

## CHAPTER TWO

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**R**elieved when Jesse finally ended the extra smooch, Tavo and everyone else looked at the preacher. Pastor Mike's smile burst into a grin. "And now, ladies and gentlemen—"

Tavo had noticed Vi sway slightly during the ceremony. Probably wasn't feeling too good, hot as it was. He tugged at the stiff tux collar. That little bump of hers was cute, not that he knew much about pregnant women. Beside him, Rory jerked to attention, hyper-focused on Vi. Yeah, his wife didn't look so great. And now she was floating downward into a puddle of blue dress. Rory dashed around the preacher, but it was the tall dark gal who caught her under the arms and kept her from face-planting on the rustic floor.

Tavo's feet seemed stuck, but Paige had turned at the commotion. Now *she* looked ill. Her hands crept up and cradled her jaws as if they hurt. Her look of shock loosened his feet. He strode over to her, his boots thumping an erratic rhythm on the straw-covered floor. The tall woman had gently lowered Vi

to the ground. She came to quickly, looking dazed and irritated. Rory stroked her arm, murmuring things nobody else could hear. Brenna covered her mouth and started for Vi, but Jesse gently pulled her back. The wedding seemed forgotten.

Pastor Mike moved around the podium. Squatting next to Vi, he calmly asked a couple of questions, as if a bridesmaid fainting at a wedding was no big deal. Rory helped her up and kept his arm around her. At Rory's nod, Pastor Mike said something that made the audience laugh, then he motioned everyone back into their places.

"Where were we? Oh, the most important part," he announced to more laughter. "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Jacobs." Tavo's frozen lips thawed into a reluctant smile. He clapped and hooted along with everyone else. Louder.

With a quick backward look, as if to make sure everything was all right, Jesse jaunted down the petal-laden aisle with Brenna possessively tucked into his side. Rory whispered into Vi's ear, then swung her into his arms and carried her down the aisle. The audience tittered, but Rory's face was bent toward his wife in their private world.

Tavo swallowed hard as the woman he'd never stopped loving glided toward him. Paige took his elbow with firmness, and they walked in sync down the aisle. Her familiar scent and the rustle of her shimmery blue gown stopped his breath. He blinked, desperate to stay in the present. Walking down a wedding aisle together wasn't helping. They were only part of Jesse and Brenna's special day. It meant nothing.

"We can do this, Gus," Paige murmured softly. Surprised, Tavo glanced at her. No one called him Gus anymore. Rick, his younger brother, had shortened Gustavo to Tavo years ago, and it stuck. Paige belonged to a small handful who knew. She

smiled at him. For a second, it almost seemed as if she needed his support. Then her gaze broadened to include the wedding guests, a clear signal the intimate moment was over.

A spark of hope surged. Just as quickly, he slammed it down with a hard dose of reality. She had only offered a crumb.

Much to his chagrin, his mind insisted on a replay. There was something in her tone. Longing? More likely, she was encouraging him through this juggernaut of emotions. Like game days back in high school. She always sensed when he was wound up.

However, one thought lodged and refused to leave. Between his old name and the just-for-him smile, something happened. And Paige had initiated it.

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PAIGE TOOK a deep breath and curled her toes in the tall heels. She stood at the back of the large room, her feet aching abominably. On a bright note, they had segued into the reception without drama. The buffet was a hit. The music was exactly right—a blend of classic love songs. Many couples were taking advantage of the dance floor. Paige exhaled a sigh of relief. The hours of prep work and detailed planning had paid off.

Her first paid event planning gig.

She'd offered her services free of charge, but Jesse and Brenna wouldn't hear of it. In the end, she'd given them a steep discount, but fair was fair, she reasoned. They were allowing her to practice her event-planning skills with their reception. She was born for this. Elation filled her, and she couldn't stop smiling. Until a fine black ribbon tunneled her vision. The room swayed. She blinked, then blinked again.

“You okay, Paige?” Rory, her boss and friend, had appeared. Concern filled his gaze.

“Fine. Just famished.” She covered the lingering dizziness with a laugh, hoping it was nothing. “So tell me—it’s the million-dollar question today—why was the groom late?”

A deep chuckle rumbled around Rory’s throat. “If I told you, you wouldn’t believe it”—he pulled out his phone—“but here’s proof. Here’s the text he sent to Brenna after they talked.” He thumbed down, then handed the phone to her.

As she read the text, a warm, contented feeling enveloped her.

I wanted you to have this because I  
 know how fond you are of hard copies.  
 Please forgive me for being late. It had  
 nothing, and everything, to do with you. I  
 was at a favorite boyhood haunt, saying  
 goodbye to childish things. Thanking  
 God for the honor of getting to be your  
 husband. But I got so focused on writing  
 you the perfect letter, I lost track of time.  
 And had no phone. What can I say?  
 Woman, you’ve addled my brain! I’m  
 coming, love. As long as there’s breath in  
 my body, I won’t miss our wedding day.  
 No reason to be afraid. I’m on my way.

Paige blinked away happy tears. “Aww. What a sweetheart. He has a knack for saying the right thing.”

“Well, it sure saved his bacon this time.” Rory’s gruff tone belied the sparkle in his eyes.

“But why do *you* have the text?” Paige still found it confusing.

“He’d forgotten his phone. When I found him, I already had you on the line.” Rory ran a hand down his beard, his lips stretched in a grin. “You should have seen him. When he

realized he was late to his wedding, he got that determined look in his eyes—like the day he informed me I would walk again. No way he'd let Brenna think he wouldn't follow through. After sending her the text, he broke every speed law on the books driving to the church."

Paige loved happy endings. "Well, that's adorable."

Rory rolled his eyes. He glanced around the room, taking it in. "You've outdone yourself. This is outstanding." Twinkling lights gave the remodeled event center a warm ethereal glow. Soothing music played softly in the background.

"Well, pat yourself on the back, boss. You're the one who gave me the time off to make it happen." She looked to where a noisy group of young men egged Jesse on as he proudly displayed a garter. A deep pink blush wreathed Brenna's face. Her husky laugh echoed in the large space.

From long-standing habit, Paige's eyes found Gus. Head and shoulders above most men in the room, he stood on the periphery of the group, hands in his pockets. Wearing his cop expression. Stoic. Patient. Emotionless when he was nothing of the sort. An undignified noise bubbled in her throat.

Rory had followed her gaze. A tiny corner of his mouth turned up, though he resumed their conversation as if he hadn't noticed. "You only took your accrued vacation time." He gestured to the refashioned barn. "This is magnificent." His expression grew serious. "Did it provide enough opportunity to consider doing it full-time?"

"Yes," she said carefully, knowing where his question was going.

He studied her for a moment. When she didn't volunteer more, a roguish grin peeked out from under his mustache. "And?"

"I love it."

He leaned forward and hugged her. “Stinks for me, but I’m happy for you. Vi and I have been praying you’d know.”

She stepped back. “But I don’t have enough bookings yet to leave my day job.”

“No hurry on my end.” Sincerity shone in his slate-gray eyes. “When your bookings increase—and they will—we’ll talk about finding you a replacement then.”

“Thank you. I’m grateful you’re willing to work with me on this—” A shout rose from the group of rowdy young men as her twin brothers fought over the coveted garter. A huff swooshed between Paige’s lips. Rory lifted a brow and gave her a knowing look. The twins needed no encouragement. Despite their age, Carlos and Miguel weren’t mature enough to date, much less entertain thoughts about getting married.

When Vi and Dicey headed their way, Paige leaned toward Rory with a grin. “Vi looks recovered.”

“So far, so good,” Rory said dryly. “She doesn’t eat often enough, but if I mention it, she says I’m crowding her space. These fainting spells she refers to as a few lightheaded moments are anything but. I have to watch her like a hawk—which I love.” The stern edge softened into pure sweetness.

Paige suppressed a smile. She could well imagine Rory hovering, even if he came by it honestly. Before they were married or even an item, Vi had tumbled into an old cistern, and Rory saved her life.

His mustache curved upward. “Yeah, okay. I get a little protective, but Dicey said she’d keep an eye on her.”

Laughing, Paige laid her hand on his arm. “Rest easy, boss. That gal will make sure they visit the buffet.”

Rory joined in with a deep chuckle. “I’m counting on it.”

Vi strode up to them, motioning to Paige. “You need to come. Brenna is waiting on you so she can throw her bouquet.”

Catching the bouquet was the last thing Paige wanted to

do, but duty called. Especially if Gus was going to stand in the back row and shirk *his* duty. She would set a good example even if he chose not to. Vi and Dicey steered her toward a loose circle of women.

She gave Rory her best stink eye, but he only responded with a playful shrug.

They were all in cahoots to throw her under the bus.