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A Heart of Vallantine Novella



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Wallflower Rosemary Fillmore has never endeavored anything more than a good book, a cool glass of sweet tea, and a cat to curl up in her lap after a long day of teaching teenagers how to dissect literary masterpieces. Dowdy and shy, hardly anyone in her quaint southern town of Vallantine, Georgia, knows she exists, and the only time she has an ounce of confidence is if the world is a fictional one. So, when three of her star students suddenly start to show an interest in her personal life, or lack thereof, she wonders what on earth the girls are after. Or why. And how it involves a certain town librarian. Because she hasn't exactly agreed with how he's been running the beautiful landmark into the ground since taking over, and frankly, she's been more than a little upset about it. Besides, he is probably the sole person more awkward than herself, despite how kind or understatedly handsome he may be.

As the only living descendant of the original town founders, saving the Vallantine Library from destitution falls on Sheldon Brown's shoulders. And he's failing. Miserably. The one-hundred and forty-

year-old historical building, erected by his ancestors, has been in near ruins for a decade, and the state of the library system is declining. What he doesn't need adding to his burden is giggling teenage girls hanging out between the stacks, spying on him, and asking silly questions about their teacher. Even if the woman in question is Rosemary. Pretty, sweet, and utterly endearing Rosemary, who he's been attempting to ask on a date since forever. Except he's chronically gotten the impression she doesn't approve of him or his attempts to save the library. But then a mishap one night and a strange challenge from an unlikely source changes everything, and he wonders if perhaps two introverted bookworms can get a happy ending, after all.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Content Warning: Not intended for persons under the age of 18.

Cover Art Design by: Moor Books Design

ISBN: 9781005759254

Smashwords eBook

First Edition

Published in the United States of America

Praise for Kelly Moran's Books:

“Breathes life into an appealing story.”
Publishers Weekly

“Readers will fall in love.”
Romantic Times

“Great escape reading.”
Library Journal

“Touching & gratifying.”
Kirkus Reviews

“Sexy, heart-tugging fun.”
USA Today

“Emotional & totally engaging.”
Carla Neggers

“A gem of a writer.”
Sharon Sala

“I read in one sitting.”
Carly Phillips

“Compelling characters.”
Roxanne St. Claire

“A sexy, emotional romance.”
Kim Karr

“An emotionally raw story. A compelling read.”
Katie Ashley

“I devoured the book!”

Laura Kaye

Dedicated to all the introverts and bookworms in the world. You are less alone than you believe.

Dearest Visitors,

Welcome to Vallantine, Georgia, where the only thing sweeter than the Belle Peaches we're famous for are the patrons.

Founded in 1870 by William & Katherine Vallantine, our cozy, picturesque town is home to 2500 residents, not far from Savannah, and nestled beside the Ogeechee River. We have 3 inns and 2 B&Bs for convenience, or a hotel just outside the city limits. There are several family-operated restaurants for your dining pleasure to suit your palate or fancy.

On your visit, be sure to check out our main square. There're over 45 locally-owned independent shops along the old-world cobblestone streets. Take a riverboat dinner cruise at sunset or a horse-drawn carriage ride through the historic plantation district. Enjoy a walking tour of the Vallantine Cemetery or Peach Park, where multiple statues stand in remembrance of important figures in history, and stroll among the hundred-year-old oak trees teeming with Spanish moss. You can even view parts of the original library, still standing, that William built in 1875 for Katherine, who loved books. Some say she never left, that her spirit can be caught reading one of her favorite volumes between the shelves while she idly waits to assist all who enter seeking knowledge.

You may have been lured here for our annual Peach Festival or Pecan Fair, but our southern charm will make you never want to leave. Hospitality is our middle name. If you're so inclined, before you do depart, go say hello to Miss Katie—the first Belle Peach tree ever planted in town, named after the one and only Katherine Vallantine. It's legend around these parts that doing so will bring you good luck and a lifetime of love. She's also been known to grant a wish or two if she's in the mood.

Y'all come back now, you hear!

Gunner Davis, Mayor of Vallantine

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Prologue

Dorothy Wilson set her hand on her hip, staring at the mayor of Vallantine as if he'd fallen out of one of their town's infamous peach trees, and bruised his fruit on each branch of his dissent. Because, really. He wasn't making a lick of sense.

Struggling for patience, and a break from the sweltering humidity, she fanned her face with the folder he'd given her. The historical library didn't have AC. It didn't have much by way of anything, actually. It had been erected by the original town founder, William Vallantine, for his wife, Katherine, in 1875 because she'd adored reading. The gorgeous, if not severely dilapidated old colonial-style building, had remained with the ancestors ever since.

It was still one of her favorite places on Earth. And now, the mayor was as lost as last year's Easter egg if he was claiming it belonged to her. Well, her and her two BFFs.

"Gunner Davis, all due respect, but I think you done gone crazy."

He offered her a withering glare and cinched his slacks higher. Or tried to. Belt aside, the pants weren't going any farther north, not with his very round paunch of a belly. It was a habit of his, though, when getting down to business or he had something to say. Which he always did. Couldn't find a nicer guy, but he was a blowhard.

Bless his heart.

"Miss Wilson, I assure you, all my marbles are in the bag." He ran his pudgy fingers through his thinning white hair, damp with sweat. The collar of his white polo was soaked through. "As the estate attorney for Sheldon and Rosemary Brown, I drew up the papers myself, based on their wishes."

He was one of a handful of attorneys in town, but he didn't practice law often anymore since becoming mayor twenty years ago. He still had an

office on Belle Street and took new business, yet the majority of his clientele had been in their prime around Vietnam. She did know for a fact that Sheldon Brown, descendant of William Vallantine, was a client of Gunner's. Except...

"He's not dead. Neither is his wife, Rosemary." It felt weird to call Ms. Fillmore by her first name. She'd been Dorothy's middle school teacher, and her favorite, to boot. "I just saw them both yesterday at the ice cream stand. Fit as a fiddle. Even if they had died, why would they leave the library to us?"

He jutted his chin. "They left you girls a note. It's in the folder. You're the only one who showed today, so I'll leave it up to you to tell the others."

The others being her best friends since the age of...gestation. Their mothers had been closer than sisters and had started the first book club in town. Thus, Dorothy and her besties had been named after southern fictional characters. Townsfolk had dubbed their trio the "Bookish Belles" before they'd hit kindergarten. Rebecca had left Vallantine right out of high school to pursue college and had stayed gone for her career. She came back a few times a year to visit her grandmother. Scarlett was still in town, and knowing her, merely running late, not blowing off the meeting. Probably.

This whole thing was odd. The Browns were not deceased. A town this size? Heck, Dorothy wouldn't even have her coffee brewed, and she'd know the details of how and when. Without asking. From about a hundred people via the gossip mill. This library had never been out of Vallantine heirs' hands. And leaving Dorothy and her friends a note seemed suspiciously like they'd moved. Or moved on. Or something.

She pressed her hand to her forehead, damp with perspiration. "I'm confused."

"Pretty clear, Miss Wilson. You, Rebecca Moore, and Scarlett Taylor are now the proud owners of the Vallantine Library."

“Gunner,” she said through a sigh, “that’s about as transparent as the Ogeechee River.”

“I’ll be in my office if you need me.” He nodded and waddled out the open doorway in the foyer.

She stared after him. “The hell?”

Throwing her hands up, she glanced around.

Square footage on the main level was roughly a thousand square feet, and about half that for the second story loft. A wrought iron set of curved stairs led to the upper area with a matching railing. A large stained-glass window depicting a book laying in the grass under a peach tree allowed filtered light upstairs. The loft otherwise was empty. The ceiling was coffered with copper plating. The floorboards were original cherry. In the center of the room downstairs was an ivory marble counter, large enough to fit two people working comfortably. Wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling bookcases lined the left, right, and back wall.

Those were the highlights.

There was an errant scent of dust and mildew. The floorboards had needed refinishing two decades ago. A large lead-glass chandelier had cobwebs forming their own cobwebs. The roof was this close to caving. Plumbing and electrical hadn’t been updated since the turn of the twentieth century. Chunks of plaster were missing from many areas in the walls upstairs. And she was uncertain just how stable the Greek support columns were for the loft, since one of them slanted precariously to the left.

Over time, Sheldon Brown had done what he’d could to salvage the beautiful old place, but funding had been nearly non-existent and the town’s fundraisers had only helped so much. It had broken his heart, day after day, year after year. How he’d tried, though. So hard.

She’d spent hours here as a girl. Escaping. Reading. Getting lost amongst the stacks. Searching for Katherine Vallantine’s ghost, since rumor

had it, she haunted the place. Dorothy had never spotted the spirit. She didn't think anyone else actually had either. Their mayor had probably started the tall tale to draw in more tourism.

Admittedly, she'd dreamed of taking over the library. Her friends, also. But, that had never been likely or possible. They weren't Vallantine descendants.

Frowning, she glanced at the folder Gunner had given her and opened it. Inside were three copies of the deed. They seemed legit. There was also an inspection report, appraisal, and an envelope. She pulled out the latter, unfolded the paper inside, and read the letter.

To Our Bookish Belles,

Once upon a time, three young girls helped a teacher and a librarian find love. And you did it inside these walls that were built a century ago by a gentleman who adored his wife so much, he created a haven dedicated to her.

We want that love to continue, to pass down to another generation, but not just anyone will do. Since we don't have children of our own, and because of you, we found our happy ending, we choose you. No one loves this place or respects it more than you girls. Our beloved library is filled with volumes of knowledge and exciting adventures just waiting to be explored. You genuinely understand that and know the importance. We feel you are the best caretakers and will restore it in ways we cannot. It is yours to do as you see fit.

As for us, we are off on a grand adventure of our own to see the world. We don't know when we'll be back, only that we will return someday. When we do, we know you'll have made us and the Vallantine legacy proud. There's something inside this envelope to help with financing. Gunner Davis can explain. We are so very grateful to you and proud of the young women you've become.

Happy Reading,

Sheldon & Rosemary Brown

Well, geez. Shock and doubt assaulted Dorothy, even if hope was prying for footing.

Eyes misty, she checked the folder again. And nearly dropped it.

A cashier's check, made out to her, Rebecca, and Scarlett, was behind the deed. A very, very sizable check.

The breath whooshed from her lungs, and she laughed. Hysterically. Uncontrollably.

Then, she shakily sat in a chair by the counter and cried.

Chapter One

Spring, 2004

“You should totally put your hair up, Ms. Fillmore.”

Rosemary glanced up from the desk in her classroom where she was grading papers—terribly written book reports—and looked at Rebecca Moore. The girl was one of Rosemary’s favorite eighth graders. Astute, driven, and self-aware, Rebecca mimicked the love interest of Tom Sawyer in *Huckleberry Finn*, the fictional character her mama had named her after. Just as feisty, too. A blonde-haired, blue-eyed, slender firecracker who was going to break hearts soon.

She and her two best friends—known as the Bookish Belles—had stayed late after class to voluntarily wash boards and prep the classroom for spring break. What that had to do with Rosemary’s hair, she hadn’t a clue.

“You know, try a new style or something.”

“Oh.” Rosemary skimmed her fingers over her brown, wavy strands, hoping it hadn’t frizzed to a poodle state with all the humidity. “Um, well...” Hmm.

“Yes!” Scarlett Taylor paused in motion of placing a chair upside down on a desk. Favorite student number two, the girl was as dramatic as O’Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, for whence her mama had named her. Though she’d come from money, and a lot of it, she wasn’t a snob and seemed keenly aware of others around her. She just preferred all the attention. Sleek cocoa locks, willowy frame, and bright golden eyes. The latter of which were alight with interest. “Maybe a haircut with layers and highlights? That would look so great on you. Ohmigosh! And contact lenses!”

“Uh.” Rosemary adjusted her glasses, not sure why they were suddenly an issue. Plastic and black-framed, they were a bit large for her face, but the selection hadn’t been that extensive when she’d had her eye exam. Plus, she hadn’t wanted to drive an hour to Savannah or almost two to Statesboro for the sake of eyeglasses. No one noticed, anyway. She’d had them for two years.

At a loss, because hardly anyone in town was aware of her existence, she glanced at favorite student three, wiping off the dry-erase board. Dorothy Wilson, named by her mama after the lead in *The Wizard of Oz*, had auburn hair, blue eyes, and a very curvy shape, bordering on plump. She was down-to-earth, strong, and like her friends, very smart. She was the quietest of the three, probably because she hadn’t grown into her esteem yet. Kids could be cruel sometimes. She was watching the conversation, but had kept mum.

“What do you think?” Rosemary prompted.

“I think you’re very pretty the way you are, Ms. Fillmore.”

Shucks. She hadn’t been called pretty in, well, ever. “Thank you. How kind of you to say.”

“Of course, she’s pretty.” Scarlett emitted an exasperated noise and rolled her eyes. “We just mean she could, you know, do more.”

For what purpose? And why mention it now, after Rosemary had them for English class the entire school year last term and this one? Besides, a wallflower didn’t suddenly start blooming.

“Yeah. Something different.” Rebecca tucked her hair behind her ears. “A cute dress or whatever.”

“What’s wrong with my dress?” Rosemary glanced at the article of clothing in question. Short sleeves, high collar, hem to her ankles, and navy blue with white roses. “It’s comfortable.”

“It’s a little outdated.” Rebecca raised her palms. “It doesn’t show off your figure.”

Figure? “Girls, I appreciate your advice. Sincerely, I do. But—”

“A little makeup?” Scarlett nodded, facing Rebecca, as if Rosemary wasn’t in the room and they weren’t discussing her.

Now this was more normal.

“Agree.” Rebecca eyed Dorothy as if willing her to chime in. “Don’t you think?”

An exhale, and Dorothy gave Rosemary a once-over. “I think she should be herself, but it wouldn’t be terrible if she tried a couple things, I guess.”

“Girls.” Rosemary cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I’m always open to discussion and opinions, but where is this coming from?”

All three looked down, shuffling their feet or playing with the ends of their hair.

Eventually, Rebecca spoke. “We were just trying to help.”

Darn it. Rosemary’s belly churned with guilt. “Help with what, honey?”

Rebecca looked at Scarlett as if seeking assistance.

Scarlett sighed, drama heavy on the undercurrent. “You’re not married or anything. Of all our teachers, you’re the nicest. I mean, you listen to us when other adults don’t and know we can think for ourselves. You don’t treat us like babies or tell us what to do. If we have a problem, we can come to you. You’re really kinda cool, even if you’re a teacher. We just thought maybe you were lonely or whatever. We never see you with anyone and figured suggesting stuff might work.”

So, they were attempting to make Rosemary more desirable for the male species. Good intentions, poor execution. They were teenagers, though, and not as suave as, say, older folk.

Her throat tightened with the sentiment. Educators weren't supposed to play favorites, and she didn't treat these three differently than her other pupils, but they'd grown on her over the past couple years. They shared similar interests and her love of the written word. Her life was her work, with teaching them the importance of literature and life lessons through books. By the girls trying to nudge her, it meant she'd gotten through to them or had formed a connection. In reality, it was all she could ask for, to mean something to somebody and leave a lasting impression.

However, she'd never been comfortable dating. Due to nerves, it took her a long time to warm up to a man. By then, they'd usually grown bored or the relationship had gone stale. Frankly, she just wasn't very interesting. She'd pretty much given up on finding her soul mate.

Flesh and blood rarely lived up to fictional heroes.

These girls were among the most popular in their class. Something Rosemary had no experience in. They were beautiful, smart, funny, and sincere. Other students looked up to them. The fact they'd noticed her, never mind attempted to assist in their own way, was sweet. Acts of kindness and paying it forward were things she often encouraged. And it had taken gumption to try. Though contact lenses, a dress, or haircut weren't going to change a thing, she should reward them for the gesture so they wouldn't think twice about doing it again someday.

"I appreciate y'all saying that. However, I think it's important to know that whomever you date or fall in love with should like you for who you are. Otherwise, they are not worth your time. Both parties deserve better. You should always be yourself, not pretend." She smiled, making eye contact with each one, and they nodded their understanding. "But, you know what? I could probably use a little change. Maybe I'll come back from spring break a refreshed woman."

They laughed, shoulders slumping with a release of tension.

Dorothy waved her hand with flair. “We won’t recognize you.”

Rebecca bounced on her toes. “I’m so excited.”

Dorothy grinned, but said nothing.

“Are y’all done cleaning up?”

They nodded.

A sigh, and Rosemary set the book reports aside. Most were hurting her brain, at any rate. “Come on over here, then. Let’s find me a dress.”

They squealed and rushed to her desk, cementing in her mind and heart that she’d reacted the proper way to their effort at helping.

She logged onto her computer, waited for the internet connection, and went to a department store’s website.

“What are we looking for?” she asked, hoping she didn’t wind up resembling a has-been pop star struggling to make a comeback.

“I got this.” Scarlett leaned over and tapped away on the keyboard, plugging in her criteria in the search bar. She scrolled. “No, nah, blah,” was muttered until she paused. “This one.”

Rosemary examined the suggestion. It was a casual red teacup dress, hem just below the knee, and fitted around the waist. The sleeves were quarter-length. It was cute, but not a color she’d ever choose for herself. “It’s kind of...bright.”

“Exactly!” Scarlett grinned. “It’s the best shade for your coloring.”

The others nodded.

“Okay, then.” Rosemary clicked a drop down menu, found her size, and added the dress to the cart. Color notwithstanding, it wasn’t a horrible

suggestion. She could see herself wearing it. “Would you two like to pick something?”

Nudging Scarlett out of the way, Rebecca tapped keys. She searched for a good two minutes before straightening. “I like this.”

An ankle-length denim skirt, which according to the description, was a stretch material, and it had a slit up the side to the knee. The website showed a model in a white lace tank top shirt to accompany. Very gauzy. Again, it wasn’t something Rosemary would pick for herself, but she’d wear it. Plus, she had sweaters and blouses at home she could match with the skirt, making the outfit interchangeable.

“That’s very nice. I like it.” She added both in her size to the cart. “Dorothy? Would you like to look?”

The girl seemed hesitant at first, but eventually did her own search. Intently, she waded through results until stopping on a suit combination. It was a forest green color with a pale yellow silk shirt. Loose-fitting slacks, short blazer, with rounded lapels. Feminine, yet professional. Again, Rosemary could interchange a lot of her current blouses to wear with the suit, or just use the pants without the jacket.

“Do you like that outfit, Dorothy?”

The girl glanced at Rosemary and back to the screen. “Yes.”

A nod, and Rosemary added it to the cart. Then, she did a search of her own to find an item she picked, with their approval. A cobalt spaghetti strap dress that went to mid-calf. The checkout total wasn’t as bad as she’d feared, and estimated delivery was less than a week.

“There we go. Ordered. Thank you, girls.” And since it had been a couple years since her last eye exam, she’d make an appointment this week to get checked. If she thought she could handle contacts, then she’d buy a pair. “Now, how about you go get your spring break started?”

They laughed and left, more enthusiastic than the hour before.

Rosemary smiled, watching the empty doorway, warmth filling her for having done something good for their mood and inserting a lesson about honesty. She wasn't sure if their plan to attract a husband would pass. In fact, it probably wouldn't, but updating part of her wardrobe and listening to the girls had been her goal.

Satisfied, she tucked the book reports in her bag, shut down her computer, and cut the lights.

She pushed through the main doors, stepped out into the late day sun, and breathed in the scents of spring. Flowers blooming, cut grass, and the faded scent of the Ogeechee River in the distance were welcome after a rather cool season. Though winters were relatively mild for them, rarely getting to the freezing mark, this past one had brought two frosts. She was ready for the heat. Since she lived a couple blocks from the school and it had been warm this morning, she'd walked. She was glad she'd left her car at home.

Taking her time, she smiled as she passed tourists, most of them coming from the direction of the port where riverboat cruises operated. Vallantine was located on a good spot along the river. There were often conflicting scents because the fresh blackwater channeled into saltwater farther down at the edge of their county, then merged into marshes on the other side. An eastern breeze brought the algae smell to blend with pollen today. People were probably taking advantage of the weather or window shopping at some of the quaint shops along the banks. Vacationers always got a kick out of the wildlife, too. Osprey, bald eagles, and wood storks mostly. Once in a while, alligator sightings popped up in the cypress-dense privately owned areas.

She turned the corner into a residential neighborhood, waving to those she knew from her block. Judging by the stares and absent waves in return, they either didn't recognize her or had forgotten who she was until put right in front of them. Such was life. Her life. That was all right, though. She didn't know what to do with attention.

Her subdivision was three blocks of interwoven side streets with single-story cookie-cutter homes in various colors built in the eighties. White picket fences and manicured quarter-acre lots. She loved it. Though the plantation district on the other side of town had history, horse-drawn carriage rides, and huge oaks with Spanish moss, this was more modern and reflected everyday folks. It was also a hike from the main square, thus less traffic.

Buds were forming on the dogwood and willow trees. White fragrant blooms on the magnolias were starting to open. Decorative crepe myrtles popped with pink, purple, and white flowers. Puffy white clouds against a blue sky added a surreal backdrop. It would be a good night to sit on her tiny front porch and read while the sun set. Perhaps she'd brew some sweet tea instead of hot chamomile this evening. Perfect way to kickstart a week off.

Making her way up the front walk to her yellow house with white shutters, she noted it was about time to have it pressure-washed again. The green one next door, owned by the Hendersons, had just been done last weekend, but the salmon house on her other side needed it badly. Mrs. Widmeyer, an elderly widow, owned it. Rosemary made a mental note to schedule both homes soon.

She keyed her way inside and dropped her bag on the entryway table. Poe pounced over from the direction of the kitchen, meowing loudly.

She laughed. "You poor dear. Did you have to wait an extra hour for your dinner?"

Picking up the black furball, she toed off her flats and walked across the carpeted living room to the kitchen, where she slid into the slippers she always left there. She hated the feeling of cold linoleum on her feet. While she opened a can of cat food one-handed, Poe sniffed her.

"I didn't cheat on you with any other cats today. I promise."

Smiling, she set him on the floor and spooned food into his dish. Satisfied he'd be occupied for a bit, she backtracked through the living room and down the short hallway to the bathroom, starting the shower.

She'd just put on a robe when the doorbell rang.

Frowning, she shut off the water and went to answer it. No one ever came calling unless she had a package. It was too late for mail delivery.

She opened the door to find the Bookish Belles on her doorstep. She tilted her head, eyeing the students, hoping nothing was wrong. They'd never, not once, come to her house before. And she'd just seen them at school.

Scarlett held up a small canvas bag. "We brought reinforcements."

"Uh." Rosemary cinched the lapels of her robe tighter, just in case. "For what?"

"Your makeover." Rebecca rolled her eyes. "Duh."

Makeover? Rosemary had thought they'd done that by ordering clothes. "I'm confused."

Dorothy shrugged. "I told them we shouldn't come."

"Don't be silly." Scarlett scooted right past Rosemary into the house.

Rebecca followed.

Dorothy shrugged again. "Sorry. It's best just to go with it. When those two get something in their heads, there's no stopping them. This one time, when we were ten, Scarlett wanted a treehouse. We built one. It was so terrible and rickety that Aden Abner—he's in the ninth grade now—had to fix it so we wouldn't 'break our pretty little necks,' according to him."

"I see." She really didn't, but Rosemary gestured to let the girl enter, anyway. She closed the door and faced them. "Do your folks know you're

here?”

“I told Gammy. She’s fine.”

“My parents couldn’t care less, so long as I don’t embarrass the great Taylor name.”

The first answer had been Rebecca’s, whose parents had died in a car wreck when she was eight. Her grandmother was her guardian. The second response had been from Scarlett, whose folks were richer than half the world, and were often more worried about appearances than their daughter’s feelings. Rosemary felt horrible for both situations, but the girls seemed to handle the punches they were thrown with a grain of salt and a lot of backbone.

She glanced at Dorothy. “And you?”

“Mama and Daddy said okay, so long as I was with them”—she pointed—“and that I was home before bedtime. Which is eleven on non-school nights.”

Alrighty. The trust of a small town mindset.

Crossing her arms, Rosemary cleared her throat, wondering what the heck. “What’s this about a makeover?” That sounded ominous. And dangerous in the hands of teenagers. It was one thing to let them pick a couple outfits, and another to—

“I got a dye kit for highlights and I brought scissors to cut your hair.” Rebecca all but oozed enthusiasm, bouncing on her toes.

Scarlett held up the canvas bag again, equally gung-ho. “And I brought cosmetics.”

Yep. *That*. Exactly what Rosemary had feared. She opened her mouth, but Dorothy spoke first.

“I have the manicure stuff. And snacks.”

Oh boy. “That’s very nice of you to take time out of your Friday night, but I’m not so sure I’m ready for that kind of change.” That seemed a safe answer to deter them, but apparently it fell on deaf ears.

“Where should we set up?” Scarlett glanced around, eyeing the bay window and scattering of potted plants, the small fireplace with dragon figurines, a TV stand with a rarely used twenty-inch, two full bookshelves, and the green plaid couch. Her gaze finally stopped on the coffee table holding magazines. “Kitchen might be better. You’ve got carpet in here.”

“Agree.” Rebecca strode to the doorway, peeking in the kitchen. “Oh yes. Much better.”

“Girls—”

“You have a cat!” Dorothy crouched and held her hand out to Poe, who side-glanced Rosemary with apparent disdain, probably for the visitors. “I love cats, but my mom is allergic, so we can’t get one.”

“That’s a shame. Look, girls—”

“You’re already in a robe, too. Perfect.” Scarlett clapped her hands. “Let’s get started.”

All three of them marched into the kitchen.

Rosemary threw her hands up and followed. Correct her if she was wrong, but she was the adult here, right? “Do you even know anything about dyeing hair or cutting?” Cosmetics could be washed off and nail polish removed. Hair took longer to fix.

Rebecca paused by the four-seat maple table while removing items from her bag. “My grandmother taught me. She does mine.”

True. Okay. Worst case? Rosemary could book an appointment at Shearly Beloved salon in town tomorrow. She was off work for ten days and no one would see her, never mind notice.

“We can skip it if you want?” Rebecca’s sorrowful tone and eyes indicated upset with an insult chaser.

“No.” Rosemary adjusted her glasses. “It’s fine. Just, um…” How did she wind up in this mess? “Let’s be subtle.”

Rebecca grinned. “No problem.”

For the next couple hours, Rosemary sat in a chair while Rebecca did something to her hair that involved foils. Dorothy polished finger and toenails. Once Rosemary had washed her hair in the kitchen sink, she was directed once again into a chair while Rebecca cut and Scarlett put on cosmetics. A full tutorial was given as she went along so Rosemary could apply them herself next time. She’d never worn much makeup. A little gloss and eyeshadow, but that was it. Scarlett made it sound easy and claimed she’d leave the items for Rosemary since she didn’t use that brand any longer. They ate candy and chips between discussions on boys, the books they were reading, and TV shows Rosemary had never heard of before.

When all was said and done, her stomach clenched in nervousness as they assembled, en masse, into her tiny bathroom to see the results. She froze, staring at her reflection.

Her wavy brown hair, which had been a couple inches past her collarbone, was cut to her shoulders with reddish highlights that seemed to warm her complexion. Nothing drastic. Complementary. And her makeup was natural, as well. A copperish eye shadow, mascara, and a lip tint just one shade darker than her true tone. The concealer had made her skin even and blended well. What a difference it made, though. If she wound up with contact lenses, she’d look like a better version of herself, but still recognizable.

“Wow, girls.” She glanced at her finger and toenails, painted a deep red. They looked nice. Different, since she never polished them, but nice. “This is amazing.”

They clapped and jumped in place.

Rosemary figured even if they'd made her look like a train wreck, she would be glad she'd allowed them to "make her over." In their own way, they did something kind for someone else, while having fun in the process.

"You did a wonderful job. Thank you."

Their faces beamed with pride.

"You should go to the library tomorrow, Ms. Fillmore." Rebecca tucked her hair behind her ears. "You know, check out that book we were talking about before."

Scarlett emphatically nodded. "Oh yeah. Definitely."

What an odd transition in topics. Rosemary tried to recall the name of the young adult title they'd been gushing about in the kitchen. They'd mentioned the library a couple times and that a movie was being made based off the book. What that had to do with her makeover, she hadn't a clue.

Nevertheless... "I think I might."

Chapter Two

Sheldon Brown glanced up from his computer screen to the ceiling when, once again, the teenage girls who frequented his library started giggling anew.

They'd arrived a minute after opening, and had seated themselves on the couch in the back under the pretense of reading. Though they each had a book in their hands, they had done little by way of actually reading. Which was odd. The Bookish Belles were well known in Vallantine and had lived up to their nickname. They could discuss *Moby Dick* or *To Kill A Mockingbird* as freely as most around these parts could The Bible. Their generation was losing touch with great literature, sticking to TV, video games, or nothing at all instead. A generalization or stereotype on his part, but they were the only ones at their school to grace his library for pleasure and not for an assignment.

Typically, he enjoyed and welcomed their company, but he was on a deadline with a publisher who occasionally hired him on consignment. The manuscript in front of him had to be edited by Monday. He needed the money. The state of the library system was declining, the historic building required repairs, and the last town fundraiser for the effort had only been enough to pay for repainting the exterior.

It was sad. And he was pathetic.

One-hundred and twenty-nine years ago, his ancestor and town founder, William Vallantine, had built this library on the grounds of the family estate because his wife had loved books. He'd loved her more than life itself. At the middle of the town's main square, in what was now a small courtyard, he'd planted her a peach tree, too, because she'd had her first taste of the fruit after migrating to the area, and she'd been smitten. Both the couple and their mansion were lost to the strongest hurricane in state record in 1898, but strangely enough, their two sons, the library, and tree had survived.

The tree had morphed into somewhat of a legend over time because belle peaches rarely grow to the maximum mature height of twenty-five feet with a spread of twenty. This one had. Belles had a lifespan that was usually no longer than fifteen years, twenty max. This one had thrived over a century, though it had stopped producing fruit long ago. Townsfolk had named her “Miss Katie” in Katherine Vallantine’s memory, and claimed she (or it) granted wishes. Tiny shops, restaurants, and storefronts had been designed around the spot through generations, so that it wound up at the very center of Vallantine. A short stone wall had been erected, surrounding the base, to protect the precious tree, plus a flower garden box for aesthetic purposes. It even had an iron plaque staked in the ground nearby telling of its origins and benches for visitors to bask in its glory.

The library, however? Next to zilch in support.

The family trust had gone dry eons ago. Sheldon’s grandfather had to sell the remaining land of the estate to keep the library afloat before Sheldon’s father had been a gleam in Granddaddy’s eyes. It was now a park with statues of important historical figures. When Sheldon was a kid, his dad had started the rumor of Katherine Vallantine’s ghost in hopes of drawing more interest to the building. It sometimes worked, but in unsteady waves, and not enough to make a difference overall.

Sheldon couldn’t afford to hire staff to run the place, which had made it impossible for him to get an outside job. If not for the publisher sending manuscripts his way each month over the past five years, he might’ve been living in the library. He could not miss this deadline.

“Hey, Mr. Brown?”

Closing his eyes, he sucked a calming breath. His burdens were not the girls’ fault. There had to be a punchline in there somewhere, though. *A blonde, a brunette, and a redhead walk into a library...*

He removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and replaced them. “Yes, Scarlett?”

“Did you get the rest of this series in?”

Without turning around from his perch at the main desk in the center of the room, he knew what she was referring to because she'd asked a month ago. He hadn't been able to purchase copies, even at a discounted rate.

“I'm sorry, no. Hopefully soon. Funds have been kind of tight.” A crappy response to an average request. He was letting a fifteen-year-old down as much as he was his ancestors.

Some days, he really hated himself.

“Bummer. Do you need more donations, Mr. Brown?”

Today was one of those days. “Donations are always welcome. Thank you.”

Every once in a while, a box of brand new books would be waiting on the doorstep for him when he arrived. Sometimes, cash would be inside an envelope taped to the door. He'd figured it had been the girls' families or Scarlett Taylor's folks bending to her demands, but the donations were never identified. People should be able to walk in and find what they needed here. Instead, three teenagers were supplying him with goods.

Rebecca cleared her throat. “We were telling Ms. Fillmore about how they're making movies based on the books.”

“Oh yeah?” A film was probably the only way most of her class would know the storyline. “That's neat.”

“I hope they do it justice.” This from Dorothy. “Movies ruin books.”

He huffed a laugh. “You're right about that.”

“So,” Scarlett hedged, mischief in her tone. “Ms. Fillmore said she might come by today to check out the books.”

He glanced up from his screen, heart thumping in stupid hope, and stared blankly at the open doorway.

Rosemary was their favorite teacher, as the teenagers liked to remind him often, and a lovely person. She'd moved to Vallantine in the last legs of his and her junior year of high school. Shy and reserved, she had piqued his interest on and off over the years. Others in town had referred to her as dowdy, but she had a quiet, natural beauty that was so understated, one had to really look to notice with all the other splendor throwing her in shadow. She had a dry yet witty sense of humor if he could get her engaged in conversation long enough. Which wasn't often since he was awkward with people, especially women he was attracted to, and he was very attracted to her.

Except, she disliked him. Or so he'd gathered. He almost never saw her about in town, so the majority of their encounters were in the library. Her disdainful expression when glancing around was telltale.

Damn, but he was trying.

"Mr. Brown?"

Crap. What had she said? "I'm sorry, Scarlett. I was editing. Yes?"

"Did you hear me about Ms. Fillmore?"

"I did." He adjusted his glasses. "It would be nice to see her."

There was a pause, then giggling.

Rebecca broke the laughter. "She's so pretty, isn't she?"

"Pretty as a picture." It seemed an appropriate comment, but the girls giggled again. Or still.

Scarlett made a humming noise. "We did a makeover on her last night."

Makeover? Was that like rearranging a room for fengshui, but with a human? He wasn't up to date on lingo. He struggled to formulate a reply. "How so?"

"Fixed her hair, makeup, and a manicure. That kind of stuff."

Ah, okay. "Sounds fun." Not really. And Rosemary didn't need a makeover. He reached for his mug.

"We're thinking she wants a husband."

He choked on his coffee. Coughing violently, he grabbed a napkin and covered his mouth, eyes watering.

As fate would have it, the woman in question chose then to stroll through the door. Peachy.

Wearing a long beige dress with green flowers, she studied him, concern wrinkling her brow. "Are you all right?"

A couple residual coughs, and he cleared his throat, focusing on her green flip-flops. "Yes, ma'am." He coughed once more when his voice caught. "Coffee went down the wrong pipe."

"Are you saying you have a drinking problem?"

Ha. Case in point on her dry wit. "Apparently so."

She nodded, stepping closer, and glanced around him. "Hi, girls."

"Hello, Ms. Fillmore," chanted behind him. Then giggling.

She engaged with the teenagers some more while he got his act together.

Her hair *was* different. Shorter, and with hints of red. Not a lot, but her light brown strands caught the sunlight streaming through the double doors he'd left open for the breeze. She had on cosmetics, also. Again, not a lot, but more than typical. They seemed to make her eyes and lips stand out

in a flattering way. She had a lean body that she often hid behind dresses too large for her frame, just like her eyeglasses did for her face. Small gold earrings. No other jewelry.

Her laugh at something one of the teenagers said filled the space with melodic light, shrinking the dismalness of the atmosphere. For the first time in what felt like forever, he smiled. He stared at her mouth, the upper lip slightly thinner than the lower, and imagined how well it would fit against his.

“Sheldon?”

He blinked and shook his head. “Sorry. Yes?” He hoped she hadn’t noticed him staring.

“Is that okay by you?”

Crap, he needed to focus. “Is what okay?”

She smiled, but it lacked warmth. “To have the girls help you clean the shelves in exchange for me buying a couple of books you don’t have in stock? They suggested it just now.”

His gut sank. Now the teenagers wanted to do physical labor while their teacher shelled out the funds, and all because he couldn’t provide the supply.

Maybe it was time to turn the library over to the town. Let them fix up the place and flip it into something more functional. Just sign the deed and wash his hands of it. But that’s not what the family wanted. Living or dead, the wishes had been to keep it in their name, pass it down to heirs. He’d failed in that, too. At thirty-seven years old, he wasn’t likely to have any kids. Heck, he didn’t even have a wife. Girlfriend. Secret torrid lover. Prospects. No one.

She was staring at him, brows arched, expecting a response.

“I’ll order the books.” He’d throw it on one of his credit cards if he had to.

“But, Mr. Brown!” Scarlett launched from the couch and hurried over, the other two trailing behind. “We can help!”

Not in the way he needed it most. Unless they padded the walls, gave him a rainbow of colored pills, and stuck him in a corner with basket weaving supplies. Or a winning lottery ticket.

“I appreciate that, but I’ve got it. Thank you.”

Rosemary’s lips twisted while her gaze studied him. “Girls, why don’t you head out. Let me and Mr. Brown discuss options.”

“Or,” Rebecca sang, “you two could get lunch and talk. We’ll watch the library until you get back.”

“Totally.” Scarlett’s eyes rounded. “Take your time.”

Dorothy smiled, nodding encouragement.

Rosemary’s lips parted, but she seemed unable to spit out words. Her expression indicated confusion with the teenager’s suggestion and a side of suspicion.

He wondered what was going on himself, but he’d been wanting to ask her out on a date for some time. They’d just provided opportunity. “I can close the library for a couple hours. No one comes in on a Saturday really, anyway. Would you like to grab some lunch?”

“Um…”

“Yeah! Go, Ms. Fillmore.” Rebecca took Scarlett and Dorothy by their wrists. “We’ll head to my house. Gammy is making peach cobbler.” She all but dragged the other two to the doorway. “Bye.”

Sheldon and Rosemary stared after them a good twenty seconds before she skimmed her hand over her hair. “They’ve been acting so weird lately. Last night, they showed up at my house to give me a makeover.”

“They mentioned it. Your hair looks lovely, by the way. Er, it always looks nice, but I like the change.” He sincerely needed to shut his trap. “It suits you. The color or cut.” He was blowing this. Badly. “Whatever you ladies call it. It’s lovely.”

Her gaze darted to his and quickly away. “Thank you?”

Yep. He’d screwed it up if her thank-you was in the form of a question. He was so out of practice with the dating scene, and he hadn’t been very sophisticated or suave when he had been in the pool.

“Lunch?” He bounced his knee in nervous energy. “What A Pickle deli shouldn’t be too busy this early. Or if you just want coffee, we can get that and a croissant at The Busy Bean.” He should high-five his own face, talking to her like she didn’t live here or know the restaurants. “Pizza My Heart? Or Guac On for Mexican food? What are you in the mood for?”

It was a wonder he was single. Truly. Why not completely go caveman at this point and drag her—

“Pizza sounds good.”

He blew out a breath, rewinding her words in his head to be certain he’d heard correctly.

“Are you sure about closing for a bit? I’d hate to—”

“Yes. Sure, I mean. I am. Sure.” Someone kill him.

She breathed a noise that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. “Okay. I’m ready whenever you are.”

He stood and saved the document he’d been editing on his computer, then swiped his keys off the counter. Patting his back pocket, he did a

mental hurray he'd remembered his wallet this morning.

Rounding the desk, he smiled. "After you, ma'am."

"I'll agree to lunch if you quit calling me ma'am." She smiled as if amused. "I know it's a southern form of respect, but it just makes me feel old."

He followed her onto the front stoop. "Yes, ma'am."

For the love of... Turning his back to her, he pulled the doors shut and locked them. He opened his mouth to apologize for the slip, but she laughed.

Laughed. As if he'd been funny or something and not a blundering moron. Whimsical and carefree, the sound reminded him of the windchimes his grandmother used to hang on her porch in the summer. Gosh, how he'd loved them and the sense of comfort they'd instilled.

"Har, har." She paused. "Sir."

Okay, he got the point. "Touché."

They made their way to the road and down the cobblestone walkway toward town. The library was smack at the end of the street, overlooking the rows of small storefronts on both sides. Sometimes, he'd sit at his desk with the doors open and just take in the view, the bustle, but rarely did he make himself a part of it anymore.

Tourists and residents mingled on the sidewalks, at café tables, and under the colorful shop awnings. It would only get busier in the summer and autumn months, but a decent turnout was already here, geared for spring. Pink cherry blossoms on the trees lining the curb were beginning to fall, scattering in the breeze. The flower boxes around them still held pansies from the winter, though. Another couple weeks, and the garden club would swap those out for marigolds, zinnias, begonias, and impatiens. Cast-iron old-world lampposts between the trees had pastel-colored wreaths hanging for Easter.

It was already pushing seventy-five degrees, but with the sun beating down through a cloudless sky, it felt warmer. Humid, too. “I could get used to this being outside thing.”

She laughed. He was on a roll. Go him.

“Don’t get away from the library often?”

“Not as much as I’d like.”

They came to the end of the road. To the left, down the side street, was an inn, bakeries, candy shops, and an ice cream parlor. Maybe he could talk her into a dish or cone after pizza. They made a right, where again, several restaurants lined both sides, and he breathed in the various scents. Cajon spice, roasted chicken, ground coffee, grilled burgers, and ah... Italian. Pizza My Heart was halfway down the row.

He held the door for her, and she smiled her appreciation.

Several booths and tables were full, but there was some open space. A quick glance out the patio door to the back deck showed more tables with umbrellas, half occupied.

“Want to eat outside?” he suggested.

“Definitely. It’s gorgeous today.”

They waited in line to order. Green and white tiles checkered the floor, and above a chair rail, on the painted red walls, were framed images of Italy. Over the counter on the rear wall was the menu, and he narrowed his eyes, debating. He hadn’t realized how hungry he was until he smelled food.

“Serious question. By the slice or a whole pie?” He could take on half a pizza.

She laughed. Again. His heart thumped stupidly in glee.

“Um, I don’t know. I’m hungrier now that we’re here. As for toppings, I’ll eat anything but dead fish.”

He laughed. “Ditto. Twelve inch, the works? No anchovies.”

She nodded.

They got to the head of the line, and Sal, the owner, slung a towel over his shoulder. His white apron was stained with red sauce, his arms and hands coated with flour.

He scratched his bald head, eyeing them. “Didn’t know you two were a thing.”

Sheldon tried to formulate a suitable reply, but before he could say anything, Rosemary laughed. A short spurt that seemed unbidden. And loud. She paused, looking at him, then laughed again. Uncontrollably, with fervor, laughed, as if the idea of him and her dating was ridiculous.

She pressed her hand to her chest. “I’m sorry.” She fanned her face with her other hand, but the hysterics started anew. “I apologize. I just realized what’s going on.”

Maybe she could clue him in? He looked at Sal, placed the pizza order with two sweet teas, and paid. She didn’t quit laughing the whole process.

Sal handed Sheldon a number tag for their table, staring at her with irritated confusion. “Y’all enjoy now.”

Fanning her face again, she sighed and pivoted toward the patio door.

He followed her outside and sat across from her at a table near the deck railing. “I guess dating me is not in the cards?” Honestly, he wasn’t sure if he should be insulted, annoyed, or heartbroken. Perhaps all three.

“No, it’s not that.” She blew out a long, slow exhale like she was trying to get a grip. Her glasses slid down her pert nose. “The girls,” she

said in a calmer tone. “The makeover and sending me to the library? I think they’re trying to set us up.”

He blinked.

“You know, matchmake?”

“Oh.” He straightened in his seat. “Oh,” he muttered again slowly as it sank in. Well, color him surprised.

“It hit me when Sal made his comment.”

The waitress came by, setting plates, napkins, silverware, and sweet teas on the table.

Rosemary thanked her, then adjusted her glasses.

“I’m honored then, if that’s the case.” He took in her cheeks, flushed from laughter, and met her gaze. A rich, deep brown, her eyes. “You’re their favorite teacher. That they picked me to match with you is flattering.”

She set her elbow on the table and chin in her palm. “They’re sweet kids. I just don’t understand what got into them to pull this kind of stunt.”

“They just want to see you happy, I’m sure.” He crossed his arms on the edge of the table. “I’ve been wanting to ask you on a date.”

Well, oops. His nervousness in her presence seemed to have dissolved his filter.

She tilted her head. Outwardly flustered, she lowered her gaze and toyed with the corner of her napkin. “Why didn’t you?”

Good question. “I got the impression you didn’t like me.” He slammed his lids shut and sighed. Stupid non-filter. “That came out wrong.”

The waitress dropped off their pizza and left.

They both stared at it until he finally took the initiative to serve them two slices each.

“I like you.”

His gaze whipped to hers.

Her expression distressed, she worried her brows. “I would have said yes if you asked.”

“Really?” Perhaps he’d been reading her wrong.

“It’s just...” She swallowed and looked away. “The library is in poor shape. You know that. Everyone does. You just don’t seem to care.”

Anger pounded his temples. Not at her, but at the situation. “I do care. It’s everyone else in town who could give a damn.” It was easy for them to sit and judge when they didn’t have the family legacy sitting on their shoulders or they didn’t have to put in the work. “My hands are tied and I’m doing the best I can. I’m not getting much help.”

She appeared to be thinking that over as she took a bite and chewed. “I offered help today, but you turned me down.”

Pride, the needle in his side. “Though I appreciate it, that wasn’t the sort of help I meant. You shouldn’t have to buy books and your students shouldn’t have to do slave labor.”

“It’s not slave labor. It’s volunteering, and it would be good for them.”

He hadn’t seen it that way. “Good point. I’ll talk to them and consider it.”

They ate three-quarters of the pizza and boxed the leftovers to go. The walk back to the library was silent, and he struggled to get on good footing with her once more.

She paused by her car and smiled at him. “Thank you for lunch. It was very good.”

“The pleasure was mine. Pizza is my favorite food group.”

She hummed a sound of agreement. “Technically, it’s all the food groups in one.”

“And that’s why *you’re* the teacher.”

Her laugh slowly faded until only a grin remained, and he realized he wanted to make her laugh often. Every chance he could get. She was quite pretty with the midday sun warming her features and a light in her eyes. He enjoyed her sense of humor and her quiet, non-oppressive personality.

She reached for her car’s door handle, and he tensed in panic.

“Go out with me.” Sweet Jesus in the Manger. He tilted his face toward the sky. “I meant that as a question, I swear. You make me nervous.” He should tape his mouth shut.

“Why do I make you nervous?”

Bless her heart, she actually seemed baffled.

“Because I like you.” She did crazy things to his pulse, and somehow, without exerting any effort, reminded him he was alive. “Would you please go out on a date with me?”

Her smile was late in blooming and this side of endearing. “Yes.”

Chapter Three

Rosemary glanced at herself in the bathroom mirror and placed a hand over her abdomen to calm her nerves. Her new outfits had arrived by mail yesterday and her eye exam had proven she could wear contacts without irritation. She'd put them in the past three days before going about her morning, taking them out at night to don her new frames before bed. She'd also been applying the cosmetic techniques the girls had taught her and did, in fact, find it much simpler than she'd imagined. She was still herself, just an updated or refreshed version. The subtle changes had boosted her confidence.

Until now.

Over the years, she hadn't given much thought to Sheldon Brown or dating him. Even in high school, they hadn't chatted often or hung out in the same circles. She really only spotted him at the library, and honestly, she'd been more than upset by how he'd been running the gorgeous landmark into the ground. But his comment last weekend had given her the impression he'd been trying and perhaps she'd been wrong. She'd ask him more about it tonight.

Sheesh. A date. She hadn't been on one in some time. She knew Sheldon, had grown up with him in the same small town, but she didn't know a lot about him. They both were the types of personalities to keep to themselves and not draw the attention of the rumor mill.

They'd exchanged phone numbers and email addresses before she'd left the library after their lunch. He hadn't called, but he had emailed out of the blue on Monday. It had started a fun back-and-forth exchange all week of clever quips about everything from quirks of the town to favorite books. She'd learned a bit more about his character through the interactions, but hiding behind a screen was very different than face-to-face.

He was going to be here any minute to pick her up. She'd worn the new red teacup dress Scarlett had picked, but questioned whether it was too much. She didn't have any idea where he was taking her.

She glanced at Poe, sitting on the toilet lid, slow-blinking as if bored by the events. "Do I look okay?"

If cats could roll their eyes, hers just did. He jumped down and sauntered out of the bathroom.

"Well, fine." Maybe she was overdressed?

The doorbell chimed, and she gripped the edge of the vanity while her stomach flip-flopped. "Oh boy."

Another breath, and she straightened to answer the door.

Sheldon had on khaki slacks and a blue long-sleeve button-down shirt, so perhaps she'd dressed appropriately. His sandy blond hair was neatly combed versus his typical bedhead style. Hazel eyes behind black-framed glasses stared at her, doing a slow sweep from head to toe.

As he stood, seemingly frozen on her porch, the flower arrangement in his hand quivered. "Wow. You look amazing."

Heat flooded her cheeks. "Thank you."

"Here. For you." He passed her the bouquet.

"They're pretty. Thank you." She gestured him inside and closed the door behind him. "Let me just put these in water."

He followed her into the kitchen and leaned against the counter while she filled a vase and trimmed the stems. Daisies, carnations in various colors, a couple lilies, and filler ferns went in one by one. They were cheerful.

"I love lilies. They're my favorite. Thank you for these."

“I will remember that, and you’re very welcome.” He paused. “Where are your glasses?”

“Oh.” She breathed a laugh, touching her face as if to adjust them even though they weren’t there. Habit. “The girls talked me into contact lenses. I’m adjusting.” She set the vase on the table.

“You look great with or without.”

Well, shucks. Wasn’t he a charmer tonight? “Thank you.” She glanced around. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He closed his eyes a beat and grunted. “My bad. *Rosemary*,” he emphasized.

She smiled at him. He was adorably handsome in an unsuspecting way she guessed had been overlooked by other women. He had a lean body, bordering on athletic, and was taller than her by at least a few inches, putting him somewhere around five-foot, nine. Wide mouth and chin, dusted with sandy-colored stubble, and an aristocratic nose. His eyes, though. Very endearing and expressive. Kind.

He even held the door for her as she climbed in his passenger seat, then he rounded the hood and got behind the wheel. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“I am.” She watched his profile as he drove, but he didn’t offer any insight. “Where are we going?”

He barked a laugh. “Probably should’ve mentioned that. I’m sorry. Figured we could do a riverboat dinner cruise. Is that all right?” He muttered under his breath. “Would have been smart of me to check if you get seasick on boats.”

She assumed she still made him nervous, which somehow calmed her nerves like it had at lunch last Saturday. “I’ve always wanted to do one of those, but never got around to it. Sounds fun. And, no, I don’t get seasick.”

He sighed, obviously relieved. “Good.”

He drove in the opposite direction of town toward the riverfront and parked in the lot reserved for the cruises. Two large white ships waited, bobbing in the shallow water, their lights a bright yellowish glow against the fading pink and orange of clinging daylight. One was used for dinner and daytime tours, and was two stories tall. The other catered more to nightlife with dancing and cocktails, often booked for weddings or events, and was three levels.

The scent of freshwater and fish rose as they made their way up the dock to wait in line to board. People chatted excitedly. Most seemed like tourists, dressed in t-shirts and shorts. She didn't recognize anyone from town, but she didn't necessarily know everyone, either. A warm breeze wrapped around her to beat off some of the humidity as fireflies blinked in the long grass by shore.

"Pretty night," she commented.

"Have to agree." He tilted his face toward the darkening sky. "Good to do this before summer is in full swing and it's too hot."

"True story."

Once onboard, they walked around the lower level, consisting of a gift shop, café, and bar.

He picked up a Vallantine tourism brochure and grunted, showing her Mayor Gunner Davis's letter, along with several photos of their quaint town. "I can't remember the last time the library looked this good. It must have been taken in my great-granddaddy's day."

She studied the picture. "I don't see the edges of the park grounds, so you're probably right."

They worked their way upstairs and to a table for two by the window. White tablecloths with lanterns and cloth napkins with silverware were already set up. String lights hung from the ceiling in a cross pattern while

decorative nets and anchors hung on the walls. Lots of polished wood and rustic décor. It was nice.

While he perused the menu, she idly watched the lingering sun as it set. She didn't do that often enough and should.

A waiter arrived dressed in black slacks and a white shirt with a bowtie. He delivered ice water and asked if they wanted drinks. They ordered a bottle of wine.

The boat began moving, so she checked the menu, noting an array of steak and seafood. Ultimately, she settled on grilled salmon with asparagus and roasted potatoes. Sheldon got a ribeye with mashed potatoes and okra.

He poured them wine, a Pinot Noir, and set his napkin in his lap. "Have you always wanted to be a teacher?"

"Yes." She thought about how to engage him about the library without overstepping. He seemed to have a love/hate relationship with it. "I considered other careers, but at the end of the day, teaching was a calling for me. What about you? Did you always want to be a librarian?"

He made a noise indicating thought and sipped his wine. "Yes and no. I adore literature, my whole family tree is full of bibliophiles, but I don't think taking over the library was much of a choice."

Ah, now they were getting somewhere. "How so?"

A shrug, and he leaned back in his seat. "It's a family legacy. I was an only child, thus the sole person who could inherit. Though I love my job and I love books, sometimes it's stifling. I'd like to travel one day, see the things I've read about, but I'm strapped."

She nodded, understanding. "Why not hire someone?"

"No means to do so." He shook his head, appearing to weigh his words. After a moment, he leaned forward and took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes. When he replaced the frames, his gaze was focused on the table,

his body language dejected. “The library is broke. Because we’re still a private collection, we’re not eligible for funding like public institutions from local taxes, nonprofit and for-profit grants. We rely mainly on donations, and they aren’t many. The trust ran out eons ago. Everything comes out of my pocket. Plus, I can’t work unless it involves doing it from the library, or we’d have to close. I inherited a cluster of problems between repairs, cosmetic needs, and outdated material, with zero means to solve any of them. If not for the occasional stray tourist and the Bookish Belles, we’d have no visitors. I just...”

He grabbed the back of his neck, sighing. A world-weary expression slackened his features. “I just can’t keep it going at this rate. I don’t have descendants, either. Part of me wants to pass it off to someone else, but I’d be letting down over a century of ancestors and the town. It’s like that mouse that runs in circles chasing the cheese, but there’s no cheese on the string anymore. I don’t know. I don’t know anymore. It’s fruitless.”

Dear Lord, she had no idea the struggles he’d been facing. Her chest tightened and her stomach shifted. She’d been no better than the gossips in town, thinking what a shame he’d let the place go and that he hadn’t cared about the sentimental value. He wouldn’t have shown up day after day and done what little he could if he hadn’t given a damn. He would’ve just sold the place and moved on. It was his to do with as he wished.

The waiter returned with their meals.

Once he’d walked away, she glanced at Sheldon. “I think it’s admirable what you’re doing.”

His gaze whipped to hers, hopeful, and it broke her heart.

“History and preserving it are so important, and you’ve been trying. Maybe together we can come up with ways to help.”

He cut into his steak and took a bite. “Anything at this point would be great, but I don’t want to put you or anyone else out.”

“If I’m offering, it’s not putting me out. I noticed you don’t do subscriptions. That might be a good starting point.”

He jutted his chin as if to agree. “My father always hated the idea, but I’m not opposed. I have a long list of email addresses for those who have library cards. We can start charging a small yearly fee for card renewal. Post a notice on the desk about it for those contacts I don’t have.”

“Good plan. I’d add late fees.”

He smiled. “Will do.”

“You could also sell a small selection of library souvenirs for the tourism market for those who come in. Keychains or bookmarks that are inexpensive to produce. It would generate a little income.”

His brows jumped to his hairline. “Yeah. Never thought of that. I’ll look into it.”

“Okay.” She sampled her meal, and it was very tasty. The salmon was light and flaky, and the asparagus had just enough crunch. The potatoes had a bit too much seasoning for her taste, but they were decent. “Mine is very good.”

“Same here. I haven’t had a good steak since my dad died. He was an expert on the grill.”

“I was sorry to hear of his passing last year. My dad did all the cooking in our house. He still does for just the two of them.”

“Oh yeah? That’s great.”

The interest in his eyes and posture indicated he was no longer upset. She was glad he seemed more comfortable and had warmed up to her. He was easy to talk to and funny in his own right.

She finished the last of her salmon. “Do you cook?”

Nodding, he set his napkin aside. "I'm quite savvy with cereal."

She laughed, sipping her wine, genuinely amused.

"And you should try my PB&J. Second to none."

"Really?" She smiled, watching his hands. She hadn't noticed how large they were before now. That was erringly sexy. "I'd be happy to sample sometime."

He playfully narrowed his eyes. "Are you saying you'd fancy a second date?"

"Yes, I would. I'm having a great time."

"Me, too." His grin faded to a smile. "I think your students were onto something. I'm sorry I didn't ask you out sooner."

"We're here now."

"We certainly are." He clinked his glass with hers. "Would you like to go walk on the deck?"

"Absolutely."

They left the dining hall and went upstairs to the open upper deck, claiming a bench up front. Other diners mingled about, but it was quiet. Peaceful.

A gentle sway from the slow-chugging boat was hypnotic and relaxing. To their left was the shore and glimpses of Vallantine. To the right was a narrow channel of water with cattails, high grass, and water lilies. The riverboat had already turned and was heading back, by the look of it.

Stars winked in the navy sky, too many for counting, as they sat in contented silence. There was something profound about a person who didn't need to fill a hush with unnecessary words for the sake of chatter. So much could be said without talking. It made her appreciate him more.

After a beat, he brought his arm up and draped it over the back of the bench behind her, but it didn't seem to be a slick move so much as an unconscious shift for comfort. He had his face turned away, toward town, and she studied his profile. Very handsome. Defined jaw and long lashes. Full lips. He smelled lightly of pine aftershave and a hint of something familiar she couldn't place. Paper or books, perhaps. Undoubtedly, from being in the library a lot.

He absently stroked her upper arm with his thumb. Caressing. Almost as if to lightly reassure her or himself. He didn't seem aware of what he was doing, but it turned her on. His subtlety. His physical attributes. His honesty. He had a charisma about him that was charming in way that reminded her of classic movies. Jimmy Stewart or Cary Grant. Even though her face and belly heated, she shivered.

“Are you...” He turned his head, and their noses brushed. “Cold,” he finished, no longer a question, but a whisper. His warm breath fanned her cheeks, smelling faintly of wine. His rich hazel gaze darted back and forth between her eyes, a drugging haze of interest in his. Blue and gray and green and brown, all blended together for a potent mix.

“I'm not cold.” Farthest thing from it.

“Do you kiss on the first date, Rosemary?”

Merciful Heavens, how he said her name. Low, possessive without dominating, and yet with a guttural quality that bespoke intimacy. Words betrayed her, so she nodded instead.

“Good. That's good. Because I'm about to kiss you.”

She didn't know whether he was preparing her or himself, but she found it sensual and sweet that he—

Pressed his lips to hers. Softly. Gently. A sweep, then a brush that fired every neuron in her body and cindered thought to dust.

She sighed in contentment.

He must've taken that for the indicator of approval she meant it to be because he slid one hand into her hair and the other cupped her cheek. He tilted his head and offered a firmer pressure. Parting her lips with his, he touched the tip of his tongue with hers. After a careful beat, he stroked. Swirled. Stroked some more.

More, more, more.

Yes. Oh wow, yes. She moaned, her hands vying for purchase and finding his shoulders. So wide. Strong. She clutched his shirt, bunching the material in her fingers. He was so good at this. Tender. Seductive. Experienced enough to have skill, but humble enough not to flaunt it. He took his time. He learned her ways and preferences. Discovered. He was driving her out of her ever-loving mind with desire.

A groan, and he eased away, resting his forehead to hers. "That was so hot, it fogged my glasses."

She breathed a laugh, eyes still closed. "Yes, it was."

And after he'd taken her home that night with plans for a second date soon, she rode that euphoric high he'd given her straight into the next morning.

Giddy, she went about her day in a happy bubble, determined to help him save the library. Based on the repairs needed that he'd mentioned during dinner and on the way home when she'd probed, she'd already had ideas brewing before her coffee.

Travel mug in hand, she strode into Brush Hour paint store and looked for Zeke. His son was one of her seventh grade students. She spotted the man in question by the left wall, seemingly doing inventory, wearing paint-splattered jeans and a white tee with a backwards baseball cap. Dark hair poked out from underneath.

"Hey, Zeke."

He turned, clipboard in hand. His eyes rounded. “Ms. Fillmore. What did Beau do now?”

She smiled. “You can call me Rosemary outside of the classroom.” She’d told him so before. “And he didn’t do anything wrong.” Today. “I’m here for a possible favor.”

“Ma’am, anyone who can deal with my boy all day long can have whatever she wants. Name it.”

At least her parents appreciated her. “The favor’s for the library, actually. I’m helping. When people order custom paint colors and return them or don’t pick them up, what do you do with them?”

He snorted and pointed to a floor-to-ceiling shelf, brimming with one gallon cans. “Some of the colors are so terrible, I give ‘em away. Others are at a deep discount. Why?”

“The library’s interior walls need repainting, as well as the shelves. Do you have anything not too...hideous?”

“Let’s look.” He dragged a ladder over, and they went through options, settling on a pale blue for the walls and a gray-green for the shelves because he had more than enough to cover the library space in those choices, plus they went well together. “Know what? I just had the Mertons push back their kitchen job due to a late cabinet install. I’d be happy to donate the paint and my time to the cause.”

Wow. “Really?”

“Yes, ma’am. Pleased as punch to help. It should take me less than two days to knock out, and besides, you’re helping me by getting rid of some of the stock.”

“Thank you so very much!”

Gary at Plumber’s Crack was just as helpful, claiming he could fix the bathroom sink leak and toilet seal in under an hour with leftover supplies he

already had in his van at no charge. Jan from the PTA was going to send an email out to all parents asking for book donation drop-offs to the library. Betty from the Garden Club was getting her crew together with a few perennials they were thinning from their yards to transplant in front of the library porch. Josephine, who did outside contract work, said she could add a large donation box for books and a smaller one for money to the library's exterior using leftover lumber she had laying around.

Electrical and roofing proved more of an issue. Shawn at Zap-it said the building was running on old fuses and needed to be switched to a circuit breaker, which was too much of a cost endeavor. He was, however, going to change the fuses and lightbulbs for Sheldon, and leave him some extras. Natalie and Porter from the roofing company had said the library needed a total tear down and new roof. Apparently, they'd quoted Sheldon once before. But Rosemary had talked them into repairing a small section that was starting to leak since they always ordered extra shingles for other projects and had some on hand.

She rounded out her afternoon by popping into a few stores to buy small thank-you gifts for those willing to help. Since nothing would be coming out of Sheldon's pocket, and the people in town were doing this out the kindness of their hearts, she could at least do this for them. She'd drop 'em off at the library today for Sheldon to give the townsfolk as they showed up next week.

A satisfied sigh, and she parked her car in the lot outside the library. The two-story colonial style building's white exterior had been repainted last year. On the outside, all seemed okay. The small porch held no furniture or coziness, and only a few holly bushes lined the front, but it seemed on the up-and-up. Inside? It was falling apart. Everything she'd arranged today was cosmetic, but it was a start.

Sheldon had been hanging on by a thread for ages. It was time someone offered him a hand. He deserved it.

Heck, the library deserved it.

She climbed out of her car into the late-day warmth, breathing in the scent of pine and pollen. A threat of rain dampened the air to the west, the sky darkening as she made her way up the steps and inside the open double doors.

Sheldon was behind the marble desk station in the middle of the room, a pencil behind his ear and laptop in front of him. Black-framed lenses were at the tip of his nose. His sandy hair was disheveled and unruly, probably from him finger-combing it. He glanced up and blinked as if uncertain.

Adorable man. “Hello.”

“Uh, hi.” He straightened and stood, adjusting his glasses. “Did we have plans?”

“Not until tomorrow night, but I did a thing. Several things.” She held up the tiny gift bags, then set them on the counter. She told him about the townsfolk she’d contacted, when they’d be coming to the library, and for what. The deeper she got into the relaying, the wider his eyes got until they resembled saucers. “Everything should be done at the same time in a few days next week, and shouldn’t hinder business too much. These are for the people coming to help, if you would please dole them out.”

“How?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “How did you do that?”

“Mostly, I asked.” She shrugged. “It still leaves huge projects, but at least cosmetic things and minor repairs will be fixed.”

He shook his head as if in awe. A bewildered expression slackened his features, then he rounded the desk. Without passing go, he strode up to her, held her face in his huge warm hands, and kissed her. Smack, right on the lips.

Groaning, he closed his eyes and rested his forehead to hers. “Thank you. I didn’t tell you my burdens so you could take them on yourself, though.”

“I’m not. I’m helping. This building is a town treasure and part of its history. Not to mention, you’ve been breaking your back trying to salvage it.” She offered him a light, swift kiss and smiled. “You can unload your burdens on me anytime.”

Chapter Four

Sheldon swiped a hand down his face and replaced his glasses. He had takeout on the kitchen table and a DVD loaded in the living room for when Rosemary got here. Dinner and a movie in, her choice. It seemed odd, but he'd rolled with it for their date. He'd been busier than a moth in a mitten this week. Yet, now that he had a moment to breathe and think, he had to wonder if her suggestion was because she thought he couldn't afford to take her somewhere.

Was she showing mercy on him? Like, pity?

Hell, he'd been irritable all week. No clue why, other than his schedule had been disrupted. Which had been because she'd arranged to have people come in and help him. For free. Painters, plumbers, electricians, roofers, gardeners, carpenters, book donations after book donations... His head spun. He liked order. Calm. The past few days had been anything but, and he was acting like someone had licked the red off his candy cane instead of grateful. Which he was very appreciative, but geez.

It was just... Well, emasculating.

He'd opened up to her about just how bad things had been for him because she sincerely seemed to care. Those soulful brown eyes, her sympathetic way of understanding, and genuine ability to problem-solve had sunk its claws into his reserve and he'd unloaded. He'd been dragging the weight around for so long, he hadn't realized he'd been crawling under the pressure.

All she'd done, though, was fix things he should've and could've done himself, had he used the good sense God had given him. Had he? Nope. He'd never thought to utilize the town's assets, talk to small business owners, or... He sighed. Or ask for help. Pride, she was a stinker. Thus, in his failure, Rosemary had done it for him.

One part of him wanted to kiss her into oblivion and worship the ground she walked on until every other potential future mate disappeared from her sight with only him remaining. Crowned victor. The other part of him wanted to raise his chin, turn his back, and allow anger to keep his feathers ruffled because she'd inadvertently wounded his ego. That way spelled disaster. And loneliness.

He was being irrational and knew it. She'd offered, had stepped in because she loved history, the library, the written word, and liked him as a man. She'd said as much. She'd agreed to date him on more than one occasion. She was still coming around and communicating. They called and emailed all the time. She often popped in just to say hello. The highlight of his otherwise bleak existence. When he'd kissed her, she'd kissed him back. She'd responded. Fervently. Many times. Which meant she was attracted to him. He was more than just attracted to her in return. She was sweet and gracious and pretty and smart. He could effortlessly, joyfully continue this path.

So, what in the world was wrong with him? Had he just spent too much time alone? Stuck in his ways? Been so focused on the library that he hadn't been able to see beyond the shelves?

The doorbell rang before he got his thoughts together.

Damn it, anyway. At least he no longer turned into a bumbling dork in her presence. There was that. Progress.

He opened the door and forced a smile, but his muscles began to release their stronghold just by looking at her. She wore gray leggings and a long white sweater that hit midthigh. She had her hair back in one of those female knots that confounded him with loose strands framing her face. In one hand was a bottle of wine, and in the other, a box of what looked like pie.

Because he was a mere mortal man, he leaned over and examined the box.

She laughed. “Dutch apple.”

His favorite. Not peach, like the town was known for or inundated by, but apple. “You’re amazing.” He’d mentioned something about it in one of their many conversations, but bless her, she remembered. Details always mattered to him, said so much about a person, and she was riddled with details.

“Why, thank you, kind sir.”

He ushered her inside, taking both things off her hands. Before pivoting toward the kitchen, he offered her a quick kiss. “I mean it. Amazing.”

“So are you.”

Funny thing. Until her, he never would’ve believed such a phrase from anyone else’s lips but his father’s. Nearly his entire adult life, he felt like he’d been letting everyone down. “Thanks.”

They dropped off the pie and wine in the kitchen. Since she’d not been inside his moderate three bedroom tri-level before, he gave her a brief tour.

He’d grown up in the house and had bought it from his mother a few years ago when his father had gotten sick. She still resided in the assisted living apartment complex where they’d moved at the time, and insisted she’d wanted to stay there after Dad had passed away. Sheldon mentioned it to Rosemary as they walked around. Thankfully, the mortgage company had allowed the loan at a higher amount than the house value, which had given him the means to do some updating.

“Oh, I love the fireplace.”

“Thanks. Me, too.” It was the focal point of the only wall without windows. Floor-to-ceiling gray brick with a white mantel. Gas, also, thus easy to maintain. “I had the bookshelves beside it added, but the fireplace itself is original.” It went well with the gray leather sectional and black

tables. He had a TV stand in the corner, but he typically watched the one in his bedroom.

The living room carpet had been removed and the hardwood floor underneath refinished. He laughed as they walked up the three steps to the hallway, telling her how fun that had been.

There were two bedrooms and a separate bathroom besides his master and attached bath. One spare room he had set up as an office, the other as a guest room. “Kinda goofy. I don’t have guests.”

She smiled. “But you’re ready for when you do.”

Ever the optimist.

They headed back to the kitchen. “I had Zeke paint the cabinets in here rather than replacing them. He suggested distressing them for that antique look.” The gray marble countertops were new, though. New laminate floors also since the original linoleum couldn’t be ripped up due to age.

“I love it. The colors make it look so much bigger and clean.”

That had been his reaction, too. He smiled. “Hungry?”

“Famished.”

He laughed. She was adorable. “Let’s eat.”

Opening the trays from Guac On, he offered her enchiladas, burritos, tacos, and rice.

Halfway through, she wiped her mouth on a napkin. “Did you see the weather report? They upgraded that tropical storm to a hurricane. It’s supposed to hit the day after tomorrow.”

He’d heard, but from townsfolk, not the news. Crap. “What category?”

“Cat Two as of four p.m.” She spooned another bite of rice. “How do you normally prep the library? Do you need help?”

As if she hadn’t helped enough or saved his hide. Something about another offer of aid sent his appetite into the ether. “The shutters framing the windows are steel and close with a latch. Other than that, I shut off the power and water as a precaution.”

He would say he brought in furniture and things from outside, but he hadn’t had outdoor decoration and amenities since the wicker front porch rockers had rotted. They hadn’t been replaced yet.

Georgia wasn’t a virgin to hurricanes, but Vallantine was slightly inland and far enough from the coast to offer a scarce amount of protection. The river would flood, trees would go down, and sometimes there would be property damage, but typically the town fared well. Only once in memory did they have to evacuate. They’d had some doosies through history, though, like the one that had killed William and Katherine Vallantine, and had wiped out their mansion. It still amazed Sheldon that the library and infamous Miss Katie peach tree had survived. Or had made it through all the storms since.

“Would you like some help tomorrow?”

Yeah, he hadn’t answered that part of her question, had he? “I’d never say no to seeing you.” There. Both a charming and truthful answer. Yay him.

“Aw.”

Her cheeks turned a sexy shade of pink. They’d done it several times before when he’d been on point, and he wanted to make it a mission to have her blush everywhere one day very, very soon.

Not tonight, though. That was rushing things a bit. They were both old souls. Or so it seemed to him. Not necessarily old-fashioned, but traditional. The past couple weeks, their dates, conversations, and emails

had allowed them to get to know one another on a deeper level than surface. And he'd enjoyed it. Being with her felt like a memory, as if they'd done this before or had been together much longer. Comfortable, yet exciting. He had zero doubt that their chemistry would replicate in the bedroom. Enhance their bond.

It was like he'd been searching for her his whole life, but she'd been right there. He supposed that was what happened when his focus had been too intent on something else, going through the motions at the library with his eyes closed, not realizing they were until she'd come along and opened them.

"What's wrong?" She set her plate and silverware aside, placing her hand over his. Her touch was both a balm and a trigger.

"Nothing." He smiled, embarrassed she'd caught him staring and still trying to shove aside irritation that shouldn't be there from earlier.

"Something," she coaxed, brows wrenched in concern. "I'm here if you want to talk about it."

That right there. Her in a nutshell. She knew something was grating at him, that clouds were fogging his thoughts, and yet she didn't push or demand or get insecure. Just simply offered an ear should he want one.

This woman, though. This brilliant, gorgeous, intuitive, compassionate woman. Where the hell had she come from? And why had she liked or chosen him, of all men? Did he even deserve her or...

He straightened. Um. Okay. Perhaps that was his problem. His esteem and worth. Though he'd not particularly had a huge issue with self-reverence, moping about or had depression, he also hadn't been the first kid picked in gym class, the one to get the girl, or had praises sung about him for his career efforts. In reality, most didn't notice him at all.

Except her.

"Sheldon?"

He blinked. High cheekbones and fair, smooth skin that was petal soft to the touch. Deep, bottomless brown eyes and long, arched lashes. A pert little nose and mouth that could do damage to an unsuspecting nerd like himself. Slender frame, yet curves that fit remarkably well against him. He could stare at her forever and never grow weary.

“Did I do something wrong?”

Was she kidding? Everything she did was right.

“No, not at all.” He puffed his cheeks and blew out a breath. “Just been a long week.”

She nodded, but didn’t seem to believe him. “We can skip the movie if you prefer.”

“I don’t prefer.” He smiled to ease the tension and stood, kissing her forehead on the ascent. “Let me put the leftovers away, then we can have pie and wine on the couch. I might even share the pie.”

Ahh, yes. A laugh.

“If you’re sure. Let me help clean up.”

Always helping. He closed his eyes a beat.

“Now what did I say?” Aggravation scraped her tone, but it had an undercurrent of hurt tacked on at the end.

He was a jerk.

Setting their plates back down, he gently took her upper arms and dipped to look in her eyes. “I’m sorry. My mood sucks today. It’s not your fault. I’m just not used to having a lot of people around, and they were everywhere this week. I’ve never been very good at socializing. Honestly, you’ve been doing nothing but helping me, and it’s feeling very one-sided. I’m wrestling with that and the notion that, at this point, I could throw myself on the ground and miss, I’m that dense. Especially after one

conversation with you about the library's issues, and you had fifty fixes in one morning. Ergo, I'm really, truly, irrevocably sorry for anything that comes out of my mouth tonight."

She stared at him, eyebrows raised, but otherwise with a blank expression. After the sun went down, crickets chirped, an owl hooted, the sun rose anew, and a rooster crowed—or so it seemed—she finally opened her mouth to reply.

But all she said was, "Okay."

Straightening, his arms dropped, slapping his sides. "Okay?" What did that mean? Was that the new southern female version of "fine?" He only had one oar in the water, then. Upstream.

"Yes, okay. As in, I understand."

This was a trick. Had to be. "You understand what?"

"Everything." She shrugged, calm as you please. "You are more comfortable with fictional characters than flesh and blood humans. Me, too, by the way. But you were overwhelmed by an abundance of people for the sake of making cosmetic fixes on the library, which was both a relief to you to have it done and a guilt trip because you didn't think of how to do it by yourself. Incidentally, you're not stupid, contrary to your previous statement, but you're more black and white than creative. As a teacher, I require a bit of both personality types. I also have more connections to townsfolk as a result. Everyone needs help sometimes, Sheldon. Now that the week is over, you're left with the aftermath of conflicting emotions, and taking it out on me because I initiated the problem and the solution. It also means you're relaxed enough around me to include me in your bubble in order to be cranky in the first place. I'm honored. I like you a lot, too. Very much. This thing isn't one-sided because you make me happier than I've been in such a long time, plus I know if there was something I needed, I just have to ask, and you would try to provide. That's the kind of man you are, and that's how relationships work. Give and take. So, yes, okay. I understand."

She cleared her throat, glancing around. “Go ahead and clean up if it’ll make you feel more in control and better about yourself. Thank you for talking to me, trusting me, and for being honest. I’ll take the pie and the wine into the living room. Do hurry, please. All this realization has left me turned-on. I’d like to make out and pretend to watch a movie while doing it. Does that work?”

Slack-jawed, he gawked at her. “Yes?”

She smiled.

He was still reeling. “You must be one helluva teacher. I mean, no wonder you’re their favorite.”

The smile became a grin. “Thank you.” Rising on her toes, she kissed him, then swiped the wine glasses and two plates of pie off the table.

After she left the room, he stared after her, wondering how, what, who, when, and where.

He still didn’t know the answers by the time he’d put leftovers in the fridge, dishes in the sink, and wiped off the table. Cutting the light, he carefully entered the living room.

She was halfway through her glass of wine, but hadn’t touched her pie. She sat perched at the edge of the sectional’s cushion, staring into her glass. As he approached, she glanced up at him. Gone was her bravado from the kitchen. In its place, uncertainty clouded her features.

Unsure himself, he strode to the fireplace, switched it on, and then grabbed the TV remote. “Would you like to leave the lamp on or off?”

A humming noise in her throat, then, “Off please.”

“Off it is.” He switched it, darkening the room, and claimed a seat beside her. After fidgeting with the settings, he got the title screen for the DVD of *Casablanca* to come up.

She made a sound he couldn't decipher.

"You said this was one of your favorites."

"It is." She sighed like a teenager ogling a crush. "It's a classic. I love Humphrey Bogart."

So she'd said in one of their many emails. "Ditto, though I prefer his performance in *The African Queen*. We're good, then?"

Turning her head, she grinned at him, and it beamed bright enough to reach her eyes. Possibly power the sun. "You remembered."

"Yes, ma'am. Lilies are your favorite flower, classic movies are your favorite genre, though you'll watch about anything but war flicks, summer is your favorite season, yellow is your favorite color, and you named your cat Poe because, according to you, he looks and acts like the famous poet. I'm still unclear how a cat can—"

Her lips on his. Boom. Mid-sentence, and she'd erased the distance between them before he even knew what hit him.

And she sure knew how to level a guy. Heart-pounding, soul-searing, pants-shrinking decimation. From such an unsuspecting source. Soft lips, firm pressure, and strokes of her tongue that matched his. He cupped her cheeks, her soft skin under his palms, and breathed in her light floral scent. Intoxicating. Beat for beat, they fell in sync, a rhythm created solely by them. They nurtured, devoured, and built up need to a point he'd never experienced in all his existence. From a kiss. Her fingers wove into his hair, lightly clenched his strands, and he was done for.

Music blared, filling the quiet sensualness with a jarring bolt.

She flinched. He glanced around.

The TV. Their movie had auto-started.

Huffing a laugh, she settled in and cozied up next to him, her head on his shoulder.

Alrighty, then. He took a few calming breaths and ordered his body to down-shift. It took twenty minutes, but he got there.

Throughout the flick, she mouthed what he assumed were her favorite lines and dreamily sighed at the romantic ones. She must've said "this is the best part" seven times, and he found her utterly endearing. Halfway through, they ate the pie and finished their wine, but she snuggled right back against his side.

He imagined them doing this every Saturday night from now until eternity. Watching movies and cuddling with a good wine. After work on the weekdays, she'd prepare dinner and he'd pretend to assist for the sake of watching her. They'd discuss their day and laugh. Afterward, he'd do the dishes while she harped about how she could help. On Sundays, they'd chill while reading, her feet in his lap, and her cat nestled somewhere beside them, demanding more attention than the book. She'd garden. He'd cut the grass. She'd cook. He'd clean. He'd bitch about visitors at the library. She'd relay funny stories about her students. They'd eat lunch or dinner out in town once in a while, pop into the shops at leisure, hold hands as they strolled. They'd make love whenever they wanted, and often. The slow, intimate kind that was bonded in trust and built tension to a crescendo.

Glancing at the top of her head, her dark hair against the crook of his shoulder, he realized he wasn't even jarred by the thoughts, the future he'd just envisioned this early in the relationship. They had mutual interests and personalities. Great communication and understanding. Definitely chemistry. He hadn't wanted another woman as badly as he did her. They'd had all the typical conversations about what they wanted and didn't with a partner, but...

"Do you want to get married?"

She abruptly lifted her head, and he slammed his lids shut.

He opened his mouth to cover his blunder with something akin to, *do you want marriage down the road*, but she had the jump on him, as usual.

“Not tonight. I’m pretty tired and it’s late. Plus, I don’t have a dress and the courthouse isn’t open.” She resettled and made a humming noise in her throat that indicated amusement, while he tried to replay what she’d said in order to deal. “In seriousness, yes. I’d like to get married one day.”

Yep. There he had it. The perfect woman.

The best thing about her was how she handled him. He knew he wasn’t exactly an easy personality type. He wasn’t outgoing, he liked routine, and he could be moody. She not only accepted those traits with a grain of salt, but she also didn’t hound him to dissect every little thing in their relationship or push him to divulge what he wasn’t ready to process. As if that weren’t enough, she never, not once, made him feel stupid or awkward for fumbling when, in reality, everyone else did. Outside of his family, she was the only person who allowed him to be himself. Without ramifications.

A warmth filled his chest, shoving aside the emptiness he hadn’t realized was there.

“What about you?” She shifted and resettled. “Would you want marriage someday?”

He had the absurd thought that he’d do it right now if she asked.

“Yes.”

Chapter Five

“This was a bad idea.” Rosemary cringed as another gust of wind pummeled the outside of the library. Her heartrate was through the roof and her stomach was eating itself. “We should’ve left sooner.”

They’d downgraded the hurricane back to a tropical storm, but it was a nasty one. Not only had the mass hit landfall much earlier than expected, it was plowing right through Vallantine. Once the bulletin and sirens had gone off, townsfolk scattered to close their businesses and batten down the hatches. She and Sheldon had done the same, but the shutters on the second story for the big stained glass window had given them a duck fit and the water shut off valve required finding a wrench because it hadn’t been used in eons. By then, it had just seemed safer to ride it out and stay put.

“I said I was sorry.”

And there was that. They’d been going at one another with short snarky remarks for an hour. Normally, she could tackle his occasional mood, but her anxiety wasn’t allowing her to think straight. She knew he was worried and probably feeling guilty, not that he should, yet it accounted for his fussin’. Perhaps she should tell him about her fear of storms. Maybe he’d understand. They’d never fought before, and she was uncomfortable.

From the couch near the rear of the room, positioned between the loft pillars, she drew her knees to her chest and watched him pace near the front doors. “Sheldon?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

His shoulders slumped and he hung his head. “You got nothing to be sorry for, darlin’. This is my fault for not coming first thing this morning.” He faced her and ran his fingers through his sandy-colored hair, disrupting

the strands into further chaos. For the first time all day, he looked at her. Truly looked. A frown marred his brow. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head. “I love the rain, can handle a thunderstorm, but I always get out of sorts for anything worse. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

“Hey.” He ate the distance and crouched in front of her. “Don’t apologize. We’re all afraid of something. We’ll be all right.”

A boom resounded from outside, loud enough to rattle her teeth and send her heart in the vicinity of her knees.

Then, the power went out.

“Crap,” he muttered. “Stay here. I’ll get the lanterns.”

She nodded, watching as he hustled into a small side room he used for storage.

Aside from the loft, the library was one big open room with floor-to-ceiling shelves on every wall except the front-facing. Though it was late afternoon, the storm made it very dark, plus the only windows were the big one in the loft, which wasn’t creating much light down below because the shutters were closed, and two small ones flanking the front door, also with closed shutters. Repainting had spruced up the place, had rid some of the dismal quality, yet it was still on the creepy side with the storm raging. Shadows created shadows, and for the first time in memory, the building didn’t comfort her.

“Okay, I only have two.” Sheldon emerged from the room holding two battery-powered camping lanterns. “Luckily, the batteries are fresh.” He strode to the front desk, switched on one lantern, and left it there. He turned on the other as he walked toward her, casting his features in a yellowish glow. “These should last quite a few hours. I have a blanket back there, too. Do you need it?”

“No, but thank you.” The tropical system had brought humidity and a rise in temperature. “Maybe later when the sun goes down.” Not that there

was any sunshine to be found.

Wind whipped against the walls, whistling, and rattling the shutters.

He plopped next to her and draped his arm around her shoulders. "It'll be all right. Just a storm."

Nodding, she tucked herself against his side and breathed in his pine aftershave. Much better. "At least we'll have plenty of reading material to pass the time."

His chest bounced with a laugh. "True. You know, a good portion of the books on the top shelves were picked by Katherine Vallantine herself or her children. They're cased in plastic, but I bet there's some real treasures up there. The original ladder broke before I was born, and the replacement doesn't go that high. Perhaps we can look into that next weekend. Never really had the time or means, and work just piled up, so I kept pushing it back. I think my father was the last person up there, and he was a teenager then."

"Definitely. That would be awesome." She'd bet the dust bunnies had spawned, but it did sound like fun.

She glanced past the loft overhang at rows and rows of books. The shelves at the front part of the building that cleared the loft were thirty feet high. The painters had stopped at about twenty, making the top shelves resemble a wallpaper border from a distance. It actually looked pretty neat. And now she understood why he hadn't allowed Zeke's crew to paint them if old volumes were up there.

"Right over there," Sheldon pointed to their left, "on that pillar, my great-grandmother carved her name when she was a girl. It's been painted over, but you can still see traces of the knife indentations. The stained-glass window upstairs was designed by William Vallantine and was made by a local craftsman. There's a nail partially protruding from the window frame on the front porch that William and Katherine's son, Charles, put in when he was five years old. According to family legend, it was because he

wanted to help with construction. Dad built the shelves behind us. He told me once they were running out of room for new releases. It used to be empty space. My grandfather proposed to my grandmother right there.” He bumped his chin toward the desk with a half-smile. “She almost said no because he was so nervous, he forgot to get down on one knee.”

He laughed, rough and low, and she adored the sound. Such a great laugh. He was probably trying to comfort her by rambling, but she could listen to him for hours. Gone was his previous tension from earlier as he recounted pieces of his family’s past tied to the library. The retrospective, almost whimsical way he talked about it bespoke his respect and love for the place. Guilt tightened her throat at how wrong she’d been about him all these years.

She smiled. “So much history.”

A grunt of agreement. “It kills me how it’s falling apart. Good bones, lots of heart, but a building can’t survive on those alone.”

“No, they can’t, but we’ll give it some work and do what we can.”

He turned his head and looked over the rim of his glasses at her. A smile infused his eyes mere seconds before his lips caught up. “We, eh?”

She kissed him, brushing her nose against his. “Yes, we. If you want me around or my help, that is.”

The smile fled. A crease formed on his forehead as he cupped her jaw, thumb stroking her cheek. “I want.” His gaze searched hers, and she found fragments of herself in his eyes. “You’re all I want.”

“Aww.” Geez. Her sinuses stung and her eyes grew hot. “You’re all I want, too.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but a knocking sound came from their right. Hollow, wooden. Like knuckles on a door. *Tap, tap.*

They both glanced that way, but nothing seemed amiss. The wind continued outside, howling, rain lashing, but inside, everything appeared normal.

“Must just be the wood settling or change in pressure,” he mumbled.

“Yes,” she agreed, but wasn’t as certain. The sound had been distinct. “What about the rumors of Katherine’s ghost?”

A chuckle, and he refocused on her. “Worried the library is haunted?”

“Not necessarily.” A structure this old with this many stories? She’d have a hard time believing there wasn’t a specter or two. In her mind, it meant the souls that had spent time here didn’t want to leave, even in death. There was a certain romanticism to the notion. She’d never seen a spirit or had any encounters herself, but she was open-minded enough to consider it. She said as much to him and shrugged. “Just one more tale to add to the legend.”

He adjusted his glasses. “Well, my father made up the Katherine’s ghost fable to draw more interest in the library, hoping it would help bring in more funding and tourists. It does once in a while. However,” he shifted, crossing one leg over the other, “my mama said he was stirring a hornet’s nest. Some ancestors have often felt someone watching over them while here. In a good way, like a guardian angel. Others have claimed to be looking for information or a specific book, only to give up and find the exact volume on the desk or a table in the room when they swore it hadn’t been there before.”

“Katherine trying to assist all those seeking knowledge.”

He nodded. “My dad’s words to describe the phenomenon. If there’s any truth to it. I’ve never experienced anything unusual.”

“Maybe it just hasn’t been your time yet.” It was a grandiose, sweet idea. She nuzzled his shoulder. “They seemed to love each other a lot, Katherine and William. How did they meet?”

“To my recollection, through a childhood friend of his. If love at first sight exists, they were an example. But that love grew and built, so there was a foundation.” He snapped his fingers. “I heard she had a journal and that it was here somewhere. I wonder if that’s true. We would know for sure, then. Anyway, we have a tradition in our family because of them for when we meet our mate and it becomes serious. Forgot about it until now.”

Interesting. “What’s the tradition?”

“Apparently, on William and Katherine’s first date, to break the ice, they each had to recite one thing that was true, one thing that was a lie, and one thing they wished were truth or lie.”

How clever. “And then the other person has to guess which is which, while at the same time, get to learn more about the other person.”

“Precisely.” He winked at her. “Want to give it a go?”

“Absolutely.” She paused. “I might need a minute to think of something.”

He huffed a laugh. “Same. Let me know when you’re ready.” He made an exaggerated point to scoot his butt farther down the cushion and get comfortable, tucking her closer to his side.

Such an adorable, delightful guy.

She thought about truths and lies, about their relationship so far. It was early yet, but they didn’t appear casual or a whim. He made her laugh when it seemed like she’d forgotten how. He gave her a sense of safety even though she was independent and already had security. He listened to both sides of a story and connected to the elements, despite often not agreeing with them. He was respectful and kind. He never made her feel invisible and always asked her opinion. He could admit when he was wrong and was capable of owning up to his mistakes. And when he loved something or someone, he gave it everything he had until there was nothing left in him.

Because of him, she got out of bed each morning with an eager grin and rested her head every night with a contented smile. She couldn't wait to check messages or emails or see him. She spent half her day clocking minutes until their time together and saving stories to tell him later. She didn't schedule weekend adventures without considering him in the plans, even if it was just a run to the store.

Was it possible to be this happy so soon? To be able to see them together beyond the horizon into the next?

Yes, and the answer didn't scare her or feel like a justification. They both had their eyes wide open, life experiences, and weren't into games.

"I'm ready." She tilted her face toward him, smiling. "You?"

His lips twisted in a thoughtful pout. "I think so. Want to go first?"

Since he seemed nervous and probably wanted to follow her lead, she nodded. "Okay, in no particular order..." She held up her hand to tick off her three things on her fingers. "I adore pickles, I've never been in love before, and I fear no one in town will notice if I disappear."

Though they weren't moving, he went still just the same. As in, rigor mortis.

Shoot. Had she gone too deep with her answers? Anxiety bubbled in her belly, clawing its way up her chest to squeeze.

After a moment, he adjusted to sit forward, easing her away from him. "Hold on." He shifted sideways to face her, a bewildered expression tightening his features. "One truth, one lie, and one thing you wished was truth or lie, correct?"

"Yes." She turned to face him, crisscrossing her legs.

He tilted his head in clear confusion. "I think they're all lies."

Actually, she hated lying, even for just a game. "Nope."

A sigh, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “Hmm. I find it doubtful you’ve never been in love, so I’m going to say the pickles thing is the truth, the love comment a lie, and I’m sincerely flabbergasted by the disappearance reference, but you hope it’s a lie?”

“You got one correct.”

“Which one?”

“The disappearance.” She struggled to formulate an explanation that would make sense to him. “I wish it were a lie. I think I leave a lasting impression on some of my students, like the Bookish Belles, and my family would miss me. But,” she slowly shook her head, “I don’t think anyone else in town would truly realize. I don’t mean that to sound drab or melancholy. It’s just...I’m there or I’m not, and they don’t seem to care one way or the other.”

“I do. I care.” The vehemence in his tone brooked zero room for argument. He seemed downright cross with her, in fact.

Reaching for his hand, she squeezed. “Thank you. I know. Sometimes it just seems as if I’m going about the motions, but I’m invisible.”

“I get it.” He stroked the back of her hand. “People like us tend to fly under the radar. Unless the library crumbled to dust or, heaven forbid, someone actually needed a book and the doors were closed, they wouldn’t notice I was gone, either.”

She exhaled, and her stomach settled. “I’d notice.”

He smiled his appreciation, but swiftly frowned on the cusp. “Wait, that means you’ve never been in love before?”

“I haven’t.” She brushed a strand of hair from her face. “There’s been a couple serious relationships, dates, of course. Yet, I don’t know. There wasn’t that punch in the gut you’re supposed to feel or utter grief after it was over.”

“Huh.”

“Stumped you, did I?”

“A little.” He scratched his jaw. “Just surprised.”

“Your turn.”

Nodding, he glanced at his lap, then across the room as if pondering. “I think beets are gross, I’m terrified I’ll have no one to inherit this legacy after I’m gone, and,” he looked her square in the eye, “I’m in love with you.”

She gasped. Perhaps not the best response, but it was knee-jerk.

Staring at him, she tried to swallow, but couldn’t. Her heart thundered, her vision went gray, and her limbs were heavier than lead. A truth, a lie, and something he wished were truth or a lie. A man didn’t just come right out and spout something like that unless...

“You’re in love with me?”

“You found the truth.” He studied her, jaw ticking. His gaze was wide-open, heart in his eyes. “I am utterly, completely, totally in love with you.”

A shuttering exhale passed her lips, and she pressed her hand to her chest. It didn’t help. Her heart was cracking ribs.

“That punch in the gut you just mentioned, Rosemary? I have it. And I miss you when you’re not near me.”

“Oh,” she said stupidly. Or tried to. Her voice was shaky and it sounded more like incoherent garbled nonsense than speech. Geez. Her eyes were wet. And leaking. Holy tarnation.

“You not only make me happy, but you remind me I’m alive.”

Sweet Lord, he was killing her. With kindness. And love. And by saying all the right things she'd wished all her life someone would say to her, never mind mean them. He so obviously meant it, too. His tone was not only sincere, but absolute.

A sympathetic smile, and he wiped her tears from her cheeks. "Are you going to guess the other answers?"

"No." She could barely breathe. She didn't think sheer, unadulterated happiness would be so stifling and freeing at the same time.

His gaze did a sweep of her face before meeting her eyes again. "Why not?"

"Because I love you, too."

He grinned. Just like that. As if he'd merely been lying in wait for her to spit it out.

A sniff, and she swiped at her remaining tears. "That was storybook romantic."

"Yeah?" If possible, his grin widened. "Off the cuff, but truth."

Holding his jaw, she brought him in, telling him in a kiss all her love for him.

Tender and passionate. Certain and resounding.

Forever and lasting.

He rested his forehead to hers, smiling.

The other things he'd said came to mind. "Don't be afraid of passing on the legacy to someone. When the timing is right, we'll find the right person."

"Thank you." Another quick kiss, and he leaned back against the cushion once more. He held her against him and squeezed. "Love you. I

don't think I'll ever tire of saying that.”

“Love you, too, and me, too.”

She listened to the sound of rain beating against the library, the hollow sound of it running down the gutters, and realized the wind had eased. A rattle here or there, but not the frightening gusts from before. It was also dark. The sun had set while they'd been talking. The lantern on the desk had gone out, and the one on the floor by their feet had dimmed.

They could probably head home if that were the case, come back tomorrow and assess the damage if any, but she didn't want to. In his arms, cuddling on a couch that had springs poking her in the butt and fabric worn to threads, inside a more than one-hundred year old building held together by hope and memories, and surrounded by books, she decided she was right where she was supposed to be. She closed her eyes, smiling, her heart full of joy.

Awhile later, he groaned. “Good morning.”

Opening her eyes, she took stock, not realizing she'd fallen asleep. Daylight filtered through the thin slats of the shutters by the front windows and the sound of rain no longer pattered the roof.

She tried to straighten, and oof. Her neck was stiff.

“Same here.” He chuckled and stretched. Reaching over, he rubbed her nape for a moment. “Looks like the storm passed.”

“And the library is still standing.”

“It's quite resilient.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead, smiling against her skin. “How about we go to my place and order breakfast.”

“Deal.” She was starving. They'd skipped dinner last night in lieu of events.

Slapping his thighs, he rose, but his foot bumped something before he could get very far. She assumed it was the lantern, but he frowned.

She rose and stretched also, then glanced at the floor. “What is that?”

Beside the lantern was a book. Thin with a dark brown cover, it looked old. The pages on the side were yellowed and the spine was cracked.

“I don’t know.” Bending, he picked it up and examined the cover. He shook his head and flipped it over, but still didn’t seem satisfied. Carefully, he opened it, and froze. His complexion paled several shades. “That’s not possible.”

“What’s wrong?” She leaned over and looked at the first page.

Diary of Katherine Vallantine

1875

First book in the Vallantine Library

“Oh, my gosh.” Rosemary whipped her gaze between Sheldon and the book.

No way. No possible way. All the windows were closed and locked, with shutters latched to protect them. The front door was not only deadbolted, but he had a bar bracing it from the inside, just in case. Not a soul could’ve gotten in here. And even if they had, they wouldn’t have done so without waking them. Not to mention, they’d have to know exactly where the journal had been kept on the shelves, and even Sheldon didn’t have that information.

Suddenly, he glanced up. Book in hand, he strode around the perimeter, gaze on the upper shelves, but they could barely be seen from the floor. He did an about-face and climbed the circular wrought-iron stairs to the loft.

She followed, not sure what to make of the situation, but the fine hairs on her neck rose.

Eyes on the bookcases, he shook his head. Once. Twice. Repeatedly.

They'd just been talking about the journal last night. How maybe next weekend, they'd go through the volumes on the upper shelves if they could find a ladder tall enough in town. But...

She straightened, crossing her arms, the answer smacking her upside the head. "To assist all who enter seeking knowledge."

He spun around to face her, eyes wide.

"Your dad's words, but he'd heard them from other members of the family, and so on. What if it wasn't fabricated? How else do you explain that?"

His lips parted, but no words emerged. He swiped a hand down his face, dislodging his glasses. A moment later, he replaced them and threw his arm in the air in a heck-if-I-know gesture.

"You asked about the journal, are trying to save the library, and love this place almost as much as she did." She smiled at him, her throat tight. "You sought knowledge, and she provided."

His laugh was almost hysterical as he glanced at the book in his hand, then around the room. He expelled a shuddering sigh.

She hugged him, not sure what else to do, and he held her with trembling limbs.

"So, that just happened." His warm breath ruffled her hair.

"Yessir." She laughed, pulling away. "We should put that in a safe place until you come back and decide what to do with it."

He nodded. "I'll lock it in the back room in the safe." Another shake of his head. "What a crazy night. Love you."

Aw. "I love you, too."

"Come on. I'm hungry. I know you have to be, also. Let's nab breakfast."

Halfway down the stairs, he turned back to look at her as if he'd just thought of something. "Speaking of food, who doesn't like pickles? You're weird."

"I'm weird? You like beets. They smell like feet."

They laughed, put the book in the safe, gathered their things, and made their way to the front.

Once they were on the porch, bathed in warm sunshine and surrounded by the call of chirping birds, the scuffing of shoes on concrete caught their attention.

They turned to find the Bookish Belles standing on the sidewalk. Two of the three looked pleased with themselves, and the last girl seemed relieved.

"We were so worried." Dorothy chewed her lower lip. "We just had to check on you with the storm and everything. You weren't home."

Gosh. Rosemary strode up to the girl and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, her heart clenching. "Mr. Brown and I waited out the storm here. We're just fine, honey."

Dorothy nodded emphatically, eyes wet.

"So..." Rebecca darted her gaze between Rosemary and Sheldon. "You spent the whole night here? Together?"

Sheldon opened his mouth, but quickly shut it again, his gaze pleading with Rosemary to save him from his foot-in-his-mouth syndrome when flustered.

She smiled. “Yes, ma’am. We did. Not that you should go repeating that for the rumor mill.”

“I knew it!” Scarlett bounced on her toes. “I told you, didn’t I? I told you they’d make a great couple.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder, expression dialed to neener-neener.

“Whatever.” Rebecca crossed her arms. “It was my idea.”

A sigh, and Rosemary shook her head. She’d known her students had been up to something, they’d been obvious, yet to hear them admit it just left her flabbergasted.

Sheldon laughed in the quiet hum. Slowly at first, but it gained momentum, until he swiped a hand over his face. “Match-making teenagers. What next?” Grunting, he looked at each girl in turn. “Well, thanks for your help. I’m the happiest man alive.”

“Aww.” Scarlett pressed a hand to her chest, a dreamy look in her eyes. “That’s the sweetest thing.”

Rosemary tried her best not to roll her eyes. “You did a very nice thing for us, and we are very happy. Thank you. You best be getting home, though.”

A flurry of *yes, Ms. Fillmore*, chanted. The girls strode away, arms linked, giggling amongst themselves.

“Wonder what made them think to pair us together, or even notice us.”

Sheldon shrugged, brows raised. “I’m just glad they did.” He went to lock the library door, but paused.

She climbed the porch steps and looked at the lock. It seemed fine.
“What’s wrong?”

“I forgot to thank someone else,” he mumbled, opening the door. He stuck his head inside. “Thanks, Miss Katherine!”

Epilogue

Present

Beside Scarlett on the couch in her living room, Dorothy leaned closer to her laptop. Their Zoom call with Rebecca was going on over an hour, but it was so good to see her. Sometimes it seemed like she was a million miles away on another continent and not a thousand in Boston.

“So, that virtual blogger you hooked us up with really came through in doing that story for us. I know I keep saying that, but dang.” Scarlett flipped her long, cocoa-colored waves over her shoulder. Her red as sin fingernails were a product of a manicure she’d done herself thirty minutes ago while they’d gotten caught up for the week. “The lifestyle post she put up a couple months back based on your conversation with her about Sheldon and Rosemary playing that Truth/Lie game has more than a hundred-thousand shares alone. I’ve been spotting memes all over Instagram. Every time we talk, more have exploded.”

Rebecca grinned while pulling her blonde hair into a ponytail. “I know! Right? I’ve been seeing it, too. That’s crazy. I don’t know her that well, but I’m grateful she could do it when I asked. The exposure should help us going forward after we figure out plans for the library. If you think about it, that’s a great story on how long it’s been a tradition in Sheldon’s family and that they found Katherine’s journal the very next morning. I just wished she’d done a blog on that, you know? Instead of just the short version of the game.”

“Agreed.” Dorothy nodded. It was so amazing that the journal had just shown up, bam, without any explanation. Katherine Vallantine’s supposed ghost was legend around these parts, but that was the first and last time Dorothy had ever come close to encountering it. Having Rebecca connect with the blogger initially had been about telling the Browns story as a wayward thank-you, but it had morphed into more. “I’m still wrapping

my head around the recent internet sensation and how we played a small part. *You* could write the backstory about it.”

A shadow of remorse and doubt crossed Rebecca’s features as she glanced away, lowering her arms. “I doubt it. Things haven’t been going very well here.”

She’d mentioned it before and had made similar comments the past six months, but she’d yet to elaborate on anything more than her problems involved work. She’d gone to college and gotten her journalism degree, just as she’d dreamed of doing. Had made it on the staff at a good-sized newspaper. They were all so proud of her, including her Gammy. But, to Dorothy, Rebecca had appeared nothing but miserable. Dorothy’s heart ached for her friend, and she wished she could do something.

“Then come home.” Scarlett huffed, lifting her palm as if to say, *duh*. Ever subtle. “We need to discuss plans for the library, and we miss you.”

“Soon. Maybe. I don’t know.” Rebecca cleared her throat. “I miss you, too. We can debate options by phone or Zoom if we have to until I figure things out.”

“Okay.” Dorothy stared at the other side of her living room, gaze lost in thought. An old photo of the library, taken in the 30s, was framed on the wall above her flatscreen. The Browns had given them each one at the couple’s wedding. “I still can’t believe they left us the library. Like Scarlett, I know I’ve said that a lot the past couple months.” She shook her head. It hadn’t completely sunk in yet.

“Ditto,” Rebecca chimed.

“Y’all should’ve seen the look on my face when Mayor Gunner handed me the folder. I about fell out right there.”

“Well, we *were* instrumental in matching them.” Scarlett took a sip of her Georgia Sunset, a staple cocktail for their traditional Friday night get-togethers since they’d turned twenty-one.

Dorothy had taken over the mixing of said drink roughly five years back because Scarlett had been a little—or lot—heavy on the brandy and peach schnapps portion, going too light on the grenadine and lemon-lime soda. At least Dorothy no longer had hangovers after one cocktail.

“We did a great job at the Cupid thing.” Rebecca smiled, chin in her palm. Behind her was her tiny kitchen in the apartment she rented. Books were stacked on top of the kitchen cabinets to the ceiling since, according to her, she had nowhere else to put them. “We did right by them. They’re a great pair and love each other so much. They got married, what, a year after the tropical storm?”

“Yep.” Dorothy finished the last of her drink and set the glass on the end table. A lucky find at a thrift store in Savannah, her two tables. They flanked her beige-printed sofa. She’d gotten them last month and still liked staring at them. An ebony wood design carved in the shape of books with glass tops. “They had no kids to leave it to, either. I had to badger Mayor Gunner for intel, but he eventually caved this morning and told me the Browns sold their house. They bought a camper to travel, and the money leftover is what was in the check for us. So, we were right all along.”

“No kidding?” Rebecca pursed her lips. “They tried so hard to save the library, but it was like putting a bandaid on an amputation. They must’ve realized we couldn’t do much more without funds. Well, except moneybags over there.” She stared pointedly at Scarlett through the screen.

“Hey.” Scarlett rolled her eyes. “My family is rich. So what? Doesn’t mean I have access to all of it. Besides, everything I inherited from Miss Maureen went into my business.”

Miss Maureen being Scarlett’s grandma, who’d never allowed anyone to call her something as ordinary as “grandmother,” and the business meaning the event company Scarlett had started three years ago out of the family’s ginormous old plantation home.

Sometimes, Dorothy wondered if she’d dreamed hard enough as a girl or if she’d settled too quickly on a career as an adult. Both her besties had

gone on to achieve what they'd wanted and had worked hard to obtain it. She didn't do anything flashy or exciting. A business degree and accounting for townfolk was such a blast. Sigh.

“So, Belles.” Scarlett rubbed her hands together with an impish grin. “Are we going to make our biggest dream come true? The one we've had since kindergarten?”

Rebecca's eyebrows rose, a why-not expression curving her lips.

Ah, the idealistic notions they'd had as girls. Back when the sky wasn't the limit, ice cream cones were all they'd needed on a hot summer afternoon, and love was but a chapter away to read under the covers past bedtime. They hadn't brought it up in so very long. Not since high school. They'd discovered then that particular fantasy would never come to fruition. The library was for Vallantine heirs, which they weren't, and so they'd moved on. New adventures, longings, and that silly thing named reality.

Except, that wasn't the case any longer.

It finally hit Dorothy just what this meant. The deed was in their names.

“We can open The Bookish Belles Bookstore.” She pressed her fingertips to her lips as if the very act of saying it aloud might reverse the outcome or change the course. A sheen of tears blurred her vision. “The library downstairs, our store upstairs.”

Scarlett grinned, draping an arm over Dorothy's shoulders. “We gonna do this, Belles?”

A watery laugh, and Dorothy looked at Rebecca. “Are we?”

Rebecca tilted her head in thought, slowly nodded, and smacked the table her laptop was on. “Yes. We absolutely are going to do this. Together, as always.”

Katherine Vallantine's Bourbon Peach Pie Recipe

Ingredients:

- 3 sticks of butter
- 1 teaspoon of salt
- 1 teaspoon of ground cinnamon
- ¼ cup bourbon
- 5 tablespoons of ice water
- ¼ cup of white sugar
- ½ cup of brown sugar
- 3 ½ cups of flour
- 1 cup oats
- 2 teaspoons of plain gelatin
- 8-10 peaches

Instructions:

- Preheat oven to 425 degrees
- In a bowl, blend 2 ½ cups flour with salt and a pinch of sugar. Add 2 sticks of cut butter (very cold), and mash until well blended. It will resemble bread crumbs. Add ice water to the mix and knead by hand until dough forms and it sticks together.
- On a lightly floured surface, press the dough with a rolling pin until it is the shape of your pie pan.
- Place the dough into the pan, carefully pressing it to the sides and bottom. Cut any excess off the pan lip. Pinch the dough on the pan lip to create a crimped outer edge crust. Refrigerate.
- Peel skin and remove core of the peaches. Slice into wedges and place in a bowl.

- In a saucepan on the stovetop, heat bourbon and sugar to boiling, stirring with a whisk often. Add gelatin and stir while on a low boil for 2 more minutes.
- Remove from heat and gently add the peaches until coated.
- Remove crust from the fridge. Add the peach mixture to the pie crust until it is full. Set aside.
- In a saucepan on the stove, melt 1 stick of butter with brown sugar and cinnamon, stirring constantly, until melted and caramel-like. (About 5 minutes).
- Remove from heat. Add oats and 1 cup of flour. Stir together until blended. It will be sticky like cookie dough.
- With your fingers, take small chunks of the mixture and sprinkle it over the peaches in the pie crust until the peaches are evenly covered.
- Bake on the center rack in a 425 degree oven for 30-40 minutes.
- Allow to cool for 20 minutes before serving. Refrigerate leftovers.

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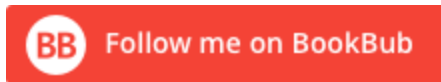
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kelly Moran is an international bestselling author of enchanting ever-afters. She gets her ideas from everyone and everything around her and there's always a book playing out in her head. No one who knows her bats an eyelash when she talks to herself.

She is a RITA® Finalist, RONE Award-Winner, Catherine Award-Winner, Readers Choice Finalist, Book Excellence Award Finalist, Holt Medallion Finalist, and landed on the "Must Read" & "10 Best Reads" lists at USA TODAY's Lifestyle blog. She is a former Romance Writers of America® member, where she was an Award of Excellence Finalist. Her books have foreign translation rights in Germany (where she is a Spiegel bestseller), the Czech Republic, Romania, and the Netherlands.

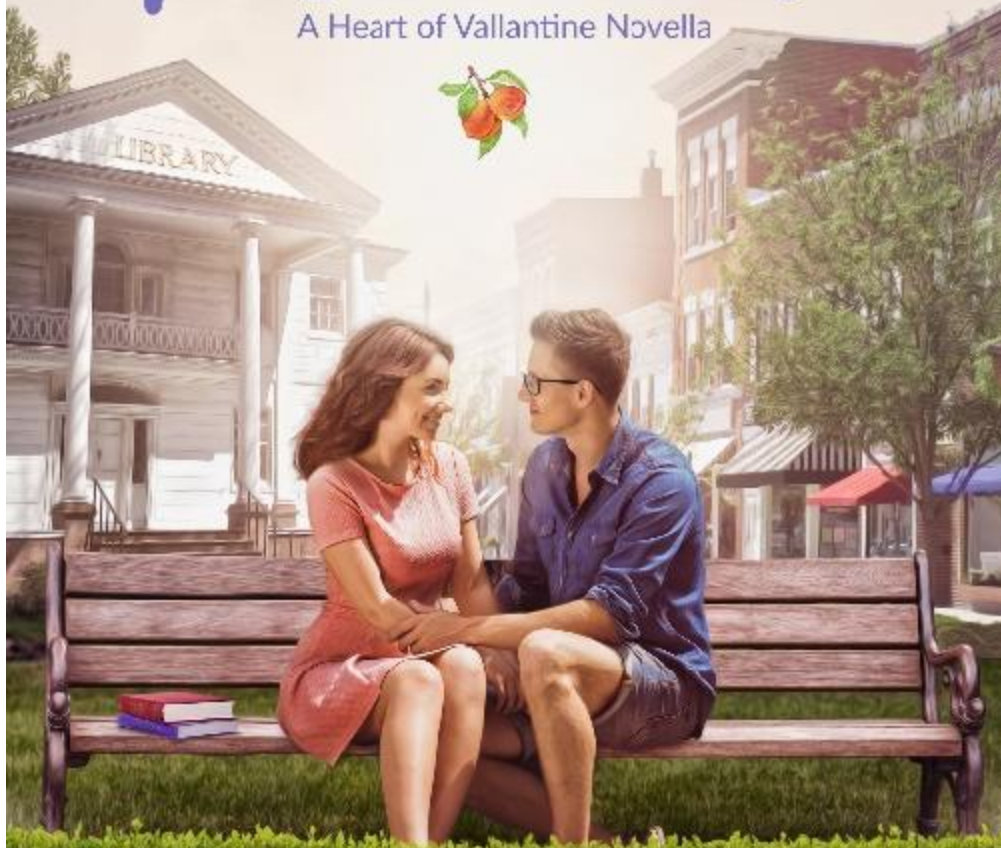
Kelly's interests include: scary movies, all kinds of art, driving others insane, and sleeping when she can. She is a closet coffee junkie and chocoholic, but don't tell anyone. She's originally from Wisconsin, but she resides in South Carolina with her significant other, her three sons, their wily dog, and their sassy cat. She loves hearing from her readers.

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