

Then There Was You

By

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Blurb

She promised herself not to give into temptation but some promises were meant to be broken.

Brooklyn Vincent is burned out from dealing with annoying bridezillas, bridal parties, and other celebratory occasions. As the head photographer of Precious Moments Events, she's ready to branch out after helping her friends achieve their dreams but has yet to fulfill her own. When the irresistible Chase Arrington reappears in her life, she decides starting a new relationship at the moment wouldn't be wise considering she's at a crossroads. However, one night together turns into more.

After a year sabbatical, Chase is ready to take over his family's Memphis law firm, but a detour to St. Simons Island has him falling for the beautiful woman he's always adored from afar. While he understands Brooklyn's fears of starting a new relationship, at the same time he knows they are meant to be ever since their eyes met. Can he convince her home is truly where the heart is?

Chapter One

“All right, you guys,” Brooklyn Vincent said, focusing the camera to capture the four pre-teen cousins who were taking a break from their volleyball game on the beach. Shifting her barefeet on the warm, light brown beach sand, she peered at the screen framing them to make sure it would be the perfect picture. The girls were dressed in cute, matching, flowery sundresses over bathing suits while the boys wore T-shirts and swim trunks. “Say, ‘The beach rocks!’”

“The beach rocks!” the two young ladies who were sisters repeated with bright, beautiful smiles while posing as if they were top fashion models with one hand on the hip and the other hand tousling their wet hair. The boys, however, didn’t crack a smile and instead went for the suave approach—heads lifted up, hand under chins, and kneeling down in the sand.

“I see everyone has swag today,” she teased, snapping more pictures as they changed poses from serious to silly.

“That’s right, Ms. Brooklyn,” Lana, the oldest at twelve, stated. “We slay,” she said with a finger snap in a half-circle. “All day.”

“Okay, you all. Back to your tournament.” Brooklyn laughed as they ran back to the volleyball net to finish the girls versus boys game.

She proceeded toward the huge, white tent centered over an outdoor plank floor where her best friend, Reagan Richardson, and her family were eating barbecue, playing spades, and fellowshiping together. In a few moments Reagan’s boyfriend, Dr. Blake Harrison, was going to propose. Brooklyn had been commissioned to capture the precious moment turning the barbecue—which included his family as well—into an engagement party. Without a doubt, she knew her best friend would say yes with no hesitation. Brooklyn made brief eye contact with the groom-to-be as he slammed down his card in the spades game, did a celebration dance with his partner, and proceeded to make his way to Reagan. Brooklyn knew the signal would be him clasping Reagan’s hand, heading out of the tented area, and onto a romantic walk along the shore.

Brooklyn began to do a few practice shots to verify she could capture the proposal at a distance, when her friend and business partner, Addison Arrington’s long, fiery red hair bounced past in the shot and she screamed in excitement, “Look who’s here!”

Brooklyn pivoted with the camera—which still held her attention on its screen—to see who Addison was elated to hug only to discover it was her older brother, Chase. Brooklyn’s

stomach churned into a knotted twist and flames flushed her entire body despite the fact it was a breezy end-of-August day on St. Simons Island, Georgia. She snapped a picture of the siblings' embrace along with one of Chase alone and immediately turned away to suppress the heated smile which wanted to emerge as she noted his upper arm muscles peeking out from under his Yale law school T-shirt. He was intriguingly handsome as usual wearing a jaw-dropping smile across his face, which was the smooth shade of a rich, dark coffee she'd craved to sip. His bald head glistened in the sunlight, and a five o'clock shadow added an even more distinguished persona along with his glasses. Reagan had teased in the past about him being somewhat of the brainy one out of him and his fraternal twin brother, Hunter. However, Brooklyn always admired Chase's intelligent charisma the few times they'd spoken. She found his nerdy swag rather sexy.

The wind drifted his articulate tenor voice her way as he and Addison neared the tent discussing the upcoming months. Brooklyn knew Chase had been in the area for the past week, an hour away in Jacksonville, Florida preparing to teach a law class that semester at the university. She rarely saw him for he lived in Memphis, but thanks to her career as the photographer and accountant with Precious Moments Events, she would see him at weddings and other events when his family needed a photographer. The only person who knew of the silly crush was Reagan, who gave a knowing smirk before Blake grabbed her hand and whisked them toward the ocean as her white sundress blew in the wind.

Brooklyn cleared her mind of Chase and focused her attention on the couple strolling where the sand and the water met as she continued taking pictures. Standing on the edge of the tented area, she witnessed Blake kneel on one knee and her best friend's radiant face light up as tears streamed down her cheeks. Brooklyn's eyes became misty but she held back her tears while documenting with pictures of the joyous occasion. Reagan's cousin, Zaria Richardson-Braxton, stood next to Brooklyn video recording on her cell phone because they were both made aware of Blake's intentions the day before.

"I'm so happy for her," Zaria whispered, with a sniff. "Plus, it's about damn time our girl finally stopped running from love."

Brooklyn snapped some more shots while a wave landed on the shore, knocking Reagan and Blake over as they laughed and kissed, creating the ideal picture to frame. "He's perfect for her, Z. Like you and Garrett were meant to be no matter how much you denied it."

“I wonder who’s next?” Zaria questioned before joining the rest of their family and friends in cheering and clapping as the newly engaged couple approached the tent with Reagan flashing her ring.

Thirty minutes later, after the excitement somewhat died down, Brooklyn joined a table with some of the ladies admiring the pictures of the engagement on the camera’s screen. Brooklyn’s concentration was strained as Chase and a few of the other men were at the next table chatting with the groom-to-be. She kept her stare downcast on the photos for if she lifted her eyes they would be on him and the tempting smile he possessed. His voice and infectious laughter were pure, sweet torture, and her mind traveled to almost eight years ago to the first time she ever heard him laughing across the room at his cousin Shelbi Arrington’s wedding rehearsal. The smoothness of the sound had glided along Brooklyn’s skin like a fine silk scarf and had aroused a curiousness as she’d pivoted toward the man who owned such a provoking laugh. Their eyes had met immediately and a tingling rush soared through her veins when he offered a smile so alluring she nearly fell in love at that moment. However, she’d ended her first long-term relationship the week before and pursuing another one wasn’t on her list at the time. Instead, she’d admired Chase Arrington from afar over the years and always made sure to sneak a few pictures of him at events.

“Beautiful,” a deep, seductive voice said behind her. “Just beautiful.”

Brooklyn froze at Chase’s voice and a heated sensation of ecstasy swept through every part of her body. She’d tried so hard not to glance up at him that she hadn’t noticed he’d moved from his seat and now stood behind her chair. He leaned over her left shoulder to admire the engagement pictures and a whiff of his robust cologne filled her nose. She inhaled it and cleared her throat, hoping to sound as normal as possible to answer him. However, when his cheek grazed hers as he leaned even farther forward, Brooklyn simply handed him the camera considering the ladies had seen all of the pictures and left. Giving someone her camera was a big no in her book, but the urge to turn her head and kiss him charged through her, making this one time an exception to the rule.

Girl, you are acting purely nonsensical. Let’s get it together, she thought.

“Yes, Reagan and Blake are such a beautiful couple,” Brooklyn complimented and sighed in her head when her voice remained steady. “I’m so happy for them.”

“Me too. Being with *the one* is a wonderful feeling,” he said, taking the empty seat beside her. “You know what I mean?” He glanced at her with a small smirk raised up his jaw as his bare knee accidentally bumped hers.

The touch of his skin on hers, though brief, set off another round of heat to rush through her, and the thought of jumping into the ocean to cool off was forefront in Brooklyn’s head. Never had a man made her feel so sensual, and desiring to experience all of his bare skin against hers.

“Mmm-hmm,” she answered, wondering why he stopped swiping as his eyes lingered thoughtfully on a picture.

“This is nice.” He turned the camera toward her. “Can you make me a copy?”

Taking the camera, Brooklyn saw the picture of him and Addison hugging when he’d first arrived. She sighed in relief when he didn’t swipe again for the next one was of him alone, which she’d snuck in as Addison had walked ahead. Brooklyn hadn’t taken the time to peek at it until now, but it seemed as though he was staring at her. Of course it was absurd, but the way the corners of his mouth inched up and the awareness of his deep gaze suggested he’d purposely turned his head to steal a glance at the same time she snapped the picture.

Brushing aside her ridiculous notion, she placed the camera next to her on the table and turned it off so he couldn’t swipe to the next picture. “Of course, and I have the perfect frame for it.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice filled with sincerity. “My mother would love this. She has a huge round table in the foyer filled with family pictures.”

“I’ll leave it with Addison.” Brooklyn felt at ease with him and wondered where all the silliness of being nervous around him had arose. Yes, he was handsome, intelligent, and articulate; all the traits she loved in a man. However, she was a grown woman at thirty-two, and the crush she’d developed in her early twenties needed to be left in that decade of her life. Yet there was something about him that drove her insane whenever he was near.

“Cool. Or I may see you around. We’ll be neighbors for a spell. Addi has convinced me to stay in her tiny house for the next two weeks instead of a hotel while the home the university has provided is having renovations because of the tropical storm. Honestly, I don’t know how I’m going to fit in the guest loft, but I don’t want to disappoint my sister even though at six foot

three I'm rather concerned about bumping my head." Chuckling, he patted his shiny, bald head. "What do you think? Will I survive? I've only seen pictures of it."

Brooklyn's heart did a somersault followed by a backwards flip. The tiny house in question was parked in her backyard. While she'd been in it comfortably several times, she was sure Chase would feel cramped in the three-hundred-square-foot space, especially the guest loft which had to be accessed by using the rock climbing wall or the attached ladder.

"I'm sure it will be fine. Besides, you'll be out and about. The weather here on the island is pleasant during this time of the year. I totally doubt you'll be spending much time in the tiny house."

"Yeah, you're right. I'm looking forward to something different while I'm away from Memphis. Baby sis swears I'm a square and need loosening up. She's trying to plan a camping trip while I'm here. We'll see, but I know Ms. Adventurer isn't going to give up."

At age twenty-five, Addison was the youngest and most daring of the ladies of Precious Moments Events. She loved traveling the country visiting national parks, hiking, rock climbing, or other outdoor excursions. She'd decided a year ago to use some of her trust fund money from her parents and have a tiny home built to hitch up to her truck and hit the road.

"Yeah, I went with her once on a camping trip. It was cool ... well, until the ziplining through the forest and the black bear spotting. While I did capture some awesome photos, it was still a little scary."

"She's the adventurous one out of my siblings, but I'll try almost anything once."

"You know, Addison usually joins me for dinner a few nights a week so feel free to come as well."

A surprised smile smoothed across his face as his lips parted to showcase his pearly white teeth, and her heart did the stupid flip once more. She couldn't believe her brain had even produced the suggestion; however, seeing his smile made it all the more worthwhile.

"Thank you. I'd love to, and I can help cook as well. I know you ladies have long days with Precious Moments."

And he cooks? Mmm ... maybe I need to reinstate my crush.

"Addison and I would love it. We mostly order take out."

"No, you two need more than just take out." Chase hesitated for a moment as if he wanted to say something else, but instead he stood and gave a reluctant half smile as Addison

motioned for him to join her at the volleyball net. “Well, it was great seeing you again and actually hold a real conversation for once unless you were avoiding me all those times.” He raised a curious eyebrow as if he knew that’s exactly what she was doing.

“Ha ha,” Brooklyn giggled nervously, running her hands through her dark brown hair. “No, of course not. When I’m in my professional mode I tend to focus on the event. I want my clients pleased with the pictures.”

“I understand. Perhaps now we can chat and,” he paused, lingering his gaze on her, “finally get to know each other.” Scanning around, he leaned in toward her ear. “Honestly, I wanted to ask you out the second I saw you at Shelbi’s wedding, but I was informed you were in a relationship.”

“Oh.” Brooklyn tried to hold in the ear-to-ear grin wanting to expose itself, but it didn’t happen. “Yes, I’d recently ended a relationship, and the next time I saw you at my brother’s wedding to your cousin, you had a date.”

“And yet I couldn’t stop staring at the most beautiful woman in the room.” Winking at her, Chase strolled toward the volleyball game as they were picking new teams.

Brooklyn sat numb for a moment as his words repeated over and over in her head. It had never occurred to her he even knew she existed and had wanted to ask her out. At least he’d been respectful to the fact she was in a relationship... or thought she was in one when they’d met. Of course that was eons ago, and while she was flattered with his honesty, Brooklyn decided she wasn’t going to read too much into it. According to Addison, Chase was only scheduled to teach a few law classes at the university for the fall semester before beginning work at their family’s law firm in the new year.

“Hey, you!”

Brooklyn shook herself out of her daze to see Reagan standing in front of her wearing a huge grin on her face. She’d changed into a pair of white shorts with a pink tank top considering her and Blake were drenched after being knocked over by the wave. Her thick, natural curly hair was piled high on her head with a hair clip. Grabbing her camera, Brooklyn snapped a few pictures so she could preserve the true happiness radiating from her best friend.

“I’m so ecstatic for you,” Brooklyn said, showing her the pictures. “These are breathtaking.”

“Thank you, and while I’m indeed over the moon ...” Reagan paused, taking a moment to glance at her fiancé before sitting in the chair next to Brooklyn and scooting it as close as possible. “That’s not why I was cheesing,” she whispered. “I saw you talking to Chase.”

“He was admiring your proposal photos. That’s all.”

“From where I was standing, it seemed like he was admiring you. I’ve always sensed that he likes you. You know he’s staying with Addi for a bit, right? You’re bound to run into him ... I mean, he’ll be in your backyard after all. Very convenient.”

Brooklyn shrugged it off. “No big deal.” *Okay, I’m lying and I’m sure Reagan knows it.*

“Now I know who to toss my bouquet to.” Reagan pinched Brooklyn on her arm.

“Whatever. Let me know when you and Blake want to do your engagement photos.”

Brooklyn had to change the subject. “I have some ideas in mind.”

“Will do. And will you do me the pleasure of being my maid of honor?”

“Of course. You’re my best friend.”

“Perfect. Zaria has agreed to be my matron of honor and Shelbi, Addison, and Blake’s sisters as bridesmaids. I’m so excited! And don’t think I didn’t realize how you changed the subject.”

“Whatever.” Brooklyn swished her mouth to the side in a sarcastic smirk. “You have a date in mind?”

“No, but I want a late spring wedding so we’ll start planning soon. Zaria has already made herself my wedding planner, and I have a book full of ideas I’ve been collecting since I met Blake.”

“Wow, you sensed he was the one, huh?” Brooklyn asked, remembering when Reagan first met Blake on the beach while she was in a yoga class. Blake jogged by and was instantly smitten with her.

Reagan nodded her head wearing another bright smile enhancing her dimples even more. “Yes. I think when you meet the person you’re going to spend the rest of your life with you just know,” she answered in a whimsical sing-song voice. “And nothing can stand in the way of true love.”

Those words haunted Brooklyn later on that evening as she sat in her dark room printing out the pictures of the proposal to make a book for Reagan. The picture Chase had requested was framed and staring at her on the work table. Witnessing the siblings overjoyed to see each other

caused her to miss her big brother, Rasheed, and the sudden overwhelming of homesickness crept into her spirit as it had for the past year. She was at a crossroads in her life with career decisions, goals, and the dreams she'd placed on hold in order to help others facilitate theirs. However, she was ready to make a change and hoped her friends and business partners would understand.