

CHAPTER ONE

In the Beginning

Where does Brianna's story truly begin? After the final curtain call at the summer production of *Beauty and the Beast*? Or when a Hollywood talent scout handed the nineteen-year-old his business card, inviting her to "look him up" if she ever found herself in Hollywood?

Perhaps the deciding moment came on the sultry afternoon in August when then nine-year-old Brianna; her stoic, older sister, Elizabeth; and their father stood at the graveside of his wife and their mother. Whenever Bob closed his eyes, he could feel the child's death grip about his waist, her face buried in his chest. Was the beginning of the tale when Brianna took her first independent baby steps? Or did this narrative actually start when his newborn daughter wrapped her tiny fist around his pinkie finger and he felt loath to ever let her go?

Outside Bob Austin III's office door, a wall clock gonged three times. The man rubbed his tired eyes. He had a ton of paperwork to do before the morning. He'd tried to sleep earlier, but after hearing the family heirloom announce midnight, one, and then two, he gave up and returned to the familiar comfort of his oak-paneled office. Once there, he paced back and forth in front of the floor-to-ceiling glass-paned window

and fretted. During the day, the window looked out on his first orange grove. At night, it looked out on total darkness.

Where is my Honey Bee? he wondered. He and his wife had dubbed Brianna, their younger daughter, “Honey Bee” due to her insatiable appetite for giving and receiving affection. *Was it so long ago that she eagerly ran into my arms whenever I returned from the orchards? When was the last time she hopped into my lap and begged me to “scratch” her back—her term for a massage? When did the Hershey’s Kisses hidden in the drawers of my desk disappear and the love “stickers” of cats, puppies, and butterflies stop appearing in my luggage when I made overnight trips out of town?*

Don’t misunderstand. While Brianna brought sunshine into his life, his older daughter Elizabeth brought order out of chaos. “What a treasure,” he told his colleagues. She was the son he’d never had. Even as a toddler, Elizabeth had been nicknamed “Busy Bee” by her mother. Daughter number one had always been conscientious and industrious, almost to a fault. Elizabeth stuck to an assigned task until it was done to her liking—not merely to her father’s liking, but to hers.

On the day Bob’s wife died after a long battle with pancreatic cancer, fifteen-year-old Elizabeth stepped into the role of what she called “chief cook and bottle washer.” She cared for the home, kept the meals coming, and saw to it that her younger sister was dressed and on time for school each morning. When the girl threatened to put off attending college, Bob hired Maude to run the home and make the meals.

Elizabeth completed her accounting degree in record time and immediately took over the books for the 3 B’s Orchards with her usual aplomb. When Bob accepted the appointment of acting regional director for the California Citrus Growers’ Association, she virtually ran the day-by-day business at 3 B’s Orchards. Even Ken Raab, the business field manager and her eventual choice of a husband, fit perfectly into the organization like the missing piece of the family’s jigsaw puzzle.

Bob glanced at the oval-framed, sepia photo hanging above the fireplace. The stoic face of his grandfather—the original owner of 3 B’s Orchards, which he named for his three sons—looked down at Bob. The somber frown on his face didn’t do justice to the old man’s wry sense of humor and contagious zest for life. He willed the business to Bob III after his son Bob died in the Korean War; Bob Jr.’s younger brother Bill died in a hunting accident; and Ben, his youngest son, moved to New

York City to pursue a career on Wall Street. Bob III and his wife, Angela, continued the company tradition by naming their daughters Elizabeth, or “Bette,” and Brianna, or “Bri.” And he rounded out the trio of Bs for the 3 B’s Orchards.

The salty-haired man shook his head and lowered his two-hundred-pound frame into his aging, high-backed, cowhide leather office chair and swiveled around toward his computer screen. *What’s happening in the world tonight?* he mused as he brought up a recap of the evening news from CNN.

His gaze rested on the silver framed photo of his wife, Angie. There was no escaping the fact that Bette had inherited her mother’s head for organization, while Brianna displayed her mother’s beguiling smile and quick wit. He harbored a bittersweet blend of joy and concern. He loved his older daughter with all his heart but Bri’s and his had always been a different kind of love story, not the traditional boy meets girl romance, of course, but a love between a sometimes-indulgent father and his willful, capricious daughter.