

## CHAPTER ONE

The carousel gave a loud creak as the first piece of luggage emerged from baggage claim. Luke Worley blew out a breath, staring at the ceiling of McCarran International Airport as he held his cell to his ear.

Luke glanced to his left where a row of slot machines chimed a winner. He wasn't even supposed to be in Vegas. The home builders' shows were his business partner's thing, not his. She loved them and he stayed as far away as possible. But that business partner and her husband were also his best friends, as close as family, and there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for them.

"You owe me for this. You know that, right?" Luke said to Anna as he repositioned the phone to his opposite ear.

Drew and Anna Stevens were supposed to be standing in the Las Vegas airport. Their first trip away since the birth of their daughter, Alli, aka the cutest damn kid you'll ever lay eyes on.

But Drew had succeeded in knocking up his wife for the second time in three years. Only Anna and pregnancy weren't exactly on friendly terms since she puked pretty much twenty-four hours a day.

"I'm so sorry," Anna apologized for the thousandth time. "I wanted to be there, you have no idea how much I wanted this trip, but I can't even think about stepping on a plane right now." The hitch in her voice at the end of her heart-broken apology crushed him.

After spending nine months in their tiny office space during her first pregnancy when the slightest smell, like the cologne he'd worn for years, made her vomit more than she already was, he should know better than to pester her about it.

"Hey, I'm only teasing you," Luke said in his most soothing tone. "I'll be fine. Don't you be worrying about me. Vacation, yay!"

Anna laughed at his fake enthusiasm. "You have your hotel information, right? The meeting is Thursday at 10 and don't forget to—"

There was a pause then a smack on the other end of the phone. Luke pulled it from his ear to check the screen, making sure the call was still connected.

Shuffling came through the line followed by Drew's voice reassuring someone in the background.

"Luke?"

"Is your wife puking again?" Luke sighed. If he didn't already love their first kid like his own, he'd be ticked at the second one for making Anna so sick.

"I've never felt more helpless than watching her do this." Drew's defeated tone was evident even through the line.

Luke knew his friend would do anything to take away his wife's pain. Drew's medical education seemed a curse that only made him feel more helpless in this situation. Although, watching him freak out while someone else delivered Alli had been fun to watch.

"Then maybe you should figure out what's causing this pregnancy thing," Luke teased.

Drew laughed. "That's the fun part, my friend."

Luke heard a muffled "I'm fine" in the background, a bark from their dog Roxy, then a shrill cry from his favorite person on the planet.

"What's wrong with my girl?" Luke asked.

"It's bedtime, and I turned off the Paw Patrol."

"Well, turn it back on. You know my Alli Bug loves her Paw Patrol."

Drew sighed. "No wonder she's a mess after you babysit. You understand it's ok to tell her no, right?"

"I'll let you know how it goes if I ever do it," Luke said, watching for his bag to emerge. "I'm gonna let you take care of

those Stevens women. Tell your wife I'm a grown man and to stop fussing over me. I've got the meeting information and her lists. I'll text her pictures like she asked."

The "Paw Patrol" screams grew louder, and Drew had to yell over the noise. "Have a good time and don't do anything too crazy."

Luke said his goodbye and rolled his eyes. The plan was to spend the time he wasn't forced to be at the home builders' show in his room catching up on sleep or watching whatever sport happened to be on. Doing anything crazier than drinking a few beers and shouting at the TV were not on the agenda.

Bags continued to pour out onto the conveyor belt until Luke spotted the pink polka dot ribbon tied in a bow around the handle of his gray suitcase.

When he'd shown up at his friends' house for a ride to the airport, little Alli tried to tie the thing around his neck like a pup tag for one of her puppy characters she loved so much. Her tiny toddler face puffed out and tears welled in her eyes when he went to take it off, so he fastened it around his luggage and promised her he'd leave it there forever.

"You a big fan of pink these days?"

That voice...

Luke suppressed a gasp, his eyes closing for the briefest second.

Then he smiled, a damn goofy grin that he forced himself to rein in before turning around. The erratic beating of his heart, yeah, that wasn't something he'd ever been able to control around her.

April Youngblood stood in front of him, a sassy smile on her face as she pulled her own bag from the dozens spinning around.

"Absolutely. I look good in pink. Brings out my eyes," Luke answered.

April laughed, the sound stirring feelings Luke squashed years ago. She was the only woman in well over a decade to actually

spark thoughts of a picket fence and two point five kids, but he'd shut that down the day his best friend handed her a drink.

"I'm sure it does. Did your um...daughter give it to you?"

Luke sputtered, "Me...no...she's my niece."

"But you're an only child?" April's cute little nose scrunched in confusion.

"Yeah, she's um...Drew's daughter...Allison, we call her Alli for short." Luke rubbed the back of his neck, doing his best to push past the awkward and the slight raise in April's eyebrows at the mention of her ex and his child with his high school sweetheart. "Best damn kid you'll ever meet."

"Yes. I've seen her a few times on social media, and she is precious. It's wonderful for him." April nodded toward the exit, then back to Luke. "It was great to see you, Luke. I'm going to try and grab a ride to my hotel before the line gets too long."

He hurried after her. "Where are you staying?"

"The Bellagio." She stepped toward the exit, pulling her suitcase behind her.

"Me too. Want to share a ride?"

To save money, of course, not because the thought of her walking away again made his chest ache.

He chose to continue ignoring why that was.

She shrugged her agreement, and they emerged through the sliding double doors onto the chaotic sidewalk.

A fellow traveler with his head buried in his phone bumped into April, nearly knocking her over. Luke wrapped one arm around her waist, pulling her flush against him so she didn't fall.

Warmth flooded him as he held her tiny frame, a second arm protectively covering the back of her head on instinct. April glanced to her right where the man practically ran to his destination without even looking back.

“Thank you,” she whispered, so close that Luke could smell some sort of flowery scent from the chestnut hair that hung past her shoulders.

He held her there a few seconds past appropriate, searching the sapphire depths of her eyes that nearly matched his own.

Could she feel the pounding of his heart against her chest?

Luke released his hand from her waist, but not before taking one last sweep across the small of her back.

*Rein it in, Worley.*

This insane chemistry sparked between them the moment she stepped on his job site almost five years ago. A bright red dress hugged her curvy body, and he openly gawked until her heel snapped, and she literally fell into his arms.

Her laugh stirred his heart in a way that he hadn't felt since he'd cemented walls around it at eighteen. And it only got worse when she kicked off the ridiculously expensive shoes and walked barefoot for their tour of the building her father had started his company in more than 30 years earlier.

They worked together for the next three months to make her family's office space one of his finest expansions ever.

The best twelve weeks of his life.

Luke snapped out of the past when April stepped away from him, glancing at her pink Converse. He shook his head and moved to grab the cab that had stopped next to them.

Luke grabbed April's flower-covered suitcase and gripped the car's door handle way too tight while opening it and motioning for her to climb in. She raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow in his direction while sliding inside.

Luke met the driver at the back lifting both their bags into the trunk. Pulling in a breath, he slammed the trunk closed with more force than necessary telling himself he could handle a twenty-minute car ride sitting next to her. Then, he'd do his best to stay away from her for the rest of the trip.

He rounded the car and joined April in the back seat. The tiny space forcing his thigh to rest against the thin fabric of her black leggings.

At her sharp inhale, he turned to see her nibbling at the edge of her lip. She met his gaze and they both blurted out words at the same moment.

"This doesn't have to..."

"Is this..."

Luke barked a laugh, April joining him.

He was rarely rattled and didn't allow things to affect him deeply enough to be nervous or embarrassed, but this woman had been his kryptonite since the moment he'd first met her.

Even if she'd never know it.

April turned her body toward his as much as she could in the small space, a hand on his bicep. "Your best friend dumped me and married his high school sweetheart like six months later. I know it, and you know it. So, let's agree that it's out there, and we can stop being weird. Deal?"

Luke was speechless. But what April didn't realize was her break up with Drew wasn't what had his heart pounding harder than if he'd extended his usual six-mile morning run.

*It was her.*

It was the burn from where she still touched his arm, her fingers lingering on the bare skin at the edge of his t-shirt sleeve. Everything about her made his heart do stupid, *stupid* things, and he hated that he'd never been able to control it around her. That he couldn't shove it away and ignore it. He wasn't sure whether to laugh at how wrong she had it or open the stupid door and roll into oncoming Vegas traffic.

Luke didn't stick around long enough with any one girl to feel anything deeply for her. The town thought of him as the single playboy that refused to settle down, and he played the role.

Though he didn't actually date as often as his nosey, yet lovable, Sage Hill neighbors thought he did.

Every woman he decided to spend time with heard his full disclosure that he didn't do relationships, definitely didn't do love. And the few times he'd tried repeat outings with someone, she always thought she'd be the one to change his mind. He ended up hurting them which was the last thing he wanted. After a while, avoiding second dates seemed the wisest choice.

Luke knew the torture of having love ripped away in an instant, and that pain he'd never wish on anyone.

He also intended to never put himself in a position to feel it again.

Luke stared, entranced by April as her oversized cream sweater fell off one shoulder. She watched him curiously, and he realized she was waiting for a response to her question.

"Deal," he blurted. "We hate that SOB, Drew, got it." Luke clenched his fist and punched his hand to lighten the tension that had taken over the car.

April laughed so hard she let out a little snort, and the sound did irrational things to him.

"Easy there, Tiger," she said, elbowing his side. "No need to beat up your bestie or anything. I got over it a long time ago."

"Bestie?" Luke shook his head. "Men do not have besties, April. I feel like less of a man for even using that word."

She glanced out the window as the car took the next right. The mini Statue of Liberty passed by her window before she turned back to him. "It's such an incredible city, don't you think?"

Luke shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"You've never been?" Her beautiful blue eyes went comically wide.

He shook his head, words failing him for the second time in her presence, but for a completely different reason. He'd had a trip

planned to Las Vegas over ten years ago. Before the day his world shattered into pieces.

April continued, oblivious to the state his mind had frozen him in. "There's so much you have to see. You're here for the home builders' show, right?"

"Yes, but I didn't plan to leave the hotel otherwise. Spend as little time as possible at the show then hang out in my room and binge watch whatever sport happens to be on."

"What? No! I won't let you. You'll get the full Vegas experience, Lucas Muriel Worley. I'll make sure of it."

"Why in the hell did I tell you my middle name?" Luke grumbled.

She shoved him playfully, and he loved that they'd so easily fallen back into a friendship more than he should have. Especially when the word "friendship" gave him a weird feeling in his gut he'd never been able to shake.

"Well, April Joann Youngblood, how exactly are you going to accomplish this?"

Her purse sat on the seat, and she pulled her phone from it. Furiously typing, she turned to him. "In the next four days you have to--"

"Two."

"What?" Her gaze swung to his.

"I'm only here for two days. Have to get back for a job that's starting."

"Well two days it is then. I'll send you a list of things you must see, and you can..."

"Only if you see them with me," he blurted.

*Crap, had that really come out of his mouth?*

She raised a questioning brow and he decided to own it. Too late to gracefully back out now. Even if being near her was a temptation he didn't need.

"I'll complete your dumb Vegas list only if you complete it with me."

*But please don't touch me again.* He added for his own benefit.

"I..." She paused, and Luke could see the questions rolling behind her gaze.

"It doesn't have to be weird, April. We were friends way before you started dating Drew. We can be friends now. What happens in Vegas and all that, right? Aren't you trying to give me the *real* Vegas experience anyway? Leaving everything else behind is what we're supposed to do."

"Yes, but..." She watched him, her gaze dropping to her lap before returning to his.

"But?" he urged.

She shook whatever thought she'd been wrestling with away. "Never mind. Showing you the city sounds great. I'm mostly here for a meeting with some buyers about a partnership we're working on. It could be huge for my family. Though my brother thinks..."

Luke cringed. "Tensions still high with your brother?"

"How did you know that?"

"The gossip mill runs strong in Robbins County. Also, I met with him last week on a custom build, and he was on the phone with you when I walked in. I'm pretty sure one of you hung up on the other, but I couldn't be sure which."

April sighed, picking at the bright blue nail polish on her thumb. "It was him. Bennett still thinks Dad was insane to make me CEO. Wyatt just hopes we never actually make him grow up enough to graduate and work full time."

She gave Luke a half smile before continuing. "But after this deal is complete, maybe he'll see I can handle this job. That I'm not ruining everything that our father built."

Luke rested his hand over hers before realizing his mistake.

*No more touching, Worley.*

But when the smile on her lips turned genuine, he couldn't bring himself to pull away from the contact. "Your dad would be proud of everything you've done. You've grown the company, taking it to places he'd never have dreamed of, and if he were still here, he'd tell you what a damn good job you're doing."

April dabbed the corner of her eye with a knuckle but smiled. "You been checking up on me, Luke?"

He'd absolutely been checking up on her. Even cyber stalked her some over the years, though he didn't do the social media thing himself.

"Nah, just word on the street and all that."

Nodding shyly, she glanced over his shoulder. "Looks like we're here."

The cab jerked to a stop in front of the grand hotel entrance, and Luke pushed away the disappointment that he had to step out of her space.

He quickly slipped the driver his credit card before she could rummage through her purse to try to pay, then darted out to retrieve their bags. When he'd placed her bag beside his on the sidewalk, she stopped him with a glare, hand on her hip. "You could have let me pay my half."

"*What happens in Vegas* doesn't include forgettin' my southern manners, ma'am." Luke drawled the words, emphasizing what he already knew was his thick accent while tipping an imaginary hat in her direction.

April chuckled, rolling her eyes and snatching her bag away when he moved to try carrying it for her.

Cool air washed over Luke as they made their way into the lobby, but he stopped short a few steps inside, awestruck by the incredible colors in the artwork on the ceiling.

"Wow," he murmured, taking in the shades of blue, yellow, green and red that made up each flower.

April had stopped beside him, her head tilted skyward just as his was. "Pretty spectacular, right? Can you believe they were individually made of hand-blown glass? It's one of my favorite things in the entire city. I could stare at it for hours."

Luke glanced her way, studying her profile and the look of utter wonder she wore.

She mesmerized him way more than the amazing art on the ceiling.

Luke shook off the thought, stepping away. Two days. He just had to get through two days and a few hours each night in her presence then he could go home and bury himself in work to forget her.

Again.

He walked to the front desk and checked into his room with the assistance of a friendly young woman who had a strong northern accent. Boston he'd guess. He thanked her and turned as April walked past him to the elevators. The doors opened as they approached and she pushed the button for floor number six before he could reach it.

He glanced toward her. "612, you?"

"614."

Next door? What were the odds in a hotel this huge...in a city this enormous?

They exited the elevator, moving toward their rooms. She stopped short before placing the card in the lock. "Tomorrow night, we introduce you to Vegas?"

He nodded, and without another word, she disappeared inside.

Luke pushed inside his own room, rolling the small bag he'd brought to a stop beside the desk. He quickly yanked the curtains closed to block the view out his window and sank onto the edge of the king-sized bed.

Since the day over two years ago when he and Anna officially bought Frank Bartlett's construction company, they'd been working like hell to make it grow.

And it was. So busy in fact that he'd worked every single day for over a year. Including Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Forearms resting on his thighs, Luke scrubbed a hand down his face to try to push away the seven hundred things he needed to be taking care of at home instead of sitting in a Vegas hotel.

But when his eyes fell closed on a deep exhale, all he could see was the memory of April walking in to help on the job site five years ago with paint stained jeans and a faded Kip Moore concert t-shirt. She'd informed him that she wanted to help renovate the space her father built not passively watch the progress.

Luke had been helpless to say anything but yes.

She showed up every Thursday for the entire eight-week project. Even though it took him twice as long to do pretty much every single task, Thursdays were the highlight of his week. Hell, being with her was the highlight of his year, and she'd become one of his closest friends.

Luke never crossed the smallest line past friendship with April in those months they spent together. Before his death, her father, who knew of Luke's aversion to relationships and why, had strongly suggested Luke stay away from his baby girl. Bill Youngblood was one of Luke's most trusted confidants, and Luke respected him too much to cross that line.

By the time the open house came along, Luke knew he didn't want their Thursdays to end. He'd planned to tell April how he felt about her that night. To ask her on a real date and take the terrifying risk of being in a relationship again after over a decade.

That evening, he'd spotted her laughing with his best friend. April's hand sat on Drew's forearm, and his smile was larger than Luke had seen it in years.

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Luke hadn't told Drew about April and whatever the hell he'd started to feel for her, so he couldn't blame him for being drawn to the most beautiful girl in the room. He couldn't bring himself to step in when Drew was so clearly the better choice for her because he could give her all the things Luke wasn't sure he was capable of anymore.

Or maybe he'd been lying to himself and that was just the outlet he'd needed. An excuse to keep from opening his heart to the possibility of being gutted again.

Luke glanced up at the blank TV screen in his hotel room and smacked his hands on his knees. He hoped a hot shower would calm his mind enough to sleep without the very real nightmares that being in this place were sure to summon.

Tomorrow, he'd go to the builders' show then he'd find a way to be just friends with April for her Vegas tour.

He both loved and hated this damn city already.

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