

Tears filled her eyes, reflecting the kaleidoscope of colors from the sky above. “I don’t know what I’d do if I ever lost you.”

I scooted over and pulled her close. “Why would you lose me?” Okay, sure, I’d had the fleeting thought of running for the hills, but I’d never leave her. Baby or not. My heart was too fully invested. God, didn’t she realize she was the first girl I’d ever kissed? The only person who knew how much I hated flying—I mean irrationally scared out of my mind of it—and how chicken shit that made me feel. She was the first person I thought about in the morning, the person I wanted to call when I was happy, when I was bummed . . . Melissa Summers had become my everything since I laid eyes on her in that middle school cafeteria. I couldn’t think of one single solitary thing that could make me leave her now. Besides, I had a responsibility to this baby.

She threw her arms around my neck and her tears soaked through my T-shirt. “What if you decided you hated me or the baby? What if . . . ?” She choked on a sob as I squeezed and shushed her.

“It’s okay, Mel. I’m not leaving you, and I could never hate you. Never. Or the baby. How could I?” I stroked her back as the fireworks popped furiously above us in a resounding finale.

It finally grew quiet, the smoke from the show settling down over the water, people around us mumbling and picking up their chairs. I continued to hold her, my eyes straying to a couple holding hands as they strolled, another not holding hands, not touching, obvious tension shimmering between them as they towed a fussy toddler. My heart ached that I couldn’t do more to ease her. “God, Mel, I love you so much,” I whispered, wishing she’d believe me. Wondering

why she'd suddenly doubt. We may be in a heap of trouble, but I never wanted to lose the spark that made us. Even at sixteen, I knew it was special.

She finally pulled back and looked up into my eyes. I used the pad of my thumb to wipe the tears from her cheeks. She simply stared for several moments. We said nothing. I let her look. Maybe she'd find whatever reassurance she was seeking. Then, gently, her eyes slipped down to my mouth. I leaned in and kissed her, giving her all the love, all the promises, all the comfort I had.

And all the hope.