

Paint A Perfect Valentine

One

Becca sat on the thin edge of the tub and focused on the second hand making its jumpy trip around the clock. Her fate had been revealed two minutes ago, but she hadn't been able to make herself get up, take the five—eight at the most—steps across the bathroom to find out. Would everything go back to normal with her safe and steady routine or would she be buried up to her side-swept bangs in what-the-crap-had-she-done and how-the-crap-would-she-survive-it?

“Becca?” Her friend Leslie called from outside the door. “Are you sure you don't want me to come in?”

“I'm okay.” Becca crossed her fingers and whispered a little prayer.

“I just don't think this is a good idea. I don't think blood tests at the doctor's office are going to be wrong.”

“There's no point letting it expire. I might as well use it.”

“If that's all you're worried about, I would have pee'd on it.”

Becca held back a laugh, because God yes, if she had taken a pregnancy test to Leslie and told her to pee on it, Leslie would have done it without question. At least, not until afterward. But what if? What if her blood test had gotten switched at the doctor's office? It could all be a mistake. A really, huge mistake.

She glanced at the clock. If she waited much longer it could be wrong. She stood, her

bare feet touched the cold linoleum. Her knees wobbled, but she managed to make it to the counter with the navy and green plaid boxers clutched in her hands. She wrung the soft cotton, focused on the tiny screen and her weight slammed in her heels.

Two pink lines.

Her head dropped, the boxers fell from her fingers and floated to the floor, hitting the tile like a judge's gavel making it official. She and Mr. L. Sanders were going to have a baby. Thank God he had the nutty sense to write his name on the band of his underwear to give her a clue to find him.

A breath shuddered out of her and she dropped to her knees. Oh, God. She was single. And she was pregnant. And, despite the name, she really had no idea who the father was. A sob croaked out of her. She covered her mouth to hold in the noise so not to worry Leslie, but with her shaking, it wasn't muffling much.

In about eight months, she was going to have a baby.

She lifted the boxers and looked at the name written across the white label again. "Who are you, L. Sanders?"

All she needed was her cousin's guest book from her wedding and she'd have her man.

She could vaguely picture the guy whose sperm found her egg. He'd been a guest. He'd worn nice khaki's and a blue button down shirt. He just had to be in the guest book. Should be in the guestbook. No one would have gotten past Aunt Janna without signing that book. Nothing or nobody ever got by Aunt Janna, one man out of two hundred plus guests included.

The background details were fuzzy. There was blond hair and broad shoulders, no mistaking that. He'd stood out only because she was normally attracted dark and thinly athletic, like a motocross racer. This guy was more...a memory flashed of a muscled chest pressing against hers, ripped abs on her belly and strong thighs nudging hers apart. She shook her head and decided on hockey player. Not that she had ever seen a hockey player, or watched it on TV,

but it seemed to fit him by the hockey players she'd seen in movies.

He had stared at her from the back pew just before she'd walked down the aisle. She had stared back. Apparently she should have kept staring at him instead of seeing her way to the bottom however many whatever things she happened to have been drinking. She'd lost track of him after the ceremony, caught his gaze across the room a few times, and then she followed friends to the hotel bar. There had been laughing, drinking, and she was pretty sure some betting that involved acapella karaoke. He'd been there through some of it and then she woke up with her head banging into her forehead in a hotel room. She had been alone, but when she found the boxers under the bed, she assumed she'd had a one night stand.

How could she tell a guy she carried his baby when she didn't remember sleeping with him? Or did she have to? She could simply not tell him. It wasn't like she was after money. She could support a baby on her own. She looked at her reflection and could see the guilt etched across her face as sharply as she felt it.

She splashed her face with water and hung her head. She couldn't *not* try to find him. She couldn't answer, "How come I don't have a daddy?" in five years. She wouldn't deprive a man of his child. She wouldn't refuse her baby its father. She'd made the mistake. She'd live with the consequences.

She washed her hands and pushed her hair back.

Leslie knocked. "Becca, you open this door right now or I swear I'll break it down. You know I will."

Becca opened the door and didn't make it past the knob before Leslie wrapped her in a hug. "It'll be okay, Becca. I'll be right here with you through it all, I promise. You're not alone."

Becca looked at her friend. The pity party was over. She had responsibilities. "I have to find the father."

Leslie raised a shoulder, her brows squeezed together. "Why don't you wait a couple

weeks. Take it all in, give yourself time to adjust. Worry with finding him later. You have plenty of time.”

Becca shook her head and wiped her eyes clear. “No. I want to find him before I start showing and people start asking. What are my clients going to think? How am I going to answer those questions?” Becca shook her head and sat on her bed. “*Yeah, I’m pregnant. I don’t know really know who the father is. How did that happen? Well, it seems mixing stress and alcohol isn’t a good idea.*”

Leslie grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. “Stop it. Let them think whatever they want. Don’t worry about them. If they have a problem with you being pregnant then they can go down the road and let Jamie Walters cut and color their hair and pray every time she won’t turn them pink and blue.”

A laughed escaped and Becca pressed her lips together. Poor Jamie had grabbed the wrong bottles one time and it would haunt her for as long as she lived in this town.

Leslie sat next to her and put her arm around her shoulders. “You’re not a bad person, Becca. You got drunk after a wedding. After your momma dragged you through a hundred of—“

“Six. There was only six.”

“Yeah, *only* six weddings that you were a part of. Only six times you were dragged through your momma dressing up in some big white virginal wedding gown, six bachelorette parties, six rounds of showers, big-ass cakes, and big-ass weddings. Six big-ass huge events that you planned.—”

“Three. I only planned three of them.”

Leslie sat back and propped her hands on her waist. “Stop defending that woman. Ain’t nobody in this room believing it. You deserved every one of those drinks you took after making it through Muriel’s wedding and planning and everything else she had you do. Honestly, *but Becca,*—” Leslie straightened and used her hand as a talking mouth “—*you’ve done this for your*

momma so many times, I know if you help me everything will be perfect. You should have given your cousin the bird and said no.”

“I—”

Leslie’s hand flew up in the air. “I don’t want to hear it, so we’ll just leave it at that. Now, if anyone tries to give you shit, you just send ‘em to me and I’ll take care of ‘em.”

Becca hugged her grade school friend back. “Thank you.”

“You’ve taken care of me long enough, it’s my turn to take care of you. If you really want to find this guy now, then let’s find him.”

Becca sat up. “I was thinking of Muriel’s guest book, but gosh, I can’t ask Muriel to dig that out. They leave this weekend for Seattle and they’re all packed. I was there yesterday and everything is sealed up in boxes. It’ll take ‘em a week to drive there and another to get unpacked and moved in.” She touched her stomach. “I guess I will have to wait then. It’s not like I’m going to be showing before next month.”

“Or....” Leslie sat up and ran downstairs.

Becca pushed off the bed and followed after. By the time she got downstairs, Leslie was digging in Becca’s desk. She flopped the Little Rock phone book out on top.

Leslie tapped the top of the book. “We can call every single L. Sanders in the phone book. He’s bound to be one of Jack’s friends cause all Muriel knows is Sheridan and we know everyone here. Chances are he’s from Little Rock or the surrounding area. We’ll even search out Hot Springs and as far north as Conway. If we don’t find him, then we’ll look farther. We’ll call everyone in Arkansas if we have to and then search out the surrounding states.”

Becca managed a smile. “Thanks, Leslie.”

Leslie faced her, her hand flat on the phone book. “We can still wait. Let the news of it settle in better for you.”

Becca shook her head. No. She needed to move, she needed to think. She couldn’t just sit

still and think about how she was having a baby. Her hands began to shake. *Oh, god. I'm going to have a baby.*

Leslie was there and holding a trash can to Becca's face. "Do it in here!"

Becca eased in a chair and pushed the can away. "I'm not gonna puke. Just got a little rush from the moment."

Leslie worried her lip and set the trash can down. "Maybe we should wait until at least tomorrow before we start calling."

Becca breathed in and out. The shaking slowed. Mild panic attack passed. "No. Let's do this before I lose my nerve. I'll put it off every day and then the baby will be here if I don't just do it."

Leslie studied her for a moment and nodded one firm time. "That baby is going to be lucky to have you as a momma." Leslie turned and thumbed through the phone book.

The pages flipped. The noise only a wisp of a sound in the otherwise quiet room. Somewhere, on one of those pages, could be his name. Her fingers shook again, or, since they hadn't really ever stopped, they shook harder. "I'm scared, Leslie."

"You should be." Leslie faced her, her head tilted to the side. "I think it would be weird if you weren't."

"You really think I'm going to be a good mom?"

"You've been taking good care of me for the past twenty-three or so years, haven't you?"

Yeah she had. Started with looking out for Leslie on the playground, continued on through school and making sure she stayed out of trouble. No easy thing cause Leslie had liked trouble. Or, according to Leslie, trouble liked her. But this was different. She'd been Leslie's friend. This was going to be Becca's own baby.

Leslie's finger pointed on the opened phone book. "Here's the first one. Are you sure?"

Two

“Hi. I’m Becca. Sorry, about the phone call. But we might have attended a wedding together. Not that we were together, together, but we were both there at the same place. Muriel and Jack’s wedding. About five weeks ago. Anyway. Becca, again, that’s my name. I was a bridesmaid. Brown hair twisted up on my head. Could you give me a call back? I need to—I uh. I have something of yours.”

Luc laughed and pressed the button to save the message on the machine again. After hassling with his brother all afternoon over a painting, he needed a good laugh. He had no idea who Muriel and Jack were, nor was this woman’s name ringing any bells. The last wedding he attended was at least two years ago.

He lifted the phone and scrolled through the caller ID. A Becca Brighton was still listed there. It was insane to even think about it, but the nerves in her voice—they were familiar. He tightened his hold on the cold plastic phone and stared at the black numbers. With his painting, all he tended to meet were women at art galleries or women who commissioned him for a painting. They were all so confident in themselves, they had him rambling and repeating and doing basically what Becca Brighton did on his answering machine.

He tapped the phone against his chest. It slipped in his sweaty palm and he dropped it in the cradle. He blew out a breath. Who was he kidding, he couldn’t call a woman up like that. He

ran his fingers through his hair and turned back to the painting that was finished, no matter what his brother said or tried to convince him to do.

He lifted his sketch pad to work on his next project. Something that would make a person feel *alive, breathless. When I look at it, I want my heart to race.* As bare as the description was, he'd deliver a painting that would do those things. He'd created several pieces for Gloria, so he knew it would take very little to have that ball of life breathless with a racing heart. But no matter, he'd do his best so that everyone she showed the painting to would feel those feelings right alongside her.

The phone rang. The name Becca Brighton with the phone number flashed in his mind's eye. He watched the caller ID, curious to see if that would pull up.

It didn't.

He sighed at seeing his brother's name on there and answered, knowing if he didn't, his brother would come after him. "What, Johnny?"

"Ready to listen to reason yet?"

"I'm not adding a woman to that painting."

"The buyer loves the idea. He insists on having a woman in there. He wants her naked back and some shit. Look, it'll sell for a song."

"I don't care what it'll sell for. Sticking a woman in the painting won't fit."

"Luc, you're killing me."

"I was asked for the painting based on my work and reputation. If Mr. James doesn't trust in my vision any longer, he can find some else. This is why I don't let anyone see the work before it's finished and damn you for sneaking in here when I wasn't home and telling Mr. James about the painting."

"Okay, okay, Luc, I can tell you're frustrated, but hear me out. He'll pay an extra thirty percent if you make the addition."

Luc rubbed his forehead. "I'm not a starving artist needing to paint every little thing. I have a reputation and I'm going to stand by it."

"I'm going to do something on the computer to show you just how good it would turn out. I'll be there in an hour or so."

Luc tightened his grip on the phone. His brother didn't know how to take no for an answer. Handy talent for talking clients into buying Luc's paintings. Not so good for Luc's temper. "I won't be here."

"Where else do you have to go?"

"I've got a date."

Johnny laughed. "You're full of it."

He silently cursed his brother. Luc did date. "I really do."

"What's her name?"

Luc tipped his head back and caught sight of the red light blinking on his machine. "Becca. And no, I don't know where we're going yet."

"You're making it up. You never date while you're in the middle of a painting."

"I'm not in the middle of a painting. The James painting is finished."

"Let's talk about this. I'll be there in a bit."

"There's nothing to discuss." Luc hung up the phone and sat back in his chair.

This painting would be the end of him. When he started, it was supposed to be something simple and easy. A light-hearted paint after the last stressful one he had completed. But this simple painting was turning into anything but simple.

Somehow, his hammock under a shady palm had gotten lost. Mr. James had asked for peaceful and restful. *I want to look at it and be taken there.* Luc was delivering that in his vision. It's how he worked. If the client didn't like the result, he wasn't obligated to buy. His brother sneaking a peak early started the downward spiral.

First, it was adding a small sailboat in the ocean in the background. Luc had refused. The painting wasn't about the ocean, it was about the dream of lazy afternoons spent in that hammock rocking in the wind. He could take the ocean out and drop in a pond, or hills or a wall of flowers. It didn't matter because the backdrop wasn't important. He'd chosen an ocean because when he visited Mr. James's home about the painting, his wife had been burning an ocean breeze scented candle.

Next Johnny suggested adding a child playing in the sand. Luc said no way on that one since it wasn't what had been asked out of him. A toddler got about as far away from relaxing and quiet as it could get. And with the many breakables in the James's house, that firmed Johnny's decision.

So then his brother reappeared with the idea to add a couple in the background. Holding hands and kicking the water. Luc said no to that cliché as well. And now Johnny spent the last two days explaining to him how a woman laying on her stomach in the sand with the ocean "licking her legs" in the painting would be perfect.

Luc needed out. Out of his house. Out of his studio and away from people he knew. Away from people constantly sticking their nose as close as they could to him to discover about the latest Lucius painting.

The red light on his machine blinked at him. It should be easy. He'd watched Johnny do it dozens of times and the man never broke a sweat or had one twitch of a nerve. Something had happened. Johnny had been nervous around girls too when they were younger, and then one day he just wasn't and Luc still was.

He cleared his throat and found a comfortable spot in his chair. He shook his hands and arms loose, pushed a breath out and reached for the phone. He hit the numbers as fast as he could. It rang. Panic sank his lungs to his feet and he jerked forward to hang up.

"E-low?" A woman's muffled voice answered.

He froze and squeezed his fingers around the phone so he wouldn't drop it. He was certifiable and finally managed to make his mouth open. "Becca?"

He was pretty sure he sounded like the Tin Man trying to talk after that first squirt of oil.

"Yeah?"

He pulled the phone away from his ear and looked at it. Didn't sound like the same hesitant woman on his machine. He swallowed and put it back to his ear. "This is Luc. Luc Sanders. You left me a message this afternoon. About a wedding. That you went to."

A woman screamed in the background.

"Oh, my God, Leslie." There was the throaty and nervous voice he knew from his machine. "I'm so sorry. Hold on, let me grab you some ice."

"Becca!"

Luc pulled away from the squeal.

The woman, Leslie, he presumed, continued on. "You better know a way to cover this up! I can't go outside looking like this! It's burning!"

"Don't worry!" Becca shouted in the phone. "I can cover it up. I can curl your hair that way and we can put some make up on. By the time I'm done, no one will even know, I swear."

Maybe he should just hang up. Calling wasn't a good idea. And how long would it take her before figuring out he wasn't the man she was looking for? The moment she walked in and saw him, that's when and there'd he'd be. Looking like a fool.

"Shit," was again whispered over the phone.

Water ran, cabinets opened and slammed. He really should hang up. "I think maybe—"

"Sorry." Becca's voice panted through the phone. "Can we meet somewhere?"

He swallowed. Mistake, such a mistake. Johnny would know what to do. Johnny would play it out. And then when he met the girl, he'd buy her a drink, say something and the whole damn thing would just magically work out.

“I’m finishing up at work now.”

“Sure. When are you done?” Luc leaned back and wanted to poke his eyes out. No way could he ever pull this off.

“Oh. You’re free now?”

Unfortunately. “Yeah.”

“Okay, well I’m in Sheridan.”

“Great. I’ll come to you.” *And maybe I’d get run over by a truck on the way.*

She snorted. “And we what, meet up in the grocery store parking lot? How about I come to you. There’s not somewhere we can meet here. Little Rock?”

His mouth opened and closed a couple times. *WWJD? What would Johnny do?* “Brave New Restaurant?”

“I’m not really sure.—”

“Can you make it by eight?” Get off the phone, just get off the phone and he he’d be able to breathe.

“It’s just....”

“If you’re gonna come all this way, you ought to I have good food.” That was smooth, wasn’t it? He’d wait to beat his head on the desk.

“I, um, I guess so.”

“See you then.” He disconnected quickly and found he still wasn’t able to breathe all that well.

He looked down at his paint streaked shirt and pants and knew it was likely on his face, too. He rinsed his brushes, covered his oils and shut off the lights of his windowless work studio. The closed room started as a reason so the sun wouldn’t mess with his light. It turned into a necessity to hide his paintings until he finished. The new lock on the door ensured that privacy.

By the time this night was over, he might need to pad the walls and put the lock on the

outside.

Three

Becca set the phone aside and ran back to Leslie. “Sorry about that.”

Leslie leaned close to the mirror and turned her head, trying to see the red whelp from the curling iron. “That better have been an important phone call.”

Becca swallowed and put the cold rag to her friend’s neck. “It was.”

“I look like I’ve got a hickey on my neck while I’m going on a date. You better tell me more than, ‘it was’.”

“I’m so sorry, Leslie—”

“Oh, no you don’t. Stop talking around. Who was that?”

“It was him.” Becca fanned the burn.

“Him, *him*?”

“Yep.” Since Leslie didn’t seem too affected by the burn, Becca returned to finishing up her hair. She had to hurry. Geez, eight o’clock. At Brave New Restaurant of all the places. She had an hour and a half before she had to leave and it wasn’t near enough time.

She needed a shower, find something to wear, find something to wear again because whatever she picked out first would never do. Re-do her make-up and hair.

“Well?” Leslie waited.

“We’re meeting.”

Leslie's eyes widened. "When?"

Becca glanced to the clock. Had five minutes really already passed? "At eight in Little Rock."

"Eight! You look like hell."

Becca lifted her gaze and met her friend's horrified stare in the mirror. "Thanks, but you could have lied."

"There's no way you would have believed me."

Becca caught a glance of herself in the mirror and tried not to squint. "I'll be fine."

As soon as she found something to wear.

"Where are y'all meeting?"

"Brave New Restaurant."

"Holy shit, that place is beautiful. On the river. What are you going to wear?"

"I don't know."

Leslie chewed at her lower lip. "You don't have a good wardrobe."

"I know."

"You need to go shopping."

"No time."

Leslie grinned. "You could swing through the mall before meeting him."

"I don't think so."

Leslie flicked her wrist up in the air toward her hair. "Well, hurry up. We have work to do with you."

Becca smiled. "You have your date to get ready for. I'll be fine."

"While you shower, I'll pick you something out to wear and then leave. I already know what I'm wearing. Besides, your date—"

"It's not a date. I'm meeting a stranger to tell him he's going to be a daddy."

Becca finished up Leslie's hair and sprinted for her shower upstairs. She considered exfoliating, but decided to skip it. What was the point? They'd already landed in the sheets and she had no interest in going back. Once with Luc Sanders was causing enough trouble. She shut off the water and stepped out.

One more hour before she had to go. She slung a towel around her and hurried in her bedroom. There were clothes on her bed as Leslie promised. Becca fingered the chocolate brown wrap dress she'd worn to Muriel's rehearsal dinner. It cut awfully low on her chest. Before that wouldn't have been such a problem, but now...she hugged her swollen boobs.

What choice did she have? She considered Leslie's mall idea and shook her head. No time for that. She hurried as quick as she could with her hair and makeup, but it still sucked most of her time. She fastened the tie of the dress under her left breast and faced the mirror.

Wow.

She cupped her boobs. It wasn't like she'd thought it would be. They were not necessarily bigger, but fuller. Perkier. Nicer. It was too much. She turned to see the backside. It looked as great as she remembered, but as she faced back to the front, she sighed. She couldn't wear this, but she wanted to. Really wanted to. She turned to the side and dropped her hand down the still flat plane of her stomach. How much longer would she have that?

She glanced to clock. Crappers. She had to go. Now.

At least with this dress she knew the walking up and walking away part of this dinner was going to be fantastic. Everything else in the middle? She slipped in her sling back heels and didn't want to think about it.

Four

Luc stepped through the front doors of the restaurant and nodded his head toward the owner who recognized him.

“Mr. Sanders, delighted to have you with us.”

“I’m meeting a Becca Brighton this evening at eight.” He resisted asking for a table in a dark corner to hide in.

“Yes, sir. I’ll see her to you personally.” He looked around him and signaled a girl forward who then took him to his seat outside. A gentle breeze eased through the covered porch just enough to make the candles flicker. His table was at the railing, overlooking the river. Good. If things got too bad, he could jump. Lots of trees. Maybe he’d hit one of them and break his neck on the way down. Nice and quick to put him out of his misery.

He checked his watch. Seven fifty-five. He straightened his sleeves and checked his phone. Johnny had emailed the ridiculous photo-shopped picture of his painting with a woman lying on the beach added in. It looked as Luc had expected. Cheapened, bland, didn’t fit and that was not something Luc would sign his name to. He silenced his phone and dropped it in his pocket.

He glanced back to his watch. Eight-ten.

She was running late. Or had decided not to show. Now, wouldn’t that work out just perfect. He wouldn’t have to deal with it at all. The waitress returned, offering him a drink and

he turned her down. Oh, no. He didn't need any of that.

Eight-fifteen.

He sighed and sat back in his chair. She wasn't coming. He was relieved and for some unknown reason, somewhat disappointed. He flipped open his menu to have dinner alone.

"Mr. Sanders?"

He glanced up and the owner held a chair out for a woman. Luc stood and nodded his thanks, waved the man off, and finished pushing who he assumed to be Becca Brighton up to the table.

Her large green eyes lifted to his. She made no move to question who he was or even seemed to notice that she'd never met him before. "Thank you. Sorry I'm late. There was an accident on 167 and traffic was down to a crawl in one lane."

Luc retook his seat across from her. She was stunning. Large rounded eyes. The slight points at the corners lent her an exotic look. Trim nose that was rounded at the tip. Cupid's bow lips. Not too puffy, but not large either. A nice balance to her eyes, which were definitely the focus of her face.

And she wasn't noticing that she didn't know him.

She smiled a little nervously and two little dots appeared to the right of her lips. Or, maybe her eyes weren't the focal point because those two little dimples drew his gaze and held him there. If he was painting her, he'd add them to the composition and then cover them up to be his own hidden secret. His own *Mona Lisa* with a mysterious smile.

"You're not quite what I remembered, but it's been a while."

He shifted in his seat, becoming even more curious and nervous. *Yeah, well, I didn't meet you at a wedding. I promise you have nothing of mine to give me, but I was desperate for a date this evening.* He mentally shook that off. The artist in him wanted to wait until after dinner to tell her the truth. He wanted time to study her every line because he knew the moment he got home,

he'd be sitting with his sketch pad and the first detail he'd work on would be those dimples that had now disappeared.

The coward in him had no trouble putting it off a little longer. Perhaps a glass of wine would be a good idea. In fact, it would be a great idea. That way when he did tell her the truth and she threw something in his face, it wouldn't be so bad. It might even save himself from jumping over the railing.

Her head tilted to the side, her arched brows that angled sharply over her eyes dipped. "Your hair is a bit darker. And I think you're taller."

"I have been getting a lot of milk lately." Those tree branches were looking better and better.

She chuckled and it seemed luck or serendipity was on his side tonight if he favored the man she was here to meet. He re-opened his menu because the longer he could put off her glass of water in his face, the better. "Shall we?"

She looked slightly uncertain, but sighed and flipped open her menu.

"I've never been disappointed with letting the chef choose for me. Or if I'm wanting something in particular, I'll go for the lamb."

"I was thinking salmon."

"It's excellent."

Her brows drew together. "Oh, well, I'm not sure I'm supposed—" she bit her lip. Her lashes lifted and dropped back toward her menu. "I think I'll take the lamb."

The waitress returned and he gave their order. "And for wine, we'd like—"

"None for me." That color took her cheeks again and she shifted her gaze off him and to the waitress. "Sweet tea, please."

Luc nodded and passed the waitress the wine list. He wasn't drinking alone and he could drink the night into oblivion later if he needed. "I'll take the same."

She pushed at hair that fell between her eyebrows. The strands weren't long enough to touch her nose, but it gently curled between her brows. She dropped her hand and the hair eased back in nearly the same spot. "I don't know very much about you."

He tried hiding his surprise. He didn't often meet people who didn't know who he was—especially when that person was the one who initially contacted him. And hell, wasn't this just getting odder and odder. He didn't know what else to do but go with it. Other option was the trees and it hadn't gotten that bad yet. "I'm a painter."

"Interesting. What kind?"

"Oils. I specialize in landscapes. You tell me what you want to feel and I create a picture to match."

"Fascinating. Have you sold very many?"

He held in his choke. His paintings hung on walls across the country, and a few out of the country. "Some."

She nodded, took a drink from her water glass and faced him. "I called you because I—you left something last time I saw you."

"That's what you said on the phone." He judged the distance to the railing and figured it'd take about half a second to be over it if it came down to it. He couldn't take some totally stranger's whatever possession she was here to give him. Unless...if it was personalized, he shook his head. He got himself into this mess, it was time to get out of it. He sat back and knew he couldn't get away with it any longer. "I haven't been completely honest with you."

Her lovely brown brows dipped. The way they turned just so was interesting. And how her lids curved over her eyes. He hadn't painted a live subject in far too long. "That is." He sat back forward. "I haven't been to a wedding in two years."

She took her lip between her teeth.

"When I got your message, I thought of calling you back dozens of times, but kept

hanging up.” Not so bad. So far. She hadn’t screamed or called him crazy names. Or thrown her water glass at him.

“But you called me anyway,” her words slowed in hesitation. The throaty nervous voice of hers that had matched his was gone.

He shrugged. “I called you anyway. I won’t blame you if you get up and leave.”

“You have no idea who I am?” She stared at him.

He shook his head. “Nothing aside from what you’ve told me.”

She chuckled and blew out her breath.

He stared at her, watched her as she slouched back in her chair and dropped her head back. “You’re not angry?”

“Honestly?” She straightened in her chair and tugged at the sleeves of her dress. “I’m relieved.” Her head angled to the side, the wind blew through and lifted the hair about her face. There, right there. Perfect image. “Why did you do it?”

“I didn’t have any plans this evening.” Her brows rose and he had to admit to himself that sounded lame. “My brother threatened to come over and discuss one of my paintings. Calling you kind of happened before I thought it out.”

“Does your brother paint, too?”

“Johnny?” He laughed. “No. He can’t even manage a good stick figure. He owns a gallery and sells my paintings. What about you?”

“Hairstylist. I own a little shop in Sheridan.” She unfolded her napkin and lowered it to her lap.

She was staying? He glanced back to her face. “You work with your hands, too.”

She grinned. “I suppose I do.”

Meals came and conversation carried on smoothly. Luc was so glad he returned that phone call, and even more so that he outted himself with the truth. After she discovered who he

wasn't, she had relaxed and by some miracle, so had he. The smiles came easier. The toss of her hands as she talked smoother. She was refreshing and interesting. The stories she told of some of her clients had him rolling with laughter. Others left his mouth hanging at the things people would say. It was like he hadn't simply met one person, he'd met dozens all in one evening.

While finishing the James painting, he hadn't had much time for talking with anyone beyond Johnny. And Johnny was well, Johnny. Active, larger than life and rarely slowed down for anything. It was overwhelming and Luc didn't have the energy to keep up with him.

Becca was larger than life too, but she had a wholesome, steadiness about her. Real. She was real and wasn't after something of his. And even better, she didn't ask question after question about his painting. Something he hadn't found since he moved away from the Ozarks some ten years ago and his career launched.

He kept his hands tucked at his back and walked her to her car. Her keys jingled in her hand and she stopped aside a small white SUV. "Thank you for dinner."

"Thank you for not walking out." He took her keys from her and fumbled through the set. In the dark, he didn't know which key and instead hit the button on the little black fob. He opened the door and she stood before him, trapped in a barrier of him, her door and the inside of her car.

She turned up to him. "I'm glad I didn't, too."

He didn't wait. She might turn away too soon. He might lose his nerve. He touched his lips to hers. The sweetness from her cheesecake at dessert and the tart taste from the strawberry topping filled his mouth. She stepped closer to him. Her hand touched his chest and that was the end of it. Gentle and short. A wishful taste of promise, but not an invitation for more tonight.

He brushed his knuckles over her cheek and curled the tips of hair she had pushed at all night long around his finger. So soft. He let them go to the side of her face and away from her eyes as he knew she'd want. "Would you answer the phone if I called you again?"

Her fingers slid down the row of buttons on his shirt until her hand fell away about his sternum. “I don’t know.”

Five

Becca popped the last chip in her mouth from lunch as her front door opened and Leslie stepped inside.

“Thank goodness you’re finally awake! I drove by earlier, but your paper was still outside and I didn’t think you were up yet.” Leslie fixed herself a glass of tea and sank in a kitchen table chair across from Becca. “Well? Are you just going to sit there or are you going to tell me?”

Becca smiled and sipped from her own tea. “He wasn’t there.”

“He stood you up?” Leslie’s mouth hung open, she straightened and looked like she’d be darting for the door to track the man down.

Becca chuckled. “No. It wasn’t him, *him*. The man who called me back wasn’t the father.”

“Who was it?”

“One of the ones we called yesterday.”

Leslie cringed. “I didn’t think about some weirdo calling you back instead. How creepy.”

Becca shook her head and pushed her empty glass away from her. “He wasn’t creepy, he was...sweet.”

At that, Becca received Leslie’s raised brows. “Sweet? You stayed?”

“I didn’t know it wasn’t him at first. I mean, I thought it kinda looked like the guy from

the wedding, but really all I could remember was blond hair and tall, and this guy was that. He's a painter. He lives in West Little Rock."

"How did you find out it wasn't him?"

"He came clean a few minutes after I got there. He was really adorable about it all. He'd gotten flustered a bit and blushed. He expected me to get up and leave after he told me."

"I can't believe you didn't. Staying sounds like something I would have done. And then you'd be railing me over how dangerous it was that I had stayed."

Becca chuckled. "I'm not as bad as that. Besides, there was nothing dangerous about him. He was...shy." She tried hiding her smile at the sweet kiss he'd given her. It'd been gentle, careful and quick.

"You like him!"

"There wasn't anything about him *not* to like. And I had fun."

Leslie put her hand up. "No need for the defense. I'm not judging. Are you going to see him again?"

Becca stood and gathered up her dishes. "I don't know. He said he'd call, but I don't know if I'll answer. I mean, it is a little crazy and nothing is going to last. I'm pregnant and that's going to be the end of it."

"Dating a guy doesn't mean you have to marry him."

Becca straightened and cursed herself at how that one single word got her back up like that. She forced her shoulders to relax. "I know that."

"Do you?"

She turned and tried not to grind her teeth. Leslie only meant well, but she just didn't understand and Becca had given up trying to explain. "Yes, I do."

Leslie's head cocked to the side. "Just 'cause you're momma married every man she's dated it doesn't mean you have to."

“I know that.”

“So if you see this guy a few more times, it doesn’t mean you have to have some big fat wedding at the end.”

“I know.” Again she forced her shoulders down.

“If you know all this, then how come you never date?”

“Because I’ve never met anybody I liked enough to date.”

“Except for the guy you met last night. You already said you liked him and you had a good time. You don’t have an excuse not to go out with him again if he calls.”

Becca pointed at her stomach.

“So what? You’re going to have a baby, not spread some horrible disease.”

“I just don’t see the point in dating someone if I know it’s not going to last. Why waste the time?”

“Because you need it, that’s why. And it’s not a waste of time to date people knowing you’re not going to marry them.”

“There’s no point.”

Leslie’s mouth hardened and she stood. “Well, then. I guess I’m nothing but a waste of space then.”

“Leslie, wait.” Becca pushed off the kitchen counter and chased after Leslie, catching her with one leg out the front door. “You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Yeah, you did.” Leslie shook her head. “I’ve tried and tried getting through to you, but you’re just not getting it and I don’t know many more ways I can say the same spill over and over.”

“And you’re not getting that I don’t like the idea of casual dating just to be dating.”

“You’re always going to be alone doing that! You’ll never meet anyone you want to think about falling in love with if you don’t date some.”

“I’ve meet plenty of guys I like and found out real fast that they weren’t the one for me.”

Leslie kicked the door shut, put her hands on her hips and Becca knew she was in for it now. “Name me the qualities you like in a man.”

“That’s an absurd question.”

“No it’s not. At your age, you should have a type you like.”

“Long and lean.”

“That’s not a type, that’s physical. I want to know the emotional stuff.”

“Fine. I want someone who can make my heart flutter.”

“Uh-huh. And what is it specifically that makes your heart flutter?”

Becca shook her head. “I don’t know, Leslie. I guess if I did, I’d be married to it.”

“Do that and you’ll be married to nearly every guy you go out with. They all make your heart flutter at the start, but it takes time before you figure out what keeps it going.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway with this guy. It’s not going to go anywhere. I don’t need the headache of trying to date on top of this baby.”

Leslie screamed. Her balled fists raised in the air and shook. “That’s just it! Dating shouldn’t be a headache. If it is, then you dump the guy and go on.”

“Again, what is the point? There is no point going through the trouble of seeing this guy because I know it’s not going to last.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I’m pregnant.”

“And again I say, so what? You’re pregnant. If the guy won’t stick around just because you’re pregnant, then I say good riddance and you go on. Having a baby doesn’t mean you’re set to be alone the rest of your life. You’re making being pregnant an excuse with this.”

“I am not.”

“Fine.” A satisfied smile spread over Leslie’s face. “Then if he calls, you have no reason

not to go out with him. You already said you liked him and had fun, so you can't say it's because y'all didn't get along."

Becca snapped her mouth shut and Leslie pranced by with a smug smile.

Leslie dropped back in her chair and lifted her tea. "So what about finding the dad?"

"I think I'll wait until next week to try calling back those who didn't answer and didn't have a machine."

"Probably a good idea. We called on the weekend, there's chance he's just not home to get the message yet."

The phone rang. Becca's heart lifted and did that fluttering thing she liked.

Six

Something dinged.

Luc groaned and dropped in and out of sleep, falling back into sleep more than out of it.

A ding rang out again and he started awake. Papers fell from his lap. A notebook flopped to the floor.

Another ding.

He rubbed his face and pushed out of his chair where he'd fallen asleep last night. He stumbled to the front door as the doorbell rang once more. He hoped this wasn't neighbors wanting something. He reached for the door, but it opened before he got to it. He stepped back, narrowly saving his nose from the swing of the solid oak.

Johnny entered and grimaced when he looked at Luc. "Hell."

Luc only waved his brother off and managed to make it to the kitchen. "I was up late and fell asleep in my chair."

"Sit down, I'll make the coffee."

Luc fixed a bowl of cereal and sat just as the heavenly scent of sweet, sweet energy juice filled the room.

"It must have been one hell of a date."

Luc was able to manage a grin. Probably couldn't have stopped it if he tried. "It was. One

of the best dinners I've ever had."

Johnny rolled his eyes and sat. "Dinner? That's it? You had dinner and you look like this afterward?"

"I came home and sketched for a while." He'd worked and worked, trying to get her dimples just right, but something was off. He was missing some detail. He'd tried over and over, adjusted, got several fresh new pieces, but he hadn't been able to get whatever small detail in there. He needed to see her again. "How quick can you call a girl after a first date?"

Johnny's brows arched before he shook his head with a chuckle. "Depends on what you want from her."

Luc sipped his coffee. "I want to see her again."

Again, Johnny laughed. "Yeah, that's usually why you call them. Tomorrow or the next day."

Tomorrow? "Why not today?"

"You'll look eager and desperate."

He *was* eager and desperate. He wanted to see her again. To hear her throaty voice. To see that interest and complete focus on whatever he had to say that had nothing to do with painting. And, he needed to see what part of her he was missing in his sketch to get those dimples.

Johnny groaned. "Jeez, you can call her today, just don't expect to get laid."

Luc frowned. "She's not like that."

"Not if you call here this soon."

"I'm not like that."

Johnny nodded. "Yeah, I know."

"I got your picture last night, and before you even get started, I'm still not going to do it. It doesn't fit the composition. If he doesn't want the painting without some ridiculous detail

added, then I'll sell it to someone else and that's the end of it."

"Tell me why it 'doesn't fit the composition'."

Luc ignored the mocking. "Let me see the picture. I know you have a copy on you."

Johnny cut his eyes across the table at Luc and pulled the picture from his back pocket.

Luc turned the photo around and faced it to his brother. "Look at the picture and see what doesn't fit."

"It all fits."

Luc hadn't missed that Johnny didn't even look at the picture just then. He tapped on the woman's legs with her feet in the surf of the water. "She'd too big for the hammock."

Johnny rolled his eyes. "So make her smaller. Hell, Luc, this was a quick job just so you could see."

"It doesn't work that way. To fit her in at the right proportions and to keep her in the frame, she'll be no bigger than a child and critics will be asking why I'm painting naked children who look like adults. I don't need that kind of press. The other option will be to stick half of her behind the hammock and that'll crowd the picture and put all the weight on the left and the right will be mostly empty. It won't balance."

"Then do a kid in the sand like we talked about before."

"I'll do the kid before I do the adult, but that isn't what was asked of me to paint and a kid in this painting will not fit Mr. James and his lifestyle. I guarantee you, he will not be happy with a toddler in the painting."

Johnny stood, leaving the picture on the table. "Just try to figure something out. We don't need you getting a reputation of not wanting to please your clients, too."

"*Too?* What is that supposed to mean?"

Johnny froze mid-step and turned around. He sighed. "I wasn't going to weigh you down with this, but you're going out of style."

“Last I checked, I had five more paintings after the James.”

“You do, but just last year you were commissioned for ten and had a waiting list five times as long. You don’t have a waiting list any longer.”

“And by the time I finish these five, there’s no telling what could be waiting for me. You said yourself when we first started the public is fickle, I believe is the term you used.”

“Can you redo a painting for Mr. James? Give him something completely different and I’ll put the hammock painting in the gallery to sell?”

Luc nodded. “I can do that.” He sipped from his coffee.

“I’ll tell Mr. James then and let him know to expect a bit longer of a wait.”

“You can tell him it’ll be a lot longer of a wait, because there’s five more ahead of him.”

Johnny stared down at Luc. “You can’t be serious. You’re going to bump him.”

“It’s not fair to my other clients that you decided to change Mr. James’s mind.”

“I didn’t change his mind, damn it.”

“You showed him a snapshot of the painting before it was completed. If you hadn’t done that, I would have delivered the painting he asked for and be on to my next client. Would you rather I piss off one client or the five others I already promised paintings to by a date?”

Johnny dropped his mug in the sink. “I’ll call and ask him what he wants.”

Luc nodded as his brother walked out. “Be your normal self and you should be able to talk him into this one and a second one.”

Johnny flipped him the bird and walked out of his kitchen.

Luc picked up his coffee and returned to his living room and the dozens of failed sketches of Becca. He was calling her today.

Seven

“Was that him again?” Leslie teased from the chair.

Becca put the phone down and tried to force the heat out of her cheeks. She felt hotter. It turned out she would answer the phone if he called. She’d answered it for the past three weeks.

“Maybe.”

“I think he’s taken you to every spot Little Rock and Hot Springs has to offer. Where are you going this time?”

She bit her lip. “His house. I’m driving up after I finish Mrs. Gardern’s color this afternoon. He’s going to grill.”

“Ohhh....” Leslie coo’ed “And on Valentine’s Day.”

Becca rolled her eyes and returned to her sandwich.

“Someone is going to get lucky tonight. Cupid lucky.”

Becca shook her head and pointed at her stomach. It had become a frequent gesture when the subject turned to Luc.

“Yeah, pregnant, not dead. Pregnant women have sex all the time.”

And every time she saw Luc, things were heading in that direction. It was hard not to. He was everything that she wanted, but facts remained that it was the wrong time. Each new day with him brought on a new level of guilt. He deserved to know, but she couldn’t risk telling him.

“But I bet their partners know about the baby.”

Leslie tossed the offensive pickles that dared to be placed on her sandwich to the edge of her plate with the same irritation she felt over Becca keeping the pregnancy a secret. “You’ll have to tell him. If you don’t, he’ll figure it out soon.”

Becca touched her still, mostly flat stomach. “I know. I can already feel the bump.”

She’d tell him soon. By the end of this weekend or next. Any longer than that and she was afraid he’d realize it on his own and that’d be worse.

“What about calling Muriel? Have you done that yet?”

“I was going to about four days ago, but Aunt Janna came in for a cut.”

“Sucks to have been you.”

“Yeah, anyway, she mentioned Muriel was really struggling with trying to get adjusted and had gotten herself lost four times in downtown Seattle in one week.”

“It’s probably not as bad as it sounds. You know how that old woman exaggerates.”

“I thought I’d give Muriel a couple more days anyway because of it.”

“And now it’s been four?”

Becca nodded. “It’s not the finding the father that scares me, it’s that knowing three-point-five seconds after I get off the phone with Muriel, she’ll have her momma and Aunt Janna on three-way and then everybody’s gonna know.” She picked up the phone and dialed. “If I wait much longer, I suppose everyone will know anyway. At least this way I’ll have the father’s name to put with the questions.”

“It’s too bad you don’t know Jack’s number to reach him directly.”

“Isn’t that the truth. If I thought I could reach Jack around Muriel’s back, you bet I would.” Muriel answered the phone and Becca swallowed down her pride. “Hey, Muriel. It’s Becca.”

“Becca! How are you? You just have to come visit me!”

“Yeah. Maybe sometime I can get away and come up there. Listen, I need a favor.”

“From me?”

Becca could picture her cousin’s confused face now. Her pointy nose would be wrinkled. Her narrowed eyes squinty. She’d look like an evil little witch and what do you know, she was one. “Yeah, there was a guy at your wedding and I’d like to find him. His first initial is an L. Last name Sanders. Sound familiar?”

“No, I don’t think so. But there were *so* many people there.”

Yeah, Becca knew. She’d ordered the invitations. “I think he’s one of Jack’s friends.”

“There’s just no telling. Why do you want his name?”

“Uh,” she fumbled for words. Any words but the true ones. “We really hit it off and I’d like to give him a call and see if we could get together. Thing is, I never caught his name. There was a bunch of people there and everyone was complimenting on how pretty everything was. I was thinking you could look in your guest book and see what he signed?” Flattery would get anyone anywhere they wanted with Becca’s family.

“It was a gorgeous wedding. *Everyone* commented to me all day long over what an excellent job I did on the planning.”

Becca’s hand tightened on the phone and she swallowed her comment. Yeah, Muriel had done an excellent job. An excellent job at seeing Becca lose her mind. Best to get the name she needed first.

“I’ve got my book out. But there are just so many names. I mean, every page is signed on. It’ll take me forever to try and find him. I’ll flip through it real quick, but if I don’t see it, I’ll wait and ask Jack when he gets home for you. We’ve got plans this evening and I don’t have time to just sit here thumbing through a bunch of names.”

“Thanks Muriel.”

“Sure. Oh—let me tell you about the ferry up here! It’s—“

“Oh, sorry Muriel. I’ve got a customer walking in the door.”

“Okay. Have fun with your job, I’m heading outside to go sight-seeing some more.”

Becca hung up the phone. “What are the odds she’ll remember to ask Jack and call me back?”

Leslie shook her head. “If she finds something she wants to brag on, you can bet she’ll call you.”

Four hours later, Becca drove up the steep hill with landscaped purple and yellow flowers lining the road. She crested the hill and turned to the left as she’d seen Luc do last week. He’d forgotten his wallet and ran home for it. It threw them a little behind so she hadn’t gone in. Instead, she sat in the car trying to pull her chin off her thighs.

This community was amazing and he had been modest when describing his paintings. That very evening she’d gone home, turned on her computer and did a search on a Luc Sanders. And then she had to again work at lifting her chin from her thighs. Words like ‘highly-acclaimed’ and ‘mastered’ were with every article he had been mentioned in. It’d been weird. The articles about him described a man that should be arrogant and nothing like the soft and quite man she’d come to know.

She parked in his drive and glanced at the overnight bag she’d packed on a whim. It was Valentine’s. She’d tossed in chocolates and a little pink number. And Leslie was right, Becca wasn’t dead. She was pregnant. And soon she’d be really pregnant and things like a hot weekend over Valentines would be far and few. There was nothing wrong with wanting to make a night special with a man her heart was tripping all over.

She grabbed her bag and shut down that little voice trying to make reason. She knew what it had to say about becoming deeper involved with Luc. She’d certainly heard it cautioning her enough over the years, but this time Becca was turning it off. Dating did not equal marrying and disappointment. Certainly not in this case.

She opened her car door, but her ringing cell phone stopped her. She fumbled through her purse for it and a breath left her. “Hey, Muriel.”

“Listen, Becca, I don’t have long. Jack is taking me to the nicest restaurant here for Valentine’s and I’m trying to get ready. Anyway, he said you’re probably looking Lincoln Sanders. He said people call him LJ. Does that sound familiar?”

“It does. Thank you.” And that name did seem a little familiar and she didn’t think it was because of studying about good ‘Ol Abe in school.

“I can get you a number, but it’ll be tomorrow.” She laughed. “This house is just huge and boxes are stored all over. I don’t know where our address book is, but I’ll see if I can take time tomorrow to find it.”

“That’d be great. I’ll let you go. I know you want to look fabulous for tonight and don’t need to waste time talking to me.”

Muriel hurried off the phone after that and Becca got out of her car. Half way up the walk, Luc opened the front door and her heart did that fluttering thing she really liked. It was a never fail thing so far. But goodness, any female’s heart would beat breathlessly at seeing this man standing there in a white t-shirt and jeans that were streaked with a little paint. He wore no shoes, no socks, no anything but jeans, t-shirt and paint. “Supper’s going to be a little late. Sorry, I lost track of time and didn’t realize it until I heard you drive up.”

He was adorable and she stepped in the entryway and accepted his quick kiss. “No problem. Point me to the kitchen and I’ll see what I can do.”

She kicked off her sandals and sat her bag to the floor at the door. He glanced at it, but didn’t ask. She followed him down a narrow wall with a light greenish paint. Artful looking metal things hung on the walls. No paintings. “Are any of these yours?”

He shook his head. “Friend of mine did them. Never cared for sculpting.”

She studied them for as long as she could manage while keeping pace. Simple, yet

refined. She stepped in a kitchen decorated in soft browns with more sculpted, metal looking things on the wall. It all had a very decorated look. It was nice and pretty, but if he hadn't said the things on the wall were by a friend, she would have thought none of it was personal.

"I need to run and take a shower real quick to get the paint smell off. I'll start the steaks after I get out."

"Go right ahead. I'll work on potatoes and whatever else I can find." She flashed him a smile and flicked on the water to wash her hands. He stepped up behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist. She leaned against him, smiling in his arms. "Happy Valentine's."

"I really am sorry. I was working on this detail, saw I had an hour left and next I know, you were here."

She turned in his arms and clasped her hands around his neck. "It's really not a big deal. Run and take your shower. When you get back, all you'll have to do is cook those steaks."

"Happy Valentine's." He pressed a kiss on her mouth that left her toes curling like Cupid just smacked her around with every arrow in his quiver. Luc stepped back, holding her hand until he was too far away and released her. "I'll make it up to you."

She grasped for air and balance. "I promise I'll let you."

She sighed after he walked out and popped potatoes in the microwave. She would let him make it up. And then she'd dig in her bag later and do a little Happy Valentine'ing herself until he was the one breathless with wobbly legs and thoughts.

She found some frozen vegetables and readied water and turned back to the pantry for dessert. Not much. Packaged cookies and that was it. He did have a few apples though. She grabbed them and chopped them up in no time. She pulled out flour, butter and salt and mixed up a crust real quick. She flattened the crust in the bottom of a pie pan and Luc came back in the kitchen.

"What are you doing?"

“Apple pie. Grab the brown sugar, will you?” He did and she tossed the wet ingredients together, dumped it all in the crust, covered and popped it in the oven. She dusted her hands and turned to find him staring at her. Heat touched her cheeks. She swiped her hand down the front of her to knock away a few streaks of flour. “What?”

“It’s just, I’ve never seen anyone do that before.”

“Do what?”

“Just mix up pie like that.”

She shook her head and wiped off the counter because she needed to focus on something else other than him looking so pleased. They’d never been alone like this and after all the time together, this intimate space was sparking. “It doesn’t take anything to throw them together. Hardest part is chopping the apple.”

His hand covers hers and stopped her cleaning. “But it was...domestic.”

His voice was gruffy and she chuckled. “Domestic turns you on?”

“It would seem so ‘cause that was the hottest damn thing I’ve seen in a long time.” His body pressed against her back. “Or it could be these jeans you’re wearing.”

She raked the left behind flour off into the sink and wiggled her hips against him. Her favorite pair of jeans. And they’d still fit. Not as well as her bottom fit against his lap, but then she didn’t imagine anything fitting better than that. “Just wait until you see me wash dishes later.”

He spun her and kissed her. She dropped the rag and wound her arms round his neck for exactly what she wanted. His kisses, his heat. This whole crazy romance that blindsided her and sent her heart tumbling and turning. For this night, this special, one-of-a-kind Valentine’s night, she was going to turn off that cautionary voice about dating and life. She was going to trip and flutter right alongside her heart and fall into his arms.

He smiled against her lips. “I think someone licked the apple bowl and didn’t share.”

“Wasn’t enough left to share. Only two or three spoonfuls of the juice.” She slipped her fingers through his hair. The soft strands were just long enough for her to grip them if she wanted. And she just might.

“I think that would have been plenty.”

“No. Not even with the bite or four of apple pieces.” She smiled up at him and batted her eyes. “I promise.”

He lifted her, setting her on the counter. His hands eased down her thighs. The warmth of his touch went right up the center of her. He parted her legs and stepped between them. “How long will that cook before you’ll need to pull it out of the oven?”

“Forty or so minutes.” She grinned and wrapped her legs around him, hooking her ankles at his back and held him. “We have time.”

A brow rose and his mouth covered hers. He lifted her, his hands cupped her backside and he turned, walking with her. She didn’t let his lips away from her, afraid if it stopped, she’d stop and she most certainly didn’t want to stop.

Something sharp and hard rammed the length of her back.

She started. Luc’s mouth fell open. Panic shifted his eyes.

She pressed her forehead to his. “Watch out for the doorframes.”

His cheeks colored scarlet and she felt the heat off them. “I am so sorry. Are you okay?”

“I’ll survive.”

His hands loosened around her. “Sorry, I know that killed the mood.”

She slanted her mouth over his. There was no mood lost, only more desire. How was it that his shy nature, his uncertainty and second guessing, made her heart do the pitter-patter shimmy? One look by him and her knees were shaking and her libido stretching for a round of the hanky-panky ho-down.

“Guess not.” He started walking again.

She chuckled and ran a finger down his nose. “You’re so adorable, you know that?”

He made a face.

“You are. It’s why I stayed at dinner the night we met. You just knew I was fixing to leave you there at that table.”

He paused at the base of the stairs and then walked onward. “I thought you were going to throw your drink at me and I’d have to walk out wet.”

“Nah,” She leaned forward and kissed his neck. “I was afraid if I left, you would have jumped off the balcony.”

“It crossed my mind a time or two.”

“See?” She kissed cheek and flicked her tongue over the lobe of his ear. He shuddered. “Adorable. It’s hot.”

“You think shy and awkward is hot? Where have you been all my life?”

“I think it’s hot that you own up to it and don’t hide from it.” She leaned back and stripped her shirt over her head. “It turns me on that you carried me out of the kitchen and paused at the stairs, unsure whether or not you should take me up there.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and rested on his shoulders. “And it just melts me that you’ve brought me to the living room, but you’re not sure what to do with me now that you’ve gotten me here. Sit down, Luc.”

He sat. She straddled his thighs and worked on the row of buttons down the front of his shirt. His hands cupped her waist. His thumbs stroked her stomach, ribs and higher, exploring and feeling her. “I know what to do with you.”

She turned the edges of his open shirt over his shoulders and pressed a kiss to the base of his neck. “I’m all yours.”

And he took her. He possessed. He claimed her every way possible as he stood her off him and unfastened the snap of her jeans and lowered the metal zipper by each individual agonizing inch. Controlled motions pushed the denim down. Careful hands lifted her feet off the

floor one at a time to free her from the jeans. He stood, leaving a kiss at her knee, at her thigh, at her belly, leaving her body to flutter under his touch.

He kissed at her shoulder, nudging her bra straps aside with his lips until they fell and dangled at her arms. His hands covered her naked shoulders, his fingertips grazed the barest touch along her skin, over the bones of her collar and left a whisper of chills across her skin with the back of his hand over her breast.

Her breath trapped in her throat as he bent and kissed her flaming skin over her pounding heart. He freed the clasp of her bra and it fell to floor. He cupped her breasts, his thumb teased her nipples and she was lost. Gone under his exploring hands that seemed to be memorizing the curves of her body.

She worked his shirt down his trim arms and slid the sleeves from him. She stripped his under shirt off and he brought her against him. His roughened chest against her sensitive nipples. His heat against hers. This was more, so much more than she ever imaged or thought. Each touch caressed her skin and awakened her.

She opened the fly of his jeans. The hardened length of his erection was against her knuckles as she pushed the dark denim down. He kicked them off and lifted her, swinging her up in his arms and then turning to lay her across the couch.

He stared down at her. Started at her head and searched her to her feet. "You're beautiful."

Warmth filled her and she reached for him. He didn't come. He kneeled at the couch and dipped his fingers in her panties. He pulled them down, slipped them over her thighs and off her feet.

He hooked a hand under her knee and lifted it to his mouth. He kissed there. And the inside turn of her leg. And higher. He kissed his way forward, kissed her into oblivion of nothing but him and all he made her feel. And then he tasted her. He licked and sucked. His fingers

teased and she was at his mercy until her body could take no more and she fell apart. His every touch, every word. Everything that he made her feel rolled through her at once.

She reached for him and this time he came into her arms. His boxers were gone, he'd already covered himself and she was ready for him. She wrapped her arms around him and never wanted to let him go, even though she knew she would. And soon. His hungry eyes stared down. His body shook over hers. She slipped her hands in his hair and pulled him to her, to her mouth, to her body.

His length filled her. His careful touch with his uncertainty as he treated her with perfection filled her heart as he made love to her. She shattered apart in his embrace and held him close as he groaned and called her name on a whispered breath.

She hugged his shoulders, keeping her head in the crook of his neck and took it all in, trying to remember it all before it was gone and over.

He crossed his arms under her back, holding her, keeping her there. He was sweet and caring and she got it. She finally got the point of dating even if it wouldn't last. She swallowed down the emotions building up her throat. And she also got why she'd never risked this before and why she'd never risk it again.

She bit her lip, tasting blood in an effort to contain that warning voice she had listened to her whole life.

“Is something wrong?” His knuckles stroked her cheek.

She searched his eyes. His sweet unknowing eyes. “The pie.”

His brow rose and he pushed off the couch, slowly pulling himself from her and taking away his deepest touch. She turned away and sat up, slipping on her clothes as quick as she could manage.

“Are you sure you're all right?”

She nodded and walked out to check to the pie. To figure out how to make an end to this

affair that wouldn't involved tragedy.

She could hear rustling from behind her and she continued on to the kitchen. Oh, God. What had she done? How could she have done it? He was going to hate her. He'd been perfect from their first date. He'd been seeing her to find a happily ever after and she'd been letting him when she knew that would never happen.

She pulled open the oven door, removed the pie and cut off the oven. He stared at her, but she couldn't keep staring at him. She turned away, sat in a kitchen chair and dropped her head to the table.

He pulled the opposite chair out. The wooden legs scrapped over his tile floor. "Did I do something wrong?"

She shook her head. "No, you were perfect."

"Then what's going on?"

She lifted her head. He was hard to see through her watery eyes. "I am so, so sorry, Luc."

His brow knitted. "For what? What's the matter?"

She wouldn't cry, she would not cry. She blinked, trying to pull it all back in, but a single tear leaked and dripped over her cheek. A second followed over the other cheek. "I'm pregnant."

Eight

Luc's breath left him. "You're what?"

She glanced down. Her fingers steepled and covered her nose and mouth. "I am so sorry. What I did, that I let you...." Her fingers shook.

He fisted his hands and forced his mouth to work. "How long."

"About ten weeks."

Ten fucking weeks. Two and a half damn months. "Whose is it."

She bit her lip, more water filled her eyes, but they weren't pulling any sympathy out of him. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, *you don't know*."

"I mean I don't know," she cried out, her arms laid across the table, but fingers curled in as though she wanted to grip something. "I was at my friend's wedding and I was drunk. I don't know who. I remember seeing him a little during the wedding. I was the maid of honor, so I wasn't paying him that much attention. From what's been filled in for me by my friends is that we drank some together and then we left together. All I remember is drinking with my friends at the bar and waking up in a hotel room with a blinding headache and a pair of man's boxer shorts on the floor."

"And nothing else?"

“There’s a hazy memory or two in between. Nothing solid.”

She drinks heavy? She parties? She...she has one night stands? “The reason you called me in the first place?”

“I was trying to find the father. I never expected someone to answer my call who wasn’t him. Muriel, my friend who got married, is in the middle of moving. I didn’t want to wait several weeks until she had time to flip through her guest book, so I went through the phone book. The name ‘L. Sanders’ was in the underwear band. When no one but you answered my phone call, I waited and called Muriel who asked her husband. When I was sitting in your driveway earlier, she called and said his name is Lincoln Sanders....”

He dropped his head in hands. She continued talking about a woman named Muriel and moving, but he wasn’t hearing half of it because Lincoln Sanders was his older brother.

Lincoln John Sanders. Johnny to him, LJ to others.

“I am so sorry, Luc. You have no idea. I shouldn’t have stayed that night after you told me the truth, but I didn’t want to leave. I’d been so relieved because I could put off telling the father a little longer and like I said earlier, I thought you were adorable.”

He stood from the table, she still talked, her words going much faster than he could take in. Faster than he wanted to try and take in. He lifted the phone.

“I don’t know what I thought might happen, I knew we wouldn’t last, but I didn’t want to give you up. Everything was coming at me so fast and you were there and you were wonderful and charming and perfect and for just those couple hours with you everything was different and so I let it go on. I let you kiss me. I answered that phone when you called when I knew I shouldn’t have. I thought about you the next day and the day after that. I smiled and ran to the phone when it rang, hoping it would be you and the more we were together, the harder it was getting to find a way to tell you about the baby.”

He turned on the phone and she finally stopped. He didn’t look, but dialed the numbers.

Johnny answered on the second ring. Luc didn't give him time for anything else. "Get over here now."

He hung up and turned back to her. Her red eyes glanced to the phone now sitting on the counter and up to his. He didn't know what to say to her. He rubbed his head, trying to think back through their times together to see if he missed something, but didn't. Just the occasional worry that things were happening too fast. That he was feeling things for her too fast, but he shrugged them off. He'd had such a strong connection to her, but she wasn't the woman he at all thought she was.

She blinked at him a couple times and hung her head. "I let tonight happen and that's unforgivable. I should have stopped it, I should have stopped it long ago, but I just didn't want to give you up."

He'd slept with her. He'd been falling for. Had fallen for her. This evening he'd planned to take her upstairs and he was going to paint her. His first live subject in a long time and the only person aside from Johnny who would have seen where he paints. The only other person he would have brought into that life.

She sobbed softly. "I knew it was going to be perfect. I knew you would be wonderful and I took that moment and I regret it more than anything I've ever done and I really wish you would just say something."

He pushed off the counter and walked away from her. "I don't have anything I want to say to you but get out."

She nodded and stood. "I understand."

He turned and squeezed the edge of the counter. "But I can't tell you that yet. Sit down and wait."

He didn't know why she did it, but she eased in the chair. And she waited. And he waited, with his back to her. And he said nothing, because he didn't know what to tell her. He

didn't know what to tell himself because he couldn't think beyond the double-edge sword driving through him in all directions.

Car lights flashed through his windows and the engine of his brother's car cut off in the drive. He straightened as his front door was opened.

"Luc?" Johnny called out.

"In the kitchen."

Luc turned and faced Becca. Her eyes, still damp, shifted from him to the entryway.

Johnny stepped in the room. "What the hell was that damn phone call about?"

Luc ignored his brother and watched Becca's eyes widen as she looked between them both. Johnny followed his gaze and Luc could feel the man's surprise.

Luc wouldn't wait longer. "Becca, my older brother, Lincoln Sanders, who wrote L. Sanders in his boxers because he's a smart ass. But I believe the two of you have already met."

She leapt from the table to trash can and vomited.

He walked out.

Nine

Becca leaned over the trash can, waiting for more, but nothing else was coming.

“Luc?” Lincoln, Johnny—hell, she didn’t know what she’d called him, if she’d called him anything—yelled after his brother, but Luc wasn’t coming back. Johnny walked to her and handed her a rag. “Becca. What a surprise.”

She wiped her mouth and straightened. He had no idea. Oh, God, she was going to be sick again. She turned to the trash can, ready for it, but nothing else was coming.

“I think you better sit down.” Johnny tugged at her arm and she followed. After she sat, he placed a coke in front of her. “I didn’t know you knew Luc.”

She drank half the can and didn’t wait. Last time she waited, she ended up in a mess. She looked up and sat the drink down. “I’m pregnant. Yes, it’s yours. I tried finding you. I found your brother instead by mistake. Tonight we..., and I didn’t tell him about the baby until afterward.”

Johnny dropped in the chair across from her. “You’re pregnant?”

She nodded. “I’m not asking for anything from you. I’m not trying to suck money out of you. I’m just letting you know. So if you wanted to be a part of the baby’s life.”

He leaned on the table and met her gaze. “You’re pregnant. And you’re sure it’s mine?”

“Positive.”

“Because it looks like you just slept with my brother right after me, so are you sure?”

She winced at the remark, but she wouldn't back down at the truth. “It's been over two months since I was with you. I haven't been with anyone else until Luc. Two men separated by months doesn't make me a whore.” She stood and leaned over the table. “It'd been three years since I'd been with anyone before I had too much to drink and was with you.”

There was paper and pens by the phone. She jotted down her number and slapped it on the table in front of him. “If you want to be a part of the baby's life, there's my number.”

He put his hand over the sheet of paper. “I'll help.”

She shook her head. “I don't want your help, I want you to be a dad. A good dad. A play catch after you get off work and help with homework kind of dad. Otherwise, stay away from us.”

A dad. Holy hell mother fucker, he was going to be a dad. The front door opened and closed as Becca left. He sat up, realization of everything slammed down on him. “Shit.”

He pushed up from the table and went to find his brother. He checked the living room first, but found it empty. He trotted up the stairs to the other likely place. He opened the door and there his brother sat.

Hunched over a canvas, hard at work. A light shown over his brother's shoulder, shining over whatever painting he currently worked on. Paintbrush in hand, Luc never looked up. “She leave?”

“Yes.”

“She tell you?”

“Yes?”

“And?”

“And I'm going to be a dad. What about you?”

“I'm going to be an uncle, I guess.”

“That wasn’t what I was talking about.”

Luc turned. The wispy sound of his brush tapping in paint sounded through the quiet room. “I know, but there’s nothing else to say.”

“I’m sorry.”

At that, Luc glanced up. “What are you sorry about? You didn’t know.”

Johnny shrugged. “I don’t know, it just seemed the only thing to say. Are you going to keep seeing her?”

“You mean seeing her beyond the mother of my nephew or niece? No.”

“Why not?”

“She’s not who I thought she was. This all happened so fast, we did. I should have slowed things down and I would have seen, but I didn’t want to see beyond what she made me feel. On top of that, she’s pregnant with your baby.”

Johnny shoved his hands in his pockets. “There wasn’t anything there. I’d seen her at the wedding. I thought she was pretty.”

“I don’t want to hear this.” Luc shook his head

“I’m just saying, it was a onetime thing. She was drunk, really drunk. I knew she probably didn’t know exactly what she was doing.”

“You fucked her anyway.” An edge of anger clipped his brother’s words in a way Johnny had never heard before.

He could do nothing but look away. “I wasn’t exactly sober myself. She passed out shortly after and then I guess I did too because I woke early the next morning and got out of there. Never thought I’d see her again.”

Luc continued to paint. “You were wrong.”

“What I’m getting at is, I’m okay with it if you kept seeing her.”

“I’m not.”

And there was no room left for argument. Luc hunched back over his painting. Johnny turned in the room to leave, but stopped at seeing some papers on the wall. Luc wasn't looking and Johnny couldn't resist. He leaned over and sneaked a peek at the sketches. He was expecting something for Gloria, Luc's next painting, but he was wrong. So very wrong. He moved closer and studied the quick and sure strokes of different parts of a woman.

Lips were in one picture. A shoulder in another. The curve of a hip in another and the slope of a jaw bone plus dozens of others. Feet. Eyes. Ears, All of them a separate picture, all of them together made something whole. But even more than the pictures themselves, it was the skill of the drawing.

Johnny had seen Luc's sketches over the years. Had been a subject in a number of them. It had freaked him out as a kid to find himself drawn in his brother's notebooks, but he learned that's how his brother worked. When something had Luc's attention, that attention carried over to his art. But Johnny hadn't seen sketches like these from Luc in...ever. "Luc, these are amazing."

"They're not right."

"Not right, hell. They're fucking beautiful." He tapped at the one of the neckline, jaw, and smile. There was something unique in that grin. "I know several people who'd pay out their ass for this sketch with this secret smile to hang on their wall. Never mind painting it."

"Something isn't right with it. You can't sell it."

"What's wrong with it? It looks like a beautiful woman. Who did you find to model for you?" He leaned toward another. This one was a back view of the woman in heels. Her ankles were crossed.

Luc glanced up, but dropped his gaze back to the canvas before him. "I didn't. That's why something isn't right. I didn't get the chance to sketch the subject live. All those sketches are from memory and something isn't quite right."

“These strokes are amazing. I’m only seeing a few signs of where you erased.” He fingered a line creating a lean thigh that connected to a knee and into a calf. “Well get this woman in here and let’s paint her. This is just what your career needs. This fresh new direction.”

“Can’t. The subject just left and she’s not coming back.”

“*Becca?* These are of *Becca?*” He stepped back and tried to see the whole woman.

“I told you something wasn’t right with them. If it was, you would have recognized her.”

“I couldn’t tell it was her because of how you have these taped on the wall. An eye where a foot should be. A knee instead of a nose. Hand for an ear. Is this how you’re going to compose the whole painting?”

“I’m not composing a painting. I was sketching her and that was it.”

Johnny pointed at them. “You need to paint these. All of them.”

“No.”

“But—“

“I said no, Johnny. I’m not painting her. I can’t paint her without her here and she’s not coming back.”

“Because you won’t let her or you don’t think she’ll come back?”

The scratching of Luc’s brushstrokes halted and then resumed. And that was the only answer he received.

Johnny turned and headed for the door.

“I’ll have you a new James painting by the end of the week. Complete with your naked woman in it. I’ll do a new one with a woman instead of the hammock. I’ll work through the break I normally take for myself between paintings and stay on schedule.”

Johnny swallowed and resisted banging his head on the wall. Damn it. For three solid weeks Johnny had fought for a woman in the painting.

Luc had really like this girl.

And Johnny was going to fix it. He studied the sketching longer and discreetly snapped off a few shots with his camera phone. The photographic images were going to be shit compared to the originals. “Can I take these?”

Luc stopped. His paintbrush hovered in the air. “Take what?”

“The sketches of Becca.”

“No.”

And that was a very firm no. Johnny nodded and slipped out. He would fix this.

Ten

“Thanks for letting me come, Becca.” Johnny took a deep breath and released it with a shake of his head. “Hearing the heartbeat was amazing.”

“I can hardly wait for the ultrasound.” Becca curled a hand around the front of her pudgy stomach. Not big enough to let everyone know she was pregnant, but enough people were asking. And she loved it. Some of her clients were excited and offering to throw showers. Others, well, Becca was blowing off the looks of disappointment and giving directions to Jamie Walters’s shop down the street for a place to get a haircut if they had a problem. That had taken care of the looks by most, others...they had pink or blue hair. Becca really didn’t care. There was no more sickness, just happy pregnant days.

The baby finally gave her something to look forward to in the future. Those all too short weeks with Luc gave her a past that she enjoyed thinking about—all but that last night on Valentine’s Day anyway. She hadn’t seen him since. Hadn’t heard from him. Every time the phone rang, her heart did that flutter thing only to be disappointed. Amazing that he could still do that to her when he wouldn’t talk to her and wasn’t a part of her life anymore.

“Becca?” Leslie called out.

Becca blinked out of her dreaming and smiled at her friend. “What?”

“I was asking about lunch.”

“I’ll eat anything.”

Johnny cleared his throat. “If you have a second, I’d like to show you something. It’s in my truck.”

Becca shrugged. “Sure.”

She followed him to his four-door, four wheel drive truck. He opened the backdoor and pulled out a handful of papers. “I thought you should see these.”

She turned them around and leaned over them. They were pictures of sketches.

“The quality isn’t good. Sorry, best I could do was use my camera phone.”

“What are they?” She turned to another and passed one to Leslie who’d been hovering over her shoulder.

“They’re of you.”

The pictures dropped from her hands. The three of them bent and Becca snatched at most of them before Johnny or Leslie could get them. “Why?”

He shrugged and stood, handing over the few he’d managed to get before she did. “Luc sketched them when you were together.”

“Why are you showing me these?” She couldn’t take her eyes off them. He’d sketched her? This well-renowned artist, highly sought after artist had sketched her. Her heart broke all over again.

“Because they’re still taped to his wall in his studio.”

“So?” So that meant what? Her heart waited with duct tape to see if should be putting itself back together or not.

He shook his head. “You don’t understand. It was years before I understood it.” He pointed at the pictures. “This is how Luc tells what he’s thinking. When I was a teenager, I found a book of sketches he’d made of me. On the baseball field. Others with my car. It freaked me out then, but I realized later I’d had his attention. He’s five years younger than me. As he got older,

he took up baseball.”

She smiled and touched the glossy prints, wishing they were the originals. “You were his older brother, he idolized you.”

“Yeah. When I got it, I was humbled by it. Luc doesn’t sketch just anyone and when he does, it’s always of the quality that I was sketched. But those”—he tapped the pictures—“he never drew me like that. I’ve never seen him drawn *anything* like that.”

“What’s different about them?” She turned to another. Leslie took more out of her hands and studied them, too.

“Everything. I’ve been looking at Luc’s art since he first finger-painted. I watched him grow and learn. I’ve sold every painting for him. I know his art, but this is bolder. With you, his lines are sharp. On the originals, the marks he made were sure and near perfect on the first pass. Damnest thing of all, there’s a quickness to them. Just looking at them, you can tell his heart was racing when he drew most of them. I want to sell them. I know several buyers that will snatch up those sketches in a heartbeat—especially this one beauty with your smile—but Luc won’t let them go. He says they’re not right.”

Her heart strapped on the tape and felt whole for the first time in a while. Luc didn’t want to get rid of the pictures of her. That had to mean something. Her heart eased out on the ledge and waited to see if it should flutter or not. Her lungs too, waiting to see if they should breath. “What’s wrong with them?”

Johnny shrugged. “I don’t know. He wanted you to pose for him, but didn’t get the chance. He says there’s a detail missing and he refuses to paint them wrong.”

“But these look perfect,” Leslie said.

“Exactly.” Johnny glanced to Leslie and back to Becca. “Don’t you see, it’s not the sketches that are missing something, he’s missing *you*.”

Becca swallowed. That flutter—yeah, it happened. She was lucky the darn thing didn’t

life her right off the pavement with the way it was taking off in her chest. She handed the pictures back because it couldn't possibly be true, no matter how much she wanted to believe it.

"He doesn't want me."

"He does," Johnny insisted.

She shook her head. "He wouldn't even talk to me that night."

"That's Luc for you. Girls have always wanted him, but he's too shy to notice. Hell, I'm surprised he even called you that first night, but give the man some credit. You probably shocked the shit out of him. You dropped the baby on him and then he discovered it was mine. What did you expect him to say?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what I was expecting."

"Bullshit," Leslie called her out. "Bull. Shit. You know what you were expecting him to say and do. Go on and admit it or do you want me to do it for you? I certainly heard you say it enough."

Becca held out her hands. "You think I like this? You think I like not having him?"

"You may not like it, but you're okay with it." Leslie crossed her arms over her chest.

"I am not."

"Then go see him."

Becca eyes were narrowing so much, she was squinting to see. "He won't see me."

"Go find out. You said you're not okay with not having him, well, then go try to get him back. If you go through life without him, it'll be your fault because you wouldn't try."

"Fine, I'll call."

"Why call?" Johnny flipped his keys in his hand. "That'll be weird. He's at home, go there. Come on. Now. Last I heard, he was painting. I'll go and get you inside. The rest will be up to you."

"Come on." Leslie grabbed her by the hand and tugged her toward the car. "I'm driving."

Just do it. You don't want to be wondering for the rest of your life."

Becca jerked open her car door and dropped in her seat. "I won't always be wondering. I know he doesn't want to see me."

"Why don't you try giving him a chance to make up his own mind this time?"

"He did and he made it clear he wasn't interested."

"You made it for him long before you went on your second date."

She sighed and fastened her seatbelt. "Fine, I'll go see him. But when he kicks me out, you're the one responsible for finding me healthy junk food to make me feel better."

Leslie grinned and backed out of the lot. "Deal. And honey? Put a little more faith in him, okay?"

"Yeah, I know. Not every guy is like the many ones mom married and I shouldn't judge them all the same. Did I leave anything out?"

"Just your belief in it, but we're getting there."

Becca sat back. She did believe it. She knew not all men were the same and Luc was nothing like the ones her mom married. Nothing. He was sweet and kind. Loving. Didn't forget her existence. He was shy and adorably insecure, but under all that he was passionate. And he'd been so disappointed. So let down that night at his kitchen table. It wasn't that she didn't believe in him. She knew he'd stopped believing in her.

Leslie stopped in the driveway behind Johnny's truck. "You ready?"

"Ready to get my heart ripped out of my chest and stomped on again." She stepped out of the car and followed Johnny up the walk. She walked in the house that had filled her dreams and thoughts. The faint scent of paint and Luc's masculine smell hit her hard in the gut. She turned away from the right...from the living room where she'd made the mistake that caused all this. "Where is he?"

Johnny gestured at the stairs and shut the front door behind Leslie. "Upstairs in his

studio. Go on up.”

She shrugged, put a hand on the dark wooden banister and started the climb. At the top, Johnny gestured to a white door straight ahead. She gripped the knob and pressed out a breath. Her heart was back on the ledge, but not the fluttering one. This was a suicide jump.

She turned the knob and stepped in.

Luc glanced up. A paintbrush fell from his fingers. He hadn't changed. He looked a little tired, but still the same soft eyes. Hair just long enough to get her fingers in. Uncertain shaky movements as he wiped his hands on a rag. And same as when she saw him last, he said not a word. This time, he could at least look at her.

She ventured deeper in the room. “I know you probably don't want to see me.”

His mouth opened, but nothing came out.

She glanced around the room. The sketches were there, just as Johnny said. She faced back to Luc.

Eleven

Luc stared at her and blinked, trying to figure if she'd really appeared or if he'd imagined her again. But she spoke. And he never imagined her speaking, because that would mean he would have to speak back and he didn't know what to say in return. So he never imagined her speaking.

"I'll just go then." She turned away.

"Wait." He managed to force the word.

She glanced back, her mouth opened, but before anything else came out, a blonde woman he didn't know stepped in the room, grabbed the doorknob and jerked the door shut, leaving only him and Becca in the room.

Becca ran to the door and tugged it open just as the backside of a piece of furniture was slid in front of the open doorway. He couldn't be certain, but he was pretty sure that was his dresser from the spare room. Too wide for him to push it forward without risking sending it down the stairs. That was, if he wanted to move it and let Becca out. And he was pretty sure that wasn't what he wanted.

"Becca, I'm so sorry, but we're doing this for you," the woman's voice pleaded from the other side.

"Leslie!"

“Just work it out. I’m sorry. Love you babe, but I did this for you.”

Becca flung the door shut. She turned and started back a step.

“Sorry.” He took his own step back, too. Close, that had been too close. Close enough to smell the honey scent of her hair and the see the fine softness of her skin.

She nodded and moved around the room. “No windows.”

“For privacy. And to block the light.”

“No escape either.” She hugged her stomach.

“Is that what you want?”

Instead of answering, she faced the wall of sketches of her. “Johnny wanted me to see these. Do you mind if I look?”

“I’m not ashamed of my work.” But he was afraid. Terrified of what she’d think. Some would consider it creepy. She studied them, remaining silent and he couldn’t stand it. He stepped forward. “Your face has nice proportions to it.”

She pressed her lips together and pointed at the one of her naked hip. The sketch included all the way to her little belly button, but the angle cut away from anything lower. “Looks like more than just my face has nice proportions to it.”

He pulled at his constricting collar.

“Are you sure you don’t mind me looking at these?”

“I’m worried what you’ll think about it. You interested me and I couldn’t help but draw you. I never had you pose for me, so something is off with the pictures.”

“Johnny said you thought so.”

She leaned in and studied his favorite. His own *Mona Lisa*. His *Becca* portrait of her hidden dimples. “Do you want me to pose so you can sketch my nice proportions?”

A smile tugged at his lips, but he stopped it. He didn’t know why she was here, but sketching would keep her longer. Maybe by the time he finished, he’d know what to say to her.

“If you have time.”

“Where do you want me?”

In my arms again. He pointed to the corner where a white sheet hung. He moved the pedestal of fruit he’d been painting as a still for a client to the side. It’d be hell to get it back again, but he’d start that painting over for this opportunity.

“You might want to sit down. This might take a bit.”

She sat on the floor. “Put me how you want me.”

Another loaded response. He cleared his throat and had her turn around so her back was to him. He gently pushed her shoulder down a bit and cupped her cheek, turning her so she faced over her shoulder. Her eyes lifted to his and he pulled his hand away.

“Look down, about four feet out.” He pulled the black clip from her hair. The strands tumbled down in his hands and he turned the edges so they flicked toward her shoulder.

“It probably needs to be brushed.”

“No. It looks fine like this.” He reached across his desk and grabbed a sketch book. He sat down in front of her and leaned against his desk. He started with the profile of her face.

“How’s the baby?”

“Doing well. We heard the heartbeat today.”

“Johnny said you invited him.”

“He was excited.”

“That was nice of you to let him come.”

Her shoulder lifted to shrug, and she dropped it quickly, as though remembering she was posing. He reached forward and adjusted her back into position.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Definitely okay. Adjusting meant he was able to touch her. He sat back and returned to the drawing.

“I’m sorry, Luc.”

“It’s really no trouble to adjust you back, Becca.”

“I meant about us. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the baby.”

“It’s not the baby.” He drew the line of her shoulder and up her neck. “It was you.”

She winced.

“I mean.” He bit his lip and silently cursed. “What I meant was, I never thought you would drink so much that you would have a one-night stand. That just really knocked me because when you left that message on my machine, I heard a timid voice and pictured a shy woman. That was why I called you back. That uncertainty in your words. God, I know what that’s like and I was drawn to it. I fell for that woman, but then you turned out not to be her.”

“But that is me. I didn’t get the chance to explain to you why I had drank so much that night.”

He glanced to her and returned to the arch of her brow. “We have time now.”

She was silent for a few moments and she finally pressed out a loud breath. “My momma’s been married six times. I was in every single one of her weddings. And every one she had to have this huge production. When I was little, I was a flower girl and as I got older, I graduated to bridesmaid and then maid of honor for the last three. She also had me plan every detail of those last three.”

“Why did you do it?”

“She’s my Mom. And I probably would have been all right with a movie and popcorn with Leslie, but my cousin’s wedding was four months after my mom’s last wedding. My cousin wanted me to help her with the thing because I had so much experience with all of mom’s. Those two back-to-back were exhausting. Mom and Muriel are exhausting by themselves, but toss in planning for them and it was more than I could take. I hate weddings to start with.”

Luc moved away from her shoulder and concentrated on her facial expression. He

sketched and drew lines hurriedly, capturing the sad expression marking her face.

She sighed. Heavy weight settled over her brows. “Both brides were coming to me about information on the others’ wedding. They both wanted to out-do the other. It was all I could do to make it through both of them. So yeah, after my cousin’s wedding, I went to the bar with friends. And I drank and drank and drank until I couldn’t remember one detail about either wedding.”

He hurried up to her eyes and added the lines and hit it with the eraser and then pencil again, manipulating the led until he mirrored the tears waiting to pour out. Then it happened, one tear streaked over her cheek and he followed it down on his sketch and snagged the droplet on paper just before it dripped from her jaw.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the baby? Why hide it?”

She swiped at her cheek. “I was afraid if you knew, that would be it and I didn’t want to lose you. I wanted every memory I could get before I told you the news and you ended things.”

He stopped sketching. “You thought I’d end things just because you’re pregnant?”

“I didn’t know, but knew I didn’t want to risk it.”

“Don’t get me wrong, the news of it shocked me, the fact that it’s my brothers rolled me over, but I would have over looked it. Only a self-centered asshole would leave a woman he was falling for just because he found out she was pregnant.” He added in her thick and silky hair and mimicked the curling across her back.

She straightened and faced him. Her shoulders dropped and mouth gapped.

He reached forward and pushed at her shoulder to turn her back, but she wasn’t moving. He pulled away, but she grabbed his hand and held it. “I should have believed in you. I should have realized that you were different. I should have listened to that fluttering in my chest.”

“Fluttering?”

She straightened. “But I’m listening to it now. And I’m not afraid, because I believe in

you. I believe in myself. And I believe that I'm falling in love with you Luc Sanders and I want to try again with you. I want to honestly try without having a nag in my head saying it's only temporary because I don't want it to be. Say you want me. Say you forgive me."

"You weren't the only one not wanting to believe. You came over me so fast, were under my skin that first night and it unnerved me. When the truth came out, it was my escape from something that had gotten serious fast. But when you were gone, I knew the mistake I'd made. I didn't know what to say to you to fix it." She leaned toward him, but he turned his sketch around and stopped her. "I forgive you, Becca. But do you forgive yourself?"

Her shaking fingers took the book and she stared down. She covered her trembling lips with her hand. He scouted forward and wrapped his arms around her. She came against him and the book dropped. Her hands gripped at him. Her fingers wrapped his forearm and held him to her.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"It's okay." He ran his hand up down her back and her sobbing slowed.

After a few moments, she lifted the book and touched the quick sketch. "Johnny was wrong. The others are unfinished."

"So is that one."

"But there's so much more...intensity in this one."

He stretched and felt over his desk until finding the big eraser. He handed it to her.

"Erase it."

"But it's wonderful."

"You're sad in it. I don't like you sad. If you let me, I want to sketch all those on the wall over again. I want you to pose for me so I can paint you, too. I want to wake up early in the morning and draw you while you're still asleep in my bed." He turned over her hand and dropped the eraser in her palm. "Get rid of it and let's move on."

Her shaking hand lowered to the paper. She started at the edge and took off a stray line, then a little more. He shifted around so that he sat behind her. He covered her hand with his, tightened his grip and erased a quarter of the picture in vigorous strokes. After that, she leaned over the picture, her elbow out and she took the care of the rest until there was nothing left but eraser residue and a gray and now thinner sheet of paper.

She straightened, looked over her shoulder and smiled at him. “Do we need to make an early night of it so you’ll be fresh in the morning?”

Epilogue

Valentine's Day, Next Year

“Did you pick a favorite yet?”

Becca wrapped her arm around Luc's and slide her hand in his. “They're all so wonderful.”

“It was the subject.” He tipped her chin up and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips.

“No way. You could make road-kill beautiful. Which is your favorite?”

“*Becca*, at home on my wall.”

Becca, also known as his private *Mona Lisa*, but only four people knew that. And only the two of them knew he'd painted over her dimples for their own little secret. She nudged his side. “I meant of these here.”

“Um...” He glanced around his brother's gallery. Opening night, premiering Luc's new direction in his painting and the place was packed. “There.”

He kissed her knuckles and pulled her across the room to the back wall and pointed to one of her hands. “That's my second favorite.”

She leaned in. “I don't remember this one.”

“I have to keep some secrets from you.”

It was a painting of her hand, clasped in his. “Luc, I love it. I can't believe you slipped

this one by me. It's sweet."

"Is that all it is?" He lifted her hand and held it alongside the large canvas painting. "I think there's more."

She glanced at her hand and then to the painting and her jaw dropped. Luc lowered beside her, still holding her hand, only he was slipping something on her shaking finger. She looked at the square cut ring now on her finger and back to the one painted in the picture. It was the same.

"Becca Brighton, will you marry me?"

"I..." Marriage. For life. A commitment. Marriage. *Wedding*.

"If you agree, we can go to the court house first thing Monday morning if that's what you want."

Her heart slowed from panic-attack into that fluttering she really liked. She threw her arms around him. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He kissed her and leaned back. "Well?"

She nodded, letting the tears fall. "Yes. Monday morning at the Court House, yes."

Clapping erupted around them and Becca blushed, burying her head on Luc's shoulder.

He wrapped his arms around her. "Let's get out of here."

"But this is your big night."

"And I want to spend it just with you."

"I'll have to ask Johnny if he can take Emma."

He grinned. "Already taken care of. Leslie's keeping her until Johnny closes up here."

She looked to the painting and heat drained from her face. "You're going to sell the painting you used to propose to me with?"

"No," he chuckled. "It's not for sale. I painted it for you and it's on public display for one special night only."

“This is the best Valentine’s ever.”

“A lot better than last year.”

Way better than last year’s. “You’ll never be able to top it.”

“Since we’ve had the worst and now the best, aren’t we due for mediocre without all the big stuff?” He curled her hand in his and led her to the front.

“You know me so well and I love you for it. From now on, I’ll buy the chocolate.”

“I’ll get the chocolate. You get the sexy lingerie.”

“Oh...keep making these kinds of plans and we might not make it to the car.”

“I love you. Happy Valentine’s Day.”

She leaned up and kissed him at the front door of the gallery. “Happy Valentine’s.”

The End

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