

Chapter Two



“It’s one day, Mike. And everything worked out.” Luke ran a hand over his stubble-covered chin. “Tim was looking for some extra hours anyway. No harm done.”

“No harm?” Mike’s laugh barked through the phone speaker. “Funny. Almost as hilarious as thinking it’s only one day. It’s one day this week, one day last week, and countless more the entire time you’ve worked here. I can’t depend on you.”

Desperation snaked through Luke, leaving his muscles jittery. He bounced his heel against his hard bedroom floor. The urge to fight back welled up, but that wouldn’t work with Mike. He paused to breathe. “You can. It won’t happen again.”

“You’re right. It won’t, because you won’t be working here.” His boss’s sigh sat heavy between them. “Listen, Luke. I like you. I really do. And I consider us friends.”

“A friend wouldn’t hang me out to dry like this.”

“I’ve got no choice. You’re unreliable. As your friend, I worry about you. You’ve got a problem, and you need to get it under control. Because right now, it’s controlling you.”

“Whatever, man. Keep your job and your so-called friendship. I don’t need them.” Luke hit end. No job. And with the way

things ended, no decent reference to get a new one. Mike was wrong. The previous night had been a mistake, but he had it under control.

Luke's breaths came quick and shallow. Heat filled the blood pumping through his veins. He worked hard and always accomplished more than was asked of him. So, he missed a day or two every now and then. How dare Mike insinuate he had a problem. And now, thanks to that bleeding heart sticking his nose where it didn't belong, Luke was without money coming in.

An angry growl erupted from his chest. Luke hurled his phone across the room. As soon as it left his hand, he realized his mistake. He crossed the room. Even before picking it up, he could tell the screen was shattered. Not the end of the world, as long as the electronics still worked. He lifted it. The black screen didn't fade to the picture of him and Daisy from their high school prom. He'd have to make do without a phone for the foreseeable future.

No phone meant no call to smooth things over with Daisy. His apology tour would have to be in person. Nothing like adding the complication of face-to-face to what should've been an easy fix.

He considered throwing the broken phone again. Instead, he dropped it in the trash and scrounged through his dirty clothes from the night before to find his keys. See. He had everything under control, no matter what Mike or anyone else thought.



DAISY STARED at her kitchen counter as her best friend poured smoothies from the blender into waiting cups. "What's this one, Bek?"

"Citrus mint." Bekah placed a cup in front of Daisy. "It'll be a hit this summer at the communi-TEA Barn's tea bar."

Daisy moaned as the bright flavor of citrus melded with the

smooth mint. Refreshing. “I chose the right person to collaborate with on new drink flavors, but I have one question. Are you trying to usurp the throne?”

“Definitely not.” Bekah’s laugh rang through the kitchen. “Communi-TEA is your baby. I’d never have thought to start an herbal tea business, especially one where you’re responsible for growing and blending the product.”

“You’re taking to it, though. Without a doubt. I’d better watch my step or the other artisans will help you oust me.”

Bekah playfully shoved Daisy’s shoulder. “Don’t even start. The crafters renting booth space love the place, because of you.” She leaned against the counter and crossed her arms. “Now, enough stroking your ego. You’re avoiding, but we’ve got to get back to the real issue of the morning. It’s time to cut him loose. Once and for all. No going back.”

“I’m not sure, Bek.” She pushed the straw around and around through her smoothie. “This isn’t Luke. Not the real Luke.”

“I love you, hon, but you’re wrong.” Bekah took a drink before continuing. “He isn’t the boy you grew up with, and he’s not the man you fell in love with anymore. He’s changed. What you see is who Luke is now.”

“Even if you’re right, it’s not like he’s a monster. He’s got a problem.”

Bekah scooted their cups to the side and grasped Daisy’s hands in her own, forcing Daisy to meet her eyes. “Yes. He’s got a problem, and it’s spiraling out of control. Luke’s going to crash and burn, and I hope it isn’t literal when he does. But even more, I hope he doesn’t take you with him when it happens.”

Daisy shrugged. “I’m being careful. I won’t let it go too far.”

Bekah’s raised eyebrow spoke for her.

“I’m serious. I won’t. But he needs someone in his corner if he’s ever going to beat this thing.”

“He doesn’t even admit there’s a thing to beat.” Bekah’s

voice climbed higher as she spoke. “You can’t help where it isn’t wanted.”

“I can’t write him off like all our years of friendship, everything we’ve been through together, doesn’t mean anything. He’s hurting. You know as well as I do, his drinking didn’t become an issue until after Pops died.”

Bekah moved across the kitchen and leaned against the far counter with a huff. “And Pops wouldn’t have put up with his drinking in the first place. He’d have boxed Luke’s ears.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, memories of Pops brought the hint of a smile. “You’re right. But Pops wasn’t aware. And if he were here now, he’d be fighting for Luke. Can I do any less?”

The doorbell prevented Bekah’s response. Daisy pushed away from the counter and made her way to the door. Opening it, her stomach dropped faster than it did on the coasters at Six Flags.

“What are you doing here?”

Luke never conducted his after-a-bender apologies in person. She suspected he didn’t want her seeing his day after, woke-with-a-hangover look. Too bad that even in his disheveled state, Luke could still catch the eye of any woman he wanted, including her.

“Mornin’, Daisy.” Luke nodded as he tugged the brim of his raggedy baseball cap. “Can I come in? Or could we go for a walk?”

“No,” Bekah spoke from behind Daisy. “She’s got nothing to say to you.”

“Bekah.” Daisy turned to find Bekah glaring at Luke. “It’s okay.”

Disappointment filled her gaze. “No, Daisy. It isn’t. And don’t let him convince you otherwise.”

“Please.” Daisy willed Bekah to see what she saw. “Try to understand.”

Bekah rubbed her lips together and shook her head. "I can't. But whatever. I've got to get to *your* store." She swiped her purse from the kitchen table. "Closed on Mondays or not, a manager's work is never done. I'll talk to you later."

A weight settled in Daisy's chest as she moved to allow Bekah's exit. They'd patch things up later. Luke stepped out of the doorway.

"Always a pleasure to see you, Bek." His smug smirk discounted a polite nod in her direction.

She huffed. "I wish I could say the same."

Daisy waited only until Bekah moved out of earshot. "Did you have to provoke her like that?"

"All I said was ..."

Daisy held up her hand. "I know what you said." She snatched her coat from one of the pegs by the door. "And in case spending time with Jose or Jack or even the good Captain made you forget, we've been friends all our lives. Your tone was clear, and the spark in your eyes means you were absolutely trying to provoke Bekah. She doesn't deserve it, and I want you to leave her alone. She's trying to protect me."

"Protect you? From me?" Luke ran a hand through his brown hair. "Daisy, I'd never hurt you."

She bit her lip to trap her words inside.

"Daisy?" A crease formed between Luke's brows. "You know that. Don't you?"

Her eyes stung. She blinked the discomfort away, praying as she did for the simple favor of dispelling the tears without letting them fall.

"Daisy?"

She raised her gaze to his. Concern radiated off him like waves crashing onto a sandy shore. It was too much. A tear escaped, trailing down her cheek. She shut her eyes against the onslaught. Warmth chased the coolness from her cheek as Luke's thumb grazed over it, brushing away the moisture.

“Oh, Daisy.” His voice was a whisper.

When his arms pulled her against his chest, she knew she should resist. He’d held her a million times. She’d done the same for him. In celebration and in devastation, they’d always been there for each other. She’d found camaraderie and comfort in the arms now holding her, in the hand softly stroking her hair.

Finding herself embraced once more, the issues dividing them almost faded away. Her shoulders sagged as tears continued their silent descent. Nestled against his strong chest, even his coat couldn’t keep her from hearing the steady rhythm of his heart. She sighed. It would be easy to believe the Luke she’d fallen in love with stood next to her. What-might-have-been flooded her soul with hopes of happily ever after.

But.

But this was not a fairy tale. A happily ever after wasn’t looming. And though she believed with everything inside her that the Luke she loved still existed. He lived hidden away under the man who ran from life by drinking too much. Bekah was right. Who he was now wasn’t the man she knew Luke should be.

As if in answer to her silent conflict, Luke’s arms stiffened. Cold rushed in where her cheek had been warm against him. Why did he pull away?

His hand gently cupped her chin, raising her face until she looked him in the eyes. His square jaw tensed. His green eyes deepened until they appeared almost emerald.

Daisy tensed, chewed the inside of her lip. In her experience, that look meant anger bubbled under the façade of a calm demeanor.

“Tell me the truth.” Before she could do more than open her mouth in answer, Luke continued. “I mean it. No lies or sugar-coating things. Do not protect me. Agreed?”

She nodded as much as his hand under her chin would allow. “Always.”

His eyes darted away from her and back again. “Did ...” He sucked in a breath and swallowed hard. He refused to look at her, his focus drifting to something beyond her shoulder. “Did I hurt you last night?”

“Yes.”

He swore. His hand dropped from her chin as if he’d touched a flame. He stepped backward, away from her. “No. I couldn’t. I didn’t.”

He spun away and retreated from the porch to stalk over the lawn in front of it. Rubbing his hands over his face and hair, Luke glanced back at Daisy and completed his show with another word that would have brought Pops with a switch in hand. “Tell me. Please. You don’t owe me, but please. I need to know.”

A sudden realization made the smoothie churn in her stomach. Luke believed he’d taken advantage of her, and anger tempted her to let him think so. After all the crude offerings he’d voiced through the years, he deserved to experience some of the hurt. Besides, if he were convinced of the worst, he might understand the need to address his issues.

No. Daisy couldn’t do it. Lying to Luke, even refusing to correct his misconception, was wrong. Pain and disgust mingled in his eyes, and Daisy’s hesitation to clear up his misconception was responsible for their appearance.

As much as he’d hurt her, Daisy wouldn’t allow him more pain than he brought on himself. The truth would bring him comfort. She took a step toward him, but he shook his head.

“Oh, Luke.” She reached out to him, only to drop her hand as he retreated once again. “No. It wasn’t like that. I promise, you’ve got it wrong.”

Breath rushed from him as his eyes slid shut. “You’re telling me the truth?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you. And never about this.” She waited

until he looked at her to offer a reassuring smile, weak as it was. “You hurt me, but not physically.”

“Will you tell me?”

Daisy climbed the steps and sat on the porch swing. She patted the seat beside her. Luke hesitated before joining her, leaving as much space between them as possible. It was just as well. Sharing last night’s phrases and invitations would be embarrassing enough without him right next to her. With only occasional glances in his direction, she filled him in on all the crude details.

Luke hissed at multiple points in the telling but didn’t try to minimize his behavior. “I’m so sorry, Daisy. You don’t go for those sorts of things. You’re too good for that, and I’m embarrassed I said them to you.”

She drummed her fingers on the arm of the swing. He didn’t understand, not fully. Of course, he wouldn’t if she didn’t tell him. How far should her assurance of honesty take her?

“What hurt most—” Now it was her turn to look anywhere but at him. “What hurt most was that there was a time I would’ve married you and given you every part of me.”

His jaw tightened again. “You broke up with me.”

“You know why. And if you doubt, you can look at last night for a clearer understanding.” Whether he wanted to hear it or not, he needed the truth. “But you’re right. I broke up with you, and it broke my heart. I’ve never stopped loving you. That hurt hasn’t ever healed. Your crude propositions, the idea you’d take from me what I always wanted you to have, but without thought or reason beyond physical gratification, were salt in the wound.”

His dark expression hinted at a storm raging inside. His jaw worked. “You never stopped loving me, huh?”

“Not even one day.”

“What about the others?” His lifted brow challenged her to prove her honesty.

She flinched. “Not that it’s your business, but I’ve not dated

in the last four years. Early on, I tried. I thought it would help me heal if I moved on. It didn't."

"Jason Price? Zachary Allen? Didn't I hear about you going out with both?"

Her shoulders straightened as she raised her chin. How could Luke think this line of questioning was appropriate? *Father God, give me patience to answer without losing it on him and making matters worse.*

"I went out with them, but only as friends. Once I knew, for whatever reason, you'd taken up permanent residence in my heart, I knew it would be wrong to continue dating. No one who went out with me had any misconceptions about our dates turning into anything more than friends hanging out."



LUKE STOOD and strode to the porch railing. Going on the offensive to ease his guilt over his boorish behavior was a poor choice. But jealousy had left him countering her claims of loving him with the men she'd dated, and the truth was worse than he imagined. Not that her dating would be wrong. He'd dated since they broke up, and not in the chaste way Daisy would have. But she'd not. Because of him. Because she still loved him.

His stomach twisted in knots. Daisy, who'd stood by him despite the choices driving everyone else away. The one person in his life he could always count on. When they were together, she'd accepted every physical display of affection as a gift, even though they were as simple as a kiss, holding hands, or brushing stray curls from her pale green eyes. Daisy was selfless. Good. Better than anyone he knew. Her heart craved giving love and receiving it from another.

But she couldn't have it because of him. Luke struggled to breathe past the squeezing of his chest. The one person most

deserving of a Hollywood love story, and she was missing it because she fell for the wrong guy.

Luke hated the title. Wrong guy. He wanted Daisy as much as she wanted him. None of the other women came close to filling the emptiness left by her loss. Daisy was the one for him, but he'd long since made peace with settling for less. It was all he could hope for after she'd ended things between them.

"I'm sorry." One tiny apology when Daisy deserved much more.

"Luke?"

Her soft voice washed over him with what might be called hope. It'd been so long since he'd felt it, he was hesitant to name it.

"I'm sorry, Daise. I didn't know." He joined her. Her hands were small and tense inside his own as he reached out. Emotion highlighted the darker green flecks in her eyes as wariness filled them. "I should never have said those things to you. Forgive me?"

He loosened his hold when her hands twitched to pull away. The choice belonged to Daisy, and he resolved to respect it. Her hands stilled inside his, though her indecision was obvious in the twist of her lips. When her silence continued, Luke nodded. He asked too much. He always did, and he gave little in return.

"I forgive you."

He tightened his hold on her hands and raised them to his lips. Her skin was soft against his kiss. She sucked in a startled breath.

"Then let's make this work." He gave her his most persuasive smile. The roguish one that still drew her like a moth to flame. "We're miserable apart. I love you, and you still love me. Now that we've both admitted the truth, there's nothing stopping us from being together."