

## Chapter 6

Brooklyn Barr POV:

Joel Sanchez.❸

The name felt like coming home.

He wasn't a billionaire or a daredevil. He was a neurologist. A brilliant one, who had left for a prestigious fellowship at Johns Hopkins right after we graduated and had only recently returned. I knew him vaguely from our college hiking club. He was the quiet, studious one who always had an extra water bottle or a spare granola bar, the one who'd hang back to make sure the slowest members of the group weren't left behind.

When I was admitted to the hospital after the accident, a mess of fractures and a terrifyingly unstable field of vision, he had been the attending physician on call.

"Brooklyn Barr?" he'd said, his voice gentle as he reviewed my chart. "I know you. We used to hike together."

At first, I didn't recognize him. My world was a shifting, unreliable landscape, and faces were the hardest things to hold onto. "I'm sorry," I'd murmured, embarrassed. "My vision..."

"It's okay," he said with a warm, easy smile. "We can be new friends."

During my recovery, his presence was a quiet constant. When I shivered in the cold hospital room, he appeared with a heated blanket, murmuring, "You always hated the cold on those early morning hikes."

I'd stared at him, astonished. "How do you remember that?"

A faint blush had colored his cheeks. "I guess I just... paid attention."

It was a stark contrast to Kaden, who, after the initial flurry of guilt-ridden devotion, had quickly grown bored with the tedious reality of my recovery.

One day, I broke down completely. A new test had shown the damage to my optic nerve was more severe than they'd hoped.

"I'll never see the world the same way again," I sobbed, despair a thick, 0.0% 17:15

heavy blanket smothering me. "I'll never be able to design properly. I'll never see my children's faces clearly."

Joel didn't offer platitudes. He just sat with me, his presence a solid comfort. When my sobs subsided, he spoke softly.

"I remember one time, on a hike to Maroon Bells, you got separated from the group. You took a wrong turn. You were alone for almost an hour before we found you. You weren't scared. You were just sitting on a rock, sketching the wildflowers in a little notebook."

I looked at him, confused. "How do you...?"

"I was the one who found you," he admitted, a shy smile touching his lips. "I didn't say anything. I just watched for a minute. You find beauty in the details everyone else misses, Brooklyn. Your world might have changed, but the way you see it... that's all you. You'll find a way to make it beautiful again. And you will see your children's faces. I'll make sure of it."

In that moment, a warmth spread through my chest that had nothing to do with a heated blanket. It was the feeling of being truly seen.

Months later, when my heart was shattered into a million pieces by Kaden's final, cruel words, Joel was the first person I thought of. I'd given him an invitation to my wedding, a polite formality. He had accepted it with a sad, gentle smile.

"I'll be there," he'd said. "But Brooklyn... if he ever stops making you happy... just know that you have options."

I called him from the taxi on the way to the airport after abandoning Kaden and Anmarie in the cake shop. My voice was shaking, my words tumbling out in a frantic, impulsive rush.

"Joel? It's Brooklyn. That offer... about having options. Does it have a statute of limitations?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. I thought he was hesitating, and my heart sank. "It's stupid, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

"No," he cut in, his voice firm and clear. "No, it's not stupid. I'm just... trying to process the fact that the best day of my life might have just arrived via a random phone call."

Tears of relief streamed down my face.

"Marry me, Joel," I whispered. "In Aspen. In three weeks."

"Yes," he said, without a single second of hesitation. "Of course, yes. I've been in love with you since you offered me half of your squashed peanut butter sandwich on a mountaintop ten years ago." He let out a happy, breathless laugh. "I'll be there. I'll handle everything."

And he did. He re-booked the chapel. He found the string quartet. He even remembered the name of the white aspen blossom I'd once told him was my favorite and had them filling the entire space.

Now, standing at the altar, he took both of my hands in his.

"Brooklyn," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "I don't promise a life without challenges. I don't promise a life free of pain. But I promise to see you. I promise to pay attention. I promise that your scars will never be a burden, but a badge of honor that I will cherish for the rest of my days. I promise to be your anchor, your shelter, and your biggest fan. I love you."

The hot, silent tears that fell this time were not of sorrow, but of a profound, earth-shattering joy. It was the joy of being found. The joy of coming home.