

## Chapter 1

Brooke Portman belted out the last few bars of “Miss Independent” with a lot of energy and not a little amount of talent. She rarely attended karaoke night at the Escape Room, but tonight was a special occasion. It was the Monday evening of September’s Labor Day weekend, and she was seeing it off with a bang. The tourists who had taken over her Minnesota resort town for the last three months had packed up and returned to their lives. Now the summer rush was over, and regular life was returning for the full-time residents of Holiday Beach. For Brooke, that meant her daughter would be home and starting her first day of her senior year of high school, and she would be restarting adult classes at the local community college.

If this was her last homework-free Monday for the four months, she was going to make it memorable. Which is why she was at a bar on Margarita Monday, grooving to Kelly Clarkson and earning an ear-splitting round of applause.

“Why haven’t you been here before?” Lucy Callahan demanded. Her palms were red from clapping so hard. “I’ve been coming here all spring and summer, and you haven’t shown your face, let alone approached the microphone.”

“My online lectures were on Monday nights. I couldn’t afford to miss one.”

“Okay, fine, that’s a good reason,” her friend relented. As she should, considering it had been Lucy who’d encouraged her to enroll for the online program in the first place. “All your hard work obviously paid off, Miss 4.0. Congratulations on your first college credit.”

“One down, seven to go.” It was hard going back almost twenty years after high school, but it had been necessary. Brooke had almost lost her job as head housekeeper at the Dew

Drop Inn when it changed owners the previous spring. Her unstable future had stared her right in the face, and it wasn't a pretty sight. She decided then and there to work towards a better future for her and her daughter.

Roy Wagner, the bartender and bar owner, appeared beside them and wrapped his arm around Lucy's waist. "How are my two favorite customers?" he asked.

"I'm waiting for Brooke to do her encore," Lucy said as she leaned into him.

Brooke would have liked to stay longer, but she reached for her purse. "I can't tonight. I have to get home. Jordan is coming back tomorrow, and school starts the day after."

"How long has she been away?" Roy asked.

"Forever," was Brooke's quick answer. "Two months, since school ended. She spent the summer with her dad visiting his family in New Orleans." She'd missed her seventeen-year-old daughter like crazy. The two of them were as close as a mom and teenager could be. Letting Jordan spend the summer with her grandparents had been the right thing to do, but it hadn't been an easy decision.

"Then you should get one more song in before she gets back. I know Aaron is looking for a duet partner," Roy said. He lifted his hand and waved at a person behind them.

Lucy hopped off her bar stool. "I need another margarita. I'll be back."

"Don't you dare leave me!" It came out louder than the whisper she'd intended, but the music covered her slip. Aaron had been finding reasons to spend time with her for the last few months. He'd asked Brooke if she'd help organize the community's spring baseball schedule, and if she'd planned to chaperone any of the school dances. For the last couple months, every time Brooke turned around, he was there, smiling at her.

Lucy knew this. Still, all her friend did was raise her eyebrows and grin. “Later,” she said, running off before Brooke could stop her. Aaron was suddenly in front of her and Roy.

“The Karaoke Queen and the Karaoke King together at last. When can we expect a duet?” Roy asked with an infuriating smile.

“I didn’t know you did karaoke, Aaron.”

“I’m nowhere as good as you. It is a good way to blow off some steam though.” The handsome, sandy-haired man turned his back to her for a second and wagged a finger in Roy’s face. “Forget it. Don’t ask me to sing ‘I Fought the Law’ again.”

“But Brooke would harmonize so well with you,” the bar owner protested. “Brooke, talk him into it. I have to make my girlfriend’s drink.”

Aaron slipped into Lucy’s empty seat. “It wasn’t funny the first time he asked.”

Considering that Aaron Gillespie was the sheriff for Holiday Beach and the surrounding area, Brooke had to disagree. “It was a little funny.”

Aaron gave her a wry grin, his hazel eyes laughing. “It’s better than when he asks me to sing the *Cops* theme song.”

She snorted into her margarita glass. “How’s Trevor?” Aaron’s son was the same age and in the same grade as her daughter, but they weren’t really in the same social circles.

“Driving me nuts. It’s like he gets paid a bonus every time he gets my blood pressure into the red zone.”

“What’s he doing now?”

“Nothing. That’s what’s so suspicious. He’s been a model son for the last month. I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Maybe he’s turned a corner,” she suggested, although she didn’t believe it herself. Jordan was a good kid too, but Brooke knew from experience that anything more than five days in a row of good behavior meant something was coming, be it bad news or a request for expensive concert tickets in Minneapolis. They were teenagers, after all.

“We’ll see. He’s promised to get himself organized for school on Wednesday, so I can guarantee I’m taking a quick late-night trip to the store tomorrow to buy all the things he’s forgotten.”

“Count yourself lucky. I had to promise to hold off till Jordan got home so she could approve all her new stuff, down to the pens. We’re going to be shopping for hours.” She’d booked the day off as a vacation day for precisely that reason. Brooke was grateful Lucy had volunteered to cover her hours, even though Lucy wasn’t technically a housekeeper. She was more of a Jill-of-all-trades for the hotel, and thankfully some of her skills included cleaning up after guests.

As the current singer wound down a rough version of “Living on a Prayer,” Aaron applauded politely. “Roy was right about one thing. I am looking for a duet partner. Want to give it a go with me?”

Brooke froze. His interest was so confounding she could barely keep up her half of a conversation. In the spring, he’d started saying hello when he ran into her at the store or popping into the hotel and asking her how things were going when she was working. Aaron was always polite and funny and interested. But he never once took it a step beyond that, no matter how friendly she was in return. Now he was asking her to do a duet? She had no idea what he

was up to. But her curiosity, and her desire to give him one last opportunity to make a move, overrode her common sense. “What were you thinking of singing?”

“Don’t Stop Believin’.”

His suggestion made her little musical-loving heart swooned. “Sure.”

They were halfway through the first chorus when Brooke realized what she’d done. There was no way that performing with him was anything other than a signal to continue his half-hearted flirting. She gave herself a mental shake. Half-hearted attention was more than she’d received in months, even if she did wish that it was the real thing. As a single parent with a teenager, her dating life hadn’t been anything to write home about since her divorce. Besides, Aaron never seemed to take it too seriously anyway, to her disappointment. She hadn’t even received an invitation for a cup of coffee from him in all these months of conversation.

The revelation that she’d have to put up with her frustration for a while longer caused her to stumble over her next line, but she quickly glanced at the little bouncing ball on the screen and finished her verse. Another chorus, and they were done.

“We’re not going to top that performance tonight, folks,” Roy announced. “I declare Aaron and Brooke the champions to beat in October. We’ll see you on the first Monday of October for the Escape Room’s next karaoke night.”

Aaron’s smile was grateful when he looked at her. “Thanks for the duet. It was a lot of fun.”

Despite her earlier misgivings, she had to agree. “It was.”

“Maybe we can do it again sometime.” But instead of waiting for an answer, he simply waved goodbye to Roy and left.

Lucy returned into her now empty seat. "Well?" she demanded. "How did it go? He's cute, *and* he's single. Any sparks? Because it looked like there was sparks. Did he finally ask you out?"

Brooke opened her mouth to speak then snapped it shut. "Cute" didn't describe Aaron Gillespie. He was tall and lanky and fit. He wasn't shaped like a bodybuilder, but he was too active to have a dad bod. He had great eyes and a slightly crooked smile. She tried again and still couldn't find the words for the mass of contradictions that was her duet partner. Finally, she spit out a single syllable. "Men!" she exclaimed.

"I'll take that as a no, then," Lucy said with a sigh.

"What is wrong with him? Is he being friendly? Because that wasn't a song for just friends to sing. Does he want to ask me out? I don't think I'm his type because he chases down bad guys for a living, and I'm not nearly that exciting. Is he messing with me? If so, it's working. But I have a job, a teenager, and night school. If he wants my attention, he's going to have to do a lot better than he has been." Brooke wasn't against the idea of dating, but the lucky fellow she decided on would have to make it worth her while. So far, Aaron wasn't measuring up.

Her outburst must have been louder than she'd realized. Lucy stared at her with wide blue eyes. Behind the bar, Roy's brown ones were equally big. "We'll let him know."

"No, don't!" She didn't need them interfering in her non-existent love life.

"That's what friends are for," Lucy insisted with a grin.