

Across the Miles

Part One of The Not So Bad Boys of Rock Series

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ISBN: 1507684002

ISBN-13: 978-1507684009

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Cover layout design by Taylor Lynn James

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PROLOGUE

Sebastian~

Every part of my body screams at me, and not just a slightly elevated scream, but a full-on screeching, not so unusual as of late, but annoying as hell just the same. I opened my eyes slowly, allowing my pupils to adjust to the light filtering into the room, even that bothers me. I sit up, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed, hovering them in the air for a moment, before planting them firmly on the cold floor. Why is the floor cold? I paid good money for top-quality luxurious carpeting that's normally soft under my feet. I stretched slowly, turning my head to look around the room, nothing looks familiar, in fact, I've never seen this room in my life. I looked down at my waist and saw that I was completely naked. My tired eyes quickly scanned the floor for my clothes, which appeared to be just past the foot of the bed, the bed that I currently occupied, a bed that isn't mine. I felt a tightening in my chest as I twisted my body to the left. My eyes settled on the strange woman resting

comfortably beside me, lying face down on the mattress. Auburn hair spilled over her shoulder, partially covering her pale face. A face that I don't recognize. Then a sickening awareness washes over me, I've done it again.

I scrambled furiously around the apartment, collecting all of my belongings, and made a mad dash out the door. I didn't bother saying goodbye. I dug in my pocket for my car keys and peeled out of the drive as fast as my Shelby Mustang would go, which at this precise moment wasn't nearly fast enough.

Once I was home, I took a long shower, a vague attempt at washing away the remains of the previous night, and crawled into bed, pulling the covers over my head. This morning wasn't the first time I'd found myself in bed with a woman I didn't know. These past nine months had been a downward spiral into more drugs and alcohol than I had ever consumed. Before losing Charlotte, I barely drank alcohol, then one night, a car driving way too fast down a slick, winding road changed everything. I spent the next four months in a dark haze, withdrawn and racked with guilt. I returned home tired and lonely after our last tour overseas. The partying helped mask the emptiness I struggled through daily if. I was fairly good at hiding it, even managing to keep up my Sunday visits with my family in Manhattan Beach, when I'm in town. No one seemed to notice that I had fallen off the deep end. I had slipped further into a dark abyss than any of us had ever been, which said a lot, considering we're one of the hottest rock bands in the world right now. Yeah, as far as I knew, no one had been the wiser.

Little did I know how wrong I was.

BAM! BAM! BAM! The sudden noise was unbelievably loud and intrusive; I had just drifted off.

“Sebastian, open up! Now!” Another loud bang rattled the door. I groaned loudly before shuffling down the stairs, stumbling slightly along the way. When I swing it open, I’m staring face to face with Dek, my best friend and band mate, and he’s not smiling, not even remotely. I turn and move away from the door, not happy with what’s about to come my way.

“We need to talk,” he started, following close behind me. “Dude, stop walking away from me.”

“What do you want?” I turned on him, voice thick and slightly slurred, even hours later. I must have had more than I realized.

“You can’t keep this up Sebastian. You’re destroying yourself and the band.”

“The band is fine,” I turned away, rolling my tired eyes in frustration at hearing this lecture again. The guys have been trying to talk some sense into me, for months they have tried to do an intervention, but I don’t listen. After six months of talking and tears, even my brother Travis has given up on me, which is why Dek is the last one standing here in my living room having the same tiring conversation hoping for a different result. Insane, right?

Dek sighed, choosing his next words carefully. “The guys are tired of your antics. You need to pull it together; we’re worried about you buddy.”

“Yeah, well nobody asked you to worry. I can take care of myself.”

“Come on Sebastian, you haven’t been yourself for the past year and a half, not since the accident.”

I turned quickly, my face only inches from his. “Don’t you dare mention her! I don’t want to talk about that night ever again! Just stay the hell out of my business and everything will be fine.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that man. I’m here because I

love you, you're my best friend. We all love you, but we can't keep sitting by while watching you fall apart, it's not happening anymore." His breathing hitched and I noticed how his hands kept balling into tight fists. "If you don't pull yourself together and get some help...you're out of the band."

"What?" I stepped back involuntarily. "Out of the band? Yeah right," I sneer, "the band is nothing without me, and you know it. I'm the face and the voice. People pay to come see me. The rest of you are just a bonus." My lip curled into a snarl just before I felt his fist make contact with my face. The blow stunned me, knocking me back a few feet, I reached out, grabbing the back of the armchair, to keep myself from hitting the floor.

"What the hell was that for?" I groaned, blood pouring freely from my lip and nose.

"I'm sick of your bloated up ego," Dek huffed. "And I can't stand by any longer and watch you try to kill yourself. She's gone man. I'm sorry that loss has hurt you so deeply, but it's been over a year, don't you think it's time to move on? You'll never heal if you don't allow yourself to face what happened."

I slumped to the floor, resting my elbows on my thighs, and hung my head. "I don't know how. What am I supposed to do with myself? When I'm not playing music, or with you guys, it's all I think about." I ground the heel of my hands into my eyes, suddenly more alert than I recalled being in days, even weeks. "I miss her man. I miss having someone in my life. Do you know what it's like to find out that the woman you cared about died because of your negligence?"

"No," he replied softly, "but I do know that you are a good man who deserves the chance to love again. Charlotte would want that for you. You're better than

this,” he waved a hand in front of me as if indicating the state that I am in. “You need some help. I’m taking you in for rehabilitation.” He stood up, pulling at my elbow.

“Detox?” I grimaced. “Shit man, they’re going to kill me. You know that, right?”

“They won’t kill you. You’ll go in defeated but come out stronger; you’ll be the man you were before all this mess started. We’re all here for you man, now is the right time to do this.” He pulled me in for a brotherly hug; we’ve been best friends since we were young kids. “Everything’s going to be okay, I promise.”

I’m in hell. There’s no other way to put it. I’ve been here for six days, and I’m going through some pretty nasty withdrawals. When I checked in, they told me this was a ninety-day program. Now, one week into it, and I already want to go home and try this on my own. I don’t need this crap. I can’t have visitors, no cell phones, no phone calls of any kind for the first thirty days. I spend my days in a small furnished room that holds everything I need to survive at New Beginnings Ranch. Everything I need consists of very few things. Three pair of jeans, five T-shirts, a pair of tennis shoes, my iPod, and a thick, leather-bound journal, given to me by the staff upon checking in. The iPod is the one luxury they allowed on the premises, claiming that the music can help with healing and cleansing of toxins in the body. I meet with a counselor every day, and we discuss my feelings. I’m uncomfortable at first, but after the third visit I start to open up a little. He asked me to start journaling my feelings, I was hesitant to participate because I’m not good at focusing on my weaknesses, no man usually is. After a while it becomes easy to open up the journal and start writing about things that annoy me, things that make me happy, what I want to do with my life. If I feel it may

be worth sharing, it makes it into the book.

Before long, the days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months, and I begin making plans to return home. I feel great, better than I have in years. During my stay, the doctor encouraged me that exercise would help deal with the frustration and shame. So I started lifting weights, and before long, started running again, silently cursing myself for being so careless with my body.

“So how are you feeling today Sebastian?” Barry, my counselor, asked, leaning back into the leather armchair. He asks me this every day, and every day for the first month I gave him the same answer. But today is different. Today marks my seventy-fifth day here. Seventy-five days of waking up in a bed that’s not my own, something I’ve long grown tired of, but today I woke up refreshed.

“I’m feeling pretty good today,” I replied, leaning back into my chair. “I think I’m ready to talk about it.”

“Okay, that’s good; I’m ready when you are. The last thing you told me was that you two had been on a drive, visiting wine country.”

“Yeah, just a simple drive, at least that’s what it should have been.” I hadn’t been able to talk about this for nearly two years; that wasn’t because people hadn’t tried to get me to talk about it. I just hadn’t been ready to open up, until today.

“Charlotte wanted to drive to Sonoma Valley; she said it would be a romantic getaway. I remember wanting to spend time with her, but the idea of being trapped in the car for six hours wasn’t exactly the kind of quality time I had in mind. The band had been on the road for five months, and we were young, being apart like that was hard. I just wanted to hang out at my apartment, maybe lie on the beach. But since it was important to her, I

caved. The first three hours weren't too bad, between catching up on all that we had missed and listening to the radio, we managed to get along pretty well. After a while, the conversation shifted to a more serious nature, she wanted to talk about our future and what I saw happening between us. Charlotte made it clear that she wanted to get married, settle down, and have at least two kids. I was only twenty-three, my band had just taken off, I wasn't thinking about marriage, let alone kids. I was thinking about where my next concert was and how many songs I could pen before the next show. So, instead of telling her what she wanted to hear, I told her the truth, and it led to an argument." I closed my eyes and leaned further into the chair, allowing the cushion to pull me in deeper. I could picture that day like it was only yesterday.

"She was naturally hurt because we had been dating for a year, and she was older and had already graduated college. She was ready to plan out her life and mine had only just begun. I'm not a planner; I fly by the seat of my pants most of the time. I was far too young to consider fathering a child. I have a great father, so I know what it takes to make a good one, and I knew that I didn't possess those qualities. I was very selfish, hell I still am today, aren't most of us though? I told her that I loved her, but I didn't see any of that in my near future. She freaked out and started hitting me, punching me in the arm and swinging at my head. I managed to avoid most of her blows, but each time she would swing again I would get madder and madder. I knew I should have stopped the car, just pulled over and talked with her rationally, but in the heat of that argument rational thinking went right out the window. I caught one of her wrists as she swung it through the air, and I held on tight, trying to talk her down. She screamed at me, telling me

that I was hurting her, and I shouted back ‘good’ and then she cried and said she hated me.” I ground the heel of my hand into my eyes, trying to wipe out the visual that wouldn’t stop playing on the back of my eyelids. “I called her a liar and told her to calm down. That only intensified her anger. She unbuckled her seatbelt and grabbed the steering wheel, we fought some more, and during that struggle I crossed over the centerline. I tried to correct it, but I must have jerked too hard on the wheel because the car spun around, flipping two times. We were broadsided by an oncoming car that never had a chance to slow down; everything happened so fast. I remember seeing her, out of the corner of my eye, as her body went through the windshield. I tried to reach out and grab her, but my arm wouldn’t move, my shoulder had been dislocated.” I felt hot tears on my cheeks before I could stop them from falling. Never before had I allowed myself to give in to the grief, having fought so long to smother it.

“If only I had told her I wanted those same things...” I cried softly.

“Sebastian, telling her a lie would have only prolonged the inevitable. You can’t blame yourself just because you told her something she didn’t want to hear. You told her the truth. Did you love her?”

“I don’t know. I thought I did back then, but now, on this side of it, I’m not sure. I know that I cared for her, very deeply, but I was too young and immature to think about being in love or starting a family. But if I had only waited until we weren’t driving, if I had held off my honesty until we reached Sonoma, maybe she would be alive. She would be off somewhere living her dream with someone that deserved her. I didn’t deserve her.”

“Why do you say that?” Barry leaned forward, elbows

resting on his knees.

“I didn’t appreciate her. I didn’t value her needs, put her needs before my own. That’s what killed her, my selfishness.” I gave in, finally allowing the grief to wash over me. The tears that poured out felt almost as if they were cleansing me, ridding me of all the shame I had carried since that fateful night.

“I’m proud of you Sebastian, I know that wasn’t easy for you. I think that you need to learn to start putting others needs before your own. I’m not saying you should do that every time, just be aware that it’s okay to put someone else before yourself for a change.” Never before had that concept entered my mind, now that it was out there, served up as a form of healing, it felt like a lifeline. I wanted to grab hold of it and never let go.

I woke up this morning with a renewed energy. I’m stronger, and healthier, and my mind is clearer than its ever been. My confidence has been restored. I’m able to talk about what happened, even though it hurts. I’m still lonely, and have a hole in my heart, but I’m healing.

Travis is picking me up this afternoon, and I’m filled with hope at the thought of seeing him again, it’s been far too long. Travis and I have always been close; he’s only three years older than me so growing up we shared everything. We used to run around the neighborhood and hang out in Dek’s garage playing music and dreaming what it would be like to start a real band. Even when he started dating Natalie, became a married man, and then a father, Travis always made time for me. Maybe that’s why it had hurt so much when he didn’t want to see me these past three months. I understood why, I truly did, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. Watching me fall apart had been more than he and Natalie could stand. That final day, when Dek had shown up at my house to take me to

rehab, I recalled wondering why Travis hadn't joined him. In my heart, I had known why, that memory was what helped me get through my stay at the ranch. I didn't only want to get well for myself; I wanted to get my act together for the sake of my family. They loved me, and I never wanted to hurt them again.

I stuffed my belongings in my backpack, it didn't take long, there wasn't much to pack, but it was heavier leaving than it had been coming. My journals were packed carefully at the bottom of my bag. I had fought against the idea at first, but over time had given in, finding it to be very therapeutic, filling them cover to cover. There were three in all, and I planned to keep them with me until the day I died, serving as a constant reminder of the life that I never wanted to return to.

I had just zipped my pack when I sensed his presence. That's the cool thing about being brothers, I didn't have to see him, I felt him. I couldn't hide the smile that spread evenly over my face. I welcomed it joyously; it had been a long time since it had taken up residence there. I hoped like hell that it wouldn't leave anytime soon.

"Hey man," Travis clapped a hand over my shoulder, "are you ready to go home?"

CHAPTER ONE

Brooke~

The heat in the kitchen was stifling, making every article of clothing cling to my skin. Flames licked up from the nine-burner cooktop and steam rose from large stock pots filled with boiling water. Shouting ensued all around me, but this kitchen was a well-oiled machine. There were six of us running this brigade, and we had been on our feet for over twelve hours preparing for this evening. We were hot and we were tired, but we were only half-way through one of the busiest nights this restaurant had seen this year. College graduation was upon us, and we had been booked solid for three nights straight. One hundred and fifty covers every two hours for three nights meant a lot of food and a lot of cash. Businesses all over the bustling city were profiting from this weekend's influx of out of town visitors, and restaurants like ours were reaping the benefits.

I paused a moment, looking around the kitchen, and couldn't hold back the smile, feeling my eyes start to well

up, this is what I had worked so hard for. I loved working in the kitchen; it came naturally to me. After my father left when I was just eleven, it had become my job to make dinner every night otherwise I never would have eaten. My mother never changed her demeanor, remaining cold and detached, so life as I had known it continued on as usual. The only difference had been that I had decided not to care anymore and learned to manage on my own. I worked hard and finished school a year early, graduating at seventeen, and enrolled in culinary school where I learned to master my craft and excelled in all courses. Food was something I was passionate about, and it treated me well. I graduated from the culinary arts program with top honors and was sought out by many local restaurants, it felt nice to be wanted; that was something I had never felt while growing up. This restaurant hired me on as their Sous Chef; a position offered only based on skills presented in the classroom and how well I had performed on their kitchen test when I applied for the job. Yes, food treated me well, and as I looked around the kitchen I knew that I was where I belonged. It had taken a lot of hard work and sacrifice, but I had finally found my happy place. This restaurant specialized in beef and seafood, serving only the finest and freshest cuts of each. All vegetables are locally grown, and the breads are baked in an artisan kitchen located four blocks over. We were known for quality food, excellent service, and our support of local businesses. The people in this town are all about supporting the local community and no restaurant in the area rose to that challenge quite like the Cork and Cleaver.

Tonight I was expediting, and as the next orders were placed in front of me, I set about plating them expertly. Sauces were spread onto the plates with just the right

amount of finesse. Steaks were checked for temperature accuracy based on customer preference. Plates had to be spot checked for cleanliness before finally reaching the hot plate, this was a process that took great precision and it was by far the most rewarding thing I had ever known.

“Service, please!” I announced, bringing about another flurry of activity as servers snapped to attention. Three hours later the kitchen was closed, burners shut off, everything cleared and put away; surfaces sparkled as if shiny and new and ready for another day of cooking. On my way out the door, after a very long day, I heard my name being called.

“Brooke?” It was Donnie, the Executive Chef. I turned and followed his voice, finding him sitting in his office. I poked my head in and smiled.

“What’s up?” He motioned for me to have a seat. I plopped down into the armchair, completely exhausted, and smiled again, waiting for him to speak.

“So, you’re off the next three days?” he stated knowingly. I nodded. “Are you nervous? Do you have any questions or concerns about the interview process?”

I had been working in this kitchen for five years, and in that time, had proven myself to be a competent chef and leader. Under Donnie’s guidance and care I had quickly become a highly sought after chef, and because of that, I received a call from an up and coming restaurant out in Los Angeles to interview for their Executive Chef position. A rare opportunity for someone of my young age. I was scheduled to leave tomorrow afternoon.

“I’m feeling pretty confident,” I started, “but what are the odds they’ll hire a twenty-four-year-old chef from Michigan? I mean, come on, this is L.A.; there’s no way I could even begin to blend in?”

“You’re looking at it all wrong Brooke. You don’t

need to blend in; you need to shine, which is something that you excel at my dear. From the moment you set foot in my kitchen, you have never ceased to amaze me. I know L.A., and I know the restaurant you're interviewing at, the owner and I go way back. He wouldn't have sought you out if he didn't think you could cut it in his kitchen." Donnie leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head. "You've got this kid. Now go make me proud." He smiled warmly and stood to give me a hug. Donnie was ten years my senior, and he had taken me under his wing as a mentor and father-figure over the years, only wanting what was best for me. I had been an only child, so I welcomed the care and attention with open arms. He's been a good friend and a great boss. I knew that if this interview didn't work out that I always had a place in Donnie's kitchen, it was a peace of mind that gave me great strength as I set about my latest adventure.

When I opened the door, I found my best friend and roommate, Jade, curled up on the sofa with a glass of wine and her favorite feline companion, Marmalade, an orange tabby that had followed her home one day. She looked at her watch before rising up from her comfy position and pouring another glass of wine.

"Long day," she declared, handing me the glass.

"Yeah," I muttered, kicking off my shoes and flopping down on the opposite end of the sofa. "It was a good night, and the team was on top of their game, but I am glad to be home and off for the next three days."

"Are you all packed?"

"Almost, I just need to throw in a few more items and I'll be good. I won't need much, I'm only there for two nights," I took a sip of wine and leaned my head back, closing my eyes. "I'm dreading the flight."

“I know. Just be sure to take your Dramamine. You’ll sleep most of the flight and be ready for some sightseeing. Hey, maybe you’ll catch a glimpse of a celebrity or two, be sure to take pictures,” Jade clapped her hands together, bouncing in her seat.

“What are you, five?” I laughed. “I promise to take lots of pictures if I see any famous people. Do you really think they just wander about the city? I’m pretty sure they would get bombarded by crazy fans. The most famous person I’ll see will be the owner of the restaurant where I’m interviewing.”

“Bummer,” she pouted. “But you should keep your phone charged just in case. What if you get there and meet someone and fall in love,” she batted her eyes playfully. Jade and I were both single, and had known each other for six years, meeting through mutual friends at school. We hit it off immediately and moved in together less than two months later. Neither of us were currently dating anyone, despite Jade getting asked out repeatedly by guys at work, we hadn’t met the men of our dreams.

“I highly doubt I’ll meet the man of my dreams and fall in love during a three-day visit,” I replied, rolling my eyes, making her laugh. “And if I do, I’ll be sure to call you right away.” I stood up and stretched before yawning loudly. “Well, I’m heading off to bed; I’ll finish packing in the morning. Are you still driving me to the airport?”

“Yep, see you bright and early sunshine.”

“Don’t stay up too late and set your alarm,” I called out, looking back to find her settling back in with Marmalade.

I hate flying. Being trapped in tiny seats among hundreds of people is not my idea of fun but it is the fastest way to get to California from Michigan. Thankfully

I spent the extra money and booked a seat in first class. I never fly, so I figured that I might as well do it in style and comfort, well not exactly comfort, but it certainly looked better than the alternative sitting less than ten feet behind me. I settled in and was rewarded with a glass of champagne and a warm blanket. I snuck a peek back at the crowded rows behind me, noting that they had neither a beverage nor a red blanket, I guess that's what two hundred bucks more buys you. The flight was nearly five hours long and scheduled to land at LAX at six o'clock. My interview was scheduled for first thing tomorrow morning, which meant I had plenty of time to explore the city and see if it was a place I could live.

I was only scheduled to be in L.A. for two days, and I intended to make the most of it. I was going to check out as many restaurants as I possibly could, do a little shopping, and visit the beach. I had never seen the ocean; most of my beach hopping had been spent on Lake Michigan, which was by far and away the most beautiful body of water I had ever seen. I had seen photos of the ocean, and they paled in comparison to Lake Michigan's deep blue waters. Even though I had my favorites, I still wanted to check it out, just to say I was there and had dipped my toes in the water. I didn't plan on swimming though, I had watched enough shark movies to know that you couldn't get eaten alive if you remained on the beach.

I slipped in my earbuds and fired up my music app, choosing a song by my favorite band, Paradox, then leaned back against the small pillow, closing my eyes, thankful that the Dramamine had already begun to take effect. I felt the plane begin to back up, a sensation I greatly detested, waiting another fifteen minutes before feeling the plane's speed increase rapidly as we descended down the runway and lifted off the ground. I heard the

soft sounds of Sebastian Miles, his deep voice serenading me as sleep began to take over. I hadn't slept well the night before so I welcomed the darkness as it overtook me.

A jerking motion awakened me from my slumber as the plane began to descend. I rubbed my eyes then looked at my phone to check the time, I had slept for over four and a half hours. As my mind continued to take in my surroundings, I realized that the same song was still playing, I must have had it on repeat, which meant that he had been singing to me for nearly five hours. I instantly felt sorry for my cabin neighbors, praying that the noise level had been low enough that they hadn't had to listen to the same song over and over. That would have driven me nearly insane.

The plane touched down fifteen minutes ahead of schedule, and once again I was thankful for having chosen first class as I was among the first passengers to exit. I hadn't checked a bag so I made a hasty retreat through the terminal and out to an awaiting taxi. I gave him my destination and soon we were on our way, speeding through the nightmarish traffic that makes up the Los Angeles freeway.

Twenty minutes later, we pulled up to The Westin Bonaventure Hotel. I stepped out, looking around in an attempt to take it all in. I turned toward the entrance and was promptly escorted to the lobby by an elderly bellhop with a friendly smile. I gave him a generous tip for his kindness and approached the front desk.

The elevator stopped on the eighteenth floor, and I made my way down the hall toward my room. Once inside, I dropped my bag onto one of the beds, walking over to the large windows showcasing a view of the surrounding city. I had arrived. I dashed off a quick text

to Donnie and Jade, letting them know I was safely in L.A., and took a quick shower before heading out for a bite to eat. I'd heard great things about the hotel's signature restaurant, so I made my way to the thirty-fourth floor and stepped up to the reservations desk to inquire about a table for one at the exclusive L.A. Prime.

Seated on the far side of the restaurant, along the bank of windows that helped make this restaurant famous, I sipped my wine and stared at the Hollywood sign in the distance. The waiter came by with a fresh glass of wine before taking my order. The streets below bustled with traffic, both vehicle and pedestrian, and I was reminded of my most recent trip to New York City with Donnie. He had taken me there to attend a food and wine event, with the hopes of helping me mingle with the upper elite in the food industry. I loved the electric atmosphere, full of energy and excitement. That was exactly what I felt when gazing down at the street below. Electricity was everywhere, and I don't mean just in the hundreds of thousands of lights that adorned the surrounding signs and buildings. This town was electric because it was alive.

The first course was placed before me and, as I gazed down at the gorgeous plate of food, I couldn't help but smile. I had ordered one of the appetizer specials, braised double-cut pork belly with a pinot noir reduction and Fuji apple butter. The pork was so tender I didn't need a knife. I took a small forkful, swiping it through the apple butter, and raised it to my lips. Small explosions of flavor burst forth on my tongue, bringing a smile to my appreciative lips. Oh, how I loved dining on pork. Soon after finishing, my plate was cleared, and a silver dish of sorbet was placed in front of me, just two small scoops was all that was required to cleanse my palate. In one swift motion, the silver dish was removed, and my entrée

was presented carefully before me.

“Enjoy your meal, Mademoiselle.” I picked up my knife and fork and, true to my culinary training, sliced precisely down the middle, revealing a perfect medium rare cut of beef. I had ordered one of my favorites; steak au poivré with assorted black and pink peppercorns and a brandy demi-glaze, which paired perfectly with the 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley that I was currently enjoying. I love food. Food doesn’t scare me, it doesn’t demand anything of me, it just sits there waiting for me to turn it into something amazing, and I do it gladly. I love being creative with food; I’m good at it. It’s what I know, and it makes me happy when nothing else does.

I woke to sunshine and blue skies unlike any I had ever witnessed. I couldn’t wait to explore the city after my interview. I dressed in my navy blue pencil skirt and white blouse, throwing the matching short jacket over my right shoulder as I headed out the door, my chef’s coat packed neatly in my handbag. The drive to the restaurant didn’t take long, I paid the cab driver, stepped out onto the busy sidewalk that made up the heart of the downtown district, and immediately felt at home.

The interview process took over two hours. I met with two of the managers before they sent me into the kitchen for my food preparation test. I was supposed to cook one of the restaurants signature dishes. Having been sent the list of dishes ahead of time, I knew right away which I would choose to re-create. Lardon’s was known for their beef Wellington, a hard dish to perfect for the average chef, but I was no average chef, and I wanted this job. By the time I brought it out of the oven, the color on the puff pastry was a beautiful golden brown. I just prayed that my timing had been as perfect as the other fifteen

times I had prepared it before arriving in L.A. When I sliced into the elegant package, I knew instantly that I had hit it out of the park, the meat was a perfect medium-rare. I went about plating the dish, adorning it with glazed petite carrots, whipped potato mash, and a red wine demi-glaze. Satisfied with the finished product, I walked the plate over to the managers, placing it before them with a slight nod, before turning and moving off to the side to observe them as they tasted my creation.

After quite a bit of sampling and nodding, their heads pressed tightly together as they discussed their thoughts of me. I was anxious, not sure what to expect, but I was confident enough in my cooking to assume that they were impressed, if not surprised.

“Miss. Caldwell, that was a very impressive replication of Chef Wolf’s signature dish.” Kimberly Mathews, Lardon’s general manager, informed me. “A lot of chefs wouldn’t be able to nail that as well as you did, and at such a young age. It’s clear that you have what it takes. I think it is safe to say that Mr. Wolf would want to meet with you and sample your talents. As you may know, we are looking for an executive chef for a new venue that he is opening in nine months, right here in L.A.” My heart both sank and soared at the same time; I thought that I was competing for a position here at Lardon’s. “Mr. Wolf is out of the country at the moment; he is scheduled to return in six weeks. He’s in London preparing for the opening of a new restaurant, Lardon’s of London. I can have him call you when he is ready to move forward if that works for you.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you for the opportunity,” I smiled gratefully. “I look forward to hearing from him upon his return to the states.” I stepped forward and shook both of their hands. “It was an honor

to meet you both. Good day.” I breathed a sigh of relief as I exited the restaurant and stepped back onto the bustling sidewalk. I hailed a cab back to the hotel and sank into the seat as the driver lurched forward.

I quickly changed into a pair of black yoga shorts and a pink tank top; exposed pale flesh stared back at me, begging to be sunburnt. It had been a long Michigan winter, and the West Coast climate was exactly what I needed to brighten my day. I slipped my small purse over my shoulder and headed out onto the busy street, making my way back to the heart of the downtown district. After browsing through a few small boutiques, I grabbed a coffee and flagged down a cab, asking him to take me to the beach. I wanted to go for a leisurely walk and enjoy the rest of my afternoon, before grabbing a plane back to Michigan tomorrow. The beach wasn’t far away, and I made my way to the pier and sat down on a bench to finish the last half of my coffee, completely lost in thought.

“Mind if I join you?” came a deep voice, sounding a little out of breath and dangerously close. I turned and gasped, immediately drawn to the sapphire blue eyes staring back at me. Butterflies instantly began fluttering around in my empty stomach. My gaze flitted over his face, and I couldn’t help but linger over the pair of perfectly shaped lips that turned up into a slight grin when I didn’t stop staring. Two small silver studs winked at me from the lower right side of his mouth. They were called viper bites. I only knew this because one of the young guys that worked kitchen prep at my restaurant had the same piercing. On him, it looked slightly weird. On this guy, it was unbelievably hot. He looked vaguely familiar, though I couldn’t quite put my finger on where I had seen him. Perhaps he was one of the many famous

people that adorned this city, or maybe he just resembled one of them. Either way, he was breathtaking, and for a brief moment, I completely forgot what had led me to sit on this bench in the first place.

CHAPTER TWO

“I don’t own the bench,” I shrugged, sliding over to leave plenty of distance between us, instantly regretting the separation.

“I just need to catch my breath.” He huffed a bit before resting his elbows on his knees, breathing slowly and deliberately.

“If jogging is this difficult why do you even bother?” I asked flippantly, then covered my mouth when I realized how nasty I’d sounded. “Sorry, I don’t mean to sound rude, it’s been a busy two days.”

“That’s quite alright. I often ask myself the same question when I get dressed to come out here. But, after a while I get lost in the rhythm and remember how good it makes me feel,” his smile brightened as he spoke. “It’s just that my life got complicated, and I haven’t been out here for a little while.”

“Oh, sorry,” I offered, unsure of what to say next. He looked like he wanted to spend time chatting, but I just wanted some time to myself to reflect on how the interview had gone. Donnie had asked me to call him the

minute I was finished, but I couldn't very well do that with a dark-haired stranger sitting next to me, listening to my personal business. No, I needed to excuse myself before I got sucked in.

"You look distressed, everything okay there honey?" I grimaced at the term of endearment.

"What did you just call me?" He looked as if he didn't understand my question. "Why did you call me honey? You don't even know me."

"Because of your hair, it reminds me of the honey jar that sits on my mom's kitchen counter," he shrugged. "I didn't mean to offend you, you just appear to have a lot on your mind. I don't mind listening if you want to share."

"I don't normally open up to people that I don't know." I replied, skeptically.

"Sometimes talking to a stranger can be better than someone you know, kind of like a judgment-free zone."

"Maybe." I shifted my feet nervously on the sandy surface beneath me. "I just feel a little unsettled, like I should be doing something exciting with my life. I came out to L.A. for a job interview. I'm a twenty-four-year-old chef, I graduated at the top of my class, and I have a successful job that I love back home. I think I aced my interview, but now I'm terrified that the owner won't offer me the job. Other than my best friend back home, there isn't a whole lot to keep me there. So far, I love this city, even though I've been here less than a day and haven't seen much of it. On top of everything else, I'm surrounded by thousands of people, and I've never been so lonely in my life."

He sat there staring, as if uncertain of what to say. I knew I had just laid a lot on him, but he offered to listen. The longer the silence drew on, the more exposed I felt.

Finally, he spoke up, choosing to ignore my comment about feeling lonely.

“If you aced the interview, why wouldn’t the guy call you back?” His dark brow furrowed in confusion.

“I didn’t meet with him today, he’s off in London, I met with his general managers. Honestly, I don’t know how it all works. When I graduated from culinary school, I was whisked right into a successful restaurant, and I haven’t had to do any of this before, my work has always spoken for me.”

“I’m sure you were awesome,” he smiled warmly; a small dimple formed to the left of his mouth. I couldn’t help but stare.

“How can you say that? You don’t even know me,” I said, rolling my eyes, yet unable to hide my smile.

“Well then, let’s change that shall we? I’m Sebastian.” He held out a large hand for me to shake; I accepted it tentatively. The electric charge I felt when our skin connected was enough to make me hold my breath. The butterflies bounced wickedly off the sides of my empty stomach. His hand engulfed mine; they were strong, and I felt the hint of small calluses at the tip of each finger as our hands reluctantly pulled apart.

“Brooke,” I offered shyly. Sebastian? Slowly, my mind began assembling the pieces together, eyes widening slightly as I finally realized just whom it was that I had been chatting with. Sebastian Miles, lead singer and songwriter of the rock band Paradox, my favorite band in the entire universe. No freaking way! I smiled carefully, trying my best not to give away the fact that I had recognized him. I didn’t want him to think that I was a crazed fan. Besides, he seemed to like the fact that I didn’t fawn all over him. Maybe he preferred the anonymity, I know I would. I could only assume how

difficult it was to be someone in his shoes, aside from the money and fame there had to be a huge downside to losing your freedom.

"It's lovely to meet you Brooke; now we're no longer strangers. As I was saying, I am sure you did a great job." I stared at him incredulously before shaking my head.

"I see what you did there," I nudged him gently with my elbow. "But thank you, it means a lot to hear it, even if you don't know a thing about me."

"Let's change that as well, where are you from?"

I pondered his question, uncertain if it was wise to share my personal information with him, celebrity or not. He raised his brow, as if asking the question once more.

"Michigan. I flew in yesterday and head back tomorrow."

"Whirlwind trip. Be careful, the jet lag can be harsh. Michigan huh? Never been. What's it like there?"

"Cold right now, but beautiful. The lakes are amazing, and I love camping up north." I replied, smiling fondly at the memories of my last trip to Lake Michigan.

"You have a beautiful smile Brooke." I felt the blush spreading rapidly across my face, and immediately my hands flew up to cover my cheeks. "Aw, don't hide, you're even prettier when you blush." He leaned forward, lifting a lock of hair from my face. As he tucked it behind my ear, his fingers brushed lightly over the sensitive skin below my earlobe. I shivered uncontrollably at his touch, and immediately blushed again.

"So beautiful," he whispered.

"Well, it was very nice meeting you Sebastian." I held out my hand for a parting shake, and he cocked his head slightly before realization spread across his face, *I wanted him to leave*. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy his company; I honestly did. It was more of what I felt by him being this

close to me. I felt a sense of longing, a feeling that I hadn't recalled in years. Suddenly, having him that close to me left me feeling raw and exposed, as if he could read my thoughts just by the reddening of my painfully pale cheeks. Damn my inability to hide my true feelings.

He grasped my hand gently, his reach appearing tentative this time, before pulling it up to his lips and placing a delicate kiss on the back.

"It was delightful to meet you too, Brooke. I hope that everything works out for you. Who knows, maybe you'll get the job, and I'll see you around again," he gave me a wink, and I watched as he jogged down the pier, away from me. The afternoon was already starting to look up.

I turned and made my way back to the edge of the parking lot, where I had entered. I pulled out my phone to call Jade; she would die when she heard who had just spent the past twenty minutes with me. After five rings she didn't answer so I hung up, neglecting to leave a message, and slipped it back into the small pocket inside my shorts. I made my way down the wooden path that led me to the parking lot, completely unaware of my surroundings, totally caught up in my thoughts, which is why I didn't see them.

"Hey baby, where are you headed in such a hurry?" Fear crept up my spine and made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I looked at both of them and knew there was no way I could get away. I opened my mouth to respond, but the words never made it past my lips, everything around me went black.

CHAPTER THREE

Sebastian~

When I woke this morning I had been in a grumpy mood, same as the previous two days. I haven't been able to write music in months, something that has never happened to me. Now here I am, Sebastian Miles, front man for the rock band Paradox, I have always been able to pen a song, it's what has made us famous. Our lyrics have helped sell albums and buy us fans. I guess our good looks haven't hurt either. I'm aware that I am a good looking man, so are the other guys in the band, but the only thing my looks have made me were money and lonely. I have women falling at my feet, and I am ashamed of the stories reported about how I used to get around. I'll admit that I'm not proud of a lot of the decisions that I have made since becoming famous.

I had a girlfriend once, but one bad decision and she was taken away. Out of my life forever. That kind of blow can be devastating to a young man who spent most of his days thinking he had the world in his grasp. I've since

learned that being with a woman physically doesn't do anything to help the emotional hurt buried deep inside. The idea of finding someone to spend the rest of my life with always nags at the back of my brain. My parents have been happily married for more than thirty years, and watching them interact with one another even today makes the emptiness in my heart ache that much more. My brother, Travis, has been married to his beautiful wife, Natalie, for ten years, having dated since they were fifteen, and eloping at the tender age of nineteen. Their daughter, Olivia, just turned three and is the light of my life. Even my little sister has found happiness, having just announced her engagement to Ben, the man of her dreams. I am surrounded by love; only none of it is my own. I know my family loves me immensely. We're a tight-knit group that enjoys one another's company, and we spend every Sunday night gathered at our parent's house for dinner and a jam session. Life is full, I am busy, money is great, but I am lonely. I know all too well what I am missing, and that sucks.

The past year had been rough on me. During my time in rehab I vowed to put the past behind me and start over. Gone were the drugs and the booze, and I most certainly didn't need the distraction of a woman. All of the women in my life since Charlotte had been after me for only one reason, to advance their careers. I honestly wouldn't mind having a woman in my life, but the idea of meeting the right one seemed like a fairy tale at this point. Mom had always told me that when the right one came along I would know it. I didn't understand what she meant by that, but I didn't doubt her. Mom had always been my biggest supporter, even through the rough times, and when it came to love, she and dad had something I could only dream about.

Running always seemed to clear my head, even in high school when I was dealing with all of the teenage drama that envelopes you when you are young and impressionable, I enjoyed running. The beach was quiet this morning, surprising considering that it was a sunny eighty-two degrees without a cloud in the sky. Perfect weather for a walk or a run, which was the norm for this health conscious town.

I had just made it past my first checkpoint when I saw her sitting on the bench, sipping coffee and staring sadly out over the vast expanse of water before her. Without giving it a second thought, I slowed down, joining her on the bench. My lungs screamed at me in protest as I had pushed myself too hard. I startled her when I spoke; she was so deep in thought. When she turned to me, the lonely ache in my heart dissipated. She looked like an angel. Her hair was the color of honey, loose curls draped down past the middle of her back. She had eyes the color of the ocean. Her lips were the prettiest color of pink, and a slightly upturned nose sat perfectly in the center of her heart shaped face. My heart warmed instantly, everything around me seemed to fade into oblivion, the only thing that mattered sat right before me. For the first time in nearly two years, I felt something stir within me, I fell hard, and I didn't know a thing about her, but I felt myself wishing I could change that.

We made polite small talk; I couldn't believe how nervous I was. I'm Sebastian Miles, rock star and wooer of women everywhere; I never get nervous. But with her, I was a nervous wreck, it took all the strength I had just to ask her name. It was obvious that she didn't recognize me, and for once I was glad. We chatted about her interview, and I did my best to encourage her, hoping that I helped boost her confidence. I silently prayed that she

would get the job, and I might have the chance to run into her again. I felt a strong desire to remain there on that bench for the rest of the day, but I knew she had some place to be, and I didn't want to come off too desperate. The problem was that she was leaving, going back home to Michigan, that was a long ways away. I had never been there, but I had the sudden urge to pack up everything I owned and follow her all the way back to that little mitten. But instead, I said my goodbyes and made my way down the pier, finishing my run. In hindsight, I should have stayed with her; my focus had been shot to hell, and there was no way I could think about anything other than her beautiful blue eyes. One look at her, and all smoothness went straight out the window, I became a lovesick teenager again.

I hit my final landmark and turned around, hoping that she might still be sitting on the bench, but knowing in my heart that she would be long gone. The song on my music app switched, and I passed the space where we had been sitting not fifteen minutes earlier. I smiled, remembering her sweet demeanor, and the way her name had rolled off her tongue. I reached the wooden path and stopped dead in my tracks. There, lying along the edge of the path, was a young woman dressed in black shorts with a pink tank, the ache in my heart was back, honey-blond hair tinged with blood spilled out onto the path. As I got closer, the muscles around my heart clenched tighter, making it harder to breathe, it was her. Someone had hurt my Brooke.

Suddenly, everything around me went silent as I dropped to one knee. I cupped the back of her head gently and bent to listen for a heartbeat. She was alive, thankfully, and still fully clothed. I murmured a silent prayer of thanks, and as I inched closer I could hear the

faint sounds of a garbled cry. She was trying to speak.

"It's okay Brooke; I'm here with you. You are safe now." I moved closer to inspect the wound on her head; it appeared to be from a hard blow. Her eyelids fluttered open, and I shifted my body so that she could see my face and hopefully recognize me as someone she could trust, even though she barely knew me. Her eyes grew large when they locked onto mine, and I knew she was about to panic.

"Honey, it's okay. I'm not going to hurt you; I'm here to help. I just found you on the path here; you've got a nasty bump on your head. I need for you to trust me okay. I'm going to pick you up and take you to get some help." She nodded slightly before squeezing her eyes shut again. I slipped my arms beneath her and stood, lifting her limp body.

The walk to the car felt as if I were going in slow motion. My head spun frantically as I decided my best course of action. Getting to the hospital in this traffic would take too long. I grabbed my phone and punched in the number of the band's personal physician and close friend. Steve had been a surgeon at a prominent hospital in Colorado when we had a chance meeting at a charity event. I made him an offer he couldn't refuse, and now he works at the hospital here in L.A. part-time, and remains on-call for the band, touring with us every twelve to fifteen months. He answered on the fourth ring.

"Yeah buddy, what's up?" he asked, voice sounding a touch out of breath.

"Yeah, you okay there Steve? Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Oh sure, no I'm okay, just wrestling around on the floor with the kids. Everything okay?"

"I've got a bit of a problem; I need you to meet me at

my house and bring your medical bag. I think stitches may be in order.” I said, squinting at the wound on her head, where the blood had finally begun to coagulate and slowed down to a slow trickle. I looked around the backseat and grabbed a T-shirt I had tossed back there yesterday, placing it carefully over the wound to try and stop the bleeding.

“What have you done to yourself now, Sebastian?” he asked, as I continued driving.

“It’s not me; it’s a young woman I met at the beach. We talked a bit, and she went her way, and I went mine,” I switched on the turn signal, jumping on the freeway toward home. “Are you on your way? I’m only about ten minutes out.” I blew out a long breath, trying to calm my nerves. “I finished my run and found her lying on the path, she was attacked and has a bad gash on the back of her head, it’s bleeding pretty badly. Getting her to the hospital would take too long, I figured it was faster for you to come to me. Is that okay?”

“Yes, of course. I’m already on the road and will be there just about the same time you’re pulling in. Is she conscious?”

“In and out, but she is breathing. She is pretty pale.” I looked over at her, instantly wishing I had chosen the hospital. I sped up, hoping no one pulled out in front of me as I made my way along the winding neighborhood streets.

“That would most likely be from shock and the blood loss. I’m sure everything will be okay.” He replied, doing his best to reassure me. “Head wounds bleed a lot; that’s normal. Where are you now?”

“I’m just turning onto my street; I’ll see you in a few then?”

“Right behind you buddy,” he chuckled. I checked the

rearview mirror, and there he was, turning onto my street, true to his word and always on time. We pulled into the drive, and I carefully lifted her out of the car and started for the house, Steve following closely behind, probing her head.

“This is bad, but not too worrisome. I’ll clean it up and put in a few staples,” he pulled out a funny looking contraption, holding it up for me to inspect. “Can you get me some clean towels, two soaked and two dry, and bring me that trash can.” I ran to the bathroom to gather the supplies and came back to find her lying on my dining room table with Steve at one end holding a syringe. He peered up at me from his position and answered my unspoken question. “Something to numb the area, I don’t want her to wake up screaming in pain. It’s going to be startling enough for her to come to and find herself in a stranger’s home. I’ve also given her a shot of antibiotics, and a painkiller; she’s going to have a nasty headache. You say you just met her?” I nodded.

I watched intently as he cleaned her head wound, admiring the way he worked so calmly, with such precision. Fifteen minutes later she was good as new, except for the few pieces of metal in her head, lying on a spare bed located in my guest wing. Steve finished washing his hands and found me standing in the doorway, watching her sleep.

“She’ll probably be out for another hour or two. I should warn you that when she wakes up she might not remember you. It’s not uncommon for patients with head trauma to appear confused, or not remember events that happened a few days prior to the incident. Here are the prescriptions. I think you should bring her to the hospital for a head scan tomorrow morning. I want to be sure there isn’t any internal damage.” I took the slip of paper

from his outstretched hand and looked down at it.

“Thanks, Steve,” I ran a hand over my mouth and sighed. “She’s going to be okay?”

“I think she’s going to be fine, but I want to be sure.” He furrowed his brow before continuing. “Is there anything you want to share with me? The way you’re staring at her leads me to believe that something is going on here.”

“I don’t know, I can’t put it into words, but there is something about her...” My mind drifted for a moment, thinking about her smile. “It’s like when you come across the perfect gift for someone you care about, and you know you just have to buy it, that’s how it was when I met her today. There’s just something about her that makes me want to know her better, to take care of her. I don’t even know her last name.”

“Oh, I do, it’s Caldwell, when I slipped her shorts down to give her a shot her phone fell out of the pocket,” he said, handing me the phone.

“Yeah, she told me her first name at the beach. Brooke Caldwell.” I said her full name out loud, it sounded great rolling off my tongue as well. I said it a few more times, making Steve laugh on his way out the door.

“You’ve got it bad already my friend, and she most likely has no clue who you even are. Good luck, and make sure you get her to the hospital within a day or two for that scan.”

“You got it buddy, thanks for everything.” With that, he was out the door, and we were all alone.

I gathered a few items and set up a workstation in the corner of the guest room. I knew she would be waking up soon and, if what Steve had said was true, she might be scared to death that the attacker had kidnaped her or something. I hoped she would remember talking

with me before the incident, maybe there would be some small chance that she had felt about me the same way I had felt about her after our short meeting. I couldn't shake this feeling; I've never had a woman get to me quite the way that Brooke did. I stared at her carefully, taking in all of her delicate features. Her hands were small, yet they looked strong, most likely from years of working in the kitchen. She wasn't very tall, maybe five foot five, and looked quite fit. There was a vulnerability in her eyes that made me sad; it stirred something within me that made me want to look after her and protect her, the way my father cares for my mother. I wanted to know all about her. Did she have someone that already loved her? Did she love them? Was she leaving Michigan to escape something or someone in her life? Was she happy there? And finally, how could I convince her to stay here with me for a few days, just so we could have a chance to know one another better? And if she did agree to stay, would I be able to let her go when she decided it was time to go home?

