

POPPY & THE BEAST

BONUS EPILOGUE

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“How long do you reckon it’ll take before Bobby Lee whips it out and calls for a ruler?” Iris rolls her eyes as her pink-painted lips purse.

“It’s not that bad. He’s actually being really nice.”

“If you say so.” She shakes her head and scowls before stuffing a shrimp canapé in her mouth.

I glance at Bobby Lee—which is hard to do since my eyes have been locked on Mac in his black suit and crisp white shirt all damn night. That man makes anything look good, but let me tell you, Mac in a suit is enough to make a grown woman weep. And her panties get more than a little damp.

But it’s true. Ever since I spilled my guts out to Bobby Lee in Cookie’s kitchen a few months back, he’s turned over a new leaf. Not once has he tried talking me into moving back to Savannah or said any of his usual crap about our breakup being a temporary thing. He’s essentially turned back into a good friend, much to my relief.

“No, Rissy. I think he gets it.”

We both look over again to where Mac and Bobby Lee are in conversation by the bar of the reception hall. It’s the night of Vern Collinsworth’s retirement party—one that’s been postponed twice now due to him getting cold feet about ditching his career. Hell, I reckon I’d have second thoughts too if I knew retirement would mean Bunny fawning all over me twenty-four/seven. But the mood is bright and the party is in full swing, zydeco band and all, God help us.

Mac glances over and catches my eye, making my knees threaten to give out when he sends me a wink. I really should rescue him since it’s clear Bobby Lee is doing most of the talking and I’m sure half of it is about the exciting world of accounting. It has me feeling sorry for Mac that he doesn’t drink. But Iris grabs my arm just as I’m about to make my move, my mind on finding an empty alcove so I can feel Mac up a little.

“Wait a sec,” she mumbles over her mouthful of shrimp as she pulls me over toward one wall and out of earshot of all our relatives and nosy-ass friends. I send her a curious look because it’s not like her to get secretive or serious at a party. I wait while she chews and swallows, checking to make sure my dress hasn’t shifted to show my bra.

I hardly got out of the yellow bedroom wearing this thing when Mac caught sight of me earlier. Suffice it to say, he likes my dress. Although he assured me he’s gonna like it a whole lot more later tonight when he sneaks in my room and strips it off me. All this tiptoeing around at the inn is driving me nuts, but I’m not missing my chance with Mac tonight after seeing him in that suit.

Iris finally clears her throat and draws her lips between her teeth. My attention focuses fully on her because this is officially getting weird.

“Iris, what’s going on?”

She doesn’t meet my eyes.

“Iris!” I pull on the black skirt of her low-cut dress to snap her back to reality and prompt her to spit it out.

“Okay, fine.” She sighs and slumps her shoulders. “I just wanted you to be the first to know that I’m moving to Wilmington.”

My jaw drops. “What? Why?” I mean, not that Wilmington isn’t nice, but...

“I just need a change of scenery.” Her eyes don’t meet mine but scan the room instead. Something is definitely off, and I suddenly feel guilty. Iris and I have always been close, but I’m afraid my move to New York has left her a bit... untethered. I reach out and grab her hand this time.

“Is this because I left? I’m so sorry. I never wanted you to feel left behind.”

“No. It’s not that. Well, I mean, you striking out on your own makes me crave a little more liberation, sure. But no. It’s just time for me to get some space.” She still hasn’t met my eyes and I’m getting worried.

But then it dawns on me. I turn my head and catch sight of Cookie laughing at something Bunny just said, her head thrown back and her hand slapping Bunny’s lace-covered arm. Mama is brushing lint off Daddy’s suit coat a few feet over and he’s batting her hand away.

Yup. That’s got to be it.

Since I left, Cookie, Mama, and Bunny have undoubtedly focused all their attention on my sister and she doesn’t want to make me feel bad by telling me they’re smothering her to death. I watch as Bunny calls Bobby Lee over to pull him into their conversation and they all surround him like a flock of turkey vultures wearing lipstick.

Yeah, that would be a lot for anyone to take.

“I can talk to the coven and get them to lay off you a little.” I offer her a half smile.

She finally meets my eyes with her identical blue ones. “You know I can hold my own, Pops. I just tell them something scandalous and they leave me alone—for the most part.”

She’s grinning now, but she’s so full of shit.

“What are you gonna do in Wilmington? Do you have a job lined up?”

She scrunches her nose, which tells me everything I need to know. But she says it anyway. “Uh, not yet.”

“Rissy.”

“I know. But I’ll find somethin’ when I get there. I have some money saved, so I’ll get by. Besides, I’m gonna stay with a friend from school.”

I don’t have a leg to stand on since I pretty much did the same thing, just in a different city. But I can tell she’s holding back on me, especially when she tucks her hair behind her ear. That’s one of my sister’s tells. “What aren’t you sayin’?”

“Nothing! I swear!” she responds too quickly, looking me firmly in the eye this time—a move that feels a bit too calculated. This ain’t my first day.

But I won’t get anywhere with this tonight, so I need to let it go... for now.

I pull her in for a hug and we both have the same idea to smack each other on the butt to distract from the unspoken weirdness and call an end to the serious portion of the evening.

“Ouch!” we yelp simultaneously and then we’re laughing. I’ve missed the hell out of her.

“God, we need a drink.”

“My thoughts exactly.” I link my arm in hers and head for the bar where my man is waiting, one of those wicked eyebrows raised at me—no doubt he saw the spankings and is getting ideas.

But we’re waylaid on the way to the bar by Cookie.

“Just the girls I’m looking for!” She grabs a hand of each of us and I send Mac a “save me” look over my shoulder. He just leans against the bar and drops his eyes to my ass. Bastard.

“Cookie, can we at least get a glass of champagne before you sacrifice us to whatever you’ve got planned?”

“No time for that.” She yanks us forward with a strength that belies her age and size, making me wonder what the heck she’s been doing since I moved from town. Has she been lifting? But that thought flies from my head at her next words. “You two need to lead the line dancing.”

Oh, good God.

But there’s no time to protest because, in the next two seconds, she’s shoved us in front of the entire crowd of sixty or so retirees, friends, and family and is clapping her hands for everyone’s attention.

I look at Iris and she’s staring back at me with the same horror I assume fills my eyes. I swear to God, if Cookie makes me do the chicken dance in front of Mac, I’m gonna die of embarrassment. I mean, I like to think I can make a lot of things look sexy, but I challenge *anyone* to make flapping your arms like chicken wings translate to, “Come and get me, you sexy hunk of burnin’ love.”

“Okay, everybody!” Cookie shouts. “Line up! Poppy and Iris are leading this next dance.” She hooks her thumbs back toward us. “Just do what they do.” Then, to the band, “Hit it!”

The drums start first and I have no clue what song might be coming. But when the accordion joins in and then the bass, my jaw drops and I bust out laughing just as the first words of “Blurred Lines”

by Robin Thicke sound through the speakers. Iris is giggling her ass off and we waste no time before launching into the steps of the dance.

Cookie is the first to join in, her dress fluttering around her knees and her eyes trained on our feet as she learns the steps. And then Mama and Bunny are there, along with half the ladies in town and a handful of the men.

I throw myself into the dance, having a ball and laughing like crazy as we step, shuffle, and clap to the beat.

It's no surprise that Mac doesn't join in, but that doesn't mean he's not enjoying the dance from his perch across the room. I can feel his eyes on me and it warms me to my core. I can't think of too many things I'd love more than a night like this—my family surrounding me and Mac right in there with the rest of the crazy loons.

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"Congratulations." I stroke my hand down the front of Mac's white button-down and grin up at him. "You officially survived your first Savannah social function."

He sits down on the bed in the yellow room and it groans under his weight as he pulls me into him, his hands settling themselves on my butt. "You have a good night?"

"Yeah." I know I'm smiling as I replay the evening in my mind. "Although talking to Bunny had me fearing a bit for Vern's future." I let my hands still on Mac. "She's already signed him up for half the committees in town—the poor man probably just wants to spend the next twenty years fishing."

Mac makes one of his humming noises. He likely doesn't give two hoots about Vern and his fishing, but I know he likes it when I ramble on like I do. Lord knows why, but my voice tends to make his shoulders relax.

"What were you and Bobby Lee talking about?" I busy my hands unbuttoning his shirt.

Everyone was exhausted after the party, so I'm not too worried about being caught with Mac tonight. Not that I think Cookie would actually bust in the room and demand he vacate the premises to protect my virtue—but a scolding eye over the breakfast table packs more punch than you might think.

"Not much," comes Mac's unsurprising response.

I roll my eyes at him. "Y'all were talking for a good twenty minutes."

His shoulder hitches half an inch. "Honestly, the guy was distracted."

"Well, I suppose it was a big night for him too. He's officially taking over the practice now." I resume the unbuttoning and Mac gets distracted by the strap of my dress as my movements cause it to fall down my shoulder. He helps it along with a little growling sound.

"Thought for a minute he was distracted by you. Wasn't looking forward to putting him in his place."

I smile at that, secretly loving his possessive side. “You don’t need to worry about that, big guy. He’s over me.”

Mac nods, but his eyes are on the skin he’s exposing. He leans forward and places an open-mouthed kiss on my collarbone. “You’re sexy as hell in this dress. Couldn’t keep my eyes off you.”

My head falls back and desire pools in my core at the touch of his mouth and the feel of his breath against my skin. I thread my fingers through his hair and hold him to me. I’m formulating my strategy to get him naked in the quickest way possible when he pulls back again, clearly not on the exact same page for some ridiculous reason.

I scowl but it drops at his next words.

“He was watching Iris.”

“Wait. What?” What the hell is he talking about?

His eyes hit mine. “Your friend. Bobby Lee. He was watching Iris.”

My hands fall from Mac’s hair and I stare at him. Then I remember Iris not meeting my eye and nervously scanning the crowd. Was she avoiding Bobby Lee? No. That doesn’t make any sense.

I try replaying her actions throughout the night and my mind catches on her comment about Bobby Lee whipping it out to compete with Mac. At the time, I assumed her level of disgust was for my benefit, but maybe...

Well, I’ll be damned.

“You think?” My eyes widen at Mac.

“The guy was trying to be subtle, but he sucked at it.”

“Oh my God. But she hates him.” I wave a hand in the air. “Well, I mean, she loves him like we all do, but not like that. He annoys the crap out of her.”

Mac just gives me another half shrug, this revelation obviously not remotely as mind-blowing to him as it is to me. *Bobby Lee and Iris?*

Mac is back to undressing me now, but my mind is racing. “She’s moving to North Carolina, you know. She told me tonight. Do you think *he’s* the reason she’s leaving?” The mere notion is crazy!

He hums again and reaches behind me to unzip my dress. It falls to my waist and his eyes turn smoky. Damn, that’s a good look on him.

But, no! I need answers. He can’t distract me with his hotness.

“Mac!” I smack his hand but it only makes his lips twitch. “This is no time for sex. We’re in the middle of a crisis here.”

That brings a full-on grin to his lips and my lower belly sings, despite my brain’s protest.

“No, we’re not. They’re both adults and, more importantly, they’re both adults who aren’t in this bedroom right now. Let it lie.”

My scowl is back, but he presses his thumb to my chin, forcing me to look him straight on.

“Tomorrow.” The deep timbre of his voice and the intensity of his stare fully penetrate this time. Damn him.

When he knows he’s got me, his hand drops from my face and skims down the front of my body, pulling my dress down the rest of the way and bringing goosebumps to my skin.

“Fine,” I concede, poking his chest. “But only because you’re really really good at this and I haven’t had an orgasm since last night.”

He chuckles and I feel the sound in my belly when he pulls me fully into him again. And he’s right. Everything will still be there in the morning and there’s nothing I can do about it tonight—even if I could get Iris to talk to me, the cagey wench.

“Let’s see what I can do about that,” Mac responds. And then I forget all about Iris and Bobby Lee and the whole rest of the world as Mac makes good on his word.

When his lips capture mine and the scent and taste of him fill me, I’m lost to him. Our tongues dance and our fingers explore. I moan into his mouth when he strips off my bra and massages my breasts, his caresses stoking the fire in my sex. My skin knows his touch, craves it. I can’t remember a time before my body’s addiction to this man and I don’t want to.

Before long, we’re both naked on the bed and Mac pulls me on top of him, guiding my body until he’s got me exactly where he wants me. He presses up into me as I sink down and I’m filled with him. My head falls back but his voice commands me.

“Eyes,” he growls. God, I love his sexy growl.

I force my head forward and open my eyes to find his golden-brown irises almost completely engulfed by his enlarged pupils as he thrusts up into me and hits a spot that makes me whimper.

“Mac.” I’m panting now.

“Eyes on me, honey.”

We watch each other as we move, creating a sweet rhythm that causes my entire body to go electric. My hands prop on his hard chest and even his hair brushing my palms there sparks my nerve endings as Mac continues his strokes into me and I rock my hips against him.

It doesn’t take long for my orgasm to hit and Mac is covering my mouth with his to dampen my cries. But I don’t care who hears me as the waves of my release crash over me and I buck against Mac’s solid weight below me.

He continues thrusting up at an increasingly frantic pace as I ride my orgasm out and whimper into his mouth, and when I feel his jaw tighten under me, I know he’s close as well. Mac does a better job of staying quiet than I did, but that’s not unusual in any sense. His last forceful strokes send my eyes rolling back into my head as his movements administer a delicious assault to my already over-sensitized sex. I practically squeal at the sensations and then Mac rolls us so I’m under him and he’s on top of me, still inside me.

“Fuck,” he mutters into my neck as his breaths come out in pants to match my own.

“Exactly,” I reply and I feel his lips curve into a smile against my skin.

His chest rumbles with one of his hums and my own lips tip up in response while I stroke my fingers down his spine, the skin there damp with sweat.

He nips at my neck and then, as he often does, he blows my mind without any warning whatsoever.

“Need you to move in with me.”

I freeze, causing him to lift his head so I get his eyes again. He doesn’t repeat himself, knowing full well I heard him the first time.

My eyes drink in his every feature, from his piercing eyes to his crooked, scarred nose to that full bottom lip I always want to suck on. And there’s only one thing to say as I reach up and stroke the dark slash of one of his eyebrows.

“Okay.”

He nods slowly, the corner of his mouth tilting up again and making my belly dip, even though I just had an orgasm two seconds ago. Then he leans down for another hot kiss and we make out to celebrate this huge new development.

After another round, Mac drops his hip to the bed so he can pull my back into his front, making sure our skin makes contact from our ankles to the spot on the back of my neck where his breath tickles my hair. I almost don’t hear him when he breathes out my name.

But just the one word is enough to let me know everything he’s thinking. The rest of the world can go on moving without us, as long as we have each other and this moment and all the ones waiting ahead for us. Jobs, sneaky siblings, estranged relatives, and all the rest can wait when it’s just Mac and Poppy. And that right there has me drifting off to sleep with a smile on my lips and his solid warmth at my back.

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Thanks for reading Poppy and Mac’s bonus epilogue!

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