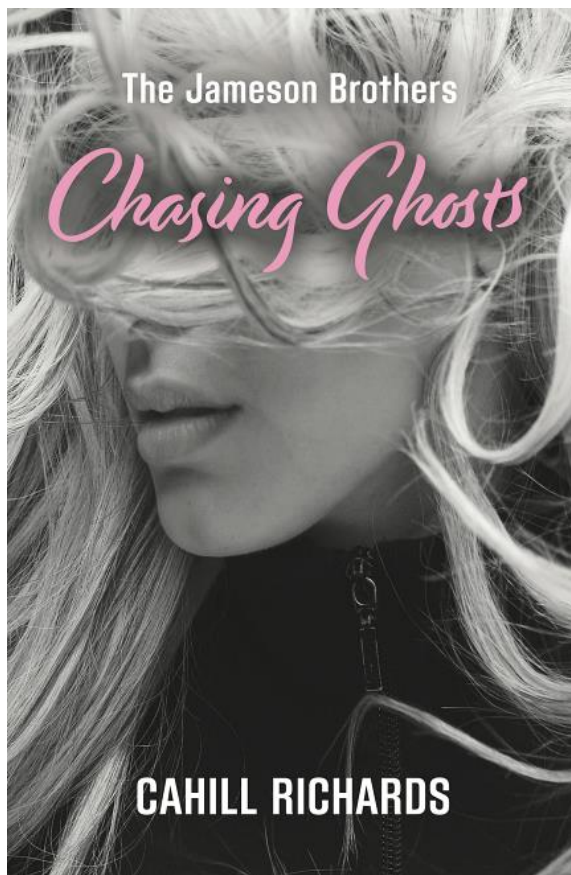




Rock star Marcus Jameson has sworn off love until singer Bethany Waters turns his world upside down. Haunted by painful pasts, can two broken hearts let go of their ghosts and trust love again?

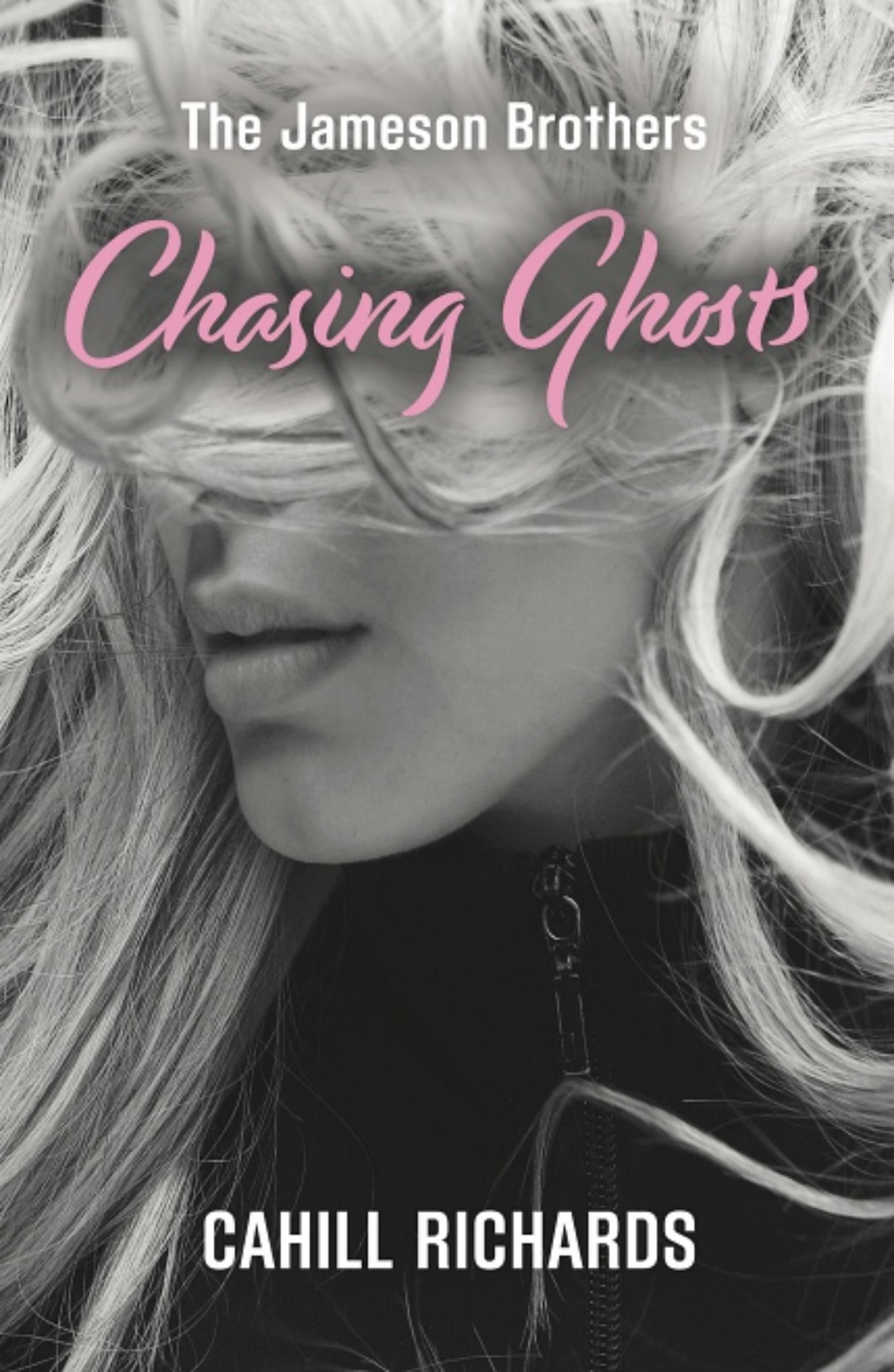
The Jameson Brothers: Chasing Ghosts

By Cahill Richards

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The Jameson Brothers

Chasing Ghosts

CAHILL RICHARDS

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CHAPTER 1

Marcus

Marcus Jameson eased open the back door that led to the kitchen of his brother's mansion and slipped in as quietly as possible. He was fairly certain the home's inhabitants would already be up since it was a little after seven in the morning. His brother Taylor and Taylor's wife Stephanie had three small boys who awoke with the sun, but he hoped everyone had slept late this morning since they'd been up until the wee hours the night before celebrating the wedding of his niece, Meghan, and her new husband, Aidan O'Donnell.

Marcus closed the door silently and stepped into the huge kitchen, glancing from one side to the other. He heard voices close by, and he momentarily froze before ducking into the next room and making his way to his guest room on the ground floor. Once inside, he closed the door, stripped off his clothes, and hurried into the shower. He felt fortunate that no one had seen him come in. He was sure his sister-in-law would figure out what he'd been up to for the last several hours if she had, and then the news would travel to the rest of the family.

It had been his first "date" with Jenny, a very sexy blonde with long legs, ample breasts, and an appetite for one-night stands. Once he'd gotten his young daughter Gabrielle to bed and made his guest for the wedding, a singer named Bethany, comfortable in her guest room, he'd snuck off from the wedding reception to make the short drive to Jenny's apartment. Just as he'd suspected, her invitation to "come by for a drink" had been her transparent petition for him to "come by to have me."

He and Jenny had enjoyed a glass of wine and some conversation together before the kissing began, but he hadn't stayed long enough to finish what they'd started. He'd made an excuse to leave, and then he'd

driven to his Malibu beach house, the home he'd shared with his ex. After sitting in his car, staring at the house for at least thirty minutes, he'd forced himself to go inside. He hadn't set foot in the house since Arielle had left him in February, and he felt uneasy being there now. What had once been his home for many years now seemed incredibly vacant, as if the ghosts of his past had moved in to haunt him. The sun hadn't yet risen or he might have donned a wetsuit and grabbed a board to get his head on straight, but deciding not to risk surfing in the dark alone, he went back to his car and drove back to Taylor's house.

And now he was bone tired. All he really wanted to do as he emerged from the shower was to lie down on his bed and sleep for a few hours, but that would have to wait. He needed to check on Gabrielle, and he needed to see how Bethany was feeling.

Bethany Waters, Marcus's guest for the wedding, had suffered an unfortunate mishap on the stairs in Taylor's house the day before and had managed to break her ankle. She'd stayed the night in his brother's house at his insistence, and as such, he felt a little ashamed of himself for sneaking out to meet up with Jenny once she'd gone to bed. But Bethany was little more than a stranger to him, after all, and he'd promised his brothers, Taylor and Matt, that he'd be a good boy and keep his hands off her. Bethany's band, Courtesan, had just been offered a record deal with the three brothers' new label, Áthas Records, which meant a personal relationship with her might be risky. Nevertheless, since meeting her, she'd been constantly occupying his thoughts.

Marcus pulled on a pair of jeans and yanked a T-shirt over his head, then strode out into the kitchen to see who belonged to the voices he'd heard when he'd come in. There at the table was his young daughter Gabrielle, her cousins Ian, Kane, and Kieran, and his guest Bethany. Taylor and Stephanie were busy at the stove cooking breakfast, and Taylor spoke to him as he sauntered in.

“Morning, Marcus,” Taylor said cheerfully. “How were the waves this morning then?”

He grinned at his brother, who was keeping up the pretense that he’d gone to do some early morning surfing to explain his absence. “I caught some good swells. It felt good to be back on my board. It’s been far too long,” he fibbed.

“Enjoyed the ride, did ya?” Taylor asked in his lilting Irish accent, chuckling to himself.

“It was good to clear my head, yeah,” he said.

“Brilliant,” Taylor said. “It’s grand to see you happy again.”

“You really shouldn’t go surfing all by yourself, Marcus,” Stephanie admonished, glancing over at him. “Especially so early in the morning. What if something happened to you?”

“There are usually other surfers out hitting the waves, too,” he said. “We keep an eye out for each other. It’s perfectly safe.”

Stephanie looked at him doubtfully, then quietly said, “I hope you’re right. Gabrielle needs you more than ever right now.”

“I’ll be careful,” he said, dropping his eyes. “What’s on the agenda today?” he asked, hoping to change the subject.

“Steve’s coming at half one for a training session,” Taylor replied. “You’re welcome to join us.”

“Sounds good, yeah,” he said. “I could use a workout.”

“Sit down, Marcus, and I’ll get you some tea,” Stephanie said. “Unless you’d rather have coffee. I made some for Bethany.”

He suddenly remembered Bethany was sitting at the table, and he turned to her, asking, “How’re you feelin’ today?”

Bethany looked up from her phone, replying, “I’m okay,” although her gloomy expression and demeanor said otherwise. Even in her melancholy state he thought she was a beautiful young woman. He usually preferred brunettes, but Bethany was quite striking with her platinum blonde hair that had just a hint of gold in it, and her creamy

porcelain skin. Her big eyes were as blue as the Irish Sea on a calm, sunny day, her full lips a dark rose, and she was tall and willowy. He loved long shapely legs on a woman, and Bethany's drove him a little wild. He'd imagined having her bare, sensual legs wrapped around his waist more than a time or two since he'd met her.

"Are you in loads of pain?" he asked as he sat down next to her.

"Poor Bethany had a rough night," Stephanie said as she put a platter of eggs and a bowl of fruit salad on the table.

"Jaysus, I'm sorry, Bethany," he said, feeling guilty for not having been around to help her. "Is there anything I can do for ya?"

"Not unless you can cut my leg off at the knee," Bethany replied, and he detected a little coldness in her voice.

"Do you need a pain pill?" he asked. "Or some ibuprofen? How about some more ice?" he offered, glancing at her splinted ankle propped up on a chair.

"Maybe some ice would help," she said, her pain evident in the expression she wore.

"You got it," he said, jumping up from the table to go to the freezer. He made up an ice pack wrapped in a dish towel and returned to the table, and while gently placing the bag on her ankle, said, "Give it a few minutes to work. I hope it'll help."

"Thanks," she said dismissively, glancing back at her phone and ending any more conversation with him. He leaned over and gave his daughter a kiss on her cheek, hoping he'd receive a better reception from her.

"And how's my baby girl this morning? Did you sleep well, Gabs?" he asked, but Stephanie answered for her.

"I think she was missing you early this morning. She wound up climbing into bed with me and Taylor," Stephanie said with a sympathetic glance at Gabrielle, and Marcus reached over to pull Gabrielle onto his lap, cuddling her close.

“Did you miss Daddy, baby girl?” he asked her very quietly, and Gabrielle nodded, laying her little head on his shoulder. “But I wasn’t gone too long, was I?”

When Gabrielle shook her head against his shoulder he noticed tears on her cheeks. He put a hand on the back of her head and stroked her soft, dark curls, asking, “Why are you so upset, Gabs? Daddy has to do things from time to time, but I’ll always come back to you. You know that, yeah?”

“I don’t want you to leave, Daddy,” she said so quietly he almost missed her response.

He hugged her closer and closed his eyes, his chin resting on top of her head. For the thousandth time he silently cursed Arielle for abandoning their sweet little daughter, then berated himself for letting his own sexual wants come before Gabrielle’s need to feel safe and secure. He should have postponed his meeting with Jenny until he and Gabrielle were more settled in Winding Hills. They’d just returned to the California town near the Santa Monica Mountains after spending two months in Costa Rica where they could both get some distance from the shock of Arielle’s departure. He hadn’t been able to stand the idea of remaining at his Malibu beach house with all the memories it held, and he thought Gabrielle might fare better, too, away from the constant reminder that her mother was no longer there.

He’d started having a house built just down the mountain from Taylor’s place in late fall of the previous year, but its construction had only recently been completed and it was sitting completely empty. He still needed to furnish it and gather the few possessions he wanted from the beach house, which was why he and Gabrielle were currently staying at his brother’s place. He reminded himself that in the coming week he needed to get busy buying furniture so that he and Gabrielle could move in and try to regain a sense of normalcy in their everyday lives. He also needed to hire a full-time nanny and enroll Gabrielle in

the preschool Taylor's four-year-old son and his brother Matt's youngest daughter attended, and he thought it might be wise to do that right away.

"How would you like to go to preschool with Ian and Mellie?" he asked his daughter. "You're three-and-a-half now, and you're so smart. I bet you'll love preschool."

Gabrielle appeared to brighten at this idea, but she also seemed hesitant. "I don't want to leave you, Daddy," she said.

He smiled even though his heart was aching for his little girl. "You don't have to worry about me, Gabs. I'll be working while you're in preschool, and when you come home I'll be done with work, so neither of us will be without the other. What d'ya think? Shall we enroll you in school tomorrow?"

Gabrielle looked up at him to smile and say, "Yes, Daddy," with excitement in her voice.

"Alright then," he said, kissing the tip of her nose. "We'll go take care of it first thing tomorrow."

Taylor walked over to the table, setting a platter of pancakes in the middle as Stephanie brought along butter and syrup, and the two of them sat down between Kane's and Kieran's high chairs. Taylor put pancakes and eggs on Ian's plate, then took some onto his own to begin feeding the eighteen-month-old twins, and he passed the platter of pancakes to Marcus before cutting the food into very small pieces for his two young sons.

Marcus eased Gabrielle back into her booster seat and put food on her plate, then offered the platters to Bethany. He began cutting Gabrielle's food into small bites and poured syrup on the pile of pancake pieces, and once Gabrielle had begun eating, he turned to get some food for himself, noticing Bethany still busy with her phone, her plate empty.

“Tuck in, Bethany,” he urged. “You need to eat to help you mend those bones you broke.”

Bethany reluctantly took a pancake and a tiny scoop of scrambled eggs from the serving dishes, then added a small amount of fruit salad to her plate. She stared down at her food, and Marcus thought he saw the beginnings of tears in her eyes.

“Are you okay, Bethany?” Stephanie asked as she put several small pieces of pancake on Kieran’s highchair tray. “Would you like something different?”

Bethany looked up at Stephanie, a bewildered look on her face. “My friend out here in LA can’t let me stay with him. He has other company at his place right now,” she blurted out.

“You’re welcome to stay right here, Bethany,” Stephanie assured her. “There’s no rush for you to leave.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” Bethany said. “You guys have been great and very welcoming, and I can’t thank you enough, but I really feel like I’m imposing on you. I’ll figure something out.”

“Where’s home?” Stephanie asked. “Can we get you to your parents’ house or some other family who can help take care of you?”

Bethany shook her head. “I don’t have any family, and I never got an apartment because I figured I wouldn’t be there anyway,” she admitted. “My band’s on the road at least fifty weeks out of the year.”

“Your parents are gone?” Stephanie asked.

“They died in a car accident when I was eight,” Bethany confirmed.

“I’m so sorry,” Stephanie said empathetically. “I lost my parents when I was seventeen.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Bethany said with sincerity. “Do you have any other family?”

“I have a brother who lives in Connecticut. We’re not super close,” Stephanie replied. “And I have some distant relatives across the pond,

I suppose, since my dad was from Ireland and my mother was Swedish, but I don't know where any of them are. Taylor and I came close to tracking down a great aunt of mine when we were in Ireland for our honeymoon."

"It's weird being an orphan, isn't it?" Bethany remarked.

"Kane, Kieran, and Gabrielle are the only ones at this table who aren't. Marcus and I lost our parents, too, and Steph and I adopted Ian," Taylor put in, and Bethany's eyes widened in amazement.

"Holy crap," she said incredulously. "We're like an orphan's club here. How old were you when you lost your parents?"

"Our mother died of cancer when I was eleven," Taylor said. "Marcus must've been six, nearly seven, and Matt was almost sixteen. Our da died not long after."

"I'm sorry. Did you have other family to take the three of you in?" Bethany asked.

"Actually, there were five of us, and no family could be found before we were shipped here and there. Matt tried to keep us together, but I was eventually taken to a group home and Marcus wound up in foster care. We've no idea what became of our younger brother, Jake, nor our baby sister, Caitie. We've never been able to find either of them."

"That's awful," Bethany commiserated. "I'm sorry for you both. Did you stay in the group home until you were of age, Taylor?" she asked.

Taylor's face grew somber and he quietly said, "Nah, I couldn't stay there. I managed to escape when I was twelve. I took care of myself from then on."

"I did the same thing when I was sixteen," Bethany said quietly. "What about you Stephanie? Did you live on the street, too?"

"I was a lot more fortunate than you and Taylor," Stephanie replied. "I'd already started modeling and my agency had a models'

apartment, so I was allowed to stay there for a while. And I became very good friends with a photographer, and he and his boyfriend let me move in with them until I'd earned enough to get a place of my own. They're still two of my very best friends to this day. Maybe they'll come for a visit while you're here and you'll get to meet them. I'm sure you'd love Derek and Wade."

"You can't help but love them," Taylor remarked. "They're quite a pair."

"Maybe I'll call Derek today and see when they can come for a visit. It's been too long since I've seen them," Stephanie said as if thinking out loud.

"That might be a good idea, Beauty," Taylor said. "I'll be very busy at the studio for the next couple of months. It'd be nice for you to have some company around here, especially with our new wee one coming soon," he said as he reached his hand over to rub Stephanie's belly.

"Yes, it would," Stephanie said with a thoughtful expression. "I hope you'll decide to stay, Bethany. This big house gets really lonely when Taylor's working and Ian's at school."

"Maybe the two of you can help Mara decorate my new house," Marcus put in. "There's loads of furniture to buy, and I'm sure it'd look better with a woman's touch. Mara seemed excited when I asked her to decorate for me. Maybe you and Bethany could give her a hand, Stephanie."

"I'd be happy to help, Marcus," Stephanie said. "What do you think, Bethany? Do you want to help us spend Marcus's money?"

"I think I'd slow you down, hobbling around on my crutches," Bethany said, still looking rather gloomy.

"We've a wheelchair around here somewhere, I think, from when Aunt Ruby visited and had her little mishap, don't we, Steph?" Taylor asked.

“We do, and I know just where it is,” Stephanie replied. “You won’t have to hobble around at all, Bethany. We’ll just wheel you around.”

“You’re pregnant, Stephanie. I don’t think you need to push me around in a wheelchair,” Bethany protested.

“Mara can push you, or one of the security men can,” Taylor said. “You should do it, Bethany. I’m sure you don’t get loads of female companionship on the road with a band full of men.”

“I guess I can help,” Bethany acquiesced. “I mean, unless I find somewhere to go.”

“I think my wife has her mind made up that you’re staying here, so you can put any notions of leaving out of your head,” Taylor said with a grin. “You’ve no idea how persistent and determined my Beauty is, do ya?”

“Better just say you’ll stay, Bethany,” Marcus said, putting a hand on her back. “You’ll never win, especially if she gets Maggie in on it, too.”

“That’s true,” Taylor said. “Our sister-in-law can be very persuasive.”

“Please stay, Bethany,” Marcus said quietly, giving her back a gentle rub, and when she glanced up at his face, her eyes stared straight into his.

“Okay,” she said, not breaking eye contact with him. “I’ll stay... for now.”

CHAPTER 2

Bethany

After breakfast, Marcus insisted on doing the clean-up, and Taylor and Stephanie took their boys and Gabrielle up to the playroom on the second floor, leaving Bethany alone with Marcus. “Would you like me to help you back to your room so you can have a lie down?” Marcus asked her.

“No, I’ll just sit here and finish my coffee, I think,” she said. “It’s hard to get comfortable in bed with this splint on my leg.”

“Maybe we can come up with something better,” Marcus said. “Let me think on it while I clean up.”

Marcus gathered the dirty dishes from the table and took them to the sink, then grabbed the butter and syrup, stowing them away in the largest refrigerator Bethany had ever seen. He loaded the dishwasher and began washing up the griddle and skillet by hand, stealing glances at her all the while.

“Would you like another cup of coffee?” he asked her, and when she nodded, he brought the pot to the table to pour her a second cup. He moved the sugar bowl and creamer near her and gave her a kiss on top of her head. “I’m glad you’ve decided to stay,” he said, running his hand down her shoulder and arm. “I meant it when I told you I want to get to know you better.”

She reeled a little from the feel of his hand on her arm and her stomach did a flip. One of the reasons she’d been adamant about going elsewhere to convalesce was the effect he seemed to have on her. He’d kissed her a few times yesterday and she was a little afraid of the way he’d made her feel. Staying at the Jamesons’ and being so close to him all the time without wanting to be *very* close to him would be difficult at best, but as soon as the record deal was signed between her band

and Áthas Records, he'd be her employer in a way. A personal relationship with him was probably a really bad idea.

Her emotional armor went up and she searched for a way to distance him, choosing sarcasm as her shield. "Looks like you got to know someone else better this morning while you were surfing," she said, staring at the hickey on his neck. "Either that or you had an unfortunate encounter with a sucker fish."

She thought she saw his cheeks flush slightly, but he remained cool and collected, mumbling, "Something like that," as he turned and strode back to the sink. He got out a spray bottle of cleaner and brought a cloth with him to wipe down the high chair trays and table, and she studied him as he worked. The man was absolutely, breathtakingly gorgeous with his sandy blonde shoulder-length hair and tall, muscular physique. His nose was thin and straight, he had a firm chin and jawline covered in stubble, and Bethany kicked herself for wanting to have her lips on his neck like some other lucky woman had very recently.

Marcus glanced at her, and when he caught her watching him he paused his work, his penetrating brownish-hazel eyes looking right through the wall she'd built around herself as he stared her down. She let her eyes drop, breaking the connection, and took a sip from her coffee. "You didn't tell me you were a foster kid, too," she mentioned.

"I'm sure I had it easier than you did," he said. "I was only in one foster home, not nine like yourself."

She was impressed he'd remembered the exact number of foster homes she'd told him she'd lived in during their conversation the day before, and she was curious to know more about him. "Are you close with your foster parents? Why didn't they adopt you?" she probed.

"I haven't seen them in fifteen years," he replied. "They didn't want a son. Just a farmhand."

She nodded empathetically, knowing the scenario and the feeling all too well. “I’m sorry,” she said sincerely. “Sounds like your childhood sucked as much as mine did.”

Marcus returned the cleaning spray and cloth to the counter and came back to the table to check her ice bag. It was melting and dripping, creating a tiny puddle on the floor. He removed it and went to make her a fresh one, then sat down next to her, placing the new ice pack on her ankle.

“Is the ice helping?” he asked, and as he lightly stroked her cheek with one hand, his touch sent a slow tingle up her spine as she nodded. “Would you rather stay inside, or would you prefer some fresh air?” he asked. “I think I’ve a couple ideas to make you more comfortable than you are in your bedroom.”

Her stomach flipped as she imagined several ways he could make her more comfortable, then quickly chased those images out of her mind before she answered him. “It might be nice to get outside for a little while,” she said quietly, peering out the large picture window by the table. “It looks like a beautiful day.”

“Alright,” he said, giving her cheek a final caress. “Give me just a minute.”

Marcus got up from the table again and disappeared out the back door. She wondered what he was doing and where he’d gone, but his absence gave her a chance to steady herself and try to shake off the stirrings his caresses had elicited. She couldn’t allow herself to have any feelings for him other than friendship, and she knew it was going to be very difficult to do so.

He was, after all, Marcus Jameson, Rock Star, and she was Bethany Waters, struggling singer. He had money, fame, talent, and looks by the boatload, and he could have any woman he wanted — and probably had, since he’d earned a reputation as a ladies’ man long ago. She couldn’t fathom why his ex had dumped him to run off with

another man, because on top of everything else, he was actually a very kindhearted guy. He was a loving father and caring brother, and his actions yesterday when he'd taken her to get her leg x-rayed and bought her a brand new phone to replace her crappy one proved he was exceptionally thoughtful as well. He was, she figured, way out of her league in every way.

Marcus returned then and approached her, giving her a smile as he did. "Put your hands 'round my neck," he instructed.

"I can walk wherever we're going, Marcus," she argued, reluctant to have her arms around him. "My crutches are right there."

"Stop bein' so difficult and do as you're told for once," he said, breaking into a grin before picking up her ice pack, and when he leaned in to brush his lips against hers, her stomach flipped again. She hesitated for a moment before she slipped her hands behind his neck, and he put an arm around her back and the other under her thighs, lifting her from the chair.

"You're gonna hurt yourself if you keep picking me up like this, you know," she said, flustered by being so close to him, and he laughed.

"You can't weigh much," he retorted. "You're light as a feather. I could bench press two of you. Now stop bein' contrary and just enjoy the lift."

Marcus carried her out the back door and through the gardens to the edge of an infinity pool, and she gazed at it mesmerized, wondering how the water didn't spill out. She noticed Marcus had arranged a lounge chair in the shade with a small side table beside it, and he set her down on the chaise, propping her feet up on several throw pillows before positioning the ice pack on her ankle. Without a word he strode back to the house. Bethany assumed he'd left her there all alone, but he reappeared a minute later carrying her coffee mug and her phone. He set the items on the table before he said, "Sit forward for a moment,

please,” and puzzled, she did as requested, thinking perhaps he was going to place a pillow behind her back. Instead, he threw one leg over the chair and nestled himself behind her, then pulled her back against his chest and wrapped his arms around her, bringing his legs up to the edges of the lounge so that she was cocooned in his body.

“Is this more comfortable than your bed?” he asked her quietly, his face next to hers. When he gave her a light kiss on her temple and rubbed her arms, she shivered.

“Yes,” was all she could manage to say.

Marcus brought a hand to her cheek again, gently turning her face to kiss her, lightly at first, until her lips parted and his tongue sought hers. They shared a lengthy kiss, his hand still caressing her cheek, and once it finally ended, she felt a little lightheaded. “You give very sweet kisses,” he said. “You may have the sweetest mouth I’ve ever kissed.”

Bethany highly doubted that, speculating that he’d probably kissed a lot more women than she’d ever kissed men, but she had to give him credit for his smoothness and charm. “Are you still trying to get in my pants, Marcus?” she asked with a wry grin, and he gave a laugh.

“I’m not much for sex during that time of the month, darlin’,” he said grinning back at her. “And seeing as how I bought you tampons yesterday, I’d assume it’s still that time. But I am a very patient man,” he said, caressing her side. “Now stop kissing me and close your eyes. I’m dead tired and I need a nap. How about setting an alarm on this fancy new phone of yours so I can wake up in time to work out.”

He reached over to the table, and once he’d handed her phone over to her, she hurried to pull up her alarm app. “What time do you want to wake up?” she asked.

“Make it one o’clock,” he instructed. “I’d like to hold you without you arguing with me for a few hours.”

She snickered and set the alarm, then handed the phone back to him, very sarcastically retorting, “Your wish is my command, my lord.”

“Mmm,” he murmured, caressing her arms. “Keep thinkin’ like that and you and I are goin’ to get along just fine, darlin’.” Her eyes filled with fire at his comment and he laughed again. “I’m just takin’ the piss, Bethany, but fuck’s sake, I do like fierce women. They’re much more interesting.”

He kissed her again, passionately this time, pulling her even closer into him, and she could feel what she imagined might be the beginning of an erection pressed into her backside. She was thrilled, excited, and slightly anxious all at the same time because she wasn’t sure if it ever came down to sleeping with Marcus that she’d hold his interest in bed. She was sure he had a lot more experience than she had, and she doubted she could satisfy him the way some of the women he’d been with surely had.

And then Bethany reminded herself once again to chase away any thoughts of sex with Marcus. She’d let him play with her like this, kissing and caressing her, but it had to stop there. She’d have to be strong and resist the temptation of sharing herself with him. She didn’t want to be only a conquest of his, pretty certain that was all she was to him, and she didn’t want to be just another girl to bed to help him get over losing the woman he’d loved.

She relaxed into him and closed her eyes, letting herself pretend for a time that he was really hers. It felt wonderful to be in a man’s arms, even if he was a virtual stranger to her. She breathed in his scent and enjoyed his warmth as she drifted off to sleep with him wrapped around her.

CHAPTER 3

Jonathan

“Jon, it’s time for breakfast,” Anna Vandemore called up the stairs to her son. Jonathan stood alone in his bathroom and glanced at himself in the mirror, wondering how he was going to explain to his parents why he was sporting as many facial injuries as he currently had, and why he hadn’t been home since Wednesday. Then again, he was a college senior and twenty-one years old, so it was really none of his parents’ business where he’d been. But they’d definitely ask about the black eyes and the broken nose, not to mention his bottom lip, which was split open on one side.

The truth was, one person had caused all of his injuries, and that person was Patrick O’Donnell, the Irish musician whom Allie had been running around with behind his back. How she could be stupid enough to think she was in love with the guy he had no idea, especially since he’d invested two fucking years into a relationship with her and she wouldn’t even kiss him anymore. He bet she let Patrick do a lot more than kiss her. In fact, he knew she did. He had photos that proved she was letting him do whatever he wanted with her. Or at least he’d had photos until Allie and that Nunya chick had set him up. Why the hell had he trusted Allie? Now his blackmail card had been lost, too.

He thought about the photos of Allie with the Irish drummer and grimaced. How dare she humiliate him like that? The photos showed them having sex on a lounge chair by the Jamesons’ pool, yet she’d never wanted to take the chance of having public sex with him. In fact, for the last few months she’d refused to let him touch her, and that really pissed him off. She’d deserved the chokehold he’d put her into on Thursday afternoon in town when he’d seen her there with the drummer, although he hadn’t meant to slam her into the wall of the

shop as hard as he had. And then Patrick had been on him in an instant, pummeling him almost into unconsciousness. He'd narrowly escaped before the police had arrived, and he'd been hiding out in a friend's dorm room on campus ever since.

He was going to have to get Allie alone to talk some sense into her. He'd make her realize that the two of them would be getting married whether she liked it or not. He had to marry Allie, and very soon, or his future career plans would vanish. He'd also wind up being coerced into marrying Kelsey Sampson, the high school girl he'd been sneaking around with since last summer. Kelsey was a bit of a nymphomaniac, the one trait of hers he enjoyed the most, but she was also a liar as far as he was concerned. She'd sworn she'd gone on birth control or he never would have stopped using protection, except when she went down on him, which she seemed to like to do a lot. And now she was six months pregnant and convinced they were tying the knot right after his graduation. He guessed it was his own fault for leading her to believe that, but he'd only proposed because Kelsey's father had threatened to file charges against him if he didn't.

His parents had been pretty cool when they found out, but they didn't want him to marry Kelsey any more than he did. His dad had even cut a deal with Mr. Sampson, saying they would take full financial responsibility for the baby and raise it as their own since he was already engaged to Allie. Or at least his parents thought he was engaged to Allie. If they knew Allie had tried to break up with him and was seeing the drummer, the shit would hit the fan.

He had to get Allie back. There was no way out for him otherwise, and he figured they could both come to terms with the fact that they had to be together or their fathers would make both their lives a living hell. And he was fond of Allie, even if she didn't excite him in bed like Kelsey or his other girlfriend did. He supposed he could live with the bland sex she offered to seal a deal for his father, and for himself

with Allie's father Bill. And maybe the Irish drummer had taught her a thing or two in the sack and she'd take the lead in bed once in a while after they got married.

"Jon, your breakfast is getting cold, dear," his mother called again.

Jonathan let out a breath and headed for his bedroom door. He'd figure out something to tell his mother and father about his face. He'd just have to wing it and hope they wouldn't see the rest of his body, which looked just as bad. That Irish drummer was pretty badass, and Jonathan suspected he'd had lots of practice fighting, considering his line of work. The thought of Allie with the ruffian made his stomach queasy as he descended the stairs and walked into the kitchen.

Kyle Vandemore looked up from his tablet to greet him, gasping when he saw his face. "What the hell happened to you?" his father asked in alarm.

"I got in a fight," he replied. "No big deal."

"With whom?" his father asked.

"Just some idiot who's been bothering Allie," he lied.

His mother returned to the kitchen and shrieked when she saw him. "Jonathan, what happened to you?" she asked, moving closer to him and taking his face into her hands. "I've been worried sick about you, and you finally come home looking like this?"

"He got into a fight defending Allie," his dad told his mom. "I hope you pressed charges," he said to him.

"Uh, yes," Jonathan lied again. "He's probably still in jail."

"What on earth happened?" his mother asked.

"This guy kept hitting on Allie and wouldn't leave her alone, and I asked him repeatedly to go away. And then he got belligerent and I had no choice but to get physical."

"Who was it, son?" his dad asked.

"I don't know who he was," he answered. "Just some guy who was on campus. I don't even know if he takes classes there or not."

“When did this happen, Jon?” his mom asked.

“Uh, I think it was Thursday afternoon,” Jonathan said. “It must’ve been, because I had my cytogenetics class.”

“And why didn’t you come home before now?” his mother asked. “This happened three days ago and you didn’t come home?”

“I had a lot of coursework to finish,” Jonathan said, stretching the truth like it was a piece of taffy on a hot day. “Alan let me sleep in his room so I could be on campus, near the library and the lab. I’ve told you a hundred times that living on campus would’ve been a lot easier with my major.”

“Have you had a doctor look at you?” his father asked. “Your nose looks like it might be broken.”

“It’s fine, Dad,” Jonathan said, dropping his head.

“I think I’d better make you an appointment with John Gallagher just to be on the safe side,” his father said. “I’ll phone Bill and have him set it up for tomorrow after your classes. And I also want you to give me a copy of the police report so I can ensure the young man who did this to you won’t see the light of day for some time.”

“Mr. Nolan is away, Dad, on college visits with David, remember?” Jonathan said nervously. “And I left the police report in Alan’s dorm room... I forgot all about it. I just want to get on with my life and not worry about that ass hat anymore. Can we just drop it?”

“You’re a grown man now, Jon, so I’ll leave the legal side of it to you,” his father conceded. “But at the very least, I still want John Gallagher to take a look at you. And what about Allie? Did she get hurt?”

“No, Allie’s okay,” he said. “She’s staying at her friend’s house this weekend. Meghan got married yesterday.”

“You didn’t attend the wedding with her?” his mother asked.

“No, I stayed on campus to work. Allie understood why I couldn’t go,” Jonathan fibbed. “I didn’t want to go looking like this anyway.”

“I hope your assailant looks worse than you,” Kyle jested.

“He does,” he lied. “Or at least as bad as I do. I’m going to take my food upstairs so I can get back to work.”

“Did you and Allie set a wedding date yet?” his mom asked as she poured him a cup of coffee. “And have you broken the news about Kelsey to her?”

“I plan to tell her tomorrow when I see her,” Jonathan said. “I hope she’ll take it well.”

“We can help you break it to her if you’d like,” his dad offered. “We can assure her it won’t affect her.”

“I think I should be the one to tell her, Dad. I’m the one who screwed up, but when her father finds out he’s going to be livid,” he said as his mother left the room again.

“Don’t worry about Bill,” his dad said lowering his voice. “He wants you two to get married, and he doesn’t want to ruffle my feathers. He has no choice but to overlook your little dalliance, but in the future, you’ll have to be more careful.”

“I will, Dad,” Jonathan said, grabbing his plate and filling it with food. He grabbed a napkin and silverware, then picked up his cup of coffee as he got ready to retreat back to his room upstairs.

“You know, Jon,” his father added. “It might be wise for you and Allie to start a family right away... even before the wedding,” he said with a wink. “In fact, it might be better to start that family before you tell her about your little faux pas. If she’s pregnant, she’ll be more likely to forgive you.”

“I’ll get right on that, Dad,” Jonathan said with a smirk. “Can I use the cabin next weekend?”

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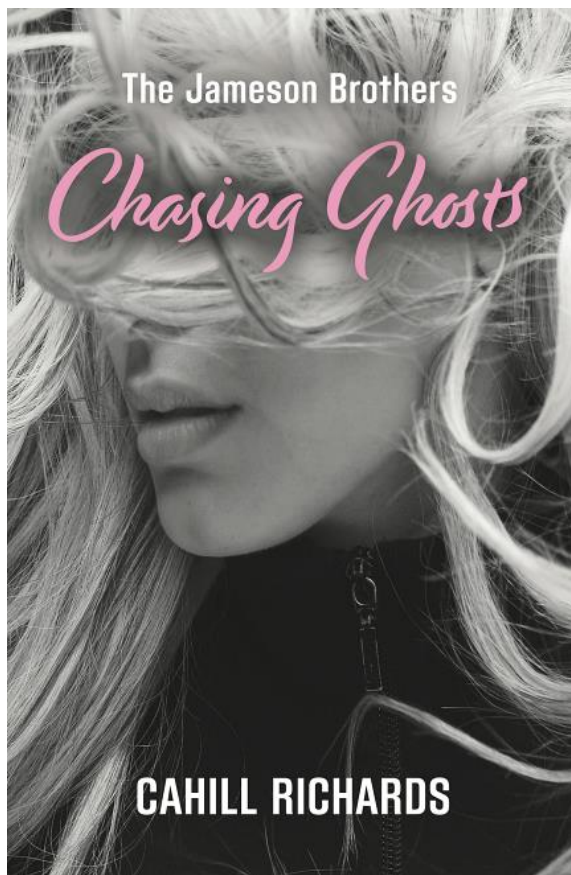
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