



a Winter Wish



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGAN RYDER

A WINTER WISH

WISHING FOR LOVE



MEGAN RYDER

ABOUT A WINTER WISH

Mirror Mirror on the wall, show me my true love.

Callie Ricci, research librarian and self-avowed romantic, has been waiting her whole life for her prince to come. She saw him for the first time when she was eighteen in a magic mirror, but his face was obscured. Every midwinter she gets a glimpse of him, but each year the figure moves slowly away, indicating the love is fading, become less of a possibility.

Alexander Morin, local police officer and protector, has always been in love with Callie but she has never seen him as anything other than a friend. Convinced he's lost his shot, he resolves to find a new job and life elsewhere.

When someone tries to steal the mirror, Alex and Callie must take the mirror into hiding for safekeeping. As they spend time together, they may discover more than a thief. They may discover true love.

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CONTENTS

[Prologue - Mirror Myth](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Free Book - A Second Chance Wish](#)

[About The Wrong Cowboy](#)

[Sneak Peek - The Wrong Cowboy](#)

[Also by Megan Ryder](#)

[About Megan Ryder](#)

PROLOGUE - MIRROR MYTH



Once upon a time, there was a beautiful mirror. This mirror was a special mirror, kind of like the one in Snow White, except it didn't talk to you or show you who the fairest woman was in the world. But it did have a special talent.

This mirror showed young women their soul mate.

On one special night of the year, midwinter solstice, also known as the hibernal equinox for those who want to be precise, when a single woman looks into the mirror, she will see the person who is destined for her.

Unfortunately, like with most legends and magic artifacts, the mirror isn't easy to interpret.

The person you see may not be clear or obvious, which may indicate that they are not nearby or the future with them is in doubt. If the person is obvious and easily seen, that young woman better prepare herself for a wedding in the near future.

Though, as with anything else in life, free will allows people to make their own choices and decide to ignore the message from the mirror.

CHAPTER 1



Callie Ricci stood in the parlor of the Jacobs House and studied the ornate mirror that was displayed prominently on the interior wall. Garland and a few sprigs of holly berry had been woven along the top of the mirror to highlight the Christmas season. The rest of the Jacobs House had also been decorated and played host to multiple holiday events, thanks to the owner, Margaret Spenser, a descendant of a founding family of Sutton Falls and a member of the historical society.

But Callie was here for the mirror, not a holiday party. For this was no ordinary mirror. Decades ago, it would have resided in the dressing room of the lady of the house for her to review her outfit of the day or evening and decide if she needed to make any changes. The lady could see her entire ensemble, since the mirror was over six feet in height and three feet in width, highly ornate and decorated in the Louis XIV style, with a gilded gold leaf wooden frame. It was exquisite, with elaborate cornices in the upper body featuring chubby cherubs and flowers to enhance the style.

This particular mirror was a historical artifact, going back at least two hundred years, though Callie could only trace it back to the United States and this house to the 1920s, when it had been gifted to Nora Jeanne St. Hillaire Jacobs on her twenty-first birthday. Shortly after receiving the mirror, she met and married the love of her life, Leo Jacobs, and settled right here in this

house.

The mirror was also a magical item, if you believed in magic, and Callie did. Every year, on Midwinter Eve, if you looked into the mirror, you would see your true love. Of course, it was never that simple and there had to be rules or some such bullshit because Callie had been looking every year since she turned eighteen and now, twelve years later, she was still waiting to see her true love.

Of course, she'd seen someone. A tall figure, not full formed, just a male shape, with no face. If she watched horror films, she'd swear the figure was from one of those movies, but deep inside, she knew this man. He was her soul mate, and she just needed to find him and her life would be complete. She'd even dated while waiting for this man, dated any number of possibilities, but none were her man. She came close once, but he found someone else while they were dating. She had the worst taste. Every year, the mirror showed the same thing, the same figure, so she clearly hadn't met him yet.

“Callie? I didn't know we were meeting today.”

An older woman spoke from the beautiful staircase that was the centerpiece of the Jacobs' House. It had been crafted from rich, polished oak, meticulously carved and ornately embellished with intricate patterns and motifs, showcasing the skilled handiwork of master craftsmen. Despite the formal style, it wasn't cold. It exuded both a sense of warmth and sophistication, a cozy style that welcomed visitors to the home.

Margaret Spenser, Nora and Leo's granddaughter, walked down the steps, dressed impeccably as always in a gray pantsuit, her salt and pepper hair in a chin-length bob and her makeup flawless. She was who Callie aspired to be someday, not the messy ponytail, flustered, chaotic mess she often was.

“I'm sorry, Margaret. I stopped by to drop off the books you requested from the library. I thought I'd save you a trip in the cold.”

Margaret's blue eyes gleamed as she spied the latest mystery novel she'd

been waiting for. “It came in! I’ve been waiting for that book. I know what I’m doing tonight.” She gave Callie a sly, sideways look. “Are you sure you’re not checking out the mirror a little early this year?”

Callie’s face burned. She could get nothing over on Margaret. Ever since she’d done her high school history project on the mirror, Callie had been obsessed with the mirror and the legend, and she’d become good friends with Margaret, especially now that they both worked together on the Sutton Falls’ Historical Society, Callie from the library perspective and Margaret as one of the town’s founding families.

“It couldn’t hurt. It’s been twelve years. I had hoped something would have changed by now.”

Margaret came down the stairs and stood next to Callie, both women’s reflections in the mirror and nothing else. Callie had occasionally seen glimpses of a shadow in the week leading up to midwinter in previous years, but this year, with midwinter a week away, the mirror only showed her and Margaret. She sighed and turned away.

“Maybe it’s too soon to see anything.”

Callie laid the books on the table and sat on the sofa, trying to hide her disappointment. Every year, she attended the midwinter festivities at the Jacobs House. Every year she watched other girls look in the mirror, gasp, and find their love. While she only had a vague sense of her soulmate.

Margaret sat next to Callie and took her hand. “Callie, you’ll find him. This is your year.”

“Is it, Margaret? Last year, it seemed like he was further away, like he was walking away, not coming toward me. And I still can’t see his face. Doesn’t that mean something?”

The older woman looked troubled and stared at her hands, now clenched in her lap. “I’m not sure, Callie. There have been instances where some girls never found their soulmates or they disappeared. My grandmother told stories like that, often during wartime, when their loves died or married someone

else.”

Callie’s heart dropped. “You’re telling me that my soul mate may have died?”

Margaret gave her a reassuring smile. “No, dear. You’re still seeing him. But, since he is fading or walking away, that shows that the possibility of a love match between you is fading.”

“How can it be fading when I don’t know who he is? We’ve never met!”

Margaret laid a hand on Callie’s shoulder, gently rubbing down her back. “Are you sure, dear? Maybe you have met him, but you just don’t recognize him as your love. Sometimes we don’t see the truth, even when it’s right under our noses.”

There was something in her tone that made Callie think Margaret spoke from experience. But Callie shook her head. “No, I would know if he was someone I’ve already met. I’ve even taken weekends and trips around the area trying to meet new people. Maybe I just missed him.”

“Maybe you should look closer to home.”



*A*lex Morin reviewed the arrest report for the last time and forwarded it to the chief of detectives. Sutton Falls might be a small town compared to Albany or Syracuse, but they had their share of crime like any other town. He and his partner, Roger Towbridge, focused mostly on robbery and property crimes, of which they had a rash of them with the holiday season approaching. At least they’d solved this series of smash and grabs and arrested the crime ring that had broken in to several local businesses and homes over the past several weeks, though they suspected some of the perpetrators were still out there since they hadn’t gotten the ring leaders yet.

The door opened and his partner poked his sandy blond head inside. “You finish that report yet?”

Alex nodded. “Just sent it off. You finished booking them?”

Roger came in and sat in the chair, relaxing for the first time since these guys had started their spree. “Yeah, they were tough guys until they realized they really were headed to jail. Then I think reality sunk in. A couple of them used their phone call to call their parents. I heard crying at one point.”

Alex shook his head sadly. “I hate how they roped in younger teens, telling them that they wouldn’t get arrested or charged because they were underage.”

Roger snorted. “Reality is a bitch.”

Alex nodded. “At least for these kids. Did they say anything else?”

There was always hope one of the kids would roll on the mastermind, the organizers of the ring. Neither he nor Roger believed these kids coordinated the effort alone. They had to have help selecting targets and moving the stolen goods out of Sutton Falls, especially since only a few of the items were found where the kids lived or hung out, despite exhaustive tails and surveillance. They were missing something, likely an outside group that had gone underground for now. Hopefully, they wouldn’t have any other robberies and had stopped the ring.

Roger shook his head and settled in the chair. “No, not a word. Maybe a night in jail will loosen their tongues. If their parents don’t bail them out first.”

“I doubt they know anything. At least we bought some time.” Alex shut his computer down and cleaned his desk.

“Ahhh, it’s Wednesday. Time for your not-a-date dinner, right?” He used air quotes around the words and waggled his eyebrows. “Man, why do you keep doing this? It’s just twisting the knife deeper.”

Alex avoided his knowing gaze and kept straightening his desk, even though there wasn’t a lot of extra stuff on the top. They may not have gotten the ringleader, but at least he had tonight to look forward to. And he didn’t have work or surveillance to get in the way of his evening, which had

happened far too often lately. He'd missed Callie, missing spending time with her. Phone calls and quick lunches weren't enough to get his fix.

"We've had dinner every week for years, except when work has interfered. Besides, it's bowling night. It makes sense to go together."

"Does it really? You guys are like an old married couple, including the no sex part. Have you ever told Callie how you really feel?"

Alex glared at his partner. "Say it a little louder, why don't you? They didn't hear you in dispatch."

Roger only rolled his eyes. "Like it would matter. You've been stupid in love with Callie since I've known you. I don't know how she hasn't seen it. I just want you to be happy."

Roger's words stabbed him in the heart. He'd been in love with Callie Ricci since before knowing Roger. He'd met her in second grade and knew then that she was the one. Sure, he had tried dating other girls like any guy did, but she always held a piece of his heart in her hands. What killed him is that she never saw it. Instead, viewed him as her best friend. What would it take to move him out of the friend zone and into the lover zone?

"I am happy. I have a great job. Good friends." Even to his ears, the words were hollow.

And his friend knew it. "But you don't have the girl. Man, stop torturing yourself. When will you take the chance? You need to tell her how you feel."

And what if she rejected him? Where would that leave him? No friendship, no lover, no relationship at all. Would that be better than this purgatory that he had been in for the past several years? Maybe tonight would be the night to tell her. And, if it didn't go well, then he could always pass it off as momentary insanity, a midwinter moon phase thing. She'd buy that, wouldn't she?

CHAPTER 2



Callie swiped her French fry through the mayonnaise and popped it in her mouth. Her friends, Elise and Jennifer, stared at her, not masking the mixture of revulsion and disgust at her choice of food.

She deliberately did it again, slower this time, keeping her eyes on them. “You should be used to this by now. I’ve eaten my fries this way since third grade.”

Jennifer wrinkled her nose and took a liberal swallow of her Diet Coke. “It’s just as gross now as it was back then. How did we ever become friends?”

“You’re just jealous of my culinary daring,” Callie stated.

“Philistine,” Jennifer replied.

“Weirdo,” Callie shot back.

Elise raised her hands and leaned between the two friends. “Okay, that’s enough. I don’t want to have the appropriate sauce for French fry debate again. I swear, I thought we had this discussion and ended it at in junior high.”

“Fine,” Callie shrugged. “Let’s talk about Midwinter. It’s in less than a week. You two are coming that night, right?”

Jennifer groaned and even Elise looked uncomfortable, then spoke. “Look, Callie. Theo isn’t thrilled with the idea of me attending the party.”

Callie stared at her. “We’ve gone every year since we turned eighteen. Why would he have a problem with it? It’s tradition.”

Elise and Jennifer exchanged glances, then Elise spoke again. “No, you’ve gone every year since then. Jennifer and I only went since we got back from college. It didn’t seem necessary until we were ready to settle down. But now that I’m with Theo, I don’t need a mirror to know he’s the right one for me.”

Callie sat back in her chair, stunned by her friend’s words. How could she not want to know? The mirror would provide that conclusive proof Theo was the perfect man, though, given the way he doted on Elise, it was obvious how much he cared about her. But he hadn’t proposed yet or given any indication of moving the relationship to the next level, not that he needed to share his plans with Callie. She was well aware that he thought the mirror legend was ridiculous, and scoffed about it every time she mentioned it.

“It’s not just about the mirror. It’s about everyone getting together before the holidays and celebrating. It’s a tradition,” Callie said.

Elise only looked uncomfortable, her teeth worrying at her lower lip. “I’m not going this year. Sorry, Callie. Besides, Theo’s company has its annual holiday party that night, and he invited me.”

Callie knew she’d lost, but it was okay. She was honestly happy for her friend, finding a man she loved. Theo was a great guy, even if he didn’t believe in the legend, and he loved Elise. She reached out and gripped her friend’s hand. “Go have fun. We’ll miss you.”

Elise looked relieved. “Tell me all about it the next day.”

Callie frowned. “I don’t know if anything will happen. Nothing has happened for me in over ten years.”

“What about that guy you keep seeing? Maybe he’ll be clearer this year,” Jennifer said.

“Maybe. But in my vision, he’s walking away. Margaret thinks it’s because the possibility is fading.” Callie tried to keep her disappointment

from her voice, but failed.

Jennifer squeezed her hand encouragingly. “Well, maybe not this year. Maybe you’ll see him this time. Or he could be someone you already know.”

She glanced across the bowling alley meaningfully to the three guys who shared a lane with them in their league. Theo, Elise’s boyfriend, laughed at something one of the other guys said. The other guy, Sam Thompson, had been dating Jennifer on and off for the past couple of years. The third man was Alex Morin, her best friend since elementary school. They had grown up together and been best friends since first grade when Tommy Stolnich pushed her down in the schoolyard and Alex beat him up for her. He’d always been there for her, even in the worst of times, making sure she was okay. And he still was.

The guys placed their order at the counter and came over, beers in their hands, with drinks for the girls too. They set them down, settling into spots around the table, in between the girls. Theo draped an arm around Elise, who leaned into him. Callie suppressed a spurt of jealousy. She was happy for her friend, but she wanted that for herself.

They shifted gears and talked about the league scores, the upcoming holiday, and everyone’s plans for the holiday. Finally, Jennifer gave Callie a sly look. “Why haven’t you two ever dated?”

A laugh burst out of Callie before she could stop it. “Alex and I? Seriously? He’s like my best friend.”

Alex didn’t say anything, just sat rigidly next to her with an inscrutable expression on his face. His body was tense, his thigh against hers was hard as a rock, and his hand was fisted on his leg.

Elise slowly nodded, a thoughtful expression on her face. “But that’s makes it perfect. Your boyfriend should be your best friend, the one who has your back no matter what. You and Alex have always been there for each other. Tell me you haven’t thought about it.”

Callie froze, unsure of what to say. Had she ever thought about dating

Alex? Sure, they had gone to the senior prom together, but that was because he didn't have a date and hers bailed on her at the last moment. They had both been free, and it made sense, since he had the tux and she had the dress. But it wasn't a date; just two friends going to the prom.

The silence had gotten uncomfortable, and she gave a nervous laugh. "We've been friends for so long. Why would we change that now?"

Elise looked disappointed at her answer, and so did Jennifer, but Callie didn't know why. She turned the subject back to the holidays, but she felt like maybe she had done something wrong, especially when the evening broke up shortly after, in a very awkward series of goodbyes.

But the question lingered. Why hadn't she and Alex ever dated before?



Alex drove his SUV down the darkened road, headed for Callie's condo. It was another tradition, another routine they'd fallen into as friends for so long. Bowling league, dinner with friends after, friends who had slowly coupled up and were soon to become something more, especially after what Theo had shared earlier that evening, and then driving Callie home at the end.

Things were changing for everyone around them. Theo was going to ask Elise to marry him on Christmas morning. It was a given that she would say yes, considering how stupid in love she was with him. Jennifer and Sam, while on again, off again for years, were on now and solid, presumably headed in the same direction. Yet he and Callie remained the same as they had for twenty-four years. Friends.

That was mainly his fault. He'd never pushed her beyond that comfortable place they'd fallen into, too afraid to lose her. He'd had opportunities. In high school, when her douche of a boyfriend bailed on her to take a cheerleader to the prom, and Callie had called him crying, he did the

unforgivable and cancelled his own date to take her. She never even knew what he'd done for her. He had hoped maybe they could start something that night, but then she said the worst possible thing.

“You're the best friend a girl could ever have. I knew I could count on you.”

Yeah, like he'd try to make time with her after that line.

He tried to move on in college, even going away to study criminal justice, and, while he dated, he was always drawn back to Callie, like a moth to a flame. And yet, he never once got burned. She seemed determined to never see him as anything other than a friend. He had to say something. Lingering in this purgatory wasn't healthy. His partner was right, as was literally everyone else in his life who encouraged him to say something. Only, he feared it wouldn't go the way he wanted and then where would he be? Out of a friend and then having to watch her find her perfect love?

He dreaded midwinter every year, dreaded what she would see in that damned mirror, or rather, who. But every year, it had been the same thing. A figure, no face. Instead of her taking that as a sign to find someone, she had been searching for a stranger, dating men who might fit the role, without considering the one person right beneath her nose.

He should have been happy. At least it meant he still had a chance, but did he? Did he really?

“You're awfully quiet tonight, Alex. Everything okay? Elise's question didn't bother you, did it?”

He looked out at the area highlighted by his headlights and wondered how a woman who was so smart could be so stupid. But she was like his car, only seeing what was right in front of her, what she wanted to see, not everything around her. That was one of the things he loved about Callie, her ability to see the positive in everything, her indomitable spirit. But it had a downside too, her determination to look for the silver lining and things outside rather than seeing reality and what was in front of her. Maybe it was

time that he shined a light on the present. Would it open her eyes?

“Alex?”

She laid a hand on his arm and he tensed. “No, it didn’t bother me. You?”

She shrugged, pulling her arm back and looking out the window at the holiday decorations on the houses as they drove by. “No. I don’t understand why people think we should date just because we’re friends. I mean, we’ve known each other forever. It would be weird, wouldn’t it?”

He spared her a glance. “Would it?”

She sucked in a breath and faced him, studying his profile for a long moment. “What do you mean?”

How could she be so clueless? “Why haven’t we dated, Callie?”

She stared at him, her brow furrowed. “Where is this coming from? We’ve been friends for years. You know I’m waiting for the man I’ve been seeing.”

He let out a frustrated breath. “Yes, I know you’ve been waiting for the mysterious man in the mirror. We all know. Goddamnit, Callie. What if he never shows up? You’ve been waiting twelve years. How long are you going to wait?”

“Yes, I have been waiting for him. He’s my soulmate. Why wouldn’t I wait for him?” She reached across the console, resting a hand on his leg, and his muscles jumped. She jerked her hand back as if burned, then cocked her head and studied him as if seeing him for the first time, her expression pensive.

He glanced over, trying to keep the anger out of his voice. “He’s a goddamn figure in a mirror, Callie. You don’t know him, know who he is. He could be literally anyone. He could be right under your nose. Or you could never meet him. You’re pinning your hopes on someone who may not even exist. How is that logical?”

“Love isn’t logical, Alex. But this isn’t logic. It’s magic.”

He rolled his eyes and pulled up to her condo, parking in front of it. He

turned to face her. “While you’re waiting and looking for something that may never happen, what are you missing?”

She bit her lower lip, her gaze thoughtful and confused. “Do you want something more, Alex?”

He paused for a moment, then took the coward’s way out. She was still focused on that damned mirror and the man she saw in there. He’d wait until after midwinter, wait and hope she’d see nothing or, if he was really lucky, see him, and give him a chance.

He faced the front, suddenly tired. “Never mind, Callie. Have a good night.”

She reached out and laid a hand on his forearm, her touch burning through the layers of his coat and shirt like a brand. Too bad he was the only one to feel the connection. “Alex, are we okay?”

He clenched his jaw and gave a curt nod. “Yeah, we’re fine.”

She stroked a hand down his arm, as if feeling him for the first time. And maybe it was. He couldn’t remember her ever touching him like that beyond a casual thing before. But now, she was almost exploring him, feeling him, seeing him for the first time as someone different.

She sighed, then opened the passenger door and slid out. “Have a good night, Alex.”

He waited until she got inside and turned on her lights before he left. He should have been a gentleman and walked her to her door, but he didn’t have the fortitude for it. It took everything in him not to pull her close and kiss her, show her what she meant to him. God, he was such a coward. Even when given the option to take the chance, he chickened out. He really needed to turn in his man card.

CHAPTER 3



Callie sorted through the research requests that had been submitted online through the system to the Sutton Falls Public Library, while suppressing a yawn. She'd barely slept the previous evening thanks to Alex. How dare he drop a bomb like that on her, make her think of him as someone other than a friend, then leave as if nothing happened? Normally, it wouldn't have bothered her except something he said made her think. What if she had met the person in the mirror? What if he was someone already in her life?

Heck, Alex wasn't the only one to say this. Margaret had said it too and, now that she really looked at Alex, he certainly resembled the figure. The dark hair, the build, and feeling of safety she felt every time she was with him. But was it enough? Was that love?

She had often wondered if her own mother had looked into the mirror. What would she have seen? Would she have seen Callie's father? Doubtful, given the catastrophic divorce they had gone through when Callie was twelve. She still remembered the fighting leading up to her father moving out, then the years being torn between both parents, the marriages, the dating on both sides. Neither parent had settled down yet with anyone permanent, though they did their share of shopping around. Any gatherings were awkward, as when her older sister got married. Her brother said screw it and eloped to Atlantic City. Smart guy.

Watching her parents and their disaster of marriage and then dumpster fire of a divorce was enough to put anyone off love but Callie dreamed of her own Prince Charming, but she dated her own share of frogs. Then she heard about the mirror when she did a high school history project on local legends and she knew. She had her own guarantee right here in Sutton Falls. The mirror could tell you who were supposed to marry. Many of the girls in town found their love that way. And Callie just needed to see his face.

It's not that she didn't love Alex or find him attractive. She even had a crush on him in high school and had been thrilled that they ended up going to the prom together. Her douche of a date threw her over for a cheerleader who was more apt to put out when Callie had already refused. Enter Alex, who swooped in to save the day. She had hoped for at least a kiss, but he stayed the perfect gentleman all night, much to her dismay.

For such good friends, they sucked at timing and communication.

She turned her attention back to the reference requests, determined to deal with Alex at lunch, and put him out of her mind until then. She scanned the requests. Nothing unusual or exciting. A few students from the high school looking for help with a term paper. A college kid who also had a similar request for her thesis on local history. That one might be intriguing. And a couple of additional requests she could easily fill before lunch, having everything ready for the patrons when they came in that afternoon.

She loved her job, helping people find information. Sometimes the requests were obscure and very interesting, and she learned something too. Other times, well, it was the same old thing, as was often the case with high school term papers. But she coordinated with the school and some of the teachers so they could teach the students how to do their own research, which hopefully led to critical thinking skills. Or thinking skills, period. It was a brainchild of hers and one of her best friends, Elise, who taught high school history. Jennifer, their other friend, who worked in a law office, were talking about it one night and, with the help of the high school librarian, coordinated

this research project so the students had to use both libraries. Educational and encouraged the students to use all available facilities.

If only the adults in town used the library more. But maybe by teaching them young, they would encourage more usage as adults.

A shadow fell across her desk and she glanced up at the tall, dark figure looming above her. Her heart skipped a beat. “Miss Ricci? Mr. Lewis suggested I speak with you about a question I have. Do you have a minute?”

Callie stared at the figure in front of her, the slight French accent, the bespoke charcoal suit. With the fluorescent lights shining behind him hiding his face, she was reminded of her image in the mirror and her heart gave a little leap in her chest. She hadn’t realized she was staring until he leaned forward, giving her the first full view of his face.

“Miss Ricci? My name is Etienne Belmont from Rouen, France. I’m researching my family genealogy and it brought me here to Sutton Falls. Mr. Lewis said you might be able to assist me in my search.”

Callie resisted the urge to fan herself. When she saw the figure in the mirror all those years ago, she knew he came with adventure and excitement. She never expected that he would come from another country or be so sexy. His hair was artfully mussed, in dark curls, arranged just a little too carefully to be messy. He was younger than she expected, over thirty, slight of build, with a strong jaw covered in a hint of scruff. Everything about him designed to be slick and suave yet with the edge taken off. The scruff, mussed hair, off center smile. It was a perfect balance of sweet and sexy, and it pulled her right over.

She sucked in a deep breath and pasted on what she hoped was a professional smile. “Absolutely, Mr. Belmont. What are you looking for?”

He sat in the chair next to her desk, crossing one leg over the other. “According to my grandmother, there is a branch of our family that emigrated here from France in the 1800s. I’d like to track them down. I was told the historical society is housed in the library with their archives here. Would you

be able to give me access to the records?”

It had been years since anyone asked for access to the town records, and the historical society had only been viewed by some of the old timers in town, the older people who met once a month in the society rooms to reminisce about old times, how things had been better in their day, and look at some of the pictures and donated items from estates from the older families. Occasionally, a family would donate pictures, items or other things and the little group would get excited, sorting through the treasures and creating a small display. Sadly, few people came to view them except maybe one of the classes on a field trip.

No, a small-town historical society was a dying group, no matter how far back Sutton Falls went in history. Callie loved it and was happy to take on the project and meet with the society members every month, but there would come a time when she might be the last of them, the only one with the stories.

To have someone actually want to see the records and the collection was exciting. She pulled out her keys from the drawer and got up. “Sally? I’m taking Mr. Belmont to the historical records rooms downstairs.”

Sally, the circulation desk manager, waved her hand and went back to checking in books from the drop-box. Callie headed for the stairs, Etienne a few steps behind her.

“It would help if you could tell me what you’re looking for. The family name, that kind of thing. I don’t recall the Belmont family in any of the records.”

“Of course not. It’s my father’s name. The family name is the St. Hillaires.”

Callie stopped so fast on the landing between floors that Etienne ran right into her. After an apology, he stepped back a step or two. She turned quickly, tilting her head up to see him more clearly. “The St. Hillaires? They’re one of our oldest families, a founding family, in fact.”

“I hope we’re talking about the same family. There are several St.

Hillaires. I've chased down a few of them on my trail through Boston and New York immigration records. I found families in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York. So far, none of them were the St. Hillaires that I have sought."

"Oh, didn't you have records from the family?"

His eyes grew sad. "Our family home was destroyed in World War II and all records of the American Branch were lost. In fact, many members of our family were lost in the war. Only my grandmother survived and her memory was hazy at best. I'm trying to reconstruct the family tree as best I can."

Callie gripped his forearm. "I'm so sorry. I can't imagine what your grandmother went through with the war and everything. I'll do what I can to help, but it might be better if you speak with someone in town who is descended from the family."

His eyes brightened. "There's a descendant still alive? That would be perfect. Maybe they can provide some details, along with the family I've been looking for after all these years. My parents are dead and I'm all alone now."

"I should speak with them first. Be sure they want to talk with you. I can't reveal who it is. You understand, I hope."

Poor Etienne, losing his whole family and trying to find a new one to replace the family he'd lost. And Margaret, also all alone after all these years. Maybe they could connect and become a family. And who knows? Maybe he was the mysterious stranger she'd been waiting for after all these years, the stranger she had been seeing in the mirror. She couldn't wait to go to Margaret's and see if anything had changed.

She unlocked the door to the records room. "Here are the records from the town. Most of our genealogical researchers start here." She gave him a quick tour of the room, the records available and what he could access. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

She was strangely loath to leave, wanting to talk with and learn more

about him, but she was sure he was eager to do his own research without someone prattling on in his ear. Besides, she had her own work to do and Margaret to call. But she wanted to know. Was he her mystery man finally come to rescue her and be her love?

He smiled at her. “No, thank you, Ms. Ricci. I think I will be very busy. However, I would like to take you to dinner if you’re available, as a thank you for your help.”

Heat flooded her cheeks. “Oh, that won’t be necessary. It’s my job.”

His smile broadened, flashing pearly white teeth. “I insist. I’m tired of eating alone. You must join me. And maybe show me more of your delightful town.”

She could feel the blush spreading across her cheeks. “Well, in that case, I’d be happy to.”

She left him in the room, feeling a bit like she was floating.



*A*lex stood at the bottom of the library steps and Callie fairly skipped down them, her eyes bright with excitement. She clutched his hand as she almost slipped on a snowy patch left over from the flurries that morning and he caught her, wrapping an arm around her waist to ensure she didn’t fall. He gently righted her, then let her go, when all he wanted to do was keep his hands around her.

“Be careful, Callie. You know how slippery these granite steps get when there is some snow on it. Harold should have put down some ice melt.”

She scoffed. “I was in a hurry. It wasn’t the steps but me. I’m fine. You’ll never guess what happened? I met my soulmate today!”

His heart plummeted in his chest, and everything tunneled. “Your soulmate?”

She clutched his arm, her face beaming. “Yes! The guy in the mirror? He

came into the library today. Well, I'm not sure he was the guy in the mirror because I never saw his face. I never saw him in the mirror, but I saw him in the library. You know what I mean."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, his heart plummeting. "Callie, you're going to have to take a breath and start again."

She sighed. "Fine. My mystery man from the mirror came into the library today. His name is Etienne Belmont from Rouen, France, and he's Margaret's relative!"

Alex filed away the man's name and origin to run a background check, then caught up on the rest of the information. "He's related to Margaret Spenser?"

"We think so. Come on, let's go eat so I can warm up and tell you everything." She took his arm and started walking towards the deli across the street. "He is investigating his family tree. He lost his whole family in World War II and wants to find his extended family."

"How old is this guy? World War II?"

"Come on, Alex. He's a little older than we are." She ducked into the deli ahead of Alex. "He said all their family records were lost."

"So why did he wait so long?"

They placed their order and got a table by the window. Callie was almost bouncing with excitement while Alex was resisting the urge to take out his notebook and take notes on this guy. Something was too easy, something off with the story. His intuition was ringing bells loud and clear, though maybe it was jealousy.

Callie scowled at him, not liking the way he was raining on her parade, clearly. "I don't know, Alex. But sometimes people have other things going on in life. And genealogy is relatively new for a lot of families."

He supposed that was true. He never much cared for genealogy, never understood it really, though he listened when Callie spoke about it. She loved history and could talk about it for hours. She made it seem interesting, though

he was more a crime show kind of guy. But this Etienne guy still seemed strange, and he wanted to look into him, if only because he might be approaching Margaret, though he didn't want Callie taken advantage of either.

“You haven't told him about Margaret, have you?”

She paused with her tuna sandwich halfway to her mouth and set it down. “Not yet. I'll ask Margaret first. I have privacy concerns to consider. In fact, I probably shouldn't have told you, but you're the police and can keep a secret, right?”

He kept plenty of them, so what was one more? “Sure, Callie. I just think we should look into this guy first, make sure he isn't some kind of con artist, like Vince Sampson.”

“Oh my God. You will never let me forget that, will you?” Her hurt gaze cut him deeply.

“Callie, I don't want to hurt you, but he pulled some shady things with the historical society, saying he found some old papers and a diary in the house he inherited and he wanted to sell them to the Sutton Falls Historical Society.”

“They were valuable papers,” she said defensively. She turned her head, looking out the window, and avoided his gaze.

“They would have been, if they were legit. He didn't even have a claim to the house.” He reached across the table and gripped her hand. She steadfastly refused to meet his eyes. “Callie, I'm not trying to be an asshole here. I just want to protect you.”

“Maybe trust me a bit. We all were taken in by that guy. I know I lead the charge, but I wasn't the only one.” She faced him, tears glittering in her eyes, which almost gutted him.

Fuck. “I know, Callie. You love Sutton Falls. You'd never do anything to hurt anyone here. Let me just look into this guy, please? Don't give him anything. Be careful.”

“I’m not stupid, Alex. Maybe if you trusted people more, you would have more friends.” He winced, and her eyes widened. She reached across the table, but he pulled his hand away. “I’m sorry, Alex. I didn’t mean that.”

“No, you meant it. I’m too much of an asshole to people. I get it. I know I only have a few close friends, but I like it that way.”

This time, she could grab his hand. “No, you’re not. You just make me so mad sometimes. Look, I already called Margaret. She wants to meet him tonight for dinner. Come with me. Meet Etienne. You can see what I mean.”

His heart fell. She only needed him to check on this guy. Status quo. So he got to be the protective older brother, the cop investigating the out of townner, while she flirted with him. Sounds like a fun night for him. Not. But she made the gesture, inviting him, if only for a peace offering.

But he had to ask, had to know if there was any hope for something more. “Is that the only reason?”

Her teeth tugged at her lip again, and her hands toyed with her napkin. “No. I want you there too. Will you come?”

He took her hand. “You only had to ask.”

CHAPTER 4



Callie nervously toyed with the gold cloth napkins on the table, repositioning them over and over, even though they were fine the way they were. She desperately wanted to check the mirror to see if something had changed but, for some reason, Margaret moved it out of the parlor and into a back room for the evening. She said it was to do some maintenance on it and prepare it for the party, but Callie wondered if that was the only reason.

Etienne had asked Callie about any family heirlooms that the St. Hillaire family might have had, especially any from the old country. It was an odd question, and she didn't feel comfortable answering it. Instead, she'd mentioned it to Margaret so she could be prepared for questions in case Margaret wanted to show anything. Margaret asked Callie not to mention the mirror until they knew Etienne better and now even Callie's senses were tingling, not that she would tell Alex that.

Of course, she and Alex were in a weird pace right now, something Margaret picked up immediately when they walked into the Jacobs house earlier. Alex had peeled off to check the security of the house, mumbling something about burglaries in the area while Callie offered to help Margaret. The older woman sensed the tension and eyed them thoughtfully, but said nothing, putting Callie to work on the table.

The doorbell rang and Callie raced for the door, but Alex beat her to it. When she got there, the two men were facing each other like gunslingers in the old west. Alex was unsmiling, assessing the other man, blocking the door. Etienne was wary, two bottles of wine in his hands, and a full smile on his face when he spied her.

“Beautiful Callie. I hope I’m not too late. I stopped to pick up some wine from my homeland, only they didn’t have the right vintage. I hope this will be acceptable.”

He handed her two bottles, one red and one white, from the Loire Valley. Callie wasn’t an expert in wine, but she beamed at him. “That’s so thoughtful of you. Come in, please. Alex, step aside so our guest can come in out of the cold.”

Alex grunted and moved aside. “May I take your coat?”

Etienne narrowed his gaze, then smiled again. “Of course. Thank you. Etienne Belmont, at your service.”

Alex reluctantly shook the other man’s hand. “Alex Morin, friend of the family.”

Callie frowned at Alex’s omission of being a cop, but he often did that when he met new people, since some people felt uncomfortable talking freely around the police. She led Etienne into the parlor, chattering about the house and the history, while Alex hung up the coat, then followed silently.

Margaret was waiting and greeted Etienne warmly, taking up the history of the family and house from Callie, since, after all, she was the family. After a pre-dinner drink, they retired to the dining room and enjoyed a delicious dinner of roast chicken and vegetables, while Etienne talked about the family history back in France. Alex seemed to pay more attention to the stories than his meal, which Callie took as a good sign that he was warming up to the other man.

For her part, Callie was enchanted by his stories growing up in the countryside of France, the adventures he had in the manor house, and the

many sites in the city of Rouen. By the time they were having dessert, Callie felt like she had walked the city streets, visited the Rouen Cathedral, the Rouen Castle where Joan of Arc spent time, and the many museums that she longed to visit after his descriptions.

“That all sounds so beautiful,” she sighed.

“It was lovely growing up there, though, I confess, as a child, I didn’t appreciate my home as I should have.”

“Do any of us,” Margaret said with a small smile. “I don’t think anyone truly appreciates what they have until it’s gone.”

Etienne’s expression grew sad. “So very true, madam. I was an only child and lost my parents very young. My grand-mere raised me as best she could, but I was a wild boy, getting into all kinds of mischief, as children often do. Grand-mere was often sad, remembering the war and her family lost from back then.”

Callie propped her chin on her hands. “How old was your grandmother during the war?”

He sat back in his chair and looked at the ceiling, lost in thought. “She was young, a child back then. She always said she grew into adulthood during the war. She was a teenager when it ended. She lost her older brothers fighting for the resistance, along with her father. Her mother died of disease, along with her younger sister. She left to take care of a younger sister by the end of the war.”

“How terrible,” Margaret murmured. “I had no idea we had family in France. My grandmother was a St. Hillaire and never mentioned any family in Europe though, she had never visited overseas.”

He gave a sad smile. “Travel was not so easy back then, not even for the wealthy. They had steamships, but it was still a risk. And, unless they knew where they were going, they may not have taken the chance. My grandmother said there had been a schism in the family, with the American branch leaving before World War One. Obviously, she never knew them, being much

younger, but she had heard stories. She had always wanted to find her family, especially after losing so many of them. I guess she didn't want to be alone anymore."

Tears prickled in Callie's eyes. She couldn't imagine surviving a war yet losing everyone in your family. She had her parents and her older brother and sister, but none of them were close anymore. Her father still lived in Sutton Falls and she got together with him occasionally, though it was awkward with his girlfriend, who changed more often than she could keep up with. Her mother lived in New York City, as did her brother. Her sister lived in Connecticut. Despite their distance, she knew she could call them at any time and they would be there for her. And she had Alex, who had always been there for her, no matter what. But to be a teenager and have no one left and no way to reach out to distant relations, to even know if they were still alive. How terrible!

As if sensing her heightened emotions, Alex reached out under the table and gripped her hand in his, offering comfort. He brought her back from the edge of sadness and back to the present and their situation.

"So, what brings you to Sutton Falls, Etienne? Looking for the family history?" Alex asked in a neutral tone, clearly the only one in the room not emotionally moved by the story.

Etienne turned his attention to Alex. "Yes, that is part of it. But my grandmother also told me about family heirlooms that may have been sent to America after the First World War for safekeeping. I was hoping to find them and return them to the family home where they belong."



Dinner with Etienne had been painful. Watching him weave his tales of a sad, lonely childhood growing up in a beautiful manor house in France, an orphan and an only child, with his grandmother, his only

living relative, to raise him, had been fascinating. Alex watched a lot of crime documentaries, but he particularly enjoyed the heist shows with the con artists and how they weaved their spell around unsuspecting marks. He couldn't explain it but he felt like this was exactly what Etienne was doing, playing on the sympathy that Callie and Margaret clearly had for the poor orphan boy who lost his whole family tragically and just wanted to find somewhere to belong.

Interestingly, he was looking for his genealogy, but then he slipped in the real reason. The heirlooms of his family. Alex could almost feel bells going off in his brain, the cacophony almost drowning out the women reassuring him that they would help him as best they could.

Every cell in his body screamed at him to interrupt and throw the man out, but he restrained himself, knowing Callie would only resent him even further. Seeing the lovesick expression on her face told him that he would damage the fragile state they had between them right now and drive her further into Etienne's clutches. Alex had to remain calm, play along, and continue his investigation while protecting both Margaret and Callie.

Margaret frowned. "I don't recall any heirlooms sent here from France, but I can check the estate records. My grandmother, Nora St. Hillaire Jacobs, was from that family line and would have inherited some items from the family, but she had a sister named Rose. She would have also inherited some of the items. They're my cousins but moved away years ago. I'll have to call them and see if they have any items from Aunt Rose."

A calculating gleam entered Etienne's eyes. "Are there any items on display here? I heard that the bottom floor of your home is often opened for tours about the family. It's quite beautiful and several items appear to be antique."

Margaret nodded. "I open the house at certain times of the year for events such as the holidays, Founder's Day, and more. But I believe most of the pieces are American, not French." She paused, as if deliberating internally.

Then she took a breath. “Though there is the mirror.”

Damn it. He was hoping to have a night without mention of the damned mirror. Etienne’s entire face lit up, then he quickly tamped it down. If Alex hadn’t been watching carefully, he might have missed it.

“A mirror? I believe that was one item my grandmother mentioned. It had magical qualities, she said.”

“Yes, it does,” Callie said. “An unmarried woman will see her intended in the mirror on Midwinter Eve.”

Etienne arched an eyebrow, clearly not believing her. “Her intended? Really?”

Alex rolled his eyes. “It’s kind of a big deal here in Sutton Falls.”

Callie blushed. “It’s a festival of sorts. The unmarried girls in town of a certain age come here and can look in the mirror on Midwinter and see the man they’re supposed to marry.”

“And have you looked into this mirror?” He asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Alex wanted to snarl at the other man. Sure, he didn’t believe the mirror myth either, but Callie did, and he didn’t appreciate Etienne making fun of her for it. Margaret stood smoothly. “I’ve also seen it. Men rarely see anything. But we can show you. Follow me.”

They dutifully trooped from the dining room down the hall to the smaller library where the mirror had been set up for the interim. A sheet had been placed over it to protect it during the move. Margaret pulled the sheet off the mirror, revealing the ornate wooden mirror in all its glory.

It was a large rectangular one, capable of showing a person full length in the mirror. The wood was heavily decorated in what Callie had told him often enough was the Louis XIV style, with fat babies and angels and curlicues all over. It was a little too much for him. He just needed a simple, half body mirror to make sure he looked decent in the morning, then he was off. Why anyone would need this monstrosity in their house was beyond him. But

Callie was obsessed with it, or what it showed.

She took an involuntary step forward, eyes fixed on the mirror, as did Etienne, but his gaze was focused elsewhere. Alex might have missed it if he wasn't watching more closely. Etienne was scanning the woodwork surreptitiously, as if looking for something, though what, Alex didn't know. Etienne stood next to Callie, but then he leaned to the side, just a slight lean, to peer at the edge.

Callie, on the other hand, was staring straight into the mirror, and Alex couldn't see what she saw, but her eyes were wide and fixed on the image. Etienne reached out but, before he could touch it, Margaret grabbed his hand.

"Please don't touch the wood. As you can imagine, it's quite old and the oils from your hand can damage it. We ask that people wear gloves when touching it."

He tucked his hand back in his charcoal gray dress slacks. "Of course. May I ask why you have such a beautiful piece tucked in a back room? It should be on display to be admired and seen by all."

"It usually is in the front parlor, but I have a restorer coming in to look over it and do some minor fixes to the wood to ensure it remains in top condition. He will work on it back here."

Etienne nodded and glanced around the library. "You have a lovely home, Margaret. I hope I might return and look at the mirror more closely someday before I leave. I believe this is the mirror my grandmother spoke of, though I cannot see my intended in it. I only see myself. Though, maybe that means I will remain a bachelor forever!"

Margaret graciously inclined her head. "Please call, and I will make sure you have a chance to take a look at it more closely. Shall we?"

She gestured out of the room, and they headed back to the front parlor. Etienne begged off another drink. "I believe I am quite tired after my day. Might I escort you home, Callie?"

Alex wanted to shove him outside and slam the door in his face, but

Callie had been acting strange since she looked in the mirror earlier. And she wouldn't appreciate him stepping in. So, he waited for her response.

“Thank you, but I think I will stay and help Margaret clean up. Drive safely, Etienne.”

Alex hadn't expected that response, but he quickly got the other man's coat and escorted him to the door, after a quick inspection of the pockets, which revealed nothing but a pair of leather gloves. It was worth a shot.

Alex shut the door firmly behind Etienne, then headed down the hall to find Callie and ask why she was acting weird.

CHAPTER 5



Callie sat in the passenger seat of Alex’s SUV and wondered when things had gotten so strained between them. No, she knew when they had gotten strained. She just didn’t know how to fix it, or if it was even fixable. Their relationship was different now, knowing that Alex wanted something different from her, from them, and she had to decide on where to go from here.

When they looked into the mirror that evening, she had hoped for clarity for her situation, something to tell her what to do. She even had Etienne on one side of her and Alex on the other. She prayed fervently for the mirror to show her the right man to choose, or neither of them. She’d never been a fan of love triangles in movies or books, hating the heroine for stringing along two men. In her mind, the woman was fickle, teasing and taunting the men until she got what she wanted. Now Callie had a whole new appreciation for that trope, being that she had no idea what she wanted and didn’t intend to string anyone along or hurt anyone. She just wanted to pick the right guy.

Alex steered them through the night and swirling snowflakes. The lights and dancing snowflakes created a winter wonderland that Callie would normally love but couldn’t really appreciate at the moment, with her thoughts in disarray. The first of which being Alex’s treatment of Etienne.

“You were rude tonight.”

“I was rude? How?”

“The man is just trying to find his family, reconnect with people, so he’s not alone anymore. You, of all people, should understand that and sympathize with him. You should help him, not suspect him of nefarious schemes.”

He laughed, the sound startling her. “You’re kidding right? Just because my family is complete shit and all over the place, I should welcome him with open arms? Come on, Callie. You’ve known me almost my whole life. That’s not me.”

She shifted in her seat to face him. “Maybe that’s the problem. You’re so closed off that you can’t let anyone in. I don’t understand it. I know your brother’s death really threw your family into chaos, but you had each other and me. Etienne had no one.”

“Thanks for the trip down memory lane of all my horrible shit that I’d like to stay buried. And yes, I had you and my family. But I didn’t run out and try to find other people and bilk them out of stuff. I got on with life.”

“What makes you think he isn’t? He has no one. He has a business, but he wants his roots too. Will you deny him that?”

“He wants that mirror and any other antiques he can find. And you can make damn sure they’re not to put in some fancy manor house, but I’d bet to sell for profit.”

His scorn pricked her temper, and she faced front again, her arms folded across her chest. After a minute, she continued. “I don’t know when or how you got so cynical. Maybe it’s your job, but I don’t like it.”

“Maybe it’s the job, seeing the worst in people every day. It’s called reality, Callie. I don’t take people at face value and believe them when they’re blowing sunshine and rainbows up my ass.”

She glared at him. “He’s not doing that.”

“He’s doing exactly that with his sob story about his dead grandmother and the whole family. The only thing missing is the gravestone, the will, and

letters to prove his side. Notice that he has no actual proof of his story, Callie. Just his word. Tell me you don't see it as suspicious."

Damn him. He had to make a good point. She set her jaw in a stubborn line. "Everything was destroyed in the war."

"Convenient. But why now, why here, what is he after? Ask yourself these questions. Please think about this."

She turned and looked out the side window, not wanting to admit Alex had a point. But damnit, he did. Even the last con artist in town had proof, though it was used against him to prove he lied. But he had something tangible to hang his story on. Etienne had nothing to prove he was even who he said he was, and Callie had walked right into it with her damned belief of her soulmate and mirror bullshit.

God, she hated when Alex was right.

They pulled up to her condo, and he parked the SUV. "Callie, I hope I'm wrong for your sake. I don't want to see you get hurt."

And that was the last straw. The whole protector, for your own good, bullshit, pushed her over the edge. She flung off her seat belt and stormed out of the car and headed for her front door. Vaguely, she heard his door open and close and Alex shout her name, but she was too angry to respond. She fumbled with her keys and dropped them in the dusting of snow on her doorstep, her eyes blinded with tears.

His hands closed over the keys just as hers did, and she froze. "Leave me alone, Alex. You clearly think I'm an idiot."

He pulled the keys out from under her hands and straightened. He put two fingers under her chin and tilted her head up, forcing her to look at him through the tears in her eyes. "Callie, I don't think you're an idiot. I think you're a warm, loving, sweet person who is too kind for some of the assholes of the world. Remember Darren Peterson? Asshole number one. Dumped you the day of the prom. Josh Gunderson. Stole your ATM card and two thousand dollars. I still think you should have let me arrest him."

She hiccuped. “You beat him up. That was punishment enough.”

“Not even close. My point being, you are too kind and can’t see the things that I do. And that’s a good thing. I don’t want you tainted by the stuff I deal with. But I wish you would be a little less trusting of people like Etienne. At least until we know more.”

Tears had frozen on her eyelashes and she blinked up at Alex, who was standing closer than she ever remembered him before, the warmth of his body seeping into her cold frame. She stared into his eyes, noting the flecks of green in his hazel eyes that she had never seen before, the intensity burning in her. It was like she had never seen Alex before.

She sucked in a breath and watched him. “Alex?”

“Fuck it.”



She watched him with wide eyes, open and vulnerable, as if she was seeing him for the first time, not as her friend, but as someone desirable. The wonder and surprise caught him off guard and he decided that this was the moment he had been waiting for. He would never get a better moment to show Callie how he felt. Words had meant nothing, but he had always been better with action.

Her lips were parted ever so slightly and he cupped her cheek, rubbing a thumb over her lower lip. She blinked, caught in his gaze like a deer in a scope, frozen in the moment. Ever so slowly, he lowered his head and brushed her lips with his, softly, gently, testing to gauge her reaction. When she sucked in a breath but didn’t move away, he leaned in for a deeper kiss, settling over her mouth with a hunger he had never known before. Callie was the one he had always wanted, the one he had always dreamed of, and finally, having her in his arms made him feel alive.

The kiss deepened, and he felt his body relax as he surrendered to the

moment. His hands moved down from her cheek to wrap around her waist, holding her close to him. Her hands found their way to the back of his neck, pulling him closer, and he knew he would never want to let her go.

Their bodies molded together as they kissed, the heat between them only growing with each passing moment. He couldn't get enough of her, the way her lips felt against his, the taste of desire lingering on her tongue. His hands roamed over her curves, tracing every contour as if committing them to memory. She moaned softly into his mouth, a sound that sent a shiver down his spine. She pressed her body against his, her hands tangling in his hair.

He let out a low growl in response, his desire consuming him completely. His fingers delved into her hair, gripping it firmly as he deepened the kiss. Their bodies were like magnets, drawn to each other with an irresistible force. The world around them faded away, leaving only the intoxicating sensation of their connection.

She gasped softly as he pressed his hips against hers, the feeling of her body against his driving him wild.

In that moment, there was no one else in the world but the two of them. Nothing else mattered except the feel of her lips on his, the warmth of her body against his, the desire that flared to life. But it was that same craving that brought reality crashing down on him.

He broke the kiss, and looked into her eyes, seeing the same hunger reflected there and a sense of wonder and a hint of confusion.

He stepped back, dropping his arms. Callie wobbled for a moment, holding onto the doorframe for support, her brow furrowing.

Before she could say anything, he opened her door and handed her the keys. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, Callie. Good night."

And he turned and walked away, knowing it was too soon for anything else. He was in this for the long haul, and if anything happened tonight, he might lose her.

CHAPTER 6



That loathsome son of a bitch. Callie stomped into work the next morning with an extra-large coffee from her favorite coffee shop, low on sleep, and high on anger. This was the second night in a row that Alex Morin had caused her to lose sleep, and she still didn't understand what the hell was going on between them. The first night, he declared he wanted a relationship. The second night, he kissed her like she was the most desirable woman in the world. Both nights, he walked away like it never bothered him.

That kiss, though. She had never been kissed like that by anyone before in her life. She had had some spectacular kisses. Her college boyfriend at Syracuse University had been a dynamite kisser. Granted, her previous experience had been her high school boyfriend who had been all about scoring, which Callie had not been interested in doing, not in high school. So, his kissing was wet, sloppy, lacking in technique, and, more importantly, finesse. But Dale, at Syracuse, spent hours making out in her dorm room and the things that man could do with his tongue were pretty awesome.

Yet Dale never once made her feel like Alex did last night. Hence the sleepless night. She had been tempted to call Elise or Jenn, but it was late and didn't want to disturb them. And what would she say? Alex kissed me and I didn't know what to do?

Yeah, they'd laugh their asses off, tell her, I told you so, then tell her to

go for it.

Which begged the question, what did she want to do and where did that leave her in her question for the mysterious mirror man?

Thinking about the mirror reminded her of the previous evening when she stood in front of the mirror with both Alex and Etienne by her side, praying for an answer. The mirror did not respond, not as she had hoped. But she saw a figure. The shape was closer now, still faceless, not turned away, but she couldn't tell who it was. She had hoped it would appear next to her or on one side, some sign of which man he could be. But she wasn't in the frame, only the shadowed figure.

Damn it.

Sally came behind the counter, pushing a cart of books from the book drop. "Oh, Callie. I didn't expect to see you here today, not with the news and all."

"The news? What happened?"

Her first thought went to Alex, as it always did working as a police officer. She never stopped worrying about him when he was on duty. Now that he was a detective, she could relax a little more than when he was on patrol, but anytime someone said something about bad news to her, she immediately thought of him.

"The Jacob's house was broken into last night."

Blood drained from her face and she felt dizzy. "The Jacob's house? Is Margaret okay?"

"I believe so. The police are there now."

She pulled her purse out of the bottom drawer. "I have to go, Sally. I have to see if Margaret is okay."

"Of course. I'll tell Mr. Lewis. I know he'll understand."

She broke most of the speed laws on her way to Margaret's house and Sally had been right. Several police cars were outside, with yellow tape cordoning off part of the house. She parked down the street and walked up

the sidewalk to the house, seeing the patrolman on duty.

“Is Margaret Spenser okay?”

He frowned at her. “I can’t share any information, ma’am.”

She was about to berate him when a man in a suit came down the steps. Alex’s partner Roger smiled. “Hi, Callie. She can come through. I’m sure Margaret could use a friendly face right about now.”

“Thanks, Roger. What happened?”

He led her inside. “We’re mostly done, which is why I can let you inside. I’ll let you talk to Alex and Margaret about the details.”

He escorted her upstairs to Margaret’s sitting room, where Alex was sitting across from Margaret. Callie hurried over to Margaret and hugged the older woman. “Are you okay?”

Margaret nodded. “I’m fine. Just scared. They came in through the library and made an awful mess, as if they were looking for something. Fortunately, Alex had strengthened the security system when he was here last night, ensuring we had adequate coverage back there. If he hadn’t, who knows what might have happened.”

Callie turned her attention to Alex, who gestured for her to follow him to the hallway. She promised to return and went into the hall where Alex waited soberly.

“As Margaret said, they smashed the back window of the library. It’s a silent alarm, but when they touched the mirror, it triggered the audible alarm.”

She frowned. “I didn’t know it had an alarm on it.”

He smiled grimly. “I connected it before we left. It’s a valuable antique, insured for a lot of money. But, more than that, is the sentimental value for Margaret. I wanted to make sure it was protected. The audible alarm alerted Margaret and scared away the would-be thieves. But the police were almost here, thanks to the silent alarm.”

Callie shook her head, shaken by the brazen attack. “Why would they go

after an older woman and this house?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Margaret asked, joining them in the hallway. She leveled a stern look on Alex, who shifted uncomfortably on his feet. “I assume you have suspicions.”

“I do, but you might not like them.”



Alex really didn’t want to dash the hopes of Callie or Margaret by sharing his suspicions on the break-in. His partner told him not to say anything because they weren’t sure, but he was convinced that Margaret and Callie had to be careful and protect themselves. Until Alex had more information from his connections on the background check for Etienne Belmont, everyone had to watch out.

Although, he could be wrong. The library had been trashed and, while he thought it might have been a cover for someone going for the mirror, some other items appeared to have been taken too. They would need Margaret to do a full inventory of her belongings to see if they were right. Someone touching the mirror could have been an accident or intentional. It was too soon to tell for sure. But Alex thought the library damage was more of a cover than anything.

“You suspect Etienne. How could you think that? Just because you don’t like him doesn’t mean he did this,” Callie exclaimed.

Roger glanced up from the bottom of the stairs and gave him a knowing look, as if to say, I told you so. Yeah, yeah, but Alex was still going to say it.

“Of course I suspect him. He showed undue interest in a mirror that, a few hours later, someone broke in to tried to steal. He’s not the only one I suspect, though, so don’t think I’m blindly focused on him. There’s a burglary ring operating in town. Mostly businesses, but they’ve hit a few of the more expensive houses. This house is a little outside their usual MO, but

it could be them.”

Callie looked hurt at his words, as if he had personally accused her of the theft. “You should focus on known criminals rather than innocent people.”

“That’s the point, Callie. We don’t know anything about Etienne. He is an unknown, so we have to keep him on the radar.”

“He’s right, Callie. Etienne showed a lot of interest in the mirror, and some of the other antiques from my family, and there are easier ways to break into the house rather than a small library window. It’s as if they knew where to go, or were directed where to go. But how would they have gotten the mirror out? That window was too small to get it out.”

Alex shrugged. “Maybe they were going out another door? Grab other items as decoys? We don’t know yet. We need to finish our investigation before we know more.”

Margaret looked sad. “Honestly, there isn’t much here of value to grab and run with. Most of it is antiques that would require a moving van. There are a few small items that appear to be missing from the desk but they could be under the mess.”

“You know that, but they didn’t. Or maybe they did. The mess in the library could have been a distraction, or they could have been looking for a safe or something. We’ll keep looking.”

Roger came up the stairs, giving Alex a long look. “We’re all set for now. Prints have been taken and photographs too. The techs are winding up their work.”

“Thanks, Roger. Margaret, do you want me to call a cleaning company for you?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want anyone else in here. I already feel so violated. I just want to be alone to clean it.”

Callie hugged her. “I’ll stay and help you.”

Alex nodded, understanding how Margaret felt. “We’ll leave a patrol man here as long as we can and we’ll increase patrols for the next several days. In

fact, why don't you go lay down? Callie and I can handle cleanup. And, as soon as you feel able, we'll need a list of anything you think is missing."

Margaret wiped her face with a shaky hand. "I am pretty wiped out. I would like to lie down, if you don't mind."

Callie took her by the shoulders. "Of course. Let me help you get settled and I'll help Alex after."

Callie escorted Margaret down the hall to her bedroom, leaving Roger and Alex. When they had disappeared from sight, Alex turned to Roger. "Talk to the kids we still have in custody and the ones we let go. Let's get alibis and statements from all of them. Put pressure on them to find out who else is involved in the burglaries. I'm not discounting that it could be them, but this doesn't feel like that."

Roger nodded. "I agree. The houses they hit were higher end, and smaller things were targeted. Jewelry, electronics, things easily sold. A mirror that weighs almost as much as you or I? Difficult to steal or sell. Too recognizable and hard to move."

"Exactly. I'll call my contacts again in Immigration and at the Bureau. Maybe one of them knows something. I still think it has something to do with this Etienne guy. We need his statement."

Roger raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to get it or shall I?"

Alex grimaced. "I'd like to do it. I think I can tell if he's lying, even if Callie will be annoyed that I targeted him."

Roger grinned. "For the record, where were you last night between midnight and three?"

Alex rolled his eyes. "Taking a cold shower, then in bed, staring at my ceiling. Alone. Happy?"

"Not really. Brenda had made a nice pot roast for dinner and was feeling romantic, so I was decidedly not alone and having a very nice time when I got the call. Why can't these criminals take a night off?"

The bedroom door opened, and Callie stepped out. Alex slapped Roger on

the shoulder. “Get going on those statements and let me know what you find out.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. He waved to Callie and headed downstairs, leaving Alex and Callie alone.

“Margaret all settled?” He asked when Callie reached him.

She nodded. “She’s pretty shaken up, but she took a half a sleeping pill and is resting now.” She cocked her head and studied him. “So, are you going to apologize?”

CHAPTER 7



Callie stood in the hallway and stared at Alex, waiting for his response. Judging by the confused expression on his face, the slight, almost constipated look, he wasn't exactly sure what to say.

"I'll help you. An apology goes something like this. I'm sorry, Callie." She deepened her voice at the end in an effort to mimic him.

His mouth twisted in a grimace. "I know the words, but I'm just not sure what I am apologizing for."

Her jaw dropped. "You're kidding right? The kiss last night. The way you treated Etienne. The accusations today. The list goes on."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Okay, that's quite a list. Only, I'm not sorry for any of it, so I won't apologize."

He turned and walked down the stairs, heading for the library. After a moment, she scrambled after him. "What do you mean, you're not sorry?"

He paused in the doorway to survey the damage. She stopped next to him and gasped. "Oh my God. Who would do something like this?"

Books had been thrown haphazardly on the floor. Some appeared to even have been damaged. Occasionally, there was a trace of black powder from the fingerprint analysis performed on the books and other surfaces to determine if there were fingerprints present. Shards of glass were also on the floor and the window was already being boarded up. The room was chilly from the

exposed window, and Callie shivered.

“Go into the kitchen and have a cup of coffee while we clean up the glass. Then you can come in and work on the books, okay?”

“Is the mirror okay?”

He sighed and pointed to the corner where the mirror stood, leaning against the bookcase. The reflective surface was intact, and the wood appeared fine. “We found it on the floor, but it doesn’t appear damaged. When you come back in, you can examine it more closely.”

She nodded and walked away, numb from the willful destruction she had seen. She brewed a pot of coffee, sensing both of them would need it. Alex had probably been there half the night and looked as tired as she felt.

As the coffee brewed, her mind whirled over the attempted theft. Why would anyone do that? What value was the mirror to anyone? When she had done her research paper in high school on the mirror and the legend, she had found that the mirror was valuable, like any antique from the Louis XIV era, but no more than any other. Was it worth stealing? That didn’t make sense. It was too big to easily lift or carry, so the motive had to be something else, which ruled Etienne out, right?

Alex was focused on him for all the wrong reasons. He was too convinced that Etienne was a con artist to be objective. Callie would talk to Etienne, prove that he had nothing to do with this.

“Callie? You can come in now.”

She headed back into the library and handed Alex a cup of coffee. “I thought you could use this. You look tired.”

She gave in to the urge to brush a lock of hair from his eyes and he froze, his eyes fixed on hers. She blushed and pulled her hand back. “Is the glass all cleaned up?”

“Yeah, thanks for the coffee. We got the call around three and I’ve been here ever since. Why don’t you start over there by the far wall, and I’ll start here. Watch out for glass. We think we got it all, but you never know.”

She nodded but walked to the mirror, the pull irresistible. She ran her hands lightly over the wood. “Was there any damage?”

Alex stood next to her and for a second, she saw a flash in the mirror of a couple, but not as she stood there but in the future. Was it her and Alex or someone else? It was gone too fast to see.

“We think some of the wood might have been dented or chipped. Margaret’s restorer will have to check. Or maybe Margaret herself. We’ll wait until she’s awake. It’s not important right now.”

She continued to run her hands over the piece, then over the back of the top, feeling a little catch at the back. She frowned and tried to see the back. “Can you move this forward so I can see back here?”

He obliged and leaned it forward. A little line appeared in the back, a split in the wood. “That’s new. The wood may have split when it fell over.”

“How do you know?”

“The only person who knows this mirror better than Margaret or her restorer is me. I’ve spent more time with it than anyone over the past twelve years. Trust me, that wasn’t there before.”

She took his hand and ran it over the spot. “Small, subtle, but a split.”

He nodded. “We’ll have them look at that more closely. Insurance may have a claim after all.”

They worked quietly for a little while cleaning up books, with Callie directing Alex where to put them and how to shelve them. Finally, after about an hour, Callie paused.

“What about that kiss last night?”

He froze, bent over, in the process of picking up a stack of books. “What about it?”

“Why did you kiss me?”

“Seemed like a good idea at the time,” he said without looking up.

She arched an eyebrow. “Seemed like a good idea at the time? What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged and faced her. “Exactly what I said. The timing seemed right.”

“Alex, we’ve been friends almost our entire life. That kiss changes everything.”

He cocked his head and thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, I guess it does. So, what do you want it to mean?”

She stared at him, startled to have the entire conversation thrown back at her. “You’re the one who kissed me. What do I want it to mean?”

He nodded and leaned against the antique walnut desk. “Sure. I mean, you’re the one who wants to talk everything to death. So, go for it.”

She gave a strangled scream. “You’re kidding, right? It’s so typical. You start it and then dump it in my lap to figure it all out.”

He pushed off the desk and advanced across the room, a slow predatory walk that made her feel a bit like a cornered rabbit. Yet, she wasn’t scared. In fact, she was a little excited to see that gleam in his eyes.

He kept walking, crowding her back against the bookcases in the corner until she had nowhere else to go. He braced both hands on either side of her head and leaned in. “I dump everything on you to figure it out? If I did that, we’d still be dancing around this complete bullshit, playing at being friends. Instead of what we both really want.”

His mouth was inches from hers. She could smell the coffee that she had made him with the French vanilla creamer and the hint of sugar he liked. She could see the flecks of green in his eyes, a shade of green that was quickly becoming her favorite color in the world. And the intensity in his gaze sucked the air right out of the room.

She held her breath, waiting for his next move. He was so close. It would take nothing to close the distance, seal their lips in a kiss that would scorch their souls, set them both on fire. Millimeters to take them to the next level.

He pushed off the bookcase, a knowing smirk on his face. “If you want me to kiss you, you’ll have to make the next move, Callie.”

She almost threw the book at his back. Bastard.



Nothing had ever been harder than to walk away from Callie in that moment. She was asking, no begging, for a kiss. She had been goading him all day, pushing him into it. But he was done doing all the chasing. He couldn't keep making the first move, especially when she demanded he apologize for it. No, the next move had to be hers. But that wasn't to say he couldn't persuade her to make it.

He half expected her to demand a kiss right then and there, but there was a knock at the library door.

"Detective? There's someone here to see Miss Spenser, and I didn't want to disturb her. Can you come out?"

The patrolman was young but a decent sort. He wouldn't have interrupted if it wasn't important. Alex and Callie headed for the front door, where Etienne stood with an older man in a suit with a briefcase. Etienne's trademark good-natured smile was missing, and he looked almost grim.

"What has happened here?" He asked with a bit of a sneer.

Callie stepped forward. "Someone tried to steal the mirror last night. You wouldn't know anything about it, would you?"

Alex groaned. "Callie. Enough."

Etienne exchanged glances with the older man, who Alex now recognized as Harold Sampson, a family lawyer in town. "No, I don't know anything about it, but it appears that I'm here just in time."

He handed Alex a packet of papers. "I have filed for ownership of the mirror."

"On what grounds?" Margaret asked from the top of the stairs.

He looked up at her. "The mirror is provenance of my family and should be returned to me, as the last descendant and direct heir of the family. Now,

with the threat to the mirror, I believe this has strengthened my case. I have moved for a speedy hearing on Monday. I'm sorry, Margaret, but it's the best thing for everyone."

He turned and walked out the door. Harold remained for a moment, looking apologetic. "I'm sorry, Margaret, but he had the papers and provenance of the mirror as proof. You only have a letter from your grandmother. The legal claim lies with him."

Then he also left, leaving shock behind. Callie sagged against Alex, who wrapped his arm around her, his other hand holding the papers. This had to be a joke, a mistake. Though, it made him wonder why Etienne would try to steal the mirror if he was going through the courts for it.

He opened the papers and scanned them quickly, then sighed and handed them over to Margaret, who had reached the bottom of the stairs, looking remarkably calm. She also reviewed the papers.

"I'll call my lawyers and see if there's anything they can do. I have the letter that came with it, transferring ownership of the mirror from the relative, Suzanne Rochefort, in France to my grandmother. That might be enough to confirm ownership."

"Rochefort? How does she relate to the St. Hillaires?" Alex asked.

"I believe Rochefort was her married name. The mirror is passed down to the eldest unmarried female in the family. As such, it would never go to Etienne as he is male. The magic doesn't work for him, only a female. However, if he had a daughter, he could claim it."

Callie shook her head. "No, he couldn't. You're the eldest unmarried female in the line. It still belongs to you."

Margaret smiled, a sad, gentle smile. "Very true, Callie. Though, if another girl was born and of age for marriage, I would send her the mirror. I'm beyond the age for the magic. It would be better served for another member of the family. I had hoped that Etienne had a daughter so I could pass it along, but now I fear it, and the magic, will die with me."

“We can’t let that happen. Are we sure it won’t work for someone else?”

“There is only one way to find out, and I’m not quite prepared for that.” Margaret turned to Alex. “Is there any way to protect the mirror for now? Ensure Etienne doesn’t get it?”

Alex shook his head. “All the security systems are back up and running. I suggest we move it upstairs or somewhere else where no one knows where it is for now. But if the courts say you have to give it to Etienne, I can’t help you hide it.”

She laughed. “I’m not asking you to do that. I’m just asking how to keep it safe for now, especially if he was involved in the robbery.”

Alex frowned. “I’m not sure he was. Why would he follow legal channels if he was going to just steal it?”

“Hedging his bets?” She suggested.

“Maybe. I’ll continue the investigation, but for now, let’s move the mirror somewhere else, okay?”

“I have a replica that we had made for it. We could put it in the library for now. Move this one to a storage closet under the stairs.”

“Perfect.”

Alex headed down the hall to make the switch, leaving Callie and Margaret to talk. When he returned, after making the switch, he noticed Callie and Margaret in an intense conversation, and Callie looked uncomfortable.

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” Margaret said. “I was just telling Callie that I’ll be fine now and she should head back to work.”

Alex narrowed his gaze. There was something they weren’t telling him. He knew Callie well enough to recognize the misery in her expression, the way she wouldn’t meet his eyes, and the way she toyed with the hem on her sweater. All telltale signs that she was lying. But he’d get it out of her. She never could hide anything from him for long.

So he just smiled and said, “Okay. Callie, want me to walk you to your car?”

She glanced wide-eyed at Margaret, then nodded. “Sure. Thanks.”

They were quiet as they headed to her car. When they got to her driver’s door, he put a hand on it, not letting her open it. “I don’t know what scheme you and Margaret have cooked up, but don’t do it. Let us handle it and leave it alone, okay? Stay out of it, Callie. It’s dangerous.”

She gave him a wide-eyed, innocent look. “I’m just going back to work. I would never interfere in your investigation.”

He studied her for a long moment, then nodded and stepped back. “See that you don’t. I mean it, Callie. Leave it to the professionals. Have a good day.”

She smiled and got in her car. It was only as she drove away that he realized that she turned away from the library, not towards it.

CHAPTER 8



Callie pulled up to the hotel where Etienne was staying and hoped he had driven back there after they had spoken at Margaret’s house. He could have gone anywhere, but where would he have gone? He came to town for one thing only—to find his family and his lost heirlooms, though Callie was questioning if he cared about finding family and he only cared about things. But this conversation could clear it all up. She just needed to remind him that this lawsuit was counterproductive to everything he professed to desire in his life. She wanted to protect the mirror and Margaret. She had to persuade Etienne that this lawsuit was ridiculous.

Unless Alex was right and Etienne had been playing them all and was lying. But Callie refused to believe that she had misjudged him so much. His story was too emotional, too touching to be a lie. She just had to remind him of that and look him in the eye when she asked him about it.

She knocked on his hotel room door, after sweet-talking a woman she went to high school with to give her the room number. After a few minutes, during which she was convinced he wasn’t there, he opened the door.

“Callie! I didn’t expect to see you after this morning.”

“I know, but I had to talk to you. Do you have a minute?”

He glanced in the room, then stepped aside. “Of course. Come in.”

She looked around the room, curious what it would reveal about Etienne,

the man. But it was very boring. A suitcase laid open on the stand next to the wall, a few items of clothing in it. Other items were hung in the closet next to the door, all dress slacks and button-down shirts. Toiletries were placed neatly on the bathroom counter. The desk had a laptop, but the screen was blank.

Etienne gestured to the comfortable chair in the corner. “See anything you didn’t expect? Maybe something someone would wear to break into a house?”

Heat flooded her face. “I never thought you would break into Margaret’s house. That’s not why I’m here.”

He arched an eyebrow in surprise and settled into the desk chair. “Really? Now I’m intrigued. How may I help you, Callie?”

She twisted her hands together, trying to think of the best way to start. “I’m here about the mirror. I couldn’t help but think about everything you said last night. About your grandmother, losing your entire family, having no one left. A mirror can’t replace your family.”

“But it can replace some of the things stolen from my family by the war and opportunists who took advantage of us because of the war.”

“That’s not what happened at all. The mirror belongs to the eldest unmarried daughter. It would have never gone to you, even if it had stayed in France.”

“It could have gone to my sister, but the mirror was gone by then. It should have gone to my grandmother or her mother. But her aunt, Suzanne Rochefort, sent it away. She had no right to send it to distant cousins. It belongs with us.” His voice rose as he spoke, anger sparking in his eyes.

Callie was wondering if maybe this was a bad idea, being trapped in his hotel room, and no one knew she was there. “What about everything you said about losing your family and looking for a place to belong?”

A half smile danced across his lips. “I never said that. I said I was tracing my family tree, but I don’t need to belong to any family. I am doing fine on

my own, Callie. I don't want to be tied down to people who take advantage, hold you back, and demand from you. I do much better on my own."

"So, why do you want the mirror?"

"Because it's mine," he yelled. Then, as if realizing that he had lost control, he visibly gathered himself. "My apologies, Callie. As you can see, this is an emotional topic for me. I think it might be best if you go now."

She gathered her coat and purse and headed for the door. Then she stopped and turned to him. "You said the mirror should have belonged to your sister. But last night at dinner, you said you were an only child. When did you have a sister?"

He paled and swallowed hard. "I lost her when I was young, when I lost my parents. I don't like thinking about her. It's cruel of you to remind me of her."

That was strange. He had made it a point to talk about how he had been an orphan, an only child raised by his grandmother, how he had been alone in the world and was looking for family. Now he had a sister. What else had he forgotten, or was inventing on the fly?

She laid a hand on his forearm. "My apologies, Etienne. I know how hard it is to lose someone you love. I won't mention it again."

"Please don't mention it to anyone else. It's very painful."

She smiled, vowing to tell Alex the first chance she had. "Of course not."

He opened the door and Alex stood there, his hand raised to knock, his face like a thundercloud. Shit. She was in trouble.



*A*lex was shocked, then furious, to see Callie in Etienne's hotel room. Of course, she looked horrified, then embarrassed to be caught there after promising to go back to work. He lowered his hand and glowered at her.

She pasted on a bright smile. "Well, I see you have company. I'll talk to

you later, Etienne. Thank you for clearing this all up!”

She brushed past Alex, but he grabbed her arm. He pulled her close and pressed his mouth to her ear. “Wait for me in the lobby. Don’t make me hunt you down.”

She shivered at the threat in his words, but only nodded. She hurried to the elevators and disappeared from view.

Alex turned back to Etienne. “I’ll make this quick. As you are aware, there was a break-in at Margaret’s Spenser’s house early this morning. Where were you?”

The other man gestured to his hotel room. “Right here, asleep. And before you ask, I was alone.”

Interesting that he automatically knew the routine for an alibi, but Alex let it go. “Do you have any reason to want to steal the mirror or anything else at Margaret’s?”

Etienne scoffed. “I already put in a solid legal challenge. I assure you, I much prefer to win legally than go to an American prison.”

“Fine. Thank you for your time.”

Alex turned on his heel and stalked away, noting the look of surprise on Etienne's face. The other man expected a more detailed interrogation. Good to know. Alex didn’t have anything else to ask him, not yet, and he didn’t trust Callie to stay put for long. He could find Etienne later, especially since the legal case was a few days away. He doubted the man was going anywhere before it was heard before the judge.

He exited the elevators and let out an exhale of relief at the sight of Callie seated before the gas fireplace in the lobby. For once she had listened, but he was still furious with her. He stalked across the room and took her arm.

“Come with me.”

“Hey, where are you taking me?”

“Somewhere where we can talk privately.”

He walked down the hallway where the conference rooms were, pushing

at doors until he found a small unoccupied space. He pulled her inside and closed the door behind them.

“What the hell were you thinking, Callie, going to his hotel room all alone and not telling anyone?”

She wrenched her arm free and glared at him. “You do know that I’m an adult, right? I had questions for him and, in case you were wondering, I learned something that could be important.”

He folded his arms and lifted an eyebrow. “Okay, Miss Detective. What did you learn that was so vital to the mystery of Etienne Belmont?”

“I don’t appreciate the sarcasm, but I’ll share anyway in the interest of solving the crime. I think he’s lying about who he is and his past.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure he is, too. Do you have any evidence to support that theory?”

She narrowed her gaze. “Only that he said he thought the mirror should have gone to his sister.”

“He never said he had a sister. He said he was an only child.”

She smiled triumphantly. “And there you go. He lied about siblings. What else is he lying about?”

He nodded thoughtfully. “I suspected he was lying, but had no proof. That was good, Callie. Did you ask him about it?”

“Of course I did. He said she died with his parents when he was young. It was too painful a topic, and he didn’t like to talk about it. Oh, and he asked me not to tell anyone. Like I was going to listen to that.”

He let out a long-suffering sigh. “You really should have said nothing and just told me. Now he knows you caught him in a lie and he’ll be more secretive, harder to catch.”

“But I did good, right?”

He hated to admit it, mostly because it put her in danger if Etienne was a thief, but she did a good job. He smiled and hugged her. “You did a good job, but Callie, don’t do it again. He could be dangerous, and I couldn’t bear it if

something happened to you.”

She squeezed him hard. “Don’t worry. You’ll protect me. You always do.”

His heart seized at the trust she placed in him. “Damn it, Callie.”

She pulled back just a little and gave him an impish smile. “I think that’s becoming your favorite phrase when it comes to me. Damn it, Callie. I kind of like it.”

He opened his mouth to say something, and she rose on her tiptoes and kissed him. As her lips met his, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in closer. There was no hesitation as their tongues danced together, exploring every inch of each other's mouths. The passion between them was palpable, and they both knew where this was headed.

Breaking away for a moment, she looked up at him with a mischievous grin. “You know, I never realized you were such a good kisser.”

He chuckled and leaned in to whisper in her ear. “You haven't seen anything yet.”

With that, he lifted her up in his arms and carried her over to the conference room table. He gently laid her on top of it and moved between her legs, his lips finding hers once again. His hands roamed over her body, exploring every curve and dip, causing her to moan softly into his mouth.

As they continued to kiss, he trailed his lips down her neck, nibbling on her skin and sending shivers down her spine. She arched her back, pressing herself against him, wanting more. Her hands roamed over his back, his shoulders, finally finding their way to his hair, grabbing a handful and pushing his face into her neck.

Her breathing was heavy, and her was heart racing. She pulled her head back, breaking their kiss, and looked at him with lust-filled eyes and a flushed face. She opened her mouth, then voices from outside the conference room broke the moment.

Her eyes widened, and she stared at him in horrified silence. They both

held her breaths as the voices continued down the hallway. Once silence reigned again, he dropped his forehead to hers, letting his breathing regulate.

“I’m sorry, Callie. This was so not the time or place.”

She rubbed her hands on his back, soothing him, only her touch was inflaming his senses, making him want to continue what they’d started. Only, he wasn’t keen on getting caught having sex in a hotel conference, not even if it meant he had Callie in his arms. There was a better time and place for that. Like his bedroom where he could spread her out and have his fill, maybe over a weekend when he could turn his phone off, lock his door, and ignore the outside world for a few days until he was satisfied.

“Maybe not, but I think it’s inevitable,” she whispered.

He lifted his head, scarcely daring to hope that she was on the same page as him. Desire flared through his body, but before he could say anything, she ducked under his arms and stood, straightening her clothes. “I need to get going. I’ll talk to you later?”

He nodded, still struggling with his impulse to finish what they’d started. “Tonight, Callie. I’ll pick you up after work. Please let us handle it, okay? Promise?”

She paused, then shook her head. “Fine. I promise. Come to my place for dinner. I’ll cook. Then we can talk.”

He nodded, and she slipped from the room. He let out a breath. Finally, he might actually get the girl.

CHAPTER 9



That kiss must have scrambled her brains, because next thing Callie knew, she was inviting Alex for dinner at her place. That was counterproductive to her taking some time to think about everything that had changed between them and what it meant for them. They'd had dinner plenty of times at her place and his, though he lived in a minimalist bachelor pad and she had a cozy condominium, so it was more comfortable at her place. Yet, tonight it would be different. They would be feet from her bedroom with no interruptions likely. Was she ready for that? Was she ready to have a conversation about their relationship, because everything was different. That kiss changed everything. She didn't know what to do about it either. She was so damned confused.

If Alex was her soulmate, wouldn't the mirror have shown her that all along? He'd been right there next to her for years, her best friend. So, maybe the mirror didn't show her Alex because, as she well knew, a romance between them could only end one way—in disaster. She'd lose her best friend, the one person who was always there for her, the one person who understood her, the one person who got her out of trouble. Maybe they were never intended to be together.

But she never expected this explosive attraction between them. She'd never known how great a kisser he was, or how sexy he was. That was

completely unexpected. And she worried what the next step would do to their friendship. It was true what the adage said. Sex changed everything. And now, she had to figure out her next steps. Fortunately, she might have a reason for a tactical retreat from Alex, from Sutton Falls, from everything.

Her thoughts were a jumble throughout the day. What should she do? What to do about Etienne and the mirror? Margaret had expressed her own concerns about Etienne and the mirror, not to mention her own safety. She worried Etienne would come back again and try to finish what he'd started. And, after Callie spoke with Etienne that day, she was more convinced than ever that he was hiding something. But she had promised Alex to let him handle it.

After work, Alex texted that he'd grab some takeout and head to her place, so she rushed home to make sure she was there before him. She had just finished changing and touching up her makeup when her doorbell rang. She opened the door and her heart flipped in her chest at the sight of Alex standing there with a large bag of Chinese food.

He gave her a lopsided grin that warmed her heart and made her breath catch in her throat. "Hope Chinese was okay. I was dying for some beef and broccoli."

Damn it. Today hadn't been a fluke. She had feelings for Alex that went way beyond friendship. She swallowed hard and stepped aside. "Sounds great. Come in."

He looked as awkward as she felt, as if also feeling that things had fundamentally shifted between them and he wasn't sure how to proceed. He handed her the food and shrugged off his navy blue peacoat in the hallway, hanging it in the closet, all familiar motions they'd done a thousand times. Then he paused, staring into her living room.

"Whoa, Callie. Did Christmas throw up in here?"

She scowled at him. "You know I love the holiday season. You helped me get the tree in here the day after Thanksgiving."

“Yeah, but I didn’t see the end result. Did you add more tinsel and garland this year? And the lights could blind a person. You might need to put a warning sign.”

She grinned, proud of her additions. “I sure did. And lots of gnomes. They’re my theme this year. Gnomes from around the world. I’ve been collecting them all year in preparation for this.”

He rolled his eyes, but a smile played about his lips. “You certainly love Christmas, Callie.”

She hooked her arm through his, trying to ignore the muscles of his arm beneath her hand, and led him to the dining room where she’d set up plates for dinner. “And why not? It’s a magical time of year, and probably the only good thing that came out of the divorce. I got to celebrate two Christmases, one with each parent. Though I hated the shuffling back and forth and the rushing around. Still do, to be honest. But mom is in the city now so I’ll go down there after the holiday and spend a few days with her, and Christmas Day with dad up here.”

“You’re always welcome at our house, you know,” he said, then an awkward silence fell, bringing to the forefront the relationship conversation that they still needed to have.

The silence was charged with a sexual tension that had never existed before between them. To postpone the talk further, she dished out the food onto the plates, stealing glances at him from the corner of her eyes, realizing maybe for the first time how he filled out the button-down shirt he wore that day for his job and the way the jeans stretched across his thighs. His eyes were a deep brown of rich chocolate, with golden flecks in them, that warmed when he was amused and when he was turned on, as she saw that afternoon, and tonight, if she was reading him correctly.

She slid into the chair across from him and picked up her fork, still not meeting his gaze. He studied her for a long moment. “Callie. Are you ever going to look at me?”

Slowly, she let her eyes meet his. Yup, there was the dark chocolate that made her want to melt. “I look at you, Alex.”

She’d looked at him, all right, and she liked what she was seeing. In fact, she wanted to do a lot more than look at him. She wanted to see if he was as warm as she remembered, as strong as he’d been when he lifted her onto the table that afternoon, which she’d never thought would be such a turn-on. She wanted to trace his muscles with her fingers, then her tongue. Damn, was it getting hot in here? She gulped a large sip of her wine and coughed when it went down wrong.

His amused gaze met hers over the rim of his beer. “You okay over there?”

“Of course. Thanks for dinner.” Yeah, this wasn’t awkward at all.

They ate quietly for a few minutes, though Callie mostly pushed her fried rice around her plate.

“So, about that kiss...” he said.

She choked again. He went there. Right away. No lead in. And all she could think about was doing it again. Right now. It was all she had thought about all day, in fact. Her body simmered in a slow burn of arousal since that moment earlier.

She swallowed hard. “About that kiss.”

He grinned, a lazy, sexy grin that made her want to climb across the table and onto his lap. “Are you really hungry or just enjoying pushing that rice around your plate?”

Screw it. She’d been thinking about him, about this, all day. She didn’t want to think anymore. She wanted to act. She’d waited long enough. She pushed her plate aside, got up, walked around the table and straddled Alex’s lap.

“Is this obvious enough for you?”



Alex almost swallowed his tongue. Well, fuck. He never expected Callie to be so forward with what she wanted. But he was grateful that she took the initiative. It left no doubt as to the next steps.

She leaned forward and kissed him, sending an electric jolt of anticipation through his body. Her lips were soft, her tongue teasing against his, and he couldn't help but succumb to the intoxicating sensation. The kiss deepened, their mouths moving in perfect synchrony as desire swirled between them.

With each passing second, the world outside faded away, leaving Alex and Callie immersed in their shared passion. Her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer as their bodies pressed together, aching with longing. It was as if they had been waiting for this moment their entire lives.

Their hands roamed, exploring each other's bodies with a newfound hunger. Alex traced the curves of Callie's waist, his finger dipping under her cashmere sweater, feeling her shiver beneath his touch. She moaned into his mouth, her breath hot against his skin, igniting a fire deep within him.

As the intensity grew, a surge of heat coursed through Alex's veins. He wanted her—every part of her—in a way that he had wanted no one before. Their passion spilled over, consuming them both as they shed their inhibitions and allowed their desires to take control.

"Fuck me, Alex."

Without breaking their kiss, Alex surged to his feet, grateful for the years of workouts, and holding Callie against his body, moved toward the bedroom, their bodies moving together in a dance of desperation and longing. The room was dimly lit, casting shadows that danced along the walls, mirroring the intensity of their connection.

He set her down, and she blinked at him, her eyes glazed with passion. They tossed their clothes aside haphazardly, exploring each other as they went until they were naked. Time stood still as they explored each other's bodies, reveling in the touch and taste of their forbidden desires. Alex

worshipped every inch of Callie's body with his lips and hands, leaving a trail of hot kisses along her neck, her collarbone, her breasts.

Callie arched her back, her moans urging him on. Her fingers dug into his skin as she pulled him closer, her nails leaving welts that echoed the pleasure coursing through their veins. Alex groaned against her skin, his desire mounting with each passing moment. He couldn't resist the temptation any longer.

He fumbled for his jeans and the condoms he'd stashed there in the farfetched hope that he'd be in this position tonight. Tossing a few foil packets on the bed, he ripped one open and sheathed himself while Callie watched with hot eyes. He then lifted Callie effortlessly into his arms and carried her to the edge of the bed. Her legs wrapped around his waist as he positioned himself between her thighs, their bodies now perfectly aligned. The anticipation in the air was palpable, a heady mix of lust and surrender.

As he entered her, he groaned at her tight, wet heat. Heaven, pure bliss. Callie's body welcomed him eagerly, her walls gripping him tightly as he moved, setting a rhythm that matched the rapid beating of his hearts.

She clutched his shoulders, her nails biting into his skin, tiny pinpricks of pain that barely registered. She sighed, then moaned as he seated himself fully inside of her, waiting until her eyes fluttered open to settle on him.

He leaned forward and kissed her, pouring all of his emotion into the kiss, everything he had never said over the years, hoping she understood what he was saying. Her tongue tangled with his, stroking, teasing, loving. He lifted his head and moved, his hips thrusting with a slow, deliberate movement.

Callie's body responded eagerly to his touch, arching against him in perfect harmony. Her breathy moans and whispered encouragements filled the room, and he moved faster.

Alex's heart pounded as he watched Callie lose herself in the pleasure he was giving her. He reveled in the way her eyes fluttered shut, the way her lips formed his name on every gasp and sigh. Every reaction she displayed only

fueled his desire to bring her to the brink of release over and over again.

He shifted his angle, angling his thrusts to hit that special spot inside of her, and her body convulsed around him. Her cries grew louder, her nails dug deeper into his back, and he knew she was close. With each stroke, he pushed her further and further, until she shattered beneath him, her orgasm washing over her in waves of pleasure that left her breathless.

But he wasn't done yet. Alex pulled out of her, a whimper escaping Callie's lips at the loss of contact. He flipped her onto her stomach, urging her to get on all fours. She complied willingly, anticipation radiating off of her as she arched her back, offering herself to him.

He positioned himself behind her, guiding himself back inside with a single stroke. Callie moaned loudly, the sound muffled by the pillow. His thrusts were hard and fast now, his hips meeting hers with a relentless force. The sound of their skin slapping together filled the room, mixing with their moans and gasps as their bodies moved in perfect synchrony.

Alex's hands gripped Callie's hips tightly, his fingers leaving faint marks on her skin as he pounded into her with an urgency that bordered on desperation. He lost himself in the primal rhythm, the raw need that consumed him. Every thrust sent jolts of pleasure jolting through his veins, pushing him closer and closer to his own release.

Alex's climax approached, the heat building within him like an unstoppable force. He held onto Callie tightly, his fingers leaving marks on her skin as he drove into her with an urgency born from a hunger that only she could satisfy. He gritted his teeth and reached beneath her to stroke her clit. She clenched around him and cried out, arching her back and tightening her legs.

He finally let himself give in, following her over, letting pleasure explode through his body. He trembled with the force of his orgasm, falling over her back, boneless with pleasure.

As their breathing slowly returned to normal, Alex rolled over, pulling

Callie into his arms. They lay there, his body still buzzing with the aftershocks of passion. He wrapped an arm around her waist and held her close, his face buried in the curve of her neck. Peace. That's what it felt like.

"I never thought it would feel like this," Callie whispered, her voice tinged with awe and vulnerability.

Alex kissed the top of her head, his fingers tracing soothing circles on her stomach. "Me neither," he murmured, his voice filled with tenderness. "It's like we were always meant to find each other, to share this connection."

Callie snuggled closer to him, her body fitting perfectly against his. "I've never felt this way before," she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper. "With you, everything is magnified. Every touch, every kiss—it's like magic."

CHAPTER 10



*M*orning afters sucked, even after great sex. Callie always felt incredibly awkward after the first night spent with a guy, and Alex was no different. The previous night had been the hottest night of her life with any guy, but this was not the same as anyone else. This was her best friend. Had she screwed everything up by sleeping with him? And they hadn't even had the talk yet about where this was going and what it all meant?

Okay, maybe that was her fault for literally jumping him at the dining room table, but he didn't have to look so damned good, did he? Now she needed to figure out what she wanted to do about Alex and this relationship. Her brain was saying run away and her body was begging for more orgasms. Her heart was busy building a wall, already setting up protections to ensure she didn't get hurt again and lose, not just her heart, but her best friend. Orgasms were great, but were they worth losing her best friend?

After Alex left, she was getting ready for work and her phone rang. Talk about freaking out.

"Margaret, calm down. I can't understand you."

"I'm sorry, Callie. I barely slept a wink last night. I think someone tried to break in again!"

"Did you call the police? Do you want me to call Alex?"

Margaret's voice was a shuddering sob. "I called them and they couldn't find anyone. I'm convinced it's Etienne coming to get the mirror again! What am I going to do?"

Margaret sounded terrified, her voice high and shaking with fear. "Do you want me to stay with you for a few days?"

"No. Do you remember what we talked about yesterday? About you taking the mirror away from here until the case is heard? Will you do that? If the mirror is gone, then he has no reason to come here."

Alex would hate that Callie was getting involved. He specifically told her to stay out of it. But she could use the time away to think about their relationship and what had been changing. And Callie would do anything to make Margaret feel better, though she wasn't convinced that Etienne would even know about the mirror being moved.

"I'll make sure he knows it's not here anymore. That maybe the restorer has it. Please, just for a few days."

Callie's heart softened. "I could take it to my dad's cabin in the Adirondacks. I haven't been there in a while, but I'm sure it will be fine."

"Thank you so much! This is such a relief. I'll get it ready to go." And Margaret hung up.

Alex was going to kill her, but she'd do anything for Margaret. Besides, she was now convinced, after speaking with Etienne yesterday, that he wasn't who he said he was. Hiding the mirror might be the only way to keep it safe.

She called her father quick and, while he was confused by her request to use his cabin in the Adirondacks for the weekend, he didn't argue, especially since she may have implied she was going with Alex. A small white lie, but it pacified her father. She then packed a bag with her warmest woolen clothes. She called work and took a few days off. Then she headed to the grocery store and loaded up on supplies.

It had been a few years since she'd gone to the cabin, since it was mainly a rustic cabin for hunting and fishing and she wasn't interested in either. She

knew enough to know she had to pack the right clothes and gather food for the weekend since it wouldn't be stocked. She hoped there was enough wood and the heat and electricity were on. Her father said that there was wood stacked out back for the fire and the electricity and plumbing should be working. Of course, he then said Alex would know how to handle any issues, since she implied he was going too, so she didn't dare ask too many questions.

Once she was packed and loaded with supplied, she headed to Margaret's house, around the back, and the two women loaded the mirror into the back of Callie's car, careful not to damage anything. She gave a last hug and headed north on Route 87 with the directions in her GPS and prayed she remembered enough to get to her destination.



Alex had a bad feeling all day. He should have been relaxed, happy even. He'd finally shown Callie how he felt about her, though he had been surprised that she had made the first move. He hated having to leave so quickly in the morning, but he'd gotten a call from Roger with updated information about the theft at the Jacob's house and he had to get to the station. Margaret had come through with a list of items that were missing and there were quite a few smaller items, which made him wonder if the mirror was a target at all. Margaret still thought so, and told him so, but he wondered if their burglary ring had expanded into her neighborhood.

He and Callie had parted ways easily, maybe too easily. He wished they'd had a chance to talk, but they had time for that. He'd call her later and maybe pick her up for dinner. He'd been stuck at the station, going over reports and witness statements, so he hadn't had time to call her all morning. He texted her once and asked how she was and she'd responded, great. But that meant nothing, as every man knew when dealing with women. Nothing often meant

something, only God knew what.

A bad feeling brewed inside of him, and he had the urge to check on her. They hadn't actually made plans to get together, and now he wondered if everything was okay. Not for the first time did he wish he'd installed that Find my Friends app on her phone. Then he saw a report from the dispatch desk about a call from the Jacob's house the previous evening, a call about a possible intruder. Though patrol had found nothing, it was enough to worry him.

"Roger, I'm going to grab something to eat. Want anything?"

His partner waved his hand, and Alex grabbed his coat and headed out. He called in an order to the deli on his way to his SUV, then drove by the library looking for Callie's car. He did a second sweep, but it wasn't there. Damn it. Callie, where are you?

He called the front desk only to find that she'd taken a few personal days. That bad feeling in his gut grew.

He grabbed his sandwich and headed to Margaret's house. She met him at the door, looking anywhere but at him.

"Where is she, Margaret?"

"Who?" She gave him a wide-eyed innocent look, yet somehow didn't quite meet his gaze.

"You know who I mean. Callie. If I came inside, would the mirror still be here?"

Her gaze darted to the parlor where the mirror usually hung. "I have a mirror hanging."

He let out an exasperated breath. "Margaret, Callie could be in trouble. I need to know where she is."

Her facade crumbled. "I'm sorry, but I was so worried that Etienne might come back during the night and take it or something. And Callie also thought it was possible that he was behind this. So we agreed it needed to go to a safe place for a while until this whole legal mess was cleared up. It's only for a

few days.”

He closed his eyes and counted to ten, then twenty. “Where did she go?” Then the solution came to him. “Her father’s cabin? Damn it. She hasn’t been there in years. She’ll get lost or freeze her ass if anything goes wrong. You should have talked to me.”

“I know, but we didn’t want to implicate you. I’m sorry, Alex.”

He shook his head. “No, I should have known she would do something like this. I’ll take care of it, Margaret. Call Roger if you need anything.”

He handed her a card with his partner’s cell number circled on it. Then he left, hurrying to his place for warm clothes and then the store for supplies. He wasn’t sure if she even knew the right kinds of food to stock for the cabin. It had been years since she’d been up there and she hated it when she’d gone. Damn it, why hadn’t she talked to him first?

CHAPTER 11



Maybe this had been a mistake. It had been years since she'd been up here and she couldn't remember much about the cabin at all. The heat was kicking in, though slowly, and she couldn't find the thermostat to make it warmer. The lights had come on when she flicked the switch, which was a relief, allowing her to look in all corners for the thermostat. While it wasn't freezing, it certainly wasn't comfortable, and she hadn't figured out the trick to lighting a fire in the fireplace. And night time was imminent. She was about to break down and call her father, though she had assured him, when she got the keys, that she could handle it. Boy, was she wrong.

Yeah, she made a mistake coming here. But at least the mirror would be okay. It probably wouldn't crack in the cold, but she might freeze her ass off or starve to death.

Now that the initial panic from the mirror and the break-in was over, she wanted to sink into the wood chair and cry. She was not built for roughing it.

A noise outside pulled her attention from her misery, stamping on the porch, making her heart seize for a moment. Given her luck lately, it was probably a bear coming out of hibernation to devour her supplies and make this day much worse.

Knocking jerked her upright. A bear wouldn't knock. She peered out the

window and her jaw almost dropped. “Come on, Callie. I know you’re in there. It’s me, Alex. Open up. I’m freezing my balls off out here.”

She almost fell over herself getting to the door, her heart pounded, and other parts of her humming with an intense need that she’d been ignoring for the better part of a day. She flung it open. “What are you doing here?”

Alex stood on the porch, two bags in each hand, with groceries and a duffel bag over his shoulder. “Can we debate that later? It’s fucking cold out here.”

He pushed past her and into the cabin. She shut the door behind him, not moving from the spot. He set the bags on the counter, as familiar with the cabin as with his own place, having come up here with her father on hunting and fishing trips plenty of times before.

“Why the hell is it so goddamn cold?”

“I just got here about thirty minutes ago and I can’t figure out the fireplace, okay? I’m a failure.”

He stared at her for a long moment, then laughed. “You’re not a failure, Callie. You just haven’t been here in years.”

“I know, but I didn’t think it would be that different. I loved coming up here in the summer, when I wasn’t in imminent danger of freezing to death. I just forgot how to get here, took a few wrong turns on the way, and don’t remember how to start a fire.” She didn’t want to admit she had been thinking of their time last night, replaying every second, and wondering what tonight would have brought if she stayed in town and had missed the turnoff. Twice.

Alex chuckled. “It has been a while since you’ve been here, hasn’t it? Well, I’ll see if something is damaged or off for it to be so cold. Let me get the fire going before we freeze to death first.”

She huddled on the chair and watched Alex stack the wood and some paper and soon had a fire going in the fireplace. She sighed. “Thank God. I thought I did that.”

He straightened. “You stacked the wood too tightly. There wasn’t enough

air for the fire to breathe.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, even as a part of her wanted to jump him and see if their connection was as electric now as it was earlier. “Great. Thanks. You can go now. I think I can manage to keep this going.”

He arched an eyebrow and smirked. “Really? What if it goes out? Do you have food that doesn’t need to be cooked? Are you sure you want to be alone up here? It gets awfully dark. I also have to check on the furnace.”

She peered out the window and realized the sun had gone down past the trees, wreathing the room in shadows. “Damn it. Stay, okay?”

Knowing damn well she would never keep her hands or anything else to herself. Did she want to?

He chuckled again. “I thought so. Now, are you hungry?”

He headed outside and brought in more bags, then wood from the side of the house. Soon, she heard the furnace kick in. Thank god. She had no idea how he did it, but she was grateful. She really wanted to be pissed at Alex for following her, but the heat from the fire and the furnace was thawing her out, not to mention the stew he was heating truly smelled a lot better than anything she could have pulled together. Soon, they were sitting at the small table, eating the beef stew and munching on the fresh bread he bought.

“Is it safe to say you’re glad I followed you up here?”

“Fine, but I could have handled it if only my dad had told me where everything was,” she grumbled.

He laughed. “Did you ask him when you got the keys? He probably thought you knew. It was simple, really. The furnace only needed to be turned up, though he put the thermostat in a weird place, in the hall closet. Very hard to find. How do you not know this?”

She rolled her eyes. “In my defense, I haven’t been here in years. It’s not my fault I couldn’t find it. I thought it would be obvious. I just thought I had to protect the mirror from Etienne.”

He sobered. “I thought I asked you to trust me.”

She sighed. How to explain this to him? She propped her feet on the chair and wrapped her arms around her knees. “I know, but Margaret was scared. She thought someone was lurking around the house last night. What if he came back and hurt her? Anyway, I still think there’s something off with Etienne. He lied about his sister. What else did he lie about?”

He pushed his plate back and studied her. “We talked about this. Maybe he misspoke. He could have meant he was an only child after she died.”

She stared at him, not believing that this was the guy who was so suspicious of Etienne just a couple of days ago. “That’s a weird way of thinking about it, isn’t it?”

He shrugged. “It reduces questions. I mean, if he said he had a sister, you’d ask about her. Then he’d have to talk about her death. By saying he was an only child, no one asks and he can avoid the pain. We need more information before we can accuse him, though I wouldn’t mind if it was him.”

She narrowed her gaze at him. “Weren’t you the guy who didn’t like him just a few days ago?”

He sighed. “Callie, just because I don’t like someone doesn’t mean they’re guilty of something. We have to follow the evidence and right now, I don’t have anything on him. Yet.”

Damn it. That made sense and proved Alex was far more emotionally intelligent than she expected. And far more logical than she wanted. She dropped her head. “So, you’re telling me that I jumped to conclusions again, acting all impulsive, right? Great.”

He reached across the table and took her hand, sparks flying from the contact. “No, not at all. I understand how you came to the conclusion, and you might not be wrong. Coming to the cabin, well, yeah, that wasn’t your finest moment.”

He snickered, and she glared at him. “I would have figured it out.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Maybe not. But you had my back. You always do. I can count on you, Alex.”



Yeah, that was just what he wanted to hear from Callie. That he was always there for her, like a good shoe or a reliable car. Not what he wanted after the hottest sex of his life, and with his best friend. Was she regretting it? Was she worried that they had moved too fast? Damn it. Maybe she was friend-zoning him again, and he wasn't reading the room again. He couldn't go back to that place. Not after feeling her come apart around him. He could never be her friend after tasting her, touching her, hearing her orgasm. But could he walk away forever from her if that was what she wanted?

He'd driven up to the cabin knowing she wasn't fully prepared for life up here in the winter. If it was summer, or even early fall, he wouldn't worry as much. But he'd suspected that she wasn't familiar with the cabin and might be in over her head. She had never been much for coming up here since high school.

Instead of arguing with her, he gave a wry smile. “You can always count on me.”

She gave him a brilliant smile that cut into his heart. “It's only for a couple of days, just until the court hears the case on Monday. We can survive this weekend, right?”

He could, but could his cock? All he wanted was to use that bed and show her how good they could be together, continue what they'd started the previous evening. But she was speaking too brightly, too fast, almost as if she was keeping the subject general and light. Maybe she wasn't as unaffected as he thought, just nervous and unsure. He could work with that.

They cleaned up and Callie stifled a yawn, the events of the day crashing

down on her. “Clean up and get ready for bed. I’ll take the bunk beds.”

He’d slept in the bunk room in the second bedroom every time he’d come up since he was a kid, sharing it with her brother and their friends, while her father always had the main bedroom. It would be cold, but he’d handle it. The heat never really made into that room. He brought his down sleeping bag. Not that he’d turn down a chance to sleep with her. But he needed her to be sure, not to push her into something she wasn’t ready for.

She yawned again and nodded, shuffling off to the bathroom. He went into the main bedroom and did a quick inspection to ensure no unfriendlies had made their home in the bed for the winter. He pulled out an extra wool blanket and stretched it on the bed. It was chilly in the bedroom, but she’d be fine under the covers until the heat warmed the place fully.

He heard a noise and turned to see her in the doorway wearing a flannel pants and t-shirt. She was shivering, her nipples beaded, as if begging for his attention. “Tell me it will get warmer in here.”

He lifted the blanket, willing his cock to stand down. “Get in. You’ll warm up.”

She dove in and wrapped the blanket around her. Then she peered out from under the blanket. “What about you?”

The cold air could only do him good, almost as good as a cold shower. “I’ll be fine.”

He walked to the door. “We could share the bed.”

He froze, his hand on the doorjamb, his cock pressing painfully against the zipper of his jeans. He swallowed hard. “Excuse me?”

“We could share the bed. It’s better for the heat.”

He didn’t even turn around, afraid she’d see how painfully aroused he was. “Callie, if we share the bed, I don’t think I can keep my hands to myself.”

“Maybe I don’t want you to.”

Fuck.

CHAPTER 12



Ellie stayed still under the sheets, not because she was freezing, though she was cold, but because she didn't want to spook Alex. She sensed he was fighting with himself over whether or not to sleep with her, despite spending the night together already. She'd been trying to avoid thinking about it all day, but her body had betrayed her at odd times. She'd missed the turnoff to the cabin because she'd been thinking of his hands on her, his lips on her, and the way his cock had felt driving into her. And she wanted all of that and more. She had a feeling that her imagination was woefully inadequate when it came to Alex.

She'd had her share of men, dates and kisses, but none had been as hot as her best friend. When had he gotten that hot, that sexy? Why hadn't she noticed? And now that she had, she couldn't stop thinking of him that way. Retreating to the cabin was an excuse not only to protect the mirror but to give her space, to prevent her from calling him, going to his house, jumping him. And yet he'd followed her to protect her. Nothing like a knock to her ego. He had to save her from herself again. And now, he didn't appear to want her, though, he was gripping the doorjamb awfully hard, his head fallen forward. Maybe he wasn't as unaffected as she thought.

"If you don't want to..."

He whirled around so fast that she almost fell back. His eyes were blazing

with heat and he prowled to the bed, crawling up on it until he caged her against the log headboard, his face inches from hers. “Don’t. Want. To? Are you fucking kidding me, Callie? I have been doing my goddamn best to be a fucking gentleman all evening, to give you fucking space. Now you invite me to your bed and I told you. I fucking warned you what might happen. And you said...”

“I said I don’t want you to hold back.”

Alex groaned, his head dropping forward to press against hers. “Do you even know what you’re asking for? Do you have a clue how I feel?”

“Well, judging by the iron bar pressing against my stomach, I’m going to say you’re hard for me, so it’s safe to say you want me. Unless it’s been a while and you’d feel that way for anyone.”

He ground his cock into her stomach. “Not fucking likely,” he bit out. “You’re the only one I want, Callie. The only one I’ve ever wanted.”

Holy shit. She had no idea that he’d felt that way. Now that he said it, she had to admit that it felt right between them, that he fit her like one of those Lego blocks. A perfect fit. Why had they waited so long?

“Because of your fucking mirror out there. You were blind to everything and everyone else.”

Shit, she’d said that out loud. “To be fair, the mirror was ambiguous.”

“Do you really want to debate that right now?” He rubbed his cock against her again and she moaned.

“Nope.” She reached up and pulled his head down to her, kissing him deeply, telling him with no more words what she really wanted from him.

He kissed her back hungrily, and then they were on fire as his hands roamed up and down her body, touching and grasping and pulling.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” he ground out, his hands moving down to grip the bottom edge of her shirt and pull it up over her head. “And I don’t want to wait anymore. I don’t want to have to be careful. I want to be inside you.”

“You’re the sexy one.” She pulled his head down for another kiss,

grinding her hips against his as she did so. “Take it all off.”

She wanted to watch him strip for her. To see him out of his clothes. She was so damn turned on that she would come at the merest touch, and she wanted to savor the moment, to take her time and watch him, see every inch of him. Last night had been too quick, and she wanted time to explore. She quickly pulled off the rest of her clothes, not taking her eyes off of him.

With a low growl, he stood up and pulled his shirt over his head. He stood there, staring down at her with those hot, hot eyes, before reaching down to the button on his jeans and jerking them open. His cock sprang out, and she eagerly grasped him with her hands, barely able to circle it with one hand. She leaned forward and sucked him into her mouth, flicking her tongue over the tip.

She sucked and licked and stroked him with her tongue, reveling in the way he hunched forward, straining to get closer to her. He released her hair, his hands balling into fists as he struggled to keep from grabbing her head, from holding on to her.

Instead, he just bent and laid a hand on the top of the headboard, looking down at her with a feral grin that just about did her in.

She knew the moment he lost the battle and broke, knew because one hand gripped the back of her head and he pressed her face harder against his cock and his other hand left her head and trailed down her body until his finger was sliding into her wet pussy. She moaned around his cock and sucked faster, wanting more, arching into his fingers, spreading her legs for more. He slipped another finger into her pussy and finger fucked her, while his cock hit the back of her throat again and again.

He fucked her hard and fast with his fingers, his cock thrusting into her mouth in the same rhythm, sparking her higher, making her body shake with the desperate need to come.

“I’m going to come,” he groaned, his voice already deep and rough. “Oh my god, I’m going to come so fucking hard.”

She loved to hear those words, loved to know that she had that effect on him, she loved to know that she was giving him as much pleasure as he gave her. She'd never heard Alex speak so roughly, loved that she reduced him to that.

She moaned as she felt the first hot splash of his release hit the back of her throat, as she took his cock in deep and milked everything he had to give. She lost herself in him as she swallowed him down and licked him clean.

And then he did something with his fingers, hitting a spot inside of her so perfectly that she was the one going crazy. Her body was shaking, her hips moving of their own accord, rubbing her pussy against his hand. Her eyes were locked on his as her body tightened, her orgasm so close, so fucking close that she could taste it.

“Oh, god. Oh, fuck.” Her hips moved faster, harder.

“Come for me,” he growled. “Fuck, Callie, come for me.”

She screamed as she went over the edge. The orgasm hitting her harder than she'd ever climaxed before. She focused on Alex. Had to see him. See what he was doing to her, see how he was making her feel.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” he whispered.

She shook her head, unable to speak as her body continued to shudder with aftershocks.

“And you're mine, Callie,” he said in that deep, rough voice as he stood up. “Mine,” he barked as he pulled her across the bed by her ankles. “You're going to be mine forever. Say it.”

She grinned, her body one big, writhing ache for him. “You're mine, too, Alex. Forever.”

He pulled a string of condoms from his jeans and tossed them on the bed. Grabbing one, he covered his cock, then brought her legs up over his shoulders and slid inside her deeply, stretching her wide. The pain was brief as he filled her, but it was so good, so right to have him there, to have his cock inside her body. A piece of him.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard,” he growled. “I’m going to make you come so fucking hard. You’ll never forget me.”

He slammed into her again, his cock hitting the sweet spot deep inside her. She thought she’d been prepared for this, thought she had remembered how good it had been, but this was nothing like it was earlier. This was so much hotter, so much better. She moaned and writhed under him, loving the way his body slid against hers.

He leaned over her, supporting himself with one arm, his other hand reaching down to cup her ass and grind her into his body, tilting her so he hit her sweet spot deep inside on every thrust.

“Alex,” she moaned.

“Fuck yes.” He thrust into her again, hard, pushing her hips up and grinding his cock against her clit.

She came again, hard and fast. Her body shook and heels dug into his back, urging him on.

“Please,” she begged. “Please, Alex, please, I need you.”

“I know, baby. I know. I’m going to make you come again.” He slid one hand between them, circling her clit with the pad of his thumb.

“You’re going to make me come again,” she whimpered. “Come with me, Alex.”

She knew he was close. She could see it in his face. In his eyes. The way they darkened, the way his nostrils flared, the way his body tensed against hers.

“Yes, baby. I’m going to come with you.” He rolled his hips against her, reaching down to rub against her clit harder as he did so.

“Oh, god.” Her whole body was shaking and her body convulsed around his cock, squeezing him so hard he had to struggle to keep from coming.

He thrust into her one last time, holding her against him as he came deep inside her.

“Callie.” Alex collapsed on the bed beside her, pulling her into him and

holding her close.

“I think you killed me,” she managed to get out.

“Yeah. Me too.”

She smiled as she snuggled her face against his chest. She had no idea what the future held for them, but for now, she wouldn't worry about it. For once, she'd enjoy the moment and Alex.

Tomorrow was another day.



Alex rolled to the side and pulled Callie into him. She snuggled against him and his cock stirred, though how it could show any interest was beyond him. He was drained, in more ways than one. He hadn't expected her to invite him to her bed, especially since she had been acting skittish all evening, as if she was ignoring their earlier encounter. He resolved himself to them going back to an awkward friendship until she mentioned sharing the bed. His heart had literally stopped, and the blood rushed south so fast that his head spun. He'd gripped the doorjamb to steady himself, unsure that he'd heard her correctly, and to stop himself from rushing onto the bed.

The question now remained. Did this change anything or was this a onetime thing, like a vacation fling? Or would she want to continue when they returned to Sutton Falls?

Callie had been obsessed with the mirror and how it could tell her who she would marry ever since she had done a history project back in high school. She counted down the days until Midwinter like most kids counted the days to Christmas, and every year he watched her disappointment as she never saw the face of the man she would marry. And she never looked closer to home, at anyone right next to her.

Granted, he hadn't exactly been waiting around for her either, dating his fair share of women. He hadn't expected the explosive chemistry between

them, only that the constant disappointment and focus on the mirror was irritating to him. Now maybe he had an answer as to why it bothered him so much. Maybe on some level, he always wanted to be the man in the mirror for Callie and, when she never saw him, it bothered him.

But what if he never was that man? What if Midwinter came this year, and he still wasn't that man for her? What would that mean for them?

Fuck, he needed her again. Needed to show her what she meant to him, so when the time came for that damned mirror, she'd be thinking of him and only him.

He rolled until he was over her. Her eyes fluttered open, dazed and cloudy with sleep, but they focused on him and a small smile curved her lips. "Again, Alex?"

"I'll never get enough of you, Callie. Not in a day, a month, a year, ten years."

He took her lips in a deep kiss, ruthlessly driving her higher until she wrapped her arms around him and moaned into his mouth, arching her body into his. She opened her legs so he could fit between her and rubbed her pussy against him, urging him to come inside. His cock hardened painfully as he kissed her, but he forced himself to wait. He wanted to see her face as she came. It was too soon to be inside her, not yet.

He lifted his head and gazed down at her—her flushed face, eyes glazed with passion, her swollen lips from his kisses, and her breasts reddened from his beard burn. She was beautiful. She was his everything. It was time to show her how much she meant to him.

He moved his way down her body, stopping to worship her breasts, the taut peaks begging for his lips and fingers. Her hand brushed against his cock and he glanced down to see her hand between her legs, her fingers working her clit. He grabbed her wrist, stopping her motions, the pulling her away.

"Your orgasms belong to me."

She moaned. "Then get on with it or I'll do it myself."

He chuckled and lowered his head back to her body, moving south, while his fingers took over where she'd left off, expertly pleasuring her. Her breath was getting shorter and her moans were getting louder. He moved his hand away and took himself in his hand, stroking his cock, giving himself a few strokes to calm down.

He slid further down and put his face in front of her glistening pussy, looking up at her. Her eyes were closed and her head was tilted back, but she opened her eyes when she felt the heat of his breath on her.

He used his tongue to part her lips and licked her slowly, savoring the taste of her juices. She moaned and slowly thrust her hips towards him, unable to resist moving against his mouth. He continued to lick her, taking her clit into his mouth, sucking it softly. She moaned loudly. Her fingers were tangled in his hair, pulling at it softly.

“Alex, damn it. That feels so good.”

He pressed his mouth against her, harder and faster. Her moans got louder as he flicked his tongue against her clit, swirling it around and sucking it. She squirmed under him.

“Alex, oh, oh god, I'm going to...”

Her back arched as she clamped her legs together around his head. He kept at it, giving her everything he had, lapping up her juices as she came, letting her ride out her orgasm.

As soon as she came down from her high, he slid up her body, his cock rock-hard and ready to be inside her. He gripped himself in his hand and stroked himself a few times, the pre-cum on his cock making it easier as he built up his orgasm. He was close.

She stared up at him, her eyes full of lust and desire. She opened her legs wide, her face flushed, lips red and swollen.

“Alex, please.”

He didn't argue. He positioned himself at her entrance and thrust in, hard and fast, burying himself to the hilt in her wet pussy. She moaned loudly as

he fucked her, his hips slamming against hers. He leaned in to kiss her and she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, devouring his mouth with hers.

He picked up the pace, his balls slapping against her as he pounded into her. She was so wet that he could hear her juices as they dripped down her inner thighs. She reached down and grabbed his ass, pulling him in deeper. Their kiss was turning sloppy, their mouths open and their tongues battling for dominance.

As he watched her, his eyes locked on hers, he could feel the pressure building in his cock. The intensity of the moment was building, sending him to the edge.

He reached down between them and moved two fingers to her clit, rubbing against it roughly as he fucked her, giving her just enough sensation to send her over another edge.

Their orgasms came at the same time. He felt her pussy clenching hard around his cock, his cock pulsing and shooting out his load into her while he grunted in pleasure. His legs gave out, and he fell on top of her, his cock still buried inside her as they both caught their breath.

Alex rolled off her and onto his back. He tried to catch his breath and as he did, his eyes caught hers. He reached his arm out and pulled her close, kissing her gently on the forehead.

“You’re going to kill me at this rate.”

She smiled and nuzzled into his chest. “I don’t know what you mean. I was just sleeping.”

“Whatever you call it, you just about killed me, Callie.”

CHAPTER 13



Ellie stretched Monday morning, feeling deliciously sore in places that she'd never felt before. It had been three days of marathon sex and laughter with Alex. They spent the weekend enjoying each other's company, both in and out of bed, and other places in the cabin. She'd have to remember to take some of the blankets home with her to wash them before her father came up in the spring. Thank God he wasn't big on ice fishing. She had plenty of time, hopefully.

She hadn't expected to have such a wonderful time with Alex. She had always had fun with him. Being best friends since the second grade, they had always enjoyed each other's company. Bowling leagues, sporting events, parties. But there had always been this line between them, this gap, that they had never been crossed. She had never realized it until her friends asked her why she had never hooked up with Alex. She had never really considered him in that way. He had always been her friend, the one who was always there for her, no matter what.

Then she couldn't stop thinking of him like that, though she was afraid to lose him. What if it didn't work out between them romantically? Who would she call when she needed help in her kitchen? Who would be her plus one for events? Who would be there when she did something impulsive, like take the mirror for a ride? If Alex wasn't in her life anymore, there would be a gaping

hole inside that could never be filled.

But if he was there as something else, something more, maybe they could be even better, even stronger. Was it possible? Could he really be the one?

A chopping sound echoed from outside, jerking her out of her thoughts. No wonder she was alone in the bed. Alex must have gone outside to chop wood. He had mentioned something about that the previous day when they had emerged from the cabin for a walk. He thought they should replenish the wood for the pile before they left, since they used quite a bit for ambiance and heat.

She slipped out of bed and into her slippers and robe. She padded out of the room, deciding to tackle breakfast, since she was sure Alex would be starving. Then they had to decide if they were going to head back or wait a little longer. She had told her job she'd be out until tomorrow, but she didn't know about Alex.

She walked through the main area and paused in front of the packaged-up mirror leaning against the far wall. She had put the mirror out of her mind all weekend, not even thinking about the upcoming Midwinter and who she might see in it. Margaret had packaged it to protect it from the journey up here, but it wouldn't take much to unwrap it and peer inside, to see if there was a glimpse of the man she would marry.

In previous years, she often caught snippets of the man before the Midwinter evening, fleeting glances that whetted her appetite for the main event. She was so conflicted. She had been convinced it was Etienne, but look how that turned out. He was trying to steal it from Margaret, literally and figuratively, with a court case. There was no way he could be the man in the mirror. And now there was Alex, the man she had never considered. But what if neither man was her mystery man? Would it matter?

She forced herself to walk to the stove and crack five eggs in a pan for scrambled eggs. She set the bacon in another pan to cook and the bread in the toaster. Meanwhile, she could almost hear the mirror calling her. Don't you

want to know the truth? Don't you want to be sure?

What if it wasn't Alex? She would ruin a friendship that was an integral part of her life since childhood. Maybe Elise was right. Maybe she shouldn't rely on the mirror and listen to her heart. But her heart led her to Etienne.

She found herself in front of the mirror, her hand on the paper when the door opened, letting in bone-chilling air. She jumped and moved to the stove. Alex's dark eyes missed nothing, though.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes! I was just making breakfast. Hope you're hungry." Even to her ears, her voice was too bright, too loud, too false.

He didn't say anything, just laid a load of wood by the fireplace. He went into the bathroom and washed up. He came out and sat at the table just in time for her to set a plate for each of them.

"I was thinking we should head back today. I have to get back to my job." He didn't look at her as he ate.

She nodded, also eating, but it all tasted like ash. "I have to get back to work tomorrow. The case should be decided today, right?"

The fork paused on the way to Alex's mouth, then he ate the bite. "It's unusual to have a case heard this quickly, but you never know."

"Do you think it will go in Margaret's favor?"

He was acting weird. Was he regretting the weekend? Did he wish they had never slept together? The food was tasteless in her mouth and she pushed her plate away, fisting her hands in her lap. He looked up, alarmed.

"Are you okay, Callie? I can't imagine Etienne has a case. Margaret has a letter giving her grandmother the mirror."

She took a deep breath and faced him. "Do you regret coming here this weekend?"

He looked startled. "Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"You're acting weird, distant, and strange. I wondered if you were sorry to have slept with me."

He reached out and grabbed her hand, gripping it and peering into her eyes intently. “Callie, I will never regret that, never regret being with you. I thought you might have felt that way about me, especially now that we’re headed home. I guess communication is not our strong suit.”

She laughed. “I guess not. So, we’re going forward with whatever this is?”

“There is no whatever this is. This is a relationship, Callie. I want everything, okay? Are you in?”

She couldn’t help the burst of happiness that exploded in her chest. “Absolutely! Though I wish we had more time here. I can’t believe I’m saying that.”

“Me neither. Let me finish with the wood, stacking it and cleaning up out there, then we can hit the road.”

“I’ll clean up in here and we’ll be ready.”

He got up, leaned over and kissed her, a heated kiss that almost had her forgetting her goal, then headed outside. She cleaned up the dishes and gathered the laundry to bring home for washing, packing up her car with stuff, walking back and forth in front of the mirror all the time.

Finally, she stopped in front of it, fully intending to bring it out to the car to pack it. But somehow her hands unwrapped the paper and revealed the reflective surface. She stood in front of it and stared into it, willing her match to be unveiled.

“Are you kidding me, Callie? Still with that fucking mirror?”



*A*lex had been stacking wood and chopping some last pieces to ensure the pile was replenished from their time over the weekend. They had used more than he had expected since Callie loved the ambiance in the fireplace, and it was certainly romantic. But he didn’t want to leave her father

with a lower wood pile, so he put in the time to chop the extra wood stacked on the side so they were ready for the next visitor. It also gave him a break from Callie and the marathon sex.

Not that he minded that. After all this time, he never expected this to happen, and with Callie, of all people. She was an integral part of his life, though they had never once considered a relationship, which had seemed weird to all his girlfriends, not that there had been that many. But they all had been jealous of his closeness with Callie and hated whenever he spent time with her, not understanding their friendship. One girl even went so far as to accuse him of having unrequited feelings for her.

Of course, now that he'd spent the weekend with her, his feelings were anything but friendship. Or maybe it was more accurate to say they were more than friendship. Maybe the adage was true. You should marry your best friend. He wasn't sure who said that, and he wasn't quite ready for marriage, but this was definitely not a weekend fling.

The only fly in the ointment was the mirror and her fixation on it. She was determined that she had to see her soulmate in the mirror and only that person would do. What if it wasn't him? Could he step aside and watch her marry another man, especially after all they'd shared?

He finished with the stacks and headed inside, only to see Callie standing in front of the mirror, the wrappings on the floor, mesmerized by the reflection in the glass and whatever only she could see. His anger at the mirror and the fear of losing her boiled out of him in that instant and he exploded.

“Are you fucking kidding me with that mirror, Callie? Am I not enough for you that you need to test it with the mirror?”

She jumped back, a guilty look on her face. “I didn't see anything, Alex. I was just making sure it wasn't damaged in the journey here.”

But she averted her gaze, and he knew when a perp was lying. He'd seen it too many times in his job. “Bullshit, Callie. You were trying to see your

mystery soulmate in there.”

She lifted her chin and steeled her gaze. “So, what if I was? I’ve been looking in it over ten years. Is it so wrong to want a little magic? Nora and Leo Jacobs were brought together by the mirror, and they lived almost sixty-five years together. I want a little magic in my life. I want to be sure that I have the right person. I mean, look at my parents. That was a disaster.”

He advanced until he was right in front of her, forcing her to tilt her head up. “Callie, Nora and Leo may have been brought together because of the mirror, but they had to work to find love. The magic is not in the meeting but in the love they found together, in the working together, the loving, the time they spent together. Love is not magical. It’s fucking work and a commitment. Something you know in your heart. It’s not from outside of you. It comes from inside.”

She whirled away from him and fled to the other side of the room. “What do you know of it? You had your flavors of the month until now. What do you know about love?”

“My parents have been married for thirty-five years. They talk about their first meeting and how they each fell for each other right away, but it was a journey to the destination. In fact, my mother still talks about how hard marriage is sometimes. Just because you saw the catastrophic fallout from when it doesn’t work, doesn’t mean it will work when the mirror says it will. It’s still an attraction, lust. You need to build a relationship and that takes work.”

She eyed him skeptically. “That’s what we have. Lust. How do we know it’s anything more?”

“Look inside, Callie. Do you really think this is a quick wham bam thing? I’ve known you forever and I’ve always loved you, but was afraid to admit it and risk losing you as a friend. But I know you’re the one for me. I don’t need a fucking mirror to tell me what’s in my heart. Trust your heart.”

She shook her head, tears glistening in her eyes. “I can’t. Every time I do

that, I'm let down. Look at my history. Darren Peterson. Josh Gunderson. Dale Murphy. Now, Etienne. I pick the worst men."

"Etienne is a con artist. You only trusted him because of the mirror. And the others were all assholes. Maybe it's the mirror that's causing your problem, not your heart. You need to trust yourself, Callie. Trust my feelings for you."

She kept shaking her head. "No, Alex. Every time I do that, I let people down. The historical society almost lost everything because I trusted the wrong man. Margaret almost lost the mirror because I thought Etienne was my mystery man. Now I might lose my best friend. I can't trust myself."

He could feel everything slipping through his fingers like water. "Don't do this, Callie. Don't throw us away. We have a good thing. We could be amazing together. Please, Callie. I love you."

She only shook her head, tears coursing down her cheeks. "I can't, Alex. I'm afraid."

Anger burst inside of him. "Fuck it, then. See if your mirror keeps you warm at night or if you become a cold, lonely woman like Margaret."

He turned and grabbed his duffel bag. "I'm headed back to Sutton Falls. My partner needs me for the burglary ring. Can you find your way home?"

"Alex, please, don't leave when you're angry."

He turned, seeing her on the couch, wringing her hands together. "I'm not angry. I'm just disappointed. I'll turn down the thermostat on my way out. Make sure everything is off. Good bye, Callie."

And he left, leaving what remained of his heart on the cabin floor.

CHAPTER 14



Callie made it back to Sutton Falls, despite the tears clouding her vision. How she didn't get into an accident amazed her. It was a complete turnaround from the amazing weekend she had just spent with the one guy she had never seen in that way. Now, thanks to her obsession with the mirror and her inability to trust herself, she may have screwed up the best thing that ever happened to her.

She pulled up to Margaret's house with no idea of how to fix the situation with Alex. She tried dialing his phone again, but it went straight to voicemail. Either he was avoiding her or he was busy. She was pretty sure it was the first one. Damn it.

Margaret stood on the back porch, her face wreathed in smiles. "You made it back quickly. Everything go okay?"

Callie burst into tears.

A short while later, the mirror was back where it belonged and the two women were sitting in the parlor having a cup of tea and some cookies Margaret had gotten at the bakery.

"So, Alex finally made his move. I wondered when he would admit how he felt," Margaret mused.

Callie stared at her friend, the cup halfway to her mouth. "You knew?"

Margaret gave her a gentle smile. "Dear, it was obvious to anyone who

was watching, though I didn't think Alex would ever tell you. So, how did it go?"

Callie felt her face heat, and she covered by sipping some tea. "It was fine."

Margaret raised an eyebrow. "Only fine? That's disappointing. I expected more from Alex. Though you were crying when you got here, so maybe fine is an overestimation of his skill."

Callie felt the need to defend Alex, even if he broke her heart. "He was wonderful. He followed me to the cabin, though I don't know how he knew I was there." Catching Margaret's smirk, she rolled her eyes. "Of course. You told him. Playing matchmaker?"

Margaret shrugged. "I've been watching the two of you dance around what was patently obvious to the rest of us for years now. So, I gave you a little nudge."

Callie sighed. "Well, it turned out to be a good thing. I didn't know half the things in my father's cabin, and Alex did. Though we had already taken that step. The cabin just added on."

"Really? So why are you here and not with Alex?"

Tears threatened again, but Callie held them back, glancing at the mirror, which only showed the room and nothing else. "I looked in the mirror."

"Oh, Callie," Margaret sighed.

"I know. But I have a terrible radar when it comes to people. That guy who tried to sell the historical society those fake letters? Etienne? I mean, half my dates before now were losers, too. I had to be sure. You understand. You grew up with Nora and Leo as grandparents." Callie couldn't remain seated anymore and began pacing the parlor.

"First of all, yes, I saw my grandparents and how much they loved each other, but I also saw how much they argued. My grandfather was a good man, but he and my grandmother had their own battles at times. Just because she saw him in the mirror didn't mean their life was smooth, without any

bumps.”

“I know that. I know the mirror doesn’t mean life is perfect. But it helps you know that person is the right one for you, doesn’t it?”

Margaret looked out the window for a long moment. “Let me tell you a story, Callie. I waited for my one true love, a lot like you are. Every year, I looked in the mirror and hoped to see him. Meanwhile, there was a boy who lived next door, someone I knew my whole life. William Henschal. He was a nice boy, handsome, kind. Our families were close. In fact, his grandparents and mine were best friends. Anyway, he asked me to marry him one Christmas, but I said no. I was waiting for my true love. He left Sutton Falls after that and I never saw him again.”

Callie sank onto one of the chairs, her heart wrenching for her friend. “That’s so sad. But maybe he wasn’t your true love.”

She smiled sadly. “I believe he was. The mirror doesn’t tell everyone who their soulmate is. We have to trust ourselves sometimes. I know you worry you can’t trust yourself, but you might lose out on the best thing that could ever happen to you.”

Margaret stood and walked to Callie, resting one hand on her cheek. “Think about it, dear. Don’t be like me. Listen to your heart. The mirror doesn’t know everything.”



“*W*hat crawled up your ass and died?” Roger griped from across the desk. “I would have thought, after a nice weekend away, you would have been relaxed, happy, not Krampus.”

Alex glared at his partner. “Who the fuck is Krampus?”

“You know, the opposite of Santa? The one who comes and punishes all the bad kids. You’re telling me you never heard of him?”

Alex smirked. “I guess I must have been a good kid to never have heard

of him.”

Roger threw a stress ball at Alex. “Whatever. Anyway, we have the results of the fingerprints from the Jacobs’ House. Definitely wasn’t your buddy, Etienne Belmont. We pulled in the kids responsible and guess what we found?”

Alex waved his hand to get his partner to tell him, not really in the mood to play guessing games. Roger grunted. “A bunch of stolen material and the names of the ringleaders. Want to go on a sting to bring him in?”

Alex grunted, still sorting through his email, hoping for the background check on Etienne. He may not have been the guy to do the smash and grab at Margaret’s house, but there was something off with that guy. “Yeah, I suppose.”

“Wow, don’t overwhelm me with your excitement. What’s gotten into you? Did you finally get the balls up to tell Callie how you feel and she reject you?”

Alex leaned back in his chair, the squeak of the springs grating on his nerves. “Something like that.”

Roger stared, his jaw hanging open. “Seriously? You told her? Outstanding. It’s about time. I mean, you’ve been beating that dead horse a long time, never really saying anything.”

“Not good. I mean, it was good then she had to look in that fucking mirror.”

Even thinking about it had his blood boiling again. Why couldn’t she trust him when he said he loved her? He never said that to anyone else before, had never planned on saying it unless he meant it. His parents were still in love thirty-five years into their marriage and he swore he would wait until he had a love like that before ever saying it. He often thought he had that possibility with Callie, but he hadn’t known until now. But she clearly didn’t believe him, if she needed the confirmation from a mirror. Did she doubt him? Doubt that he had the commitment to back it up?

She wasn't wrong that he'd dated around a lot. Anytime a girl started talking about commitment, he'd backed off, but that was because he knew she wasn't the one. None of them were. He hadn't known that he'd been waiting for Callie. But now it felt right, and no one else would ever fill that void in his life.

Roger gave a low whistle. "I've heard about the mirror. Thank goodness Carla never joined in on that ritual. She always thought that was bullshit."

"Maybe she was afraid she wouldn't see anything, or see someone else," Alex said.

Roger shrugged. "I don't know. Seeing someone in a mirror and saying they're your soulmate or some such bullshit is too much like judging someone by how they look. How does a mirror know that you two belong together? It's a fucking mirror."

"Right? That's what I said," Alex nodded.

Roger winced. "Yeah, I don't think I would have said that to Callie, though. She believes that shit and you basically insulted her beliefs. Not cool, Alex."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Come on. You just said it was stupid."

"Yeah, it is, but you don't say that to someone you love who actually believes it. That's a bonehead move, unless you wanted to torch the relationship. Did you?" Roger said with a side-eye.

"Of course not. She blew us up." Didn't she?

"She looked in a mirror. You have often said it yourself. She has terrible judgment. Maybe she just wanted to be sure. For once, she was checking. Sounds to me like you were the one who blew it up when you went all scorched earth. So what if she looked in a mirror?"

"She didn't believe me when I said I loved her." Alex could still feel the pain in his heart at her rejection.

Roger was already shaking his head. "Nah, it's not that she didn't believe you. She didn't trust herself. But you walked away. Not a good plan when

you finally had the girl.” Roger heaved himself out of his chair. “Look, we have to deal with this mess. Do you think you can pull your head out of your ass long enough not to get yourself or anyone else killed? Dumbass.”

Alex flipped me off. “I’ve got this.”

Yeah, he had this. But then, he would have to deal with Callie. Maybe he was a dumbass. But could he take the chance that she wouldn’t retreat when they got serious? No, maybe it was time he cut bait and found a new path, one where he wasn’t stabbed in the heart every day.

CHAPTER 15



Callie spent a restless night trying to forget about everything Alex had said to her, but it was useless. Had she been too focused on the mirror to see what was right in front of her? Could she finally trust her heart and trust Alex that he would be there for her? She wanted to talk to him, but he wasn't picking up the phone. He had mentioned he was dealing with a burglary ring. Most likely, he was busy working on that, so he couldn't cater to her. He'd done this before when he had a case gone dark and focused on the situation at hand. She would just have to be patient.

In the meantime, Margaret needed help cleaning up and getting ready for the Midwinter event the next evening. Callie always helped her with it, along with decorating for the Holiday Historic House tour later in the week. Most of the basic decorating had already been done, but some decorations had been damaged by the break-in, so they were fixing everything and adding some new things from the attic for the historic tour.

Margaret went with the theme of the Roaring Twenties, so Callie started the day lugging boxes out of storage to gather some of the original decorations from that era. They picked a different time period every year, and the Twenties were Callie's favorite. She had bought a flapper dress for the tour and hoped to persuade Alex to dress as Leo so they could portray the original owners of the house, with Margaret's endorsement.

Somehow, Callie didn't think Alex would be up for cosplay this year.

They were taking a break when the front doorbell rang. Margaret glanced at Callie, who shrugged. "I'll get it."

She opened the door to see Etienne on the doorstep, a genial smile on his face. "Ahh, one of the two women I was hoping to see today. May I come in?"

Callie wanted to resist, but Margaret appeared behind her. "Of course, Etienne. We were just about to take a break and have a cup of tea. Will you join us?"

His smile broadened. "I would be delighted. Thank you."

Shortly, they were seated in the parlor with cups of tea and sandwiches in front of them, all the image of friendliness. "Thank you so much for seeing me. I want to apologize for any distress I may have caused you over the mirror. I hope you can understand my position."

Margaret smiled, a tight one but still gracious in her victory. "Of course, Etienne. I understand wanting to connect with your family and your history. That's why I have dedicated myself to the preservation of this house and my family. I keep our name and our history alive for the next generation."

"You understand. But who will be the next generation for the mirror? Who is the next in line to inherit it?"

Margaret frowned. "My lawyer is tracing the line to ensure the next female is identified to inherit. That is the history and legend of the mirror and must be honored. Do you have any insight into that genealogy?"

He shook his head woefully. "Alas, my path ended here. All my other lines of inquiry resulted in dead ends."

"I'm sorry. If you share your contact information with me, I will keep in touch when we find other members of the family."

"Of course. Thank you." He glanced past them up at the mirror now returned to its spot on the wall. "You've hung it back on the wall?"

Callie and Margaret both turned to look at it. Callie thought she saw a

shape inside and she squinted to see if she could make anything out but it was too vague, too insubstantial. Margaret gave her an odd look and Callie just shook her head.

Then both turned back to Etienne. “Yes, we’re getting ready for the Midwinter festival tomorrow, then the house tour. Will you stay for it?”

He shook his head. “No, I leave tonight for France. I miss my home. But thank you for sharing the mirror with me and stories of my family.” He picked up his cup and drained it. “I should take my leave now. No need to show me out. I know the way.”

He bent over and kissed both their hands. “Adieu, and happy Christmas.”

They waited a few moments and the front door opened and closed. Margaret looked at Callie. “Well, one door closes, I suppose. Wait, he never left his contact information.”

Callie snorted. “I don’t think he really wanted to stay in touch, Margaret.”

She picked up her tea and took a swallow. “We should finish our break. We have a lot to do.”

There was a slightly different taste to the tea, and Callie frowned. Had it steeped too long while they were talking? That seemed strange. Margaret also drank her tea and looked strange. Then Callie’s vision grew fuzzy, and she felt dizzy. She put the cup down.

“Margaret, I don’t feel so good.” When she looked over at Margaret, the older woman was slumped on the couch, unconscious.

Callie fumbled for her phone, but her hands wouldn’t work. She had to call Alex. He would know what to do. A shadow fell across her. Etienne stared down at her, an unreadable expression on his face. Then everything went dark.



Alex sat across from his lieutenant, his mind resolute on the path he'd chosen. While his heart was still here in Sutton Falls, it was time to move on. Callie wasn't ready to see what they could be, and he was tired of banging his head against that wall. And if she moved on, he didn't think he could watch her with someone else, especially if they hurt her, like all the others. He needed to protect himself for once. It was time.

"Are you sure about this, Morin?" His lieutenant asked, his voice clearly skeptical.

"Yes, sir. I've been giving it a lot of thought and I think a change of scenery would be good for my career."

His lieutenant narrowed his eyes. "You're a damned good detective, on the track for a promotion here. You could go further faster here than in the city, where they have more people competing for fewer spots. And it's more dangerous. Are you sure you want to do that?"

Alex nodded, firm in his conviction. He needed a change. It was time. "Yes, sir. I was approached last year, and it wasn't the right time, but now, I think maybe I'm ready for a change."

"Is there something wrong in the department?" Understanding dawned in his lieutenant's eyes. "Or is it personal? Does this have something to do with Callie Ricci?"

It really sucked living in a small town where everyone knew each other. He felt like he owed his boss the truth, though he hated to admit it, but the last thing he wanted to do was discuss his personal life with his boss. "Yes, and no. I think a change might be good for me."

Regret and resignation settled on his lieutenant's face, and he nodded. "I understand. I wish you didn't feel that way. You're an excellent detective." He stood and extended his hand. "We'll miss you around here, Morin."

Alex shook his hand and left. Now he had to head to Margaret's and tell her about the robbery, that they'd caught the suspects, and confirm one of the

items from her home. It would be his last case in Sutton Falls. After the new year, he would move to New York City and start fresh.

He swung by his desk to grab the photos of the stolen property recovered from the sting operation, ignoring the betrayed look from his partner. Then he headed out for Margaret's house. Hopefully, he wouldn't run into Callie. His partner thought he should talk with Callie one more time, try to work it all out, but Alex knew it was futile. She was fixated on finding the perfect man, and only the mirror could tell her who he was.

He knew perfection didn't exist. His parents had told him that over the years, that love was a good start, but it took work to make a marriage successful. When his brother died, his family imploded, and it took a lot of work for them to get back to something resembling normal. But they did, or a new normal.

But Callie had a different experience. To her, she needed assurances she picked the right man, so she didn't have the constant battleground that was her parent's marriage, then eventual divorce. Her own experiences in dating had been less than optimal, if he wanted to be generous, so she sought someone or something that could give her a guarantee. But a mirror was an inanimate object. He couldn't compete with that. And he was tired of trying.

He pulled up in front of Margaret's house, noting all the holiday decorations. He'd forgotten that it was the day before Midwinter and Margaret would be ramping up the final touches on the holiday trappings for Midwinter and the Holiday House tour later that week. He'd most definitely run into Callie since she usually helped Margaret. Damn it. If they hadn't needed this final confirmation of the stolen items, he'd put this off for another day. But it would strengthen their case for the bail hearing.

He sighed and got out, then headed for the front door. As he reached the bottom steps, the door opened and Etienne stepped out, patting his pocket. He quietly closed the door and stopped dead on the top of the stairs when he saw Alex standing there, looking startled.

“Detective Morin. I didn’t expect to see you today.”

Alex narrowed his gaze, wondering why Etienne looked so nervous, toying with his pocket. “We had an update on the burglary. I needed to check in with Margaret.”

Etienne grew still. “An update? What’s happened?”

Something told him not to share too much with the other man. Of course, that could be because Alex didn’t like him very much or trusted him. He wished the background check had come back, but they hadn’t found anything on Etienne Belmont yet, which was strange on its own.

“I’d prefer to discuss that with Margaret. You’re welcome to come inside and join us.”

Etienne’s eyes widened ever so slightly and he shook his head. “Alas, I have a flight to catch. I need to return home before the holidays.”

Alex cocked his head. “Are you joining family for the holidays?”

“I have people waiting for me. It’s so hard to be away from them during the holidays,” he smoothly said, avoiding the subject of family. He sidestepped Alex. “Thank you for looking out for Margaret and Callie. They’re special ladies.”

He stepped around Alex and hurried down the walkway and to his waiting rental car. He glanced back a couple of times until he was in his car, then he peeled out. Alex watched him go, a sense of unease spreading. Then he walked up the steps and knocked on the front door. No one answered, and his unease grew. He tried to pass it off as they were working in the back part of the house. He tried the handle, and it was locked. Now alarm bells were ringing. Something was off in his conversation with Etienne, but he couldn’t put his finger on it.

He walked along the length of the porch, peering in the windows until he came to the parlor. Two figures were slumped over, one on the couch and one on a chair. Callie and Margaret.

He pulled out his phone and dialed emergency services while he raced to

the front door. He kicked it in and spoke with dispatch, requesting an ambulance, and put an APB on Etienne's vehicle.

He checked the women's pulses, finding them weak and sluggish, and they were breathing. Margaret was already stirring, but Callie was out.

"Come on, Callie. Wake up, sweetheart. Please, honey. Open your eyes."

After a moment, her eyelashes fluttered, and she focused on him. "Alex? I tried to call you. Where were you?"

Her words were like a stab to his heart. The one time she needed him and he wasn't there. He'd failed her.

"I'm here now, Callie. I have you."

"It was Etienne. He did something to the tea, I think." She weakly lifted her hand toward a spilled teacup on the floor.

Officers rushed in, followed by emergency services. "Bag the tea. There might be poison or a sedative in there."

Nods indicated they heard. Then he was shunted aside so they could work on both women, while he stood there feeling completely helpless.

"Alex," Callie called out. "Check the mirror."

Always with that fucking mirror. But she sounded upset, and he wasn't going to argue, not now. He turned and was shocked to see it on its side; the back pulled apart and wood split from the back of the top. It had been ripped apart as if someone was looking for something. What the fuck?

He pulled out his phone and called his partner. "Get forensics here. I think Etienne Belmont was looking for something."

CHAPTER 16



Callie struggled to open her eyes. They felt like the weight of sandbags had been placed on them and her tongue felt like wool has been stuffed in her mouth. Her head pounded, and she felt like she weighed a thousand pounds. Beeping penetrated the fog that surrounded her, and she pushed her way to consciousness.

“Callie? Honey? Oh my god. You’re awake. Get the nurse.”

The voice eventually registered, and she focused on the face. “Dad? What are you doing here?”

“You’re in the hospital, honey. Your mother is here, too, as are your friends. You were drugged. Alex called us.”

She tried to get to a sitting position, but there were wires and tubes around her and her mother gently pushed her down. “Relax, sweetie. You have an IV and some wires connecting you. If you move, you might dislodge them. Stay quiet until the nurse can check on you.”

“Where’s Alex?” She glanced at all the worried faces that surrounded her, all slowly coming into focus.

Elise and Jennifer exchanged glances. “He’s not here, Callie. I think he’s running the investigation. Do you want us to call him?”

Disappointment stabbed her in her heart. He had always been there for her. She expected him to be right by her side when she woke, but it made

more sense that he would handle the investigation. Stifling her disappointment, she shook her head. “No, I’m sure he’ll be here when he’s ready. What happened?”

“I was hoping you could tell us, Callie,” a male voice spoke from the doorway.

Her heart leapt, thinking it was Alex, but his partner, Roger, stepped into view. “I know you’ve had a rough time, and you just woke up, but it would really help us out if you could tell us what you remember.”

Her family and friends protested, all speaking at once, but Callie sank into her memories, the fogged and disconnected images she had from that afternoon. Then she spoke, her voice a little hoarse. She had to repeat herself since her voice was so raw. “No, it’s okay. He needs to hear this. Give us a moment, please.”

With a last look, they left the room, promising to be right outside. “Why isn’t Alex here?”

Roger looked uncomfortable, not meeting her gaze. “He is overseeing the details at the house.”

She got the sense that Roger wasn’t telling her something, but her mind was foggy so she could be wrong. “Okay, what do you need to know?”

She quickly ran down the events of the afternoon. Roger took notes, then closed his notebook, standing to leave. “Thank you, Callie. I’m sorry this was so difficult for you.”

“Is Margaret okay?”

He nodded. “She didn’t drink as much of the sedative as you did, but there was a small interaction with some of her medication. They’re watching her closely. But she’ll be okay. She should be released tomorrow, just like you.”

She eyed him carefully, noting how he avoided her gaze and shuffling his feet. “Roger, what’s going on?”

He lifted his head, alarm in his eyes. “What do you mean? It’s an ongoing

investigation. You know I can't share information, Callie."

"No, there's something else going on. Something about Alex." His eyes flared, and she knew she was on to something.

But he shook his head and backed out, his butt banging the door. "You'll have to talk to him, Callie. I'm not getting in the middle. But," he paused, clearly torn. Then he lifted his head and fixed her with a look that had desperation written all over it. "Aw shit, Callie. You're tearing him up inside, you know?"

Tears filled her eyes. "I don't mean to, Roger. I'm working through it as quickly as I can."

"Work faster, Callie," he spoke cryptically and slipped out of the room.



Alex glared at the background check on Etienne Belmont, AKA Etienne Archambeau, Steve Belmont, Steve Archambeau. The list went on and on. The one thing that was consistent. He never lived in Rouen or at a manor house, nor was he related to Suzanne Rochefort, or at least not that they could find. He pulled the scam about World War II and missing, stolen, or lost family heirlooms across several countries, often filing legal challenges, but somehow the items went missing before the case could be heard. He was never arrested or definitely accused in any of the cases, but the MO was too close to what happened here.

Though he had never attacked anyone before. And no items were stolen. So what did he want with the mirror? And why damage a valuable antique?

There was no way that he could have taken it with him. It was too big to transport, especially with people watching. It was valuable, but Alex got the feeling there was something they were missing.

Unfortunately, Etienne, or whoever he really was, was in the wind. He probably had several aliases that he went by and had switched it already,

maybe even his appearance too. He had never fully spoke like a true European, not that Alex knew what that would be like, but his accent was a little too fluid, a little too inconsistent for Alex's taste. But that hadn't been proof, not on its own.

He'd circulated Etienne's image and information to all the border crossings and airlines, but he didn't have much hope.

"Callie was asking for you," Roger said as he dropped into the chair opposite Alex's desk. "You should go see her."

"I'm busy trying to find the asshole who tried to kill her." Alex waved the papers in the air and avoided his partner's gaze.

"You'll have to face her sometime, have to tell her that you're abandoning all of us for the bright lights and big city."

Alex sighed and set the papers down. "I'm not abandoning you. I'm just moving on for a new career opportunity."

"Bullshit," Roger coughed the words into his hands. "You're butthurt and running away. How long have you been planning this?"

"Since they approached me last year. It's been on my mind as an option," he admitted.

"And you couldn't share before now?" Roger's voice held a tone of hurt.

Guilt tweaked in Alex, but he had to remain firm. "I'll miss you. I'll miss Sutton Falls. But I'm ready for a new challenge."

"You want distance from Callie. I get it. But now I'll have to partner with Dan Sims and he's an idiot."

Alex laughed at the disgruntled expression. "Look at it this way. Now you'll be the senior partner and can give him all the grunt work."

"He'll only fuck it up. Don't think I'll forgive you easily for this."

"I never thought you would."

Roger grunted. "How long are you going to beat yourself up for Callie getting hurt and Etienne slipping by you?"

Damn it. His partner knew him all too well. The city would be good for

him. No one would know his history and he could have a clean start. “I’m not beating myself up. I’m doing my job, which I should have been doing earlier today.”

“No one could have known that Etienne had drugged them. You did the best you could. Hell, we have intel on the guy because you trusted your gut and got a background check days ago. We’re ahead of the game because of your instincts.” He heaved himself out of his chair. “The city is lucky to have you. Now, you have to come to dinner before you leave.”

Alex nodded as Roger left the room. He should have known better. Etienne was acting all kinds of suspicious. He should have strongly suggested the man come inside with him. He should have searched him or forced him to remain there while he checked on the women.

He threw a pen across the room. He knew he did the right thing. He hadn’t had a reason to stop Etienne beyond a vague sense of something wrong. It didn’t erase his guilt over letting Callie down. How would it feel when he was a hundred and fifty miles away?

CHAPTER 17



Callie shivered in the evening air. It was Midwinter and the Jacobs House was all alight with holiday lights and decorations. She and Margaret had been released that morning as promised, with no lingering effects. She had gone home with strict instructions not to help Margaret today. Others had stepped in to prepare for the event tonight so she and Margaret could rest.

She had tried to call Alex multiple times, but all she got was his voicemail. She couldn't help but get the feeling that he was avoiding her. She considered driving to the station, but her mother, who decided to stay with her to nurse her back to health, refused to allow it. Which was probably a good thing, since Callie slept most of the day.

Now, Callie was standing on the sidewalk, staring at the Jacobs House for the event she waited all year for. The Midwinter festival. The night where she would look into the mirror and see her true love. Or not, since she had yet to see him, only a vague, faceless figure. Would tonight be any different?

She pulled out her phone to see if Alex had called, but there were no messages or even texts. Damn it. Where was he?

"Why are you freezing out here?" Callie turned to see her two best friends walking up the sidewalk, Elise and Jennifer, arm in arm.

A broad smile crossed her face and joy burst inside of her. "You made it!

I thought you had Theo's holiday party at work. And Jennifer, you said you didn't think you would come either."

Elise shrugged. "I told Theo it was our last Midwinter festival together, and I wanted to support you. He understood. Besides, this weekend, he proposed, and I said yes. I don't need the mirror anymore." She waggled her finger in front of her, the light catching on the diamond on her hand.

Callie squealed and hugged her friend. "I'm so happy for you, Elise. You should be with Theo tonight."

"Honestly, his work colleagues are so boring. A bunch of CPAs and lawyers. I could do with a break. They're my entire future, you know. Besides, you need me tonight."

Callie hugged her again and turned to Jennifer. "What about you? I thought you didn't believe in this."

"Maybe I don't, but hey, I'm hedging my bets," she grinned. "Like you said, it's tradition. I'm kind of surprised to see you here. I heard you and Alex spent time at the cabin together."

Tears flooded Callie's eyes, as they often did that day. She would blame it on the accident, but really, it was the mention of Alex. Her friends dragged her onto the bench in front of the Jacobs House and they all sat on it. "What happened?"

"How do you know if someone is the right person for you? I mean, Elise, you never saw Theo in the mirror. How do you know he's your person?"

Elise and Jennifer exchanged glances over Callie's head. "Well, I just know it in my heart. He's the guy I couldn't imagine living without. Life is dull without him, and that's saying a lot since he's a CPA and kind of defines dull. But he fits me. I can't imagine spending another day without him in my life."

Callie turned to Jennifer, and she nodded. "And Sam and I, well, we've been on again, off again for years. We're on now, and the world is gray without him in it. I spent a lot of time without him, dating other guys to see if

there was a better fit. But he brightens my life and we fit together. We make each other better.”

“But wouldn’t it be better to see them in the mirror?”

Jennifer laughed. “I never saw anyone in the mirror. I may not see anyone this year either. But I don’t need a mirror to know Sam is the one for me. I’ve dated enough to know he is the right man.”

“But what if you’re wrong? I mean, I dated a lot of men too and they were all horrible. How can I trust Alex won’t turn out to be the wrong fit, too?”

Elise took her hand. “I don’t remember where it came from, but remember the saying, life is like a box of chocolates? Well, I consider dating like that. Dating is like a box of assorted chocolates. We rarely get a good piece right out of the box, unless we stack the deck and get a box of just the kind we like. So we go through the box, trying chocolate after chocolate until we find the perfect one. Yours will be different from mine and from Jennifer’s. But we have to try them to find the right one.”

She glanced at Jennifer. “Theo wasn’t my first boyfriend. I had quite a few doozies. Remember Scott, the guy with the feed the snake parties? Then Dylan, who slept with his ferrets?”

Jennifer picked up the thread. “I had Marc who stole my car and Charlie, who tried a Ponzi scheme on my family. None of us got it right the first time, or second. But when we find the right guy, we know it. In our hearts.”

Callie stared at the street, the muted sounds from the party in the Jacobs House drifting on the air behind her. Could they be right? Could it be that she didn’t need a mirror to tell her what her heart had known for years?

Elise and Jennifer stood. “It’s freezing out here. Do you want to go inside?”

Callie shook her head. “Not this year. I have somewhere else to be.”



Alex tilted back the bottle of beer and stared out over the night sky onto the city lights of Sutton Falls. His view was going to be very different in a few weeks, once his transfer went through. He'd be lying to himself if he didn't already regret it, but he also knew that he couldn't stay here much longer. Callie was determined to wait for some kind of absolute certainty around a relationship, one he didn't think was ever possible. While he thought they could make it work, he had to wonder if the mirror showed her someone else. Would she walk away?

He couldn't risk his heart anymore, risk her walking away, or risk her finding someone else. So it was time to cut bait and move on before he was hurt more than he already was. Maybe it made him a quitter, a loser, but he preferred to think of it as protecting himself this time.

He glanced at the boxes leaning against the breakfast bar, still wrapped in the plastic ties. He'd picked them earlier that day, figuring he could keep himself busy and start packing. It would keep his mind off Midwinter and the mirror event. Only, he'd spent the evening drinking and staring at the city he'd grown up in and brooding, wondering where Callie was now. Except he knew exactly where she was. Looking into the mirror and hoping to see her true love.

His grandfather's clock chimed seven, and he finished the beer. That was it, then. She was at the party, getting ready for the mirror viewing. He wished her well; he truly did. He only wished that things could have turned out differently for them.

He needed another beer. He got up and headed for the kitchen, but a knock at his door interrupted him. Probably Roger, who was still butthurt over his decision to leave. He knew how this night made him morose every year.

He opened the door and Callie's fist hit him square in the chest. "Oops. Sorry. I was just going to knock again. What took you so long?"

“Why are you here, Callie? Don’t you have your party tonight?”

He blocked the door so she couldn’t come inside, figuring she was just stopping by to thank him for saving her again. Then she’d be on her way.

She glanced at the empty bottle dangling from his fingers. “Big night?”

“Yeah, hockey and beer. Just celebrating the burglary bust.” He lifted the bottle to take a sip, then remembered it was empty.

In that moment, she slipped past him, under his arm, and into his apartment. He sighed and shut the door. “Callie, why are you here?”

“You’re avoiding me, Alex. Why?” She leaned against the back of his couch, her arms folded in front of her, wearing that ridiculously poufy pink coat that he always made fun of and made her arms stick out.

“I’m not avoiding you. I’ve been busy. You may remember the guy who drugged you? I’ve been trying to track him down, so he doesn’t do it to someone else.”

She narrowed her gaze, reminding him a bit of his mother. “You haven’t once asked me how I’m doing. I’m fine, by the way. A little tired, a headache, but okay overall. Thanks for not asking.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face and walked to the breakfast bar, setting the empty bottle on the counter. He hitched his butt on to one of the stools. “Callie, what do you want from me? I thought we’d said everything that needed saying at the cabin.”

“I don’t think that’s true. In fact, I know it’s not true.” She tossed off her coat and froze, her eyes fixed on something next to him. “What are those, Alex? Are you moving?”

He glanced over at the moving boxes. This was not the conversation he was ready to have tonight. “Yeah.”

“Another apartment? You bought a condo? A house?” He kept shaking his head at each question. “You’re not leaving Sutton Falls, are you?”

“I think it’s time for me to move on, don’t you?”

CHAPTER 18



Callie stared at Alex, her heart plummeting to floor. He was leaving? He couldn't leave, not when she had figured it all out, finally. No, she wouldn't allow it. She had to say her piece and hope it was enough, hope she was enough.

So she deliberately walked away from the boxes, leaving that subject for a later discussion. She stood in front of Alex, feeling unsure of herself for the first time. "Alex, I love you. You're the only one for me."

His eyes lit for a moment then he scoffed. "You saw something in the mirror?"

She shook her head, keeping her gaze firmly fixed on him. "I didn't go in. In fact, I haven't looked in the mirror all season this year."

He stared at her, his jaw tightly clenched. "I saw you at the cabin."

"But I didn't have time to look before you came in. I stood outside Margaret's tonight, but I just couldn't go inside. Something held me back." He just looked at her, so she took a deep breath. "You."

His eyebrow twitched, but he still didn't react. "I didn't prevent you from going inside, Callie. You can look at the mirror all you want."

She let out an exasperated breath. Why was he making this so damned hard? "No, you don't understand. I already know who I love. I don't need a mirror to tell me who is the right person for me. I already know it. It's you,

Alex, you big jerk.”

He physically reacted that time, jerking away from her, not the heartfelt embrace that she'd expected and hoped for. “Callie, you only think that now because you think I'm leaving. Eventually, you're going to regret this. I can't, no, I won't be a part of making you miserable, making you question your choices.”

She cupped his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her, to see the truth in her eyes. “I understand why you feel that way. I've been a terrible friend to you. I've constantly overlooked you for years, taken you for granted, always assumed you would be there for me, even as I chased after the man in the mirror. But tonight, I learned something. No, I learned it this weekend. I love you and I can't imagine my life without you.”

He turned away, but she forced him back to her. “No, Alex. Listen to me. Not because you saved me or are always there like a best friend, but because you are in my heart, a piece of me. If you were gone, a piece of my heart would go with you, never to come back. I will never find anyone who fits me like you. You're my chocolate.”

He frowned, confusion clouding his gaze. “Your chocolate?”

She shook her head. “Long story. I'll tell you later. Bottom line, I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I'll do whatever it takes to prove that to you.”

He sighed and moved past her, walking over to the big picture window overlooking the city. After a moment, he spoke. “Callie, you've spent so many years chasing your dream. Why do I feel like you're settling for me?”

Her heart sank even lower, if that was possible. She had lost him. She'd known it was a risk that he might not believe her, but she never thought he would reject her. Did he really not care? Had she truly destroyed all hope for them?

Her shoulders slumped, and she tried to think of something she could say that would persuade him. But then he spoke.

“I’ve dated a lot of women, not more than my share, but enough to know that they were not for me. I always suspected that you were the right woman for me, but I never thought I had a chance. Then you and I had that moment in your condo, then at the cabin. That weekend.”

“That weekend was the best weekend of my life. I regret how it ended so much.” She pressed her hands to her stomach and tried to hide the tears that threatened.

“I really thought we connected and, for once, everything aligned. I thought we were on the same page,” he continued, still staring out into the night sky.

She took a few steps forward, then stopped, wrapping her arms around herself. “We were. But that damned mirror.”

He finally turned. “No, it wasn’t the mirror. It was both of us. We weren’t ready to trust each other. The mirror was an excuse. Love is all about trust in each other, which is the foundation of relationships. If you don’t have trust, how can you have anything else?”

Her world was crumbling around her. She had lost him. She had wasted too much time on a silly fantasy and forgot to listen to what was most important.

He turned and looked at her. “But then I remembered something else. You always trusted me to help you, no matter what. You were calling me for help and I let you down. I wasn’t there when you needed me. Maybe I broke us.”

This time, she couldn’t stop herself. She went to him and hugged his rigid frame. “You didn’t let me down. You were there. I was calling you because I knew you would drop everything and come for me, like you always did. And you were there. You saved us. Margaret could have had a terrible reaction if you weren’t there. No, Alex. You have always been my rock. I think I’ve loved you forever and was just too blind to see it. I was so worried about needing to be sure but, I am sure. You are the only one for me.”

He let out a shuddering breath and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight, and letting his head drop to the top of hers. “Are you really okay?”

She smacked his back. “You would know that if you bothered to show up at the hospital, but yes. I’m fine.” She paused and took a deep breath, gathering her courage for one last push. “Alex, I love you.”

His arms flexed reflexively around her, and he pressed his lips to the top of her head. “I love you, Callie. Did you really give up the mirror for me?”

“I don’t need the mirror, Alex. Not if I have you.”

He gave a shuddering sigh and relaxed into her hug. They stood there silently for several moments, then Callie laughed. “So, now what do we do?”

He drew back and tilted her chin up to face him. “Seriously? You can’t think of a single thing?”

She blushed. “Well, maybe something.”

Before she could finish her thought, he settled his mouth over hers, stealing her breath away. Callie's body quivered with excitement as their lips met. She melted into his arms, eager for more of his touch. His hands wandered down her back, pulling her closer to his hard body. She moaned softly into his mouth, feeling her desire growing with every passing moment.

He broke the kiss, his breath hot against her ear as he whispered, “I want you, Callie. Right here, right now.”

She nodded eagerly, her heart racing with anticipation. He lifted her up effortlessly, settling her onto the back of the couch. His lips found hers again, hungry and urgent. Callie wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer.

Their hands roamed freely over each other's bodies, exploring every inch of skin. Callie gasped as he found the sensitive spot behind her ear, nibbling on it with just the right amount of pressure. She felt like her body was on fire, consumed by his touch.

He lifted her up again, this time carrying her around to the couch. He lowered her onto the cushions and followed, settling his body on top of hers.

Her hands held him close as he kissed her jawline, her neck, her collarbone, and lower still. He undid the zipper of her dress and peeled it down over her shoulders, exposing her black bra. Callie reached behind her back and unclasped her bra, tossing it carelessly aside.

He growled softly as he drew one of her breasts into his mouth. Callie's fingers tangled in his silky hair, holding him close. Her mind reeled as he kissed each of her breasts in turn, moving back and forth between them.

As he worked, he slid her dress down her hips, sliding it off her legs. His hands explored her thighs and back, trailing fire in their wake. His fingers slid under the waistband of her panties, working their way down to her knees. Callie moaned softly as his fingers tickled over her skin. With one swift motion, he slipped her panties off, tossing them aside. Callie lifted her hips as he undid his pants, letting him pull them off. Before she knew it, he was back on top of her, her body pressed against his, moving together in a perfect rhythm.

He kissed her neck, her cheek, then her lips again. His tongue flicked against her lips, asking for entrance. She eagerly let her tongue touch his, their two bodies writhing together. She felt like she was on fire. Nothing else in the world mattered.

He pulled away from her kiss and looked her in the eyes. Callie's heart pounded as she looked back at him, waiting for his next move. She ached for him to be closer to her, to kiss her again. He held her gaze as he eased himself inside of her. She gasped as he filled her up, his body covering hers. He moved, slowly at first, then the pace increased. She wrapped her legs around him again, holding him close to her.

She moaned as he moved, waves of pleasure washing over her. She felt like she was drowning in his touch, lost in the sensations he was creating within her. They moved together as one, Callie's body on fire, consumed by her desire for him.

Her climax built and built until she thought she might explode. He moved

faster and faster, building up to the same crescendo. She moaned louder as the pleasure grew and grew until finally it peaked. With her orgasm, he had his own. He groaned softly as he thrust into her one last time, his body stilling. They lay together on the couch, spent. He rolled off of her, pulling her against him.

“Wow,” he whispered.

“Yeah, wow.”

She curled up in his arms and closed her eyes, her mind drifting. She had completely fallen for him. It was undeniable. How had she not seen it all these years? He was her soulmate. She knew it, deep in her heart. He was the one for her.

Her heart raced at just the thought of being with him. Her whole body shuddered as she felt his fingertips trail up and down her arm.

Callie lay in his arms for what seemed like hours, just reveling in the feeling of having him next to her. After a while, she wondered what he was feeling. He hadn't said a word since they rolled off the couch. He hadn't even moved.

Callie cuddled closer to him, whispering softly in his ear, “Alex?”

His body tensed as she spoke his name, making her wonder if he had been pretending to be asleep the whole time. He turned over slowly, his expression solemn.

She stroked his cheek, leaning in to kiss him softly. At her touch, he relaxed, his eyes drifting shut.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Callie.”

She waited a moment, then spoke about the elephant leaning against the wall. “What are we going to do now?”



Alex rolled to a seated position and stared at the gas fireplace, his hands loosely clasped over his knees. He was so fucking stupid. If he had just waited like Roger told him to do. He should have had some faith in their weekend together that Callie felt the same. But no, he had to go and burn his bridges. What a dumbass.

“I accepted a transfer to a precinct in New York City. Detective ranks. I start sometime in the new year.”

Callie was quiet as she knelt next to him, her hands in her lap. “Oh.”

He shifted so he could look at her. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. They asked me last year, but I said no. When they came back this year, they caught me at a weak moment and I said yes. I signed the papers yesterday.”

She nodded slowly and let out a breath. “Well, there are libraries in the city. I’m sure they could use a reference librarian with experience.”

He froze, her words slowly sinking into the alcohol soaked portions of his brain. “You’d move to the city to be with me? You’d leave your friends and family?”

She shrugged. “Of course. Alex, that’s what love is. We go through everything together. Where you go, I go. Though, I have to admit, living closer to my mother will not be fun. Promise me that we have some kind of distance from her.”

He laughed and pulled her into a hug. “I’ll do my best. I don’t even know where I’m being assigned.”

She tilted her head. “Did you want to leave me that badly?”

The hurt in her voice just about tore him up. “Callie, I didn’t want to leave. But I couldn’t watch you fall for someone else. Not when I knew how I felt.”

“Well, you should have said something first.” She punched him on the shoulder, then winced and shook out her hand. “Damn, have you been working out?”

He chuckled and got to his feet, pulling her to him. “I have frozen peas in the freezer for your hand. Then we have one more thing to do.”

She followed him, a frown on her face. “What else could we have to do?”

“We have to look into the mirror.”

CHAPTER 19



Callie argued with Alex the entire time they showered and dressed, then drove to Margaret's. Why wouldn't he believe her when she said she didn't need the mirror? But he was set on this course, even calling Margaret to ensure they wouldn't be bothering her.

He pulled up and parked. "Callie, it's not that I don't believe you. I just want you to have no regrets. This is the night and I think you should do it, one last time. It doesn't matter what you see."

"Aren't you afraid that I'll see someone else?"

"Are you? What if you see someone else?" He countered.

Damn it. Why did he have to turn it back to her? "I honestly don't care. You're the one I want, no matter who shows up. Unless he's Benedict Cumberbatch. Then we might have a problem."

He grinned. "Baby, if it's him, you have my permission to go for it."

She still thought it was a bad idea, but when he rounded the car and opened her door, she took his hand and let him lead her to the front door where Margaret waited. Dread filled her, and she dragged her feet going up the walkway.

"Move it, Ricci. Margaret wants to go to sleep tonight."

Margaret stood in the doorway, a cream-colored cashmere sweater wrapped around her. "Don't worry. I'm still cleaning up from the evening."

You were missed, Callie, but I see you found something infinitely better to do with your evening.”

Callie blushed. “I did. Which is why I don’t think this is necessary. But Alex seems to think it is.”

Alex drew her forward. “I just want you to be sure. No regrets.”

Within a few minutes, they were inside the warm house, their coats on the coat rack, and they were in the parlor. Alex stood in front of the mirror, studying it carefully.

“Have you figured out what Etienne wanted?”

Margaret joined him. “No, but my restorer said there was a hidden compartment in the upper back of the mirror, obviously, since that’s what Etienne broke into. At least he didn’t damage the mirror. He just opened it and took out what was in there.”

Alex turned to her. “You have no idea what was in there?”

She shook her head. “None. My lawyer, Bill Henschal, has been looking into the history for me. He never found what you did about Etienne. He looked into the family from Suzanne Rochefort’s side, the one who gifted the mirror to my grandmother. Etienne was right about one thing. Most of the family was either killed or disappeared during World War II. We may never know what was hidden in the mirror.”

The name reminded Callie of someone. “Bill Henschal? I don’t recall him in town.”

Margaret blushed. “He’s newly returned to town and is working part-time at the firm that handles my business. He had some time to handle this, so he offered to assist. His wife recently passed away, and he came home to live. He needed something to keep himself busy.”

Now she knew where she’d heard that name before. This was Margaret’s first love and possibly her soulmate. She wondered if a romance was in the air, if second chances were possible for Margaret?

Alex didn’t know the story, so wasn’t aware of the undercurrents. “Well,

Etienne did his research well on the family. It would be interesting to find out if your friend can identify anything else about the mirror or the family, anything that might help us figure out what Etienne stole. Jewelry, documents, money. We don't even know where to begin."

Margaret shook her head sadly. "I wish I could help. Bill will share what he can." She pasted on a smile. "At least the mirror wasn't damaged, though."

"Are you sure? Maybe it's not working anymore," Callie said, still hanging back.

Margaret studied her quizzically, as if confused by her reticence. "No, it worked tonight for a few women. And I think I saw something earlier when I was setting up. In fact, when you called, I was getting up the nerve to really look into it. I haven't done that, not really, since Midwinter, when I was about your age, Callie."

"Really? Why not?"

"I think because I knew I had missed my chance with my love. But sometimes, if it's meant to be, it comes back around again." She walked over to Callie and put her arms around her. "Trust your heart, dear."

"What if I'm afraid?" Callie whispered. "What if it shows me someone else?"

"What if it doesn't? Be strong, Callie."

She squared her shoulders and stepped between Margaret and Alex until she stood alone in front of the mirror. Slowly, she focused on the reflective glass. Within moments, her reflection dissipated, and the figure appeared, his back to her. Then, ever so slowly, he turned and his formless features took on structure.

As if coming out of the fog and darkness, the figure took shape until he stood right in front of her. She could finally see who her mysterious man was now that she was open to the possibilities, and she was stunned.

She turned and launched herself into Alex's arms. He barely caught her

laughing as she peppered his face with kisses. She was shocked to realize her face was wet with tears.

“It was you. All the time, you were my figure in the mirror. How could I have missed it?”

He held her, his arms as steady as rocks around her. “Because the timing wasn’t right. We weren’t ready, baby. But now, we’re ready for our future. Together.”



Alex headed into the station the next morning, still groggy from lack of sleep but walking on clouds. Though, walking through the front door brought him down to reality quickly. How he wished he had waited a few days before confirming the transfer. Granted, they pushed him to decide and he, who was never impulsive, jumped at the exit opportunity, running away from his problems.

He headed to his office, but his lieutenant called him into his office, where his partner waited.

“Glad you could finally join us. We had a call from Logan Airport customs. They arrested a man matching the description of our Etienne Belmont, though he went by a different name. Stephen Armie. When they searched him, they found some papers that might be of interest to Margaret and her attorney.”

Alex perched on the edge of the chair and scanned the images of the documents his lieutenant passed him. “What are these?”

“Swiss bank account numbers. Several of them. They’re old, at least upon first research. A couple of the numbers were checked out and belonged to the Rochefort family. We decided to hold off on any more investigation until Margaret and her lawyer could be involved.”

Alex set them down. “So, someone hid a bunch of bank account numbers

in the mirror and sent it here? How would anyone know that?”

His lieutenant shrugged. “During the war, a lot of accounts went missing, were pillaged, and stolen by the wrong parties. Some families did everything they could to get the numbers and keys to safe family members. It was possible that this was a safe place to hide it. Either they intentionally sent them here to be retrieved later or someone forgot they were here.”

Roger let out a low whistle. “That could be a lot of money.”

“Or nothing. We don’t know what’s in there or who it belongs to,” Alex countered.

“Exactly. But it doesn’t belong to Etienne. He’ll be sent back here for trial for assault, burglary, and anything else we can come up with. So, build up the case and have it on my desk by the end of the week.”

Roger stood, but Alex remained seated. “If I could have a moment, Lieutenant?”

Roger grunted. “Don’t think you’ll get out of all the paperwork, Alex.” He left the room, closing the door behind him.

His lieutenant fixed a level stare on him. “Is this about the transfer?”

Alex glanced away. “Yes, sir. Is there any way to retract it?”

Silence dragged for a long moment, then his lieutenant pulled out an envelope from the drawer. “You mean this transfer? I didn’t file it yet. I figured you might need a few days to really think about it. And, selfishly, I hoped you would change your mind. Consider it done. Welcome back, Morin.”

He held out his hand, and Alex shook it with a wave of relief. Thank God he had a guardian angel watching out for his dumbass mistakes. Now to tell Callie.

EPILOGUE



Christmas was infinitely different this year than any previous year. For one, Callie didn't have the sadness that lingered after Midwinter, even under the joy she always felt with the holidays. Of course, ever since her parent's divorce, she'd spent it shuttling back and forth between the houses and dealing with arguments so it was exhausting. Her pleasure came when she got together the day after with her friends for a friends' Christmas.

This year, she woke up in her bed with Alex's arms wrapped around her, warm, cozy, and loved. It was the best feeling ever. She might even survive both of her family Christmases this year, with Alex by her side. The previous evening had been spent with Alex's family, enjoying Christmas Eve dinner and opening presents. Callie thought it may have been awkward now that they were dating, but after the initial joking about how it was about time, everything went on as usual. It was anticlimactic, to be honest.

Alex had laughed and tugged her under the mistletoe to kiss her breathless, and ask her what else did she expect?

That was the point. She didn't know what she expected. Her entire world felt like it had changed, was completely different. Even though she'd known Alex forever, it was like everything was new between them and wonderful. Tough times would come, but she was confident they would get through them

by talking and battling together.

“Are you always a morning person? How did I not know this about you?” Alex mumbled from the pillow next to her, his arm tightening around her and pulling her against his body.

She snuggled her butt into his groin, and he groaned. “For the love of god, stop moving. You wore me out last night.”

She sighed. “I guess the honeymoon is over. That was quick. I’m a little disappointed. I thought you were in better shape.”

In a quick motion, he rolled her so he was braced over her, his lips inches from hers, his dark eyes gazing directly into hers. “Are you challenging me, Ricci?”

She gave him a quick kiss. “Only if you’re up for it.”

And he proceeded to show her how up for it he was. Twice.

Finally, she stumbled down the hall to her kitchen to make some coffee while Alex took a quick shower. She was leaning against the counter sipping the first sweet cup of heavenly elixir when Alex emerged, his hair wet, his jeans hanging low and a button-down shirt untucked. “Your turn. We need a bigger shower.”

“Your place isn’t much better, but at least mine has some holiday spirit. Yours was early bachelor pad minimalist.”

He shrugged and swiped the cup of coffee from her. “Hey, what did I need? A television big enough to watch the games, football, hockey, baseball. A bathroom for me and when the guys come over. Places to sit.”

She rolled her eyes and gestured to her fully decked out condo. “And this is a home. You had a man cave. Did you even cook in your kitchen?”

“I used the microwave. Sometimes the oven to heat the pizza.” He laughed and pulled her to him. “Fine. I never said we’d live at my place. I have to be out, anyway. I already told my landlord that I was moving. I have until the end of January to find a new place.”

Was it too soon? Was he hinting to move in here? Or was he waiting for

her? No, she wasn't waiting for her life to begin. Not anymore. She wasted too much time already, and she was done with that. "Well, you could always move in here. But that weird-ass thing you call a sculpture isn't coming."

"It's art. I thought you'd appreciate it."

"You got it in a white elephant exchange. I was there, remember?"

He flashed a smile, then sobered, leaning against the counter opposite her. "Are we moving too fast?"

Now he wanted to slow things down? "You're kidding, right? I've spent the past ten years waiting for the right man, only to find that he was right there all along. First, you're not going anywhere. Second, I'm ready to move on to the next phase of my life. The question is—are you?"

She held her breath. He set his coffee mug down and closed the distance between them, tilting her head up so he could kiss her. "Callie, I'm in this for the long haul. You're the woman for me. You have my heart, all of it. I just want to be sure you're ready."

"Alex, I'm all in. Nothing else and nobody else matters. Now, let's open our presents."



Christmas Day was a whirlwind. They spent the morning at Callie's condo, which was great, including an unexpected invitation to move in. Not that he didn't want to, but he worried still that Callie would regret them and wonder if there was someone else.

That was his issue to deal with, not hers, and he had to get over it and trust her, like he said. But a small part of him wondered. What if she regretted her decision?

They ended the evening at Margaret's house, where she was spending a quiet night with her lawyer, Bill Henschal, who appeared to be a lot more than a professional relationship. They gathered in the parlor with some

generously spiked eggnog and homemade gingerbread cookies, and chatted about their holiday. Alex let his mind wander a bit and his eyes kept drifting to the mirror. Finally, he got up and walked over to it, inspecting the woodwork and the back where Etienne and found the compartment.

“You trying to see your soulmate, Alex?” Margaret asked quietly from next to him.

“I already have her,” he replied.

“She’s a special woman,” Margaret said. “Why won’t you look into the mirror?”

He didn’t expect that question. “I thought the mirror only worked on Midwinter and for women. I’ve looked at it but never saw anything.”

A small smile played around her lips. “You’re looking at it, but not into it. Yes, the legend is around Midwinter and unmarried women, but I’ve heard it can offer flashes of insight at other times. Try it sometime.”

She patted his shoulder and wandered back to the conversation. He stared at the mirror for a long moment, focusing on the wood detailing. Then figured, what the hell. He took a deep breath and looked at the mirror.

He saw himself standing there, not surprising. After a moment, Callie was next to him, her arm in his, her face turned up to his, with a big smile on her face. The tension left his body, and he turned to speak to her, only to find no one standing there.

He looked back at the mirror, and only he was there. What the hell?

“Babe, what is it?” Callie spoke from the love seat.

He shook his head. “Nothing. Just admiring the mirror.”

He walked over to her and kissed her. “What are we talking about?”

He sat and pulled her onto his lap. They were going to be okay. They were meant to be together. The mirror said so, after all.



*A*re you curious about Margaret and Bill? Check out this free bonus short story about Bill and Margaret's romance - [A Second Chance Wish.](#)

FREE BOOK - A SECOND CHANCE WISH

Can second chances happen even later in life?

Margaret Spenser and Bill Henschal were neighbors, friends, and the ones everyone expected to be married before he finished law school. Until Margaret broke his heart when she saw someone else in the mirror, someone else who was fated to be her soulmate. Brokenhearted, Bill married someone else and moved away, leaving Margaret to pick up the pieces of her mistake.

Fast forward forty-five years. Bill is a widower and returned to Sutton Falls. Margaret is still single and waiting for her true love. Is the time finally right for the two of them to be together?

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ABOUT THE WRONG COWBOY

[Order the first book in the Granite Junction, small town contemporary western romance series here.](#)

If you love friends to lovers, where opposites attract and Mr. Wrong is actually Mr. Right, then this is your next one-click!

Graduate from college? Check.

Land a school counselor job? Check.

Seduce her forever crush? Epic fail!

In fact, he's not interested, period. But Emma is determined to change his mind until his cousin, Gabe Buchanan, puts a definite crimp in her perfect plans.

Gabe has come to help his cousin with work around the ranch while struggling to unravel his next book plot. The last thing he expected to find was literary inspiration in the curvaceous cowgirl pining over his cousin. Determined to prove he is the right match for her, he devises a plan to win Emma's heart.

As much as Emma wants her childhood crush to finally take notice, she can't help but be intrigued by the sizzling hot and funny Gabe. When he asks her out, she can't say no. Besides, it's just a friendly dinner. No big deal. Yet when the lines between casual and interested blur, neither can deny the chemistry between them.

Can Gabe fill every box on Emma's checklist and give her what she needs the most? His heart and a future together?

SNEAK PEEK - THE WRONG COWBOY



Gabriel Buchanan had no idea how he was going to survive in Small Town, USA, for the next three months—or however long it took him to get his head out of his ass.

Granted, he had grown up on a ranch outside of a small town just like Granite Junction, Montana. But Buck's Falls had a lot more going for it, was a helluva lot more touristy and fun. He hadn't been to Granite Junction since his uncle died twelve years ago. In typical college-aged kid fashion, he'd focused on the bars and on getting out as soon as possible, especially when his cousin hadn't been too welcoming. *Just as proud and stubborn as his father*, his mother had stated when they drove out of town a few days after the funeral. In hindsight, he knew Cam, barely out of his teens himself, had been both grieving and overwhelmed with the responsibilities of a younger sister and a failing ranch.

He hadn't seen Cam again until a few months ago, when Cam settled his sister, Amy Jo, at culinary school in Billings and asked Gabe and his family to be available in case she needed someone nearby. Gabe and Amy Jo had connected every couple of weeks—usually so he could be a test subject for some of her recipes.

But now it was Gabe looking for refuge and hoping Cam would open his doors.

At the end of the main street, he found his destination, Earl Lee Byrd's diner, housed in a former train station. He didn't exactly want to park his brand-new Charger in that weedy gravel lot, next to any of a half dozen well-used pickup trucks whose owners might not care if they dinged his shiny black doors. Although, after five hours of travel, the Charger wasn't too pretty itself, dusty and covered in the remains of hundreds of bugs. And there wasn't a touchless car wash in sight.

He parked in the lot anyway and pulled out his phone to send a quick text message, then headed inside. He hoped the food was as good as Amy Jo had said it would be, because the outside didn't recommend it. When he opened the door, it was like he had stepped back in time, to his grandfather's era. His mind started swirling with images of his fictional character Buck Lancaster replacing one of those craggy old men sitting in a booth made of cracked red vinyl and dull metal, sipping what promised to be coffee the consistency of motor oil. Real coffee, as his grandfather had often said.

He slid into an empty booth and tried not to wince as his ass hit the hard wood, the ancient cushions providing no buffer at all. Ideas sparked in his brain and he pulled out his steno notepad that he took everywhere for situations like this and jotted down a couple of ideas for the setting. He even had a few scene ideas that he wanted to capture before they flitted away, lost in the dark recesses of his mind. He was so absorbed in his scribbles that it took a minute for the presence of another person to register. He looked up to see a dark-haired woman with her long, thick hair pulled back into a ponytail. She cleared her throat and gave him a broad smile.

"Haven't seen you around here before. What can I get you?"

His smile broadened as he studied the curvy woman. She had beautiful dark eyes that snapped and popped with life, and the way she cocked her hip and narrowed that gaze at him only reinforced that impression. He was always attracted to feisty women. His time here in Granite Junction was looking up.

A hand slapped the back of his head. “What the hell, asshole?” he sputtered, then turned to meet Cam Miller’s overly serious glare.

“Welcome to town, Gabe.” Cam slid into the other side of the booth. “We’ll both have a coffee and the menus, Emma, thanks. And ignore my ill-mannered cousin here if he’s been bothering you. He doesn’t get out much.”

Emma beamed at Cam and shot a suspicious glare at Gabe, dumped a couple of worn laminated menus on the table, and left. Gabe leaned forward a bit to watch her sashay away. Damn, that was a fine ass. Then he winced at a sudden pain in his shins. He glared at his cousin. “What?”

“Emma is a nice girl. Not for you,” Cam warned him.

Gabe frowned, then settled back in the seat, stretching his arm out on the back of the booth. “Sorry. I didn’t know she was your girl.”

Cam frowned. “She’s not. She’s like a sister to me.”

Gabe’s eyebrows raised and he snorted. “My sister doesn’t look at me like that. Neither does your sister, for that matter, thank God.” He cocked his head and studied Emma as she picked up a tray and started back to them. “If she’s like your sister, and you don’t have a claim staked, doesn’t that mean she’s fair game to me? Or is there another reason why she’s off-limits? A fiancé? Husband?”

Cam slowly lowered his hand to the table and fixed a hard stare on Gabe, who grinned unrepentantly at him. “Leave Emma alone, Gabe.”

Gabe shrugged, deciding to give up on teasing his cousin for now, especially since his stomach was cannibalizing itself. He hadn’t stopped to eat on the long drive. “Fine. What’s good here?”

“Burgers. Waffles. Anything except the special. Earl’s exploring some new recipes from the Food Network again. I don’t recommend being test subjects,” Emma chirped as she set coffee in front of both of them. She turned her attention to Cam, along with a sunny smile, leaving no doubt as to where her affection lay. “I didn’t know you had cousins in the area.”

Gabe arched his brow at Cam. His cousin might think she was like a

sister, but Gabe would wager the sexy waitress had a different opinion on the subject. “He likes to keep us away because we’re the better-looking, friendlier cousins. Ask his sister. I’m Gabe Buchanan.” He held out his hand, gauging Cam’s reaction, to see if there was any jealousy. Judging by the way his expression didn’t change, he was telling the truth about his feelings for this woman. Interesting.

Emma’s eyes widened and a look of pure delight crossed her face, though not for Gabe, unfortunately. She took his hand and a spark of something arced between them, giving him pause. “How is Amy Jo doing? Has she settled into school okay? I know she was really worried. She was emailing me a lot for a while, but I think she’s gotten busy.”

“Well, I had dinner with her last night. Join us and I’ll catch you up.” He winked, risking another kick in the shins but it was worth it.

She gave him a cool look. “I’m working.”

Cam laughed and Gabe just smiled. “I’ll have the waffles, per your suggestion. It’s a little too early for a burger.” He looked down into the thick, dark depths of his coffee cup. “I don’t suppose you have cappuccinos?” An incredulous look from both Cam and Emma made him sigh. “Fine, just keep the cup filled. I was up early this morning.”

“I’ve already eaten,” Cam replied. Emma trotted off.

Silence dragged while Gabe fixed his coffee, adding cream and some sugar, then took a sip. It wasn’t as bad as he’d expected. Palatable at least.

“Book business is doing well, isn’t it?” Cam finally said. “Enough to buy a Dodge Charger, I see.”

Gabe shrugged, avoiding the question. “I always wanted one. I don’t work the ranch except to help out once in a while when they need me, so it doesn’t really matter what car I drive.”

“Damn inconvenient in the Montana winters, without four-wheel drive.”

“Better than you’d expect and, besides, I live in the city. Not much driving in heavy snow required.” At Cam’s arched look, he shrugged. “Don’t

tell me you're not jealous.”

A ghost of a smile crossed the other man's face. “I'm going to need time behind the wheel if you're planning on staying for a while. That's why you're here, isn't it?”

Gabe sighed and looked out the window onto the parking lot, trying to decide how much to tell Cam. It sucked having to admit he was struggling, especially when most people didn't even respect what he did. He could hear his father's voice in his head. *How hard could it be, boy? Just throwing some words on a page. That's not a real job, not like working the ranch.*

He shook his head to clear out the negativity. He had enough of his own without adding his father's voice to the chorus. “I need a place to hole up and work on my next book. It's a new series and I'm struggling a bit getting a feel for the world and characters.”

“Why don't you go to your family's ranch? You could have a guest cottage to yourself, gourmet meals cooked and hand delivered, and cleaning service. You won't get that here.”

Gabe snorted. His family ran a working ranch, a lot like Cam's, but theirs included fancy accommodations for tourists. It was one of the top guest ranches in the state—hell, several states—and they were booked out for a couple of years or more, with people coming and going all the time. But if he went there, his family would be poking their well-meaning noses into his business every few hours. Not to mention pressuring him to take up what they saw as his familial duty, his *destiny* according to his father, and take over the guest ranch, relegating his writing to the sidelines.

He was the black sheep of the Buchanan family. It had been a bitch trying to find his own path when his siblings had excelled so beautifully in their own ways and toed the family line as expected. His older brother, Michael, was slowly taking over the day-to-day operations of the ranch from his father, and their beef cattle were in high demand. His younger brother, Rafe, had started a veterinary practice, replacing the local vet just two years ago and

was already considered a gifted animal whisperer in the area. His sister Ariel was working with special needs children and developing programs on the ranch for them and for veterans with PTSD.

And what was Gabe doing? The often invisible, misunderstood, second child who never seemed to fit in with his family? He wasn't learning the guest ranch business with the goal of taking it over from his mother, so she could step back. No, he was living his own life in Billings, authoring books about a fictional Montana sheriff, and writing freelance articles for various magazines and websites, with only occasional forays back to the family ranch to help out.

He didn't mind helping out, that wasn't the problem. But he was often on the outside, disconnected from his siblings, and struggling to make his parents understand his life choices. It had been his grandfather, now dead, who'd given him his love of storytelling and encouraged his choice of careers even if no one else approved. He'd moved to Billings and created a new life for himself.

He was finally seeing financial success, having published four mysteries about Buck Lancaster, a gritty Montana sheriff. When that series exploded into a sleeper hit, he was contracted for three more books, then sold an option to a streaming service. His agent had suggested they capitalize on the momentum and propose a new series, something a bit edgier. Since that was something he had already wanted to write, he drew up the proposal and it went to auction, netting him a high six-figure advance—and a metric ton of writer's block.

Thinking he might need a break, he'd decided to call his recently reconnected cousin, Cam, and head for his ranch. He hoped some breathing space, the change of scenery, and some good old-fashioned physical work without the pressures of his immediate family would jog loose his creativity.

The door behind him opened, the bells jingling, and a couple came in, greeting Cam. The noise jarred Gabe out of his rambling thoughts. He

blinked to see Cam watching him, a patient and serious expression on his face.

Cam sipped his coffee, then asked, “Do you have muscles under that fancy shirt, or have you gone soft since you got citified?”

Gabe scoffed. “I still help out with calving, branding, and the roundup, along with other things around the ranch. I think I can keep up.”

“Good. Because I need help getting the ranch ready to sell.”

Gabe was still letting the shock of Cam’s words settle in his mind when Emma placed his breakfast in front of him, with a warm smile at Cam and barely a cool glance at him. Ouch. He tucked into the meal, his stomach giving him little choice, and he wasn’t disappointed. The waffles were as light and fluffy as promised. Too bad he couldn’t concentrate on them after the surprise news that his cousin was upending his life completely, selling his livelihood and legacy that had been in his family for generations. Of course, Gabe had walked away from his own legacy so maybe he could understand the decision better than anyone.

After a few more bites, Gabe said, “So, you’re selling? Why? You’ve dragged the ranch back from the edge of debt. You’ve built a good reputation. You make a good living, I assume. Why walk away from a sure thing?”

Cam settled back in the booth, the wooden seat creaking under his weight, and allowed a ghost of a smile to cross his face. “Why don’t you ranch? You have a pretty sweet deal with your family’s place. You could flirt with the tourists, do a little work with the cows here and there, and live a cushy life escorting the tourists around the dude ranch. Why did you leave?”

Gabe nodded. “Point made. What are your plans?”

“Do you know Mick Castleton?” The name was vaguely familiar but Gabe couldn’t quite place it. Cam continued, “He was a friend of my dad’s. He lived with us for a while out at the ranch after my mom died. While he was here, he taught me how to work leather to help me with grief over my

mom.”

The name finally rang a bell. “Wait, Castleton Leathers? The man is a legend, especially in the rodeo circuit. My brother would sell his soul for a saddle from him but the wait list is a killer.”

Cam gave a satisfied half-smile. “He should ask me. I do most of the custom saddle work now for Mick.”

Gabe chuckled. “Keeping secrets, are you? I can’t wait to tell Mike that. Please let me tell him that. Or, better yet, make me a saddle that I can flaunt in front of him next time I’m home.”

“A saddle would be wasted on you, city boy. Anyway, Mick wants to retire, and he offered me his business.”

Gabe sat back and sipped his coffee, wishing it was a cappuccino and not a plain coffee. “Where is this business? I’m guessing it’s not here.”

Cam shook his head. “Wyoming.”

Gabe whistled. “That’s a long damn way. Does Amy Jo know? Hell, does Emma know, because from what I can tell she’s halfway in love with you, maybe all the way.”

Cam unfolded his body from the booth and took out his wallet. “Yeah, I know.”

Gabe grabbed his hand. “I got this. It’ll give me a chance to flirt a little with your girl, maybe convince her that I’m the better choice.”

Cam snorted and glanced over at a couple in another booth, the ones who’d greeted him earlier. “Good luck. I have some people to talk to. Can you find your way to the ranch? I know it’s been a while since you’ve been here.”

“I have GPS.”

Cam laughed. “You’re such a city boy. That rarely works around here. Wait for me out front and you can follow me back.”

Gabe clapped him on the back. “I’m not that directionally challenged, but I’ll take some more time with the lovely Emma.”

Instead of rebuking him as Gabe expected, Cam simply warned, “Be nice.” Then he walked to the other table, pulled a chair over, and straddled it.

Gabe went to the register, noting Emma’s suddenly tense expression as she twisted around Gabe so she could see Cam. Gabe planted himself in front of her, leaning his hip against the counter. “I’m beginning to think you don’t like me, darlin’. You keep ignoring me in favor of my cousin. I mean, you know him, have known him for years, so you have to know that he’s a surly bastard on the best of days. But I’m perfectly friendly.”

She straightened and looked him straight in the eye, maybe for the first time since he walked inside the diner. “You really think quite highly of yourself, don’t you?”

He gave a slight cock of the head and let a big smile grow. No one could resist his brand of charm. His family had been telling him that for years, and it was the primary reason they had pegged him for running the damn guest ranch in the first place. “Well, I’m pretty awesome. Once you get to know me, you’ll see it too.”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Wow. You’re unbelievable.”

His grin broadened. “It usually takes people a bit longer to figure that out, but I’ll take it. Amy Jo was right. You are pretty smart.”

“Do women really fall for that load of bull?”

His smile faltered but stayed in place. He was surprised that she hadn’t at least softened a little bit toward him. “Usually.”

She whipped the money out of his hand and rang him up, handing him the change. “You need smarter women.”

She turned and headed toward the coffee station—and what looked like a cappuccino maker. A laugh burst out of him. “You little devil. You had more than that sludge you pass off as coffee and you never offered me any?”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and a sweet smile. “It’s broken.”

The machine spluttered as she made a cappuccino, then headed for the table where Cam was seated.

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ABOUT MEGAN RYDER

Ever since Megan Ryder discovered Jude Deveraux and Judith McNaught while sneaking around the “forbidden” romance section of the library one day after school, she has been voraciously devouring romance novels of all types. Now a romance author in her own right, Megan pens sexy contemporary novels all about family and hot lovin’ with the boy next door. She’s also a master procrastinator—if only her cocker spaniel, Bentley, would let her focus on writing instead of playing ball all day!

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