

His eyes jerked up to hers. "Wow, this is... thanks." He set the love note down by his computer and kissed her. "Are you done for the night?" he asked her, wanting to take her into the bedroom.

"No, I was going to head into the restaurant. Sophia isn't feeling well, and she asked me to cover her shift tonight."

He groaned softly. "Then I have a few more hours I can work." He motioned to the computer. "Let me know when you get there and when you're on your way home." He kissed her again and then let her crawl out of his lap.

"I'll set the alarm when I leave," she told him. She left and he opened his laptop and got back to work on his secret project.

Did Juliette know what he was working on? What it meant to him to find a love letter from Harry Rothschild to Karna Bergman?

For the next few hours, as he wrote, immersing himself in the story and the characters, he completely lost track of time and place. Details flew from his fingertips. History. Fiction or real, it didn't matter at this point. What mattered was getting it down before he lost the thoughts.

"So, this is what you chose over my sister," a voice sounded from the doorway. He jerked his head up.

There, standing in his doorway, was a figure in all black.

No alarm in the house had sounded.

No noises had caused him to be on guard.

"Who are you?" he said, reaching for his phone.

"Don't!" the figure warned him, and it was then that he saw the shadow of the gun pointing at him.

His hand froze in mid-air.

"What do you want?" he asked slowly.

"I thought it was for you to suffer."

He frowned. That voice. That wasn't a man.

He squinted as the figure took a step further into the room. He managed to hold in a gasp.

"Gabiella?" He shook his head. "But you're..."

"Not Gabiella." The woman sneered.

No, he thought after she took another step further into the light. It wasn't Gabiella. But whoever it was was a spitting image of her, maybe just a few years younger.

"Giovanna DeLuca," she said, and his heart sank.

Gabiella had mentioned her younger sister while they'd dated. He'd read all about her. How her sister had been locked away at an early age after trying to smuggle a gun into her middle school with a list of students she wanted to end. Then, shortly before their parents' death, she'd been sent to rehab. Or so the articles claimed.

"You... attacked me and killed your sister?" he asked, feeling his throat go dry.

"She loved you, you know that," Giovanna said, taking another step closer. "If she was capable of love."

"Why attack me then?" he asked, his mind racing. How could he get help? And what would it do to Juliette if he couldn't?

"Because, there's something... different about you. You're not like her." She tilted her head.

"Meaning?" he asked, hoping and praying that it wasn't too late and that Juliette was not on her way home anytime soon.

Whatever was going to happen, he didn't want her to be a part of it.

He had felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. Was that Juliette texting that she was on her way home? God, he hoped not. He wanted to respond, but Giovanna was watching him too closely.

"Gabiella was vicious." She practically hissed it. "She always had a snide remark at the ready. Always a twist to the story to make her seem like the victim." She sighed heavily, her eyes still glued to his. She mimicked Gabiella's voice. "Oh, my poor sister is crazy. How can I spin this to get attention? I know, I'll claim she went into rehab. Oh, my parents died in a car crash as they headed up to vacation. I know, I'll have them die in a freak skiing accident. That's how I can spin this to get attention on me."

He remembered her telling him about their deaths and, yeah, he had felt sorry for her.

"Did you know, she is the reason they were on that trip in the first place?"

He shook his head. "I... no, I didn't know that."

"She paid for their trip after they had me locked up. I didn't even get to attend their funeral." She raised her voice slightly, and he tensed.

"I... I'm sorry."

"It was very hard living in her shadow, you know," she said softly. "Everywhere I went, everyone I met instantly compared me to her."

He wondered how someone like her could do the things she'd done.

"You have two sisters." She changed her tone and, somehow, the way she was holding herself.

"I do." He felt his heart stop. Had she hurt them? Was she planning on doing so?

"I met Faye. I wanted to see what they were like. She was nice." She sighed. "She helped me. I'm sorry she's deaf."

"Th-thanks." He frowned.

"Your other sister..."

"Ally," he supplied.

She nodded her head. "Your niece is cute. I watched them play in the park. She looks sad most of the time but happy when she looks at her daughter. I didn't hurt them, or your mother."

"Th-thanks," he said again. He wanted to ask her what she planned to do with him, but the words wouldn't come out.

She was quiet for a moment and then, to his surprise, she glanced around the room. "This place is pretty cool. I thought..." She stopped for a moment before continuing. "I thought I could sneak in, kill you, find the diamond, and maybe start a new life with the money. You know, maybe head somewhere tropical. Where no one recognizes me because I have my sister's face. But then I saw this place and... it's not all fancy like Gabriella liked. It's... raw. Classic." Her eyes returned to his. "I remembered how much she hurt me when you broke things off with her. She locked me up after she flew into a rage when the first articles surfaced that she had broken things off and... now I know the truth. I'm sorry I hit you."

"Thanks," he said, feeling his toes and fingers go numb. "Why come back here?"

She shrugged. "I have nowhere else to go."

He waited. She was in charge here. Whatever happened next, it was all her move.

"Did you love her?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, she used me," he admitted, knowing that she needed and deserved the truth.

"She used everyone." She paused and took a step towards the windows. The light from the lighthouse circled outside the windows every now and then, lighting up the dark ocean beyond. "Do you love the woman you are with now?"

"With everything I am," he answered quickly.

Just then, he heard the front door open and wanted to scream out to warn Juliette not to come in.

"I won't hurt you," Giovanna said, turning back towards him, no doubt because she too heard the front door. "I won't hurt either of you," she said as Juliette came around the corner and gasped at the scene. "I'm sorry," Giovanna said to Juliette. "I had nowhere else to go. I have no one left." She lifted the gun towards her own head.

Juliette screamed as he rushed towards the girl, but he was too late.

The glass behind her head shattered, sending broken shards raining over them. He caught her body right before it hit the ground.

With shaky fingers, he felt for a pulse.

"She's still breathing," he called out. "Call—"

"I've already called," Juliette said, rushing to his side. "Is that..." she asked, but then turned away and gave the dispatcher their information. He held his shirt to the large hole on the girl's cheek.

"Don't die," he told her over and over. "Please."

"I just don't want to be in pain any longer," she gasped as blood oozed out of her mouth. "Please, just let me go. I want to be with them. With my family."

He didn't know what to say, so he just held onto her, trying to stop the bleeding, until lifesaving hands replaced his, and she was taken away.

Then he sat on the floor, holding his blood-soaked shirt. Juliette helped him stand and walked him into the bathroom to change and clean up.

He was a zombie. He'd do whatever she asked of him at the moment. His brain had just... shut down.

Questions were asked and answered. He heard himself explaining everything as if watching the scene from above. He vaguely heard someone mention the padlock being broken on the outside basement door. That was how Giovanna had gotten in the house without tripping the alarm.

Someone set a glass of the Irish whiskey he'd bought the last time he'd been in Dublin in front of him, and he'd sipped it until everything felt... numb.

Hours later, after Juliette had walked everyone to the front door, he followed her up into the bedroom and let her strip him down. He crawled into bed when she asked it of him.

As he held onto her, his mind finally felt centered.

"I mean it this time," he said into her hair. "Marry me. I don't want to live this life alone. You're the one I dream about every single night, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

She shifted and looked up at him as the full moonlight shone into the room through the French doors. Tears rolled down her cheeks. He used his thumb to wipe them clear.

"Yes, Max. With all of my heart, I've known from the first time you asked me that I was going to marry you someday." She smiled. "After all, it's not often a woman gets asked four times by the same man."

He smiled for the first time in hours and then kissed her. "I love you."

"I love you too." She sighed.

Epilogue

“It’s here!” Juliette came running into the room holding a large box. “The first copies.” She beamed at him as she set the box down on his desk.

Grinning, he stood up and ripped open the box.

“*The Search for the Ocean’s Heart Diamond.*” He held the hard copy of his new book in his hands and then handed it to her. “You look,” he said with a grin.

Juliette ran her fingers over the cover and then flipped the book a few times before holding it up to her face and taking a deep breath.

“God, one of the best smells in the world.”

“It doesn’t compare to your chocolate chip cookies,” he pointed out, causing her to laugh. “Open it.”

She did and flipped to the first page. She frowned down as she read something.

“Read it out loud,” he suggested.

She shook her head slightly, and he watched a tear slip down her cheek as she took a deep breath.

For Juliette,

From the moment you walked into my life, you became the greatest story I’ve ever known. Your love, your strength, and your unwavering belief in me have shaped every word on these pages.

This book, like my heart, is yours—written with love, always.

Max

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About the Author

Jill Sanders is a New York Times, USA Today, and international bestselling author of Sweet Contemporary Romance, Romantic Suspense, Western Romance, and Paranormal Romance novels. With over 100 books in eleven series, translations into several different languages, and audiobooks there's plenty to choose from. Look for Jill's bestselling stories wherever romance books are sold or visit her at jillsanders.com

Jill comes from a large family with six siblings, including an identical twin. She was raised in the Pacific Northwest and later relocated to Colorado for college and a successful IT career before discovering her talent for writing sweet and sexy page-turners. After Colorado, she decided to move south, living in Texas and now making her home along the Emerald Coast of Florida. You will find that the settings of several of her series are inspired by her time spent living in these areas. She has two sons and off-set the testosterone in her house by adopting three furry little ladies that provide her company while she's locked in her writing cave. She enjoys heading to the beach, hiking, swimming, wine-tasting, and pickleball with her husband, and of course writing. If you have read any of her books, you may also notice that there is a love of food, especially sweets! She has been blamed for a few added pounds by her assistant, editor, and fans... donuts or pie anyone?

