



forbidden
Love

A MOUNTAIN HAVEN NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEA COLL

forbidden
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FORBIDDEN LOVE

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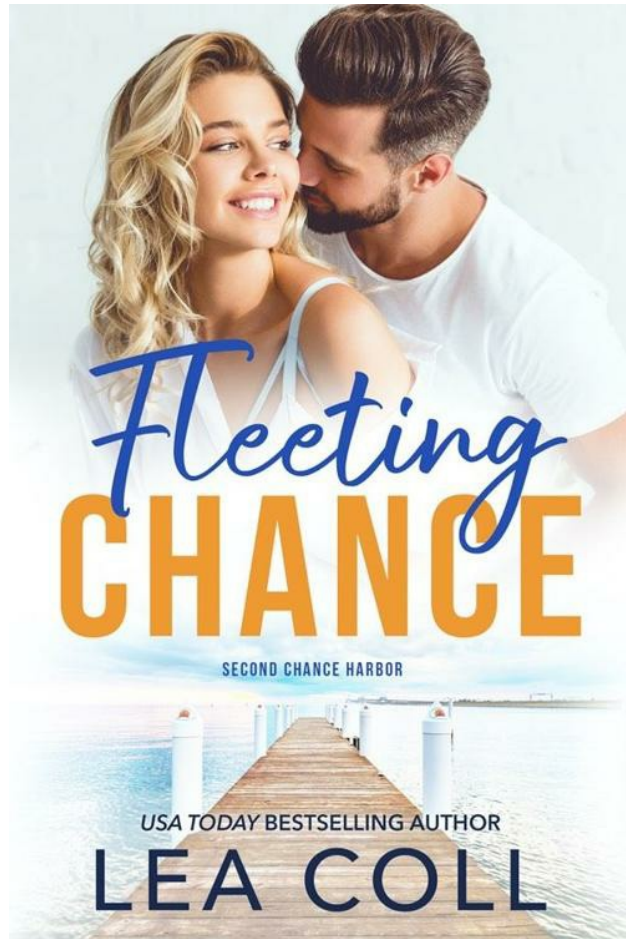
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CHAPTER 1



TYLER

I tugged on my tie, uncomfortable wearing a suit to represent my family's business, Fletcher & Sons Contracting at the Wilde Ski Resort. The Wilde family was hosting a charity event tonight, spearheaded by their youngest child and only daughter, Kylie Wilde, or as I liked to call her when we were kids, Baby Wilde.

It was a good cause. She was collecting new or gently used athletic gear for use on the ski hills and monetary donations for kids that couldn't afford lessons or the lift ticket.

I'd been content staying on the outskirts of the crowd, nursing a drink at the bar. When Kylie crossed the room in a black, form-fitting dress with stiletto heels, my gaze went to the curve of her hip and that delectable ass I wanted to squeeze. When she came closer, I noticed how her hair curled around her shoulders, touching the bare skin I wanted to be intimately familiar with.

When we were growing up, she'd been a tomboy, forever chasing after her brothers, trying to keep up with their antics. They thwarted her at every turn, so she became sneakier. We'd have epic hide-and-seek games in the lodge, and she'd hide, only to jump out at us. Her brothers were annoyed by her, calling her a pest. I'd thought so too, but as she got older, she filled out, lost the leanness from youth, and became harder to ignore.

Her brothers made it clear to their friends that she was off-limits. There were a few times we found ourselves alone during hide-and-seek, and I'd like to say I kept my hands to myself, but that last time, I didn't. I'd always been impulsive and a little reckless, and I'd been the same with Kylie.

I felt guilty about it over the years. I'd betrayed my best friends with their

sister. But Kylie left after high school and hadn't returned, other than for short visits—until now. Her being home was difficult because that pesky attraction I'd always felt for her hadn't gone away.

I should have been focused on business. Usually, Mac or my dad would attend community events and fundraisers, but I'd been tasked with attending this one since Dad was doing less these days, and Mac spent more time with Natalie and her daughter, Delaney. Sam had a daughter, Maggie, so I was the only single one without a life.

This was my chance to prove that I was responsible and could take on more tasks surrounding the business. I couldn't get distracted by the Wilde brothers' younger sister, who looked a lot like temptation on a stick.

My goal for the evening was to talk to Kylie about the possibility of us working together on a sports charity. Mac came up with the idea after talking to other contracting businesses about their fundraising projects. We'd settled on sports since we'd all played baseball growing up, and Kylie seemed well-versed in the fundraising aspect.

I needed to talk to her, but she was already speaking to a man in a suit who was in his thirties and looked all too happy to touch her bare shoulder and lean in close.

My jaw clenched as she tipped her head back and laughed.

I clenched my hands into fists, uncomfortable with the tightening sensation in my chest. When we were younger, I listened to her complain about her brothers, but I didn't realize until she was older that we had a connection. One that wasn't friendly.

Xander approached me and followed my gaze to his sister. "As much as I like having her home, she's trouble."

"Kylie?" I asked nonchalantly, as if he hadn't caught me eyeing her from across the room.

He shook his head in disgust. "I don't like the way he's touching her."

Me either, but I wasn't saying that to her brother. Because I was having the same naughty thoughts that the other guy was having, and I was positive Xander wouldn't appreciate it.

Xander shifted so that I couldn't see Kylie and the man anymore. "Apparently, he has deep pockets, and Kylie wants her little charity to be successful."

"Little charity?" It sounded like Kylie's brothers didn't respect her any more than they had when we were kids, even though she'd grown up, worked

on her own in Europe, and returned home.

Xander braced one hand on the bar while he signaled to the bartender that he wanted a drink. He shifted and leaned an elbow on the bar top. “I want her to stay, and if running this side thing is what she wants, I’ll let her.”

“You’ll *let* me?” Kylie asked, her eyes spitting fire, and one hand moved to her hip.

I shouldn’t be thinking about what she was wearing under that form-fitting dress. Not when her brother, who was my best friend, stood next to me.

“You know that’s not what I meant. I love having you back.” Xander pulled her into a hug.

I remembered Kylie complaining that they didn’t take her seriously. It appeared that not much had changed from when we were kids.

I understood when she left. She’d felt stifled by her family’s lodge and this small town, but now that she was back, I was dying to know why.

Kylie’s cool gaze moved to mine. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for Fletcher & Sons.”

“Doesn’t your father usually do that, or even Mac?” Xavier asked.

“Dad’s taking a step back. He wants us to take on more of the responsibility, and both of my brothers have kids now.”

Kylie’s face softened. “Mac’s with my friend, Natalie, and Sam is with Alice.”

“I see someone I know,” Xander said by way of apology, when someone in the crowd caught his attention.

Kylie stepped closer. “What are you really doing here, Tyler? I never see you at these events.”

My throat tightened at her proximity, making it difficult to breathe. It was probably best to talk about the reason I was supposed to be here and not why I enjoyed being close to her. “We’re looking to get into some charity work.”

Kylie crossed her arms over her chest; the effect was pushing up the globes of her breasts. “And what? You’re here to take notes on mine?”

I swallowed hard, looking anywhere but at her chest. “Not exactly. I was hoping we could talk about partnering on something.”

Kylie’s face pinched, and I knew she was remembering how I’d left things. “I don’t think we have anything to talk about. Not after how you left things.”

I’d left her in one of the lodge’s guest rooms, sleeping. I should have left

a note or texted her afterward, but I hadn't. Back then, I was petrified of crossing her brothers. It was a small town, and the Wildes were a prominent family. "I'm sorry for how I handled things."

Kylie huffed. "I'm a big girl. I'm not hung up on something that happened when we were kids."

She had been eighteen, but I had always thought of her as younger and more vulnerable. Probably because that's how her brothers viewed her.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted." I used the only excuse that made sense at the time. "You know I'm friends with your brothers."

Kylie rolled her eyes. "They're why I left. I couldn't have a life with them hovering and ruining anything good that came into my life."

My brain snagged on the idea that maybe she thought I'd been some of that good, but I refocused on why I was here. "My brothers and I were talking about starting a charity, and we settled on baseball. Since we played and you played softball, we'd like to help local teams in some way. We're just not sure how yet. You've done such an amazing job in a short amount of time with this event, and I was hoping you could give us a few pointers."

Her head tipped to the side, and her expression softened. "Is that all you wanted?"

"We were hoping you'd partner with us since we heard you were interested in helping athletes."

She shook her head slightly. "Tonight was just a test to see if I could fundraise. I want to help female athletes. Growing up, the girls didn't have the equipment the boys had. But I'm not sure that's what you were looking to get into."

When I played baseball and football, I had everything I needed. But then the sports boosters raised money that went to the most popular sports—football, ice hockey, and baseball—all male-dominated sports. "What were you thinking?"

"Our team shared batting helmets and bats. We never had a dugout. Sometimes we didn't even have a bench to sit on. We sat on the bleachers with the fans. Our field was used for gym class, while the boys' field was covered in a protective tarp." Her tone was tinged with disgust, and for the first time, I realized how things might have been different.

"I never thought about it like that." It wasn't my experience, and I was embarrassed to say I hadn't been more curious back then.

"I guess you wouldn't."

My pitch had fallen flat, but Mac and Sam were depending on me. “I know you’re busy tonight, but do you think we can talk about this somewhere else? I’ll go back to my brothers with your ideas, and maybe we can still come up with something that will work for all of us.”

“What’s your goal in all of this, Tyler?”

“We want to get more involved in the community and give back. Mac’s contractor friend talked about renovating houses for those who are disabled.”

“I’m almost positive that whoever Mac’s friend is, that cause was something important to him. If you want to get involved in the community or raise money for something, it should be something you’re passionate about. I just don’t see you getting behind female athletes when your business is comprised of men.”

“You never know,” I murmured, a little distracted by the fire I saw in her eyes. This cause was important to her, and I knew she’d be successful at it. “I love your idea. I love what you’re doing here, and I’m confident we can do something together that will be amazing.”

Kylie’s lip curled. “I’m not just throwing the Wilde name up on team jerseys or on a banner on an outfield fence.”

My face heated because those were a few of the first ideas we’d come up with. “We want to do something more meaningful, something that will have an effect on the kids in the community and their ability to play sports. Buy the equipment they need. Sports are expensive, and these days, kids are expected to pay for the helmets, bats, cleats, and sometimes even the uniforms.”

“I’m happy to talk to you about it and give you some direction.”

My shoulders tensed. “But you’re not willing to partner with us?”

She held up her hand. “I didn’t say that. If you still have my number, text me when you want to grab coffee. We can discuss it further.” Her tone was professional, but my heart rate picked up at the idea of meeting her for anything.

“I’ll be in touch.” I wasn’t ashamed to admit I’d transferred her number to my new phones over the years, even if I never reached out. I wasn’t going to ask her if she’d done the same. I was stronger than that.

She sighed and turned to leave.

“Kylie?”

She paused. Her brow arched. “Yes?”

“I’m glad you’re back.” It complicated things. I was worried about her

brothers finding out, but I liked having her home. I wasn't going to think about why that was.

"I'm not so sure I am," she said when she spotted one of her brothers stalking toward us. She walked away before I could respond, probably trying to avoid him.

"What were you talking to Kylie about?" Eli asked. He oversaw hotel management, so he was always visible at an event like this.

"I talked to her about the possibility of working with Fletcher & Sons on a nonprofit."

Eli raised a brow. "Was she game?"

I chuckled. "Not exactly. She has very clear ideas on what she wants."

"I just wish she'd tell us what that is. She came back after whatever the hell happened at her job in Paris. She won't say why she left, why she's back, or how long she's staying."

I wanted to know more about her leaving her last job but asking would arouse Eli's suspicions. "I can't say I understand your sister."

Eli shook his head. "Me either."

"It might have something to do with us ignoring her when we were kids." I hadn't, but her brothers sure had. I'd never been able to ignore her. Every time she showed up where we were, I had this indescribable urge to protect her, to make her feel wanted, because her brothers always told her she wasn't.

"She was always following us around. We did what any big brothers would do," Eli said as he leaned on the bar to order a drink.

She was always sneaking out, trying to keep up with us, until that one time she got hurt. No one knew she was skiing on the hill behind us when she fell and broke her arm. I was the one who heard her cry out and carried her to the lodge.

She must have been in pain, but she didn't cry. Her face was white, and I talked to her until we were at the bottom of the mountain, and I handed her over to her father. After that night, she never showed up when we were out like that again.

I wasn't sure if it was her parents keeping an eye on her or if she didn't want to get hurt again. I knew her brothers meant well. They pulled crazy stunts and were a little wild. They didn't want her attempting to do the stuff they did. They wanted to protect her, but it came across like no one wanted her around.

Whenever I found myself alone with her, she grumbled about how lonely she felt as the youngest of five siblings. Even when her cousins visited, they were boys and played with her brothers. Each time she confided in me, I sympathized with her situation. I thought she was tough.

Eli took his drink, threw a few bills on the bar top for a tip, and turned to scan the room. "I heard you're looking for a new place."

"I want some land to build on."

"Like Mac."

Not that I wanted to copy my brother, but his place was amazing. He built a large house at the base of the mountains with enough property to grow and enjoy for a long time to come. It was perfect because he'd recently met and started dating Natalie, Kylie's childhood friend. She had a daughter, and he'd even gotten a puppy. He'd said he was lonely before they moved in and was happy to fill his house.

I tried not to think about the fact that I'd be doing the same, building a house without someone to share it with. But then my goal wasn't to be in a committed relationship. "Living downtown is getting old."

"What are you talking about? You always talk about how you can walk to the bars."

I chuckled and leaned an arm on the bar. "That's not everything. Not anymore."

"Your brothers settled down, and you are following in their footsteps."

"They have their women locked down, but that's not what I want." I'd never thought about it too much. Mac had always been a romantic, wanting that relationship from a young age. When he got burned a few times, he took a step back, but we always knew his heart hadn't changed. And when Natalie came around, we knew she was the one for him. It took him a little longer to figure it out.

Sam was a single dad, so he'd had to grow up in his early twenties. He didn't think he'd ever have a committed relationship since he had a young daughter, but then he'd hired Alice to be his nanny, and the rest was history.

"I'm busy with work, and I enjoy my alone time too much to be committed to anyone. At least not anytime soon."

"Same," I said as I watched Kylie work the room. This was her event, so she was meeting with everyone here, probably to drum up donations and generate interest in her cause.

"I'm proud of her," Eli said.

“She pulled it together in a short time.” I hoped Eli told Kylie he was proud of her because I had a feeling they neglected little details like that when it came to their sister.

“How long will she stick around? She’s never loved Telluride like we do.”

“Maybe she never thought you wanted her here,” I said, repeating what she’d told me when she was eighteen.

“How can you say that?” Eli asked, shifting so he could see my face.

“She was always trying to keep up with you and your brothers, but you always told her she wasn’t wanted.”

“She was the youngest, and we did some crazy shit back then. I didn’t want her to get hurt. Hell, she did get hurt that one time.”

“Did you tell her that?”

His jaw worked as he thought about it. “Not in so many words.”

“Have you offered her a position at the resort?” I remembered that night we spent together; she was upset because she felt like there wasn’t a place for her at the lodge or in her family. The boys had taken all the available positions, and there was nothing left for her.

“We never wanted her to feel like she had to stay here and work for the family business. We wanted her to have options.”

“Maybe she doesn’t see it that way.” At Eli’s concerned expression, I held up a hand. “I’m just guessing.”

Eli’s shoulders relaxed. “We’d love to have her here, but I don’t know where she fits in.”

“I hope you figure it out before she leaves again.” There was no chance that I’d pursue anything with Kylie, no matter how much I’d wanted her over the years. I’d taken advantage of her that one night, and I felt horrible about it. But more than that, she deserved a relationship, and there was no way her brothers would be okay with her dating me.

I wouldn’t do that to her or to her brothers. The Wilde family had always been good to me. I wouldn’t do anything to screw that up. Especially now that we wanted to partner with Kylie. A personal relationship would complicate things.

CHAPTER 2



KYLIE

Since I'd returned home, I'd run into Tyler at the party Natalie had for her new B&B, but I hadn't expected to run into him tonight. I'd never seen him in a suit, representing his business before.

He looked uncomfortable in his suit, and it sent a pang through my heart that I did not want to feel. I wanted to shove his charcoal jacket off his broad shoulders, slowly unbutton that crisp white shirt, and find out if his skin was tan all over, and if he'd filled out since we'd seen each other last.

One night. That was all we ever had. There were other small moments when we'd hid in closets and under beds, and one night when we'd found ourselves alone in a hotel room. I was fairly sure the others had given up on the hunt when we moved from the closet to the bed.

Tyler had been the one to lock the door, but neither one of us wanted to turn on the TV. We talked about my brothers and the way they made me feel. Tyler had been surprisingly supportive.

That night, Tyler wasn't my brothers' friend; he was just a guy who got me. And when we kissed, I stupidly told myself it was the beginning of something, not the end.

Back then, I'd been naïve, and I'd learned my lesson. I wouldn't allow myself to be vulnerable with a man again, especially not Tyler.

He'd gotten his chance, and he'd screwed it up by leaving the next morning before I woke. I later learned that he'd left for college early, and he never texted or called. I thought after what we'd shared, it warranted some kind of response.

I was a lot more careful with men since Tyler, but unfortunately, I fell into old patterns of bad decisions when I dated my previous boss's son, Brad.

Until I got ahold of my impulses, I wouldn't be going there with a guy for a while.

I came home to heal, to regroup, and to figure out what I wanted. It was surprisingly hard to know what you wanted when you'd always done things either because of or in spite of your family's desires.

This charity event was a test for me, a single push to raise money for equipment and lessons for kids who couldn't afford them. I'd organized similar fundraising events at my last job, and I'd always wondered if I could do a better job without anyone else's supervision.

I was pleasantly surprised with the turnout. It could have been the Wilde name, the resort's reputation, or my brothers', but I liked to think at least some of the donors respected me and what I wanted to do.

I'd be lying to myself if I said I wasn't intrigued by Tyler's proposal. The thing was, I didn't think I could be around Tyler. He churned up too many emotions. They hadn't dissipated over the years. Instead, they'd reignited since I'd seen him again.

He had no such qualms about being close to me. He wanted to work with me and seemed to have no issues with it.

It was a good reminder that he was the older guy just playing around, and I was the stupid, naïve girl who thought it could be something else. I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

I'd meet with him because I was intrigued by his and his brother's ideas. I wanted to help female athletes, but I didn't have the capital to start a nonprofit.

I'd already discussed the possibility with my oldest brother, Oliver, and he'd advised against attempting anything bigger than what I'd accomplished tonight.

But if the Fletchers had some money to throw behind the project, I might be persuaded to give them a chance. The only thing was, I wasn't sure if I'd be staying in town. I loved Telluride and the resort; I just never thought there was a place for me here.

"Ms. Wilde, do you have a minute?" Mayor Todd Jenkins asked.

"Of course." He wasn't married, and I'd heard rumors that women flirted with him.

"I love what you're doing here tonight. The city's happy to support you in any way we can."

I gave him my full attention. "I'd love some help with identifying kids

who'd benefit from the program, and I have a few more ideas for how I can expand it to something that could benefit the town."

He winked at me and smiled. "I love discussing ways to help the community. How about we schedule dinner soon so we can talk about the ways I can help you?"

I noticed he'd said *I* instead of *we* or *the city*. It might have been a slip of his tongue, but I didn't think so. As a politician, I'm sure he was used to watching every word that came out of his mouth and every gesture he made. "I'd love that."

He moved in close, touching my arm as he leaned in to say into my ear, "I'm looking forward to it."

I wasn't in the market to date anyone, but it felt good to be desired. Especially when my presence had no effect on Tyler.

I lifted my gaze, meeting Tyler's irritated one over Todd's shoulder. My lips tipped up at Todd's comment. I briefly touched his arm in response, then moved toward the bathroom. I needed a moment away from everyone.

I took my time in the bathroom, knowing as soon as I went back out there, I'd need to be on in a way I never had to be in Paris. Here, everyone knew me as the little sister, the one who tried to keep up with her brothers but never did. I wasn't as fast on the slopes as Xander or as good at doing flips on a snowboard as Killian, not as smart as Oliver or as business-savvy as Eli. In fact, I never excelled at any one thing. The only thing that ever set me apart in the Wilde family was that I was a girl.

When we were younger, my parents were busy running the ski resort, so I was left alone a lot. When I was older, they let me have friends over, which was always a blast at the lodge, but I never felt like I was enough by myself. As teens, my friends wanted my brothers, and I was a means to get to them.

When I finally opened the bathroom door to leave, Tyler stood leaning against the wall across from me.

"You need the ladies' room?" I quipped as I attempted to move past him. I was a successful, confident woman; I shouldn't feel anything when I was near Tyler.

His fingers encircled my wrist, stopping my forward motion. "You okay?"

"Of course."

"I saw you talking to Todd Jenkins."

"The mayor?" I asked to buy time, my heart thumping wildly in my chest

because his hand still gripped my wrist loosely.

Todd nodded tightly.

“We were talking about raising money for needy kids. He’s going to help me identify which kids could benefit from assistance.”

“I don’t think that’s all he wanted,” Tyler murmured softly, his voice vibrating in my chest at a frequency seemingly only I could feel.

I tipped my head to the side. “What does it matter if he wanted more?”

“It shouldn’t.” He tugged my wrist so that I moved closer to him. I felt like an insect trapped in a spider’s web, and I was transfixed by the web he was weaving.

“But it does.” My entire body was vibrating with need as he held my wrist, and I stood within inches of the tempting warmth of his body. I arched a brow. “Is there something you need, Tyler?”

His nostrils flared, and he shifted on his feet so that he was no longer leaning casually against the wall but stood straight. “How long are you sticking around?”

“I’m not sure.” There was this heat when he was near me, a chemistry I don’t remember from when we were kids. I crushed on him and had this hero worship for him since he carried me down the mountain. Even though we messed around when I was eighteen, I hadn’t remembered this energy between us. It felt combustible. If one of us lit a match, we’d explode.

Being near him was dangerous, and partnering with him and his brothers was not a good idea. I wished I could move away, but I couldn’t. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to work together.”

Tyler grinned. “Are you afraid you wouldn’t be able to resist me?”

I snorted and stepped back until my wrist fell from his hold. I didn’t acknowledge that I missed the contact. “I can resist you.”

Men in Europe were confident in a way most Americans weren’t. They were more adventurous and attentive in bed. I was more experienced than that eighteen-year-old girl he left sleeping in a hotel room that night.

He moved close to me in the same manner that Todd had earlier. Except this time, I felt his proximity in the hair that stood up on my arms and neck and the slight anticipation in the way my body leaned toward him. “We’ll see about that.”

When he moved away, the air around me cooled considerably. Why did I let him get to me? The thing was, he was so different from when we were kids. He was all man and more confident. I had a feeling he’d be skilled in

the bedroom—not that I should even be thinking about that.

I went back to the event but didn't see Tyler for the rest of the night. When everyone was gone, I went through the donations and found a sizable check from Fletcher & Sons, written by Tyler. Had he anticipated donating before he arrived? Was that his purpose in being here tonight, or was it the potential partnership?

A needy part of me, the girl who wanted closure after we'd hooked up in that hotel room, wanted to know if it was me, but I quashed that notion quickly. There was no way Tyler would ever consider dating me, not with his friendship with my brothers. Besides, if we partnered together, it would make things messy.

He'd always see me as his friends' younger sister, nothing more. A part of me wanted to prove to him that I was all grown up now. I was a confident woman who could have a fling and walk away. I could prove to him and to myself that I could resist him.

But I wasn't as confident about that part. I'd hear what he had to say about this potential partnership and then turn it down. I could always use the excuse that I wasn't sure how long I'd be in town.

No one expected me to stay, so it wouldn't be a surprise when I left. There was nothing for me here. There never had been. The ski resort was my brothers'. My parents let them run it almost entirely on their own now.

There was never any room for me, not when I was in college and certainly not now. The hollowness in my chest threatened to overwhelm me, but I added up the donations and made notations in my spreadsheet. The evening had been more successful than I'd anticipated.

I'd hoped my friends, Natalie and Alice, could come, but they both had children. Natalie had Delaney, and Alice had Sam's daughter, Maggie. They didn't go out a lot anymore, and I couldn't blame them. I hoped the fact that they were dating Tyler's brothers wouldn't make for awkward encounters while I was in town.

I should reach out to more of my high school friends if I was going to stick around. Just because Natalie and Alice were in serious relationships didn't mean that I had to stay home. I could go out and have a good time.

Oliver came into the room. "How'd you do?"

I tilted the screen so he could see the total numbers.

He whistled. "That's impressive. I'm proud of you."

I shouldn't have felt any pleasure at his words, but I did. I still sought

their approval when I received so little of it. When would my brothers stop seeing me as their little sister and, instead, as an adult they respected?

Eli and Xander walked in next. They stood behind my chair, looking at the numbers over my shoulder.

Eli ruffled my hair. "You did good."

I felt a rush of pride. I'd set out to do something at the ski resort, and I had. "It will be good publicity for the business."

Oliver made a noise of disagreement. "This was all you. We just provided the venue."

"You know everyone donated based on the Wilde family name and the resort's reputation." They hadn't invested in me.

"You're the one who came up with the idea and organized everything. You were the face of the cause tonight," Xander said.

"I don't know." I had planned everything, but it felt a little too similar to what I'd done in my last job. Organizing big events for other people and organizations. None of it was mine.

"You're not giving yourself enough credit," Oliver said, taking a seat next to Eli across from me.

"How are you going to distribute the money?" Oliver asked as he leaned a hip against the desk.

"I'm meeting with Todd to discuss ways to target the kids who'd need it the most." I had more ideas, but I didn't feel comfortable sharing them with my brothers yet.

"You could also reach out to social services and see if they have any tips," Eli said, the one in charge of managing the hotel. He had a knack for finding the solution to anything.

"I'd say that's a better bet than Todd. I think he wants more than your charity work," Xander said.

"When will you stop caring about who I date?" I asked them, the familiar irritation flaring to life.

"Never," Xander said, softening his response with a wink.

"You'll always be our little sister," Oliver said.

He was the oldest and the one I was the least close to. By the time I was in fifth grade, he'd left for college.

I sighed, weary of pointing this out. "I'm not little anymore. I'm a grown-up and can handle myself. If you want me to stick around, you need to start treating me as the independent woman I am."

Xander winced. “You haven’t been around in a while. We just need to adjust to having you home.”

“We want you to stay. I hope you know that,” Eli said, ever the peacemaker in our family.

“I lived on my own in Europe. I don’t need you warning me off guys.” Silence fell between us. “Not that it matters. I’m not ready for a relationship yet.”

Eli leaned his elbows on his knees, his eyes soft. “You want to talk about that?”

“I don’t ever want to talk about men with you. Any of you.” I gestured around the room at them. I was closest to Killian since we were nearest in age, but I wouldn’t even talk to him about guys.

There was some agreement between them to thwart any relationship they discovered. They were notorious in high school for warning guys off me. No one wanted to cross a Wilde boy. They were known for being reckless, eager to get into a fight, and held the power to ban them from the resort. The last part probably wasn’t true, but kids always believed it when they said it.

“As long as you don’t date any of our friends,” Xander said.

Xander was the adventurous one and usually pulled our older brothers out of their serious and contemplative moods. Growing up, we joked that Oliver and Eli both had oldest-kid syndrome, and the younger ones just got wilder and more fun loving. No one included me in those descriptions. I was merely the youngest, the only girl. I was an afterthought. “I’m not ready to date, but even if I was, your friends wouldn’t look at me twice.”

Xander crossed his arms over his chest. “Then we’ve done our job.”

“You don’t need to protect me from anyone.” With three of my brothers in the tiny office, their eyes on me, I felt like I was under a microscope.

Oliver shifted his weight. “We don’t want you to feel like we’re interfering.”

I bit back the familiar feelings of resentment and said, “I appreciate everything you’ve done for me since I’ve been home.”

“We just want you to be happy,” Xander said.

“I am.” Except I wasn’t even sure what that word meant. It seemed like something elusive that other people experienced. I hadn’t felt truly happy in a long time.

I’d wanted to leave Telluride after high school, and I had. I stayed away for years, but now I was back, and all my old insecurities were popping up

again. I could stay and deal with it or run away again.

CHAPTER 3



TYLER

I spent the morning touring potential properties to build my new house. A few were just lots so I could build exactly what I wanted, but my realtor insisted on showing me a couple of houses. I wanted a new build like Mac had.

There were a few possibilities, but I wanted to show my brothers. They both had a good sense of what lots were conducive to building. I was a little wary of making such a big decision without their approval.

I intended to meet my brothers at Mac's house afterward. Their women, Natalie and Alice, had gone shopping together, leaving them with the kids. When I arrived, Delaney was pushing Maggie on the new swing Mac had hung from a large tree in his backyard.

It was one of those round discs that could spin in any direction. Delaney was taking turns pushing Maggie and spinning her in circles. High-pitched screams and giggles floated over the yard to where we sat on the patio.

I balanced a beer bottle on my thigh as I considered my brothers. Mac stood in front of the grill, and Sam sat next to me.

Over the past few years, our parents allowed us to take over more of the business, and the charity project was solely ours.

"How'd it go at Kylie's event the other night at the lodge?" Mac asked.

"I don't go to many of these, but it seemed well-organized. I hope she raised a lot of money."

"You have a chance to talk to her about our ideas?" Sam asked.

I thought back to the way she looked in that dress and the way her eyes flashed as she talked to me. "She's skeptical about working together."

Mac frowned as he turned to face us. "Why?"

“She wants to help female athletes.”

“We want to help athletes. I don’t think gender matters,” Sam said.

“She said boys’ sports tend to have more support and funding from the schools.”

Sam frowned. “That’s unfortunate.”

I hadn’t thought about the fact that Mac and Sam might be amenable to her suggestion because they had daughters.

“She mentioned female players not having a place to sit at softball games, having to share bleachers with the fans.”

“She wants to provide dugouts? That’s an expensive proposition. I was thinking more along the idea of providing gear like she is for the skiing and snowboarding.”

Mac turned his attention to the grill, turning the hamburger patties. “We work in construction. We could provide the lumber and labor.”

“You’re seriously considering this? I thought this was more of a raise-money-and-hand-it-out-to-the-most-deserving-team kind of thing,” I said, resting my elbows on my thighs, dangling the bottle between my legs.

Sam mulled over his words. “It makes sense. We can get wholesale prices on the lumber and provide free labor.”

I thought about what it would mean to build dugouts for Kylie’s project. She’d raise the money, and we’d provide the lumber and labor. I couldn’t help but wonder if she would help too. She was sexy in that dress, but there was something about seeing her in a tank top and cutoff jeans with a tool belt that got me going. I wanted to dirty her up.

“I kind of love the idea,” Sam said to Mac.

I leaned back in my chair. “Should we build dugouts only or expand it to include sports equipment?”

Mac placed the patties onto a platter. “I have to say, I love the idea of it just being dugouts. We could expand to something else later. And we don’t have to say it’s just for female teams. We open it up to anyone who needs them. It protects the athletes from sun and rain and provides a team atmosphere. The coach is able to address the team without the distraction of parents and siblings on the bench.”

“You’re really on board with this?” I asked them.

“Kylie wants to build dugouts; we have the labor and supplies she needs. It’s the perfect partnership,” Mac said to us.

“It sounds like her fundraiser was successful. She’d handle that part, and

we'd do the construction," Sam added.

I mulled over what they were saying in my head. It was a natural partnership. There was no way she could turn us down.

"Someone has to do the work. Why not us?" Mac, ever the reasonable one, said.

"I like it," Sam added as Maggie raced across the lawn and landed on his lap. "What do you say, Maggie-girl? You want to help us build dugouts?"

Her nose wrinkled. "What are dugouts?"

We all exchanged a look.

Sam ruffled her hair. "I think it's time for your baseball education to begin."

We'd grown up playing Wiffle ball in the backyard. There was always a game in progress, the bases leaving permanent bare spots in the yard. My dad hated that balls and bats were always strewn across the yard. But we wanted to pick up where we left off every time we headed outside. It was a never-ending baseball game, but my mom liked to say it was a never-ending fight because we fought about strike zones and outs.

When Maggie noticed me, she scrambled off Sam's lap and moved over to me. I lifted her in my arms, loving the tickle of her hair against my cheek, the warmth of her body against mine, and the way she looked up at me with her big blue eyes.

She loved having uncles, and we teased her by pretending to fight over her. She was surrounded by love. I pulled up a picture of a dugout on my phone. "See, the players sit inside this in between plays."

"It's like a house," Maggie said, getting excited.

"Exactly. It's a house for baseball players. Want to help us build them?"

"Can I play inside?" Maggie asked.

I would have said yes to whatever she wanted. "Once construction is done."

I had visions of her learning the construction business alongside us, but she was only five. Construction zones were still too dangerous for her.

"Can you build me one?" Maggie asked me, and I knew I'd have a hard time telling her no.

Mac waved a hand at us. "She saw a picture of these storage houses in backyards that had been turned into a playhouse."

"What do you want it to look like?" I asked her, never wanting to deny her something that we could make for her.

We scrolled through pictures, and she pointed out the designs she liked and explained how she wanted room for a table and chairs, maybe even a play kitchen. The windows would have curtains, and the house itself would have a tiny porch.

I heard Natalie and Maggie come home from their shopping trip. I didn't move from my spot since I was holding Maggie. Mac went inside to help them with the packages and bags.

"You going to talk to Kylie about the dugouts?" Sam asked me.

"I was supposed to text her about meeting up sometime this week."

Sam stood. "You can talk to her tonight. She's here."

"She is?" I asked. Maggie scrambled off my lap and raced toward Alice, and I followed her. Alice lifted Maggie in her arms and gave her a smacking kiss on her cheek. She squeezed her tight and said how much she missed her. But it was Kylie standing next to Alice that had my attention.

She wore a sundress and a jean jacket, with white sneakers. It was cute and sporty. Her exposed skin was tan and soft-looking. I stood and moved closer to her. "What are you doing here?"

Her eyes widened. "I went shopping with Natalie and Alice."

A weird sensation entered my stomach. They were friends. I'd be seeing her all the time. "You hang out together."

"Do you have a problem with that?" she asked, moving past me to sit in one of the chairs.

I returned to my seat and said, "I was just surprised."

"I was friends with Natalie when we were kids, and she introduced me to Alice." The look she gave me said everything—she didn't think she owed me an explanation, but she gave me one anyway.

"That makes sense." My brain was still trying to play catch-up and make sense of the fact that Kylie was in our lives now. She wasn't the younger sister of the Wilde brothers I could easily avoid; she was best friends with my brothers' fiancées. There'd be no avoiding her.

"You're close to Maggie?" Kylie asked.

She must have seen her sitting in my lap. "She's my niece."

Sam grinned. "Mac and Tyler are enamored with her. There's nothing they wouldn't do for her."

"Which apparently means building a playhouse," Mac said.

"Can you show her the picture, Uncle Tyler?" Maggie asked, coming up to my side. She was an ace at getting us to do whatever she wanted. All she

had to do was ask in that baby voice, and I was mush.

I opened up the pictures and handed my phone to Kylie.

Kylie scrolled through them as Maggie sidled up next to her. “These are so nice. What will you have inside?”

Maggie went through her ideas, her hands gesturing wildly as she described everything she wanted. When she was done, Kylie said, “That sounds amazing. You’re a lucky girl.”

“She’s lucky she has two uncles who will indulge her every whim,” Sam said.

I was close with my brothers because we worked together, but we were good friends too. When Sam had Maggie, it brought us even closer. Maggie’s mother moved to Maryland, and he needed our help. It was a little less now that he had Alice, but we still loved spending time with Maggie. And now that Mac was dating Natalie, we had her daughter, Delaney, to spoil too.

Mac pointed the spatula at Sam. “Your house will be done soon. We’ll build the playhouse inside this winter and then put it out in the spring.”

Maggie’s ears perked up at that. “I can play in it over the winter?”

“I don’t see why not,” Sam said.

Sam was building a house on a property he’d purchased. He was taking his time, building it to his exact specifications.

“As soon as Sam’s done building, Tyler will be ready to start his,” Sam said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You’re building a house?” Kylie asked.

“I want more space.”

“A house is a lot for a single guy,” she said.

“Mac built this place before he met Natalie. I originally moved to an apartment downtown so I can walk to the bars, but it’s getting old. I’m ready to have more space and a view like this from my back patio.” I gestured toward the mountains.

“You have that rooftop deck at your place,” Mac said.

The entire town was located in a canyon, so the view of the mountains was spectacular from the roof. But I wanted to see the view from my windows. I wanted to wake up to it every day. I wanted the silence that came with living in the country. I was done with the activity in town. I’d said I was ready to settle down, but that wasn’t it. I didn’t want to share my space with anyone. I just wanted more of it.

“I’ll have room to build something—like Maggie’s playhouse—if I have

a garage.”

“You want a separate work shed?” Mac asked thoughtfully.

“I think so.” Although I hadn’t given it too much thought before today. Mac and Sam would have more kids, and I wanted to build them things. Maybe even a dollhouse.

“You’ll need a patio and an outdoor kitchen,” Sam said. He’d recently added an outdoor space construction branch to our contracting business. He’d created incredible spaces at his house, Mac’s, and Natalie’s B&B in town. But the demand for his expertise was growing.

“I’d love it, but only if you have time.” I didn’t want to take away from his work or time with his family.

Sam shook his head. “I make time for family. Besides, you’re building Maggie’s playhouse.”

I chuckled. “A playhouse and a house are not the same.”

“You know what I mean. Family comes first.”

Something flashed in Kylie’s eyes, and I wondered if she was thinking about her brothers. She’d complained that she was something of an afterthought. I didn’t think a lot of people knew Kylie. She’d left when she was young, and no one understood why she’d stayed away. I wondered if Alice and Natalie did.

I could have brought up the partnership proposal, but I wanted to wait until we were alone. I wanted her to know I was taking the lead on it, even if my brothers were helping. It was an excuse to spend more time with her without my brothers hovering nearby.

“You hungry?” Mac asked as he plated the patties for us and the hot dogs for the kids.

“I’m starved,” Natalie said.

Alice sat in Sam’s lap. “Shopping works up an appetite.”

I was the only single Fletcher now. Mac had always been a guy who wanted to settle down with a woman, and Sam hadn’t thought it was possible for him with a daughter, but he’d found love with his nanny. I had no serious prospects and wasn’t looking for any.

I was content being single. Building a house was a big project that would keep me busy. I didn’t need anyone else’s opinion on what kind of house I should build. Sam changed his plans for Alice, but I didn’t see that happening to me.

I had plenty of time before I thought about having what they did. I wasn’t

even sure I wanted it, as much as I enjoyed spending time with my brothers and their burgeoning families.

We moved to sit around the table as Mac placed the food on a platter in the center, and Natalie grabbed napkins, silverware, and glasses. I enjoyed these evenings with my family. Sam had created a nice space to gather outdoors, and we liked to enjoy it as much as we could before fall turned into winter.

When we finished eating, the girls raced around the yard, playing some version of tag, and Mac turned on the heaters.

“You happy to be back?” Sam asked Kylie what I was hesitant to do.

“I love Telluride. The view, the clean air, and the stars,” she said as she tipped her head slightly back as if she could see them, but it was still light out.

“You here to stay?” Mac asked.

Kylie chuckled. “I have no idea. My work history consists of working in a hotel in Paris. There’s nothing similar here.”

“What about the lodge? It’s not as luxurious as where you worked, I’m sure...” Mac trailed off.

“My brothers have it handled,” Kylie said simply. There was no censure in her voice, but I heard the emptiness and the unspoken words—there wasn’t a place for her.

I hated that she felt that way. My dad made sure there was space for me and my brothers in the business, while assuring us we could pursue whatever we wanted. We didn’t have to work for him, but we wanted to. When Sam wanted to branch out to create patios and outdoor kitchens, my dad supported him.

“I’m sure they’d make space for you,” Mac said, but I wasn’t so sure.

The Wilde brothers had been running the resort for a while, and they were set in their ways. They’d never included her in anything when they were younger and she came home from college on breaks.

“I used to organize events at the hotel. It was kind of my specialty, and I always wondered what it would be like to do it myself. The fundraiser I held the other night was supposed to be a test of sorts.”

“How did it go?” Sam asked.

I’d have to start thinking of her as my future sister-in-law’s best friend and not my best friend’s younger sister. But I wasn’t sure either was a good option.

“Surprisingly well. It was something people could rally behind. The local sports stores were the biggest contributors, offering to put bins at their stores to collect lightly used equipment and offering a sizable donation. But it was the smaller donations from local businesses that all added up. I have to thank Tyler and you guys for your donation. I wasn’t expecting it.”

“We’re happy to donate to a good cause and support the Wilde family,” Mac said, probably not realizing this was Kylie’s thing and not her family’s or her brothers’. It was important to her to be seen as a separate entity, a force all her own.

I saw that. I always had. When her brothers brushed her off or pushed her away, I wanted to extend an olive branch, but back then, they would have teased me, saying I had a crush on her. And maybe I did, but I think I just saw someone who was lonely and wanted to be included.

As the middle child, I’d always gone from Sam to Mac, playing them off one another. I’d never truly been alone. But that fear was there that I’d be left out.

“Who wants dessert?” Natalie asked as the kids cheered, and the talk of Kylie’s charity event was forgotten.

I was the only one who noticed she was quiet for the rest of the night. I wanted to take her aside and tell her I got her. But we weren’t friends.

CHAPTER 4



KYLIE

When I went shopping with Natalie and Alice, I hadn't expected to find Tyler at Mac's house when we returned. But I'd have to get used to him hanging around Natalie and Alice. It would have been nice to have a girls' night out at a wine bar in town, or even dinner, but both of my friends had kids. They had responsibilities, and they wanted to spend time with their significant others. I couldn't blame them.

I'd heard that Tyler enjoyed the single life, living near the bars downtown and generally liking being unattached. I wondered if his buying property and building a house signaled a change in his life.

He was settling down, and I felt more unmoored than ever. I thought I'd be promoted up the chain of management at the hotel I worked for. I never should have hooked up with the owner's son. It was cliché, and I should have known it wouldn't end well for me, especially when there was a no-fraternization policy. When Brad's father and my boss found out, I was the one reprimanded and let go. I should have known a family member would inherit the business, not someone from outside. But I'd only taken that risk because I thought what I had with Brad was special. It turned out he had a history of dating employees. I was just one of many.

How could I fit in somewhere when there was never a place for me? Because I was the youngest of five, and the only girl, my parents didn't really know what to do with me. They were past the point of buying new toys, even if I was a girl. Any desire for a dollhouse or dolls was dismissed. Finally, I gave up and decided to be more like the boys. That didn't work either. Why was I always trying to fit in somewhere I didn't?

Today, I was supposed to meet with Tyler to discuss his plan for a

partnership. I was sure I'd turn it down. This was my thing, and I had no interest in sharing it with anyone.

I wanted something just for myself. I loved organizing the event and talking to people about my plans. It was exhilarating. And the best part was, I loved helping people. The last thing I wanted to do was get involved in something that would force me to work closely with Tyler. It was playing with fire.

When I arrived at the coffee shop, I found Tyler leaning against the brick wall, his head bowed over his phone.

The air was chillier today, a hint of the fall weather that was just around the corner.

I paused in front of him, and he slowly lifted his gaze to meet mine.

"Hey." I fiddled with the chain strap of my designer purse. I'd dressed professionally in black slacks, a silky white button-down, and my favorite red patent leather shoes.

I'd worked in Paris. I was a sophisticated woman. I didn't revert to being "that Wilde girl" just because I was back in my hometown. I wasn't sure why it was so important for Tyler to see the distinction between how I was then and how I was now.

Tyler straightened, still a head taller than me, even in my heels. Then he grinned. "Thanks for joining me. I was initially thinking we could get coffee, but I'm kind of hungry. Want to do lunch?"

Before I could say no, because I wanted to limit our time alone together, he'd gripped my elbow and guided me down the sidewalk. "You always dress like this to meet an old friend?"

I scoffed. "This is a business meeting with a potential associate."

Tyler glanced down at me and winked. "And catching up with an old friend."

"We weren't friends." Especially not that night when we'd given in to our desires.

"Are you sure about that?" His breath ghosted over my ear.

I barely suppressed the shiver that his proximity gave me. "I'm positive."

He'd worn jeans and a light jacket over a T-shirt. He was casual, and I wondered if he'd decided to play this meeting a different way. No matter what his plans were, I'd keep it professional. There'd be no talk of the time he'd seen me naked.

He'd obviously felt bad, or he would have talked to me about it a long

time ago. Instead, he'd kept it hidden—our little secret from everyone.

He opened a door for a pub-style restaurant, and as soon as we stepped inside, I relaxed. I was used to men in France taking me to fancy restaurants, but this was more how I'd grown up. I enjoyed the casual atmosphere, the dark wood paneling, and the deep booths.

“Is this okay?”

I raised a brow as the hostess led us to a booth in the back. “It’s a little too late to ask now, isn’t it?”

Tyler chuckled. “You’re a fun date. Sweet and kind, with a fire simmering underneath.”

We sat across from each other as the hostess handed us the menus. When she left, murmuring something about returning for our order, I said, “I’m only like this with you.”

It was like he'd lit a match in me at eighteen, and it had been burning bright for him ever since.

“Is that right?” he asked with a slight cock to his head.

“It’s nothing to get a big head about,” I said as I scanned the menu. I wanted a big, fat, juicy burger, but I'd be good and get the seared salmon with a side of vegetables.

After we ordered, Tyler set his elbows on the table. “Watching your weight?”

I frowned. “Why would you ask that?”

Tyler tipped his head. “You ordered the salmon when you wanted the burger.”

I chuckled and glanced around self-consciously. “How do you know that?”

“When we were kids, you were a burger-and-fries kind of girl.”

“You paid attention?” I'd always annoyed my brothers and their friends.

“I noticed you.” His voice was softer.

There was something about his admission and the way he couldn't quite hold my gaze. We had a few moments, like the time he carried me to the lodge when I broke my arm, the few times we found ourselves in the same hiding spot, and of course, when we hooked up. But I never thought he saw me as anything more than the Wildes' younger sister.

Before I could figure out how to respond, he cleared his throat. “I believe we're here to discuss our future partnership.”

I held up a hand to stop him. “I never agreed to anything. I said we could

talk about it.”

Tyler grinned, his earlier discomfort gone. This was the Tyler I remembered from when we were kids. He was quick to flirt and charm. “You want to provide a service to kids who need something, and we can provide it.”

I barely suppressed an eye roll. “How so?”

“You want to help out teams who don’t have dugouts, and we can supply the materials and labor.”

“You’re going to build the dugouts,” I said, letting the disbelief I felt tinge my voice.

“Me and my brothers, along with our crew.”

“Are you serious?” I asked, my heart thumping. I thought I’d raise some money and give it to the teams. I hadn’t planned on being directly involved with building anything, but the idea had merit. I loved being involved in these fundraisers, but what better way to be involved than to build exactly what they needed? I could see the project through to the end.

“I never lie about construction,” Tyler teased.

“You realize this is a nonprofit. I can’t afford to pay you for the labor. Even the lumber might be pricey.” I wasn’t sure how much we could raise, or if anyone in the community would even be interested in helping. Building dugouts would be an expensive proposition. It’s why I was inclined to provide equipment first.

“I thought you wanted the teams to have the same amenities as others.”

“I do, but building dugouts is expensive and labor-intensive.” I didn’t have to crunch the numbers to know lumber was expensive, and labor more so.

“If we’re going to do this, we want to contribute directly. You mentioned that not every team has dugouts. They protect the players from the weather and allow them to be together instead of seated with the fans. I think it’s a worthy cause, but we’re in a unique position. You need the labor that we can provide.”

I tipped my head to the side, still not quite believing him. “And you want to do this? You want to volunteer your time to provide this at no cost?”

“Is that so hard to believe?”

“A little. I know you’re busy. Mac and Sam have families to think about.”

“You can help too.”

Was he asking me to help with the build? I wasn’t sure how I felt about

that. “I was planning on raising the money. I’m good at planning events, marketing, and getting people behind a cause.”

“I have no doubt, but I think you need to get your hands dirty. You could even learn a new skill.”

My eyes widened. “You want me to help you build the dugouts?”

He shrugged. “Why not? You contribute, learn a new skill, and the kids get their dugout. It’s a win-win.”

I didn’t like the idea of working with Tyler, especially when I knew Mac’s and Sam’s availability had to be limited. But it spurred other ideas for the fundraiser. “What if we reach out to teams, ask if they need one, and get the team involved in the fundraising?”

He smiled widely. “You want the team to help build the dugout?”

“I mean, there are insurance issues to consider, parents’ permission, and we’d have to be careful, but I kind of like the idea.”

“I love it. We’ve always wanted to work with the community and help kids. This is perfect.”

It would make for a great cause. “Those who donated would be able to come to a ribbon-cutting ceremony to see the final product. We can post online and even get the newspaper involved.”

Tyler smiled. “I’m full of great ideas.”

I was too excited about it to take offense at Tyler’s cocky smile and the way he relaxed back in the chair, one arm thrown over the booth behind him. He looked relaxed and confident.

“So, we’re doing this?” I asked, my stomach fluttering with excitement. “Can you run the numbers? Let me know how much lumber and materials will cost and how many hours of labor will be needed. Even though we’ll have a lot of hands, it might not be the skilled labor you’re used to.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll teach you everything you need to know.”

My cheeks heated. “I think we should talk about what happened. Clear the air, so to speak.”

“What about?” he asked curiously.

I looked away from him, suddenly uncomfortable. “You know that night we got stuck in the hotel room together.”

He chuckled, and it went straight through my chest. “We didn’t get stuck there. I locked us inside so we could be by ourselves.”

Now my cheeks were hot because I hadn’t told him we should do that. I’d finally gotten Tyler right where I wanted him, and I wasn’t going to walk

away before I got the kiss I wanted. I got a hell of a lot more than that too. It was my best memory and my worst because he never called after that. “The reasons and circumstances don’t matter. But we’re going to be working together. I don’t want to have anything unresolved between us.”

“I can be professional,” Tyler said, his expression serious.

“I can be too.” Or at least I hoped so. My former boss would disagree. But when it came to working with Tyler and his brothers, we didn’t have a choice. I didn’t want to mess up something that had the potential to be amazing.

“The only question is, how long will you be here? If you have plans to leave, it doesn’t make sense to start anything.”

I sighed. “I don’t have any concrete plans, but let’s take it one project at a time. You get me the numbers, we’ll see if it’s doable, and then we’ll reach out to a few teams.”

“We need to make sure we raise enough money to cover one, much less multiple dugouts. My mom’s great at fundraising. She works with one of the local organizations, runs their bingo nights, and is always stuffing baskets to help one group or the other. She might be helpful to you.”

“That would be amazing. Thank you, Tyler.” I needed to clear this awkwardness I felt around him. He’d been casual, quick to flirt or wink, but that didn’t mean anything to him.

The first few times we ran into each other, I felt an undercurrent of something else. But today, he was light and fun. It was clear he didn’t have any unresolved feelings toward me. I was just convenient that night. What teenage boy would turn down a girl who wanted to mess around? It hadn’t meant anything to him. I wished I could say the same.

But the more I was around him, the easier it would be. This was just a little test. He was a means to getting what I wanted.

“So, you’re in?” he asked after the server gave us our food.

“I’m agreeing to research it further. I’ll look at the numbers, and we can see if it’s feasible. I appreciate you offering to help. I couldn’t do something of this size without you and your family’s business.” I hadn’t even allowed myself to dream this big. I used the dugouts as a way to show the inequality in sports, but Tyler zoned in on it and was offering a real plan to fix it.

“We wanted to do something tangible, to showcase our business and provide something to the community.”

“It’s kind of perfect.” And I was excited to get started. When I returned

home to Telluride, I had no idea what I'd do. I just knew I needed the comfort of the only home I'd ever known. I needed to escape what had happened and put distance between myself and my mistakes.

We dug into our food for a few minutes, both of us lost in our thoughts. "The salmon is amazing."

Tyler surprised me by reaching over to cut a piece and popping it into his mouth. After he chewed and swallowed, he said, "You're right. It's great."

"I didn't say you could eat my food." I let the irritation with him slide through my voice, but I was uneasy with being so familiar. I didn't think I'd ever dated a man who was comfortable enough to steal food from my plate. Maybe it was because Tyler knew me when we were kids. We didn't have those same boundaries between us. If so, that didn't bode well for our future working relationship.

"How else was I supposed to test your claim?" Tyler asked with mock surprise.

I rolled my eyes but enjoyed the banter. "Take my word for it like any normal person."

"What fun is that?" Tyler winked as he took a bite of his chicken. "I'll let you have mine."

I shook my head, even as my cheeks heated. Why was it that everything he said sounded like an innuendo? I was enjoying our meal more than I thought I would. I figured I'd hear him out, finish my coffee, and be on my way. I hadn't anticipated sharing lunch or that his ideas would be so attractive. Tyler was surprising me in the best ways.

It would be difficult to work with him because of my childhood crush, but it would be worth it if local teams got their dugouts. I could only imagine how excited the kids would be.

"Why don't you come over for Sunday dinner? I'll get the numbers you need, and you can talk to my mom about fundraising."

"Are you sure? I wouldn't want to intrude." I'd heard about their family dinners. Both Alice and Natalie adored the Fletcher family. Both of them hadn't had the best family experiences, and Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher had accepted them into theirs.

"You won't be."

I wanted to ask if he'd asked anyone else to join him for family dinner, but I was afraid I didn't want to know the answer. I hadn't heard that Tyler had ever been in a serious relationship, but maybe I was wrong. And if so, I

didn't want to know about it.

I was getting in deeper with Tyler. I'd be working with him and his family, and I wouldn't do anything to mess that up. I'd already screwed up enough in my life, and my brothers didn't expect much from me. I wanted to prove that I was worthy. That I wasn't just some flighty girl who traveled the world and came home when she screwed up. I wanted to do something meaningful. Something that didn't have much to do with my family's business.

This was the perfect solution. So even if I had to work with Tyler, it would be worth it.

"I look forward to working with you, partner," Tyler said with his signature wink.

"If we're going to work together, no more flirting," I said, a little uncomfortable that I let him know it got to me.

He drew back as if I'd surprised him. "This isn't me flirting. This is just who I am."

If he was like this with everyone, no wonder I'd crushed on him as a kid. I didn't stand a chance. But I had grown up, dated around, and been burned. I wouldn't make the same mistakes again. Guys who were quick to flirt or wink weren't to be trusted. Just because I'd known Tyler all my life didn't mean he was any different.

CHAPTER 5



TYLER

I thought I could make it through a casual lunch with Kylie Wilde, but I was wrong. I covered my reaction to her with flirting and winks, but my charm didn't work on her. She saw right through it. Probably because she knew me when I was younger.

I didn't know how I was going to work with her and keep my hands off her. The only thing that kept me going was imagining her working with me on the dugouts. I wanted to teach her how to build something. Would she enjoy creating as much as I did?

I'd always viewed my job as creating something new out of something old and used. The owners of the homes we worked on were always happy with the result. I could only imagine these kids would be the same.

I was excited about this project. More than I thought I would be. I'd have to see what deal I could get for the lumber. Maybe our supplier would be willing to give us a steeper discount if we promised to put their name on a plaque somewhere in the dugout.

Now that I had this vision in my head of Kylie in cutoff jean shorts, wielding a hammer, I couldn't forget it. Especially seeing how excited she was with my ideas. I wanted to make it happen. I could tell she needed this right now. Whatever had happened to bring her home was still eating at her.

I wanted to help her out with this one thing. It had nothing to do with crushing on her as a teenager or that the one night we'd shared had been too short. She was out of bounds, off-limits. She'd always be my best friends' younger sister. Nothing would change that.

Her brothers wouldn't come around to me pursuing their younger sister. They'd always been protective, and with her coming home and not knowing

the reason, they had to be more concerned about her. I wouldn't do anything to violate their trust.

Xander met me out at a bar near my apartment. As nice as it was to walk, I was tired of living in such a confined space. It was a small one-bedroom with a tiny kitchenette.

We sat at the bar, watching the baseball game on TV.

Xander tipped his bottle back. "I heard you're working with Kylie on something."

I tensed, even though there was no way he knew about the time we hooked up. Kylie would never tell her brothers. "My brothers and I want to get more involved with charity work and the community. Figured it could only be good for the business, and I like the idea."

Xander frowned. "Why isn't Sam or Mac heading it up?"

I smacked his arm. "You don't think I'm responsible enough to handle it?"

Xander chuckled. "You know I do. I just didn't think you'd be interested."

"So, I'm a self-centered ass?" I asked, irritation lacing my voice.

Xander shot me a disbelieving look. "You're grumpy tonight."

I grunted because I was annoyed. I wanted his younger sister in my bed, but instead, I was drinking a beer with him.

"It sounded like Kylie was impressed with your ideas."

"She mentioned something about the girls' softball teams not having dugouts, or even a bench to sit on. Seemed like something we could provide."

"You're providing the lumber at a discounted cost and the labor?"

"It's the least we can do. We didn't want to just give money or put our name on a banner. We wanted to contribute in a meaningful way. What better way than to build something the team can use?"

"I think it's a great idea, and obviously, Kylie does too. Will you be able to raise enough money for it?"

"I asked our supplier for a discount in exchange for their name somewhere. I still need to run that by Kylie. This is her baby."

"It's nice of you to help my sister. I appreciate it."

"You know, this was her idea; we just offered to help." I didn't want to take away from Kylie's ideas or take credit for something that wasn't mine.

He slapped my shoulder. "I'm just hoping this project will keep her in town."

“I don’t think anything will keep her here if she doesn’t want to be.” That had been my impression over the years when she rarely returned for the holidays. I thought it was because of me, that I hadn’t reached out to her afterward, and hadn’t explained myself adequately. That the night might have meant something to her. The familiar guilt settled in my gut.

I always told myself I was reading too much into things. Kylie had always been a confident girl. She wasn’t hurt by what had happened. She’d moved on and became a successful woman. She wasn’t still thinking about me and my teenage mistakes.

“Still. I appreciate you giving her something to hold on to here.”

“She mentioned something about there not being a place for her at the resort. You think that’s why she was so quick to leave after school?” It wasn’t my place to say anything, but I wanted to know.

Xander frowned. “When did she say that?”

“You know how she’s friends with Natalie and Alice?” At Xander’s nod, I continued. “She was at Mac’s house one night and mentioned it in passing. She didn’t explain herself, but I was curious.”

“I didn’t think she wanted to work for the resort. I mean, she worked for some fancy hotel in Paris. What could she possibly want with a ski lodge?”

I shrugged, hoping he didn’t read anything into my curiosity. “You won’t know unless you ask.”

The bartender dropped off a bowl of freshly popped popcorn, and we dug in.

Xander chewed as he watched the game on the TV. “You’re being cryptic tonight.”

“I don’t know what’s going on with her. But if you want her to stick around town, you might want to find out.”

He bumped my shoulder. “Since when are you into feelings and shit?”

“Who said anything about feelings? You want your sister to stay, then find out why she won’t. It’s simple.”

“Since when are you the relationship guru?”

I shrugged, hoping he couldn’t see right through me. “I was just trying to help.”

“You should probably stick to your wood and tools.”

“Asshole.”

“You know it.” And just like that, we were back to normal, exchanging barbs and ribbing each other.

We talked about the game and what was going on at the lodge, but we didn't talk any more about Kylie. I wanted to get my mind off her, even as it kept circling around to why she was back and if she intended to stay. The only way to find out was to get closer to her. I hadn't been that interested in spearheading this project, but now that Kylie was involved, I was all in. Even if it was the dumbest move I'd made in a long time.

When it came to Kylie Wilde, I couldn't resist her. She was sexy and sophisticated, and I wanted to dirty her up. I wanted to strip her of that protective armor she wore to lunch, the silky top, the pressed slacks, and those killer heels. What would she look like in nothing but those stilettos?

I shifted on the barstool, hoping Xander didn't guess where my thoughts had gone. I was imagining his younger sister naked. He'd kill me if he knew. It was one thing that I'd screwed up when I was eighteen, but I was older now. I knew better than to get involved with her. It wasn't worth ruining a lifelong friendship over.

Kylie needed a friend in town, and maybe I could be that for her.

When the game was over, it was close to ten. Colorado had won in overtime, and I needed to get up early.

Xander walked with me to my apartment. "I'd appreciate it if you could keep an eye on her."

"Eye on who?" I asked, dreading what he was going to say.

"Kylie. I don't know what's going on with her, and you're the only one close enough to find out."

I held up my hands. "I'm not close to your sister. Her best friends are engaged to my brothers."

"You know what I mean. You are partnering together on this project, and you see her with your family. Just keep an eye on her. Let me know if you figure out what's going on."

"You know I'd never betray her confidence." One thing she'd confessed that night in the hotel was that her brothers always found out about guys who were interested in her and made sure they weren't anymore. I wouldn't interfere in Kylie's life, not when I knew how difficult her brothers made things for her.

"I'm not saying that." He sighed and hung his head before slowly lifting his gaze to meet mine. "I just need to know if she's okay."

My throat tightened. "I can do that."

He looked relieved as he pressed a hand to my shoulder. "I appreciate

that. You're a good friend."

Guilt curled through my chest because I'd taken advantage of his sister. When it happened, she was legally an adult, but Xander wouldn't see it that way. He and his brothers would see it as a betrayal.

* * *

ON SUNDAY NIGHT, I told Kylie I'd pick her up and drive her to my parents' house. She gave me the address of one of the A-frame cabins on the resort's property.

When I pulled up, she was already sitting on the front porch, waiting for me. She bounded down the steps and made her way over. Today she wore tight jeans, a black sweater, and boots. She looked like the Kylie I knew when we were younger.

I reached over to push the door open for her because she didn't give me time to walk around and do it properly. Her hair fell loose around her face, and her freckles were visible. I wondered if she'd covered them with makeup at our lunch. I preferred this fresh-faced look.

Kylie buckled her seatbelt. "I could have driven."

"What would be the fun of that?" I flashed her a smile before pulling out of the driveway. My heart beat hard in my chest because I didn't want her to see what I'd never been able to hide around her—I liked her as more than friends.

When she didn't respond, I asked, "Why are you staying in a cabin and not with your parents?"

Her nose scrunched. "I think you know the answer to that."

"You need your space?" I guessed with a glance in the side mirror as I signaled to change lanes.

"My brothers would be popping in every day to check on me, and my father would be asking me what I intended to do next. As if there was never a time in your life you could press pause."

"Is that what you're doing?" I glanced over at her.

"What? Pressing pause?" she asked, and at my nod, she continued. "I needed a break after—you know, leaving my job."

I wanted to ask about the circumstances surrounding it but wasn't sure if she'd answer me. "Care to share?" I might have been friends with her

brothers, but we'd shared things over the years. I felt like we had a connection. That I could trust her, and I hoped she felt the same about me.

She let out a long breath and looked out the window. "I dated the owner's son. I think we all know how that turned out."

"You lost your job, and he didn't?"

She blew out a breath as she turned so that her knee was folded on the seat, and her body turned slightly toward mine. "That's the long and short of it. The bitch of it was—I knew better."

"We all make mistakes in relationships." Not that I'd been in any serious ones, but I'd screwed up things with her.

She tipped her head to the side. "Have you?"

I felt her gaze on the side of my face. "You want to know about me?"

She laughed softly. "I'd love to hear about someone else's mistakes for once."

"I've never even been in a long-term relationship. I never really wanted to, or no one appealed to me. I didn't like anyone enough to take that leap, I guess. There's no story."

Kylie shook her head in disgust. "Men. I should have known better than to get involved with Rick. He swore it wouldn't make a difference, that I was special. If we were the real thing, then what did it matter where I worked or who his father was?"

"It always matters," I said thinking of her brothers.

"Right?" She was quiet for a few seconds before she asked, "So, no one has ever caught your eye, huh?"

"Nope." *Just you.*

"That's interesting."

"Sam knocked up a girl when we were young, and I saw how that worked out. Felicia left him here to raise Maggie by himself. He had plenty of help, and I love Maggie, but I wasn't eager to follow in his footsteps. Then there's Mac. We always called him the hopeless romantic. He always fell hard and fast. Every girl he dated was his girlfriend. He had two serious relationships, but both girls ended it when he was looking for more. It broke his heart, and I wanted no part of that."

"And now he has Natalie."

"Natalie and Alice are awesome. Perfect for my brothers. But I don't see the same thing happening to me."

"Then what's the deal with you buying property and building a house?"

That's a pretty big commitment."

"I love Telluride. I love working for my family and living near them. There's no reason to rent anymore. Besides, I love Mac's house, his property, and the view. I want that for myself."

"I can see that. I just never felt like I belonged here, you know?"

"Maybe it's not so much a location as the people you surround yourself with."

Kylie sighed. "My brothers pushed me away with their overprotectiveness and opinions about how I live my life. I guess I just wanted space."

"And now you're back."

Her lips turned downward. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"You were thinking, *I'm going to start this amazing nonprofit that's going to give athletes what I didn't have.*"

"You make it sound great, but we're not feeding the hungry or giving coats to the poor."

"But you could do that. You start with the thing you're most passionate about, and then you expand."

"Are you saying that fundraising is my passion?"

"Maybe it's helping others." I huffed out a laugh. "You worked in the hospitality field. What is that except for helping other people? Now you get to do it on a different scale. You choose the beneficiaries, and you get what they need."

Kylie reached over to touch my forearm, the warmth seeping through the thin long-sleeve shirt I wore. "I love your idea so much, Tyler. I can't even tell you."

I parked in the driveway in front of my parents' home. "You can say, *Tyler, you're brilliant.*"

Kylie groaned. "You're impossible."

"But you love me anyway." I kept my tone light because she obviously didn't, but she liked me. She'd felt enough for me to confide in me at one point. She apparently said more to me than to her brothers. There was something between us.

"I don't know why I talk to you."

"Because we're friends."

She met my gaze, her eyes considering me before she finally agreed. "I suppose we are."

Had I said something wrong? Had I misread something? “We’re going to be working together, so it only makes sense.”

“No, you’re right.” She climbed out of my SUV before she smiled at me. “Friends it is.”

Her smile and her words fell flat to me, but I didn’t have a chance to analyze them because Mac was already opening the door as we stepped onto the porch.

A smile spread over his face. “Well, what do we have here? Is Tyler bringing home a girl for the first time?”

“First of all,” I said as I shouldered past him and inside the house, “be respectful. Kylie’s a woman, not a girl.”

Mac closed the door as I turned to face him. “Which you’ve obviously noticed.”

“We’re working together on the dugout project, remember?”

Mac waved a hand at me before placing it on my shoulder like we were the best of friends and he wasn’t razzing me right now. “This is the first time you’ve ever brought a woman home.”

“You know it’s not like that.” I pulled away from him as we entered the kitchen, used to his ribbing. Even though we were adults, in this house, we acted like teenagers again.

“Oh good, you’re here,” Mom said.

Natalie sat at the table with Delaney and Maggie, who were coloring next to each other. Alice and Sam stood by the counter, drinks in front of them. The slider was open slightly.

Dad must have been by the grill. He used every opportunity to fire it up now that he had the outdoor kitchen Sam built him.

“You see who Tyler brought?” Mac asked the room in general, but I was positive it was directed at my mother, who wouldn’t be satisfied until all her sons had settled down with someone.

Mom held Kylie’s hands. “Kylie Wilde. Tyler said you’d be here. I’m so happy you could join us.”

Kylie hugged my mom before looking around at us.

“I wanted Kylie to talk to Mom about fundraising,” I said by way of explanation.

Mom waved a hand at Kylie. “I don’t even see it as fundraising. I make an offer they can’t resist, and they hand me their money.”

“You’re good at it,” Mac said, respect in his voice.

Mom grinned. “I can talk to you about it while the baked potatoes finish cooking.”

When Kylie smiled at me, I nodded and headed outside to see my dad. The kitchen felt a little too heavy with expectation. I hadn’t thought about the fact that my brothers would assume Kylie meant something to me if I brought her to Sunday dinner.

CHAPTER 6



KYLIE

I tried to focus on what Miranda was saying about fundraising, but my mind was on Tyler and his brothers, who followed him outside. When we arrived, Tyler seemed a little uneasy with Mac's teasing.

Did he not see me as girlfriend material, or was it the girlfriend aspect itself he wanted nothing to do with?

"I think what you're doing is great. The community will rally around you for sure," Natalie said from the kitchen table.

"That's what I'm hoping," I said, refocusing on the conversation.

"You go into something like this with a pure heart, and people will respond to you," Miranda said.

"What things do you raise money for?" I asked her.

"Several of the boys' baseball travel teams. The Lions Club supports the boys' baseball fields. The money we raise through the group provides money for the fields, and the money I raise goes toward equipment, bags, and uniforms for the teams."

"Who sponsors the softball teams?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"I'm not sure. The baseball fields have been on the group's property for years, ever since my boys were young. I was never involved with softball, not having any girls."

"I want to figure out what they need, raise money, and provide it."

"That's not too different from what I do."

"I just hope people are willing to fork over money to support the girls' teams."

"Why are you building dugouts?" Delaney asked.

I moved to sit with them at the table. "It protects the players against the

weather—rain, wind, and the sun. Plus, it helps you stay together as a team. Otherwise, they have to sit with the fans, which can be distracting.”

“That makes sense,” Delaney said.

“Do you play?” I asked her.

“I never have before,” Delaney said, her attention on the coloring page in front of her. It wasn’t a typical child’s coloring book. It was one of those ornate patterns that appeared to have a castle hidden in the middle.

“We’re still getting settled at school. We haven’t signed up for any outside activities yet,” Natalie said.

“I loved playing sports.” It was the one time I had someone to play with. I thought if I learned the various sports my brothers played, they’d eventually let me join.

“Did you play softball?” Maggie asked me.

“It was my favorite sport, but I played soccer and basketball too.”

“I want to play,” Delaney said.

“Should we sign you up for spring?” Natalie asked her.

Delaney’s tongue darted between her lips as she concentrated on coloring the leaves that covered the castle. “Can Mac coach?”

“We’ll see,” Natalie said.

“I bet Sam and Tyler would help,” Alice offered.

This is how I’d always wanted my family to operate. If one person participated in something, everyone pitched in to help. Everyone was interested in what others were doing and showed up at games to support them.

By the time I was in sports, my brothers were preoccupied with high school and, eventually, went away to college. My parents were always too busy with the resort.

I could imagine that if the brothers coached Delaney’s team, the whole family would show up at games to watch. It was funny how I’d come from a large family, and everyone assumed we were close, but there was this divide between us.

My brothers were this tight-knit group that no one could penetrate, and I think my parents let it go.

Tyler’s father came inside with a platter of barbecued chicken, and Tyler followed with a bowl of grilled veggies. It smelled amazing.

We got up and helped Miranda set the large table that overlooked the backyard. I couldn’t help but wonder what the men had been talking about.

Were they giving Tyler a hard time for inviting me here?

Tyler and I sat next to each other, with the length of Tyler's leg pressed against mine.

My pulse pounded in my ear as the food was passed around. I quickly learned that teasing was usual among the brothers. Natalie and Alice watched with amusement but didn't get in between them.

Occasionally, Miranda would scold them like they were little boys, but for the most part, their energy was high. I ate my chicken, veggies, and potato while allowing the conversation to flow over and around me. This was what I'd missed growing up. Large family dinners where we shared about our days. Everyone was too busy with various sports and activities, and my parents were busy with work.

The Fletchers were a cohesive group, and the room was filled with love.

After dinner, we helped clean up. When Maggie suggested s'mores, Mac grabbed the marshmallows, chocolate bars, and graham crackers while his father grabbed the skewers. I stuck around the kitchen with Miranda, Alice, and Natalie while Miranda made a quick batch of hot chocolate.

She placed small bowls on a serving platter, and we helped her fill them with candy cane shavings and miniature marshmallows. When the mugs were full, I helped carry them outside to the patio table.

The view was similar to Mac's. He must live nearby. There was a playground in the yard, obviously new, meant for their grandchildren.

Everyone grabbed a hot chocolate from the table, doctoring them with their favorite fixings before gathering around the fire. Wooden Adirondack chairs were placed in a circle, but Maggie and Delaney grabbed the skewers and placed large marshmallows on the ends.

Tyler helped Maggie with hers, guiding her to the fire to keep a steady hand on hers. Each time she got too close, he drew her back. He squatted next to her, talking softly to her, while her eyes flitted between him and the fire.

It reminded me of the time I went to Mac's house with the girls, and Maggie was sitting in his lap. He loved his niece.

"Is there anything you need to tell us?" Natalie asked as she and Alice flanked me a few feet away from the warm fire.

"No." But I couldn't take my eyes off Tyler. He lifted Maggie's skewer out of the fire and blew the flames until they were out. Then he helped her place the blackened marshmallows between two graham crackers and a square of chocolate.

“He’s sweet with Maggie,” I said to them.

“There’s nothing sexier than a man with a kid,” Natalie said.

Alice and I both looked at her, and she shrugged. “What? It’s true.”

We were childhood friends, but she moved away for college, got pregnant with Delaney, and married the father, Carter, soon after. She recently moved back as a single mother, renovating a B&B in town. Mac had been the foreman on her project.

“I have to agree,” I said, still watching as Tyler licked a glob of marshmallow off Maggie’s fingers.

“Tyler adores Maggie. He says he doesn’t want to settle down, but I don’t know. He’s such a family man.”

“He’s even watching Maggie for us next weekend while we go out.”

“Is that usual?” I asked Alice.

“Sam said he babysat more before he hired me to be the nanny,” Alice said, sipping her hot chocolate.

“When we first moved here, Mac went with Delaney to her daddy-daughter dance. She was hurt that her father couldn’t come.”

I remembered keeping her company that night. She was worried Delaney would get upset about her father not attending, but she’d been content with Mac. They were close now.

“I have to agree, a man around children is attractive. I never thought I’d say that before.” Watching the Fletchers with the girls had my insides melting.

Mac had been roasting some marshmallows on a skewer when he asked Natalie, “You want one?”

Natalie moved toward him and said, “Yes.”

“You guys are so cute together with your little families,” I said to Alice, feeling a little left out. Although it was perfectly fine to be single in Europe, here, there was a little more pressure to settle down. Although I wouldn’t exactly call it pressure. It just looked so nice to be in a relationship where someone else asked about your needs and offered to take care of them.

Where men were enamored with little girls. I’d need to hit the bar scene soon so I could remember what stage of life I was in. I wasn’t ready to settle down anytime soon. Especially since I hadn’t figured out what I wanted to do with my life yet.

Alice nudged my shoulder with hers. “You could have a Fletcher brother for yourself if you wanted.”

“Even if I was interested in Tyler, which I’m not—” I paused because he lifted Maggie in his arms and said he was going to hose her down. Her cheeks were covered with sticky marshmallow and her fingers in melted chocolate. When he walked into the house with her, I continued. “He’s friends with my brothers.”

“So?” Alice asked.

“My brothers warned all guys off me in high school.”

“You’re not in high school anymore.”

“I don’t think my brothers remember that. I’m still their younger sister and must be protected from their friends at all costs.”

Alice frowned. “I doubt that’s true anymore.”

“Oh, it is. Besides, Tyler wouldn’t want to ruin his friendship with them.”

“You’re talking like you’ve thought about this.”

I sighed. I hadn’t planned on telling her anything, but it would be nice to confide in someone. “Nothing is happening now, but I had a crush on him when we were kids.”

“I don’t blame you.” Then she caught my expression and said, “Oh, something happened between you? Do your brothers know?”

“Nope, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“We need to have a girls’ night soon to talk about it. I have a feeling there’s a lot you’re not telling me.”

I nodded because Natalie handed me a plate with a s’more, and I sat down in front of the fire to eat. I was happy to have something to focus on besides how hot it was that Tyler was taking care of Maggie with an ease that suggested this was something he was used to. He hadn’t shied away when she was sticky with marshmallow, and that was to be commended.

When they returned, her face and fingers were clean, but Tyler’s shirt was wet. He sat down next to me. “Oh, I see how it is. You get the s’mores while I watch the kids.”

“I think you snuck a few bites of hers. Besides, it looked like you were happy where you were.”

Tyler smiled at Maggie, who was now sitting in Sam’s lap. “She’s the best.”

“You’re good with her.”

Tyler smiled easily. “I’m babysitting her next weekend. Want to come and help?”

I was a little surprised he’d asked, but I was curious to see him in action.

“I’d love to.”

He arched a brow at me. “You don’t have anything better to do on a Saturday night?”

“As you can see, most of my friends are paired up.” My best friends now were Natalie and Alice.

“It kind of happened overnight. For a long time, it was just Maggie who was the center of everyone’s attention.”

“Do you miss those days?” I asked him, genuinely curious.

“I love that Mac finally found the right woman. He’s always wanted to be a family man. And not just with our extended family. He wanted it for himself.”

I never thought of myself as someone who’d want to settle down any time soon, but seeing this family interact, I could see the appeal. “Are you next?”

Tyler chuckled and shook his head. “This isn’t for me. I can enjoy this while I’m here and then go back to my bachelor pad.”

“I thought you were tired of the bachelor pad?” At some point, we’d moved closer together.

“I am. I want the house, the space, and the view. Then I can have the family over for dinner too.”

“That does sound nice.” I was renting a cabin from the resort. I hadn’t wanted the scrutiny of my family, but I wasn’t ready to buy a place of my own.

“You going to rent the cabin forever?” Sam asked, considering me.

“I need to figure out if I’m staying or going.” I set the plate aside and leaned back in the chair. The stars were visible tonight.

“You have time?”

I knew what he was asking. Did I need to find another job, or could I afford to take my time? “I’m okay for now.”

Tyler nodded. “I’m lucky because I worked alongside my dad and knew early on that I wanted to work with him. I never thought about doing anything else, even when he said we could.”

“I thought I’d work at the resort. I loved helping my mom check people in and direct them to their rooms when I was a kid. But as I got older, my brothers filled those roles, and it didn’t feel like there was space for me.”

“Make your space. Figure out what you can offer them that’s new and different and pitch it to them.”

My shoulders dropped. “I’m tired of trying to prove myself to my

brothers. That I'm big enough to keep up or smart enough to run the business. They'll never see me that way."

Tyler's jaw tightened. "I don't know about that."

"I forget that you're friends with them. You probably hear the other side." I looked at the fire. "Sometimes I don't think my brothers think much of me at all."

"It doesn't matter what they think, and you shouldn't have to prove anything."

"But?" I slapped his leg. "I know there's a but coming."

Tyler took a deep breath. "I think they love you, and they'd be willing to listen to what you want. If you'd give them a chance."

My nose wrinkled. "I don't even know what I want."

"You'll figure it out. Give yourself the space right now to explore your options. If you have the time and money, why not?"

"I have a little time, and I'm saving money by living on the mountain."

"I will say that I love running a business. The best part is that we share it as a family. We each have things we're good at, and we handle those aspects of the business. I'm better with people, so I tend to handle any customer service or schedule issues."

"What am I good at, Tyler?"

"I remember you being particularly good with your tongue, or maybe it was my teenage excitement that my childhood crush was giving me a blow job." His eyes darkened, and I could imagine how he saw me—on my knees, my hair covering my face until he'd held it so he could see my face.

I forgot to worry about the repercussions, what my brothers would think, or how we'd act the next morning. There was nothing but us.

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

I sensed a few others looking over at us, but Tyler only had eyes for me.

"That's what you bring up?" I asked when she'd recovered.

"It got you out of your head, didn't it?" Tyler grinned, clearly pleased it had worked so well.

"I miss our talks."

"I do too."

"You never looked at me like I was a little kid. You listened like you valued what I had to say. That was a big deal to me then."

"I didn't see you as a kid, and maybe that was my mistake."

I bumped his shoulder, not wanting him to regret anything. "Hey, I was

eighteen. Perfectly legal.”

“Why didn’t you call or text?” Then I sucked in a breath that I’d asked what had been on my mind since that day.

Delaney and Maggie were doing some dance in front of the fire that had everyone enraptured.

“It’s not the right time for this conversation, but I owe you an explanation. I’m not proud of how I acted.”

“It was a good memory, but we never would have worked.” I smiled before moving to the outdoor fridge for a drink, letting him off the hook. I needed to steer clear of anything personal with Tyler. I couldn’t let him see how much he’d hurt me back then.

CHAPTER 7



TYLER

*W*e never would have worked.

It was exactly what I'd always thought, even if I questioned how true that statement was over the years. But to hear her say it so nonchalantly, like it was just the way it had to be, felt wrong. Sure, her brothers would never be on board with anything happening between us, but I preferred when there was a possibility of us. She'd effectively shot down any hope with a few hard-hitting and well-placed words.

I felt bereft as she talked to Natalie and Alice.

"Everything okay?" Mac asked as he sat next to me. "It looked like you two were talking about something serious over here."

I wanted to hear someone else's take on the situation. "Remember all those times we played hide-and-seek at the lodge?"

"Those were good times. Half the time we'd give up the hunt and play video games in the game room."

That was what had most likely happened the night Kylie and I hooked up. "Kylie and I used to end up in the same hiding spot on occasion, and we'd talk. She talked to me about her family, her brothers. She trusted me."

Mac considered me. "I didn't know you two were close. You seemed annoyed when she was back in town."

My chest felt tight. I couldn't explain how it was my guilt for how I'd treated her that had me lashing out. "I carried her down the mountain when she broke her arm."

"I remember that."

"We bonded or connected. I'm not sure how to explain it." We'd understood each other when no one else did.

“I didn’t know.”

“No one did.” If her brothers ever knew about it, they would have shut it down fast.

“You’re scared of her brothers?” Mac teased, and then quickly sobered. “Oh, fuck. You are.”

“You know it,” I said, leaning against the wooden slats and crossing one leg over the other. There was no way I was telling him about what happened. That secret wouldn’t come from me. “Xander asked me to watch out for her.”

Mac chuckled and rested his head in his hands. “Xander asked the man who likes his sister to protect her from men like you.”

“That’s about right.” I didn’t mind admitting it to Mac. He’d always been the brother we came to when we had relationship questions.

Mac shook his head. “That’s kind of funny.”

“You think it’s funny because it’s not your life.”

“So, you’re going to work with her and manage to keep your hands off her?”

I blew out a breath. “That’s the plan.”

“It won’t work,” Mac said grimly.

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“I went to Sam when I first realized I was attracted to Natalie. We concluded it was a bad idea. She was a client. If our relationship went south, it wouldn’t be good.”

“You don’t have to tell me.” Dad always said not to get involved with our customers.

“I thought I could resist her, but I couldn’t. Then I thought I could have a fling with her, and I wouldn’t feel anything.”

“But you did because you’re *you*. But I’m not like you. I don’t believe in love and relationships. I don’t want to settle down.”

Mac’s brow furrowed. “Do you know what she wants?”

“I don’t get the impression she’s looking for anything. She said she just got out of a bad relationship.”

“I predict that you won’t be able to stay away from each other, and you’re going to fall for her.”

My jaw tightened. “I won’t.”

Mac raised a brow. “You might not want it, but sometimes, you don’t have a choice. Someone comes into your world, and you can’t deny it any longer. I’m not saying you’re not going to screw it up, because you will. It’s

inevitable.”

I shook my head. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t repeat any of this.”

Mac slapped my knee. “I have no interest in getting on the Wilde brothers’ radar. I’ll leave them to you.”

“Thanks, asshole.”

“There’s no reason not to pursue her if you’re on the same page. You’re both adults. Her brothers don’t factor into it anymore. But if it’s serious, I’d talk to them.”

Was it that simple? The light of the fire danced over Kylie’s face, and she’d never looked more beautiful to me. We had a connection, and time had done nothing to make it go away.

I needed to talk to her. She might not even give me a chance once she heard my lame excuse, that I didn’t want to piss off her brothers. She was tired of her brothers interfering in her life, and she deserved a man who would stand up to them, not be cowed by them.

“I’m here if you need to talk. I want you to be happy.”

“Not everyone will get what you and Sam have with Natalie and Alice.” My voice was petulant, which didn’t make any sense. Why did I want what they had?

“I don’t believe that.”

I glanced over at him to find his expression solemn. “Ever the romantic.”

He leaned forward, letting his hands dangle between his legs. “I’m not going to lie. Finding love for myself makes me think it’s possible for everyone, but that’s only the case if you’re open to it.”

I gripped the neck of the now-warm beer bottle in my hand. Was that the issue? Was I blocking any possibility of having someone in my life by keeping things casual? Had some part of me always pined for Kylie Wilde?

In the back of my mind, I never forgot our night together. I always wondered what if. What if I’d stayed the night, left a note, or even texted her the next day? Would we have continued to talk? Would we have confronted her brothers?

“You’ll be working closely with her on this dugout project. It’s only going to bring you closer together.”

I was confused about everything else we’d talked about, except for the idea of getting closer to Kylie. I was looking forward to it.

When she caught me looking at her, she smiled softly. Yeah, I couldn’t

resist Kylie Wilde. Not for long. She'd always had that effect on me, and I didn't think I wanted to put a stop to whatever was happening between us.

Even with the threat of her brothers looming over us, I wanted to get to know her better. I wanted to see where it would take us.

I winked at her, and her cheeks flushed.

"You're playing with fire, brother," Mac said.

I tipped my bottle back, letting the lukewarm beer coat my throat. Why was I so excited about what was to come then? It didn't feel like I was making a mistake. It felt more like I was jumping into the fire feet first, without a care for the consequences. It sure as hell felt good to jump though.

I met his gaze and held it. "I'm going to see what happens. No expectations. No worries."

Mac shook his head. "You mean, you're going to ignore the not-so-little problem with her brothers."

"She doesn't want her brothers running her life, and I'm the perfect excuse for her to do her own thing."

Mac grunted.

I swirled the remnants of the beer in the bottom of the bottle. "I thought you were all for following your feelings?"

"Just be careful."

I grinned. "I'm always careful."

That elicited a guffaw from Mac because I was known as the reckless brother, the one who did things without thinking first. Except this time, I knew exactly what I was getting into.

"What are you two talking about over here?" Sam asked as he sat down on the other side of Mac.

"Up," Maggie said as she stood in front of me. My heart melted as I lifted her easily and set her on my lap. She snuggled into my chest, her thumb going into her mouth. I smoothed her curls out of her face.

"She's ready for bed. She'll probably fall asleep on the way home," Sam said, his tone full of affection for his daughter.

I never thought about having kids of my own, but I could see the appeal. They were adorable, especially when they were cuddling against your chest. Maggie made me feel ten feet tall, like I could do anything.

I'd been living the bachelor life for too long. It was time to finally decide on a piece of property and get started on the build. "You want to visit the top three properties sometime this week?"

“You finally ready to make a decision?” Mac asked.

“I think I need you to see it first.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Sam said.

I loved living here with my brothers. No matter what happened with Kylie, Telluride was my home. I’d never leave my family or my nieces. Family was everything.

Instead of running as Kylie had, I’d embraced this town and my family.

I leaned back in the chair, holding Maggie against me. I felt when her breathing evened out, and she relaxed even further into my body. She smelled like something sweet, marshmallows and graham crackers.

Kylie’s gaze locked on the sleeping form in my arms. Her eyes widened before softening. She liked what she saw.

If she couldn’t accept me, then all the chemistry in the world wouldn’t matter.

* * *

THE NEXT SATURDAY, I met with my brothers, and we toured the properties my realtor lined up. One stood out above the rest. It was near their homes. I didn’t want to be far from their growing families. I wanted to be an option if they needed a sitter. I wanted to be involved in their lives.

My realtor put in a fair offer for it, and it was accepted later that day. Closing would be quick because my paperwork was in order. I’d been waiting to make this decision. I just needed confirmation from my brothers that it was the right one.

Later in the afternoon, I drove to a local park to meet Kylie at the softball fields. She was already there, waiting in the pavilion. I parked my truck next to her smaller sedan and walked past the empty playground to reach her.

Kylie’s hands gripped a clipboard, and her hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail that I wanted to tug so I could taste her exposed skin.

“How’d it go this morning?” she asked as I leaned in and kissed her cheek. I lingered for a second, picking up on her surprise and the smell of lavender.

“They accepted my offer. As soon as we close on the property, I’ll break ground.” I smiled. With spring around the corner, it was the perfect time.

Kylie grinned before throwing her arms around my neck. I felt the

unforgiving hardness of the clipboard dangling down my back, but it was the softness of her breasts pressed against my chest that had my full attention. She squeezed me tighter, and I barely suppressed the groan at the way she felt. “That’s so amazing. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I said as she unraveled her arms from my neck.

Her smile was brilliant. “That’s so exciting. I can’t even imagine building a house.”

I chuckled. “It’s literally what I do.”

“It’s probably not exciting for you. But picking out everything from scratch? I’ve always loved looking at blueprints of houses online. I love thinking of the possibilities. Which room would be mine, where would I relax, and how would I come in from the garage? Sorry, I’m rambling.” She glanced away as if she was embarrassed.

“You’re speaking my language right now.”

Her shoulders relaxed as she laughed.

“But seriously, I had no idea you were so into houses.” It was a surprise.

“I look at blueprints and imagine myself living there.”

“You lived in an apartment in Paris, didn’t you?” Did she want to build a home, and if so, where?

“It was so tiny, but it was all mine. My fridge was one of those mini ones, so I’d either eat out or buy my dinner each night fresh so I could cook it right away. I enjoyed that, but there’s something about being back home. Even with the mountains in the distance, the land feels so empty and vast.”

“You feel small in the scheme of things.”

“I always compare myself to the mountains,” she said as she led the way to the edge of the pavilion facing the ball fields.

We fell silent for a minute, enjoying the view.

“It’s so beautiful here.” Her gaze was on the land and the mountains. Mine was on her. The line of her jaw, the curve of her shoulder, the dip in her waist. I was so close to her I could smell the lavender of her body wash, or maybe it was her shampoo. Whatever it was, I wanted to move closer and rest a hand on her back while I breathed her in.

“We should take a look at the fields. See what we’re working with.” She sent me a bright smile before moving toward the first field, where there was a sign advertising fast-pitch travel softball tryouts. “This is where the local travel team practices and hosts games.”

There was a metal fence surrounding the field and a smaller fence behind

a metal bench. A yellow tarp was tied to the two fences, providing a little bit of shade.

Kylie sat on the bench.

“It only provides a little bit of shade. Depending on the angle, it won’t block anything.”

“There’s no protection from the elements and no separation from the fans.”

“It’s better than what I had, but we can do better.” Her gaze met mine.

“We sure can.” I grinned at her, and she smiled in response.

I was going to enjoy working with her. She was smart and detail oriented. It had nothing to do with this attraction I had for her.

“I reached out to the travel teams and rec leagues in the area. Most got back to me and expressed interest. A few asked if we’d be helping the baseball teams too.”

“I think we start small. Let’s create a list of anyone who needs a dugout. We’ll see how much money we can raise and if there’s enough for everyone. Then we’ll see what else we want to do.” I didn’t want to overwhelm Kylie, especially if this was a short-term project for her.

“Did you have time to run the numbers for me?” Kylie asked, using her hand to shield the sun from her face.

I pulled the paper from my back pocket and sat next to her. I smoothed out the folds so she could read my writing. It was handwritten, so it didn’t look as clean and professional as the spreadsheet on her clipboard.

“Seriously?” Kylie asked as she leaned in close to read it.

“This works.” I showed her the numbers and the last one circled on the bottom. “This is what we need for each one.”

“Do you have the measurements?”

I flipped the page over and showed her the picture I’d drawn, along with the specs.

“This will work. Can I keep it?”

“Of course. I’ll take a picture of it so I have it for myself.”

“I’m going to visit the fields for the other teams that reached out to me to make sure there’s room for a dugout.”

“You need any company?”

“I can do it. I’m the one who doesn’t have a job, remember?”

“It sounds like a lot of work.”

“I want to be thorough. I want to make sure they need what we’re

offering and that we can deliver.”

I tipped my head back to study the yellow tarp again. “If all the fields have this fence and cover, we’ll need permission to remove it. Do you have a plan for where we’ll start first?”

“I think we need to raise money first. I’ll use your numbers for the cost of supplies to show potential donors our target number, and then we’ll see what we get. We can do smaller raffles and fundraisers, too. I had another idea—what about a softball game? Contractors versus first responders? Or kids versus parents? We could have a few games going on at once, or even a double-header so everyone can see the games. We’d sell tickets to watch the games—all proceeds from the snack shack would go toward it—and we’d accept donations. It’s not a fancy party like I had for the ski resort, but—”

I took in her flushed cheeks and the excitement on her face before I said, “I love it. It’s fresh and different but perfect for what we want to do.”

She flushed. “The idea just came to me when I was driving here.”

I wanted to ask if she was thinking about me, but I didn’t. I wanted to make a move, but I knew I had to be patient. We’d work together on this project, and I’d let things unravel how they would.

CHAPTER 8



KYLIE

“*Y*ou’re good at this.”

“Planning events?” I asked, feeling a little conflicted about the compliment. I wanted to be good at something, but event planning wasn’t running the ski resort or building houses.

“That, too, but it’s more than that. You’re good at pinpointing what people need and getting it for them. I’m impressed.”

The pleasure from this statement went through my body until I felt like I’d burst from it. “When I worked at the hotel, I knew I was good at organizing things, but I didn’t realize it was the fundraising part, the helping people piece of it that was so intriguing.”

“If it means something to you, then you can get behind it.”

“It’s not that I’m not excited about the ski resort and making it profitable, but it’s already established. I want to do good somewhere that I’m needed.”

“If you decide to do this in the future, you can pick your projects. You can keep your brand as sports, or you can focus on whatever you’re passionate about.”

“You act like this could be what I do for work.”

“Why not?”

“I’m fundraising for a cause. It’s hardly going to pay my bills.”

His shoulders lowered in defeat like he hadn’t thought of it like that. “You’ll figure it out.”

We leaned on the metal back of the bench, Tyler’s legs outstretched, with one crossed over the other.

“It’s so peaceful. The perfectly manicured fields, the mountains in the distance.”

He kicked my foot with his. “You know it’s only like this in between games. Otherwise, there are people everywhere, the sounds of the bat hitting balls, screaming kids, and the smell of hot dogs in the air.”

“Maybe that’s why I like it so much. We’re enjoying the small amount of peace and quiet this place ever has.” There was something about sharing space with Tyler when no one else was around. It was like I could forget about my brothers and Tyler’s family. Nothing else could penetrate.

He shifted so he leaned on his thighs as he glanced over at me, one brow raised. “Want to throw a ball around?”

“I don’t have my softball stuff.” It was probably still sitting in my childhood bedroom. I had no use for it when I was living in Europe.

“I always have mine in the truck. I’m sure you could throw around a baseball with no problem, but I keep a softball in my truck for Delaney and Maggie.”

“That’s sweet,” I said before I could censor my words.

“You think I’m sweet, huh?” he asked as he headed toward the rear seat of his truck.

“When it comes to your nieces, yes.”

“I love that you refer to Delaney as my niece, because she is.”

“I know,” I said quietly as he pulled a large duffle bag from the back. There was a child seat in the back, probably for Maggie, and a bin of toys. “They spend a lot of time with you.”

“Not as much as I would like, but sometimes, yeah. More now that Mac is busy with Delaney.”

My heart was pitter-pattering in my chest. There was nothing sexier than a man who took care of a child, especially when it wasn’t his. He didn’t need to buy a car seat for Maggie or keep toys in the back to entertain her. He didn’t have to say yes every time she wanted him to pick her up, but he did. Not only that, but I could tell from that night at his parents’ house that he loved it.

The expression on his face, when he was holding a sleeping Maggie in his arms, kick-started my ovaries. I should probably keep my distance from him before I asked for something I wasn’t ready for—a relationship, and maybe even a family in the future. I wasn’t ready for that. Not when I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life.

“You ready to play some ball?” Tyler asked as he tossed a purple-and-yellow ball at me.

I caught it easily.

“Can you still pitch?” he asked as he pushed his batting helmet over his head, pulling out a bat.

“Do you still play in an adult league with your brothers?” I asked, remembering my brothers mentioning something about the local businesses having a league that played in the spring and summer.

He rolled his eyes and closed the door to his truck before walking over to the field. “When they’re not busy with their families. I don’t blame them, but I miss hanging out with them. We don’t see each other much on the job site either. We work on different projects. It made sense since we’re usually the foreman on any project.”

“But you miss them.”

“I do.”

I loved that he was so into his family. I wondered what he thought of me when I kept my distance from mine.

“Get on the mound. Let’s see what you got.”

“You sure you want me to throw the softball?” I asked when I stood on the pitcher’s mound.

“Let’s start with it. I want to see if you’ve still got the speed.”

He practiced a few swings before stepping into the box.

Tyler got into his batter’s stance, which was a little hotter than I remembered. “There’s no umpire, so let’s keep it honest.”

I could just imagine what he’d look like in uniform, the pants stretching tightly over his ass. I cocked my head. “Our brothers aren’t here. We should be able to play a nice, clean game of baseball.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said with a smirk.

We probably should have warmed up, but he was already in the batter’s box, so I got into position, remembering the stance and the motion. I started the windup, everything coming back to me in a rush. I used my legs for extra momentum, and it flew past him.

I smiled. “Caught you looking.”

He dropped his bat. “Wasn’t expecting you to be that fast.”

“I love when people underestimate me,” I said with a saucy smile.

“I bet you do.” His light tone quickly turned to his game face when he stepped inside the box.

“Be ready this time.”

He rocked the tip of his bat while he focused on my hands. “I’m always

ready.”

I swear my panties got wet as I wound up for a second time. This pitch was even faster and clipped the outer edge of the plate. He swung but missed.

I wasn't proud of my loud whoop and holler, but Tyler brought out the kid in me.

“Hey now. No need to rub it in my face.”

I covered my smile with my glove.

“I can still see you smiling through the leather,” he grumbled.

That made me laugh. I leaned over, my hands on my knees. I heard a growl before I was lifted into the air, my body draped over his shoulder as he ran with me to the outfield. Before I could ask to be put down, I was falling and twisting until I landed with a thud on a very hard body.

A hand pressed against my back, keeping me in place.

“Are you okay?” His voice rumbled through my body.

“I think so.” I barely got out the words before I was twisted to my back, and he was hovering over me. He grabbed my hands and placed them over my head. “You call mercy?”

“Never,” I said, my voice coming out breathless.

I couldn't seem to draw in a deep breath with his weight pressing me down. I felt every ridge and valley of his body, my legs widening for him to drop between them. This was intimate. He kept his dick apart from my body, but it didn't seem to matter. I was on high alert for any contact.

Then his mouth was on mine, and I couldn't form a complete thought. He nipped my lower lip with his teeth before soothing it with his tongue. I let him take the lead, opening for him, welcoming his tongue in my mouth, his body pressed fully against me. I felt every hard inch of his cock at my core. A spasm ran through my body, almost like a mini orgasm.

I writhed against him, needing the friction. I hadn't been with anyone in a long time. Not since my mistake of a boyfriend back in Paris. Tyler always felt different, more intense somehow. Like fireworks were exploding when we came together. I'd previously thought it was my teenage crush amplifying things, but it wasn't.

He continued to grind his cock against my center while he kissed me. I was going to have an orgasm in the middle of the outfield where anyone could see us. I didn't care about anything except chasing this feeling I had when I was around him.

He lifted his lips from mine, his eyes dark with desire, and then he

lowered his mouth to my neck, sucking there as he increased his pace. Lights flashed behind my lids as the orgasm rolled through me, wave after wave of pleasure, and I still wanted more.

I wanted his bare skin pressed against mine, his lips on my clit. I wanted so many things as I rode it out.

“That was the single hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Me coming like a teenager.”

He groaned. “Fuck. Don’t talk like that. I can barely handle you without the dirty talk.”

I sobered, considering him. Was he as attracted to me as I was to him? I felt this irresistible pull any time he was near.

Then he was lifting off me, extending a hand so he could help me up. I straightened my clothes and tried to finger-comb my hair. “How does an innocent game of baseball end up with you having your way with me in the outfield?”

“I hardly had my way with you.” He adjusted himself, and my gaze was drawn to the very noticeable bulge.

“Do you want me to—” I gestured lamely toward his crotch, wondering if it was advisable to get on my knees in the grass, or would we scandalize some poor family who showed up for batting practice?

“As much as I want that—and, baby, I do—it’s not the right place or time. There are your brothers to consider too.”

Rage burned through me, hot and red. “My brothers don’t have a say in my life. I’m my own person.” I moved away from him, but his hand wrapped around my wrist, stopping my momentum.

I couldn’t look at him. I was embarrassed that I’d let go as I had and that I’d gotten angry about my brothers. I wish they didn’t affect me the way they did.

“Hey, I just meant that we should talk about what happened before.” He dropped my hand, running it through his hair. “I didn’t mean to make a move before you heard me out. Now it’s probably too late.”

“I want to hear what you have to say.” I’d been waiting eight years.

He sat cross-legged on the grass just feet away from where we’d been making out and dry-humping like a bunch of teenagers without a care in the world. He motioned for me to sit in front of him, so I did.

The palms of his hands rested on my knees. “First of all, I was a stupid kid. Not for what happened, but for sneaking out and not calling you later.”

He shook his head but held my gaze.

This was what I'd wanted him to tell me all along, but now that he was saying it, I wasn't sure how I should feel.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I was thinking about your brothers and how they'd react if they knew. I didn't have a right to do what I did. Whether you were legal or not, your brothers would have been pissed. I didn't want to do anything to screw up our friendship."

"You're right. I don't want to hear it."

He squeezed my legs. "But we're not kids anymore, and I've never felt this way around anyone else."

My heart fluttered like a butterfly using its wings for the first time. "So, what does this mean?"

"That's up to you, but I want to be your friend and get to know you. The person you are now."

My stomach sank. He wanted to be friends. I shouldn't have been disappointed. We couldn't offer each other anything else, not with him being friends with my brothers and me not knowing where I'd be living next month. "That sounds good."

"Then it's settled." He moved to get up, holding his hand out to assist me.

We walked back to the mound in silence, but my mind was rolling with what just happened. I'd suspected everything he just told me, except for the part about me being different from everyone else. That maybe there was something between us, but then he'd called it friendship. That didn't sit right with me.

"Why don't I pitch to you?" Tyler asked me.

"I don't have a helmet."

"Use mine." I picked his helmet up off the ground where he'd thrown it before he'd charged me on the mound. It was a little big, but it would work for now.

"No charging the pitcher," he said with a wink when I picked up his bat and moved into the batter's box.

I got into position and narrowed my eyes at him. "That's your MO, remember?"

"You seemed to enjoy it," he said as he stood sideways and brought his glove and ball to the front of his body.

I flushed all over, the memory of him grinding against me coming back to me. My body still tingled with the aftermath of that orgasm as he threw the

ball, and it sailed past me. I hadn't even had time to react because I was preoccupied with thoughts of him.

When he raised a brow, I said, "You distracted me."

I threw the ball back to him, and we got into position a second time. I refocused on the pitcher, trying not to think about what we'd just done in the outfield. I was only mildly successful. This time, I swung, but it was late.

Thankfully, he remained silent as I threw the ball back and got into position.

"Third time's a charm," Tyler said.

"It had better be," I muttered as he threw another pitch. This time, I jumped on it early, hitting it before it crossed the plate. It sailed over Tyler's head, bouncing just past second base.

"Run!" he reminded me as I dropped the bat and took off.

I ran as fast as I could to first base, wondering when the last time I jogged was.

"It's a shame we can't play a real game," he said as he stopped in front of me, tagging me with the glove, probably out of habit since I wasn't going anywhere.

I squinted up at him. "Kind of hard to do with two people."

"This was the best game I've ever played," he teased.

I cocked my head to the side. "We can't run the bases or field or—" Oh. He meant because of our break in the field. "It was interesting."

"Interesting?"

"We're friends, remember?" I took off his helmet and handed it to him. "I'd better go. I'm supposed to meet my parents for dinner."

"With or without your brothers?" Tyler asked as we headed over to the bench and stowed his equipment.

"They always show up. It doesn't matter if we've invited them or not. They're nosy." I had fond memories of my brothers checking on me when I was sick and reading me a book, but my older years were taken up with ones where they interfered with guys dating me. I felt like my wings had been clipped. I suppose most teenagers felt like that from time to time, but not as adults. Every time I returned to Telluride, I was right back in that same place.

Tyler threw his bag in the back of his truck and turned to face me. "Good luck with your family, and if you need someone to talk to,"—he rested his hand on his chest—"you can call me."

"I appreciate that." There was something about the way he listened when

I spoke. He didn't judge me for what I'd said about my brothers. Over the years, many friends said it was great to have family that looked after you. They didn't get it, but Tyler always had.

I moved to go to my rental car when Tyler drew me into his chest and wrapped his arms around me. "I don't regret what happened."

But he didn't believe in us enough to pursue anything. He would always be worried about my brothers. I needed to ignore this crush I'd had on him forever and move on with my life. I pulled away first, offering him a small smile before I opened the door and got inside.

The engine roared to life, and with a nod, he softly closed the driver's side door and stepped back. He waited, his hands in his pockets, while I backed out and drove away.

What was it about Tyler that drew me in and kept me coming back for more? Was it that he was the only one of my brothers' friends to take me seriously? Or was it more than that? Was there some kind of special connection between us, and if so, why wasn't he willing to pursue it?

I focused on the drive to my parents' house, reminding myself I wasn't in town for long. With every mile I drove, my stomach tightened. They'd have questions for me about what I was doing in town and where I was going next. I didn't have time to ruminate over a childhood crush that was never meant to be.

CHAPTER 9



TYLER

I wasn't sure why I'd said we were friends. I was worried about her response to my apology, and it just seemed easier to say we were friends. But what we'd just shared on that field was not friendly.

I got hard just thinking about it. I was so close to coming in my pants—something I hadn't done since I was a teenager. I wanted to see her orgasm, but then I'd pulled back, the familiar guilt rising to the surface.

I tightened my hands on the steering wheel. I'd meant to tease her by charging the mound, but when I lifted her body over my shoulders, my body shifted gears in a big way. All I could think about was getting her under me.

I could say it was innocent until her legs spread, letting me fall between them. Then my brain shut off, and my dick took over. It was like a heat-seeking missile, determined to find her center and make itself known.

I ran a hand through my hair. I wondered if I'd screwed up with the orgasm, the apology, and then the "friends" comment. I felt like everything was mixed up, and I didn't know how to sort it out.

I called Mac on the way to the bar near my apartment, asking him to join me. I would have gone to his house, but I didn't want to talk about this in front of the girls.

I arrived first and sat at the bar, ordering our favorite beers while I watched the baseball game on TV.

"How's it going?" Mac said as he slid onto the stool next to me.

I just shook my head.

"What did you do?" Mac asked, tipping his bottle against his lips.

"I went to check out the fields with Kylie. I showed her the numbers and the measurements."

“She was so impressed with your drawings, she jumped into bed with you?” he quipped.

I snorted. “Not exactly, yet oddly accurate.”

He set his bottle on the bar top. “Tell me.”

“I thought it would be a good idea to play baseball.”

Mac chuckled. “You really know how to court a woman.”

“I’m rusty, okay? And I’m not even sure what my intention was, maybe to spend more time with her.” I just knew I wasn’t ready for her to walk away.

“That’s fair. Then what happened?”

“She was pitching—”

“Baseball or softball?”

“Softball. Do the details really matter?” I asked, giving him an exasperated look.

Mac grinned. “I have a feeling they’re going to in a minute.”

My cheeks flushed at the memory of me dropping the bat, throwing my helmet, and charging at her. I’d lowered my shoulder and tipped her over my back in one motion, continuing to center field. I was like a caveman. There was no finesse. She must think I was an idiot, or at the very least, a Neanderthal. “I lost my head a little.”

Mac smirked, his bottle tipped back. “Define a little.”

“I might have made out with her in the outfield like we were a bunch of teenagers.”

Mac frowned. “Kylie lived in Paris. The men there are smoother.”

I hadn’t even thought about that. Whenever Kylie and I were together, I felt like no time had passed. I was back in the same headspace I was in when we were teens. “I didn’t think.”

“Obviously.”

“Afterward, I apologized for always deferring to her brothers.” There was zero chance I’d tell him about our night together when she was eighteen. I knew Mac wouldn’t like it either.

Mac winced. “You kissed her and then apologized?”

“The way you make it sound—” I shook my head. “I’m an idiot.”

“You are.”

I shifted as if to leave. “I don’t know why I asked you to come.”

He rested a hand on my forearm. “I’m sorry. I was just giving you a hard time.”

I faced the TV again and asked the bartender for another beer.

“I messed up with Natalie too. I tried to keep emotions out of it when I was incapable of doing that. I wasn’t clear about what I wanted. I let my past define the way I treated her.”

Was that what I was doing? Was I letting our past with her brothers define our future?

“If you want her, you need to get past her brothers. You need to tell them you’re interested in her and want to date her.”

Did I want to date her? “I don’t know that I want that.”

“Then why are we here?”

“I want her. But beyond that, I have no idea.” At Mac’s disgruntled look, I continued. “I like her. I want to know her. But I don’t even know if she’s sticking around. She doesn’t either.”

“We can work with that. Be the man she needs. Support her. Listen to her. Let her take the lead.”

“I can do that.” I wouldn’t be pursuing her. I’d just be there for her. That sounded easy. “She’s eating dinner at her parents’ tonight. I told her she could call me if she needed to.”

“Sounds like you have it handled.” He finished his beer, placing the empty bottle on the bar top.

“You have any advice for me?” I asked, my stomach churning. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“Be patient. Be what she needs. But be prepared to pivot if necessary. If things get serious between you, talk to her brothers. She might not like it, but it’s the right thing to do.” He squeezed my shoulder.

“Thanks for listening.” Mac was the brother I went to when I had girl troubles, which wasn’t all that often since I’d gotten older. I hadn’t ever wanted more from a woman. That’s why Kylie had me discombobulated.

“That’s what I’m here for. I want you to be happy.”

“I am.” I loved my work, my family, and this town. What else was there?

“What’s the deal with you dragging your feet about the plans for the house?”

“I’m not dragging my feet.”

“What would you call it? We can start on the house as soon as you pick a design and choose everything.” Mac took a long pull of his beer, his gaze fixated on the game.

“I haven’t been able to decide on anything.” I felt stuck, and I wasn’t sure

why.

“You don’t have to build a house because Sam and I did.”

“That’s not why,” I insisted, even though that was partially the reason. My brothers were settling down, and I wanted to do the same. “I need more space. I want to live outside of town.”

Mac held his hands up. “And give up all this?”

I snorted. “The bar scene is getting old.” I’d much rather be watching the game on my couch, or better yet, my outdoor patio.

“I just wanted to make sure you were doing it for the right reasons.”

“It’s past time, and I have the money. Why not?” I shrugged. The truth was, I’d been itching for a change, unsatisfied with my life.

“What if you meet someone you want to settle down with and they want to live somewhere else?” Mac asked.

“I’m never leaving Telluride. My business and my family are here.” I couldn’t imagine living somewhere else. The only time I’d left was for college. “Are you talking about Kylie?” At Mac’s nod, I continued. “She has no interest in settling down here. It’s temporary.”

“I’ve found that you can’t control who you’re attracted to and how your feelings develop. If you’re involved with her and she leaves—”

“You’re worried I’ll get hurt?” I asked, my stomach churning.

“I worry about you.”

“I’ve never wanted more from a woman. I’ll be fine.” But I already did want more than I’d ever wanted from someone else. I never talked to my brother about a woman’s family or got his advice on how to handle her. I always kept things casual. I’d seen what Sam and Mac had gone through and wanted nothing to do with emotional entanglements.

“I’m just looking out for you.”

“And I appreciate it, but I know what I’m doing.” Then why did I feel like I’d taken a step off a cliff and was falling toward the rocky cliffs below? I’d sink below the surf, and if I was lucky, I wouldn’t get slammed against the rocks. A sense of foreboding unfurled through my body.

Mac stood and threw some bills on the bar top. “I want to get back to my girls.”

“Tell them I said hi, and I love them,” I said, feeling a little uneasy that he was leaving. I would have preferred for him to stay and help me work through these new feelings sprouting in me. But I’d told him I was fine.

Mac grinned. “Come visit for dinner and tell them yourself.”

“Will do.” I nodded, and then he was gone.

I drank my beer and watched the baseball game unfold in front of me. Kylie would hate it if I talked to her brothers. I wasn't sure she'd forgive me for that. At the same time, I didn't want to keep what was happening between us a secret. That didn't feel right either.

Although I could justify it for a little while longer because I'd stupidly declared us friends after I'd given her what I hoped was an earth-shattering orgasm.

Despite what I'd told Mac, I was conflicted. I didn't get hung up on a woman ever. I didn't question what I was doing or seek Mac's advice. This was new territory for me.

* * *

BUT TONIGHT, I closed out my tab and headed to my apartment by myself. It wasn't usual for me to end the night by myself. I used to go to the bar with my friends to have fun and hopefully find someone to hook up with at the end of the night. My apartment was within walking distance and convenient for those times.

I dodged other couples and groups of people clearly out to have a good time. But I wasn't feeling it.

Not after watching Kylie's face when she came earlier. All I could think about was her, and nothing Mac said deterred me from my current obsession.

I unlocked the door to my apartment and pushed it open. I always thought my apartment was enough because I worked hard and partied harder, but it wasn't the right fit for me anymore.

I needed more space. I needed room to breathe. That was what was wrong. I wouldn't feel better until I'd settled on a property and built the house that would be mine.

When I moved in, everything would settle down again. I wouldn't feel this unease in my gut. I shook off the voice in the back of my mind that said something or someone would still be missing. Mac lived with Natalie and Delaney, and Sam was building his house with Alice and Maggie.

As I got ready for bed, I convinced myself that a house was a good investment. I could always sell it if I didn't like it.

When I was lying in bed, the unsettled feeling intensified, and all I could

focus on was Kylie, the feel of her under my fingers, and her scent. I fisted my cock and groaned. I wished she were here. I wanted her with a fierceness I'd never experienced before.

I lost myself in the fantasy of Kylie underneath me, her dark hair covering my pillow. Maybe I just needed to have her, get her out of my system, and then everything would go back to normal.

I imagined her breasts, her tan skin, and the cries she'd make when I entered her. I erupted over my hand, wishing Kylie were here. That I was coating her with my cum.

As I came down from that high, I had a feeling one time wouldn't be enough.

CHAPTER 10



KYLIE

I parked in front of my parents' house, next to Xander's truck. The house was a large cabin set apart from the resort, giving it a secluded feel.

I opened the front door and pushed thoughts of Tyler out of my mind.

"Baby Wilde is here," Xander called as he walked down the hall to me and enveloped me in a hug. It was hard to be mad at him when he'd given me a warm greeting.

"Stop calling me that," I mumbled against his chest. I wasn't sure who'd started it, but I hated the nickname with a passion when I was a kid. I hadn't wanted to be known as the baby of anything.

He ran his knuckle over my scalp. "Never."

I twisted away from him as my dad greeted me. "Leave your sister alone."

It was one of the few times my dad was around to referee anything between my brothers and me. When we were younger, he was preoccupied with the business, in a never-ending battle to keep it afloat.

At some point in high school, the business had stabilized, and now that my brothers ran it, my parents could take a step back.

"Retirement looks good on you," I said to him as we hugged.

"It's nice to take a step back and leave the business in reliable hands," Dad said.

I stiffened as we moved into the kitchen, where I kissed my mother's proffered cheek.

"What's for dinner?" I asked her.

"When you were kids, someone was always asking what was to eat when

they came into the house,” Mom said, her tone filled with affection.

“With four boys, I don’t know how we survived the grocery bills,” Dad said gruffly.

I listened to the familiar talk around me, content to be home. I think it helped that I wasn’t sleeping in my childhood bedroom. I’d insisted on my own space when I asked if I could move home for a bit.

“Is anyone else coming to dinner?” I asked Mom.

She pointed her wooden spoon at Xander. “Who knows? I didn’t invite this one, but here he is.”

Xander pressed a hand to his chest in a show of mock hurt. “You don’t want me here?”

Mom sighed. “You know I do, but maybe Kylie wanted to visit by herself.”

I swallowed over my suddenly dry throat, surprised Mom was so in tune with my feelings.

Xander moved close to ruffle my hair. “That’s not true, is it, Baby Wilde?”

“It’s fine.” It was better that my brothers were here to act as a buffer between me and my parents. Maybe with Xander present, they wouldn’t ask me any questions about what I was doing with my life.

Xander grinned. “See? Baby Wilde said it’s fine.”

“Treat your sister with respect,” Dad reminded him again, and it felt good.

Maybe if he’d done this more when I was living here, I would have been prompted to stick around. Or maybe not. I had been a bit of a wanderer back then. I’d wanted to see the world outside Telluride.

Now that I had, I could appreciate Telluride for what it was. A beautiful town, hidden by the mountains, and only known by a few. I felt lucky to have grown up here like I had. We’d always had space to run, and the lodge was a blast for games like hide-and-seek and people-watching. My friends loved hanging out here. I tried not to be bitter about the fact their interest was more about my attractive older brothers than me.

I helped Mom get the stir-fry onto the table.

“Mom wants to eat healthier,” Dad said as we sat down to eat at the large wooden farm table that we’d used as kids. It was worn in spots, but it held a lot of memories from holiday dinners to epic board games that went on for days, and finally, thousand-piece puzzles when it snowed.

Mom gave him a look. “Dad went to the doctor recently and had some bloodwork done.”

“Is everything okay?” I asked, concerned. Had I been so wrapped up in myself that I’d neglected to check in with my parents?

“His cholesterol is high. He needs to make some changes to his diet,” Mom said grimly.

“She’s got me eating vegetables like I’m a rabbit,” Dad grumbled.

Xander didn’t seem to be concerned about it, so he must have already heard this development. Why hadn’t anyone called me? “You should do whatever the doctor recommends.” There was a sharp pain in my chest. I hadn’t thought of my parents as getting older. I’d never felt guiltier for focusing on myself.

“It would be nice if your father listened to the doctor,” Mom agreed.

The meal was a little different from what we’d had in the past. It was brown rice and veggies with no sauce. It was healthier. If it helped Dad, then that was all that mattered.

“Enough about me. What’s going on with you, Kylie?” Dad asked.

Tension formed in the space between my shoulder blades. “I’m enjoying some time off.”

“But what are your plans? You can’t hide out in my rental cabin forever.”

This was what I’d hoped to avoid. “I’m working on a new fundraiser with Fletcher & Sons Contracting.” I didn’t want to say it was with Tyler. Not that anyone thought something was going on between us, but I didn’t want the scrutiny.

“How’s that going?” Xander asked over a mouthful of food.

“I was supposed to meet with the mayor to discuss additional townspeople who might benefit from our ski equipment drive, but he’s already rescheduled. I was hoping to bring up my plans for additional fundraisers. But he’s a busy man.”

“I’d call some of the community programs that provide outreach. I’d think they could help you,” Mom said.

I smiled, grateful for the suggestion. “I’ll do that.”

“What’s this thing you’re doing with the Fletchers?” Dad asked.

I took a deep breath before relaying the information. “We’re partnering to provide dugouts for the local teams.”

“Teams have dugouts,” Xander insisted.

“Not all the girls’ teams. I’m visiting fields this week to see what they

have and if adding them is feasible. One field had a yellow tarp and a wire fence. It won't provide enough coverage. Although it's more than we ever had."

My parents and brothers rarely made it to my games. They were always too busy with the ski resort. Even in the off-season, we got hikers and other tourists on the mountain.

"Is that what you really want to be doing with your life?" Dad asked, scraping the last of the rice off his plate and sitting back in his chair to consider me.

"I didn't say it was what I wanted to do with my life forever, just what I'm working on now." I frowned. "Why? What's wrong with it?"

Dad frowned. "Now, don't go putting words in my mouth. I didn't say anything was wrong with it."

"I've always wanted to ensure that girls' teams had the equipment they needed." It wasn't something I'd discussed with my parents before, so they might have been surprised.

"Maybe you should talk to your old softball friends. See if they'd be willing to help," Mom said.

"That's a great idea. I was thinking about contacting them too. Natalie and Alice are in serious relationships, so they don't go out much." There was just the occasional coffee or shopping trip. They were more likely to invite me to dinner, and there was always a chance that Tyler would be there.

"It will be good to catch up with them," Mom said.

"I think so too." I was grateful for the change in conversation because I had no idea what my long-term plans were.

"You think you'll want to make fundraising a full-time gig?" Xander asked, pushing aside his empty plate.

I had a feeling he'd be scrounging for something to eat later. It wasn't enough food for him. "No idea. The one for the ski equipment was just to see if it would be successful."

Dad rested his elbows on the table as he considered me. "You raised a lot of money. It was a great event. I'd like to continue it at the lodge. Make it an annual thing."

"Oh?" I asked, wondering if they'd run it when I was gone. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I'd been proud that it was my event.

"Your father and I have talked about the need for an event coordinator at the lodge. Eli is busy with the lodge, and we can't put anything else on his

plate.”

My heart raced because that was similar to the service I’d provided at my last job. “Oh?”

“Whomever we’d hire would plan weddings, fundraisers, and other fun events for kids.”

“I always thought it would be neat to offer an art class for kids. The parents could go skiing while the kids did something fun.” It was no secret that kids didn’t last as long on the hills, especially the younger ones. But why was I offering suggestions when they hadn’t offered the position to me?

“The fundraiser really got me thinking. It was good for business and our reputation. Plus, we like giving back to the community that supports us. We often hold weddings and other parties. They bring in outside planners, but why not hold that in-house?” Dad said.

“I used to handle events at the hotel I worked at.”

Dad held up a hand. “We’re not ready to hire anyone. It’s just something we’re considering.”

“I’m not sure what I want to do yet.” But if there was ever a position I was qualified for, this was it.

Keep the business in the family. I’d heard that a billion times growing up, and now he’d created a position that suited me, I wasn’t sure I wanted it, but at the same time, he hadn’t offered it to me. And what about my desire to travel, meet new people, and experience the world? If I took a position at the lodge, that would be it. I wouldn’t be able to back out without letting everyone down, and I couldn’t do that.

Xander threw a thumb in my direction. “It sounds like Kylie would be qualified for that position.”

“You’d have to want to stay,” Mom said.

“Let’s see what you do with the dugout project. If you can get that off the ground, we’ll have another discussion. But I’d need to be convinced you were here to stay. I wouldn’t hire you only to have you leave again.”

Anxiety churned in my stomach. Is that how he saw me? As someone he couldn’t count on? He hadn’t asked me to stay. No one had ever offered me a position. There was nothing for me here. Right? Had I misread things over the years?

Mom patted Dad’s hand, and they exchanged a look. “We want you to be happy. Whatever that looks like for you.”

* * *

THE SUBJECT WAS LIFTED, and we didn't discuss the possibility of that position for the rest of the night. But I couldn't get it out of my mind. It was perfect for me, but would they offer it to someone else? The thought of it going outside the family when I was perfectly capable of doing it myself hurt. But then I hadn't proven myself to be reliable. Maybe they needed convincing that I was the right person for the job. They hadn't seen the events I'd led in Paris.

The dugout project was my chance to show them that I was competent and the perfect person for the event coordinator position. The problem was, did I want it?

On the way to my cabin, all I could think about was sitting on the back deck and watching the stars. I usually enjoyed it by myself, but tonight, I didn't want to be alone. When I arrived, I scrolled through my contacts and hit Tyler's name.

"Hey. How'd it go?"

I wasn't ready to answer that question. "I'm sitting on the deck, looking at the stars."

"Want some company?" he asked, his tone light.

I smiled. "You read my mind."

"I can be there in fifteen."

My heart rate picked up. "I don't want to interrupt your evening."

"I met with Mac at a bar and nursed a beer while watching the baseball game. Now, I'm sitting on my couch, flipping through channels. I'd much rather be stargazing with you."

I smiled wider. "Then get over here."

When he hung up, I set my phone aside and placed my feet on the coffee table in front of me. Telluride was gorgeous. I didn't miss the smell and busyness of the city. Here, it was quiet. Serene. I could think.

With each minute that passed, my heart rate kicked up. I'd invited Tyler here with no expectations. I wanted company, but after what happened on the field, I wasn't sure if being alone with him was a good idea. Did I want to take things further with Tyler?

My body was on board, but my head was all over the place. My heart was convinced he'd break it like the last guy, and I shouldn't get involved.

When the knock sounded, I sighed. Bad idea or not, it was too late to

rescind the invitation.

My stomach felt fluttery and excited in a way it hadn't since I was a kid and anticipating Tyler Fletcher being in the lodge.

I opened the door, and he leaned in to kiss me on the cheek. My heart flip-flopped in my chest at the gesture.

Tyler moved inside as I shut the door. "It must be nice to stay here."

"Just wait until you see the view." I grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge and led the way to the back deck.

Tyler whistled as he braced his hands on the railing. "This is something else."

The sky was clear tonight, and it felt like the stars were endless up here on top of the mountain. I set the bottles on the table. "I missed this when I lived abroad."

"Will you want to do that again?" he asked, looking over at me.

"Maybe. I love traveling," I said as I stood next to him.

"I can't imagine ever leaving Telluride. I love it here. Even though I enjoyed college, I looked forward to coming home."

Because Telluride felt like home for him. It never had for me, and I wondered why that was. Was home a place where your family was, or something else? "I was always itching to see what was beyond the mountains. I didn't want to be tied to the lodge."

How we looked at the world was the fundamental difference between us.

"Fear of missing out. Sounds like a sickness," Tyler teased as he rested the back of his hand against my forehead as if he was checking for a fever.

My eyes fluttered closed at the contact, and I swayed slightly in his direction. His hand moved to my hip to steady me.

"You feel light-headed?" Tyler asked, amusement tinging his voice.

"A little," I admitted. I reverted to the teenage girl hidden inside me who crushed on my brothers' best friend. Over the years, I thought it was the fact that he was forbidden that attracted me, but now that we were hanging out, there was more to it than my brothers not approving.

"We'd better sit down then." His hand drifted down my arm, and his hand curled around mine as he led me to the chair I'd been sitting in earlier.

I dropped his hand as we sat next to each other.

He popped open the beer and handed it to me. "To our future partnership."

I clinked my glass against his and drank the obligatory sip. He'd made

our relationship sound like a business proposition, which it was.

We leaned back in our chairs, propping our feet on the table in front of us and cradling the beers in our hands as we talked about anything and everything. What college was like for Tyler and his brothers. How he'd immediately moved back home to be near his family. He'd loved working for his father and, unlike Sam, didn't have any hidden desires to start a new branch of the business. He was content with being a foreman.

"You're happy in Telluride with your family, and you love your job, but have no desire to do anything else?"

Tyler rested the glass against his thigh and, with a nod, said, "That sounds about right."

"For me, something feels unresolved. Like I should want something more. I just don't know what."

He shifted in the chair, dropping his feet flat to the planked deck. "You traveled the world, and now you're back. You're figuring out what you want in life, but it feels like you should already be content with what you have."

"Are you content with everything?" I asked, genuinely curious about him.

Tyler gazed at the sky as he talked. "I love being near my family, spending time with them. I love my nieces. Sam and Mac will expand their families to have more children, and I'm looking forward to that. I was feeling a little unsettled. But then I decided on buying a property to build a house."

"That's amazing, Tyler. Congratulations."

"I still feel a little unsettled. Like my life is too good. Or it's not enough."

"I moved back home because I was upset and off-kilter. I'd just lost my job. Without a job and a sponsor, I couldn't stay abroad. I felt unmoored. Like there was nothing tethering me there. But for you, there's nothing that says you can't be content with what you have. Maybe this is it. You'll be happy spending time with your family and working together."

"That's kind of anticlimactic. I already have everything I want and need." He smiled, but I sensed he wasn't sure about that.

"Maybe you feel uncomfortable because your life is so good. You think something bad has to happen to outweigh the good, but life doesn't have to be like that. There is no truth to the idea that something bad has to happen when life is good. It can just be good."

Tyler smiled over at me. "Stargazing makes us philosophical."

"Apparently," I said as we laughed together. When we sobered, I said, "No. But seriously. You're seeing everyone go through these big life

changes, and you're feeling a little left out. That's all it is. Once things settle down, and you're busy building your house, you'll be fine."

"You're right. I'll be busy enough with my projects at work and my house."

"Can I look at the blueprints, or do you already have everything figured out?" I asked him, eager to see what he was building.

"I haven't gotten that far. I just know I want a two-story colonial with a huge back deck to look at the stars. It won't look like this since the house is in the valley, but—"

"It will be beautiful." I smiled as he met my gaze, and something passed over his face. I couldn't say what the emotion was, but it sent a pang through my heart.

We talked until midnight, and then I walked him out. This time, he pulled me in for a hug and held me as if he were breathing me in. When he let me go, I felt like something was missing. Like I was supposed to grab on to the moment, but I didn't.

I let him walk away because whatever was missing in Tyler's life wasn't me. I didn't belong in Telluride forever. It was the home I visited now and then, but it wasn't where I'd settle down. But this time, when I said it to myself, it didn't ring true.

CHAPTER 11



TYLER

Later that week, I was checking my work email when I received a message from Kylie with a spreadsheet listing the different parks and schools that had requested dugouts, including how many fields for each, and whether there was space for one. Then she'd listed them in order of the ones she wanted to help first. She'd started with travel and recreation softball teams that didn't have the same funding as the baseball teams that were supported by various organizations already.

I was impressed. The number of fields she'd visited this week must have kept her busy, and she'd compiled a useful amount of information. She was a natural at organizing things and presenting them in a manner that was easy to digest.

The second spreadsheet was a breakdown of the numbers, how much we'd need to raise, and how many dugouts we could build depending on the amount we raised.

I replied to her email, asking her if she wanted to discuss it further. We still needed to plan the softball games to raise money from raffle tickets and concessions.

Instead of emailing, she called me. "You said something about babysitting Maggie this weekend. Is that still on?"

"It is, but you don't have to join me if you don't want to." I'd invited her but then figured she had better things to do than babysit a five-year-old.

"I figured we could discuss the dugout information when she goes to sleep."

"Are you sure babysitting is what you want to do on a Saturday night?" I asked as I played with a pad of Post-its on my desk.

“I still need to reach out to my old friends. Natalie and Alice are busy with Mac and Sam, so I’m free for the foreseeable future.”

I wondered what was holding her back from contacting her other friends. “You have some kind of falling-out or something?”

Kylie was quiet for a few seconds before she said, “I left and didn’t keep in touch. I’m not sure if I’ll be welcomed back.”

“We’re adults now. I’m sure if you explain that you were busy, or whatever, all will be forgiven.”

“We’ll see.”

The line fell quiet for a few seconds, and all I could think about was that night we spent on her deck and how comfortable it had felt discussing my hopes and dreams. She’d eased my worries, but it was still there, lingering just under the surface.

“I’m babysitting Maggie at Sam’s house. I’ll send you the address if you want to meet me there.” I’d offer to pick her up, but I wanted her to be able to leave whenever she wanted. I still wasn’t convinced she wanted to babysit with me.

“That works. Should I bring anything?”

“We usually get takeout.” Part of the reason Maggie looked forward to me babysitting was that we did fun things she didn’t ordinarily do, like eating out.

“Are Alice and Sam okay with me being there? I don’t have any experience with kids.”

“I didn’t clear it with them, but I’m not a teenager they have to remind not to bring over girlfriends. They trust me.”

“Will Maggie be okay with it?” Kylie’s voice was softer.

“You’ll be fine. Maggie will love you.” I was surprised she was worried about Maggie liking her. Kylie was surprising me in the best ways. I never thought someone who’d lived abroad in Paris and worked at a luxury hotel would want to babysit and plan community softball games to raise money.

She let out a sigh. “I hope so.”

“She will. Be ready to play some games.”

“I can expect to play competitive board games?” she teased.

“That’s right.” I chuckled as Sam walked into my office. We’d rented a house downtown for our offices. It was empty most of the time since we spent more time on the job sites, but we liked to have the option of meeting with clients in a professional space. More and more, we used computers to

show images of what the final renovation would look like.

I cleared my throat as Sam sat in the chair across from my desk. “Listen, I have to go. Sam’s here.”

“See you on Saturday,” she said, and I hung up without another word.

“Who was that?” Sam asked.

“It was Kylie. We were talking about the dugout fundraiser we’re working on.”

He raised a brow. “How’s that going?”

“She reached out to the organizations that expressed an interest, figuring out the number of fields that had a need, and she took pictures so we could plan for the conditions. Then she ran the numbers to see how many dugouts we can build based on the money we raise.”

He sat across from me. “I didn’t realize you guys were so deep into planning.”

I clicked on the screen with her spreadsheets and angled it toward Sam.

“I think when Kylie gets an idea, she runs with it.” At least that’s how she’d been so far while we worked together. So, her not knowing what to do with her life must have been an anomaly for her. She was used to making quick decisions and acting on them.

Sam leaned forward to look at the numbers. When he sat back, he said, “I’m glad to hear it’s going well. Dad’s excited about it.”

“We’re meeting on Saturday to go over everything. We’re planning a few community softball games to raise the money.”

Sam nodded. “That fits with what you’re trying to do.”

“She hoped it would generate interest and excitement for the project. Maybe even encourage a few more kids to try out for baseball or softball.”

“If it’s popular, you could make it an annual or biannual thing. That way you could help more people, do more things with the money, and provide equipment too.”

“That’s not a bad idea. I just don’t know what her plans are.”

Sam crossed his knee on his leg. “You mean if she’s staying in Telluride?”

I nodded.

“She’s laid the groundwork for the project. It sounds like you could just repeat it yourself next time. Let us know if you need help.”

I didn’t like the idea of running it by myself. But it had nothing to do with shouldering the brunt of the work; it was the thought of Kylie leaving.

“Kylie’s coming over this weekend while I watch Maggie. Then we’ll discuss the next steps after she goes to sleep.”

“I’m surprised she’d want to spend her Saturday night babysitting,” Sam said, considering me.

“That’s the thought I had too.” I felt a little uncomfortable at his scrutiny.

“Do I need to tell you two kids not to get it on with my kid in the house?”

“First of all, we aren’t kids, and secondly, there’s nothing going on between us.” There was that heavy make-out session in the outfield, but Sam didn’t need to know about that.

“Are you sure about that? You two seem close.”

I chuckled uncomfortably. “Why do you say that?”

“You always ended up in the same hiding spot when we played hide-and-seek.” Sam had been the one to find us on several occasions.

“We were kids then.”

“You seemed close, and now she’s back.”

I’d talked to Mac, and there was no reason why I shouldn’t tell Sam. “There’s something there, but she’s probably leaving soon. So nothing will come of it.”

Sam rested his elbows on his thighs. “That’s too bad.”

I rolled my eyes. “There’s nothing to feel bad about.”

Sam was quiet for a few seconds before he said, “I always had a feeling about you two.”

My throat felt tight. “I don’t know what that means.”

A siren sounded on the street outside my window, and Sam waited until the truck had passed before he said, “I’d hate to see you let something go that could be good for you.”

I waved a hand in the direction of my computer screen. “We’re working on the project together. That’s it.”

“If you’re worried about her brothers—” Sam began carefully.

“They wouldn’t want me dating her. One more reason to keep my distance.”

Sam’s jaw tightened. “I was going to say that you’re both adults and her brothers’ opinions shouldn’t matter.”

I shook my head. “They shouldn’t, but they do.”

“I have a feeling Kylie doesn’t care what they think, and any man good enough for her won’t either. It’s one thing to respect her brothers, but another to bow to them. And I don’t care if she hangs out with Maggie. I’m sure

she'll love her."

"Me too." Kylie was worried she wouldn't be good with kids, but it was impossible not to adore Maggie.

"How do you want to juggle building your house with the rest of the scheduled projects?"

"I thought we'd work on it on the side. It'll take longer, but then there won't be any interruption to the business."

Sam frowned. "What do you think about focusing on just your house? It will be done in a few months, then you can refocus on other projects."

I shook my head. "I couldn't do that."

"I talked about it with Mac, and that's how we'd like to handle it. We want you in a house sooner rather than later."

"Why? We worked on your house and Mac's house on the side."

"We weren't in a rush to move. We were already in a house. You're in an apartment."

"I don't mind waiting."

"We agreed this was best."

"So that's it, then? You already decided."

"It's not a bad thing. We want to do this for you. You'll still be the foreman, overseeing everything."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "This is because you and Mac don't have time on weekends and evenings anymore."

Sam nodded as he leaned back in the chair. "That's part of it. Mac's having a baby. He wants to spend time with his family, and so do I."

I felt something unfurl in my chest; it felt a lot like jealousy. I didn't have anything taking up my weekends. I could go to the bar and have a drink with my buddies, but my brothers would be too busy for me. I used to think that freedom was everything. Now I wasn't so sure. It must be nice to have someone waiting on you when you came home instead of an empty apartment.

"We want you to be happy. Settled."

My forehead wrinkled. "You feel bad for me because I'm all alone."

"That's not it at all. We build houses. That's what we do. We talk about the importance of home and that it reflects who you are. We want that for you too."

On some level, they were worried about me, and that felt good, even as it chafed. I didn't want my brothers talking about me, questioning whether I

was settled and happy. Mostly because those same thoughts were plaguing me.

“And this thing with Kylie, let it flow naturally. Don’t worry about what other people would say or think. It only matters how you feel.”

I wanted Kylie. I was obviously attracted to her, but Sam was right. There had always been a connection there, even when we were kids. Didn’t I owe it to myself to explore it?

“Have you decided what you want yet? You should start ordering fixtures, cabinets, and appliances. I figured we could break ground as soon as you’re done with your current project.”

I was just overseeing the finishing touches on a home renovation. It was just the bathrooms and a kitchen, so it was fairly quick and easy. The owners weren’t micromanaging our every move.

We moved to the conference room and went over some basic styles of homes we’d built recently, but nothing stood out to me. I knew I wanted a two-story colonial, but I had no definite feelings about brick versus stone exterior, trim colors, or the interior design.

“You have a bit of time, but this is something we need to know to get started.”

I ran my hands through my hair. “I know. I’ll figure it out.”

Then I remembered that Kylie said she loved looking at blueprints. Maybe she could give me some direction. The irony wasn’t lost on me that my contractor brothers couldn’t help me, but Kylie could.

“I don’t know how you built so many houses over the years and you don’t know exactly what you want.”

“I guess I never thought I’d build a house.” That was the only thing I could think of. I was content with my bachelor life and couldn’t see past it. I never wanted a family like Mac did, or needed a house like Sam did for his daughter. “I’ve been content with what I have.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

But I sensed that Sam thought it was a little odd that I didn’t know what I wanted. It added this pressure, like a weight on my chest.

“What would you want if the possibilities were endless? If you could do anything, move anywhere.”

“Why would I do that when I’m happy here? I wouldn’t want to work anywhere else or live anywhere outside of Telluride.” Everyone I loved was here. There was no need to long for something else when I had everything I

needed.

“Maybe always knowing stifled your imagination.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I could see that thinking I had everything would shut my brain down to other possibilities. I wouldn’t look for other job opportunities or places I’d want to live. But the thought of opening my brain to the options freaked me out a little. Living here, near my family, was safe.

“We’ll look at this later. Maybe something will inspire you.”

Maybe it would be Kylie.

“Thanks for watching Maggie for us,” Sam said as he gathered the blueprints.

“I like spending time with her. I don’t mind.” It was nice to have that one-on-one time with her when Alice and my brothers weren’t around. We were able to form a special bond.

“You’ve stopped going to the bars?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I just don’t have to do it every weekend.” Now that I thought about it, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d joined my friends for a night out. I was more likely to call one of my brothers to catch up over a beer than hunt for hookups with my buddies.

“You’re growing up,” Sam teased as he made a move to leave the room.

“I guess so.” Maybe that’s all this was. I was moving to the next stage of my life; it just didn’t involve a big life change.

CHAPTER 12



KYLIE

I was looking forward to seeing Tyler but wondered what I was thinking when I agreed to join him when he babysat his niece. The only explanation I could settle on was that I enjoyed watching him with Maggie.

He was a natural with her. I never would have seen him as a guy that would melt for a little girl, but he did. But then again, I didn't know him that well.

When I rang Alice and Sam's doorbell, the door immediately opened.

"Maggie," I said, a little surprised that she'd answered the door.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me inside. "They said you were coming."

"You don't mind if I hang out with you, do you?" I asked, suddenly uncomfortable, even though she was holding my hand.

"What's that?" Instead of answering, Maggie pointed at the box I held in my hand.

"It's an art box I thought we could do together," I said, second-guessing my decision since Alice was an artist and probably did things like this with her all the time.

Maggie squealed and brought her hands together as if in prayer. "Can I have it?"

"Of course." I handed the box to her, and she took it to the kitchen.

Alice walked into the foyer. "How are you?"

"Good. It's not weird that I'm here, is it?" I asked her as she hugged me.

Alice frowned. "Should it be?"

"I don't know." Maybe it was just me who felt awkward.

“I was a little surprised he invited you to join him. He brags that he watches her so he can finally have her to himself. When Mac’s around, they tend to fight over her.” Then she waved a hand. “It’s all in good fun. They’re always teasing each other.”

“It’s hot seeing him interact with Maggie. You know what I mean, right?” I asked in a quiet voice. Alice started out as Maggie’s nanny, so she probably experienced the same phenomenon.

Alice grinned. “I know exactly what you’re talking about. There’s just something about a man holding his daughter—” she broke off as Tyler came over to us, Maggie bouncing in his arms as he walked. She had her little arms wrapped around his neck as she looked over at us. “Or niece.”

“What are you two talking about?” Tyler asked as he set Maggie on the floor.

I slowly shook my head. I couldn’t admit the truth, that I thought he was hot when he held his niece.

Tyler flipped his thumb over his shoulder. “You’re doing that art stuff with me, right? It looks a little complicated.”

“You brought Maggie art to do?” Alice asked.

“We used to stock them at the hotel for kids to do in the art room. I led the class, so don’t worry, Tyler. I can help.”

“Now I want to stay to see what this art box is all about,” Alice said as Sam jogged down the steps, picking Maggie up and throwing her in the air. Her curls flew everywhere as her giggles filled the foyer.

“Be good, you little monster,” he said, blowing raspberries on her stomach as he held her upside down.

She giggled. “I’m not a monster.”

“Sure, you’re not,” Sam said as he lowered her to the ground, and then he grabbed Alice’s jacket from the hook by the door and helped her into it. “You ready to go?”

He brushed her hair to one shoulder, kissing the bare skin of her neck. It was sensual, yet casual enough that I suspected he did it all the time. A faint blush tinged Alice’s cheeks as she turned in his arms and caressed his cheek. “Ready when you are.”

Sam opened the door and said, “You two behave tonight.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. We’ve got this handled,” Tyler said as Maggie tried to tug him toward the kitchen.

“I bet you do,” Sam said with a grin.

I shook my head, even as my cheeks heated. I wondered if Alice and Sam thought there was more between us than there was. Sure, there was that incident on the field and the other one when we were younger, but nothing had happened the night we looked at the stars. We were capable of being responsible and not giving in to this attraction.

“Art before dinner?” Tyler asked Maggie as Sam and Alice slipped out.

I wondered if he was distracting her from them leaving. Did she normally get upset? Either way, my heart was contracting in my chest. I thought I could handle seeing Tyler with Maggie, but I was wrong.

Maggie nodded and then said, “Piggyback ride.”

It wasn’t even a question. Tyler dipped his knees to help her climb onto his back. Maggie giggled as he lifted her high. Her curls bounced with every step as he tipped her one way, then the other, pretending to drop her.

I followed at a slower pace, wondering how I was going to survive the night. No wonder Alice didn’t last long as Sam’s nanny. It was a wonder she resisted as long as she did.

We moved into the kitchen where the art box sat on a table. Maggie had already pulled out the little paint tray, the miniature bottles of paint, and the materials.

“First, you need to pick the project you want to do.” The theme for this one was space.

Sam opened the booklet of options, and Maggie perused them. “I want to make the planets.”

This one required a larger piece of paper, so I pulled out one. “Do you have something to go under her paper so the table doesn’t get wet?”

“I think it’s in the laundry room.” Tyler went to the open doorway just off the kitchen and returned with a mat that had an ice cream truck on it. He moved it under her watercolor paper while I opened the bottles and dropped a different paint color into each spot of the paint tray.

Then I cued up the video on my phone and propped it against her water bottle on the table so she could watch it. “You ready to watch?”

“Uh-huh.” Maggie nodded.

I hit the arrow to play the video, and the voice of the instructor filled the room. We followed the instructions, pressing pause here and there so she could complete the step before moving on to the next one. Her paper slowly filled with circles for the planets, then she colored the rest of the page a midnight blue to represent outer space.

“That looks amazing, Maggie,” Tyler said when she was done.

“Let’s leave it to dry,” I said, moving it to a higher countertop.

“Can we make s’mores?” Maggie asked, turning her pleading eyes on Tyler.

“Of course.”

I had a feeling Tyler said yes to whatever she wanted. I put the unused supplies back in the box and cleaned the tray in the sink. When I was finished, I followed the low voices to the patio, where Tyler had already started a fire and they were holding marshmallows on sticks over the smoke.

Once their marshmallows were roasted, I helped them make a sandwich of graham crackers and chocolate.

Tyler let Maggie have two before declaring it time for a bath. Maggie protested, but Tyler lifted her with a groan. “But you’re a sticky monster.”

Maggie giggled as he carried her up the stairs. I didn’t want to intrude on their one-on-one time, so I cleaned up and stayed by the fire to make sure it burned out. Twenty minutes or so later, Maggie bounded down the steps in her pajamas. “Will you read me a story?”

“Of course.” I couldn’t say no, not when she’d asked so sweetly.

I let her lead me upstairs, where Tyler was leaning against the headboard. His feet hung over the end of the bed. Even though he was too big for the twin bed, he looked comfortable, like he belonged.

Tyler patted the bed next to him.

“Will I fit?” I asked as Tyler tugged my arm, and I sat on the bed next to him. My back rested against his chest, and I felt warm all over.

Maggie handed me a book while she climbed under the covers next to us. I had no idea what the book was about as I read it to her. All I could think about was the heat behind me and the hand Tyler placed on my hip to hold me close.

I felt every inch of his body pressed against mine, and it was difficult to breathe. I worried he’d discover how he affected me.

When I finished reading the last page, Tyler said, “Time for bed.”

Maggie protested, but Tyler rolled so I could get up first, and then he followed. “We only had time for one book because you wanted to take a bubble bath.”

Maggie pouted, her lower lip protruding, but Tyler kissed her forehead, said sweet dreams, and turned off the lamp.

“Night, Maggie. Thanks for letting me hang out with you.”

We moved out of the room, and he closed the door so only a sliver of light shone through.

“She just falls asleep on her own?” I asked as I headed down the steps.

“That’s the idea. Sometimes she thinks she gets to stay up late because I’m here.”

“Like it’s a slumber party with Tyler?” I teased.

“Sometimes I indulge her, but Sam prefers her to sleep in her bed at her bedtime. He said it messes up her routine if I do something different.”

“That makes sense.” And it was sweet that he listened to Sam’s wishes. Sure, he was babysitting Maggie, but he could justify it by saying he was an uncle and got to do the fun stuff with her. I appreciated that he honored his wishes.

I was learning all sorts of things about him tonight, and I felt like I’d gotten a glimpse into who Tyler was—a family man who couldn’t resist his niece.

We settled on the couch, and Tyler flipped on the TV. “Let’s give her a few minutes to fall asleep before we get out our work. That way we’re not interrupted.”

We waited, but Maggie never got out of bed.

“Want something to drink?” Tyler asked a short while later as he walked into the kitchen. When I followed him, he said, “I can make lemon water.”

“That sounds good.” I pulled out my laptop so we could plan the softball games. “I reserved the fields we went to that first time. There are three fields in that small area, a snack shack, and plenty of parking.”

Tyler sliced a lemon and squeezed its juice into the glasses of water. “You’ve done your research.”

“I have nothing but time lately.” I kept myself busy so I wouldn’t have to think about what I was or wasn’t doing with my life.

When he pushed the glass over to me, I tilted the screen to show him the fliers I’d drafted. “Essentially, we’ll have people register for teams in one of the games. If we get enough participants, we can have three going at the same time. We’ll just have to see.”

“Teachers versus kids, parents versus kids, and police officers versus firefighters,” Sam read from the screen.

“Do you have any other ideas? Or we could do age groups against each other if we have more kids.”

“Have you talked to the police and fire department already?”

I nodded my head. “They do softball games already for fundraisers, so they were quick to say yes. They loved the idea.”

“This is impressive,” Tyler said as he stood next to me, pulling the laptop closer to him. “You did this yourself?”

“I can do a little graphic design. I took some online classes. I’m not an expert, but—”

“I don’t know. These look great. I think if we post them around town and in online forums, we’ll have a lot of participants.”

“Good.” I wanted this to be a successful event. A part of me wanted to prove to my family that I could do this. They hadn’t seen what I’d done at my previous job, and it was important that they saw me as a functioning adult. Sometimes, I thought they’d only ever see me as a teenager.

“I don’t know that we needed to meet. You have everything handled.” There was no censure in his voice.

“We can make any changes you want. I’m used to handling these events on my own with only direction from the guest. For this one, we don’t really have a paying customer.”

“I’d like to be involved too. I don’t want this to be just Fletcher & Sons in name only.”

“Of course. I’m sorry. I just start planning and can’t stop.” I scanned my to-do list, the one that I was continually adding to. “What do you want to be involved in? You’re already helping us build the dugouts and providing supplies at a reduced cost.”

Tyler moved closer so that his arms were braced on the counter next to me and leaned in to look over my notes. He smelled like soap, and there was a hint of aftershave, and I was mesmerized by the way the muscles in his arms flexed as he leaned in. “I’d like to help with the ticket and raffle sales.”

“Really?” I asked, looking up at him and realizing too late that he was a lot closer than I’d originally thought. He could drop his head a few inches and his lips would be on mine.

His forehead wrinkled. “You don’t think I can do it?”

“I didn’t say that.” I wasn’t sure he’d want to do it, and I had the time.

“We could go to local games and put up the flyers, then walk around and ask the spectators if they’d like to come and support the cause.”

I cleared my throat and looked away from the line of his jaw. I needed to focus on why I was here, and it wasn’t to admire Tyler’s body. “That’s a great idea. I’ll get the game schedules for a few of the fields.”

He's straightened. "Do you think the whole family could come? It would be good for Delaney and Maggie to be involved too."

I smiled at him. "I love that idea. You're involving your family with your business."

"The more I think about it, this is for them too. When they grow up, they should have everything they want and need if they decide to play sports. I was thinking that we should help boys since we played baseball, but that was shortsighted of me. The future generation of Fletchers is girls."

"I don't know. Mac and Natalie might have a boy." But I was lost in the way he'd included Natalie's daughter, Delaney, in his definition of family. She had a father and a different last name. Legally, Mac couldn't adopt her, but the family included her as one of them. Family wasn't just blood or a last name.

"I think it's important for the girls to help."

"I think so too." I could see how important this was for him to be involved in this endeavor, and I respected him more for it. In an effort not to throw my arms around him and press myself against his body, I added the game schedule to my to-do list.

"Is there anything else we can do tonight?" Tyler asked as he refilled his water.

"I think that's it. We can reconvene when I have a better idea of the game schedule."

He drank from his glass, and I was distracted by the way his Adam's apple bobbed up and down with his swallows. When he'd drained the glass, he rinsed it in the sink and placed it in the dishwasher. When he turned to find me watching him, he asked, "Want to watch a movie?"

"I should probably get going. Maggie's asleep—"

"This is the best part of the night. The little one's asleep, and we have the whole night ahead of us."

A movie sounded good. "At least until Alice and Sam come home."

"They won't be home for at least a couple of hours yet. They said they were headed to a movie after dinner."

I stowed my laptop in my bag and watched as Tyler pulled out the popcorn maker and a bowl. The smell of popcorn quickly filled the kitchen, and I hoped the noise of the machine didn't wake Maggie.

Tyler grabbed a beer from the fridge and the bowl of popcorn and led the way into the family room, setting everything on the coffee table.

Sam held up his hands before he sat. "I'm going to tell you right now, I can't watch the new princess movie. I promised Maggie we'd watch it together."

My heart stuttered to a stop and then galloped in my chest. "That's okay. I don't care what we watch."

"You'll need to move closer if you want some popcorn."

I sighed, wondering if he'd purposely only made one large bowl so I couldn't keep my distance, and then I wondered why. He'd made an impulsive move at the baseball field, but I thought he'd taken a few steps back since then. He hadn't kissed or touched me since, despite the opportunity.

I scooted closer to him and reached a hand into the bowl. This popcorn was so much better than the microwavable kind.

When he found a new movie neither of us had seen, he threw the remote onto the coffee table and placed his arm on the back of the couch while he balanced the bowl on his thigh with his free hand. The effect was that I was leaning into his side.

The warmth of his body seared mine, and it was difficult to concentrate on the screen. Every few seconds, Tyler reached into the bowl to grab another handful and dropped it into his mouth. I caught myself watching him several times before I refocused on the movie.

It didn't matter how sexy Tyler was, he was my partner in this fundraiser. I couldn't afford to screw this up and have my family think I couldn't be trusted or that I wasn't able to focus on the job.

When the popcorn was gone, Tyler moved the bowl to the table in front of us, but I didn't move. I was so tired. I'd been working nonstop on the fundraiser this week. Add in the stress of seeing Tyler today, and I couldn't keep my eyes open.

Eventually, they slipped closed, and it felt too good to lean my head on his shoulder. I was startled awake a short time later by a key in the door. I came to slowly, unsure where I was. My head was curled into Tyler's chest, his arm heavy on my back, and my hand rested on his taut stomach. When I looked up, Tyler was sleeping too.

Alice walked into the family room before I could move away from Tyler. She raised her brow as she looked at Tyler's arm around me. "You fell asleep?"

I extracted myself from under Tyler's arm and noticed the movie was

long over. The screensaver had been playing. “We must have.”

Tyler came to then, rubbing the back of his neck. “Did we fall asleep?”

“Yep,” I said, moving as far away from the couch as I could get. “I’ll just get going.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Alice offered while Sam sat on the couch next to Tyler.

“I’ll let you know when the games are,” I said to Tyler as I grabbed the strap of my bag and followed Alice to the door. “Sorry about that.”

“What are you sorry for, exactly? Falling asleep on the couch or on Tyler?”

I blushed. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I was just so tired, and I must have leaned into him when I fell asleep.”

“Uh-huh,” Alice said, as if she were unconvinced by my explanation. “I think we need a girls’ night soon.”

“I’d love that.” I hugged her.

“I’ll let you know when I can get away.”

I knew it wasn’t that Sam said she needed to stay in but that she wanted to spend every spare moment with Sam and Maggie, and I couldn’t blame her. If I were in a committed relationship with someone who treated me like Sam did her, I’d probably do the same.

On the way home, I tried and failed to think of Tyler liking me that way. Even if something happened between us, I couldn’t imagine it being anything more than physical. Tyler wasn’t looking for anything more, and neither was I.

CHAPTER 13



TYLER

The rest of the week, there was a flurry of messages from Kylie advising me of the games and times that we could distribute flyers. Tonight was the night we'd agreed to do it.

I hadn't anticipated that it would be so warm. When I arrived at her cabin, Kylie was in a white tank top, frayed jean shorts, and white sneakers. Even though it was a casual outfit, everything looked expensive. There was some embossed lettering on the shoes, and I was almost positive she was wearing a Gucci belt. There was something inherently sexy about her outfit, and it wasn't the expanse of bare skin.

"It's so hot out today," she said as she fanned herself with the stack of flyers.

"I think you're just not used to it yet. In July, this will seem like nothing."

"I haven't been home in so long; I don't know what to expect."

"Where to?"

"I thought we'd hit the places on Main Street and then the fields." Kylie turned on the radio. I swear she smelled like honeysuckle, a scent I hadn't detected since the days of hiking in the woods behind the lodge.

She put on some pop song, and I couldn't even protest. I was too aware of her tan legs, and the globes of her breasts were visible above her top when she leaned over to change the radio station. I bit my lip when it seemed like they were going to spill out.

"You don't like the music?" she asked as she sat back.

"It's fine."

"You seem quiet today."

Because I'm too busy ogling you to make small talk. "I have a lot on my

mind.”

“With work?”

“I can’t decide on what I want for my house. It’s holding everything up. We can’t order supplies if I don’t know whether I want brick or stone.”

Her nose wrinkled. “I would have thought you’d have your dream home picked out already.”

“I never even thought about what I’d want. Maybe I thought I’d be with someone and they’d have an opinion.” That didn’t make sense, because I never wanted to be in a serious relationship.

“Do you need help? You know I love looking at houses.”

“I might take you up on that.” I parked at one end of Main Street. “I figured we could do it together or split up. You take one side, and I’ll take the other.”

“Splitting up probably makes the most sense.”

I was disappointed, but it made the most sense, and I’d have some time to cool off. We each took one side of the street, going into one store after the other and asking if we could post the flyers. Most store owners were okay with it. I only ran into one or two that didn’t allow it.

The only thing that slowed me down was the questions about what we were raising money for. A couple of people even handed me cash.

When I was finished, Kylie sat on the tailgate of my truck, a drink in her hand and one next to her. She lifted the sweating container and pressed it against her forehead. She closed her eyes, obviously enjoying the coolness.

I wanted to step up to her, push her legs wide enough to let me in, and lick the sweat off her neck. Before my imagination could get away from me, I sat next to her. “Is this for me?”

She slowly opened her eyes. “What took you so long?”

“A few of the shop owners wanted to hear more about it, and a couple of people gave me money.” I tossed her the cash.

Kylie’s eyes crinkled at the corners when she smiled. “That’s great news. I hope this means people will be into this. I was a little worried we wouldn’t raise enough money to help everyone.”

“It could be an ongoing project where we raise money continuously to build more.”

She leaned back on her hands and tipped her head back on a laugh. “But I want to help everyone now.”

That’s what made Kylie so special. She didn’t go into anything half-

assed. She was all in. I admired her even more for it. “We don’t know what’s going to happen yet.”

“I have a hard time being patient.”

I sipped the cool lemonade. “Where to next?”

“Let’s go to the ball fields and work the crowd for a while.”

“I wish we had a pool we could jump into afterward,” I said as she hopped off.

“Maybe you should put in a pool at your new place,” Kylie said with a smile, and now I was imagining her in a red bikini.

“Wouldn’t get much use. We don’t get that hot around here.”

“But it would be an amazing luxury if you could afford it. Plus, you could put in a hot tub that would get year-round use.”

“Hmm. The whole family would have to come to me for the pool. I’m starting to like this idea,” I said as I closed the tailgate and moved around the truck to climb inside.

“You enjoy being surrounded by family,” she said with a wistfulness in her tone.

It wasn’t a question, but I nodded. “I like the idea of being the house the kids want to come to. Maybe I should put in a game room in the basement.”

“I told you that you’d figure out what you wanted.”

We arrived at the same field we’d played on a couple of weeks ago and parked in the crowded lot.

“It’s a lot different from the first time we were here, huh?” Kylie asked as we walked through the lot to the pavilion and fields.

“It’s busy,” I agreed.

“Hopefully, we’ll sell some tickets. I think we should explain what we’re doing and ask if they’d like to support us by buying tickets to the games or donating money.”

“I think that’s the best we can do.”

“Let’s split up. You take field one and I’ll take two. We’ll reconvene before field three.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

She seemed nervous, and I wondered if this crowd would be open to what we wanted to do or if they preferred to just come to the fields and watch their kids’ games.

“Here goes nothing,” Kylie said.

I grabbed her wrist, my thumb lazily stroking the soft skin there. “We’ve

got this.”

Kylie nodded. “Good luck.”

“Same to you,” I said, reluctantly letting go. I tried a few different pitches before I settled on, “*We’re raising money to build dugouts. Would you like to purchase tickets to a game to support us?*”

I got a few skeptical questions, like: *Why do the kids need dugouts? They have a tarp.*

I carefully answered each question, but I found those with similar questions didn’t donate. I was disappointed more people weren’t interested in coming to the games. I met Kylie at the backstop for field three.

“That didn’t go as well as I’d hoped.”

“If the parents of kids playing softball don’t support us, then what are we doing here?” Kylie asked, her shoulders slumped.

“If they don’t want it, then we have our answer. Maybe we could reach out to the paper to see if they’d run an article on it.”

Kylie’s eyes brightened. “That’s a great idea. Let’s tackle this last field and then get something to eat. I’m tired.”

Working the crowd together took only half the time, and we were slightly more successful. “We sold some tickets,” I said when we reconvened by the truck.

“What if we asked small businesses and corporations to sponsor the teams? That would bring in more money than selling tickets.”

“It’s worth a shot,” I said, proud that she hadn’t given up yet.

“I’ll call around this week and see what I can drum up.”

I had a feeling she was good at schmoozing business owners. “Let’s get takeout and eat at your place.”

“You just love the view.”

I smiled and winked at her. “You’re right. I do.” And I wasn’t talking about the view of the stars or the woods. I was talking about her.

Her skin was damp with perspiration, and I had visions of hosing her down. I adjusted myself in my pants as we climbed into the truck, and I drove toward the brick oven pizza place downtown. I ordered several pizzas, knowing I could take leftovers to my brothers if necessary, and drove to her place.

“I can’t wait until I have a place of my own. I want a yard to work on and a garage for my truck.”

“It’s time.”

“It is,” I said, running a hand through my hair as we headed up the steps to the porch and inside.

“It’ll take longer to build what you want, but it will be so worth it.”

“I think so too.” There was something about the process of thinking about what I wanted that was part of the journey. Maybe this house build was a way to discover myself and what I wanted out of life.

At her house, I set the pizza boxes on the back deck and then went to the shed on the ground level underneath it.

“What are you looking for?” Kylie asked, following me.

“You have the key for this?”

She unlocked it and pushed open the door. Inside was yard equipment, including shovels and garden pails. I found a sprinkler and held it up.

Her eyes widened as I set it up at the back of the house and turned it on. It squeaked as I turned the nozzle. When it sputtered and water flew into the air in an arc, Kylie smiled. I held my hand out to her. “Come on.”

“This bring you back to hot summer days at the lodge?” Kylie asked me as she took my hand.

“Absolutely.” There wasn’t a pool, so we’d cool off in the sprinklers that dotted the property. It was so large we’d run from one to the other until we were soaked and exhausted.

We stood at the edge of the stream until I said, “Let’s go.” We ran through, laughing and screaming when the cold water hit us, and then we stood in the steady stream of the sprinkler, letting the water cascade over us. Kylie’s hair stuck to her head, but her white tank was see-through. I saw the lace of her bra and the nub of her nipple. I wanted to suck it through her shirt.

I wanted so much more. I was hard as a rock as I moved toward her, as if in a trance. I cupped the back of her head and kissed her.

The water rotated around us as her lips parted and my tongue tangled with hers. I needed more. I lifted the hem of her shirt to touch the soft skin of her stomach. Then I dropped to my knees on the soggy earth and kissed her belly button.

Her fingers tangled in my hair as she looked down at me with so much wonder and desire in her expression. “Tyler.”

“I want you.” But I wouldn’t make another move unless she wanted me.

She finally nodded. “Please.”

And then I soared up, lifting her as I stood and throwing her over my shoulder. I didn’t care about the sprinkler or how wet we were. I carried her

up the steps and only set her down when we were in front of the slider.

She pushed it open as if it hadn't been locked, and I made a mental note to discuss locking it later. Right now, I wanted nothing more than my mouth on her skin, licking and sucking. I groaned as she lifted her shirt over her head, throwing it over her head as she slipped inside. The air conditioning wasn't on, but it was cooler inside.

She grabbed my hand, tugging me up the stairs and into the master bedroom. At the end of the bed, she turned to face me.

"I've never seen you look more beautiful."

She laughed. "I look like a drowned rat."

"Like I said, you've never been more beautiful." I should have offered to dry her hair or pat her down, but I was too impatient. I wanted her.

There was none of the hesitation that was there during our first night together. This time, I knew I wanted all of her. I wasn't worried about what anyone would think. It was just me and Kylie and this bed. I wanted her splayed out naked on it now. I pushed her jean shorts down, leaving her in a blush-colored bra and panty set.

She turned to place one knee on the bed, and I realized her panties were thongs. I palmed her ass, making her pause in her movement. "I could fuck you here. One leg on the floor and your knee on the bed." It would be the perfect angle.

She smiled, and it was a little naughty. "We could."

I cupped her sex from behind and squeezed lightly until her eyelids fluttered closed and she moaned. I finally had Kylie Wilde in bed, and I wasn't going to squander the opportunity. I wanted her in this position and every other. I hoped she let me stay the night because I had a feeling one time wouldn't be enough, and I wouldn't last long enough to savor it.

She braced her hands on the bed, placing both knees on the soft comforter. I lowered her panties until her plump lips were bare to me. I dropped to my knees, spreading her folds before I dove in with my tongue, licking and sucking, then using my finger. Her hips rocked in time with my thrusts. She looked so gorgeous like this.

Her skin was flushed and warm despite the water still clinging to it. I unhooked her bra, and she let the straps fall down her shoulders and onto the bed. I cupped her breast with one hand and plucked her nipple.

She was truly wild now, rocking back on my hand, little moans escaping between her lips as she begged me to make her come.

I wanted her to come on my cock the first time, though. When she was eighteen, we messed around, giving each other oral, but we never had sex. I wanted that more than anything. I wanted to establish that things were different now. We were adults, and we could have whatever we wanted. We were doing this, and there was no going back.

I moved away from her long enough to toss my shirt and push off my pants and briefs. I grabbed a condom from my wallet and pushed it over my length.

Kylie looked over her shoulder.

“You want me?” I asked her, poised at her entrance.

She tipped her hips to give me better access. “I always have.”

That was all I needed to hear before I slid inside, slowly, ever so slowly. I couldn’t believe I was with Kylie. That she was naked on the bed, offering herself up to me. It was like every teenage fantasy I had come to life.

When I pushed deep, I paused, letting her adjust to me and thinking of something else so I wouldn’t blow my load too soon.

This was Kylie Wilde. My friends’ younger sister. The woman I shouldn’t want, but the only one I did.

And when I moved inside her, it felt like nothing I’d ever felt before. She was tight and warm and welcoming, and I wanted to sink inside her forever.

She pushed back on me, urging me to fuck her harder. This was nothing like I’d imagined over the years. Somehow, it was hotter. Everything was clearer, more vivid somehow. The sunlight streamed through the windows as I rocked inside her, my fingers braced on her hips.

I never wanted it to end. Her walls tightened around me and then spasmed. I pressed my chest to her back, palming her breast as I thrust one more time, then two, and the orgasm shot through me.

When I finally came down from the most powerful orgasm I’d ever had, I kissed her shoulder, pulled out, and discarded the condom in the bathroom trash. When I returned, she was under the covers, curled on her side. Was she embarrassed? Did she regret what we’d done?

I slipped under the covers behind her, pulling her against me. I kissed her shoulder. “Are we okay?”

“Mmm,” she murmured.

I loved the feel of her skin against mine. I ran a hand down her shoulder and over her hip. “I want to stay.”

She shifted in my arms and kissed my chin. “I want that too.”

“Good. Because I’m not done with you.” I didn’t think I’d ever be. I wanted her even more now than I had when we were younger.

“Me either.”

“No regrets?” I searched her face for any sign of it.

She smiled softly. “Not at all.”

I held her until we remembered there was pizza on the deck, and then we got dressed, her in a pair of soft shirts and a tee, and me in my mostly dry shirt and shorts.

We ate out of the box, not bothering to grab plates or napkins. It was a gorgeous night, the heat cooling as the sun set. We stowed the leftover pizza in the fridge.

“What now?” she asked me.

“We could watch a movie or go to bed early,” I said with a waggle of my eyebrows.

She frowned. “You don’t have the blueprints for the homes you’re considering with you, do you?”

“They’re in the truck.”

“Can I look at them?”

“Of course.” I plucked my keys from the table and grabbed the plans from the backseat of my truck. I spread them on the table in the dining room.

There was something about sharing these with her. I wanted her opinion. I needed her input, and I couldn’t explain why.

CHAPTER 14



KYLIE

I spread the blueprints on the table so I could see each one as I walked around. When I found a two-story house I was interested in, I sat in the chair, my leg curled underneath me, and traced a path with my finger through the house.

Tyler leaned a hip against the table. “What are you doing?”

“I like to imagine that I live there. I’d park in the garage, walk through the door here, into the mudroom, and then into the kitchen.” I traced the path with my finger, returning to the mudroom. “Is this room small, or is it just me?”

He leaned closer to see the specs. “It’s tight.”

“I wonder if it should be enlarged in case you have kids and need more storage space, or could it be a separate room?” I asked him.

“You could do either.”

“I’m not a fan of walking into a house through a mudroom. Most homeowners enter through the garage, not the front door.”

“I agree.”

“And if your guests enter through the garage for some reason, you don’t want them to see your dirty laundry.”

He chuckled. “That’s a good point.”

“If this were my house, I’d create a hallway here with a separate mudroom with a washer and a dryer, cabinets for storage, and a place for shoes and jackets. If you’re into sports, you can even have something here to hold balls and bats.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

“Do you enjoy cooking?” Kylie asked me.

“I prefer grilling.”

“I think the kitchen is fine, then. A large gourmet island works for everyone, and there’s enough space to get around everything. Could you do a bump-out and put in a large farmhouse-style table since you enjoy get-togethers?”

Instead of responding, Tyler grabbed a pencil and inputted the change with a note for a farmhouse table. I was a little surprised he was even listening to my opinion. I had no experience with designing or building houses.

“The family room is nice as long as you think there’s enough room. I love a stone fireplace here. Especially with the view of the mountains I’m sure you’ll have. You want the room to be both warm and inviting.” I could see it now, sitting on a large sectional with a blanket thrown over our laps while we sipped hot chocolate and enjoyed the fire. “Is there a way you could sit and enjoy both the fireplace and the view through the windows? The way I was envisioning it, your back would be to the windows but facing the fireplace.”

“If we bumped out the back and put the fireplace on this wall, it could work.”

“Can you do whatever you want with these?” I asked him.

Tyler shrugged. “I’m the builder.”

“This is so fun,” I said as my heart rate increased. I was like a kid in the candy store. “You have a dining room and a formal living room, but what about a study? Do you work from home?”

“I’d like to.”

“Then maybe you should turn this front room into an office. You don’t need a dining room here; it’s so far from the kitchen. Besides, you’ll add that area with the farmhouse table in the kitchen, negating the need for it.”

“My mom hosts the formal holiday dinners anyway.”

I reviewed the changes he’d made. “The first floor is perfect now.”

“What do you think I should do for the outside? Stone or brick?”

“Is money an issue?” I asked him.

“Not at all. I want this to be the only house I ever build.”

I lifted my gaze to meet his. “Stone. It fits with the area. It will feel warmer than brick, and you don’t want siding.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? You’re just agreeing to my suggestions?” I asked, a little surprised. Was he just placating me and would do whatever he wanted, or did

he truly like the changes?

“I wasn’t thinking about flow the way you were. I’ve never done that. Usually, the customer will tell us what they want, whether it makes sense or not. I’m not used to making these decisions myself.”

“I’m sure you’ll get better at it as you go.”

He pulled up a chair, his arm resting over the back of mine. “Can you look at the second floor for me?”

“Of course. This is fun.”

He moved even closer, his legs surrounding my chair and his breath skating over my cheek. “I like having five bedrooms.”

“What about the sizes? I hate when there are more bedrooms but one’s the size of a closet.”

“We can make this one bigger and add a Jack and Jill bathroom between rooms four and five. En suite bathrooms for rooms two and three.”

“And a walk-in closet for this one, in case you have a daughter. Or you can use it as the guest room,” I hurried to add.

“I never thought about having kids.”

“Maybe your nieces will want to have a sleepover with you once the house is done. Camp out in the backyard.”

He sucked in a breath. “I would love that.”

“I love that you’re so close to your nieces.” And that he considered Delaney to be the same as Maggie.

I turned my head to see his face, and his lips were so close to mine. “They’re everything to me.”

I don’t think he even realized what his response was doing to my heart. There was a sharp pang telling me that he would be an amazing father. But he didn’t want that. He didn’t even want a serious relationship. Then there was the tiny voice inside my head that asked if I could change him. That was a losing proposition.

I turned back to the sheets in front of us, focusing on the master bedroom. “I think a tub in front of this window would be fabulous.”

“Fabulous, huh?” he asked, his tone amused.

“You know, one of those freestanding ones. I can see the snow falling outside, covering the trees while I was warm in the tub.”

“I like that picture too.” His nose nuzzled my neck, sending a tingle down my spine. “I think I’m done looking at the house.”

I didn’t think about whether he’d chosen this house because I liked it. My

head tilted involuntarily to give him access to my neck. “Me too.”

He accommodated me by kissing the sensitive skin, his hand roving under my shirt and cupping my breasts. I hadn’t bothered to put my bra back on after we’d gotten dressed, and I was loving that decision now. He tweaked the nipple, making my panties wet, as I turned my face to kiss him.

“I want you bent over this table.”

My breath hitched at the picture his words drew. The windows were open to the side yard, but no one ever came over. My brothers didn’t drop in here like they would at the main house, and the thought of being so free was intoxicating. “Yes.”

He lifted my shirt until I let him pull it over my head, and then I stood, shoving down my shorts and panties so he could act on his dirty words.

He did the same before pulling me against him and kissing me. My breasts pressed against the hard planes of his chest as he walked me back and swept the papers off the table so he could sit me on it. “Lie back.”

His voice was tight as I hurried to comply. Instinctively, my knees fell apart as he stepped between them and dropped to his.

He didn’t waste any time licking me from my entrance to my clit, where he teased me. His fingers entered me with no hesitation. I was already primed from the earlier bout of sex, so I easily crested with the cool table behind my back. I’d never felt more open with anyone. I wanted to give him everything if he’d take it.

He kissed my inner thighs as he worked his way up my body to suck first one, then the second nipple, into his mouth. His cock teased my entrance, and I ground over it, needing more friction. “I need a condom,” he said as he pulled away from me.

I hated the distance, even though he grabbed the wrapper and ripped it with his teeth before sheathing himself. “As much as I want to fuck you on that table, I’d prefer if you were bent over it.”

I scrambled to get down, his hand on my hip to steady me. With his palm, he eased me over, my palms flat on the table and my cheek to the side. In this position, I felt so vulnerable. I knew he could hurt me, but I vowed to keep my emotions in check.

This was just two adults exploring the chemistry between them. It didn’t mean anything, even as my heart felt like it was slowly being pulled apart at the seams.

He eased my feet farther apart as he tested the moisture between my legs.

I glanced at him over my shoulder. His eyes were dark with desire, and his focus was where he was lining up his cock at my entrance. “Tyler, please.”

“I don’t want to rush.” His voice was softer now, almost reverent, which was interesting given my position bent over the dining room table. This felt rawer than anything I’d ever done with a man before, yet at the same time more intimate.

His cock slowly slid inside, and my eyes fluttered closed as I savored the sensation of him filling me. I chanted his name in my head, wishing I could unleash all the emotions bubbling up inside my chest.

Then he pulled back and thrust inside. With a hand on my hip, he increased his pace, sending my body skidding across the table from the force.

Then he pressed his chest to my back, and he slowed his movements. He kissed my shoulder, moving my hair out of the way to suck on the skin of my neck. The effect was intimate.

I bit my lip against the sensation of his bare body covering mine, his cock filling me up. I was quickly barreling toward another orgasm. I didn’t even think it was possible to experience so much pleasure in one day.

I wondered if my other partners hadn’t been as attentive, but I think it was more than that. It was Tyler. It was like he was meant for me.

I hated to think that way when we hadn’t made any promises to each other. We were enjoying what was transpiring between us. But both of us were aware that it couldn’t go anywhere.

Anytime I’d get the flutter of hope in my chest, I stifled it. I wouldn’t make a decision to stay in Telluride because of a man.

When Tyler reached around to finger my clit, I went off like a rocket, bucking against his hips as he thrust deep. I felt closer to him than I ever had to another person. He took his time, kissing my shoulders and pulling out slowly.

He helped me stand on shaky legs before removing and disposing of the condom in the kitchen trashcan.

I’d have to take it out just in case someone in my family stopped by. The last thing I needed was for any of my brothers to ask questions. It would end whatever this was before it went anywhere.

When he sauntered back over to me, naked, his muscles flexing with each step, he rested his forehead against mine. “What am I going to do with you?”

The question made me flush with warmth. My body was still tingling

with the pleasure he pulled from my body, but I wanted more. I wanted to tell him he needed to keep me, but that wasn't what this was.

We weren't a couple. This wasn't a long-term thing. I couldn't stay in Telluride. Every once in a while, I wondered if I could, but then I dismissed it just as easily.

Tyler pulled away to pick up the blueprints scattered on the floor. "Who knew looking at a few house designs would get me going?"

I pulled on my clothes. "I love looking at them."

Tyler clutched the blueprints in his hands before placing them in a pile on the table. "So, I just need to pull out these papers when I want to get it on?"

I chuckled. "That sounds about right."

"You're an easy woman to please."

"I get excited about designing houses," I said as he pulled me into his arms again, swaying to music that wasn't playing.

"Are we dancing naked?" I asked him as he pressed his lips to my temple.

"Mmm," was all he said as he held me tighter.

The tender way he held me made my eyes sting with tears.

"I want to stay the night."

"I'm not going to say no," I said as he lifted me and carried me bridal-style up the stairs to my room. He gently placed me on the bed and shut off the lamps. I needed to brush my teeth and wash my face, but his arms came around me, and I didn't want to move.

Who knew that things between Tyler and me could be like this? I wanted to hold on to this moment forever. Remember it so I could recall it again and again. I had a feeling this was a once-in-a-lifetime connection that not everyone got to experience.

Tyler was making me believe in something more than I'd ever thought I'd have for myself. When he held me tight, I could almost see myself staying in Telluride, moving into the house we'd planned together, and maybe even having some kids to play with their cousins. There'd be family dinners and barbecues, more fundraisers to help the community, and love. So much love.

Is that what was filling my chest? The beginnings of love for Tyler? I wanted to deny it, but it was already there, taking up residence in every nook and cranny. I was in so much trouble.

I'd gone and let myself feel something for someone my brothers would never be okay with me seeing. I think they'd prefer if I was single forever, but at the very least, you didn't sleep with your brothers' friends.

If they found out, Tyler would choose them, just like he did when I was eighteen. He worried about their approval, not mine. Like everyone else in my life, my brothers came first. Was it too much to ask that a man want me despite my brothers? I wanted someone to fight for me. To tell my brothers our relationship had nothing to do with them.

I fell asleep dreaming about Tyler, his hands on my body, his voice whispering sweet words in my ear. Maybe it was real, and Tyler was whispering things to me. I just wish I could understand them.

CHAPTER 15



TYLER

I stayed awake for a long time after Kylie fell asleep, wondering what had just happened on that dining room table. There was something about the excitement in Kylie's eyes over the blueprints that made me feel something I hadn't felt before.

I felt more with her. Sex was so much more. Each time, I felt closer to her than the time before. I wanted to hold her close and never let go.

I think I'd even whispered that to her after she'd drifted off. I couldn't stop touching her and holding her close. The connection I'd had with her when we were younger bloomed into something neither of us had anticipated.

There was no way I could just walk away from her if she decided to move on. There was something between us I'd never experienced with anyone else. Didn't we owe it to each other to figure out what it was? Maybe it wouldn't work out in the long run, but I had to try.

Although I wasn't sure what Kylie was thinking. She'd been clear from the beginning that this couldn't be anything permanent. She probably had no intention of staying in Telluride. It was almost as if she couldn't be near her family or the lodge.

I held Kylie tight as I drifted off, with her warmth surrounding me. When I woke, the light was streaming in, and the sheet next to me was cool to the touch.

I smelled eggs cooking, so I swung my legs out of bed and went to the bathroom.

I pulled on my clothes, knowing I'd be late to the job site, but there wasn't anything my second-in-command couldn't handle. I sent him a quick text letting him know I'd be a bit late this morning. I wanted to take my time

with Kylie this morning, to see if I could get a handle on what was going on between us.

In the kitchen, Kylie stood by the stove, watching the eggs cook. Her hair was swept up in a messy bun, and she wore a wrinkled tee and shorts, but she'd never looked more beautiful. I walked behind her, sweeping her hair off her shoulder and kissing her neck. Her body shivered under my touch. "Morning, gorgeous."

"Morning to you too. Do you have time to eat?"

Smelling the fresh pot of coffee, I moved to pour myself a cup. "I called to say I'd be late."

She gave me an apologetic smile. "I wasn't sure if I should wake you."

"I don't have to be present all the time." We hired reliable, hardworking people at Fletcher & Sons and paid them well so we could have that luxury. Unlike Sam, Mac, and my father, I hadn't had any reason to take advantage of it.

"That's good for you," she said as I topped up her mug next to the stove.

I leaned a hip against the counter as she folded the omelet in the skillet. "I like waking up to the smell of your cooking."

She smiled, the corner of her eyes crinkling in amusement. "You like being taken care of."

"I've lived on my own for a while, so I can't say this happens unless I go to my parents' for family dinner. I'd like to cook for you sometime too." I brushed a strand of hair off her forehead, a surge of tenderness going through me.

She met my gaze and said, "I'd like that."

She plated the omelet, placing sliced avocados and tomatoes on top. "Can you grab the toast from the toaster oven?"

She carried our plates to the counter while I placed the toast on another plate. Eggs, toast, coffee, and Kylie all rumbled from sleep. It was the perfect morning, and I was glad I didn't have to miss it.

"What are your plans for today?" I asked as I sat next to her and dug into the omelet.

"I'm going to reach out to the newspaper and maybe the radio station to ask if we could spread the word."

"That's a great idea. Did you know the town has an event coordinator of sorts? I don't know her official title, but she plans the festivals, enters the town into contests, and works with the mayor to make the town better. She

might be able to help.”

“That would be great. Can you send me her contact information?”

“Of course,” I said, making quick work of the omelet. I was starving after last night. “We should talk about the rest of the blueprint. We didn’t finish the basement or the bedrooms.”

She paused and looked up at me. “Are you seriously considering the house I picked?”

“It’s a good one.”

“Shouldn’t you build the house you want?” she asked carefully.

“Honestly, any one of the two-story builds are fine, but I hadn’t thought of making those small tweaks to make it more customized for me. I don’t know why.” I shrugged. “Thanks for letting me see the possibilities.”

She reached over and touched my forearm briefly. “You’re welcome.”

Is this what a relationship was? Two people contributing to each other’s lives, giving advice and help? If so, I liked it. I liked having someone to come home to at the end of the day, even if that wasn’t quite what this was.

It was nice to have support that wasn’t just my parents or my brothers. I’d talked to Alice on occasion, but this was different. I had this sense that Kylie had my back.

“Will you help me look at cabinets and fixtures? I’m not as good at the design stuff.”

“I’d love to,” she said around a mouthful of eggs.

I leaned over and kissed her softly. She was everything I’d want in a woman if I was looking to settle down. Too bad it wasn’t the right time.

“What was that for?” Kylie asked me.

“I just wanted to.” When had I ever reached over to kiss someone during breakfast just because? I’d never done anything like that, but then I’d never been this close to someone before.

For the first time, I felt lighter and even hopeful that there was something out there for me too. I wouldn’t just be watching Mac and Sam live their lives with their families. Maybe I could have one of my own.

“We’ll push the softball game fundraiser really hard for the next week and a half and hope it goes well.”

“If not, we can just donate the time and supplies to do a few. Give the community an idea of what we’re trying to do. Maybe once they see it, they’ll be more into it.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “You shouldn’t have to do that. I appreciate the

offer, but I'm hoping it doesn't come to that."

"We could require the team to help us. They'd be learning a skill, and it would be good to involve them in the end product." We'd discussed the possibility before, but I thought it was important to include the kids.

"It would be like everyone was contributing. I like that."

We finished our food, and Kylie cleared the plates, rinsing them and putting them in the dishwasher. Then she moved around the counter, and I turned so she could stand between my legs. I wrapped my arms around her waist. "We make a good team."

"We do."

I didn't just mean with the dugout project we were working on, but the blueprints and even breakfast. We just fit, and I liked it. I vowed not to overanalyze it but rather go with the flow.

"Will I see you later?" I asked.

"Are we a couple that spends all our free time together?" Kylie teased.

"I want to see you. I don't know how much time we have." I felt a pang in my heart admitting that out loud.

She sobered. "I want to see you too."

She walked me out, and when we reached my truck, I pressed her back against the door so I could kiss her. I felt like a teenager making out with my girlfriend. I couldn't get enough of her, and I didn't want to say good-bye.

* * *

AFTER REVIEWING the plans with Kylie, I was motivated to finish the house we were working on so we could break ground on mine next. I spent the evenings with Kylie at her rental house. Part of it was I was tired of living in an apartment, but the overriding desire was to spend as much time with Kylie as possible.

On Friday, Maggie had a play at school, so I invited Kylie. She said she was running late from a meeting, so she'd meet me there. I slid into the row of Fletchers that consisted of my parents, Sam and Alice, and Mac, Natalie, and Delaney.

Mac leaned over to see me past the girls. "Where's Kylie?"

"She's meeting us here." I was a little surprised my brothers didn't give me crap for inviting her.

“You’re seeing each other, aren’t you?” Natalie asked when I settled in next to her.

“We haven’t exactly defined it.”

Mac raised a brow. “Are you planning on telling her brothers?”

“We’re not exactly hiding it, but at the same time, we spend most of our time at her cabin. She said her brothers never go there.” And there was no reason for them to be at Maggie’s school.

Mac shook his head. “People in town are going to start talking.”

“We’re working on the fundraiser together, and we’re friends. There’s no story.”

Sam said something to Mac, and his attention was thankfully diverted.

“You like her?” Natalie asked softly.

I was a little hesitant because I knew Natalie was friends with her, but I didn’t care if my family knew. “I do.”

“What are your plans?”

I crossed my arms over my chest and sighed. “Things are up in the air. I don’t know what else to say.”

Natalie tipped her head slightly forward, blocking my view from the others. “Don’t you think you should get some answers?”

I wanted to ask if Natalie knew what Kylie’s long-term plans were, but I wouldn’t come between friends. “We need to talk, but for now, we’re just enjoying our time together.”

“That sounds nice, but I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I rested a hand on my chest, genuinely surprised. “You think I’m the one who’s going to get hurt in this scenario?”

“I think that when you let yourself fall for someone, you’ll be all in, and I just want to make sure the woman’s heart is in it too.”

“There’s something there. I can’t even explain it. A connection we forged in childhood, and it’s only gotten stronger as we’ve gotten to know each other better.” Whatever it was, it had settled in my chest and refused to budge. My greatest fear was that Kylie was it for me, and she’d leave.

“Talk to her before it’s too late.”

The teacher from Maggie’s class came onto the stage, and Natalie turned her attention to her. Kylie slipped in next to me and leaned in to say, “Sorry I’m late.”

“You didn’t miss anything. It’s just starting.”

“Oh good. I was worried.”

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into my side, touched that she was genuinely interested in a five-year-old's school play, especially when we'd only been together for a short while.

She surprised me by snuggling into my side and kissing my cheek. I loved attending Maggie's and Delaney's school events, but having someone to share it with was something else. I wasn't sure which play it was, but the kids were dressed as trees, bushes, and animals. It was adorable.

It wasn't supposed to be a funny story, but it was comical when the kids messed up.

"This is the best. Thank you for inviting me," Kylie said at the end.

My heart squeezed as I kissed her upturned lips.

At the end, the kids came out and bowed, some of their costumes already worn and falling apart.

Sam held a bouquet of roses as we waited in the hallway for the performers. When Maggie came out with a few other friends, she burst into a run and jumped into Sam's arms.

It was the first time I was jealous of my brother. I wanted someone to look at me like that. When wasn't it enough to be the favorite uncle?

Sam handed Maggie the bouquet, and she squealed with delight as she buried her face in the petals and sneezed.

Everyone laughed, and then they were congratulating her on an amazing performance. It probably wasn't the best I'd ever seen, but it was the cutest.

I kept my arm around Kylie the entire time.

"Can we get ice cream?" Maggie asked Sam.

He took her hand. "Of course."

We walked outside, agreed on the ice cream store, and moved toward our vehicles.

Kylie paused before we got to my truck. "I drove separately. I guess I'll see you later."

"You're not coming?" I asked, a little surprised.

Her forehead wrinkled. "Do you want me to? It seems like a family thing."

Kylie wasn't family, but it sure felt like she fit in with us. "Please."

She tipped her head to the side. "If you're sure?"

"Get in the truck. I'll bring you back to your car later."

A smile spread over Kylie's face as she said, "Okay."

On the ride downtown, Kylie said, "Thanks again for inviting me. That

was just too cute.”

I smiled widely. “Best thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Except when Sam handed her the bouquet. It was so sweet. I don’t remember my parents going to many of my games, much less buying me flowers. I guess that’s something you do in theater or music, not softball.” Her voice trailed off.

I reached over to hold her hand. “Has anyone ever sent you flowers?”

Her nose scrunched, and then she huffed out a laugh. “You know, I don’t think so.”

I made a mental note to see about sending her flowers. Maybe I could set up something where it came once a week. If she was only going to be here a short time, I wanted to make her happy. “If you ever have a child, you’ll have to remember to bring flowers.”

“There’s just something about a dad with their kids, don’t you think? Or you’re a guy, so maybe you don’t see it.”

I shifted in my seat, amusement tinging my voice. “Are you saying single dads are sexy?”

Kylie smiled cheekily. “Yeah, I think I am.”

“I don’t have kids though.”

She laughed. “Are you jealous of Sam and Mac?”

I held up my fingers and said, “A little bit.”

She smiled and shook her head. “You don’t need to be. I think it’s hot when you’re with Maggie too.”

“You thought it was hot when I was babysitting Maggie?”

Her cheeks flushed as she nodded. “Uh-huh.”

“Huh. You learn something new every day,” I said as I found a parking spot near the ice cream store. We got out, and I immediately took her hand. This felt a lot like a date. We’d gone to my niece’s play and then out for ice cream. It meant a lot to me. For the first time in my life, I wanted to spend time with a woman and my family. And Kylie fit in with us.

Inside, we stood in line together, Kylie talking to Delaney about her favorite ice cream flavors as a kid, which was apparently vanilla. Delaney was giving her a hard time about not having any imagination or something, but I wasn’t really listening. I couldn’t take my eyes off the sparkle in Kylie’s eyes when she spoke to Delaney.

I wasn’t sure how I’d ever let her go.

CHAPTER 16



KYLIE

I'd been on a high ever since I went to Maggie's play on Friday night. Spending time with the Fletchers made me think about what it would be like to have my own family.

I couldn't get around the idea that if I did have kids, I'd want to live near my parents and my brothers. Would we all settle down around the same time and have kids the same age? Would our kids play together?

Would they enjoy hide-and-seek in the lodge and sleepovers with their cousins? Any time I thought about it, Tyler's face popped into my head. I never imagined having kids before. Was it Tyler that was bringing this up for me?

I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. He was making me long for things I'd never even thought about.

I hadn't figured out what I was going to do with my life, and I was dating this guy who I'd crushed on forever. What did any of it mean? Was it the wrong timing? Was he the wrong guy? I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do, and the more we hung out, the bigger the pit in my stomach grew.

I had this awful feeling that I was going to hurt Tyler. That I was going to revert to my usual self and run. If I left Telluride again, I wouldn't be running from my family, but from Tyler.

We spent the next week going over the plans for his house. In any spare time we had, we advertised the baseball games. I talked on the radio with a journalist and even stopped by the schools to hand out flyers.

I hoped enough people bought tickets on the day of to make everything worthwhile. I didn't want to waste the Fletchers' time with something no one wanted. I had flashes of panic when I wondered if the whole thing was a big

mistake.

If it didn't work out, if I didn't raise enough money to fund at least a few dugouts, then my dad might not consider me for the event coordinator position at the lodge. I wasn't even sure I wanted the job, but I didn't want to screw up anything either.

On the day of the baseball games, we took the boxes of team shirts to the fields. We had enough kids interested in playing on the various teams, and their parents bought tickets ahead of time. I just hoped everyone else paid at the field.

"If nothing else, we'll have fun today, right?" I asked Tyler as I pulled the shirts out of the boxes and spread them over the registration tables.

"It doesn't matter how much money we raise. Whatever happens, I'm proud of you."

I wanted to let his statement sink in, but I couldn't keep my anxiety at bay.

Field one was firefighters versus the police department, and thankfully they brought in a lot of family members, friends, and spectators who were interested in the rivalry. Field two was parents versus kids. This was essentially the entire rec league in the area, so they had huge teams. We probably should have split them up, but we wanted everyone to be able to see the game, and field three was the business owners versus Main Street shops. Tyler played on that team, so he grabbed his team shirt and moved over there to organize his team.

I manned the registration table with Natalie and Alice. We were busy for the first hour as everyone registered and bought spectator tickets. I lost track of how many we sold, and the donation jar needed to be emptied several times. We'd even gotten a few additional checks from the business owners checking in.

A few had inquired about a way to recognize those who'd contributed. I promised we could either put up a banner on the fence or put their names on the team shirts or somewhere on the dugout as a sponsor. We'd need to work out the details and get back to them.

So far, the business owners were the biggest donators, and I wanted to make sure they were acknowledged appropriately. When the idea for plaques in the dugouts came to mind, I noted it in my phone. If we did that, we'd need to ensure we raised enough money for every field that needed a dugout.

We'd also put out boxes at each field for old and used equipment to

donate to the leagues. We'd need to make sure it was in good shape before distributing them to the players who needed them.

"I think most people have checked in. We can finish up here. Why don't you watch the games?"

"Are you sure?" I asked them, eager to see how things were going.

"Absolutely," Alice said, with Maggie on her lap.

Delaney was watching Mac and Sam play on field three, but I wanted to take everything in, so I started on field one. The teams were red and blue, and there were several hot men and women on the teams. I think that was part of the draw too.

The spectators for field two seemed to be conflicted on whether to cheer for the parents or the kids, so they cheered for both. It made for a feel-good, fun game. When I moved to the last field, a woman smiled and immediately came over to me with her hand held out. "I'm Scarlett Best. I'm the event coordinator for the town."

"I've been wanting to meet you. I heard you're the one to talk to about any events around town." Tyler had forwarded me her information, and we'd played phone tag a few times, never able to catch each other.

"My job is to make things fun. I plan the festivals and coordinate fundraisers with the mayor."

"I was supposed to meet with Todd to discuss more ways to reach people for the ski equipment we collected, but he hasn't been able to meet up."

"He's busy. Sometimes I think he signs up for more than he can handle."

It was slightly annoying, but I could understand that. There was more to being a mayor than fundraising.

"By the way, he mentioned that you were looking to see if anyone else could benefit from your winter athletic equipment drive. I pulled a list of agencies we work with. Do you want me to forward it to you?"

"I'd love that. Thanks."

Scarlett's gaze turned to the baseball game in front of us. "This event was such a great idea. There's a huge turnout, and everyone's having fun."

I took a minute to look at the fields and the crowd. There were a lot of people here, and the line at the snack shack hadn't let up all afternoon. "I hope it's enough to build the dugouts we need."

"I think once people see what you're doing, you'll get more interest. Once you build the first one, put a sign on there with information on where to donate to make more."

“I love that idea.”

Scarlett grinned. “I’m the ideas person. If you want to brainstorm, come to me.”

“You know, I think I’ll take you up on that.” Her energy was infectious, and I could use more friends. We exchanged numbers, and when Mac, Sam, and Tyler approached us, I introduced them.

Fletcher & Sons’ banners were prominently displayed on each field since they were the ones donating their time and providing us with discounted supplies. I was so grateful that his family helped me take it on. “I couldn’t do any of this without your help.”

Tyler flexed his biceps. “We’re the muscle.”

Sam and Mac flashed him an irritated look before shaking their heads at him.

“Seriously, though,” Sam said, “we’re happy to help.”

“Did I hear that the kids are going to help build the dugouts?” Mac asked.

“That’s what we’re hoping. Maybe we can even teach them a few skills. The parents would need to sign a waiver, and only if it’s okay with your insurance company,” I said, not wanting to overstep.

“Dad loves the idea. He’s always wanted to create a program where we could teach some skills to kids in school,” Tyler said.

“Maybe you could spearhead that, since you’re doing such a great job with this project,” Mac said.

Tyler winked at me. “Kylie’s done all the groundwork for this. We wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for her.”

Mac raised a brow. “So that’s a no?”

“I’d love to look into it, but I’d want Kylie by my side to help out. She’s the one who has good instincts for marketing.”

I flushed at his compliment. Then it was time for the Fletchers to bat, so they grabbed helmets and bats and warmed up.

Tyler’s mom approached me when the guys went back to their team to bat. “You have a knack for fundraising.”

I held up my hands. “I haven’t counted the money yet.”

“I hope it’s enough to get you started.”

“You think we will need to have multiple events to fund it?” I asked, genuinely interested in learning everything I could from her.

“I think you will. When I raise money for travel teams, we hold five to seven fundraisers during the season, and it takes all year to get the equipment

we want. Of course, some of it is fun stuff, like bags with their names and numbers on them. But I love that they are so pleased with the things they receive. They want to look like they are part of a team.”

“I can see that,” I said, encouraged by her statement. I just needed to lower my expectations slightly.

“How are you and Tyler?” she asked.

“He’s been a great help. He helped me brainstorm ideas and post flyers everywhere.”

“He said you helped him with the plans for his house too.”

“Yeah, he seemed stuck. Like he wasn’t sure what he wanted. I just helped him get unstuck.” I wondered if she was trying to figure out what we were to each other. We hadn’t exactly hidden our relationship at the play.

“You’re good for him.”

My face heated. “Oh, we’re not—”

She quirked a brow at me. “Are you saying you’re not seeing my son?”

“Honestly? We haven’t labeled anything. I might be leaving soon.”

It hurt to admit that to his mother, but I didn’t want to give her false hope.

“Oh? I didn’t realize you had gotten a job,” she said.

My chest tightened. “I didn’t. I’m not even looking.”

“Then why would say you might leave soon?”

“That was always the plan.” But did it have to be? What if this thing between Tyler and me was real?

“You don’t think things will change?”

“I never wanted to stay in Telluride.”

“You didn’t feel like you fit in with your family,” she said, and it wasn’t a question.

“Yeah. I know it sounds silly.”

“It doesn’t at all.”

“My dad mentioned a position may be opening up at the lodge. I can’t help but think he’s watching my progress with this project to see if I’m capable of handling the job. I’m not sure I’ve proven I’m worthy of it.”

“Failure or success doesn’t rise or fall based on the amount of money you raised, but whether you planned a good event and drew interest to your cause. You can always plan another event and another until you have the money you need. And some projects have a fundraiser for each one.”

“It’s good to know there are other options. That I can pivot when I need to.”

“That’s exactly it—when it comes to both fundraising and life. Things will change, and you need to be flexible.”

“Are you saying that’s what Tyler represents? A chance to pivot?”

“Only you can determine that,” she said, her lips drawn into a straight line.

“I like him. I like what we’re building. I just don’t know if it’s enough.” Would I be happy living here long-term? Or would I grow to resent Tyler? I had so many questions and not enough answers.

She patted my arm. “You’ll figure it out. I’m sure of it.”

How could she be so confident I’d make the right decision?

“When you fall in love, everything becomes clear. The things that matter and the ones that don’t.”

Had I fallen in love? “I don’t think that’s what’s happening.”

She gave me a look and then said, “You might not have admitted it to yourself, but I saw you with Tyler at the play.”

I wanted to ask if she thought Tyler felt the same way, but it was his mother. I didn’t feel right asking for that insight.

She patted my arm. “I’m confident you’ll figure everything out.”

I wanted to ask when all of this would become clear because, so far, it was muddled in my brain. There was no clear solution or path.

We fell silent as Tyler went up to bat. I hadn’t seen him play except for the one day I’d pitched to him, and we hadn’t exactly spent much time playing baseball. His stance was strong and confident as he waited for the first pitch. He immediately swung, and it went into the outfield.

I jumped up and down, cheering for him. It felt so good to be here. To know that I’d brought everyone to the field today and that it was fun.

Whether we built a lot of dugouts or not, I’d planned a good event. Tyler slid into second base, and when he pulled off his batting gloves, he smiled at me. I gave him a thumbs-up, pleased he’d acknowledged me on the sidelines.

When the count was full, Mac hit a line drive over second base, sending Tyler home. I jumped and cheered with everyone else, moving over to the bench to high-five Tyler when he was finished celebrating with his teammates. He ignored my outstretched hands and lifted me to swing me around. “Did you see that?”

“You know I did,” I said as he lowered me to the ground.

“That was fun. Next time, you should play.”

“I’m kind of busy planning everything,” I teased lightly.

“I don’t see why you can’t partake in the fun.” He kissed me.

Reluctantly, I broke away. “Your mother’s here and probably watching us.”

He grinned. “Let’s give everyone a show.”

“You don’t care if my brothers find out?” I asked and immediately regretted it when he stiffened. I should talk to them, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that it wasn’t any of their business.

Would Tyler feel differently if they found out about us? Would he go back to how he’d always been, worried about what my brothers thought? I didn’t fully trust his new optimism.

He dropped his forehead to mine. “You shouldn’t care what they think. This is your life. Live it according to your rules. Not your brothers’.”

“I’m not the one who ever cared about what they thought. It’s always been the guys I’ve dated here.”

He held his arms up and looked around. “Enjoy this. What we planned today, how well it’s going, how good we feel.”

Mac slapped Tyler’s shoulder with his glove. “You want to play some baseball?”

“We on the field?” Tyler asked, without letting me go.

“Welcome back to the game,” Sam said as the rest of the team took the field.

“Don’t go far. I want you to watch,” Tyler said to me.

“I won’t,” I promised as he kissed me one more time before taking off his helmet and grabbing his glove and hat.

I wasn’t even sure I wanted him to talk to my brothers. I could almost anticipate what would happen. They’d rant and rave, and he’d cave to their ridiculous demands to stay away from their precious baby sister. I was so done with their attitude.

I hung around the baseball fields for the next hour while the games finished up. Everyone seemed to be having a good time, eating and drinking. I was almost giddy with anticipation about counting what we’d collected.

When the games were finished, we cleaned up the bases and equipment, putting everything back into the equipment storage boxes. Then we convened by the registration tables.

“Do we count the money now?” I asked Tyler. I was a little nervous about doing it in front of his family. What would they think if I failed to raise enough money? I hated this feeling of not being enough.

I hadn't experienced it in a long time. It probably started up again when I lost my job.

"I already did," Alice said. "Do you want to hear the results?"

"Let's hear it," Sam said, throwing Maggie up on his shoulders.

"We don't have the final numbers from the snack shack. We're still waiting on that, but so far, we've raised five thousand dollars."

It was enough for three dugouts. Not bad but not near what I wanted to raise. Why would I think that I'd raise a hundred grand from a few baseball games? I was afraid to meet anyone's gaze, but everyone was congratulating me on a job well done when I wasn't sure it had been.

Tyler hugged me tight. "This is good."

"Is it?" I wasn't sure Dad would see this as a good result or a sign he should hire me.

"It's our first attempt. Besides, I heard a bunch of people saying that they wanted to contribute more. I think if we make an announcement that we're working with a specific school or team, we could get everyone in that community involved to raise the money."

"That's not a bad idea."

"Figure out which fields or teams need them the most. Then let's make a big splash and announce it in the middle of practice. We'll get everyone excited. Maybe they'll raise more money, and we can use it for more projects."

"Okay. Yeah. That sounds good." I wasn't entirely convinced that it had been a success. But I was willing to let it go for now.

"Who wants pizza and beer?"

Everyone cheered, and we got into our respective cars and made our way to the restaurant. I could use a shower and some time to think, but I wanted to spend time with his family. I enjoyed being around them. They included me in a way my family never had.

"You okay?" Tyler asked me, bringing my attention to him.

"I will be. I don't know what I was hoping for—something more, I guess."

"It was a small fundraiser to bring awareness to our cause. It's not the only thing we can try. We didn't fail. We tried something, generated some money, and people had fun."

I liked that he'd said *we* and not *you*. We were in this together, and that felt good.

“It’s stupid, but I wanted to impress my father.”

“You don’t think he would be proud of you?” Tyler glanced over at me.

“I don’t know.” But I didn’t think he would be. I wasn’t a superstar snowboarder, and I didn’t stay home to run the business.

“He should be, and if he’s not, we are. You have my whole family behind you. Don’t forget, this is a group project. We’re in this together.”

“I like that,” I said as he reached over to squeeze my hand. No matter what my family thought, I was enjoying this time with Tyler and his family. It almost felt like what I’d been missing my whole life.

CHAPTER 17



TYLER

*K*ylie was hard on herself, and I think it had everything to do with how she'd recently lost her job and moved back home, where she wasn't sure her family respected her.

"We did it," I said to her as I parked near the restaurant.

Neither of us made a move to leave.

"Is it enough, though?" her voice was small.

I shifted to face her. "It's never contingent on any one thing in business. There are so many things we could try."

A slow smile spread over her face, and I wanted to take a snapshot of this moment and keep it forever. "Yeah, okay."

I leaned over and kissed her softly. I wished we were alone, and I could show her how proud of her I was, but my family was waiting for us.

Inside, we sat at the two large tables the hostess had pushed together. My family was loud and fun, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

I watched as Kylie accepted praise from my brothers and her friends. With each passing comment, she relaxed more. I just wished she could see how great she was. She didn't need to be in another country to be valued for that. She fit in here. Even if she always felt like an outsider with her family, she'd still have mine.

We ate pizza and salad until we were stuffed. Between the baseball games and the greasy food, everyone was ready to head home.

On the drive to Kylie's cabin, a small smile played on her lips.

"What are you thinking about?"

She glanced over at me. "I'm looking forward to building that first dugout."

I grinned. “I had visions of you in cutoff jean shorts and that white tank top with a tool belt.”

“Are you planning another run through the sprinklers?” Kylie asked.

I nodded. “It’ll be hot work.”

She let her head fall back and laughed.

My heart was lighter, knowing she felt better. I never thought I could care so much about another person that I’d put making her feel better above my own needs. I think I might have been falling in love, or maybe I was already there. I just needed to convince her that this was the place she should come home to.

When she sobered, she asked, “So you had had visions of me building dugouts before we hooked up?”

I didn’t like that she referred to our relationship as hooking up, but I let it go for now. “Can you blame me? A chick working with tools is hot, and it’s not just any girl. I’ve only thought about it with you.”

She smiled, and it reminded me a little of the girl she’d been. Back when she was freer with her smiles. “I could say the same about you.”

I wanted to show her how I felt with my body, even though I couldn’t say it with my words. Not yet anyway. I needed to deal with her brothers and make sure she was on the same page before I declared anything.

I had a feeling Kylie needed time to come to terms with what we were to each other.

At her cabin, we hurried to the front door, and Kylie unlocked the door, pushing it open. I slammed it shut behind us and pressed her against the door. I needed more, so I lifted her and kissed her like I was a man starving.

There was this urgency to our actions. Her hands ripped at my clothes, so I let her drop to the floor. Then we made quick work of our clothes. I remembered to grab a condom and lifted her again.

I slid inside, knowing she felt like home to me. It wasn’t the place or my family, but her. I wished she could see that. She needed to realize it on her own.

Everything felt intense. I couldn’t savor the feel of her walls surrounding me or the sting of my hair as she pulled it. It was like we were both racing to the finishing line. My muscles strained as I held her up, my hips snapping forward.

Kylie bit her lip against the moans erupting from her throat.

“I want to hear you.” With each thrust, I ground against her clit, silently

urging her to get there before me because I was barreling toward the finish line.

I bowed my head so I could suck on her nipples, and a few seconds later, she detonated, spasming around me.

As she squeezed my cock, the familiar tingle started at the base of my spine and spread through my body. I thrust deep, stars exploding behind my eyelids as I rested my forehead against hers.

We were both breathing heavy, our skin beaded with sweat. When I felt steady, I eased her to the floor. She leaned against the door, looking a little stunned.

“I need a shower,” I said as I took care of the condom and threw it out in the powder room of the foyer. I didn’t bother to gather our clothes; I just lifted her in my arms, bridal-style.

Kylie wrapped her arms around my neck. “Is this your thing?”

“Carrying you?” I asked, even though I knew what she was referring to.

“Yes,” she said, as if it amused her.

“I guess it is. Do you mind?” I asked, tenderness sweeping through my body.

She smiled softly. “I kind of love it.”

Pleasure burst in my chest. I wanted her to love me, not just the things I did. I knew it would take time, and we didn’t have a lot of it. I planned to spend every spare minute with her I could, showing her how I felt. I just hoped it would be enough.

I didn’t put her down until we were standing in the master bathroom. I turned on the water as she gathered her hair off her neck.

I kissed her shoulder. “I love having unfettered access to your body. Your skin is so soft.”

Her head fell back. “I like it too.”

“I’m never going to get enough of you,” I murmured so softly I wasn’t sure she even heard me. I needed to be careful. If she wasn’t ready for something more serious, I would only scare her away by being too open.

I pulled away to check the temperature of the water and then tugged her into the stall ahead of me. She stood with her back to the stream of water, her head tipped back, and I was mesmerized by the droplets of water cascading over her tan skin.

I stepped in front of her, a little in awe that I was here with her. Kylie Wilde. I never thought we had a real chance, but I was in her shower, in her

house, and she hadn't pushed me away.

I planned to take advantage of every minute we had together. I lowered my head, my hand on the curve of her waist as I sucked on her nipple.

Her fingers tangled in the hair at the base of my head as she held me to her. Then I dropped to my knees on the tile. She widened her stance to give me room as I sucked on her clit. Her hips moved forward as her nails scraped my scalp.

I enjoyed the bite of her nails and the sting of the tile against my knees. It reminded me that this was real. I was present in the moment, breathing in her scent and making her mine.

Whether she knew it or not, I wanted to ruin her for any other guys. I wanted her to moan my name, to never forget the scrape of my facial hair against the soft skin of her thighs.

By the time I used my fingers to ease inside her, she was moaning and clutching at my hair. She wanted more, and I wanted to give it to her.

I stood abruptly and turned her so that her hands were pressed against the tile, and she was bent over at the waist. She widened her stance as I lined up my cock.

My head dropped back in frustration. "I don't have a condom in here."

"It's okay," she said over her shoulder. "I'm clean and on birth control."

"I am too," I said, breathing out a sigh of relief.

There was nothing like the feeling I got when I was inside her, her walls pulsing around my cock, her cries echoing off the tiles.

Kylie Wilde was mine. She just didn't realize it yet.

I eased out and then slowly pressed forward, my hands on her hips. Each time felt better than the one before. It didn't seem possible, but it was.

I reached around to palm her breasts, brushing a thumb over her nipple. Whenever I touched her nipples, it took her to the next level, which I desperately needed because I was already close.

I covered her hand with my free one and pounded into her. This time, when we crested, we did it together. I rested my cheek against her back for a few seconds before slowly guiding her to stand.

"We were supposed to be getting clean," Kylie said as she turned in my arms.

"I seem to keep dirtying you up." But my grin belied the apology in my voice.

"I'm not complaining."

Her skin was flush, her muscles shaky, so I squirted some shampoo into the palm of my hand and turned her so I could lather her hair. I wanted to take care of her. When the suds were rinsed out of her hair, I did the same with the conditioner and then the soap.

By the time we got out, our skin was wrinkled.

My muscles were sore from the baseball game to the sex, but it was a good kind of sore. The way you felt after a particularly grueling yet satisfying workout.

Instead of handing her a towel, I dried her skin, kissing it as I went.

“You’re spoiling me.”

I paused. “You strike me as someone who could use a little spoiling.”

Her eyes darkened and then softened as I wrapped the towel around her.

“You have anything in the cupboards for a snack?” I asked as I dried myself quicker than I had her.

“How can you be hungry after eating that pizza?”

I wrapped the towel around my waist and kissed her. “We worked up an appetite, and I want to treat you. Didn’t your other boyfriends take care of you?”

“Not any of the men I’ve dated,” she murmured as she moved into her bedroom and pulled open a drawer to sift through her lace panties.

“Then you’ve been dating the wrong ones.” I kissed her shoulder as she picked up a yellow thong. I palmed her ass under the towel. “As hot as those are, I’d like you bare. Easy access.”

She shook her head. “You’re bad.”

“You like it,” I said as she turned and kissed me this time. Her arms wrapped around my neck, and I wondered if she could see how amazing we were together.

She loosened her hold on me and eased away. She pulled an oversize T-shirt over her head, and I pulled on the shorts I’d worn to the game. If I was going to be spending more time here, I’d need to bring more clothes over.

“Why don’t you get into bed, and I’ll grab some snacks and drinks.”

“That sounds great,” Kylie said as she climbed onto the bed we hadn’t touched yet. I had plans for her.

I gathered food from the pantry, crackers and hummus, strawberries and chocolate, and water. When we’d set up our little picnic, she turned on the TV.

We ate while we talked and laughed over a favorite sitcom we’d both

watched and enjoyed. It was easy and fun, and when the food was gone, I put the empty containers on the nightstand. I leaned against the pillows and put my arm around Kylie. She curled into my body, and I couldn't think of a better date.

This thing with her felt right. No matter what her brothers might think, no one could tell me that Kylie wasn't the best thing that had ever happened to me.

After a few more episodes, I turned off the TV. She turned her face toward me, and it was the most natural thing in the world to kiss her. Her lips parted, and my tongue moved into her mouth, exploring her.

When her lips were swollen, I moved down her body, kissing as I went, until my shoulders were between her legs.

"I've never had so many orgasms before."

"Get used to it," I said with a challenge in my voice as I licked her from entrance to clit. Then I doubled my efforts, using my fingers, tongue, and teeth to drive her up and over again. With her muscles still trembling from the aftershocks, I slid inside her.

We'd fucked so many times tonight that she had to be sore. This time, I held her close. I wanted to be inside her twenty-four seven. Not being near her wasn't an option anymore. She'd burrowed under my skin, and there was no getting her out.

I lowered my body over hers so that I was only able to move with slow thrusts inside her. But it was close and intimate, and nothing had ever felt better.

I interlaced my fingers with hers on either side of her head and kissed her, wanting to ride this edge forever. When I felt her first spasm, my orgasm rolled through me like a wave. I felt so close to her in that moment, and I wanted nothing more than to share my feelings with her, but it was too soon.

I eased to her side and held her close. I fell asleep like that, not even bothering to clean up.

CHAPTER 18



KYLIE

The night of the baseball fundraiser, something shifted between me and Tyler. Since then, it was assumed that he'd come over after work. We ate dinner together, sat on the deck to watch the sunset, and went inside, planning to watch TV in bed but inevitably had sex. It felt like something else entirely. It felt more like he was making love to me.

A couple of Saturdays after the fundraisers, we were supposed to build our first dugout. Weekends were the best time since the Fletchers didn't usually work on other projects on the weekends, and the team was out of school.

Tyler had broken ground on his new house recently, and there'd been this hum of anticipation under his skin. He was excited about the new house and anxious to get it completed. I was glad that he was looking forward to it because he seemed almost stuck before.

Tyler had left early this morning to help his brothers get the wood and other supplies to the field. I'd lazed around in bed for a bit before showering and putting on the outfit he'd envisioned for this day.

He hadn't mentioned it again, but he'd been so specific when he brought it up, I couldn't resist teasing him. I picked a pair of cutoff jeans shorts that covered my ass, since there were kids around, a white tank top, and sneakers. It was cooler when I stepped outside, so I grabbed a black Fletcher & Sons sweatshirt that he'd left behind one morning.

He'd begun to leave more and more things at the cabin. At first, it was a toothbrush and a change of clothes he'd neatly folded and stacked on my dresser. It made sense because he showered after work and changed before dinner. But, with each day, more things ended up in that spot, and we hadn't

had a conversation about it.

It was understood that we needed to make the most of our time together. I still hadn't decided what direction my life should take, and the dugout project let me push it off indefinitely. I was scared to say anything because I wasn't sure what I wanted.

I parked next to a Fletcher & Sons' truck as there were already several in the lot. As I got closer to the field, I saw that everyone was there—Miranda, Waylon, Mac, Natalie, Delaney, Sam, Alice, and Maggie. There were coolers of drinks and donut boxes on a table they'd set up.

Wood was laid out on the ground, and Tyler was talking to some kids who'd arrived early. When he saw me, he smiled, and it drew me to him. "Our fearless leader is here. Kids, this is Kylie. She's in charge of the project today."

"I hope not. I don't know how to build a dugout."

Tyler winked at me. "We're going to learn something new today. But first, I wanted to remind you of a few safety precautions. If you're holding a tool, then you're standing next to an adult who's assisting you. Wear the hard hats and safety goggles. If you get hot or tired, take a break. We have plenty of food and drinks. We'll get started in a few minutes," Tyler said.

I counted heads. "We're just waiting for a few more kids."

Maggie had taken it upon herself to hand out the hard hats to the kids.

Tyler turned toward me and dipped his head to whisper in my ear. "It looks like you're not wearing shorts. I thought you'd be hot in a tank top, but you in my sweatshirt? I want to take you somewhere no one can see us and have my way with you."

I smiled. "I assure you, I am. And there are kids around."

He stepped back and held up his hands. "I'll behave. For now."

I smiled, heat curling in my belly even though he'd woken me with his tongue on my pussy this morning. I felt insatiable around him, like I'd never get enough.

When everyone arrived, Tyler went through the safety instructions again, and Maggie passed out the remaining hard hats. When I put mine on, Tyler patted it. "You're adorable in that hat. I'd love to see you on a construction site. Although it might be too distracting."

"Are you being serious about me hanging around your work?" I asked, not quite believing he wasn't teasing.

"We're just digging a hole in the ground at the moment, but when the

walls are up, you should stop by. I'll put you to work."

Tyler's tone was genuine, so I said, "I'd like that."

I observed him as we worked. He was patient when he showed the kids how to use the tools.

So far, I'd mainly overseen the project, making sure kids had something to work on. That was the hardest part because there were so many people on-site and only so many things to do. We quickly got into a rhythm of having a few kids take a break for a snack while Mac worked with another group of kids on measuring. The third group of kids worked with Tyler on cutting the boards.

It was a beautiful day out.

One of the dads approached me. "I really appreciate you working on this project with the kids. It teaches them a skill, and I hope this will stick with them for a long time."

"Me too." When I started the project, I thought it would be nice for everyone to have the same equipment, but I hadn't thought about what it would be like to involve the kids in the improvements. That was all Tyler.

It made the project well-rounded and one everyone could get behind. I wondered if we could do more things like this. Not necessarily dugouts, but other projects where kids from the community could be involved. We'd be creating something for the community while teaching kids how to use tools to build something.

There was no question it was great for Fletcher & Sons. Not that they weren't already a household name, but this would help more people get to know them, and I bet they would have even more work in the future from their connections formed here.

"Why are you just hanging out?" Tyler said when his group took a break.

"It seemed like you had a lot of hands already, and I thought it would be good for me to talk to the parents."

"In my fantasies, you were helping out, holding tools—you know, hammering something." He cocked his head to the side, a sparkle in his eye.

"Hmm. That does sound nice." For him. It sounded like my working with him was a fantasy of his. "Do you have something for me to do?"

He turned so his hips were facing the area we'd been working. "As the boss, I think you should hammer in the first beam."

"Are you sure about that? I don't have any skills with tools or anything." My abilities began and ended with blueprints of houses.

He gave me a look. “You’re the face of this project.”

“I don’t know about that. I’m more the money person. I’m really great behind the scenes.” I enjoyed being here and celebrating, but building something? I hadn’t expected to have much involvement in that. “I’m more eye candy than someone who’s useful.”

He drew me in to his side. “You’re the best eye candy, but that’s not going to fly.” And then louder to the group, he said, “It’s time to start hammering in the first few pieces. I think Miss Kylie should do the honors. What do you think?”

The kids cheered.

Tyler grinned. “Don’t be afraid. This is going to be fun.”

“I’m not afraid.” I was a little worried, but I’d seen the way Tyler patiently explained the process to the kids. Surely, he would help me too.

“Before we get started, I wanted to let you know the math behind this build. The dugouts have to be along the first and third base lines. They can’t be too far down or the players could be at risk of being hit by a ball.” Tyler gestured to the areas. “That’s why when we’re done with the building, we’ll add a fence to the front. If you’ve ever watched a major league game,”—a few kids nodded their heads—“the players hang on a half wall, but since this is for kids, the fence will go to the ceiling of the dugout so no one gets hit by fly balls. The dugout itself is an enclosed space, and there’s no way for you to escape if something happens.”

The girls’ eyes were wide as they took in everything he’d said. It was important that they understood the safety issues surrounding what they were building. Tyler wanted them to understand every aspect of the build, and I could already envision these kids being able to recite the information to their friends when asked about it.

I noticed a reporter hanging around. I’d reached out to the paper about the baseball game, and I was pleased she’d come.

“Major league fields have sunken dugouts so fans can see over it, but we don’t need that here. The bleachers are to the side, so we always build them on grade, which means level with the ground.”

A few of the kids were hanging on his every word, and I wondered if he’d created a desire to build in some of them.

“Since this is a softball field, this corner of the dugout should be no closer than thirty-five feet from home plate.” Tyler pointed to the corner, where they’d already built what would be the base of the dugout.

I remembered from the specs that the building itself would be eight feet deep, ten feet tall, and twenty feet long.

“These are concrete blocks we placed before you arrived. It provides a sturdy foundation for the rest of the building. We also placed the steel frames so that our build will survive winds and storms once it’s up. Now, who’s ready to build the dugout?”

The girls and parents cheered, and Tyler motioned for me to come closer. I was nervous but hopeful that I could do it. He handed me safety goggles that I placed over my eyes.

Mac and Sam arranged the beams how they were supposed to go, and Tyler handed me a drill and a screw.

“We’ll use screws to connect the joints to make it sturdier,” Tyler said as he showed me where to place the screw and how to use the drill. The kids gathered around, but I felt confident with Tyler’s instructions to give it a try.

My nerves kicked up when the drill powered on, but I remembered that the kids were watching me. If I didn’t try something new, why should they?

I bit my lip as I slowly held the screw in place and then used the drill to screw it into the wood. When it was flush with the wood, I sat back on my heels and turned off the drill. “I hope you have extras in case I screwed that up.”

“That was perfect,” Tyler said. “Why don’t you work on the next one? Mac and Sam will get more of you started on the hammering and nails and the other corner.”

“Was it really perfect?” I asked him when the rest of the group moved to the side to get started on another part of the project.

Tyler smiled proudly. “Couldn’t have done it better myself.”

“You’re a good teacher.” An unexpected tenderness curled around my heart.

“I’ve always led a crew but never really thought about whether I was good at instructing. Most people come to me with experience.”

“Well, you are. I think this is going to be the beginning of more successful builds in the community.”

He grinned at me. “I think so too.”

He stayed by my side as I finished the corner and then helped me stand it up on the concrete and connect it to the support beam. At least I think that’s what he’d called it. He was a strong and steady support system, and the more I worked alongside him, the more confident I felt.

He was right to get me to join in. I felt more accomplished as the boards started going up. I wasn't just the fundraiser person; I could contribute in this way too. I was vaguely aware that a reporter was walking around and taking pictures.

But I didn't worry about what we looked like or whether the pictures were newsworthy; my heart was too full.

Our plan was to finish the build in one day and paint the second. By the time we finished, the sun was setting, and the reporter was long gone. She'd left her number, telling us to send the final pictures so they could be included in the paper this week.

I wasn't expecting a spot in the coveted Sunday edition, but anything online would be amazing.

"I can't believe we did it," I said to Tyler as the kids were eating the pizzas his dad ordered. Everyone was tired and hungry, so the food was devoured in minutes. One by one, the families thanked us and left.

"You did it."

"I can't take the credit. I couldn't have done any of this without you and your family."

"We did it together," Mac said as we focused on cleaning up the trash from dinner and tools used in the build.

I loved that about his family. They did a lot of things together, and they genuinely enjoyed each other's company.

Had I always been an outsider at my family's resort, or was I responsible for the chasm between me and my family? Had I been a little standoffish in high school, assuming there was nothing for me to do at the lodge? Had I jumped to conclusions?

Tyler kissed me, then said he'd meet me at home. He had a few things to take care of first. As I drove to the rental cabin, I felt satisfied that we'd completed what we'd set out to do. We'd built one dugout. We had something to show for our efforts, and hopefully, my parents would be pleased with the results.

We planned to build more dugouts over the next few weekends, but then the project would be established enough that Tyler could run it on his own. He wouldn't need me. It was probably time to figure out my next step. Maybe send some résumés to other hotels in Paris, where my previous work history meant something.

I just hoped Brad's dad hadn't badmouthed me to others in the hospitality

industry. I could work for a hotel in Colorado, but there wasn't anything comparable in Telluride. The Rigby family ran a lodge, but it catered to those who wanted to plan adventures. Then there were numerous boutique hotels and B&Bs closer to town.

Outside of town, there were chain hotels, but I wasn't interested in working in one of those. I wasn't sure I wanted to work at the lodge, but maybe I should spend more time there and figure out if it was something I'd want to do.

When Dad mentioned the event coordinator position, I wanted to prove I could do it. I'd risen to the challenge, not even sure I wanted it. Did I want the ultimate prize, a place at Wilde Ski Resort?

By the time Tyler joined me at home, I was exhausted from the stress of the day and the manual labor. We fell into bed, and he clicked on the TV, surfing channels while I tried to keep my eyes open.

Hanging out with Tyler was comfortable. The sex was off the charts, but I still didn't know if I belonged in Telluride with him. It was one thing to fit in with his family, but shouldn't I fit in with mine if I was going to stay?

CHAPTER 19



TYLER

*A*fter we built the first dugout, I couldn't help but feel accomplished that we'd done what we'd set out to do. But I had this niggling feeling in my gut that it was the beginning of the end for me and Kylie.

I felt her pulling away even as we ate dinner before we went our separate ways on the way home. She was tired, and I couldn't blame her for falling asleep before we had a chance to talk about the day, but I was worried about where her head was at.

I figured she was overthinking things, assuming there wasn't a place for her here in Telluride. Was I not enough for her? I was irritated with her family, especially her brothers, for never including her. It might not have been intentional, but when they excluded her from hanging out with them, it reinforced her belief that she didn't fit in and that there wasn't a spot for her in Telluride.

I hated that for her. I didn't want her to feel that way, but how could I even broach the subject with her brothers without letting them know how I felt about her? I needed to have the conversation with them too.

On Sunday, my brothers helped Kylie and me paint the new dugout. We painted it white with black trim. The fence would be installed later that week, and then it would be ready to go. We'd do the visitor side dugout next week.

As the first field to be completed, it would be the one we took pictures of and used in our promotional advertisements to raise money for additional dugouts. We wanted it to look classic and clean.

Sam and Mac were measuring and building the concrete block foundation for the visitor's side dugout, so it was just me and Kylie painting this one. Maggie was using a small roller to get the bottom of the wall, and Delaney

was supervising her, which seemed to consist mainly of praising her, even when more paint got on Maggie than on the wall.

“What do you think about offering an option to paint the mascots on future dugouts?” Kylie asked as she used the roller on the back side of the dugout.

“That would be cool,” Delaney said.

Maggie nodded before asking, “What’s a mascot?”

I dipped my roller into the paint tray. “It’s what the team is represented by, like a lion or an eagle.”

There was something calming and soothing about painting. It was a hard thing to mess up, so I could relax and go through the motions.

Although I had a feeling we might need to do some cleanup work where Maggie was currently working. The grass had white specks scattered over it, and her nose had one large white dollop on it. I took a few steps back so I could take a picture and send it to Alice.

“Do you know anyone who could paint a mural?” Kylie asked me.

“I don’t know any painters.”

She bit her lip. “Maybe I could put some feelers out. See if anyone would be able and willing to offer their talents.”

“There has to be someone,” I said, knowing Kylie was skilled at getting whatever it was that she wanted.

“The reporter left a message last night saying that she wanted to return when these two were complete and do a bigger story. She wanted to dive into our motivation for the charity.”

“That’s great,” I said.

“The motivation for both of us is a little different. I grew up feeling like girls’ sports didn’t have what the boys did, but you come from baseball and wanted to help fellow baseball players.”

“I think both are good reasons. There’s no one judging us. We’re helping the community. Why do our motivations matter?” I asked her.

“With the ski equipment fundraiser, I just wanted to help people, and it’s really the same motivation for this one. But is that enough?”

“Why wouldn’t it be? Wanting to help others is a good thing.”

“I guess I was thinking it should be something more.”

“You want to give back to the community and create something lasting and beautiful. Now every time someone sees one of our dugouts, they’ll know it’s the one you built,” Delaney said.

Kylie lowered her roller and took a step back. “Will they? There’s nothing on the building to show that it was our project. Should we have a plaque on it, designating it as one of ours?”

“It should have a name. What do you call the organization?” Delaney asked.

“We never officially named it. We just call it *the dugout project*.”

“We need a name,” I said.

The girls threw out a few—Kylie’s Dugouts, Dugout Dens, Fletchers’ Dugouts—but none of them sounded right, and we couldn’t seem to find a way to honor both Kylie’s and the Fletchers’ contributions.

“I don’t think it should say our names. It should just have a cute name that people can remember and easily identify as ours.”

“Dugouts for Kids!” Maggie randomly cheered as she jumped around, paint flying everywhere.

“That’s not a bad idea, but what if we eventually wanted to expand and do more to maintain the fields? Eventually, everyone will have dugouts, and I don’t see us stopping there. We could still raise money to maintain the fields, providing the paint and chalk for the lines and equipment for the kids.”

I grinned. “That’s easy. Fields for Kids.”

“I love both,” Kylie said.

“What if our initial project is Dugouts for Kids because I like that it describes exactly what we’re doing now? And if we want to expand down the road, we can call that project Fields for Kids?”

“I love it so much.” Kylie hugged Maggie and then Delaney. “Thanks for brainstorming with us.”

Delaney shrugged. “It was fun.”

What I loved most about this project was that it was a family thing. Mom and Dad pulled up shortly after with boxes of donuts and coffee. We happily took a break to eat and update my parents on our progress.

“I think this is amazing,” Miranda said after Sam gave her the tour of the finished dugout. “We should take pictures and put them on the wall at the office.”

“That’s a great idea,” Kylie said.

“You can use them for the ski resort too,” Mom said to Kylie.

“I don’t know if anyone associates this project with the Wildes. It’s more my thing.”

I didn’t argue that point because I agreed. Her family hadn’t been

involved in this one, and the credit should go to Kylie.

“For your future office then,” Mom said as she went to Dad’s truck to get her camera.

Kylie was quiet after that. I wondered if she was thinking about where her office would be—in the lodge or in a hotel in Europe.

I hated the tightening in my gut anytime I thought of Kylie not being happy here. I dreaded the thought of her leaving, the possibility that she could cast aside everything we’d shared.

After Mom took some pictures of the dugout, we resumed painting, and she got some candid shots of us working.

When we finished, we put away the paint and supplies. I was lost in thought when a splash of paint landed on my face. “What—?” I asked as I lifted my gaze to find a delighted Kylie.

“Are you throwing paint?” I asked her as I prowled closer, a roller clutched in my hand.

Her eyes widened comically before she sobered and took off like a shot. I gave chase as she darted around the fence and onto the field. The whole time she screamed, “No, no, no!”

I didn’t want to throw paint on the field, so I waited until we were in an open space and then threw the paint. My brothers surrounded us, getting in on the action. There was laughing and squealing, and even Maggie and Delaney joined in until everyone was covered in paint.

We eased off when the kids joined in because we didn’t want to have to clean paint out of their hair or explain it to Natalie and Alice. We collapsed on the ground, everyone out of breath and tired of running.

Mom showed her camera to Kylie. Apparently, she’d caught it on camera. “You think the reporter would be interested in this?”

“I think that’s a great idea. This one is the best.” I moved over to get a closer look. It was one where I was chasing Kylie, and there was this sparkle in her eyes and a delighted smile on her face. It was perfect. After the shot was taken, I’d hugged Kylie in the guise of covering her with the paint that dotted my shirt, but really, it was just to touch her. I loved being close to her.

It was fun and just the release I needed. I wanted to show Kylie that she fit in with us and that she could have a life here, and this was one way to do it. She was the one who’d instigated the paint war, which was exactly the sort of thing one of my brothers would do.

It was proof she belonged here with us. If only she could see it and not all

the ways she didn't fit in or fell short.

We cleaned up and headed home for showers. We used some towels Mom brought to clean up the girls and to cover the seats as we drove home. Inside, we immediately tore off our clothes and threw them in the wash, then I grabbed Kylie and carried her to the shower.

"You don't have to carry me everywhere," she said with an amused smile as I set her down and turned on the water.

"It's more fun this way," I said simply. I couldn't stop touching her. Part of it was knowing it might be temporary, that I wouldn't have forever with her.

We both used soap to scrub the paint off each other's bodies. It was almost as fun as throwing it on her. When our skin was red from the scrubbing, we got out and wrapped ourselves in fluffy towels.

"That was one of the best weekends I've had in forever."

"I think so too," I said as we settled on the bed.

"We should get ready for Sunday dinner."

"You're coming to my parents', right?"

"Actually, I think I should make more of an effort to see my family."

That hit like a stab to the heart. I couldn't deny that she should spend time with her family. But I wasn't invited. I wasn't ready for her brothers to know about us.

"Tell Miranda and Waylon that I'm sorry for not coming to their house."

"They'll understand." But would I? I'd gotten used to spending most of my free time with her, but the fact was, she had family here too. And if I wanted to be part of whatever she was building with hers, I needed to come clean to her brothers.

"Should we tell them?"

Her brow furrowed. "Tell who what?"

"Tell your brothers that we're seeing each other." Then I held my breath for her answer.

Kylie sighed. "I'm not ready for that yet. Let me feel out tonight, see how things are first."

"I can wait," I said, even though I wasn't so sure.

"I don't know what I want to do. Shouldn't I know by now?"

I could tell she was conflicted by this, and I wanted to soothe her. So I drew her into my body and kissed the top of her head. "I think it will come to you when the time is right."

“I love fundraising and building the dugouts. I feel great when I’m doing anything in relation to it. I felt the same about raising money for the ski equipment. Maybe that’s what I’m supposed to do.”

“Fundraise?”

“Yeah, but not for other people, for my own foundation. I keep getting this idea in my head. Kylie’s Kids.”

A tingle ran through my body as she continued. “I could raise money for sports equipment, leave boxes around town for people to drop their lightly used things into, and we could distribute them throughout the community.”

I held her tighter, so proud of her. “I love it.”

“It would be mine. Separate from Dugouts for Kids and Fields for Kids. It would just be equipment.”

“Yes.” I turned her so she was facing me. “I can’t tell you how proud I am of you. You took something that meant something to you, and you’re making it a reality. You’re helping the community and the kids.”

“I finally scheduled another meeting with the mayor and his event coordinator, Scarlett. I met her at the baseball game fundraiser. I’ll talk to them about a booth at the local festivals and events. I love the idea of these boxes being placed in the library or the grocery store.”

“Is this what you’re going to talk to your family about tonight?”

“I don’t think they’ll be that impressed. It’s not a thousand-dollar dinner or anything like that.”

“I think you underestimate them. They’ll think it’s as cool as I do.”

She rested her head against my shoulder. “I hope so. I saw more of them when I planned the ski equipment fundraiser but not much since. I think it’s time for me to reconnect with them. To see if there’s a place for me here.”

My heart hurt because I wished it was a foregone conclusion that she’d fit in with her family, that she knew there was a place for her in her hometown. “I’ll miss you, but you need to do this.” It was a necessary step for us to move forward in our relationship. She needed to make a decision about where she’d live.

“It’s past time for me to figure a few things out.”

We watched TV for a bit and then finally got up to get dressed and go our separate ways. I wanted to tell her all the things I was thinking: *I love you. I’ll always be here for you.* But I didn’t want to influence her decision beyond showing her how I felt. So when I walked her to her rental car, I kissed her, pouring everything I couldn’t say into it.

I just hoped I'd get a chance to tell her how I felt.

CHAPTER 20



KYLIE

When I'd texted earlier to say I'd be joining my family, Mom said everyone would be there. That was usual, as far as I could tell. None of the boys were dating anyone, so they were expected to be there every Sunday for dinner.

When I returned home, no one had pushed me to join them. I wasn't sure if it was because I didn't fit in or if they didn't want to push me for fear I'd leave again.

I was starting to see I didn't know my family that well. As soon as I was in high school, my brothers were already in college, and one by one, they returned home to take over the lodge. Then I went to college, studied overseas, and fell in love with Europe. I didn't return home much, other than the occasional visit.

The last few years, I'd rarely returned at all. I said it was the expensive and long flight home, but it was more than that. The longer I stayed away, the harder it was to come home. I had to admit that I might be the reason for the rift between us. I'd blamed my family my entire life without seeing how I was also part of the equation.

This was the first time I was going home with an open mind. I walked inside and was immediately met with the sound of my brothers' loud voices and laughs. Would they welcome me, or would they be surprised I was joining them?

I walked into the kitchen, and everyone fell silent.

"I'm so glad you could make it," Mom said, coming around the counter to hug me.

"Sorry it took me so long to join you."

“You’ve been busy with your fundraising projects. We’ve heard all about it,” Dad said.

I felt a little guilty for that because I should have been the one telling them about what was going on in my life. “We built the first dugout this weekend and painted it.”

I pulled the pictures I’d taken on my phone and a few that Miranda had sent me of the paint fight.

“You look close with the Fletchers,” Xander said.

“Yeah, we’ve been working closely on this project. They came to me with the idea of partnering together on a fundraiser to help the community. I wanted to help with girls’ sports, and they wanted to do something with the baseball programs. This is what we came up with.” I tensed, almost expecting one of my brothers to give me a hard time, saying dugouts weren’t really that helpful to anyone, but no one did.

Instead, Xander pulled me in for a hug. “I’m proud of you. It looks great.”

“How many do you have planned?” Dad asked.

“Just six for now. We didn’t raise as much as we wanted by hosting the baseball games, but we figured we might have to make it an ongoing fundraiser or even do it with the team that needs the dugout so that everyone can be involved.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Dad said.

It wasn’t high praise, but it was something. “I had another idea, but this one I’d lead myself. I’m calling it Kylie’s Kids. I’d set up boxes around town to collect gently used sports equipment. But I could always alter it to do coats and gloves in winter or food at the holidays.” My heart threatened to beat out of my chest as I said it because I wasn’t sure how they would take it. It had nothing to do with the family’s business.

“I love it. I can see the boxes around town,” Mom said as she handed a platter to Dad to grill outside.

“Does this mean you’re staying?” Xander asked.

“I don’t know.” But how could I create a program and then leave? It didn’t make sense. But then, the only reason to stay was Tyler. I wasn’t sure if he was all in or viewing it as a fling with an end date. Probably the latter since he’d never been in a serious relationship. Why would he start with me?

“This is just a fundraising project. I can’t live off it.” I still needed a job.

“I hope you follow through with it. I think it’s a neat idea that the

community will be involved in,” Mom said.

“I think so too,” I said to Mom, wishing my brothers would give more feedback. But as usual, the other two had gone outside with Dad. Either they didn’t care to comment on my plans or they didn’t think much of me.

The old hurt and sensation that I didn’t belong here continued. I wondered if it would change anything if I spoke these feelings out loud.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with Tyler. People have said they’ve seen you two around town, putting up flyers,” Xander said.

“His brothers asked Tyler to talk to me about partnering with Fletcher & Sons. I think Mac and Sam are busy now that they have families.” I prayed he wouldn’t ask any more questions. I knew Tyler wanted to talk to them about our relationship first. “We’re working together on it. I really couldn’t have done any of this without his family. They’re doing the work for free and giving us the lumber and supplies without any markups.”

“It benefits their business to be involved in it. I just hope they’re not taking advantage of you,” Xander said.

“Why would they be taking advantage of me?” Was Xander insinuating that I wasn’t savvy enough to know when I was being manipulated?

“Leave her alone. Kylie’s a smart woman. She can take care of herself,” Mom said, patting Xander’s hand.

I let it go, but his insinuation that others would take advantage of me grated. It fed into the belief they’d always had that I couldn’t take care of myself.

We sat at the large dining room table since most of the family was there. Four kids and my parents. Killian was the only one out of town. I wondered if any of them had ever brought a woman to dinner. Would they be as accepting as the Fletchers were to Natalie and Alice?

As usual, the talk revolved around the lodge and bookings for the summer season. It tended to be quieter during the summer, but we still received reservations from people who liked to hike and visit Telluride in the warmer months.

My brothers talked to my parents about various ways to bring more people to the lodge, activities and events to entice them.

I didn’t work for the family business. I hadn’t been here in years. What could I possibly have to add?

“Kylie, do you have any ideas?” Xander asked.

“I haven’t worked at the lodge since high school, and I only worked the

front counter or housekeeping when necessary.” I was hardly qualified to tell them how to attract more tourists.

“You worked in a hotel in Paris,” Dad said, as if that explained everything.

“Do you host many weddings? I would think summer would be a good time for those looking for mountain views.”

“We’ve had a few requests, but it’s from people who expect us to have a planner on-site. We don’t,” Dad said.

“That’s why you’re considering hiring an event coordinator?” It hurt that they hadn’t immediately thought of me as filling this role.

“We want to be sure that’s what we want to do before we advertise the position.”

“You can always hire them on a probationary period of ninety days or even six months and then reevaluate it. If it’s not bringing in additional income, then you could stop,” I said.

Oliver rubbed his chin. “I would think we’d need at least a year to get an idea of whether it’s cost effective.”

A year was a long time. Even if I wanted the position, I wasn’t sure I wanted to commit to that long.

“We could add a gazebo and a few other features that would attract couples,” Mom said.

“You can offer the more secluded cabins as honeymoon suites. The guests would stay at the lodge or the cabins. It would be a nice way to fill the resort even in the spring and fall months,” I said, finishing my meal before pushing the plate away from me.

My heart rate picked up as I considered asking them why they’d never offered me a position. I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants. Did I want to know the answer?

“Are you feeling okay, dear?” Mom asked.

I looked around at my brothers’ and my father’s faces, wondering if I was brave enough to ask them when I never had been before. “I’m just wondering why you’ve never asked me to work at the lodge.”

Dad shifted in his chair, carefully considering his words before he said, “You went to college and never returned. Not for any meaningful amount of time. We couldn’t even predict if you’d be home for breaks to help.”

A lump formed in my throat because I wasn’t sure I was needed or even wanted at the lodge. “All the positions were taken. Oliver handles the

finances, Eli handles management, and Xander took over the winter sports. What was left for me?”

My words resulted in a weighty silence at the table.

“Is that how you felt?” Dad asked.

I held my hands as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I was never allowed to make any suggestions. I was always told one of my brothers had it handled.”

“You were just a kid back then,” Oliver said.

“I felt like my opinions weren’t valued. I went to school and majored in hotel management and hospitality, but you never asked what my plans were. I just assumed there wasn’t a spot for me, and maybe in the back of my mind, I thought if I could prove myself to you, you’d change your mind about me.”

“Is this why you didn’t come home often?” Mom asked, pain tinging her tone.

“It was part of it. I never felt like there was a spot for me in the business or in the family.”

“Why would you feel that way?” Dad asked.

I’d bared my soul, and it was too late to turn back. “I was never included in anything the boys did. They didn’t want me around.”

“We didn’t want you to get hurt,” Eli bit out.

I held up a hand. “Your intentions might have been good, but it always felt like you didn’t want me around. Like I was a pest.” It sounded ridiculous to my ears. Most brothers didn’t want their kid sisters around either, but it hadn’t changed as I’d gotten older. I was excluded and unwanted.

“You broke your arm following us out one night,” Oliver added.

“Try to see things from my perspective. I was born after four boys. You were fun and adventurous, but I was always left behind. Then, one by one, you took the positions in the lodge and resort until there was nothing left for me. Now you’re creating a new position, one that seems perfect for me, and no one’s even mentioned that I might be the right person for the job.” I stood, my hands shaking as I threw the napkin onto the table. There was pain on my parents’ faces and confusion on my brothers’.

I shouldn’t have brought any of this up. I’d kept it inside for years, and that’s where it should have stayed.

“We never offered you the position because you never once expressed any interest in working for the family business.”

“I didn’t think I needed to. I went to school for hotel management so that

I could finally prove to you I was worthy of Wilde Ski Resort.” I felt sick to my stomach. They didn’t get me and never had.

“You didn’t need to prove anything to me,” Dad said.

I held my hands in the air. “I’ve been working hard on the fundraisers because I believe in them, but also so I could finally prove to you I was worthy.”

Oh shit. I hadn’t meant to even voice that vulnerability out loud. I’d never felt worthy of my family’s time and attention. Any time I wanted it, I was scorned. Sometimes, I thought if I’d been a boy, things would have been easier.

My brothers must have sensed this conversation had gotten too personal, and they gathered the dishes and went into the kitchen.

When I was alone with Mom and Dad, I said, “I’m sorry for the outburst. I don’t know why I said all of that.”

I turned to leave, and my dad said, “Wait.”

I slowly faced him.

“I didn’t know you felt this way,” he said quietly.

I stood rigid because I hadn’t ever come out and said any of this.

“I wish you’d told us you wanted to work here.”

“I guess I wanted you to ask. Maybe it was stupid, but my whole life, I felt like an outsider, like I was the girl you didn’t want. Another boy would have been easier for you.”

“I’m sorry for that. We treated you differently, and we shouldn’t have. It’s just that you were special. You were my only girl, and I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“By keeping me inside the lodge, never letting me go on an adventure of my own?” It had stifled my self-confidence.

“We wanted to keep you safe, and yes, we worried about you in a way that we didn’t with your brothers. And I see now that was a mistake,” Dad said gruffly.

“I only wanted to feel like I was part of this family. That you wanted me here. That you wanted me to work for the lodge. I would have done anything if you’d asked. But you never did.”

Dad held up his hands. “We honestly thought you wanted nothing to do with Telluride and the business. You didn’t come home much on breaks, and then after you studied abroad, it felt like we’d lost you. We wanted to give you space to grow, but then you fell in love with something besides here.

And we had to be okay with that.”

I closed my eyes because it felt like we’d crossed wires somewhere. That we’d never cleared the air, and now that we had, I wasn’t sure if anything was better or if I’d made everything worse.

“We’ve asked what your plans are since you came home,” Mom said gently.

“I said I wasn’t sure because I never felt like I fit in here, that I was wanted or needed.”

“We’d love for you to stay and make a life for yourself here. We just want you to be happy, even if that’s living in Paris. Even if we miss you like crazy.”

The tears that had been threatening spilled over. I swiped them away.

“If you want to stay in Telluride, then the position is yours,” Dad said.

I sucked in a shaky breath. “Don’t you need to talk to my brothers?”

“It’s true I’m giving more responsibility to them, but I want all my children to have a stake in the business. And this one is yours if you want it.”

“I’m not sure what I want anymore. I’d just decided to send out résumés to see what opportunities there were.” I wasn’t sure if Tyler wanted me to stay. What if I was the perfect fling because I’d always said I’d be leaving eventually?

“You’re obviously capable of the position. You did an amazing job with the fundraisers, organizing people, and marketing. I don’t know what happened with your job in Paris because you won’t talk about it.”

“I trusted someone I shouldn’t have. I dated the owner’s son, and in the end, my boss picked him.” I laughed without any humor. “Are you sure you trust me to run anything at the lodge?”

“You trusted the wrong person; that doesn’t make you a bad person,” Mom said.

“It makes me gullible.”

The house was quiet. Either my brothers were cleaning the grill or they’d left to give us space.

“No, it doesn’t,” Dad said emphatically.

“It means you have a big heart,” Mom added with confidence.

“You should have told us what you wanted back then. We would have assured you had a spot here.”

“I didn’t know.”

We moved at the same time, me hugging my mom first and then my dad.

When Dad eased away, he said, “You’ll always have a place here. I’m sorry you felt like you didn’t.”

I couldn’t manage much more than a nod.

“Take your time with figuring out what you want. It would be great to have an event coordinator for this summer, but your happiness comes first,” he continued.

“Thanks, Dad.” This conversation was long overdue. Even though I felt emotionally drained, I was glad I’d had enough courage to say how I was feeling.

“Now, let me wrap up some food for you to take home.” Mom bustled around the kitchen while I stood with my dad.

“Do you think my brothers will come around?” I wasn’t sure if they felt the same way.

“Your brothers want you here. They’ve always regretted that you didn’t feel at home here like they did.”

Even though Killian traveled a lot for competitions, he always came home to Telluride.

“I’m starting to think it was all in my head. I didn’t think there was a place for me, therefore, Telluride wasn’t my home. It sounds ridiculous when I say it out loud—”

“It’s not ridiculous if that’s how you felt. I just wished you would have told us sooner.”

“Me too.” I received hugs before I left and assurances that there would always be a place for me in the business, and then I drove home.

I felt exhausted and drained, yet hopeful. I’d read things wrong over the years, but we hadn’t communicated. But if it hadn’t happened this way, I wouldn’t have studied abroad during the summer of my junior year. I wouldn’t have fallen in love with Paris. I’d gotten good experience working at the hotel, and those skills would come in handy anywhere else I worked. So, I couldn’t be regretful. Not when life turned out the way it did for a reason.

Maybe Tyler and I wouldn’t have had a chance if I’d stayed here. I couldn’t regret the way my life had turned out. I was smarter and had more experiences than I would have had if I’d stayed in Telluride.

The question was, where did I go next? Was I content to stay in Telluride, to build a life here with my family and maybe Tyler? Did he even want that? What if our relationship was only temporary and he didn’t want anything

lasting?

CHAPTER 21



TYLER

Dinner at my parents' house was lively and fun. I teased my brothers, played with my nieces, and wished Kylie could be with us.

"Why didn't you go with Kylie to her parents'?" Mom asked, rinsing the dishes and placing them in the dishwasher.

I wasn't sure how to describe our relationship in a way my parents would understand. I finally settled on, "They don't know about us."

Mom straightened. "Why not?"

"Her brothers told me to stay away from her."

"When you were kids?" Mom asked.

"Xander asked me to look out for her, and that's not what I'm doing."

"You think they'll have a problem with you two dating?" Mom asked.

I shook my head. "I know they will. They told me to stay away from their sister and look out for her."

"You think you can keep it a secret from them forever?"

"Well, no. But Kylie hasn't said she's staying in town. If we're temporary, why should we tell them if nothing comes from it?"

"You don't act like you're temporary," Mom said carefully, as if she was trying to figure things out.

I drew in a deep breath. "I'm in love with her, but I don't know how she feels."

"You haven't told her yet?" Mom asked, her tone incredulous.

I winced. "I'm worried I'll scare her off."

Mom continued putting the dishes in the dishwasher with jerky movements. "You sound like Mac when he was messing things up with Natalie."

“I’m not messing anything up.”

Mom turned to give me a look.

I held up my hands as if to ward her off. “I haven’t messed anything up yet.”

Mom straightened and pointed a wooden spoon at me. “What if she’s waiting for you to tell her how you feel? What if she wants you to ask her to stay? What if that poor girl thinks that she’s just a fun time for you?”

“Why would she think that?” I asked, my words slowing as Mom gave me that look. The one that told me she knew my reputation around town. “It’s true I’ve never been in a long-term relationship. But everyone I spent time with knew the score—”

She turned her head away from me and held up one hand. “I don’t want to hear about your prior relationships.”

I said, “Sorry.” Then let out a breath. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I’ve never been in this position before, but I’m worried if I push too hard, if I lay out all my cards, she’s going to run.”

Mom poured dish detergent into the receptacle, shut the dishwasher, and started the cycle. Then she took a seat at the kitchen table. “That’s what you’re worried about? Her leaving?”

I nodded, feeling miserable that I didn’t know what to do and that what I had done wasn’t enough by a long shot.

“In this situation, you have everything to lose. She might leave and never come back.”

I rubbed a hand over the sudden ache in my chest, perilously close to my heart.

“But if you do nothing, you might have the same outcome.”

“So, you’re saying I need to tell her because if I don’t ask her to stay, she might think I don’t want her.” That hurt worse than the thought of her leaving.

“I’ve gotten to know her a little since she’s been back, and I’ve seen the way her brothers treat her. Kylie needs to feel that she’s wanted. That she’s special to someone. That she’ll come first.”

“Of course, she comes first.” I had no one else in my life other than my family.

“Does she know that? Have you told her that?”

“I’ve shown her.”

Mom stood up from the table and crossed the room, jabbing her finger in

the middle of my chest. “It’s not enough. She needs to hear the words. She needs to hear it from you.”

I needed to tell her I was in love with her and that I wanted her to stay. I could do that, but what if— “What if there’s nothing for her here? What if her family doesn’t ask her to stay, or she can’t find a job in Telluride? There aren’t any luxury hotels here.”

“Let her know you’ll figure it out together. If she needs to leave for her career, then you will too.”

My stomach dropped. “But I’ve never even thought about leaving. I love it here.” When I imagined me and Kylie together, it was always with my family.

“When you’re in a relationship, you make compromises. If you want her, you might need to follow her wherever she goes. Your father will understand.”

I didn’t want to move. I hated the idea of my kids growing up away from Mac’s and Sam’s, but Mom was right. If I was all in with Kylie, I needed to be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice.

“If she stays, she’ll be giving up the life she came to love in Paris. The amazing restaurants, culture, and five-star hotels.”

“But she’d be getting me?” I teased.

Mom smacked me upside the head for that one. It wasn’t hard but enough to make me sober. “I love her. I’ll say and do whatever it takes to get her to see that.”

“You do right by that girl. She deserves the best.”

I nodded. “She does, and I’m going to show her that.”

“Tell her. Not just show her.” I was starting to understand how important words were to Kylie. She’d never had them from her family, and she needed them from me.

“Got it.” Then I drew my mother in for a tight hug. I was so lucky to have my parents in my life in a way that was supportive. “Thank you for being the best mom.”

Mom eased back and blinked, tears shimmering in her eyes.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“You have no idea how I need to hear that. As a parent, you second-guess everything, and I always wonder if I did right by you boys.”

“You were the best mother. You allowed us to be ourselves and supported us with love.”

Mom patted my cheek. “You’re my favorite.”

Mac walked in and did a double take at her proclamation. “I thought you didn’t pick favorites?”

Mom grinned. “He’s my favorite today.”

I stuck my tongue out at him behind Mom’s back.

Mac scowled at me. “I don’t know what you said to get her to say that, but—”

I leaned back against the counter, crossed my arms over my chest, and said, “I merely said she was the best mother in the world.”

“Suck-up,” Mac said.

“Boys. Enough. I made chocolate cake, and if you keep it up, you’re not allowed to have a slice.”

That shut us up, just like it had when we were kids. We were always compliant if dessert was on the table. Although we might have forgotten about it a time or two.

Mac grabbed the cake tray and took it into the dining room, where everyone had started a game of cards at the table.

“There’s no doubt in my mind you two will work it out.”

I let out a breath. “I hope so.”

“But don’t screw it up.” Mom grabbed plates and a cake knife and left the room.

I let my head drop back because I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t mess everything up. I wasn’t sure if Kylie felt the same way I did. But there was only one way to find out.

I ate cake with my family, packing a slice in a plastic container for Kylie. When I pulled into Kylie’s driveway, I realized I’d come to think of her cabin as home. It was a little premature since it had only been a short while and it was a rental. Would Kylie move in with me when my house was completed? Was it too soon to be thinking about the future? Would Kylie balk at anything more permanent than this weekend?

I knocked on the door, holding the container. As much time as we spent together, Kylie hadn’t given me a key. I hoped that wasn’t a sign of bad things to come.

She opened the door, her fingers curling around the edge of the wood. “Tyler. Hey.”

I stepped inside. “I brought cake.”

She smiled softly and took the offered container. “Just what I needed.”

I wanted to be everything she needed all the time. But would she let me? I followed her into the kitchen where she grabbed a fork and set the container on the counter. With a flick of her finger, the lid flew off, and she immediately cut a bite and brought it to her lips. Her eyes closed, and she moaned.

I shifted on my feet as all the blood in my body drained south. “You’re making it hard for me to stay over here.”

Her eyes popped open, and she smiled. “This hit the spot.”

“How was dinner with your family?” I asked, feeling like I already knew the answer.

“Let’s see. I bared my soul to them, and they had no idea how I’d felt over the years.”

“Your brothers?” I asked, hopeful they’d change their ways when it came to her. It was my only hope.

She shook her head. “They left to give me some time alone with Mom and Dad.”

“How did your parents react?”

“They were surprised but supportive. They didn’t think I wanted anything to do with the business.”

“Is that true?”

She blew out a breath, her shoulders sagging. “You know, it might have been. If they’d offered me a position then, I might have said no. I was enthralled with Europe. I was free for the first time in my life. No one was telling me who to date or what I couldn’t have.”

“It sounds like Europe was the right choice for you then.” Was it now too?

“My parents said the event coordinator position is mine if I want it.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding.

“But I’m going to send out résumés to hotels too, just to see what’s out there.”

My stomach dropped. “Isn’t this what you’ve always wanted? A position in your family’s business?”

Her lips pursed. “I’m not sure. I thought it was, but I wouldn’t have turned down Paris for it. So maybe that’s my answer.”

I wanted to ask, *what if you had a reason to stay? What if I was the reason you stayed?* Would she always be happy, or would she grow to resent me?

“I don’t know what I want. Not really. I thought I wanted this one thing, and now that they handed it to me, I’m not happy.”

“I don’t know that you are always happy. Maybe it’s more of a feeling of rightness. Like I always wanted to work with my family, and now that I am, I feel content.”

“I just feel drained.”

“You just bared your soul, as you said. It was a lot. Maybe you’ll feel differently in the morning.”

She nodded and took another bite of the cake. “You’re right. Can you open a bottle of wine? I’m in the mood to relax tonight.”

I grabbed the cork and opened the wine bottle she’d pointed out on the counter. I hoped it wasn’t so she could forget everything. That she was looking for an escape. I’d hoped to be that for her. But what if it wasn’t me that gave her that? What if it was having a job on the other side of the world?

How did I convince her this was enough, living here and loving me? Did I need to convince her of anything? Shouldn’t she just know?

As I poured the wine into the two glasses she’d set in front of me, I knew I needed to talk to her brothers. Even if nothing came from our time together, they deserved to know, and it had to come from me, not her. It was important for me to clear the air. I was the one who was supposed to be protecting her while I was sleeping with her. I’d slept with my friends’ sister, and it was time to come clean.

Kylie accepted the glass and took a long pull. Then she smiled as she swished the wine in the glass. “This was exactly what I needed.”

Before I could ask any follow-up questions, she’d wrapped an arm around my neck and pulled me down to meet her lips. She tasted like chocolate, red wine, and heaven. It was the best thing I’d ever tasted.

“I want you,” she said to me between kisses.

“I want you too.” All night long. I wanted to sink into her and forget about everything else, the logistics of convincing her that I was enough. She was slipping away, and I needed to hold on.

So, I set her glass aside and lifted her so that her legs came around my hips. Our lips never parted as I walked her up the steps and into her room. I placed her on the comforter then pulled my shirt over my head and toed off my shoes.

She’d righted herself and crawled across the bed to the end. Her eyes were dark with lust. “I want to taste you.”

My cock twitched in the confines of my jeans. I shoved them down just as she reached for it, squeezing hard. I groaned because it was just the right amount of pressure I needed in the moment. I wanted to remember that she was mine, even if it was only for tonight.

Then she licked the pre-cum from the head and closed her eyes like it was a piece of that cake. Then she sucked me down, swallowing against the back of her throat. I bit my lip and rested my hand lightly on her hair when I wanted to thrust into her mouth.

She pulled off. "You can do whatever you want to."

I held myself still, every muscle in my body tense. "Are you sure?"

"I'll tell you if it's too much."

Then she sucked me down again, her gaze on mine. I flicked my hips, testing the waters. But she moaned around my cock, happily. I set a nice and easy rhythm, going deeper with each movement.

She sucked and licked, squeezing the base of my cock with her hand. I was so hard. I was quickly barreling toward what I expected would be an epic release.

"Can I mark you?" I asked as her eyes widened. "I want to coat your skin with my cum."

The image had me harder than I'd ever been.

She pulled off and nodded.

I braced my feet and jerked off, aiming my cock at her chest. I'd never done this with anyone before, and I felt like a randy teenager. I was excited she was letting me have my way with her. When I erupted, spurts of cum shooting over one nipple and then the other, I groaned at the sight. "You're gorgeous covered in my cum."

I reached out to smear it over her chest. I wanted her covered in me. I wanted her to smell like me. I felt possessive tonight, like no one else could ever claim her because I already had.

Kylie sat back on her heels, her tone tinged with awe. "That was hot."

"It's your turn." I touched her shoulder and pressed lightly until she was flat on her back, her legs spread. I left the cum on her chest because it was the most erotic sight I'd ever seen, and I moved between her legs.

I breathed her in, telling her how gorgeous she looked covered in my cum. Then I used my fingers and tongue to drive her over the edge. Her fingers twisted in the sheets; her legs trembled when she finally went over.

I wanted to leave her dirty all night, but I knew it wouldn't be

comfortable. I stood to grab a warm washcloth and cleaned her off. I threw it to the side before drawing her to me.

My heart was full of love for her. But I couldn't tell her how I felt until I spoke to her brothers. It was this block in my head I couldn't climb over or get around.

In the back of my mind, I thought we had more time.

CHAPTER 22



KYLIE

I spent the next week sending out résumés. I wasn't sure why I felt like I had to do it. Maybe I was worried I'd miss out on an opportunity. Or I needed to explore all my options before I made a final decision.

All I knew was that I was offered the position I'd always wanted, but it didn't feel satisfying. I still felt this empty cavern in my chest. I couldn't figure out what that meant. Maybe I wasn't supposed to stay in Telluride. I was destined to be the lone family member who lived somewhere else.

On Friday, I was supposed to meet with the mayor, Todd, and the town's event coordinator, Scarlett. We were supposed to discuss my ideas for Kylie's Kids and how I could possibly partner with the town.

I walked into the fancy Italian restaurant with my work uniform of a pencil skirt, heels, and a silky button-down blouse. I'd worn more makeup than I had the entire time I'd been home. It felt a little foreign now that I'd been back and living a somewhat different life than before.

Todd and Scarlett were already seated when I arrived. When the hostess led me to their table, they stood. Scarlett hugged me, and Todd shook my hand before pulling a chair out for me.

"Thank you for meeting with me today," I said as we perused our menus.

"Sorry I couldn't get together earlier. Being a mayor, even in a small town, is busy," Todd said with a cocky grin.

I smiled, remembering the number of times his secretary scheduled a lunch and then called to reschedule. I was beginning to think it wouldn't happen. "I bet."

We ordered pasta dishes and water. And it struck me as we gave the waitress our orders that my life had changed markedly since I came home. At

the hotel, I did what others told me. Here, I was steering the ship. I decided what projects to pursue and what meetings to take. It was empowering. I liked being my own boss.

Would I enjoy working for my family, or would it be more of the same as my hotel job? Would I be taking orders from my brothers? I didn't like that idea at all. I needed to talk to Dad about autonomy and freedom in that position. Maybe that's what had been tripping me up about it.

"Scarlett said you talked to her about your ideas for Kylie's Kids, and I have to say, I'm intrigued."

"I had success with the ski equipment drive and then Dugouts for Kids, where I partnered with Fletcher & Sons Contracting. But this nonprofit will be solely mine. I figured I could collect whatever is needed at the time—book bags and school supplies in the fall, coats in the winter, and food as needed. I have visions of these collection boxes in the lobby of the library, the hospital, and maybe even schools. People will know where to go with their items if they have a donation." I wanted it to be a staple in the community.

"Does this mean you're staying in town?" Todd asked as he sipped his water.

I'd noticed he'd had a difficult time tearing his gaze away from his phone. I wasn't sure if it was work-related or not, but it felt like he wasn't listening to me or giving me his undivided attention. Yet he seemed to be up-to-date on town gossip where I was concerned. "I haven't made a final decision."

"I don't see how this works without you. You're Kylie's Kids," Todd said bluntly.

"I just need to get this up and running to see if it could work."

"I think it's a great idea, and we'd love to partner with you. Every time we have an event in town, a festival or a parade, you can place the donation boxes at the town tent. We can also make the donation an entry for certain events, like the town carnival."

I hadn't expected this kind of support. I thought I'd have to convince them that it was viable before the town backed me. "That would be amazing."

It was more than I'd even hoped for.

"It's a no-brainer. But you need to maintain a squeaky-clean image. People will want to see that the donations are helping real people."

"I can have a website where it shows me dropping the items off at shelters and food pantries. And pictures with kids who benefit from the

school supplies.” I assumed a few people would cooperate, especially the bigger organizations who stood to benefit.

“Any money donated goes back into the nonprofit. I don’t want to see any stories that you’re benefitting personally,” Todd said, and I saw then that he was jaded. That he’d seen corruption working in politics, and it was hard for him to see the other side. People who honestly wanted to help.

“That won’t be an issue. I’ll hire an accountant and a bookkeeper.”

“Transparency will be your friend,” Todd said with a nod.

“Absolutely.” I was excited that he believed in the project. I’d started the sports equipment drive on a whim. It was a way to showcase my planning abilities to my father, but it became so much more. I fell in love with fundraising and helping people. It filled me in a way that nothing else did. Would I be able to walk away if I was offered a management position at a hotel?

Our food came, and we dug in. Scarlett talked about the town and what they hoped to accomplish in the next few years. There was a big push with her new position to make Telluride a place that locals and tourists wanted to visit. Her idea was to have various festivals to encourage people to fall in love with the town again.

She wanted to enter various contests, such as The Best Small-Town Main Street. I never thought about what it would be like working for a small town, but I was excited just listening to her talk about her plans.

Todd got a call toward the end of the meal and said he needed to go.

When he was gone, Scarlett said, “He’s a busy man.”

“He seemed distracted.”

“It’s an important and stressful job. That’s why he created my position. He handles the red tape, and my job is to get people to love the town again.”

“I think you have great ideas.”

Scarlett smiled. “I’m looking forward to working together. Let me know if you need any help getting Kylie’s Kids off the ground. I have some experience with fundraising and nonprofits.”

“That would be great.” We’d only had a couple of conversations, the first one at the baseball fundraiser and then this lunch, but I felt like we could be friends.

“I’m continually coming up with new ideas for festivals and projects we can do to get people excited about their town. I have a feeling you’re the same way.”

“I have come up with a lot of different ideas for fundraising. First the ski equipment, then the dugouts and sports equipment, and now this. I enjoy it in a way I never have anything else.”

“You’re like me. We thrive on helping people. I think we can help each other too.”

“We’ll see how this goes.” I didn’t mention that I’d sent out résumés because I was second-guessing myself. Did I need the validation of a job offer? Proof that I hadn’t screwed up before I could move on with my life and do what I wanted to do? Because this lunch had energized me in a way I hadn’t been in years.

I loved the idea of partnering with the town. With their support, I could do so much good. I wouldn’t have to work as hard to get the word out.

On the sidewalk, I hugged Scarlett and invited her to come out with some old friends I’d made plans with that night.

On the way home, I imagined what my life would look like if I stayed: a job at my family’s lodge, planning events and weddings. A side job of fundraising. It seemed like a life I could get behind. But what about Tyler? Could I stay here if he decided we were just a fling?

My heart ached. I wondered if that was why I’d applied for other places. I’d have an out if Tyler said we were just temporary.

He’d never made any promises or said how he felt. I didn’t know where I stood, and I was too chicken to ask him.

I needed to make some decisions soon. My chest tightened with the enormity of things I needed to figure out, and at the heart of them was where I stood with Tyler.

We’d started with an end date. Was I changing the rules by telling him I might want to stay and make a life here? Was he expecting me to leave?

My head hurt with the possibilities, and I couldn’t even talk to him. Tyler was busy building his house. He wanted it to be done by the end of summer so he could enjoy it. I didn’t want to interrupt his flow by showing up and demanding answers. I was a big girl. I could figure things out.

I’d reached out to some of my old softball teammates. We’d played rec league through the years, and most of us made the high school team. We’d grown up together, and they were the closest things I had to friends over the years. When I moved to Paris, I lost touch with most of my college friends and hadn’t made too many in Europe.

I’d dated Brad and hadn’t bothered to form close relationships with

anyone else. That was a mistake. Because when everything went down with him, I had no one to turn to.

I was surprised so many of my old friends still lived in Telluride. Emery got pregnant the summer before college and stayed. The rest went to college and returned home at various times.

When I arrived at the bar, everyone was already there, seated at a high-top table. I hugged everyone and then slid into a seat at the end.

“So, what’s everyone been up to?” I asked as I looked around the table.

“You’re the one no one has heard from over the years,” Chloe said, and I winced.

“I’m sorry. When I left, I didn’t want any ties here at home. I didn’t want an excuse to come back.” I’d never said any of that out loud before. But it was my truth.

Emery gave me a sympathetic look. “We knew you weren’t happy at home.”

“Then we heard you were in Paris, and I couldn’t believe it. I guess I always thought you’d come home and work at the lodge,” Chloe said.

“It was always in the back of my mind, but then I studied abroad and fell in love with Europe. There was all this possibility there.”

“Are you home for good?” Emery asked.

“I’ve been working on a few fundraisers, just trying to figure out what I want to do with my life. It’s a little early to have a mid-life crisis, but that’s what it feels like.”

“I got pregnant at eighteen, so I never had that luxury. I went to school, cared for my daughter, and survived. Now that she’s nine, things are easier. I feel like I can breathe again,” Emery said.

I reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “You’re doing an amazing job.”

“Thank you.”

I wasn’t sure where the father was. She hadn’t mentioned one, and he wasn’t included in any of her pictures online. But if she was a single mother, that wasn’t easy. I couldn’t imagine navigating college and my first job with a little one.

“I have help from my parents and friends.”

“We should rent a cabin and have a girls’ night,” I said, eager to reconnect with these women.

“Like our sleepovers at the lodge?” Chloe asked.

I laughed. “Except even better, because my brothers won’t interrupt our night if we’re in a cabin.”

“Are all of your brothers still single?” Brynn asked.

“You would have heard if they weren’t,” I teased, used to women inquiring about my brothers. I used to get annoyed with it, but my brothers were single and, apparently, attractive. Not that I ever looked too closely at them to know.

After making tentative plans for a girls’ night, talk turned to high school and softball. I loved playing back then. My teammates were the family I didn’t feel like I had at home.

We spent so much time together it was impossible not to be close. But when I left, I forced myself to create distance, and I hated that. I was ashamed that I’d broken off all contact.

Even if I didn’t stay in Telluride, I’d try to stay in contact with these women.

We drank, ordered appetizers, and traded stories about our softball days, school, and our nights at the lodge. Those were good times, and I hadn’t thought about them in years.

It made me think that there was more to Telluride than just Tyler and my family.

CHAPTER 23



TYLER

I didn't spend the night at Kylie's. I'd worked late, and she went out with some friends from high school.

I kind of hated my apartment. It smelled dusty and stale from disuse. I didn't like the cramped rooms or the fact that it didn't have an outdoor space. It had a rooftop area, but it was shared with everyone in my building. I was spoiled at Kylie's place.

I wanted my house to be finished, and I wanted to ask Kylie to move in with me. It might have been too soon, but I was so used to coming home to her at the end of a workday, sharing a meal, and sleeping together. I didn't want to go back to my solitary existence.

I missed Kylie, and I didn't want to spend another night apart. This was a test to see if I could do it. I could go back to the way things were if I had to, but I didn't want to. I didn't want to be apart from Kylie.

I didn't want her to move away for a job. I could follow her, but my heart was here in Telluride with my family. This was my home. But I could see what my mom was saying—it wouldn't be home if Kylie wasn't here.

I needed to talk to her brothers. I needed to tell her how I felt, that there wasn't a future without her in it. I just hoped it wasn't too late. Hopefully, she hadn't been offered her dream job in the last few days.

As focused as I'd been on finishing my house, in the back of my mind, I worried that she'd get a call and remember all the reasons why she loved Paris and her old job.

I wanted it all—Telluride, my family, the business, *and Kylie*.

I sat up in bed and sent a text to Kylie, inviting her to breakfast in town. We needed to talk, and I couldn't do it at her house. We'd end up naked, and

I'd lose all sense of reason.

She agreed to meet me at the new breakfast spot in town, and I jumped in the shower. I waited for her outside the restaurant. When she came down the sidewalk, my unease lifted. She looked gorgeous, and there was no way she was going to tell me she wanted to leave Telluride. She was happy here. She was mending the rift with her family, and she had mine to support her too. She had me, the position she'd always wanted at the lodge, and the start of an amazing fundraising business.

"Hey, beautiful," I said when she reached me. I cupped her cheeks and kissed her like we hadn't seen each other in months. When I finally eased up, I breathed her in, loving being in her presence.

She covered my hands with hers. "I missed you."

A slow smile spread over my face to hear her say that. "I missed you too. I don't want to sleep apart again."

"How was last night?" I tried not to think about her going to a bar with friends and men checking her out. We'd never talked about exclusivity, but I'd assumed we were. Maybe that had been a mistake.

"It was great to catch up with old friends."

I shifted close to her, keeping my hands on her hips and her in the circle of my arms. "I'm glad you had fun." This was what I wanted for her. For her to find her place here. To have friends and family she could rely on. I wanted her to be happy, not just with me, but with her job, friends, and her family.

Kylie smiled up at me. "It was almost like we hadn't been apart for ten years. We caught up and then talked about high school."

"I'm glad you reconnected."

"I met with the mayor and Scarlett. The town wants to support Kylie's Kids. They're going to partner with me at festivals and other events."

"That's great. I'm so proud of you." I never doubted her. It was a cause everyone could get behind.

I dropped my forehead to hers and kissed her again.

"What's going on?" Xander came upon us without any warning.

Kylie stepped away from me, guilt settling in the lines on her face, and she wouldn't meet my gaze.

It was like time slowed and there was no one else on the sidewalk except for Kylie and her very pissed-off brother.

Xander looked from Kylie to me. "Are you fucking my sister?"

I held my hands up. "That's not what this is."

Kylie's eyes widened as if I'd denounced us—her. I was fucking this up.
“So, I didn't just see you kiss my sister?”

I swallowed hard. “You did.”

Kylie glared at me and then turned her anger on Xander. “What business is it of yours who I date?”

Xander ignored his sister and kept his gaze on me. “I asked you to look after my sister. Not fuck her.”

Irritation finally pushed through the shock. “Don't talk about your sister like that.”

“Xander asked you to look after me, and you agreed? What are you, my babysitter?” Kylie asked.

My breath caught in my throat. I was floundering. I couldn't seem to form any words to appease either of them. This was spiraling downward fast, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Xander shook his head in disgust. “Friends don't sleep with their friends' sisters.”

“We were kids when you said that.” I knew that decree hadn't waned in any shape or form just because Kylie was an adult, but I had to say something in my defense.

“You knew how I felt.”

Kylie's fingers curled into fists. “You don't want me to date anyone. If you could keep me in a glass ball, you would.”

My heart fell because this was how Kylie had always felt, and I had no idea if Xander got that.

“You're just doing this to get a rise out of us,” Xander said, dismissing her feelings.

Kylie's eyes shone with tears. “I'm with Tyler because *I love him*. Or at least I thought I did.”

Her words were like a sucker punch to my chest. That was what I should have led with when Xander confronted us. I loved her. But I'd missed my opportunity. She wouldn't believe it now.

“You've never respected me as a person. If you did, you wouldn't interfere with my love life and tell men not to date me.” Kylie rounded on me with an index finger pointed at my sternum, “And you. How could you promise Xander to watch out for me like I'm a child? I expected more from you.”

I nodded slowly, my heart pounding in my chest. “It wasn't like that.”

“Was any of this real?” Her voice was filled with exasperation and so much pain.

“Of course, it was.” I was vaguely aware that Xander had stalked off, probably to tell his brothers where to find me and kick my ass. But my heart was pounding in my ears, and there was this roaring, like the surf pounding against jagged rocks. I couldn’t process anything. It was like the world had sped up around me and I was still in slow motion.

“You knew how I felt about my brothers’ interference and yet you were part of it. You talked to him about me. You made some promises to him. How can I ever trust that what happened between us was real and not some ill-advised promise to my brother?”

Before I could answer, she shook her head as if to rid me of it and walked away.

“Kylie, wait—” But I didn’t know what to say that could fix the situation. I’d fucked up, and everything was falling apart. I should have told her what Xander said to me, but I’d forgotten about it.

Xander’s ire was misplaced because I had looked out for her, just not in the way that he wanted. I’d crossed a line that shouldn’t have been there at all. Anger surged through me that her brothers had messed up the best thing in my life. It was easier to be pissed at Xander than to take a hard look at myself.

I got the hell out of there because I didn’t want to hang around for Oliver and Eli to show up. I wasn’t ready to explain anything to them. Besides, I had a feeling they’d greet me with a fist, not questions.

It was Saturday, and we’d planned on knocking out some work at the house, so I drove to my property, to the house I’d secretly hoped would be mine and Kylie’s.

I wanted this house to be hers as much as it was mine. But now I’d screwed everything up, and there was no chance those dreams would come to fruition.

I’d parked in the driveway but couldn’t seem to get out of the truck. All my hopes and dreams flashed before my eyes. Kylie, our future children, her family, and mine. Was it too much to hope for? Was it never in the cards for me?

A sharp rap on the window startled me.

“You planning on working today?” Sam asked; his expression, initially amused, morphed into concern.

I sighed, trying to cover the tumultuous feelings that had to be swirling on my face, and got out of the truck.

I felt heavy, as if my shoulders were weighted down with concrete. My chest tightened to the point that breathing was difficult. All I could see was the accusation in Kylie's voice, the pain in her eyes, and then her back as she walked away from me.

She'd said she loved me, and I hadn't said it back.

"Is everything okay?" Sam asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?" I ran a hand through my hair, and my stomach rumbled.

"I thought you were grabbing breakfast with Kylie before you showed her the progress on the house?"

"Never made it to breakfast," I said as I took measured steps toward the front door.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" Sam asked, his tone laced with concern.

"Xander saw us together." It hurt to say it out loud.

Sam shook his head, and his disappointment was almost as painful as Kylie's. "I was afraid that was going to happen. You guys weren't exactly hiding it."

"I meant to talk to him. It was on my list of things to do, but I didn't do it before he saw us. I thought we could explain it away. We worked together, after all."

"Then what did he see?"

"Us kissing," I said with a heavy heart as I headed toward the noise.

Mac had safety goggles and a hard hat on while he drilled something. I couldn't even focus on what he was doing.

"Hey, man," Mac said, removing his goggles and standing. "You're early. Where's Kylie?"

"She's not coming." I felt exhausted, as if I hadn't slept in days, and achy, as if a fever was coming on.

"Xander caught them kissing in town."

Mac removed his helmet and leaned a hip against the beam. "I take it you never talked to him."

"I meant to, but there wasn't time. At first, I thought it was temporary, so there was no point. Then when it became obvious she was the one for me, I wanted to make sure Kylie felt the same way. That's what breakfast was

supposed to be about, but I was too late.”

Mac winced. “She’s pissed?”

“Oh yeah. Xander asked me to watch out for her, and I didn’t tell her that. Now she thinks none of what we shared was real.”

Sam chuckled. “She thinks you slept with her as some misguided attempt to take care of her?”

“I don’t know what she thinks. Maybe that I got close to her under the guise of caring for her and then took advantage of the situation.” I hated that she thought that. I needed to clear the air, but how? Would she even talk to me?

“You need to talk to her,” Mac said.

Sam nodded. “And the Wilde brothers. You don’t want to lose their friendship.”

“It’s probably too late for that.” I sat on a nearby stool we used when we discussed progress and our plans. I stretched my neck, trying to ease the tension that had crept up ever since Xander confronted us.

“What’s your plan?” Mac asked.

“I don’t have one. I don’t even know where to start.” I should find Kylie and make sure she was okay, but after that? I was at a loss.

“I think you need to talk to her brothers first and get them on your side.”

I laughed and shook my head when nothing about this was funny. “There’s no chance of that happening. If they ever talk to me in a civil manner again, it would be a miracle.”

“So, you’re telling me her brothers wouldn’t be okay with your relationship if you loved each other and were serious about a future together?”

“I have no idea. They’ve always been unreasonable.” They’d been crazy about Kylie. To the point where it affected her relationship with them, and I knew it would be worse for me. I wasn’t family.

“You have to deal with this head-on,” Sam said, ever the reasonable one.

“Do you love her?” Mac asked.

I nodded. “I never told her.”

“Then that’s what you lead with. You love their sister, and you plan to take care of her forever. You’re building this house with her in mind, and you’d follow her if she got a job elsewhere. Is that about it?” Mac asked.

“I would do all those things, but what if it doesn’t matter? What if it’s not enough?” I couldn’t help voicing the questions that were racing through my

head.

“What does any of this matter if she doesn’t want me?” That was the core problem, the mountain I couldn’t plan for or get around.

“You have to sit down and have a conversation. That’s what being in a relationship is all about—communication and compromise,” Mac said.

Sitting in the space that would one day be my kitchen, I remembered all the times we’d done something similar. When Mac had messed things up with Natalie. When Sam found out his girlfriend at the time, Felicia, was pregnant, and later when she said she was moving to Maryland to pursue a job. This was us. We talked in the houses we worked on. But I hadn’t had the same level of communication with the person I professed to be in love with.

“I never told her I loved her. How fucked up is that?” I just couldn’t see a way out of this.

“We’re all afraid of putting ourselves out there and not getting anything in return.” Mac had been hurt so many times in past relationships that he almost fucked things up with Natalie too.

“I need to talk to her brothers, but what if I don’t survive that conversation?”

Sam shrugged. “Eh. Worst-case scenario, you have a black eye and a bruised lip.”

“There’s a hundred percent chance that’s happening,” I said, not feeling great about the prospect.

Sam grabbed a water from a cooler he’d brought. “I don’t know. Oliver is levelheaded.”

“The others aren’t, and when they’re together...” I was just glad Killian wasn’t around. According to news reports, he used his fists before words.

“Be honest with them. You want nothing but the best for Kylie, and if she doesn’t want you, that’s not on you. That’s on her,” Mac said.

“I have been wanting to talk to them about how they treat her. They have no business in her love life.” But then Kylie had said as much, and it was like Xander hadn’t even heard her.

“I wouldn’t lead with that,” Mac said.

“I’m sick of them hanging over our heads. I’m sick of them treating Kylie like she can’t take charge of her life.” I wanted to protect her, but I also wanted her to have the freedom to make her own choices and mistakes.

“They’ve always acted like they have to stop her from falling or making a mistake,” Mac said carefully.

“That’s it exactly. They don’t see how she feels stifled. How she ran to Europe to experience freedom for the first time.”

“Maybe you can make them see the light,” Sam said.

“I highly doubt that, but if I come out of it unscathed, I’ll call it a victory.” I thought about the way her brothers treated her over the years, and the more I thought about it, the angrier I got. “They don’t get to tell her what to do. They don’t get to dictate our lives. I’m going to tell them I love their sister, and they need to get over it.”

Mac pressed his lips into a straight line. “You might need some backup with that attitude. You sure you don’t want us to come with you?”

“I never wanted to lose their friendship, but I need to stand up for Kylie and for our relationship.” I stood up, energized now that I had a plan for how to deal with the Wilde brothers.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Sam said at the same time Mac touched my shoulder and said, “I’m proud of you.”

I’d bought property this year, and I was building my dream house with Kylie. But she deserved to know everything I’d done was for her. I loved her, and I’d stand up to her brothers. I’d risk everything for her. She needed to know, but first, I had to show her.

CHAPTER 24



TYLER

I knew I'd find the Wilde brothers at the lodge. I figured they were waiting for me to come to them. When I arrived, Eli was at the front desk.

He was usually visible in the lodge, but I doubted he waited at the front desk. I knew he was there for me.

"Xander and Oliver around?" I asked, keeping my voice even.

Eli nodded grimly. "Follow me."

I felt a little like I was being taken to my execution, but he only led me to a conference room. It was large and boasted views of the mountains. It wasn't just the view that was breathtaking. It was the situation.

"I'll get them and be right back."

The door closed with a click, and I remained standing because it was a power position.

When the door opened again, I was still revved for the conversation I needed to have with them. I held my love for Kylie close to my chest. Kylie was the one who mattered. I was fighting for her and for us.

Eli walked in first. Oliver and Xander followed. Their expressions were stony.

"You wanted to talk to us?" Eli prompted when I didn't immediately address them.

They weren't going to make this easy on me. "I love your sister."

Xander shook his head as if to rid it of my words. "You barely know Kylie."

My jaw tightened. "That's not true. We were close as kids—"

"How close?" Eli asked, his arms crossed over his chest.

My heart was racing in my chest as if it knew how important this moment was. “We used to talk when we’d find ourselves in the same hiding spot. I carried her down from the mountain when she broke her arm. She confided in me over the years, and I listened.”

Xander’s brow furrowed. “Why would Kylie confide in you and not us?”

“No one listened to her. She felt like an outsider in her family. There were four boys and then her. You didn’t want her around, and she felt like her parents didn’t know what to do with a girl.”

The guys fell silent, and I wasn’t sure if I’d gone too far by telling them what Kylie had confided in me.

“We didn’t know she felt like that.” Oliver’s gaze moved from Eli to Xander as if seeking their confirmation.

Eli nodded. “We didn’t want her to get hurt. You know how crazy we were back then.”

“Did you ever think about how it affected her? She never felt like she fit in or that she was even wanted by her family. Then, one by one, you took over positions in the family business. She loved working at the lodge, but there wasn’t a spot for her.”

“She never said—” Oliver broke off.

“She went to college and got away from the family dynamics. She wasn’t the youngest anymore, the one who needed to be protected or coddled. She was her own person. Then she studied abroad and fell in love with the freedom.”

“We thought she didn’t want anything to do with the lodge,” Xander said, as if comparing everything he’d known to be true with what I’d said.

“Did you ask her? I realize she never said anything, but from her perspective, no one offered her a position when she majored in hotel management and hospitality.”

Oliver rubbed the back of his neck. “She worked for a five-star hotel in Paris. It was nothing like what we ran here. But I can see how she might have felt left out, slighted even. I feel awful that she didn’t feel like she fit in with us.”

It was partly her parents’ fault, too, for being so involved in the business that raising Kylie was more of an afterthought. “She was lonely.”

“I hate that she felt like that,” Xander said.

“You stopped any relationship before it could happen.” I wasn’t that upset about her brothers keeping her from assholes.

“That doesn’t excuse what you did. I asked you to protect her from guys like us.”

“Not exactly. You asked me to protect her, and I did. I’d do anything for her.” If I still had the chance.

Oliver raised a brow. “You really do love her.”

I nodded. “I realize that this might ruin our friendship going forward, but she’s the one who matters. She needs someone who will put her first, and that’s me—if she’ll still have me.” I’d let her walk away. I wouldn’t make that mistake again. I’d spend every day making her feel wanted and loved.

Xander met his brothers’ gazes, and they must have come to some understanding without saying it out loud because he faced me and said, “If you’re what she wants, then we’ll back off.”

Eli stepped forward. “But if you hurt her—”

“I already did that by not telling her that Xander asked me to watch out for her. I need to talk to her, to tell her how much she means to me because I haven’t.” I’d told her brothers I loved her before I told her. I hoped she’d forgive me for that and every other mistake I’d made in our relationship. I’d be a lucky man if she’d give me another chance.

“We never wanted Kylie to end up with one of our friends. We didn’t think any of the guys we hung out with were good enough. But that’s when we were kids—” Eli broke off and looked to his brothers for support.

“If you make her happy, then you’re good for her,” Xander finally admitted, and Oliver nodded.

“That means a lot.” I didn’t need their approval, but I wanted it, and I knew Kylie did too.

I made a move for the door, needing to get to Kylie. I’d already waited too long to seek her out.

Xander stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. “I’m not saying we don’t have our eye on you.”

“I’d expect nothing less.”

With one last measured look, I turned and walked away, confident I’d done all I could to mend things with Kylie’s brothers. Now I needed to make sure she was okay. There was a good possibility she wouldn’t forgive me for what Xander had asked me to do, and I failed to tell her.

I’d broken her trust. I needed to show her, from this point forward, we were a team. Her brothers didn’t get a say in our relationship. Not anymore.

* * *

KYLIE'S rental car wasn't in the driveway of her cabin. I knocked on the door, hoping she was there, but knowing in my heart she wasn't. Would she have left and not told me?

I sat on the porch and ran a hand through my hair. Where could she be? Where did I start? I knew I needed to send her a message or even call her, but what if she didn't answer? What if I was too late? What if I'd hurt her in a way we'd never recover from?

The satisfaction I'd gotten from speaking to her brothers this afternoon dissipated like water on a hot day.

The rumble of a truck over the stone lane lifted my hopes. I didn't recognize the vehicle until the doors opened and Kylie's parents got out.

I stood as they approached, aware that these people could be my future in-laws. If I was lucky.

Her mother's face was full of sympathy. "She had a flight to catch."

"She left," I said, the words stunningly final.

"She got a last-minute call for an interview. The hotel had a management position that needed to be filled immediately. They wanted her to check out the hotel and see if it would be a good fit. They want her to start right away," her father said, his hands in his pockets.

"In Paris?" I asked.

"California."

"Why California?" But I knew the answer. I was just like her family. I hadn't told her what she meant to me. I hadn't told her I loved her.

"She said she needed to explore every opportunity. She wants to make sure she's making the right decision," her mother said.

"Honestly?" her father asked, continuing without waiting for my response. "She wasn't sure this was the right place for her."

"I didn't tell her." I ran a hand through my already-messy hair. "I didn't tell her what she meant to me. That I love her. That I want to build a life together."

Her father's forehead wrinkled. "She mentioned that you two had a fling of sorts, but not that it was serious."

Her mother shook her head. "I had a feeling she was running from something that happened between you two." And then she faced her husband. "She wanted that job with us. I knew it. There was something keeping her

from taking it.”

“It was me. I never told her how I felt.” My voice broke off, and I felt broken. Like the houses I renovated. Except this time, it couldn’t be fixed. I’d waited too long.

I dropped back onto the porch steps and put my head in my hands.

“What are you doing?” her father asked me.

“I don’t know.” My life was empty without Kylie. Why was I building a huge house that would never be filled with Kylie’s laughter, with her love? It would be empty, just like my heart and soul without her.

“You said you never told her how you felt,” Clara said.

“Right.” That was my mistake.

Hugh frowned. “Don’t you think you should rectify that?”

“When did you say she’d be home?” I asked.

“We didn’t, but does it matter?” Hugh asked, and I got the impression he felt like he was talking to someone with low intelligence. He was either talking slowly or my brain wasn’t firing on all cylinders. Everything had slowed down, and it felt like I was trying to walk through soft sand. I kept moving, but I wasn’t getting anywhere.

I was too late. I should have been honest with her. Then none of this would have happened. Kylie would still be here. We’d eat dinner and then make love. Like we had for weeks. We’d be planning my new house and talking about moving in together. I’d have bought a ring and kept it in my drawer, anticipating the best time to ask her. Because it wasn’t just the proposal; it was the anticipation of our life together that would have kept me going.

I really fucked up. “I didn’t treat your daughter with the respect she deserved. I should have told her everything when I had the chance.”

“You’re giving up.” Disappointment rang heavily in Hugh’s tone.

“If Kylie doesn’t want me, what am I supposed to do?” I asked Hugh, the man I’d respected for most of my life.

“You fight for her,” Clara said, exasperation filling her voice.

“Trust me, this is the first of many mishaps you’re going to need to smooth over. You might as well practice,” Hugh added helpfully.

I blinked, a little taken aback by the full-court Wilde press I was receiving. “I’m sorry, what?”

Mr. Wilde shook his head. “You need to tell her how you feel. Grovel. Apologize. Whatever works.”

“I need to go to California.” I stood; my mind was reeling with everything I needed to do. Figure out where she was and who she was interviewing with. Get a flight as soon as possible and tell Kylie everything before she accepted this position. Would I fight hard enough for her? Would I do all the things her family hadn’t? Tell her exactly how I feel and ask her to stay?

I reached for my cell phone I’d set aside earlier. “Where is she? Where was the interview?”

“Now we’re talking,” Hugh said with a smile as Clara showed me the itinerary on her phone that Kylie sent her.

The Wildes left after a few more words of encouragement. My impression was that they wanted Kylie to stay in Telluride, and I was their ticket. I just hoped they liked me too.

I bought a ticket for the next available flight, which ended up being early Sunday morning. I packed a few things, texted my family, and shut off my phone. I didn’t want to hear what my brothers or parents had to say.

I knew what I needed to do, and I had several hours to figure out how to say it in a way that would bring Kylie home.

The draw wasn’t that Telluride was her hometown or that her family lived here. *I* was Kylie’s home, and we needed to be together. If she got this job, then I’d go with her. If she wanted to move to Paris, I’d follow. But I was secretly hoping she’d fallen in love with not only me, but with Telluride and my family. And I hoped she saw the potential to mend fences with hers.

It was almost too much to hope for, especially since she’d taken this job interview and flown across the country for it. It would have been easier if it had been a virtual interview, but then my apology wouldn’t have the same meaning.

I needed to show her that she was the most important person in my life and that I’d follow her anywhere. If only she’d forgive me for that thing with her brother. I hadn’t broken a promise to Xander or to her.

I would take care of her for the rest of her life. I’d never leave her side, and we’d figure everything else out together. If only I could make her see the same future I did.

I had hours to agonize over the possible outcomes. In the end, the only thing that mattered was that she forgave me and took me back. That she wanted the same things I did. The hows and whys didn’t matter as much as the intentions.

By the time I landed in LA, I was exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Kylie said she loved me, but that had been in front of her brother and during an argument. Had she meant it? And if so, why hadn't she told me?

Was she afraid I didn't feel the same way? I knew what hotel Kylie was staying at, and her interview should have been done by now, so I went there first. Her parents had asked for the room number under the guise of sending flowers, so I had it.

I'd packed light, with only a duffle bag, so I immediately took the elevator to her floor, hoping she was there.

The room itself was quiet when I knocked softly, and it only took a minute for the door to open.

Kylie's hair was rumpled, and her cheeks were flush as if she'd been napping. "Tyler? What are you doing here?"

"I had to see you," I said as I brushed past her, and she closed the door behind me.

Everything I'd planned fell from my mind. There was only one thing that mattered. I dropped my duffle bag on the unmade bed and crossed the room to her. I cupped her cheeks and asked, "Did you mean it?"

I searched her face for any hesitation.

"Mean what?"

"That you loved me?" Every muscle in my body was tense. I only needed the word, and I'd unleash the pent-up emotion.

She nodded. "I love you."

"I love you too." And then my mouth came down on hers, and she opened for me. I wasn't naïve enough to think that this declaration erased everything that came before, but it was a start. I eased back slightly. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I had this plan. I wanted to talk to your brothers first and then you."

Kylie tipped her head to the side. "Did you talk to my brothers?"

"I talked to my brothers, then yours."

Kylie ran a hand through her hair. "So they know?"

I chuckled. "Everyone knows. I even talked to your parents when they found me at your cabin."

"They are the ones who told you where I was."

"I hope it's okay that I came here. I had this whole plan of what I was going to say, but when I'm with you, I forget everything." My body was

pushing me to kiss her, to claim her, to show her she was mine. But I knew she needed the words.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about that conversation with Xander, but honestly? It didn’t mean a lot to me when I already intended to take care of you forever.”

“You weren’t with me out of some obligation to ease Xander’s anxiety?” Kylie asked, her lips trembling.

“My relationship with you never had anything to do with your brothers. We have a connection, despite your brothers.”

Her lips twitched, but it was too early to declare victory.

“I love you, and I’ll follow you wherever you go. If this job is the one you want, I’ll move to California with you.” I’d hate the city, but I’d do it. “If you want to go back to Paris, I’ll be by your side.” Even if I missed my family.

“Are you serious?”

“Home isn’t a place or where your extended family lives; it’s where you are.” I pressed my hand to her chest, feeling the comforting beat of her heart. “You’re my home.”

Her whole body sagged and swayed so that she was leaning her weight into me. “I like that.”

“I like you.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you mean it? Would you really move across the country or even to another one for me?”

“You’re my home. I can’t survive without you.” I’d barely made it through the last day without her. Ever since she walked away from me on the sidewalk, I saw my future crumbling. She was my reason for building that house. I’d listened to every one of her suggestions for tweaking the plans to make it hers.

She smiled. “The job was great, but—”

I held my breath as I waited for her to reveal our future.

“It wasn’t for me. My home is with you.”

“Baby, that’s wherever you are. Remember? It’s not a place. *It’s you.*” I emphasized the last two words. I needed her to hear me.

“My home is in Telluride. Where your family is, where mine lives, and where you are.”

I was overcome with emotion. My muscles were suddenly weak from the stress of the day. I turned us so that I was sitting on the bed, and she was

standing between my spread legs. “What are you saying, baby? I’m going to need you to spell it out for me.”

Her hand cupped my jaw. “I love you, and I want to be with you in Telluride. I want to take the event coordinator position at my family’s lodge. I just need to find a new place to live.”

I turned my cheek into her hand. “Move in with me.”

“But the house isn’t finished—”

I gripped her hips. “When the house is done, will you please move in with me? I built it for you, us, for our future together.”

She nodded. “I’d love to.”

“We’ll figure everything else out together.” It was all just details. What mattered was that Kylie was mine, and she loved me.

EPILOGUE



KYLIE

*A*fter my interview, we'd stayed in California for a few days, soaking up the sun and each other. I couldn't believe that Tyler had followed me, that he was willing to leave his hometown, his family, and everyone he loved so that he could be with me.

The job was perfect for me, but LA wasn't Telluride. I'd fallen in love with the mountains when I was a little girl, and I was ready to call it my home again. I adored Tyler's family, I loved him, and Telluride was part of my soul that I'd denied for too long.

The issues with my family had been brought to light by Tyler, and my brothers were working hard to change my perception of them. I knew we had a long way to go, but it was a start. I loved my new job. I felt settled in a way I never had before. Because this was where I belonged, working alongside my family.

At the end of the day, I went home to Tyler, and we couldn't wait to move into the new house. The one we'd planned together.

I worked over the summer on marketing the new options for weddings, fundraisers, and other events at the lodge. I even convinced my dad to allow me to offer art classes for the kids, campfires, and movie nights for the guests.

The lodge wasn't just about skiing, snowboarding, or hiking. It was an experience, one the whole family would enjoy. I made that my motto, and every decision flowed from that goal.

When I got off work, Xander walked me to my car. "Are you happy here, sis?"

I smiled. "I am. I feel like I've been fighting this inevitability my whole

life. And now I'm home."

"We're happy to have you here. I'm sorry we didn't see it earlier."

"I didn't tell you either. It's not your fault." We were working toward healing our relationships. We'd had many versions of this conversation over the past few months, ever since I returned from California. I think my brothers enjoyed having me back and would do anything for me to stay. It was a good feeling. Especially after growing up feeling like an outsider.

"Tyler's it for you," Xander said, like it wasn't a question.

My phone buzzed with a message from Tyler. He'd said to meet him at the new house. I wondered what he wanted to show me next. Maybe the outdoor patio that Sam had put in. Over the past few weeks, Tyler had said he needed to put the finishing details on the house, but it looked done to me, and I wanted to move in. I was tired of living in a rental, a place that wasn't really ours.

I looked up at Xander's knowing gaze. "He is."

Xander hugged me. "Then I'm happy for you."

I wanted my brothers to have what I did, but none of them were interested in settling down. They were too busy with the lodge and resort. I couldn't blame them. I wasn't ready until I ran into Tyler again, and then I couldn't deny the connection we'd always had.

Every time I thought of our childhood talks, a warmth spread through my chest. What we had was special, and I wanted to nurture and preserve it.

"Tyler wants to meet me at the house."

Xander's responding smile was easy. "You'd better go then."

It was the best feeling knowing that my brothers were good with me dating their friend. There were still awkward moments and times when my brothers tried to throw their weight around, but Tyler always said I was his, and what we did was our business, and that was the end of it. Their opinions didn't affect our choices anymore.

I hugged Xander and got into my new SUV. I'd recently bought it because I was planning to stay in Telluride. I couldn't wait to move in. I hoped that's what Tyler invited me here to say. I pulled into Tyler's—no, *our*—driveway, and my heart fluttered when I saw Tyler waiting for me on the porch. It was large and wrapped around the house to the backyard. There was a swing on one end, but we needed to buy furniture for both the inside and the outside.

We'd make this home our own, and I couldn't wait to get started.

“What did you want to show me?” I asked after he’d leaned down to kiss me.

He interlaced his fingers with mine and led the way around the wraparound porch to the back. Here, the porch was large with an overhang for days for when it was raining or snowing. We wanted to enjoy the outdoors as much as we could. The steps led to the patio and outdoor kitchen Sam built for us.

“It looks gorgeous. Is the house done now?” I’d been waiting for this day for months. “Can we move in?”

“We can. The furniture that we picked arrived today for the master bedroom and the living room.”

I pulled away. “Let’s go see it.”

But he stood in place, not moving.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want you to go into the house as my girlfriend.”

“What are you saying?” My heart rate picked up. I’d moved here because I loved the area and our families, but I’d stayed for him. I didn’t think I could live in Telluride without Tyler. It would be too painful.

“I don’t want you to be my girlfriend.”

I moved closer to him, almost disbelieving what he was telling me. His expression was serious, his eyes devoid of any emotion. Was he breaking up with me?

He dropped to one knee, his hand still holding mine. “When you cross that threshold, I want you to be my fiancée.”

I covered my mouth, my heart fluttering in my chest again. I was almost afraid to ask, but I needed to clarify what was happening. “What are you asking me, Tyler?”

A slow smile spread over his face. “Kylie Wilde, will you marry me?”

I was nodding yes before he finished his sentence. “Yes.”

I tugged him up until he stood in front of me. “You scared me.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t mean to. I was afraid you’d say no.”

“I could never say no to you. I was thinking on the way over here about how excited I was to start our lives together.”

“And now we will.” He slid the emerald-cut diamond onto my ring finger. “I just have one more question for you.”

“What else could there be?” I asked, my heart beating so hard I thought my body would take flight any minute.

“I want to get married here in this backyard.”

I looked at the backdrop. The trees. The mountains. Soon, it would be winter and bitterly cold. We’d have a view of the snowcapped peaks to look forward to, but for my wedding, I imagined wildflowers and sunshine. “This spring.”

He smiled before he kissed me. I wrapped my arms around his neck, drawing him close. “I love you.” I wasn’t sure which one of us said it or if it was both of us simultaneously, but I’d never felt anything so strong as the connection with him.

Our journey might have been long and riddled with obstacles, but we were always meant to end up in this place. In our new home with our families surrounding us and so much love.

I hope you loved Tyler and Kylie’s story! You can read more about their happily ever after in their [bonus epilogue](#). The Wilde Brothers are next in a Mountain Haven spin-off series.

Do you love brother’s best friend/best friend’s younger sister books? Check out this special bundle of this trope on [Lea’s shop](#).

Have you read the Ever After Series? These wedding plannings are breaking all the rules to find their happily ever afters. Start with book 1, [Feel My Love!](#) I broke my number one rule and slept with the best man. How could I resist his sexy good looks and the seductive offer of one night with no strings attached?

I moved quietly around the room, snapping pictures, adjusting settings, and observing the bridal party getting ready for Savannah and Ethan’s wedding. My goal was to blend into the background, and I lived for capturing candid moments. This time, the only difference was a groomsman tracking my movements.

I felt the heat of his gaze on the side of my face, my skin tingling with awareness. I refused to look at him, but an awareness prickled my skin. He was the best man, taller than the rest of the party, with broad shoulders and a booming voice that rumbled through my body whenever he spoke.

When another groomsman drew him into conversation, his gaze lifted, and I finally drew in a deep breath. Inwardly, I chided myself. I was here to document Savannah and Ethan’s wedding, not flirt with a groomsman.

Ethan was speaking to Sophie, who’d baked the cake and was my partner in Gia’s wedding planning business. I focused in on what he was saying. He had a gift for Savannah and wanted to see her with her son, Miles, before the

ceremony.

I'd worked quite a few weddings, and it wasn't out of the ordinary for a groom to change course and want to see his bride before the wedding, but I wasn't sure how Savannah would feel. Some brides got upset, claiming it would doom their wedding; others rolled with the change.

Not only was this the first wedding we'd done in partnership with Gia's Happily Ever Afters wedding planning services, but Savannah and Ethan were our friends.

Sophie promised she'd talk to Savannah when they went to the bridal suite to deliver the bouquets. I needed to be present to document the florist, Lily, and her assistant, handing out the flowers.

The hair on the back of my neck tingled. He was looking at me again. I needed to escape.

I wasn't sure if he was a friend or if he was related to Savannah or Ethan. I didn't know if he lived close by or if he'd traveled here just for the wedding. And it shouldn't matter.

I mindlessly scrolled through the images on my camera to avoid meeting his gaze as I followed Sophie and Lily out of the room. At the very last second, I lifted my gaze to meet the weight of his stare. Blue eyes, sandy brown hair, larger-than-life presence. He winked, and my heart stuttered to a stop before picking up speed.

I ducked my head as I stepped out of the room and away from the interest I'd seen in his eyes.

My words to my sister, Brooke, a few months ago danced in my head. I'd told her the truth—I was ready for something new. I was open to dating again or maybe even a one-night stand. That was all I was willing to indulge in as the single mother of an eight-year-old boy.

Even though I'd carefully planned the pregnancy with my ex-husband, even undergoing fertility treatment, Seth left shortly after I brought our son, Hunter, home from the hospital. Seth said he wasn't ready to be a father and wasn't sure he ever would be. I was aware of his complicated relationship with his father but hadn't realized it would affect ours so profoundly.

Being a single mother was hard, and I'd probably always bear scars from my ex leaving me, but I was antsy for something different. I was finally ready to take care of my needs. I'd probably never want to get into a serious relationship again, but what harm was there in a little fun?

I had no idea if this groomsman was up for that, but his pursual suggested

he was. Entering the bridal suite, I vowed to flirt with him at some point tonight, to let whatever would happen—happen.

I deserved one night where I could let go, and Hunter was conveniently spending the night with my parents. Was I going to let this opportunity pass by, or would I grab on to it with both hands?

My hands shook a little as I steadied the camera on the flowers. I refocused on my job, snapping pictures of the bridal party, Savannah's mother, and finally, the meeting between Ethan, Savannah, and her son, Miles.

Sophie and Lily ushered everyone out of the room before Ethan and Miles entered. With Savannah's permission, I stayed, being quiet and as unobtrusive as possible.

Gia was still at the reception hall, ensuring everything was ready to go there, but Sophie stood just outside the room, ready to step in if she was needed.

I held my hands steady, snapping Savannah's tear-filled eyes and their family hug. Once I was satisfied I'd memorialized the moment, I slipped out.

The bride and groom said they wanted everything documented, but there were times when it was unnecessary. I used my judgment to slip in and out to give them privacy. Memories weren't all wrapped up in photographs; sometimes they were wrapped up in a feeling or one of our senses.

I pushed out any thoughts of my wedding, how I'd hoped for a large family and a partner for life. It wasn't in the cards for me, but I couldn't help but get caught up in the excitement of the bride and groom.

I had responsibilities, my son, and my business. The only extracurriculars I'd be involved in were of the short, one-night stand variety. Remembering the man's wink from earlier, my body heated with anticipation.

We had a few minutes until the bridal party needed to line up. I moved farther down the empty hall to scroll through my images and see if I'd caught the moment when Ethan said he wanted to be Miles's father.

Tears pricked my eyes at the love in Savannah's eyes. Miles's biological father died before he was born. Hunter's dad was still in his life but more in the periphery than anything else. I felt a pang that there wouldn't be a man who could come in and be the father figure for Hunter and adopt him. Hunter had a father, just not the one he deserved.

I startled when the bathroom door across from me opened.

A man stepped out. My gaze traveled up slowly from his polished shoes

to his nicely muscled thighs that were threatening to burst through his pants, then to his trim waist, broad shoulders, and familiar blue eyes. It was him. The guy who'd been watching me.

He glanced down the hall and then smiled at me. "You're alone."

My cheeks heated at his obvious pleasure. "Looks like it."

He stepped closer, and I let the hand that held the camera fall to my side. "I've been waiting to get you alone all day."

"You have?" My voice came out like a squeak.

This wasn't the meeting I'd imagined while I mindlessly scrolled through my camera. I'd envisioned him kissing me passionately. There'd be no words, only frantic ripping off of clothes.

His lips twitched. "I've been watching you."

"I know." If I were more practiced in flirting, I would have asked if he liked what he saw, but I wasn't. I was rusty with the witty back and forth and the sexy innuendos. I was in over my head and questioning what I was doing in a hallway alone with a man this potent.

"You're gorgeous." His tone was filled with awe as his gaze slowly slid down my body, heating every inch of my skin at his perusal.

On Savannah's wedding day, it was beyond satisfying to know that I'd attracted someone's attention. I was dressed to blend in and not stand out, but he'd noticed anyway.

I licked my suddenly dry lips. "Thank you."

"Will I see you later?" His gaze returned to mine, the heat I'd seen banked there flaring to life, warming me from the inside out.

I shrugged, the casual motion belying my heart pounding in my chest. "I'm working."

He tipped his head to the side as if my reaction amused him. "Do you get some time off? Maybe at the reception?"

I nodded, unable to speak without my voice breaking. I usually took my break after the cake was cut. That was the unofficial time for everyone to let loose.

He touched his hand to my cheek, and all I could do was blink up at him when he said, "I'll look for you."

He winked again and walked away with a swagger I couldn't tear my eyes from.

I should have said no. I should have told him I was a single mother, and he didn't want to get involved with me. But I wasn't looking for anything

serious.

“Wait.” My voice was breathless. I rested a hand over my stomach to settle the butterflies.

He paused and arched a single brow over his shoulder.

“I don’t know your name.” Maybe it was better without one. It was easier to fuck a nameless guy and then never see him again. I’d pretend he was a fantasy.

Finally, he said, “Nick.”

He didn’t move, and I assumed he was waiting for me to reciprocate, so I said, “Abby.”

He smiled wide, seemingly satisfied at my reaction to him. “I’ll look for you later, Abby.”

This time when he walked away, I didn’t feel regret, only anticipation. And I loved the sound of my name on his lips. It was sinful, a promise of something delicious to come, and I was here for it.

He moved out of sight, and I sagged against the wall. When he focused on me, it was intense, like I was the only woman in the world. That feeling was addictive.

I’d indulge in Nick tonight, forget that I was a single mom with responsibilities, and enjoy an evening of freedom.

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