




ONCE UPON A
Billionaire,
ROMANCE

Goldie AND THE
BILLIONAIRE
BEAR

CATELYN MEADOWS

Goldie AND THE
BILLIONAIRE
 BEAR
CATELYN MEADOWS

For Duane

Somebody has been tumbling in my bed, and here she is!

ROBERT SOUTHEY, GOLDILOCKS AND THE
THREE BEARS

SIGMA PHI RHO

OFFICERS

PRESIDENT - SEAN DAYTON

VICE PRESIDENT - ADRIAN BEAR

SECRETARY - HAWK DANIELSON

TREASURER - ULRICH PHILLIPS

SOCIAL CHAIR - WILLIAM RYERS

FRATERS

WESLEY BASSETT
HUNTER BRADLEY
MADDOX HATTER
DUNCAN HAWTHORNE

GREY PHILLIPS
KNOX ROBINSON
HENRIK VON FROSK
RIVER YEVIN

Once Upon a
BILLIONAIRE
ROMANCES

ONE

goldie

I WAS NO CRIMINAL. Let's just get that straight right off the bat. I didn't usually break into people's houses or sleep in random stranger's beds.

But it was getting late. I was in Middle of Nowhere, Montana, and my stupid GPS was throwing me completely off course. In fact, I had no idea where I was.

I needed help, all right? Not like—a mental implication that all my crayons aren't sharpened or that I'm the dull tool in a shed full of sharp ones. But literal, legit, I'm stranded on the side of the road needing help.

That should count for something.

In a moment of desperation, I pounded my fist against the steering wheel and glared beneath the line of my car's visor. I flipped it back into place and raised my hand to my eyes, attempting to block out some of the blinding orange light.

I vaguely heard music from the radio blazing because my attention was mostly aimed at some sign on the side of the road that might give me an inkling of where I was.

“Stupid GPS,” I grumbled to the Maps app on my phone. It was usually so trusty, so reliable. Good old Siri, telling me where to turn and when. Heaven knew I needed it. Squiggly lines on a map may as well have been hieroglyphics for all the good they did me.

There I'd been, on the freeway between South Dakota and Montana, when Siri told me to take a random exit. So I followed it. Even when it made no sense at the time.

Why in the world would Siri tell me to turn off when I knew—I *knew*—I was headed in the right direction?

“I should have followed my gut,” I said, glowering at the pine trees stacked on either side of the road.

The road curved again, and I gripped the steering wheel while nerves ping-ponged frantically inside of me, warning me I was going the wrong way. I couldn’t keep this up. I had to find my way back to the freeway again if for nothing else than the safety of knowing I was where I wanted to be.

Fortunately, the road widened briefly to reveal the shoulder, which was only, oh, you know, two feet away from the sharpest drop-off I’d ever seen. Steeling myself, I veered and pulled off.

After several breaths, I checked for bars on my cell phone. Service up here was MIA. My phone’s internet was being completely stubborn.

Despair settled in. Not long now, and the sun would sink, stealing its rays and hiding behind the trees. Leaving me in darkness deeper than the bottom of my purse. With no cell service, no map, and the line on my gas tank creeping cruelly closer to the little E, I was more trapped than I’d ever been.

I could just hear Mom now. While Dad had always been helpful, Mom had made her irritation with what she called my *incompetency* clear.

But seriously. If someone could tell me to turn left and stop at the house straight across from the elementary school, I was good to go. North and south? What were they other than the title of one of my favorite movies with a really great kiss at the end?

I rested my forehead against the steering wheel. This was why I never went anywhere. This was why I stayed home in Baldwin, Wisconsin, a rinky-dink little town where I knew every landmark from the time I could spell the names.

Until the letter arrived. The letter from a woman claiming to be Mom’s sister.

Mom had no siblings—or so I'd always thought. If that was the case, who was this woman inviting me to meet her halfway across the country? I would have disregarded the letter completely if Mom hadn't acted so plumb guilty about the thing when I'd shown it to her.

Mom's angry, defensive reaction—and obvious *lack* of denial about her sister—had the opposite effect she'd clearly meant. It didn't just spark curiosity in me; it sent me on a mission.

My mom had a sister she'd hidden from me for my entire life?

What was that all about?

“So, like a sucker, I've followed some crazy wild goose chase,” I mumbled to myself.

Growling, I stepped out of the car and into the chilled mountain air. I rubbed my arms. It was so much colder up here. Why had I ever gotten off the freeway?

I whirled around and rested against the side of my little single cab Toyota. The truck was small, but it was the perfect vehicle for a girl needing to get back and forth from the grocery store and her job. A job I'd taken a two-week break from for this.

Not for the first time, I regretted that decision. And I was sure this wouldn't be the last either.

The stars twinkled breathlessly above, hinting at the coming night. It was enchanting, sure, but I didn't want enchanting. I wanted the peace of mind that came from seeing the freeway, dang it.

I scraped my hands through my hair and tromped a few feet away, needing to move, to think. To breathe.

That was when I saw it.

Tucked in the trees beyond the road, bathed in the last remaining slices of light, was a quaint log cabin. Hope swelled inside of me. I wasn't alone up here after all.

If someone was there, they could tell me which way to go! They could get me out of this tangled forest and back to civilization where I belonged. Who knew, maybe they even had some super sleuth, outdoorsy way to contact someone for help: like a GPS that actually worked.

I didn't dare drive there. Knowing my luck, I'd lose sight of the cabin the instant I moved my truck. Instead, I retrieved my bag, lobbed it and my determination over my shoulder, and trudged into the brush.

Despite the chill and the fading light, the air smelled amazing; like fresh pine and clean dirt and the spray I used when cleaning wood surfaces. As I stepped carefully around protruding rocks embedded in the forest floor, twigs crackled underfoot.

The sun was nothing more than an orange glow stick dropped at the bottom of a well, hovering near the edge of the horizon. To say that visibility was limited was putting it a little too mildly. I could be walking toward a huge pit and wouldn't be the wiser until I wound up plummeting to my death.

That gave me pause.

Death? That was dramatic.

I couldn't think that way. I did my best to rein in my thoughts, to keep worst-case scenarios from taking over and to just put one foot in front of another. This wasn't a big city. Gunshots and police sirens weren't going off at all hours.

I kept the cabin in my sights, using my cell phone in the darker places where the latticed trees above provided a little too much cover.

Finally, my foot struck the front porch's bottom step. That was a relief—but there wasn't any light in any of the windows either. That wasn't a good sign.

I peered behind, trying to see where I'd left my truck. Though it was white, I'd trodden far enough, and it was dark enough the truck was no longer visible.

Great. Don't tell me I'd come all this way just to have to find my way back to it and sleep in its cramped cab tonight.

There were only a few last dregs of amber light sinking behind the horizon. Fading. I had the weirdest urge to reach toward the light like a dying heroine in a movie. Like that would do any good.

I braced myself and approached the cabin door. Shadows overtook the porch's wraparound corners.

As far as I could tell, the cabin was a single-level structure and was made of logs, with a slanted roof and an awning over the porch. Not the kind of getaway most families would use. This was more like a rustic romantic escape, tucked away like a secret.

I wasn't sure what to do. I'd made it this far. Might as well check and see if anyone was inside. I blew warm air onto my cold fist, bit my lip, and knocked.

No answer.

"Awesome." Leave it to me to not only get lost on the road, but to then leave that road and get lost in the woods to boot.

Chirruping noises chimed from the trees. The occasional scuffling sound followed, including a cracking twig whose sharp *rap* made me jump in my skin. A critter that could undoubtedly see me, even if I couldn't see it.

Unease pummeled into me. I rounded toward the door and knocked again, harder this time.

"Hello? Anyone here?"

The cabin's dead windows stared at me in reply. That would be a big fat no.

I plopped my bag on the porch's wooden planks, strode to the front window a few feet down from the door, and peered inside. Through a small crack in the curtain, I saw—yep. More blackness.

Perfect. Just perfect. Little Miss No Luck stuck out here. In the woods. In the dark. I checked my cell again, but there was exactly the same zero service there'd been the last time I tried.

Even if I did have service, my aunt had only given me her email and physical address. No number.

Cold penetrated through my jacket's thin fabric. I hugged my arms around my chest, rubbing away the chills and wondering what to do. Hopelessness began to carve into me.

"I can't stand around here all night," I muttered.

And I really didn't want to spend the night sitting up in my truck and hoping someone might pull over if they saw me there.

As far as I could tell, I had two options. I could try to make it back to my truck, but what if I got lost again on the way there? I could barely see five feet in front of me—what if I headed in the direction I thought the truck was only to find I was completely turned around?

It might be safer to stay here. I could hang out on the porch where I was. Rough it in the cold air.

An unnerving sound followed that thought—the clicking of something low in a predator's throat. It rumbled, making every one of the hairs on my arms stand on end. Nerves skittering, I scrambled back to the door once more and pressed my back to it, scanning the dark surroundings.

Who knew what lived out here? I hadn't heard a wolf howl yet—thank you very much, Pocahontas—but that didn't mean there couldn't be very silent, very hungry animals stalking me right this second.

There was only one thing for it.

I checked my phone, only to find I was down to twenty percent, and the little battery in the corner was now red.

"Even my battery is against me," I muttered.

Using what little charge my phone had left, I shined its light toward the cabin door once more and reached for the handle with my free hand.

It didn't budge.

Despair clawed up my throat. It fizzed in my eyes, making them burn. That burning filtered down in my chest to tear away what little hope I had left. Fighting away the despondency, I reached for the knob again.

The same clicking sound cracked a twig much closer to where I stood.

In place of gunshots and sirens, animals were the danger here. They were going to spring at me. Any second now, I'd find myself face to face with a pair of jaws displaying teeth that somehow glowed green and dripped with venom and menace. Any second now, they'd leap and tear me limb from limb.

Fear overtook me. I clicked down the latch. I jiggled it, ramming my shoulder in as hard as I could for good measure.

"Come on," I pleaded, pounding my shoulder against the door once more. I shook the latch. I bounced up and down, maintaining the firmest grip I could on it. With a final, desperate effort, I plowed my shoulder against the door once more.

Just as I was about to give into my despair, the door swung open.

With gallons of relief, I bolted for the bag I'd left on the porch, kicked it inside, darted in, and slammed the door shut behind me.

A kind of stillness ensued. Warmth wafted from the open door. It wasn't much, but it was enough of a contrast to the cold night outside.

The cabin was much too silent. Sounds of nature outside were muted and absent, and I basked in that knowledge, in the fact that there was a solid barrier between me and the terrors of the nighttime forest. I allowed my eyes to adjust for a few moments before glancing around at my surroundings.

"Hello?" I said, calling loudly, searching for a light switch.

There weren't any vehicles parked out there, but for all I knew, someone could very well be here, sleeping soundly, unaware that they were currently being intruded upon.

No one responded. I drew in a long breath.

Well, then.

The high-stress situation made me suddenly ravishingly tired. Exhaustion dragged at my limbs. Morning would come soon enough, and once it was light, I could find my way back to my truck, drive around, and figure out where I was.

That settled it. I'd sleep here and get back out there at the first break of day.

Finding the switch, I flicked it on, plugged in my cell phone, and meandered through until I came to the first bedroom. The bed was nicely made with thick blankets.

I could cozy in. Remake the bed later. No one would even know I was here.

That thought stopped me in my tracks. What was I thinking? I couldn't just sleep in some random cabin. But I had no other options.

Whoever owned this cabin, I could leave them a note, letting them know I'd come and what the circumstances were. I'd give them a way to contact me so I could reimburse them.

Yeah, that would work.

Besides, all I needed was a place to stay the night. I wouldn't continue after that. I'd leave everything just the way I found it.

They wouldn't even know I was here.

With that settled, I readied for bed, and climbed in, praying that my brilliantly impulsive plan wouldn't hit any kinks.

Except I had forgotten one very important detail that would come back to bite me:

They didn't call me Little Miss No Luck for nothing.

THE FARTHER I DROVE, the deeper my dread grew. My family's cabin was the last place I wanted to be, but after hanging out with the guys, Mom had sprung her nasty little surprise on me—and it got to me.

I had to get out of there. To think. To search.

Bad memories, awkward conversations, and experiences I'd suppressed for years—they were all rearing their annoying heads at the sight of every new tree.

To anyone else, I was sure the view here was spectacular. All I saw were the arguments and disappointments that made me leave in the first place. All the reasons I should have known better than to expect any kind of inheritance after Dad's passing.

So to find out that inheritance had actually been granted—but that it was missing?

Yeah. I wasn't about to wait around back at the ranch. How could I sleep and wait until morning to look for it? I knew the answer; I wouldn't have been able to rest. Not until I got to the bottom of this.

Dad had rarely reached out to me in any way other than in admonishment. Though I knew better, part of me hoped that this *lockbox* he'd bequeathed to me might actually be different. Part of me hoped that it might hold something in it that could help me see him in a different light.

I mean, he was gone now. I didn't want to keep resenting him.

A haze shrouded over my mind. Weariness trickled from the top of my skull, along my forehead, and down into my eyes, which began to droop.

I gripped the steering wheel and shook myself. The smartness of my spontaneous action was fading—fast.

It was nearly midnight, and I was tired.

I was tempted to turn back, catch a few Zs, and come again in the morning when it made more sense—when I was in a better mental state rather than braving the winding mountain roads half-asleep. But I'd already come this far. In fact, I was fairly certain I'd be at the cabin within minutes.

Whether it was the middle of the night or not, I didn't need any kind of direction to tell me I was almost there. It'd been years since I'd been to the cabin, but the way there was instinctive. The truth was, I could probably find it in my sleep.

Not that I wanted to test that theory. This car was new.

The road widened momentarily. A single cab, white Toyota pickup was pulled off to the side. The sight was just what I needed. My curiosity blinked, rousing me enough to keep me awake. The truck was abandoned from the look of things, unless someone was having car trouble.

I pulled to a stop beside the pickup and glanced around. No one was in sight. The hood wasn't gaped open. Maybe someone had picked up whoever this person was, and they'd be coming back for the vehicle in the morning.

This particular route was popular with off-roaders and mountain bikers. If it wasn't the middle of the night, I would have thought they'd hauled their bikes from the truck bed and were out enjoying the scenery. Maybe they were camping.

Whatever the case, I shrugged it off and pulled back onto the road until I saw the dirt road in the trees, so often missed by passersby. It was a good thing I'd seen it—the exhaustion wearing on my eyes was getting heavier.

The road turned from pavement to dirt. I braced myself through the bumpy jaunt that led to my least favorite place in the world.

I shook my head a few more times to remain coherent enough to make it to the cabin's driveway. Though the road leading there wasn't paved, the driveway was.

The Hummer I'd bought when I'd come back for the funeral took to the road better than I expected. An SUV wasn't typically the kind of car I drove—I tended to prefer something a little sportier—but its military style was dope. I liked its massive storage and comfortable driver's seat, too.

Lofty and solemn, the cabin came into view through a break in the trees. The exposed logs were stacked perfectly. Though right now they were shadowed, I knew come morning they would glow in the sunlight.

Something hitched in my chest, but I did my best to disregard it. It was the same indignant, stubborn resentment I'd experienced every time I'd come here.

You'd think with Dad gone now, the bitter feelings would leave, too. But no, they were still as insistent as ever.

Mom had told me about the lockbox at the worst possible time. The guys had all come into town for our reunion. It wasn't official Sigma Phi Rho business—even though each of us had been part of the fraternity. It was just a bunch of old friends getting together.

They were the closest friends I'd had during college. We'd kept in touch during the past ten years since I graduated, but with each of us venturing off to start our own businesses, we hadn't hung out in I wasn't sure how long.

Dad's passing had been the catalyst for that, at least. They'd come to hang out, to show their condolences at the loss of my father. Since they hadn't been able to come for the actual funeral, we made a boys' trip out of it.

And I'd ditched out on them to come here.

I could have waited until the morning to search for the lockbox, but after having Mom nag me enough about Danica, home was the last place I wanted to be.

I needed a break. I needed some time to think. I needed to find that lockbox.

But first, I needed some sleep.

Once I found Dad's lockbox, I was heading down as quickly as the speed limit and mountain switchbacks allowed. The boys and I had some catching up to do before they all had to get back.

Not only was the fundraiser creeping ever closer that evening as well—a fundraiser Mom insisted I find a date for—but my flight home was scheduled for the next day, after I went golfing with the guys and hit up the fundraiser.

That didn't give me much time. I *had* to find it.

I parked the blue Hummer, killed the ignition, and stepped out. It was just after midnight. The forest air was crisp, fresh with the hint of pine and the promise of seclusion.

At least there was that.

I craned my neck and rubbed my eyes. My legs thanked me for letting them straighten again after being bent for the last hour. The cabin greeted me, offering its porch and staring without judgment. An owl hooted nearby, and I stood for several moments, staring right back.

It wasn't the cabin's fault for the bad memories. It'd just been Dad's laser-like way of asking uncomfortable questions, backing me into proverbial corners, all while slathering on his paternal disappointment.

Dad had never seemed to grasp the real point behind family vacations. Who needed a getaway to enjoy time together? He'd seen them as another opportunity to lambast me about all the ways I'd failed him.

This at least was no "vacation." I was only here to search. I wasn't sure where the lockbox would be—stashed in one of the cupboards or cabinets, maybe. Then I'd be on my way back.

Not to Two Pines. Back to Chicago, to the life where I belonged.

But first, I was going to crash and enjoy the blessed peace that came from being completely alone.

The owl hooted again, and a soft breeze brushed across my arms. Twigs and brush crackled beneath my feet as I made my way to the door. I unlocked the door, turned the handle, and went inside.

The prospect of sleep was too strong to ignore. I was so depleted I could hardly think straight. I didn't bother turning on any lights but kicked my shoes off as I made my way down the dark hall, grateful for the moonlight spilling in.

Sleep hounded my eyes. I shed my jacket and chucked it to the floor, too drained to do much else besides feel my way into my room.

I paused near the edge of the bed. Setting my phone on the bedside table, I sat on the side of the mattress, ready to succumb to my body's demand for rest.

Except...

A soft form rolled against me.

Silky hair trailed against my arm, drifting a vanilla scent in my direction. Before I knew what was happening, my hand brushed against *something*, and reality struck:

I wasn't the only one in here.

Everything in me fired with awareness. The imposter released a drowsy, confused moan. A *female* moan. She rustled for a moment before she froze and sat up.

"What the heck?" she said in her groggy voice.

"Whoa." I startled to my feet.

Finding a woman in my bed was the last thing I expected.

I attempted to retreat, but I didn't get far before she screamed and vaulted a pillow at my face. My foot caught on something I couldn't see, tripping me in the process so I landed hard against the floor.

The woman wailed again, released a shriek, and scampered past me toward the door.

I couldn't let her leave—not until I knew what was going on here. But what was I going to do, grab her by the ankles?

Freeing myself, I hurried to my feet and followed her. Fortunately, I knew this place better than she did because she faltered at the end of the hall, arms outstretched, peering right and left.

I dove for the switch, and light flooded the cabin's living room, making her lift an arm as though to block it out.

Eyes squinted, she pivoted. Her frantic gaze darted from the plaid curtains blocking the windows, to the wooden shelves staged with books, to the empty fireplace. Then, her eyes slowly climbed from my sock feet to my face.

A small fire erupted in the pit of my stomach. I wasn't sure what to expect. It'd been dark so I'd had no idea if she was older? Younger? A homeless person who'd wandered through the forest—on foot?

But no—this woman was beautiful, with wide, shocked eyes and a heart-shaped face. Her mouth hung open in embarrassment—and then gritted in determination.

Not many people knew about this cabin. How did she? Did she somehow know about Dad's missing lockbox?

Wanting to be as collected for this confrontation as I could be, I crossed my arms over my chest and took her in.

There was something about seeing a woman unkempt like this, with her hair disheveled, with her shirt and dark leggings hugging her curves. She was in her twenties, I'd guess, with golden blonde hair draping down her shoulders.

Her eyes skimmed over me with wariness, and I couldn't say I blamed her for her distrustful scrutiny. She wondered about me?

That was nothing to the curiosity I had about her.

I had to find out what she was doing here—and what I was going to do about it.

THREE

goldie

BOTTLE ROCKETS EXPLODED under my skin. Of course, the one and only time I break the law, it had to be to enter a cabin belonging to a psychopath. An *attractive* psychopath who stared at me with caution and question marks in his eyes.

I braced myself, ready for his next move. I was shaking in my skin. Though my eyes had adjusted to the change in the light and the front door was right there, waiting for me to dart through it, I was barefooted. And in my delirium, I couldn't remember where I'd chucked my shoes or my bag the night before.

If I were going to be making a mad escape into a darkened, potentially wolf-ridden forest, shoes might be nice.

So I met my intruder's gaze, waiting for my whirring thoughts to settle on the next action I should take.

He took a step toward me. Not happening.

I dove for the figurine of a cowboy riding a horse and raising his hat with one hand sitting on the table. Sure enough, it was heavy. It could do some damage.

I held it toward the man, who lifted his hands.

"I'm not going to hurt you." His tone suggested that the notion was absurd.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

He was beguilingly handsome, with dark hair and a chiseled jawline hugged by well-trimmed scruff.

So he was hot. Did he think he could barge into any woman's personal space anytime he felt like it?

Except it technically wasn't *my* personal space...

My cheeks flamed. Oh, my sweet goodness. When I broke in here, I never imagined anything like *this*.

"Who are you?" I said again, lifting a hand to my cheek.

He flicked his tangled dark hair back. "I should ask you the same question, since this is my family's cabin. Did Jordan tell you this was here? Did he give you a key?"

I had no clue who Jordan was. I had to keep the upper hand in this conversation—as much as I could, anyway.

"Do you often get into bed with women you don't know?"

"This is my cabin, remember? And you were sleeping in *my* bed. I didn't know you were there, or I would never have—"

He shook himself. From the way he clenched his fists, I got the feeling he was working hard to keep himself in check.

"Look," he said, tempering his voice. "I'm not going to hurt you. Let's just get to the bottom of this. Would you put that down?"

He gestured to the figurine in my hands. It was getting heavy.

"Please," he added.

I considered. Chances were, he was telling the truth. If anything, I'd been the one to catch *him* off guard.

Now that my brain was starting to connect the pieces of the situation, I saw things differently. He'd obviously come home to sleep after a long day and hadn't expected to find me in his spot.

Talk about embarrassing. "Caught in the act" took on a whole new meaning.

The events of a few moments ago rushed in with all the force of a hammer. What was I doing behaving so defensively

when, in all reality, he should be the one feeling threatened by me?

Deciding it was better to give him the benefit of the doubt, I nodded and lowered the figurine back to its spot.

The man ran a hand through his hair, displaying his left bicep and its godlike proportions to their full advantage.

“Who are you?” he asked, resting that hand on his hip.

I stared in a daze. If an artist out there attempted to create the perfect man, he would fit the bill. From the striking features, the confident way he carried himself, even the way his hand rested against his hip, he was flawlessly formed.

Part of me wondered if I was still dreaming. He and his chiseled contours were definitely the stuff of dreams. Honestly, how many men out there looked like he did?

I needed to stop ogling him, stat.

“What are you doing in my cabin?” he asked, persisting even though I hadn’t answered his first question.

I hugged my chest and chided myself for losing my senses completely. *He’s just a man.* He was a stranger, for that matter. Let’s not get carried away here.

“I’m so sorry to have imposed. I got lost last night and had no cell service.”

I patted my pockets in a quiet search, wishing that I had my phone with me right now. Along with the foggy inability to recollect where my shoes had gone, I couldn’t remember where my phone had ended up either.

He sank onto the couch’s armrest. “That white Toyota?”

I considered fabricating something, but honesty was probably best at this point. Honesty—and groveling too. After all, I had trespassed into his turf.

“Is mine. Yes. I’m so sorry—I didn’t know what else to do. I saw your cabin just as the sun was setting and thought maybe you could help me. But then it got dark, and no one was here and I—I was only going to stay until morning, I swear.”

I held my breath, waiting for his verdict. I'd broken in and slept in his property. He should be calling the police, assuming he had cell service with which to do so.

He rubbed his jaw and then rested his hands on his knees, angling his head to the side as if considering the circumstance from all points. It struck me how tired he looked.

“Either you're an extremely good actress, or your remorse is genuine. I'm guessing you're no burglar.”

I swallowed. “I'm not. I'm so not. And did I mention I was sorry?”

“It's okay,” he said after several moments.

I tucked my hair behind my ear, clamped my arms around me, and stared at him. Did he just say what I think he did? I broke into his place, stole his bed—and it was okay?

He cleared his throat and gestured to the window behind me. “I saw your truck out there. I wondered if you were having some car trouble.”

“More like navigational trouble.”

He shifted, resting a hand on his thigh. I skimmed his face again, noticing the dark circles under his eyes. He stifled a yawn behind his hand and rose to his feet. “What's your name?”

“Goldie,” I said. I owed him this much. “I'm Goldie Bybanks.”

He nodded, crossed to me, and offered his hand.

It would be rude to deny this friendly gesture, wouldn't it? Steeling my nerves, I slid my small hand into his larger one. A rush coursed through me at the touch.

“Adrian,” he said.

His gaze locked onto mine, and I found myself lost in an entirely different way in the curious gleam of his brown eyes, the length of his dark lashes, the alluring shape of his lips.

“Hi,” I said stupidly. A smile crept into place, responding to the tractor beam his gaze held me in.

Adrian held my hand a little longer than necessary before freeing his and stepping back. “Goldie. It’s late.”

“It is.”

“It’s been a long day, and I’m not firing on all cylinders. I’m assuming you’re not an ax murderer.”

The quirk in his lips gave me permission to return the expression. “I’m not.”

He blinked. Tiredness glazed over his eyes, and he rubbed his jaw again. “Good. Me neither. So can we both get some sleep and continue this in the morning? You can go ahead and sleep in my—” He cleared his throat. “Where you were. I’ll take one of the other rooms.”

Heat patched my cheeks. “Oh, but it’s your room—”

“I’ll be fine. Go on now. I’ll get the lights.”

I was caught off guard completely. A glance at the clock over the fireplace told me it was nearing one a.m.

Not having many other options, I gave him a little nod. “All right, then. Good night, Adrian.”

“Good night.”

The low rumble of his voice stayed with me the entire trek down the hall and into the room we’d vacated. Shaking my head over the inanity of it all, I exhaled.

The blankets were completely thrashed, so I did what I could to straighten them before climbing back in and feeling like a completely different person now than I’d been when I’d done the same thing a few hours before.

I nestled my head into the pillow. The room now held the faintest traces of him—masculinity and musk and soul-melting catnip. Or rather, Goldie-nip. It was as though this scent was tailored to allure me and only me.

My body gradually melded into the sheets. I hugged the thick, downy blanket to my chin, hearing Adrian’s soft footsteps, before the lights went out in the hall and everything went quiet.

It was a long time before I fell asleep, though—mostly because I kept anticipating exactly what was going to happen the next day once we were both more coherent.

And also hoping he wasn't an ax-murderer, either.

Morning would come soon enough. He hadn't said anything about pressing charges...yet...but was I going to have a rude awakening?

IT WAS a good thing I was so exhausted. The concept of finding a beautiful woman in my bed was hard to cast aside. It'd been completely innocent, really, but still, I couldn't get Goldie off my mind.

I wasn't sure how long it took, but at some point, I drifted off. Gradually, I began to wake. The sun did its best to push through the curtains, and the smell of something cooking stirred my senses.

My head pounded with everything that had taken place. I tossed back the blankets and slipped my shirt back on. Conflict ravaged me as I made my way to the kitchen. What was I going to do about my unexpected guest?

I could call the police, but either I was a sucker, or I was a pushover. Or both.

The truth was, my gut instinct told me she was harmless. Still, how many people got taken advantage of or found themselves in dangerous situations because they'd been too trusting?

Not that I considered myself in any kind of danger from her.

I'd taken Jordan's room, which happened to be situated right across from mine—the one I'd found Goldie in. It wasn't a big deal sleeping in my little brother's bed. In any case, I strode out to find Goldie at the stove.

Her blonde hair was tied high on her head. She'd located Mom's apron and had it tied around her slender waist. She

hummed softly and swayed her hips in tune to what sounded like a Jason Mraz song playing on her phone.

“Morning,” I said, needing to interrupt the hypnotic hip swinging.

Wooden spoon in hand, she jolted and spun. Her cheeks pinked adorably. “Oh! I didn’t hear you. You’re awake.”

“I am. I—”

The word caught in my throat. I cleared it and gestured to the stove behind her.

“Smells good,” I said, wanting to put her at ease.

Or myself. Either one.

I wanted to think of something to say. She didn’t need to think I was a domineering psycho, although we did need to get to the bottom of what she was doing here.

She’d claimed to have navigational issues. Was that all it was?

“I didn’t even know there was anything up here for you to cook.”

She tucked a strand of golden hair behind her ear. “Yeah, I searched through the cupboards and the fridge. I was surprised to find some eggs and they hadn’t expired yet, so I figured they were still good. I also found some flour and baking items in the cupboard, and I whipped us up some pancakes.”

I wondered who left the eggs here. Kimmy? That wasn’t like her. My brother’s wife was usually on the ball with things like not leaving food that could expire behind. Then again, if it was Jordan and his friends, I could completely believe it of him.

Actually, having Jordan plan ahead enough to bring food up here in the first place was a surprise, so I took that thought back almost the instant it surfaced.

“You made pancakes from scratch?”

She turned to stir the eggs. Satisfied, she shut the heating element off on the stove and scraped the eggs onto the two

plates she had on the counter.

“Yeah. I hope that’s okay. I wanted to do something to thank you, you know, for letting me stay here. Even though it’s sort of already your food.” She chuckled nervously at this and more of that pink rose in her cheeks.

A stack of pancakes sat on a plate next to the others. My stomach growled at the smell. I strode to the counter beside her and took the plate she offered.

“Thanks,” I said. “This was thoughtful of you.”

There was only a plate between us at this point, with her hand on one side and mine on the other, and I was ensnared by that thought and by the crystal blue of her eyes. They glittered and snared me, reeling me in. I swallowed.

When was the last time a woman had had this effect on me?

I’d dated plenty of girls in college, but none of them had ever flickered *inside* of me. It was as though I had a switch beneath my ribs, and every time my eyes caught Goldie’s, she flipped it.

I hadn’t dated much in the ten years since graduation—I’d been too focused on my business—so no woman since then had impacted me like this, either.

“I—I don’t know if there’s any syrup, so I made some.” She broke our trance and reached for the other pot on the stove, holding it in my direction.

“I didn’t even know you could make homemade syrup.” I offered my plate to her, and she poured the golden liquid onto my pancakes. “Thanks.”

“I’m quirky like that, I guess,” she said, pouring syrup on her pancakes as well before placing the pot down once more. “If I can’t find what I’m looking for, I make it.”

“Like last night,” I said, veering to the table.

Sunlight glowed, and unlike the other windows in this place, these were uncovered, offering a full-fledged view of the forest, the lake beyond, and the wooden steps leading

down to that lake. The family and I had all worked together one summer arranging each of those railroad ties into place for those steps.

That should have been a good memory—except it'd been my senior year of high school, and Dad had spent the entire time berating me for the college I'd chosen to attend: University of Chicago.

Thinking of college so much made my thoughts turn to the guys again. To our plans for the day. I wondered if they even realized I was gone.

“What do you mean?” She joined me at the table, looking cute in Mom's apron.

I cut into the pancakes with my fork and placed the bite in my mouth. The syrup was the best I'd ever tasted, creamy and savory. A small moan leaked out.

“Delicious,” I said, chewing before answering. “Last night, you said you had navigational trouble. I'm assuming you meant you got lost.”

“Yeah.” The word was weak and sheepish.

“So you took matters into your own hands to find help.”

“I—I did. But I'm no criminal, I swear.”

I couldn't help teasing her. “Your actions prove otherwise.”

She chewed her lip. I wondered how she'd respond when a new glint lit her eyes. “Good thing our actions don't define everything we are, right?” She lifted her chin. “For instance, based on what happened last night, you know, I could assume you—”

I cleared my throat. “I told you, I didn't know you were there.” At least I hadn't crawled into bed *with* her. That just about happened.

She smiled with a little gleam of victory in her eyes. It was brief before she waved me down. “Eat your pancakes.”

Fair enough. I liked that she was feisty.

“So do you need directions? Where are you headed?”

“I was trying to make my way to Two Pines.”

My hometown? Why was she heading there? “You’re about an hour out.”

Her eyes widened. “An hour? So much for GPS.”

She concentrated on her pancakes and eggs for a moment. I cleaned the rest of the eggs from my plate. Had something happened to her GPS? That didn’t bode well out here. Or anywhere, for that matter.

The phone in my pocket buzzed. I swiped and sure enough, there was the text I’d expected to get.

Hawk: Dude, your mom said you bolted. Where’d you go?

Me: I had to check for something. I’ll be back in about an hour or so.

Hawk had come a few days before the others to look into buying the ski resort not too far from here, so he and I had had more time to hang out. Duncan and Maddox, though—they were only here for the day. They were probably pestering him about where I was.

I really did need to get on with my search and head back down there. We had a few rounds of golf to hit up this afternoon before the guys parted ways.

“If you’ll allow me a minute or two here, you can follow me when I make my way back into town,” I said, rising to take my dishes to the sink.

Her face transformed into overwhelmed surprise. “You’d do that?”

Her skepticism drew a smile from me. “Sure. I’ll be headed that direction anyway.”

My family didn’t live directly in Two Pines, but I had to drive through town to make it back to the ranch. Might as well give her a hand.

I waited for her to ask why I'd come all this way to stay only a few hours—or why I'd done so in the middle of the night—but she didn't. I never would have made the trip if I hadn't thought the lockbox might be here.

After Dad's death, my brothers and I had been approached by Dad's attorney to relay the contents of the family trust. Mom was content to manage the ranch. While my brothers had been gifted resources and ownership of Dad's substantial properties, my inheritance had been a single line—the lockbox.

We'd inspected Dad's vault at the bank. It wasn't there. The bank had said Dad had removed it sometime before, which left me with the question—where was it? More importantly, what did it contain? And why had the old man left it to me on the condition of his death?

I wasn't sure how to search for the lockbox without Goldie noticing. My trust only went so far.

She and I washed the dishes in communal silence. It should have felt awkward standing so close and working together with a practical stranger, but we had a pretty good thing going.

I washed. She dried. She even knew where the dishes went, seeing as how she'd been the one to snoop them out.

Drying her hands, she peered around the cabin, while I tried to find a way to excuse myself for my search. She made it easy for me.

“Is it okay if I find the bathroom?”

“You found everything else easily enough,” I said. “Don't let bathrooms stop you.”

She gave a nervous little laugh and trailed off, stopping to retrieve her bag near the sofa. I took advantage of her absence the moment she was gone. I started with her room—ahem, *my* room—first.

The memory of the night before slammed into me, but I brushed it aside and ducked to peer beneath the bed. Nothing but dust bunnies. Okay, then.

I rifled through the dresser drawers and pilfered through the blankets Mom kept stored in the closet. No lockbox.

I made my way through the other three bedrooms, sweeping through the same process as well as any other areas the lockbox might be tucked away in, including the linen closet at the end of the hall. Aside from towels, sheets, and a handful of board games, it wasn't there either.

The sunny kitchen was next. The lockbox wasn't likely to be stashed away with the bowls and plates, but it didn't hurt to check. One cupboard offered a box of instant oatmeal and several granola bars. Evidence that it hadn't been long since Chase and Kimmy had brought the kids here.

I was just about to dive into the living room when her voice pealed from down the hall.

“Adrian?”

I stilled.

She called out again. “No!”

Giving the living room a sweeping glance, I treaded in the direction of the bathroom.

It was a shame; I'd hoped to finish my search while she was preoccupied. But it sounded like something was wrong. Was she hurt?

Muffled noises came from within, including a loud bang, followed by a squeal.

I placed a hand on the door. “Hey, you okay in there?”

She waited too long to answer.

I couldn't just barge in there. But I couldn't let a total stranger have full range of the bathroom and damage the property either.

She could be doing any number of things in there. I mean, bathrooms had locked doors for a reason. But I didn't know this woman—and she was either *in* trouble or she was making it.

I had to find out which one it was.

THE THOUGHT of following Adrian to Two Pines was almost as mortifying as having been caught in his cabin. I couldn't expect anything more from him—not after everything that had transpired since we, erm, *met*.

I wanted to leave. Walking out the door without accepting his offer, though? I suspected he would argue if I tried it.

Using the bathroom had been necessary, yes, but it was also a ploy. I knew for a fact there was a window above the bathtub. I'd seen it when I'd readied for bed the night before.

I also knew the window had a latch. And wouldn't you know it, but locking the bathroom door was guaranteed to give me some privacy while I carried out my escape.

My phone was charged. According to Adrian, Two Pines was only an hour out. I'd made him breakfast as a show of my gratitude. That was enough recompense, wasn't it?

It was time to get out of dodge.

Chances were I'd never see Adrian No Last-Name again, and with the way being near him made me the sole contender in a tug-of-war match where I was sure to lose, it was better this way. I'd slip out the window, scurry back to my truck, and make it to Aunt Bethany's before he ever realized I was gone.

It was genius.

Door? Locked. Bag? Check. Phone? I patted my pockets in a sudden frenzy before exhaling in relief. There it was, keeping my left cheek company. Check. Check.

A worry niggled in, warning me I was playing with fire by not accepting Adrian's offer of help, but I cast it aside. My plan was foolproof.

If I left, that would save Adrian from having to go out of his way for me any more than he already had. It would also save what was left of my pride. I'd bolt. He wouldn't have to worry about me anymore after this. He and I could both move on with our lives.

I slung my bag over one shoulder. Its weight set me off-kilter, but I readjusted and climbed onto the bathtub's edge. Movement from my periphery startled me, but I realized it was only my reflection in the mirror. Releasing a shaky, silent laugh, I concentrated on the window.

The view outside was verdant, sequestered, and beautiful. Behind the cabin, the mountainside sloped down to a glistening lake whose blue rivaled the sky.

The prospect of being reunited with my truck, my freedom, and my sanity gushed through, propelling me. I peered back to the door a final time, waiting for any sound or indication that Adrian was close and would hear what I was up to, but he was quiet.

So far, so good.

With the flick of my thumb, the latch gave. I prayed the window was well-oiled, braced myself against the tub's side, and pushed. The window didn't budge. I tried again, bracing my feet on the edge this time.

I pushed again. Still nothing.

I exhaled in frustration and brushed a strand of hair from my face. "This is a good plan, you possessive house. Work with me here."

I tried a third time. The window groaned open so fast it startled me. I released a little shriek. My hand slipped from the window as it moved. My feet slid from the tub's edge.

The potted vase in the corner at the bathtub's side wobbled. I dove for it—but instead of catching it, I only

succeeded in knocking it that much harder. It hit the tub's side and struck the floor.

For some reason, Adrian's name tumbled from my lips.

The vase shattered, and to my horror, the tile beneath it protested with a long crack right from its corner and snaked beneath the shaggy gray rug.

"No!" I said too loudly.

No, no, no. Hadn't I already done enough damage here? My pride was already in shambles. Why did my body decide it was time to join the ridiculous party?

The footsteps I'd been dreading came. I heard him just outside the door.

"Hey, you okay in there?"

I squeezed my eyes shut. This wasn't happening. This was so. Not. Happening.

Except it was.

A moment of stillness wrapped around me and presented me with a crossroads. The window was open. I could do it. I could leap from its screen-less panes and make my clever escape.

And leave Adrian with this mess? Though I wanted to pull a Towanda and let the disaster worry about itself, my conscience wouldn't let me. Stupid, goody-goody conscience.

I could never live with myself if I left this nightmare for Adrian to deal with. Broken vases? Messes?

I'd sworn I'd leave the cabin as I found it. This was so not how I'd found it.

I'd cooked him breakfast to make up for breaking in. What could I do to repair this? His laundry?

The bathroom was a tight fit. I darted around the mess, searching beneath the sink for a garbage can so I could start cleaning up the pieces. Too soon, he jiggled the handle.

"Are you dressed in there?"

With my hands full of broken ceramic pieces, I paused. “What kind of a question is that?”

“Well, I didn’t know if you were showering or—I mean, are you ready for me to open the door?”

I supposed that was a fair question. I was a stranger to him. For all he knew, I was a shark of some kind, out to rope money or something from him in whatever way I could. I had to let him know I wasn’t a debased lunatic.

“What do you think?” I finally responded.

It sounded as though he was laughing. Of course, he would laugh at a time like this.

“I’ll be right back.”

I wasn’t sure what he was doing, so I scooped more of the pieces and tossed them into the empty garbage can. At least the flowers were plastic ones so I wasn’t dealing with dirt, but the vase? What was I going to do about the vase?

I hoped it wasn’t a priceless heirloom or something.

Cool morning air swept into the bathroom from the open window, sending chills up my arms. I was halfway through the pieces when footsteps returned outside the door and a knock sounded.

“Goldie? I’m coming in.”

“Wait—” I pushed to my feet and reached for the knob.

It clicked before I reached it, and Adrian barged through, knocking me toward the sink. Ceramic pieces crunched beneath my shoes. I cringed and attempted to sidestep, only to lose my balance. Adrian reached for me. He succeeded where I’d failed with the vase and didn’t let me tip over.

His arms secured me to my feet—to him. And oh, my gosh, he smelled good. That Goldie-nip aroma that had bathed the blanket last night swarmed in, turning my joints into jelly.

My hands landed on his shoulders, which were tensed with the effort of keeping me upright.

I was a goner.

“What are you doing in here?” he asked, releasing me and looking around before pinning me with his brown eyes. “Are you okay? Why did you open the window?”

I was too swept up in the moment, in his smell, his beautiful eyes, to think logically. What could I say? If I suggested I needed fresh air while in the bathroom, that could come across completely wrong. But to tell him I’d opened it to sneak out?

“I—wanted a bath,” I said, letting the lie take shape as it left my lips. “But I wanted to make sure the window was locked first. I mean, it’s right over the tub. Anyone can see in.”

I was sure he’d see right through the lie, but the truth would be far worse. Any idiot knew seeing inside had absolutely nothing to do with opening the window. Thankfully, he didn’t say anything about that.

“You had to take out my mom’s plant while you were at it?”

The corners of his mouth lifted, and from the way his eyes twinkled, I suspected he wasn’t really upset.

His *mother’s* plant? Bury me now.

“I—I’ll clean it up. I promise, I’m not usually this—”

“This what?”

I heard the words as they left my mouth. I’d been saying things like that since he found me here. I’m not usually a criminal. I’m not usually this helpless.

“I’m not usually this clumsy,” I finished lamely.

He crouched and continued where I’d left off, scooping the last few pieces of the vase into the garbage can.

“It’s okay, I’ll add it to your tab.”

My tab? I winced. “Was the vase...valuable?”

My nerves strung tightly. I was in over my head here. This was exactly why I’d wanted to bolt!

“I’m really sorry. It was a complete accident. The window was stuck and—”

His hand clasped mine, and the world stopped spinning. My blood froze in my veins. The mountains sang to the heavens, and their triumphal clanging chorused straight through me at the touch. Hello, world. This beautiful man’s hand was voluntarily touching mine.

Gradually, I lifted my eyes to his.

He was smiling at me. “Goldie, I’m kidding. It’s just a vase. It wasn’t important.”

I stilled and sank back, losing myself in his gaze. That bemused twinkle was still in his eyes. Was he amused by this?

Something burned in the pit of my stomach. This bathroom was small, and with the pieces cleaned up, he returned the garbage can beneath the sink and straightened to his full height. I did the same, finding myself standing way too close to him.

His presence filled the space, my thoughts, my entire awareness with the shape of his shoulders, the line of scruff on his jaw, the twist to his mouth, and the shimmer in his eyes. I was transfixed.

“You know,” he said, resting a hand on the sink, “your prowess at opening doors you have no business opening makes me think this is some kind of gimmick to get me alone in here.”

“We’ve been alone this whole time.”

“Yeah, but not in such tight spaces.”

He didn’t move away or leave the bathroom. If anything, the air between us charged with electric energy. He adjusted his posture and stepped to the door, turning and resting a hand on the jamb.

“How did you get in, anyway?”

“Into the bathroom?” The question sounded way too innocent.

Hey, it was my turn to tease.

He narrowed his eyes. “Into the cabin. The door was locked when I got here.”

I inhaled and rubbed my arms. The breeze coming in through the window was getting colder. Adrian noticed. He shuffled and with one arm pulled the window closed and latched it again.

Show off.

He glanced at me, waiting for an answer. I rested my hip against the sink.

“I don’t know—divine intervention, maybe? The universe knew I was lost and stranded in a scary place. The way to safety appeared. I tried the knob a few times, hit my shoulder against it, and boom. Open.”

Adrian’s brows lifted as if he were impressed. I waited for the argument, for his insistence on the truth, but to my surprise, he believed me. He rubbed a hand across his jaw and stared toward the bathroom door and what lay beyond.

“I wish I had your luck,” he muttered.

What did that mean? “You want to take up a life of crime?” I suggested.

He smirked and shook his head. “Want to hold off on that bath? I’m just looking a few more things over here, and I’ll be ready to head out.”

“Sure,” I said.

With a little nod, he strode out, taking his thought-warping scent with him. I gave the window a final, longing glance.

“Guess it didn’t work out,” I told it, as though the window cared about why it had been open for no reason.

I strolled out toward the living room again only to find Adrian on his hands and knees, searching in the closet near the door where blankets, fishing poles, ropes, knives, a roll of garbage bags, a first aid kit, and other necessities were stocked.

“What are you looking for?” I asked, setting my bag down by the door and peering behind him.

“Something my father left for me.” He spoke abruptly as though he preferred not to have any more questions about it.

Which, of course, only made me more curious.

“This is the last place I have to check,” he said, treading to the cabinets in the living room below the vast windows. “If it’s not here, it’s not anywhere.”

“You left something here?”

“No. I haven’t been here in years.”

How was that possible? “That’s crazy to me. If I had a place like this...”

I settled myself into the chair near the table with the cowboy figurine I’d used as a potential weapon last night.

Adrian peered back at me and stared too long.

“What?”

“You’re in my chair.”

“Is that a problem?”

He lingered long enough I thought he might respond, but his thoughts seemed to carry him away. From the line that gathered between his brows, I sensed wherever they’d led him wasn’t a pleasant place.

“Now, I think you’re the one who’s lost,” I said.

“Hm?” Adrian shook himself as if out of a stupor.

He knelt in front of the cabinet to the left of the fireplace.

Brushing my hands across my jeans, I stood and crouched beside him, examining the cabinet’s oak door as though I discerned something there he didn’t. Movies were stacked inside, as well as several books.

“Buried treasure? Your favorite movie? Ooo, wait. I know. There are books in here—the last remaining original copy of Grimm’s Fairy Tales. Or lottery tickets!”

He leaned back on his heels. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to guess what you’re searching for. Am I close?”

He quirked a brow. “About as close as Jupiter. Your guesses sound much more interesting than what it actually is.”

I straightened my shoulders. “Glad to hear it.”

I waited but didn’t press him. Though Adrian and I were getting along well together, the truth was, we were strangers. I knew nothing about him. He knew even less about me.

“You got me,” he said. “It’s lottery tickets.”

He glanced around as if deflecting. I wasn’t sure, but he seemed agitated. Was he frustrated he couldn’t find what he was looking for?

“Ah, I knew it.” I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

Adrian inhaled and pushed to his feet. His gaze swept over the cabin, indicating he was ready to leave.

Perfect. So was I.

“That’ll do it, I think. Ready to go?”

I steeled myself. “You really don’t have to help me down the mountain. I can probably find my way.”

His brow furrowed. “I thought you were lost.”

“I—I am.” I squirmed. How could I make this clear to him? “But you’ve already been more than generous. I don’t want to take advantage of your kindness any more than I already have.”

“You’re not—” He seemed to think better of this. His jaw angled and then relaxed again. He met my gaze. “I said it’s okay, remember? I believe you were truly in need of help. Am I wrong?”

I was struck by his kindness. “No. You’re not wrong.”

“Then you’re not taking advantage of me. I’m glad you were able to find somewhere safe for the night. I suspect it’d been one of my nieces who’d left the door unlocked. Besides,

I'm already headed toward Two Pines. You might as well follow so you get where you need to go. Deal?"

My mouth went dry. How was he this good?

I found myself wanting to know more about him. Who was he? What made him be like this?

"Deal."

He led the way to the door. Bag in hand, I followed and stepped out into the bright, fresh morning.

"What were you doing all the way out here if you're headed for Two Pines?" he asked, closing the door.

He double checked the locks. No need for any other intruders.

"I've been on a road trip of sorts," I said.

The gravel path to the driveway was too narrow for us to walk side by side. Adrian paused, indicating I should take the path first.

"That's right," he said pensively behind me, making me achingly aware of the way my arms swayed when I walked.

Not that he was checking me out.

Oh, gosh—he wasn't, was he? Had he felt the same charge in the air between us earlier?

Falderal and fiddle-de-dee. After this, we would never see one another again. What did that matter?

"You had Wisconsin plates. You moving out here or something?"

"I came to see my aunt."

Surprise appeared in his tone. "You must be close if you came all this way to see her."

His statement made me squirm. "I guess."

He wasn't the only one keeping things close to the chest.

"This is me." Adrian gestured to the cobalt blue Hummer with its masculine grill and square frame as though we were in

a parking lot full of other options. “You see your truck from here?”

I glanced in the direction across the trees. My white Toyota was right where I’d left it, stalwart and loyal.

The distance was farther than I’d thought. Had I really trekked that far in the dark?

When I peered back, Adrian’s eyes were on me, not my truck. I wasn’t sure how to move. A pulsing, grasping hesitation gaped between us as though neither of us were sure how to break the silence.

I certainly wasn’t. His proximity, his dark hair, inquisitive eyes, and full lips, weakened my knees. I was ready to get lost all over again.

“I see it.”

“I’ll meet you there.” He slid on a pair of sunglasses that accented the brutal definition in his features and gave him a cutting edge.

The whole look made me feel like butter. Had any guy ever affected me like this before?

“Then you can follow me down the mountain.”

He wasn’t going to drive me to my truck?

It took several moments to kick my brain into gear. “Sounds good. Uh, Adrian?”

He paused on the way to his car and peered over his shoulder.

“Thanks. You know, for everything. Not many people would accept a total stranger breaking into their space and sleeping there. You’ve been more than generous.”

“It wasn’t a problem,” he said. “I’m only glad you had somewhere safe to sleep.”

He fiddled with his key fob for a moment before taking a few steps in my direction. His nearness ratcheted my pulse to ridiculous heights.

“Hey, I should probably get your number,” he said.

The statement made every bird, every whoosh of the leaves in the breeze, every chirrup, cease. I didn't even notice the morning's chill, but gaped at him, craning my head forward to make sure I heard what I thought I had.

“You want my number?”

Color patched over his cheeks above the line of scruff. “In case we get separated. That way, I can give you a call before I get you where you need to go.”

I nibbled my lip. Oh, but he was smooth. Why, no, I didn't mind giving my number to this sizzingly gorgeous unfamiliar person who'd been completely chill about me breaking and entering.

“I promise that's the only reason.” He smirked.

“I would never have thought otherwise.” I recited my digits to him, thrilling with every tap of his finger as he entered them into his phone.

“And yours?” I wasn't going to leave now without it, not now that he'd opened the topic.

He had my number. I was getting his.

“You need mine?”

“You've been super generous to someone you don't even know. I'd like to make it up to you somehow.”

As a high school English teacher, I didn't have much to spare, but I'd always loved to bake. Once I got to Aunt Bethany's, I could whip up a batch of my drool-worthy chocolate chip cookies and bring some to him.

He waved away the offer. “No need. I'm happy to help.”

A twinge of disappointment tingled through, but I brushed it off. So much for thinking he was into me. Did he think I'd misuse his number if I had it?

I supposed he was right not to trust me too much. I had trespassed into his family's cabin, after all.

“Ready?” he said.

“I’ll follow your lead.”

He inclined his head with a withdrawn little smile.

I hurried to my truck, praying the entire time that Adrian was true to his word, that he wouldn’t take off and leave me. He didn’t seem like the kind of man who would do something like that, but I couldn’t be sure. What if I made it back only to find he’d left me behind?

goldie

AS I TREKKED to my truck, my heart sank into my stomach. I peered behind me. Where was he? The road was bare.

My heart beat faster in my chest. I should have known. Did I really think he'd just be there waiting for me? Why hadn't he offered me a ride *to* my truck?

I hurried to get behind the wheel in case I missed him. I checked the break in the trees ahead. Still no sign of an electric blue Hummer.

Had he already pulled out? Left me, after all?

Checking the street for any oncoming traffic, I pulled back onto the road.

I was all alone out here, except for some huge truck in front of me that was driving way too slow and not entirely in the lines. I matched my speed, then grabbed my phone to check for any missed messages from Adrian.

Nothing.

A screech pulled my attention back to the road, and I slammed on my breaks in tandem with the truck in front of me. This time my heart jumped to my throat, and my whole body shook. A deer had jumped into the road, and the truck driver nearly hit it.

I didn't know if he was just drunk or tired, but before I could move forward again, headlights flooded my rearview. I half expected them to be accompanied by the red and blue flashes of a police car.

When they weren't, my panic only set in deeper.

Now, I was trapped between someone who almost hit a deer with a truck and someone else from behind.

I craned my neck to try to see around the truck so I might be able to accelerate and pass when I recognized the car that had pulled off behind me—more specifically, its electric blue color.

Adrian hopped out of the car and ran up to my driver's side window. Relief surged through me.

“You okay? You drove right past me.”

“I didn't see you. I thought...”

I shook my head. I would sound so insecure if I said what I was really thinking—that I thought he had stood me up.

Instead, I continued with, “I thought I went to the wrong meeting spot, so I was trying to pull ahead and see if you were up the road.”

He nodded as if that made any kind of sense. “Wait for me to pass you and follow me back.”

He jogged back to his Hummer. By this time, the truck in front of me had surged ahead. Adrian sped around me, and I tapped the gas so I could follow his rear lights as closely as I dared.

I didn't want to lose sight of him for an instant this time.

A peculiar flutter hadn't stopped in my stomach since our conversation outside his cabin. Who kept a place like that stocked and furnished for the possibility they would stop by and use it on the occasional weekend?

Most people I knew could barely afford rent for themselves, let alone however much a secluded cabin must cost. From the state of his clothes and the style of his car, my guess was that Adrian was loaded.

That did *not* increase his appeal. Not in the slightest. Hot and wealthy? Please.

I couldn't help but be bummed that he hadn't given me his number. I considered slowing down, purposefully getting stuck behind another meandering semi-truck for the sole purpose of forcing him to call me. That way, his number would be in my phone regardless.

But I thought better of it. He was a steady driver, easy to follow. Besides, I didn't want to seem any more helpless or incompetent than I already did.

From its dock on my dash, my phone chimed with a number I didn't recognize. My heart gave a little flip. With trembling fingers, I swiped across the screen.

"Hello?"

The answering voice was deeply pleasant, sexy, and charmingly familiar. "Goldie? It's Adrian. I never asked you where you needed to end up."

I bit my lip. He intended to see me all the way to Aunt Bethany's?

My phone's signal was back. I could very well find her house on my own from here, but I wasn't about to admit as much. I didn't want to seem incompetent, that was true, but I wanted the excuse of seeing him a final time.

I wasn't kidding when I'd said I wanted to do something to make it up to him. According to one of my students, my chocolate chip cookies were comparable to eternal happiness.

I recited the number from my aunt's email. "321 Columnar Street."

My resolve settled. I would make him cookies. I had his number now. Once I landed in at Aunt Bethany's, I'd see about taking him a treat as a thank-you gesture.

Adrian led the way through a small town that reminded me so much of Baldwin, it wasn't funny. Montana had a lot more moose making appearances on their rustic signs.

Only a handful of stoplights directed traffic down Main Street. A grocery store and a Walmart nestled together alongside a shoe store. Several token fast-food restaurants

claimed a corner, and then the buildings thinned again, making way for homes.

Each home appeared small, many with an old bungalow style. Single, brick, and squat, with pointed dormers and small porches. One house had a tower on its side.

I longed to knock on the door just for a glimpse at the interior—because that wouldn't be creepy at all. Good grief, I'd imposed on strangers enough for a lifetime.

Adrian's blinker signaled at the street named Columnar. My pulse hitched. This was worse than going to my five-year class reunion. I hadn't lasted there longer than twenty minutes before I'd gone home.

What was so hard about putting yourself out there to meet someone new? Especially someone who knew things about my life that I didn't?

His Hummer slowed, its brake lights reddening. He'd left enough room for me to pull my little Toyota behind him. I took in the house with blue siding. The yard was well-kept, though small. The manicured flower beds burst with peonies and tulips.

Adrian exited his vehicle with both confidence and coolness. Every step he took dislodged my senses, and it took noticeable effort to breathe. Was this guy for real? Every inch of him was attractive.

He strutted his way toward my window. "Is this it?" he asked once I rolled it down.

My nerves began to tap dance. "I'll find out."

I stepped out of the truck. Standing closer to him turned the tap dance into a fox trot, especially when he joined me on the sidewalk.

I'd been expecting him to drop me here and go his way. That once he did, we would never see one another. Hence, my cookie plan.

I waved to a couple of neighborhood kids who slowed on their bikes to gawk at us and then turned my attention back to

Adrian. Any minute now, he would bid me goodbye and be off. Undoubtedly, he had other—better—things to do.

Instead, he hung back, leaning against his car.

“I’ll just make sure you’re good here,” he said. “Then I’ll be on my way. I’m meeting up with some friends in a bit.”

I jutted my thumb to the house behind me, and it took every amount of effort I could to say the words. “I think I’m good.”

“You sure?”

Not in the least. But who was I kidding? I couldn’t expect him to stay. He had his life. I had mine. The two didn’t—and wouldn’t—intertwine after this.

I screwed my smile into place. “Absolutely. Please don’t neglect your day on my account.”

He hesitated. I was going to melt from the concentrated focus of his attention on me, but I held my ground.

“My aunt is expecting me,” I assured him.

He didn’t reply immediately. “Okay, then,” he said. And though he didn’t sound very certain, he backed toward his Hummer. “You have my number if you need anything.”

“You’ve already done enough.”

He hung his head and bobbed it a few times. I didn’t like the tight feeling in my chest, the one that seemed as though it had wrapped its hands around everything Adrian was and wanted nothing more than to keep him close.

“Although...” I amended.

His head perked up. I wished he would remove his sunglasses so I could see his eyes. Was that hope? Or was that a vision spurring from *my* hope?

I suddenly felt stupid mentioning the cookies. I could contact him about that later, couldn’t I? Surprise him?

“I guess you have my number, too.”

He quirked that sideways smile. “Yeah. Good luck, Goldie.”

“You, too.”

What I was wishing him luck with, I didn’t know. Finding whatever he’d been looking for?

He paused another moment while my breath pent up in my chest. Our gazes caught. And then just as quickly, they snapped as he tore his away from me and climbed into his vehicle.

That was that. Why, then, did I want to run kicking and screaming to his driver’s side door and beg him to stay with me? It didn’t make any sense.

It could have been his sheer good-looking-ness. It could have been the sight of him in sunglasses. It could have been his scent that tantalized me with every inhale. Or it could have been my insecurity because, once he left, I was on my own once more.

I stood on the edge of the sidewalk and watched him drive away. Once he turned the corner, I swallowed my nervousness and climbed the walk to the three wide steps leading onto the porch, which was enclosed by an iron railing.

I was chock-full of uncertainty, but the numbers on the door matched what my aunt had told me. *321 Columnar Street.*

The sudden impulse to turn around swept over me. I wanted to dash back to my truck and keep on driving. Or text Adrian and beg him to come back.

But I couldn’t run from this. There would always be questions. Who was my aunt, really? Why had she waited so long before contacting me?

Why had she allowed Mom to keep her a secret from me?

Steeling my courage, I hammered the handle five loud, hard times. I waited, dwelling in the moment, in the intense anticipation, listening for the sound of footsteps from within. I peered through the tall, narrow windows on either side of the

door, but the glass was iced, designed to let light in and keep snoopers out.

That was unfortunate. I so wanted to snoop.

Seconds passed with agonizing slowness before I tried knocking again. I prayed. I wished. I peered behind, hoping for a sign that Adrian had rounded the block and was stopping by because he couldn't stop thinking about me as much as I couldn't stop thinking about him.

But he wasn't there. And no one answered the door.

I turned around, sat on the top step, and stared at the kids riding their bikes back and forth along the street. I skimmed through my phone, hoping for a text from Adrian, but there were only a few messages from my roommate back home.

Lois had only just started dating a boy she'd met at the grocery store. She bombarded me with texts gushing with her feelings for him. What would she think when I told her about the guy *I'd* just met?

When fifteen minutes crawled by, I tried the door again. I even considered turning stalker and sneaking around to peer in several of the house windows but thought better of it after the living room and bedroom windows gave no evidence.

I strode to my pickup as fear wedged its way into my chest. Mom's cynical voice clanged in my head. Sliding into the single cab, with the cold steering wheel as my only company, I felt more alone than I had in a long time.

What had I gotten myself into? I'd taken off work, followed the breadcrumbs, only to find there was no candy cottage at the end of the road. The last thing I wanted to do was call Mom and admit she'd been right—that I should have ignored the letter and stayed in Wisconsin.

My thoughts drifted to Adrian. I could call him. In fact, this was the perfect excuse!

To what end, though? Maybe it was better this way. He had his life here. I had mine—about a thousand miles away.

No, it was definitely better this way. My sinuses had finally cleared of his smell. No sense dosing up on it a third time. I'd only become an addict.

I fought the sting of disappointment. Nothing about this trip had gone as I hoped.

I felt like such an idiot. First, getting lost on the mountain. Then breaking into his cabin. Now to have no verifiable evidence that what I claimed was even true?

I couldn't call him. For all I knew, he'd think I was a compulsive liar and had made up the address on a whim.

My throat tightened. I needed options.

I could wait it out. Stay here for the afternoon, keep getting puzzled looks from neighbors and their kids. Camp out on the porch of a strange woman's house to grade papers on the off chance my aunt for one, lived here, and for two, was coming back sometime soon.

The stupidity of my decision crashed in harder than head-on collisions and drunk guys at parties. What had I done? And what did I do about it now?

I was no wallower. I was a solver.

I didn't know for sure that Aunt Bethany didn't live here. I only knew she wasn't here *right now*.

I'd find a hotel—not that I could afford it, not with what the trip had already cost me. But options were more limited than toilet paper during a pandemic at this point.

I triggered the ignition and made my way toward the hotel. Adrian and I had passed on our way into town. The Super 8 was positioned off the edge of the freeway across from a Dairy Queen. The parking lot was so packed I had to circle around a few times and finally park out at the edge in what I was pretty sure wasn't a parking spot at all.

I plodded into the lobby. A thin woman with black hair, black penciled brows, and thick pink lipstick greeted me. "Can I help you?"

"I need a room for the night," I said.

It was barely ten in the morning. Chances were, room service was still cleaning from the previous guests. So I'd have to wait.

That was okay, as long as I knew I had a place to roost while I waited. I considered booking it for a few nights, but Aunt Bethany would contact me before then. I was sure.

"Sorry," the woman said. "We don't have any openings."

"You—" This wasn't what I expected. "You're completely booked?"

In a town this size?

"The town fundraiser is tonight," she said.

"What fundraiser?"

"It's held every year by Bear Real Estate. The owner passed away a few weeks ago, but his wife is spearheading it in his memory this year, which means a lot of Mr. Bear's benefactors are here from all over the country. It's kind of to honor him as much as anything else, since he did so much to help others."

Whoever this Mr. Bear was, he must have been a top-notch guy. Kudos. "What does it raise money for?" I asked.

"Whatever the community needs," the receptionist answered. "Help the schools. The homeless. One year, the proceeds were used to build a new park."

"That sounds nice," I said, while everything in me was stomping.

Good job, town. That still didn't help the problem that I needed somewhere to stay.

Pity and understanding swept over the receptionist's face. "The ranch might have some openings, though."

"What's the ranch?"

"Rustic Ridge Bed and Breakfast. It's here in Two Pines. Well, it's just outside of town, actually. There's plenty of rooms. It's a bit off the beaten path, but that makes it a pretty great getaway."

That was a possibility, I supposed. “Thanks, I’ll check it out.”

“Of course,” she said, smiling. “Sorry.”

I waved and then wandered to the vacant couch in front of the dormant fireplace. After a quick search, the website popped up almost immediately.

From the look of things, the B & B was lodgy and rustic—and yep, located close by. Matthew Bear, proprietor. That was probably the recently deceased fundraiser guy.

A bed and breakfast sounded much better than settling in on Aunt Bethany’s porch for who knew how long. I hadn’t solidified a time to visit her—I’d come with the foolish assumption that she would be expecting me.

She had *invited* me to come. What else was I supposed to think?

I considered stopping by her house a final time. Should I wait a little longer? Aunt Bethany could have simply slipped away to the store—or she hadn’t gotten off work or something.

I opened the email icon on my phone and tapped *reply* to the email I’d sent before I’d left Wisconsin.

Aunt Bethany,

Surprise—I’m in Two Pines! I stopped by the address you gave me, but you weren’t home. I’ll be staying at Rustic Ridge B & B, so please give me a call or reply to this email when you get the chance. Looking forward to meeting you!

Goldie

I added my phone number—again—for good measure, tapped *send*, and then tucked my phone into my pocket and meandered back out to my Toyota.

I stared at the road, resolve settling into me. Rustic Ridge it was. I just hoped Aunt Bethany would get back to me soon.

THE THOUGHT that I'd left Goldie on some random front step haunted me. I believed her when she'd claimed to be lost. I'd gotten her to where she was going—but I couldn't help thinking I should have lingered.

Yeah, the guys were waiting for me to meet up with them, but they could have kept right on waiting. She'd been completely alone, and she'd watched me so helplessly until I turned the corner. I knew because I'd watched her in my rearview mirror the whole time, too.

I kept expecting her to turn, to wander up the sidewalk in my direction, but she stood there like a defenseless stray.

I was a putz. I'd abandoned a woman in need.

The temptation to turn back pricked me for the thousandth time, but I told myself I was being ridiculous. Her aunt lived in that house. She was fine. She was inside, talking it up, catching up, whatever they were doing. She was fine.

She was.

I shook off the worry and turned onto the road leading out to Mom's. As though she could read my mind, her name appeared on my phone. I swiped to answer.

"Mom, hey."

"Are you on your way back? That fundraiser is tonight, and I could use your help."

I hadn't told her why I'd gone up to the cabin, but I wondered if she suspected it had something to do with the lockbox. Fortunately, she didn't bring it up—so I didn't, either.

“I know it’s tonight,” I said.

I’d only been helping her with it for days now since Dad’s funeral. She’d considered canceling, but so many people had mentioned the event when they’d contacted to offer their condolences, she chose to move forward with the plan.

“Perfect,” she said. “Did you call Danica?”

I groaned. Danica. She was the other reason I’d gone to the cabin last night. It was the only place I could think of to get some peace and quiet from all of Mom’s hints.

“I spoke with her mother not long ago. She thought Danica was available, and I know she’d be so pleased to be asked by you. The girl has been waiting for a phone call from you since you returned to town, you know. I always thought you two were perfect together. I’ll never understand why you ended things—”

This was a conversation we’d had one too many times. “Mom.”

“You’re both so beautiful, it only makes sense. Think of how pretty your babies will be!”

“Mom.” I raised my voice, only enough to get her to stop.

The last thing I wanted was to make babies with Danica Foster.

“I know you’re hesitant, but if you just give her another chance—”

“I’ve met someone.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

A silent pause filled the other end of the line.

“Mom?”

“You know how I feel about these pranks you and your brothers like to play.”

“It’s not a prank. I met someone.”

It was true. I had met her—a beautiful woman with a smile that made the sun dim. I hadn’t been able to stop thinking

about Goldie since last night. It was like she'd been injected into me from the minute we collided.

“So you met someone. That doesn't mean you can't ask Danica to the fundraiser.”

“I'm bringing her with me tonight.”

I cringed. But really, I had Goldie's number. Would she be open to something like that? We'd only just met, but that didn't mean I couldn't ask her out.

“You can't get out of this, Adrian. I already talked to her mom. Danica is a lovely girl. Why don't you just call her? Give her another chance, sweetie. Maybe this time, things will work out between you two.”

I'd given that relationship as much resuscitation as I ever hoped to. Sure, we'd tried. In fact, the whole town thought Dani and I would marry once we graduated high school. It'd been one of the many lectures Dad had given me, to take care not to go around breaking hearts.

She and I had dated when I started business school, but she'd wanted to stay in Two Pines. She'd refused to move to Chicago where I needed to be for my education and my budding business.

“You can just do that here,” Danica had insisted.

She'd sounded so uncaring, so heartless, so much like Dad, it had punctured. All at once, the path with her had become clear in a way it never had before. I'd seen exactly what would have happened if I'd done what was expected of me. Married her. Settled down. Given up on my dreams.

If Danica had been the right one, the decision to end things with her wouldn't have been so easy to make. So I'd made it without question—and I'd never looked back.

She'd been the whole reason I'd agreed to sign The Pact at our fraternity back in college. It was something the other brothers had agreed to—some laughingly, others more seriously, in an attempt to keep their studies on academics rather than females—but the idea of lifelong bachelorhood was much more appealing after being with someone so selfish.

I wasn't about to open that can of worms again. No sense in giving Danica false hope.

"I'm serious," I said. "Her name is Goldie."

"You make her sound like a stray dog. It's not a dog, is it? You know how I feel about that. We've already got your dad's lab. We don't need another one around here—and if you bring a dog to the fundraiser, I'll string you up by your toenails."

"Mom," I said, trying not to get exasperated. "She's a person."

"Are you two dating?"

"I—yes, we are." I flinched at the lie, but I wanted Mom to take me seriously since the truth obviously wasn't doing it. I almost laughed at the irony.

I wasn't sure how to get Mom to believe I was blowing Danica off for a practical stranger, though. I couldn't exactly tell her how we'd met.

The memory of it shot heat through my core every time I thought about it—which was more than I'd ever admit aloud. I hadn't wanted to call the police over Goldie's breaking and entering, but I wouldn't put it past my mother.

Mom's tone was cautious. "What did you say her name was?"

"Goldie."

"Goldie? Like the actress?"

"Like the actress."

"She's blonde, too, isn't she?"

I laughed. "I guess you'll see when you meet her." A nugget of guilt wriggled into my stomach, but like a hooked fish, it was too late to pull the lie back now.

I'd call Goldie the minute this call ended. I'd ask her to the fundraiser. We could let things go from there.

Maybe I could convince her to be my girlfriend while she was here. It would make things easier for me, at least. Might

help her, too, depending on her situation.

The prospect of hearing her voice again made my fingers tingle in an unprecedented way. I hadn't gotten excited like this over a woman in years.

Mom sighed, loud and long. "Danica will be disappointed."

"She'll get over it, I'm sure." Then, like a good son, I added, "Sorry, Mom. I'll see you soon, okay? I'm just pulling in."

I passed the fields on either side and groaned. I hated it here. I'd felt more sequestered and caged by these open fields than any cubicle I'd had in Chicago. Everywhere I looked was dirt fields waiting to be planted. A mountain rose up in the distance, the one that had held Goldie hostage the night before.

It was such an oxymoron. I should feel free out here, but all I wanted was to get back to the bustle and buildings in Chicago.

The dirt road was flanked by a tall sign dubbing this as *Rustic Ridge Ranch: Bed & Breakfast & Horseback Rides*.

The driveway was a long one, bumping and jostling, leading to a large log home that put the sophisticated cabin I'd found Goldie in to shame. It was two levels high, with exposed logs, green shutters, and a wraparound porch.

A large, long barn was positioned several hundred feet away, separated from the main house with corrals and pens for animals. Several horses grazed within one of the adjacent pens, bending to sniff the patches of grass at their hooves. A handful of cars took up space in the gravel parking lot off from the main house.

I pulled into my usual parking spot, but before I could look up Goldie's number, a message from Hawk took over.

Hawk: Dude, you here yet?

Adrian: Just got here. I'll be right in.

I was still wearing my clothes from the day before, but there would be plenty of time to shower and change after meeting with the guys. I'd planned on coming down from the mountain much earlier, so scheduling our meet up at lunchtime wasn't a big deal. Now, I was pushing past noon.

I locked the car and darted up the steps. My younger brother, Jordan, was sitting at the welcome desk. He peered up from his phone only long enough to see that it was me, grunted a greeting, and said, "Your ritzy friends are all at the table in the corner."

"Thanks, bruh." I fist bumped him and then darted over, pocketing my phone.

Beyond the reception desk, the one and only steak house in Two Pines—aka, the dining hall at the Ranch—spread before me. What used to be our living room had been expanded and was now filled with a handful of tables.

The stairs leading to several guest rooms swept up to my left. I ignored the delicious aroma of steak and food being prepared in the kitchen Mom had had developed when she and Dad decided to turn our home into a B & B and went to the corner Jordan had indicated.

Hawk and the guys gathered around the farthest table. When they'd agreed to this meet-up, they'd also agreed on remaining incognito, so while most of their professions required dress shirts and ties, they were each in t-shirt and jeans. Maddox even wore a backwards baseball cap.

It reminded me of the good old days, hanging out at the frat house, lounging, talking about girls and school and life.

Nothing like a small town and its residents finding out a bunch of rich single guys were all hanging out for the weekend. At least, I was pretty sure we were all still single. Duncan had been dating a diva a while ago, but as far as I knew, she'd ended things. She claimed he was too grumpy.

Duncan wasn't grumpy. He was just terrible at communication and thinking of others before himself.

In any case, the female residents of Two Pines were a particular concern for all of us. I knew we'd each had our fair share of greedy gold diggers tailing us when they found out what each of us was worth.

Another reason it was good we'd all entered The Pact. And so far, we'd stuck to it.

"What's up, bro?" Hawk said, clasping my hand in his and pulling me in for a shoulder pound.

Hawk had it the worst as far as gold diggers went. I mean, he was CEO over a chain of popular candy stores. Candy *and* money? Women couldn't resist that.

Maybe I could have Danica meet him, and she could sink her fangs on him instead...

Scratch that. Hawk already knew who she was and would call a hard pass. Besides, I wouldn't sic her on my greatest enemy.

Duncan, it was.

I laughed that thought off and offered my hand to the stern investor, who shook. "Nice place you got here," Duncan said.

A woman passed our table and took long enough to check each of us out. Maddox lifted a brow. Duncan scowled. Hawk smiled at her, and I raised my chin and gave her the cold shoulder.

Nothing to see here. Just some old friends hanging out to ride horses, hit up the green, and discuss investments.

I took the empty seat next to Hawk and across from Maddox. Hawk and I had been friends in high school. We'd attended the same college and had been members of the same fraternity, of which he'd later become president.

He'd hit it big after college when he'd inherited Ever After Sweets and had expanded the company to impressive lengths. Hawk had relocated to Westville, Vermont, where the company was located, so he could take over.

Maddox and Duncan had been buddies in the frat, so Duncan had been swept into our group, and the four of us just

clicked the way guys who like food, money, and the outdoors do.

“What took so long?” Hawk asked. “I thought you were staying here at your family’s place.”

“I am,” I said, catching the attention of the waitress, a young woman whose name I couldn’t remember and who couldn’t take her eyes off Duncan. Or maybe it was Maddox. She kept staring at one of them and smiling in a silly, dazed kind of way.

“We hung out yesterday, and then you took off,” Hawk said.

“About that...”

“What can I get for you?” the waitress asked as she approached, stealing my attention as she removed a notepad from her black apron.

“Did any of you order yet?” I asked the guys.

“Heck yeah,” Maddox said. “I was starving.”

The others nodded their agreement.

Looks like it was just me.

I knew the menu better than the way to the cabin. “I’ll get the steak lunch,” I told her. “Medium well. And a coke, please.”

“Sure,” she said, jotting it down and turning toward the kitchen.

“I was off my game yesterday,” Duncan said in response to something Maddox said to him. “I might need to get a new driver.”

Maddox’s brow furrowed. “You just got those clubs.”

“That driver isn’t as good as my last one.”

“So you keep buying new ones until you find one you like?”

“Something like that.”

“I know a better use of that money,” Maddox said, taking a sip of his soda.

Hawk laughed and pounded his palm against the table. “This argument again?”

“What?” Maddox said. “You know Wonderland needs help.”

Maddox owned a small theme park in Westville. The attractions were based on Lewis Carroll’s classic book, which was a brilliant idea. Though I wasn’t exactly a fan, I knew others were. I couldn’t figure out why the park wasn’t doing better.

“I need some investors before Wonderland’s rabbit hole becomes a vortex that swallows itself. It’ll disintegrate to create a *black* hole that will then suck in the surrounding land and prove to be the end of life as we know it.”

“I thought you got some good traction,” I said, thanking the waitress when she brought my soda. I drew in a long refreshing sip that cooled my body.

“Not for the past few years,” Maddox said. “It almost seems like someone’s sucking the place dry from the inside.”

“It’s falling apart,” Duncan said point blank.

He and Maddox continued arguing over something, but the direction of their argument was muffled like interference. I was too wrapped up in the blonde who’d just walked in and now stood at the reception desk.

The woman who hadn’t left my mind since I’d left her on a random street back in town... She’d just walked through the Ridge’s door, and I was suddenly in zero gravity.

“Where are you going?” Duncan asked.

I’d stood without realizing it? “I’ll be right back.”

I crossed the dining room to her while the carbonation from my soda fizzled into my bloodstream. She was here? What was she doing here? I hadn’t told her where I lived. I’d mentioned the ranch—had she connected the dots?

Idiot. Who said she was looking for me?

Sunlight streamed through the doors behind her, making her hair glow. “Goldie?”

Her eyes widened. “Adrian?” She glanced around the lobby. “Are you staying here, too?”

I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was just as beautiful as I remembered. “Something like that. What are you doing here?”

“The only other hotel in town was booked.”

“You tried checking in at a hotel? Did that mean something went wrong at your aunt’s?”

Goldie hugged her arms across her stomach. “She wasn’t home.”

The same regret that had been coursing through me since I left her slathered itself all over me. “I knew I should have stayed with you.”

Her brows furrowed at this, and don’t even get me started on the allure of her pouting bottom lip. “I don’t get that.”

“Get what?”

“Why do you care?”

I scrubbed a hand behind my neck. Before I could answer, Hawk approached with his hands in his pockets. He jutted his chin at Goldie then turned to me.

“Thought I’d come see what’s holding you up.”

“Sorry,” I said, gesturing to her. “This is Goldie. Goldie, this is my friend, Hawk Danielson.”

I prayed she wasn’t familiar with the Ever After Sweets franchise. Then again, how many people knew the names of the CEOs who owned companies right off the bat? Most people were only familiar with a company’s logo or merchandise.

Hawk grinned at her. “Now, I get it.”

“What?” she asked.

“Why my man here can’t be bothered to hang with the guys. I’d ditch us for someone who looked like you, too.”

“Um...” She tucked her lips into her teeth.

After asking Goldie to give me a minute, I pulled Hawk aside. “Dude, really?”

“I thought we were catching a bite and hitting the green,” Hawk said.

Fair enough. We had agreed to remain on the down low. How could I make him understand that this was different? *She* was different?

I wasn’t sure how to explain that to him, either, or how I knew. I just...knew she was.

I peered back at Goldie, who’d approached the reception desk and was talking to Jordan. That could be a disaster. My younger brother had the worst manners. He’d just seen my interaction with her and was probably pelting her with all kinds of uncomfortable questions.

Golfing was part of the plan for today. I knew Maddox wanted to discuss possible investments in his theme park, and I was open to hearing more details. My business was similar to Duncan’s back in Vermont. I handled people’s investments and gave counsel to help them as they decided which directions to invest in.

I was mostly entailed in stock, but I’d be open to putting a dollar or two into this theme park of his, assuming it turned out a profit. Or, in the very least, guiding him to some better investors.

The guys were only in town for another day—the same as me. If we didn’t chat now, that rendered their trip here completely pointless. I supposed we could discuss things at the event tonight. Then again, I had no idea whether or not they were planning on attending.

But I wasn’t sure when I’d ever see Goldie again. I had to talk to her if I was going to convince her to be my date tonight. The guys and I could talk later.

“I’ll catch you guys later, okay?” I said, nodding to him before joining Goldie just as she was pulling her wallet out.

“She’s my guest,” I told Jordan, wishing I knew what had transpired between the two of them.

“Dude,” Jordan said.

“Adrian, no,” Goldie said with a little plea in her voice.

“You heard me.” I nodded to my brother. “Her stay is on me.”

“You got it.” Jordan typed for a few moments into the computer, and I pulled a stammering Goldie aside.

To my surprise, she looked upset. Shirking out of my grasp, she stormed back outside.

That wasn’t the response I’d expected.

ADRIAN FOLLOWED me onto the porch, but I wished he wouldn't. I wanted him to go back inside and give me a few minutes to figure out what was going on.

I was stuck here—that much was evident. With no other hotels open in town, with my plans having crumbled beneath my feet, I had nowhere else to go. But I wanted to be anywhere else.

What did he think he was doing, offering to pay for my stay?

The air smelled sweet, like hay and honeysuckle, though it was also laced with hints of manure and animals wafting from the barn. Birds chirruped in the trees lining the left side of the driveway. Flower boxes exploded with tulips and pansies, and daffodils dotted the beds in front of the hugging porch.

Any other time, I could feel rooted here. My house back in Baldwin had never felt like this, like I wanted to dig a hole, plant myself in it, and never leave. This ranch was picturesque.

Be that as it may, it was no excuse for him to step in the way he had. What business did he have swooping in and offering to foot my bill?

I'd already taken advantage of him enough as it was. I didn't need to add his paying for my room to what was becoming cataloged in my head as The Debt I Could Never Repay.

No amount of cookie baking could account for hundreds of dollars spent on a hotel room. Bed and Breakfast room.

Whatever this was.

His looks only added to my irritation, with the casual swatch of his hair sweeping to one side, the shape of him in jeans and his shirt spreading tight across his shoulders. All the more reason I was also bothered by his actions a few moments ago.

Just because he was gorgeous didn't mean he could overstep his bounds like this.

"Are you upset?" he asked.

"You can't do that. I appreciate you helping me back at your cabin, but I can't keep taking advantage of you."

"You're not," he said.

I didn't want to meet his gaze. His dose of gorgeous would drug me, dupe me into thinking he was serious. Chances were, I'd give him anything he wanted just because of the way he melted me with a single glance. This man was too fetching for his own good.

"You have no idea how relieved I am to see you here," he said.

I folded my arms. What did that have to do with him offering to pay for me? "How is that even possible?"

"I've been worried about you," he said. "I know that sounds crazy and I have no reason to, but I hated leaving you there all by yourself. If you're looking for somewhere to stay, that means things aren't panning out like you hoped."

"That's not your problem to solve."

"I want to help."

I stared him down. There was something more to this. There had to be. Hot guys didn't just up and care for a girl after they first met. He wasn't after anything from me, was he? Any... favors?

He was offering to pay for my room, after all. I couldn't help but read more into that than I should have.

“Look,” he said, “I’m telling the truth. I believed you. I need you to believe me. My family owns this bed and breakfast. The kid behind the desk in there? That’s my little brother, Jordan.”

I remembered him mentioning his suspicion that someone named Jordan gave me a key to the cabin. The sincerity in his eyes made the pieces connect. “You—you’re family?”

“Yes. My family owns Rustic Ridge.”

“Matthew Bear?”

Pain flickered behind his eyes. “Was my father, yes.”

Was? The woman at the Super 8 had said something about his passing.

Sympathy struck my heart like a javelin, hard and striking and fast. It added shame to the accusatory thoughts I’d just had. His dad had recently died. How long ago did it happen?

Poor Adrian. I hadn’t realized he was dealing with something so difficult. And here he was being so generous with me—

I analyzed him. He had no reason to believe that I was just a lost woman in need of a place to stay, but he had. I could give him this much.

My heart hurt for him. I had the sudden notion he wasn’t just trying to help me. He *needed* to help me.

And I needed to let him.

“Okay.”

His face brightened. “Then you’ll stay?”

“Yes. But I can pay for myself.”

He acted as though he wanted to argue again, but I didn’t let him. “Adrian. I already feel stupid enough as it is. I already tread on your hospitality enough. Please.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “Though I do have another request of you.”

I watched him. “Oh?”

“There’s a fundraiser tonight—and I need a date.”

My pulse kicked. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but why me? You don’t even know me.”

“Intuition, maybe?” he said with a shrug. “I don’t know. I get feelings about things. About people. Take the stock market, for example. I follow my gut when it comes to taking action. The same feeling I get telling me to buy or sell is telling me now not to leave you in a new town without anywhere to go. It’s telling me—”

“A feeling in your gut is telling you to take me on a date tonight?”

I fought my disappointment. Part of me hoped he would mention just how striking I was or how he hadn’t been able to get me off of his mind.

Those would have been my reasons to ask him on a date.

He stepped in, triggering my awareness. He had the most genuine expression. It made me tingle. It made everything slow.

“What do you say? We’ll be going with my brother and his wife, if that’s okay. My mom wanted to set me up with someone else, but the town is small, and...”

“It has a long memory?” I guessed.

There it was. That, at least, made sense. I couldn’t completely buy that he was doing this because he cared about me. But if he needed my help getting out of a blind date, that was something else.

It was a way for me to pay him back.

“Most of the single women around here are either girls I dated in high school or husband hunters.”

“And you’re not ready to settle down, I take it.”

He glanced away. “Not here, at least.”

I decided not to ask what he meant by that. The date couldn’t be anything more than a one-time thing. I couldn’t risk a relationship right now, not when I was dealing with my

mom's deceptions. I couldn't open my heart up to anyone. I knew it was unfair, but her lies made me wonder if people were ever truly honest.

"And please, accept my other offer as well," he said. "It won't cost me anything, I promise."

My stomach twisted. The Rustic Ridge was charming and inviting; where the hotel would have been affordable, staying at a place like this would probably cost a fortune. I couldn't let him pay for that. I'd put it on my credit card and then take the next thousand years to pay it off.

Still, Adrian had helped me, more than I'd thought he would.

Slowly, I nodded.

"There you are." A middle-aged woman with dark hair cut in a stylish A-line scampered up the porch steps and veered toward Adrian. She was trailed by a chocolate Labrador.

The dog seemed much happier to see me than the woman did. Its tongue lolled out as it panted with bright eyes, making me want to lean in and pet it.

"Hey, Mom," Adrian said in response.

He moved to stand by my side and took me completely by surprise by sliding his hand around my waist, luring me in close.

Fireworks erupted through my entire frame. I peered at him, but he kept his smile directed toward his mother.

Something was going on here—I got the feeling he was trying to prove something by claiming me the way he just did. Unless he thought by me accepting his offer of a date that meant he thought we were now *date-ing*?

The catnip of his scent had its usual effect on me, and it took extraordinary effort not to turn my head, lean over, and breathe him in. Instead, I remained rigid at his side and chose not to pry myself from his possessive grasp.

"Mom, this is the woman I told you about. Goldie, honey, this is Sylvia Bear, my mom."

My stomach cinched. He'd told his mother about me? Why?

And—*honey*?

Sudden paranoia struck. Oh, my goodness—had he told her that I'd barged into their cabin? That I'd shattered her vase?

Logic won out. If that was the case, he wouldn't have reeled me to his side and dominated my nervous system. But why had he called me *honey*?

As far as pet names went, there were better ones out there. Still, it was odd, considering how we were not anywhere near close enough to call one another by pet names.

"Pleasure to meet you," Sylvia said, though the words were nicer than her delivery of them.

She and Adrian exchanged a few more words, but I couldn't focus on any of them, not with the way his mother continued to glare at me with all the pleasantness of a threatened raccoon.

Maybe Aunt Bethany was home by now. If only she'd given me her number. I was ten seconds away from withdrawing when Mrs. Bear bid her goodbyes and left Adrian and me alone on the porch.

"What was that?" I asked, pulling away.

Adrian didn't have a concept of personal space because he guided me away from the door and kept his arms around my waist. Though I wanted to take his full-fledged permission to rest my hands on his shoulders and soak in every stunning sensation, I retreated again.

"My mom is under the impression I should marry this certain girl I used to date. She kept hounding me to call and ask Danica to the fundraiser tonight. I told her I was going with you."

"Before you asked me?"

"Since my mom can't believe I'm picking an outsider over Danica, I..." He angled his head. "I may have given her the

impression that you and I didn't just barely meet."

"You what?"

Forget his attractive muscles. I needed a clear head for this conversation.

"I wanted to talk to you about it first, though. I was going to call you the minute I got here, but I ran into my friends, and—"

"Seems a little late for that. You called me *honey*."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know I should have said something sooner. I just didn't get the chance to when I talked to her earlier. I couldn't tell her I caught you sleeping in our fishing cabin, and in the moment, I wasn't sure what else to do. I didn't really think things through."

I ducked my head. He had a point there. He'd been gracious enough not to press charges, and he'd helped me find my way into town. If it hadn't been for me, he wouldn't have been put in the situation in the first place.

"How about it?" he asked, resting a hand on the porch railing and looking like a walking daydream. "Want to be my fake girlfriend while you're in town? At least until either you or I go back home?"

If he were serious, there could only be one answer: absolutely not. Because the one thing I was certain of was that, even if it were just pretend, Adrian Bear would crush my heart.

I SHOULDN'T GIVE his offer any thought beyond what a bad idea it was, but part of me was too busy hoping he was genuine. I waited for the punchline to sink in. From the lack of humor in Adrian's expression, something told me he wasn't joking.

A fact that brought me joy and terrified me even more all at once.

I frowned, trying to wrap my head around this. Fake-date one another until either he or I went home?

"I thought this was your home."

"Not anymore. I'm just visiting."

If that was the case, where was he from? "I'm leaving in a week. And if I get ahold of my aunt, I'd like to stay with her."

Assuming she'd be down for that.

"Works for me," he said. "Does it work for you?"

I pressed my lips together. This was getting more and more unexpected by the minute.

"I've never been a fake girlfriend before. What does that even mean?"

What exactly were his expectations in this? My mind trailed in a thousand different directions. The word *girlfriend* implied all kinds of things. Holding hands, kissing, more invading of personal space...

"Just spend time with me." He shrugged. "Act like you like me."

“How?”

He smirked. “You need some pointers?”

Heat flamed my cheeks. “Oh, my gosh, no. I mean—what are you wanting from me?”

Adrian rubbed his jaw. Then he parted the atoms around me with shards of heat and placed his hand close to mine. Close enough I could feel it.

Gradually, a molecule at a time, he swept his pinky to link with mine. “I’ll probably hold your hand.”

A few more of his fingers moved in to claim mine. The touch severed my senses, making thinking impossible.

“Is that okay?”

“More than okay,” I breathed.

He chuckled. “Good. Let’s start with that, for now.” He held my hand, keeping me next to him. “What do you think?”

A thousand things could go wrong, couldn’t they? In the moment, I couldn’t think of anything.

I was going to be here for one night. I’d go to this fundraiser with Adrian, find my aunt, and move on. He’d go wherever he was from. I would go home. That would be that.

“This feels—”

He stroked the back of my hand with his thumb, his eyes locked onto mine. “It does for me, too.”

We were trapped in a moment together, with the sun beating down on my skin, adding to the fever Adrian had instilled by his mere proximity. I couldn’t take my eyes from his.

“I’ll do it,” I said. “I’ll be your girlfriend. But I don’t like lies.”

He inched in closer, and something inside of me shifted. His eyes took on a new intensity. “Then it won’t be a lie.”

His hand tightened around mine. He faced me directly, lasering me in with his chocolate eyes and his tempting

proximity and his tantalizing scent.

“Goldie Bybanks, will you be my girlfriend for a day? Possibly a week?”

I quirked a brow. The question was sweet and ludicrous all at once. “You must really not like this Danica person.”

Adrian laughed, and the sound pealed toward the barn and the mountain in the distance. It lifted something inside of me, giving me permission to loosen up.

“Danica is fine. She’s just not for me. You, on the other hand...”

I stilled, baited, hanging on his next words.

“You absolutely look like the woman I want to be my girlfriend for a week.” His eyes flicked to my mouth.

I trembled under that look. “And you look like...”

He squeezed my hand. “Yes?”

“You want me to flatter you?”

“I’d like to know what you’d been about to say, yeah.”

I couldn’t tell him he was like an electric storm that rendered my nervous system a frazzled mess, or that he looked like temptation itself.

“Never mind. Don’t finish that,” he said with a grin.

His cheeks held a pink tinge. He was cute when he blushed.

“You ready to head back in there? We can see which room Jordan put you in.”

“Sure,” I said. “This place is incredible.”

A shrug. “It’s all right, I guess. Shall we?”

I was ready to retort. All right. *All right?* How could anyone with eyes look at this place and classify it as just *all right?*

I hadn’t seen much of it, but I’d seen enough to know the interior was staged like something from the Parade of Homes.

Cozy and homey, it idealized the rustic part of its namesake.

Still holding my hand, together, we entered the front door again. Adrian confirmed that I was in room four, and then he carried my luggage as we made our way past the lobby, through a dining area, and past a sweeping set of stairs.

Cowboy hats hung above doorways. Muted colors of green and brown dominated every fabric. Sprigs of sage and wheat filled vases on tabletops, skewering me with renewed guilt at the thought of the vase I'd broken.

Exposed wooden beams stretched overhead, while a stone-clad fireplace and chimney climbed up the wall where leather couches welcomed visitors to sit. Massive windows also displayed an exquisite view of the surrounding land.

I expected to head toward the stairs, but Adrian guided me deeper into the dining room. He leaned in to speak low in my ear, and the teasing lilt of his voice tangled all the way into me.

“I’ve got some friends I’d like you to meet first. Is that okay?”

“Meeting friends—that’s kind of a big deal, isn’t it?”

“You’re my girlfriend now. You’re the big deal as far as I’m concerned.”

My stomach fizzled at that.

Three men sat at the table. I recognized Hawk, the handsome blond, from his interaction with Adrian when I’d first entered the Rustic Ridge. He smiled at the sight of us. Then his eyes drifted to Adrian holding my hand, and his grin widened.

“There you are,” he said, rising to his feet and clapping Adrian on the shoulder. “We wondered where you’d ended up.” He extended his hand toward me. “Something tells me we should probably introduce ourselves. I’m Hawk.”

Did he not remember Adrian had told me his name a few minutes ago?

“Hawk,” I said, “nice to meet you. I’m Goldie.”

“This ray of sunshine here is Duncan.” Adrian gestured to the surly but handsome man across from Hawk. He merely scowled at me.

“And this is Maddox Hatter.”

That was actually his name? I couldn’t help the snort that leaked out. “Seriously?”

Maddox smirked. “I get that a lot, trust me.”

“So it’s...intentional? Like from—”

“*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Yeah. My mom was a big fan of the book. It was her favorite, in fact. Hatter is my real last name, and she couldn’t help herself with a first name like Maddox.”

“That’s epic,” I said, unable to help my grin.

“You think that’s epic, you should see his theme park,” Hawk said. Then his eyes brightened. “Hey, that’s an idea. Why don’t we go?”

“What, now?” I asked.

I’d heard of Wonderland theme park, but it was on the east coast somewhere.

“Sure, since our golfing game is off. Come on, Adrian—take your girl out for a night on the town in Westville. If you leave now, you’ll have time to hit up a few rides, catch a bite, and make it back in time for the fundraiser.”

This was absurd. “You act like going halfway across the country this afternoon is actually possible,” I said.

“Why not? Our buddy Duncan here could have everything arranged in less than ten minutes. Or his assistant could, at least.” Hawk laughed.

“Don’t bring my assistant into this,” Duncan said, glowering. “She already hates me for that as it is.”

I looked to Adrian for clarification. He did that sexy lean-in-to-speak-in-my-ear thing again. “Don’t mind them. Duncan owns his own jet—”

“You’re kidding.” I gaped at him.

I also must have said it too loudly because the three men laughed.

But seriously—who owned their own jet?

Hawk strode over and slung his arm around my shoulder. “Now, now—no secrets among friends.”

“If you’ve got something to say to Goldie—that’s a name we can talk about later—then you can say it to all of us,” Maddox added.

He had me there. I wasn’t about to tell them that Goldie was my nickname. That wasn’t something I shared with most people. I’d gone by Goldie so long it was more fitting than what my birth certificate classified me as.

Adrian smiled. “I was just telling her about your private jet, Dunc.”

“I thought we were keeping things on the down low,” Duncan said.

He was brooding and beautiful, and it made me wonder if he ever smiled. What was he doing here with Hawk, who seemed to do nothing else but smile? I was suddenly glad it was Adrian’s cabin I’d staggered into. I could only imagine how pleasant someone like Duncan would be under similar circumstances.

I’d be behind bars right now for sure.

“Keeping what on the down low?” I asked.

Maddox gestured a hand to himself and his three comrades. “That we’re all—”

Adrian hurriedly cut Hawk’s reply off. “Golfing today. Well, we were going to, but now—”

“Women,” Duncan said, looking at me as though the change in their plans was my fault.

It probably was.

I lifted my hands. “Don’t let me get in the way. I love golfing.”

“You do?” Adrian’s surprise was genuine.

“Sure.” Whether I had any experience playing the sport itself was another matter.

Hawk’s face lit up. “There we go. Let’s head to the green.”

Adrian stammered. “But Goldie—”

“She can come with us.” Hawk smirked. “How about that? You have any other plans for today, Goldie?”

When Adrian didn’t argue, I gaped at him. I was starting to suspect that being around him was going to leave me in a constant state of surprise.

“I don’t think so,” I said slowly.

I did have papers I needed to grade, but those didn’t have to be done until I got back to Wisconsin.

“There we go.” Hawk gave me a nod of approval.

As though the case were settled, Duncan and Maddox pushed to their feet as well. Maddox placed his napkin beside his plate. From the look of things, they’d mowed through the food on their plates, though there was a steak lunch that looked untouched.

“Yours?” I said, turning to Adrian with a little wince.

He’d abandoned his lunch to talk to me? It was probably cold now.

He pulled me out of earshot of the guys. The mere act of being motioned closer to him tied me in knots.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” he asked. “Going golfing with us? I’ve known these guys for a long time. We’ll probably talk about boring things like investments, and—”

My earlier elation withered. So he was going to play it like that. He was trying to let me down easy. He’d had plans with his friends today, and I was an unforeseen setback.

Fake girlfriend it was.

“No worries,” I said. When he looked confused, I went on. “I get it. Finish your food. I’ve got papers to grade. I’ll see you at the fundraiser.”

I made a mental note not to get my hopes up too high where he was concerned.

When I began venturing toward the stairs, he caught my hand. The touch simmered. I wasn’t used to it. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be used to it.

The directness of his gaze was something else. When his brown eyes clasped mine, it felt as though nothing else mattered in the world.

“I want you there,” he said, lowering his voice. “If you stay here, I’ll stay, too.”

I flicked a glance to his friends behind him. They were laughing about something.

“Don’t,” I said. “You should go with your friends.”

“Then come with me.”

He pegged me with that request. Not for the first time since arriving at the ranch, I felt the desire to grow roots. To plant myself here and never leave again. I could get used to being wanted.

“I’ve never golfed before,” I said.

“I can teach you. You’re my girlfriend now, remember? It’ll give us a chance to get to know one another before the gala tonight.”

“Gala?” That changed things. I might need to probe a little more here. “I thought it was a fundraiser.”

“It’s kind of an event.”

“Like, a fancy event?”

“Is that a problem?”

I glanced at my duffle bag, doing a mental backtrack of its contents. I hadn’t packed anything that could qualify as fancy. “Not if you’re okay with me showing up in jeans.”

He pursed his delectable lips. “You don’t have a dress?”

“I wasn’t planning on anything like this,” I said. “I was going to hang out with my aunt, sightsee, kick back in yoga pants.” I plucked at my leggings and T-shirt.

I was still in the same clothes I’d worn the day before. A shower was calling my name.

“I’m sure my mom can help you find something.” He seemed to think better of this and added, “Because that wouldn’t be awkward at all.”

True. I got the feeling his mom would be happy to see me go. Especially since she was hellbent on her son marrying this Danica person.

Awkward tension strung through me. I lifted my bag and retreated a step. “You know what? I’m not sure this is going to work. Thanks for the offer, but I’ll just make my way back to town. I’ll head back to my aunt’s house. Maybe she’s back from wherever she went—”

Before I made it far, Adrian sidestepped me. His friends passed, and Hawk turned to keep his attention on us as he walked backward. He pointed finger guns at the two of us and called out, “Go green or go home!”

Adrian lifted his hand in acknowledgment, peered around as though checking for other eavesdroppers, and then slipped a hand to my arm.

“My mom thinks I’m destined to marry Danica. If you go now, you’re subjecting me to a night of pretending I have anything in common with her at all.”

“As opposed to you pretending you have something in common with me?” I suggested.

His eyes flashed with amusement. His voice turned low and sultry.

“That’s just it. I know Danica. I’ve known her my whole life, and I know exactly how much we have in common—or don’t, as the case stands. You, though.”

My stomach tightened at the word *you*. At the way his gaze enveloped me. At the way his eyes flicked to my mouth again.

“You’re a mystery to me. You have a life I know nothing about.”

I lowered my bag to the floor in submission. “You say that like you want to know me.”

“What if I do?”

I had no words. I couldn’t move. In that moment, this striking man could ask anything of me, and I’d probably give in.

He rubbed a hand along my arm. I wasn’t sure he was aware he was doing it, but the touch lit sparklers all along my skin.

“If you really don’t want to be here, I’ll stop insisting,” he said. “If you want, I’ll help you take your bag out to your truck, and we’ll leave it at that. No hard feelings. No harm done. But I hope you want to stay.”

I swallowed, but that still wasn’t enough to ease the desert in my mouth. How was this even happening? Adrian Bear was polished. He was classy, kind, and attractive on a level I never thought I’d meet.

He was curious about *me*? I felt so much the same. He’d had an undeniable pull on me from the minute we met.

But I couldn’t afford a fancy dress. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do about that.

“What if we call my sister-in-law about a dress?” he suggested. “Kimmy is great, and she might have something you can wear.”

“I—yes. If she’s okay with that, that would work for me.”

Adrian’s smile could knock the stars from the sky. It sent shivers over me.

“You hungry?” he said. “Sit down with me. We’ll get you some lunch. You can get cleaned up. I’ll text Kimmy, get you

that dress, and then we'll meet the guys at the green. Deal?"

I quivered at the prospect. In a daze, I smiled. And I agreed.

I would be putting on a pretty dress and better still, I'd be seeing Adrian all dressed up too.

I was really doing this. I was really staying to be his girlfriend.

And despite all my thoughts on how poorly things could end, I worried I would soon learn that just how much Adrian could break my heart—even in a fake relationship—was fathomable.

DATING WASN'T the same thing as falling in love.

I'd told myself that so many times I couldn't keep count. It was why I'd kept myself off-limits for years now. I had to keep my heart unattached.

When I'd signed The Pact in college, I'd done so with the full knowledge that my pledge of bachelorhood would be for life.

Hawk, Maddox, Duncan—so many of the others had done the same thing. Our financial status wasn't the only reason we kept ourselves closed off to the opposite sex. Each one of us had signed that stupid contract.

It was part of being in Sigma Phi Rho—agreeing not to fall in love. To keep our hearts unattached and never let a female have influence over us the way a woman who'd taken advantage of the fraternity's founder had done.

Over fifty years ago, Lauren had convinced Richard to add her to his will—and then he'd died shortly thereafter.

We all swore it would never happen to us. We all swore we'd never let a woman have that much sway over our lives and decisions.

I wasn't falling in love with Goldie now—not even close to it. No matter how she made my heart pound or make my blood come to life in my veins or made me want to touch her every chance I could.

That wasn't love, was it?

Nah. We'd only just met.

I'd make sure I didn't go there. I could keep my heart separated from my other feelings. I mean, how many girls had I fooled around with in college, and I'd been able to walk away from them without any inclinations?

This thing with Goldie was only temporary.

Yet, even as I tried to convince myself of that, she sat across from me in the seat Duncan had occupied. She twisted her golden hair into a loose braid before letting the strands separate again. She chewed that glossy bottom lip.

Every move she made fascinated me. I was drawn to the pink in her lips and cheeks, the light in her eyes, the shape of her face—to the mystery of her.

Who was she? What had she been doing out there in the woods to get herself so lost?

Not even Danica had caused this flicker inside of me, this insistence that I get to know her, that I help her. That I spend more time with her.

I'd made The Pact. I'd taken it more seriously than some of the other boys at the fraternity had. I'd been able to let Danica go without breaking a sweat.

This was the first time I questioned that decision.

"Your friends seem nice," she said, cutting into my reverie as I cut into my steak.

The waitress set down the sandwich she'd ordered. Goldie smiled her thanks, and the gleam of that expression speared into me, adding to my conflict. She was outwardly smoking hot, that was true, but there was something else. She had a light about her that pulled me in as surely as a moth to flame.

She raised her eyebrows at me, and I realized she'd said something to me.

Right. My friends being nice.

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

"How long have you known them?"

“We were all in a fraternity in college together,” I said, staring at my plate.

“Oh, really? That’s cool you’ve all remained friends.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you all golf in college too?”

“No,” I said, taking a bite. “Hawk and I have known each other the longest. Maddox and Duncan were buddies before, too, but Maddox and Hawk knew each other, and that kind of threw us together, you know?”

“So golfing isn’t your regular thing?”

“We haven’t gotten together in years,” I said.

My phone buzzed, and I quickly glanced to find a message from the last person I expected to hear from.

Grey?

Ten years ago, Grey Phillips had been a newer acquisition to the fraternity. He’d seemed quiet and reserved, which made messing with him all the more fun.

Eventually, though, he and I had become friends, too.

The other brothers and I had jumped Grey and a few others one night for a little bit of hazing and fun. We’d taken them to an old mausoleum and our president at the time had filled them in about The Pact.

They’d been told the same thing we all had—

If they wanted the financial assistance being part of Sigma Phi Rho offered, they had to sign as well. They’d been told they wouldn’t be able to leave that night unless they signed it, and that if they left without agreeing, they’d have to leave the fraternity altogether.

Grey had thought it was all a joke. He’d signed it without a second thought, not realizing it was an actual agreement. He’d been falling in love with a knockout named Bria, and had only signed to get the financial assistance, not thinking the fraternity would actually take measures to keep the two of them apart.

It was only after he'd signed it, after he'd fallen for Bria, that he realized just how seriously some of the guys at Sigma Phi Rho took The Pact.

They'd kicked him out. Damaged some of his property. The fraternity's social chair, Will, had even gone far enough to attack Bria and was now in jail for it.

We're talking overkill.

"Everything okay?" Goldie set her pickle down and gazed at me.

I shook aside the memories and frowned at my screen before pocketing it. I'd check the message later, once I got her to her room.

"Yeah, it's just—it's another buddy from college. Someone I haven't heard from in a while, either."

"Is everything okay?" she asked, taking a drink.

"I'm sure it's fine. He's probably saying hi." I smiled at her and played it off, though I couldn't help but wonder what Grey wanted.

He'd done well for himself after graduation. He and Bria had gotten married, and the YouTube channel he'd been working on had exploded, giving him the capital to launch a chain of bike shops across the eastern U.S. I'd helped him with a few aspects of his investments, but that was the extent of things.

Goldie and I talked some more about golfing and about how Duncan and Maddox were only here for the day. About how that was the reason I'd gone up to the cabin as late as I had—because I'd been spending the day with the guys.

"Thanks for lunch," she said, wiping her mouth and standing. She straightened her shirt and peered toward the stairs. "Guess I'll go find my room while I wait to get that dress."

"I'll take you there," I said.

She looked as though she might protest, but I took her hand.

With every step up the stairs, the air got a little thinner. It wasn't like we were going to do anything once we got there—I was just walking her to her door—but still. It was stupid. I didn't know where these thoughts were coming from.

The landing above circled around and was lined with doors, including bathrooms at either end. I pointed to room number four, the second one in from the stairs.

“Kimmy said you're welcome to head over as soon as you're ready,” I said, stopping as Goldie rifled the key from her pocket.

“Great,” she said. “I'll just get situated and be back down again.”

She lifted her chin, gazing at me. I gazed back, taken by her face and the sweetness in her eyes. I tripped on the shape of her lips, and something twisted in my low belly.

“See you soon,” I said, turning away before I did something stupid like kiss her.

I trotted down the stairs, marched through the dining room, and stormed out into the sunlight. I swallowed breaths of fresh air, hoping it cleared my head.

This was insane. How could she have this much impact on me?

Needing to clear my thoughts, I wrenched my phone from my pocket and checked Grey's message.

Grey: Hey, Adrian. I know it's been a while. I just wondered if you saw that Will was released from jail yesterday.

My chest tightened. Will had gone berserk that day ten years ago. Grey had announced his intention of leaving the fraternity, of going back on his pledge. As the president, Sean had been livid, but it was nothing to the rage Will had shown.

Will had shoved Grey out the door, locked him out, and then instead of letting Grey pack and leave like any normal person would, he'd charged up to Grey's room and tossed all of his belongings out of the window.

Then, on a psychotic whim, he'd driven past the location of Bria's twenty-first birthday party and had done more than crash. He'd stormed in like a lunatic with a knife and threatened to kill her to get back at Grey for backing out of The Pact.

Me: I don't blame you for being bothered by this. He hasn't contacted you, has he?

Will wouldn't continue holding a grudge over this all these years later, would he?

In all reality, our pledge to The Pact was probably null and void at this point. I think I'd seen somewhere that Sean himself had gotten married, too.

Really, it was a dumb agreement, one we'd all made when we were young and careless.

Grey: No, I haven't heard from him. I'm just saying, I'd better not, you know?

Me: Yeah, I know. He'd be an idiot to try anything after all this time.

Grey: Sean never sent me a copy of the contract I signed all those years ago. You don't have one, do you?

I considered. Now that he mentioned it, I wasn't sure I had ever seen the contract since I signed mine either. It might not hurt to have copies.

Me: I don't have one either, but I'll see if I can get my hands on one and send it to you as well.

Grey: Thanks.

Me: Don't sweat it, man. I'm sure nothing will come of this.

Will had been in jail for ten years. That was enough time to let something like this go, wasn't it?

MY NERVES CRACKLED like wet Pop Rocks. I hadn't been sure what to expect when I left Baldwin. See the sights, meet the aunt, sure. A good-looking Hummer driver with outrageous generosity and baking cocoa eyes hadn't been anywhere in the vicinity of my expectations, let alone dating him.

Yet, here I was, not only going on a date with him but posing as his girlfriend for the week? What was I thinking? I hadn't dated anyone since Tyler Hart, and that breakup from his possessive nature had come two years too late.

As soon as I was alone, I flopped onto the bed. I needed a moment to just breathe. To recalibrate. To orient myself with how much had changed in such a short amount of time.

After breathing for what felt like an hour—really, it was only about two minutes—I opened my phone.

I'd missed a call from Mom, but I wasn't ready for that conversation yet. I didn't want to admit I'd driven all this way only to greet a closed door. Mom was a huge fan of *I told you so*.

I dialed Lois's number instead. We'd been roommates for the last three years since I'd finished my degree and started teaching at the local high school. I'd really wanted a job farther away from home, but at the time, the idea of leaving my hometown was too frightening.

Look at me now.

Lois's exuberance nearly blasted my eardrums. "It's about time you called! I was worried when I didn't hear from you yesterday."

I covered my eyes with my elbow. "Yeah, I got a little sidetracked." That was an understatement.

"That doesn't sound good."

I explained everything, from my phone's GPS going haywire and leading me completely off track, to finding Adrian's cabin, to *not* finding my aunt, to being invited to stay at his B & B.

I left off the whole finding me in his bed thing. That dominated my thoughts way too much as it was, and I didn't want the squeals and insinuations Lois would make.

Nothing had come of it. It was the most monumental wrong place at the wrong time I'd ever experienced.

Except every coin had a flipside.

While it had been sort of wrong, it also felt sort of right too. The prospect of being with Adrian Bear was glittery and shiny. It was almost like we'd been meant to meet—and the fact that I'd conveniently shown up at the same bed and breakfast that his family owned only seemed to affirm as much.

I didn't know how to explain that thought. Whatever this was between us was a fluke thing. Nothing more.

There was such a long pause on the other end, I started to wonder whether or not Lois had heard me.

"You're at some hot guy's ranch?"

"A bed and breakfast, actually. His name is Adrian Bear, and I guess his family runs it. It's harmless."

"You can't be serious."

"He's nice, Lois."

"That's what women thought about Ted Bundy, too and look what happened to them."

I laughed, and the release was exactly what I needed. “I doubt he’s a serial killer. He’s helping me find my way around. I’d probably be lost all over if it wasn’t for him.”

Lois released a strained noise. “How many people does that happen to? Travel to a distant land and be rescued by an alluring stranger?”

“You watch too many movies.”

“You can never watch too many movies. What about your aunt?” Lois asked, changing tack without breaking a sweat. “She didn’t give you any kind of number?”

A brick sank into my stomach. “Nope; nothing. I have her email. I already sent her a note, but I’ll send her another one when we get off. For now, I’m going out with Adrian.”

“Oh.” Her voice turned coy. “Going out?”

“We’re golfing.”

She snorted. “You?”

“Shut up. I golf.”

“Since when?”

“Since now.”

Lois was one to talk. She’d never been much for swimming, kayaking, and other outdoorsy things until she’d met Sam.

“He’s adorable, Lois. He’s sweet, and he makes me feel like I’m beautiful.”

“Hello,” she said. “Because you are.”

I waved this off and fluttered my lips. That may be the case, but it was one thing to feel pretty. It was another when someone else thought you were.

“Have all kinds of fun,” she said. “Have you told your mom about this guy?”

“What do you think? After the last conversation we had, she’s the last person I want to talk to.”

I knew Lois couldn't relate to that. Her parents were doting and a little too involved in her life. They were regularly buying her new things for the apartment, taking her to dinner, shopping, and to do things like go to the movies. She could talk to them about things, about her problems, men, the events of her day.

I'd never had that with Mom.

"It's all good," she said.

When I'd showed Mom the letter, she'd demanded I give it to her, that I burn it, that I let the past die. I'd refused. I'd answered Mom's follow-up calls a grand total of once, only to find out she'd called, not to answer my questions as I'd hoped, but to let me know she was coming over to destroy the letter.

I hadn't hesitated. I'd packed, asked Lois to feed my fish, and headed out.

"My mom didn't want me going in the first place," I said. "I'm not about to let her know I'm out here up a creek without a paddle."

Not when Mom had kept such a huge secret from me my entire life. I knew I should be mature about things and let it go, but it ate at me.

Why hadn't she told me she had a sister? What else did Mom have to hide?

"Sounds like you've got a paddle to me. Or your hot cabin boy does. Tell him to use it on you. You know how snuggly bears can be."

I released a little flustered laugh and ended the call.

Talking about Adrian only flustered me at the prospect of seeing him again. I wasn't sure about the snuggle factor. Stuffed bears were cuddly, sure, but real bears? They were usually cause for turning and running in whatever direction the bear *wasn't*.

I recalled our conversation about dating. He'd mentioned holding my hand, and he'd slipped his arm around my waist. Was snuggling a possibility?

The idea lit a spark in my stomach. I wasn't blind to the way he looked at me, or the cute things he said. What if he did want more than handholding with me—would I let him?

Or would this all result in regret that I'd ever stumbled across his cabin in the first place?

I WAS INVITING someone as unconventional as a woman who slept in random person's houses to a fundraiser. Was that really the best idea?

Maybe not, but she was the only date I could find. The only date I *wanted*, anyway.

It wouldn't be a blind date, and for that I was grateful. Just blind in the sense that I knew pretty much nothing about her.

Who knew how that might come back to bite me? Especially considering the company we would be in?

At least Goldie had agreed to stay and go golfing so I could change our stranger status. I was anxious to get to know her better, to see what made the light dazzle in her eyes, to have excuses to run my fingers through her golden hair, to hold her body as we danced—

And yeah, to dodge a Danica-shaped bullet.

She was sweet. If I'd pulled a fast-one on Danica with the whole fake girlfriend thing, she would have been all up in my grill about it, but Goldie had accepted everything so superbly, so readily.

Goldie seemed hesitant about my offers of help, but I was only being decent. At least, that was what I told myself. It had nothing to do with the way her hair draped like thick silk or that I wanted to erase the flashes of worry in her magnetic blue eyes.

The fundraiser was in honor of my late father, after all. Mom was the one who insisted I couldn't show up dateless.

Not when it was black-tie. I considered the dating pool within Two Pines' 11,000 population. The swimming was shallow, to say the least.

I wanted to go with Danica Foster about as badly as I wanted to slit my wrists and do pushups in salt water. Goldie, on the other hand, was intriguing. I was fascinated by her.

She would be the perfect date for me. No one knew her. For all the townspeople would think, I met her in Chicago. She could be the ideal excuse for me to escape once the necessities were over.

I'd meant what I told her—I had a gut instinct about investments. It was what had helped me rise to the top as quickly as I had, and the reason my bank account continued to accumulate zeroes.

I'd pushed through business school with the veracity of a tycoon, not wanting to wait to apply what I was learning until school was finished like so many others in the program. One good play had led to another. The risk was a rush, and it only took another ten years until I welcomed myself into the three-comma club.

This was no different, in its own bizarre way. Despite The Pact, something inside of me told me not to let Goldie go. Which meant I had a few other things that needed to be ironed out before the fundraiser.

Sitting on the leather couch in the reception area downstairs, I tapped my assistant's number. She picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, boss.”

“Rita, how are you?”

“Fine, sir. Your jet is all ready to go for the morning. I've arranged for a car to meet you at the airfield when you get in. Hamlin Brothers called. Mr. Hamlin would like to meet with you about the quarter score deal, perhaps over lunch tomorrow—”

“That all sounds amazing, Rita, but I'm afraid I have some bad news.”

A pause. “You aren’t coming back tomorrow, are you, sir?”

Regret pinched at me. Between the funeral, the emotional meltdown Mom had had when she’d found out how quickly I was planning on leaving, and the revelation that Dad’s will and trust had been released, this was the fourth time I’d had to put my assistant off from the original plans I’d given her.

“No, I’m not. Sorry you went through all that trouble. Please cancel my appointments and delay my flight.”

People would understand. Family deaths were tough. Dad’s death had hit me harder than I’d thought it would, considering the fractured relationship we’d had when he was alive.

The worst part was that we’d never gotten the chance to straighten things out. He’d died with me still mad at him.

I still wasn’t sure how to handle that, so I avoided it as much as possible. Goldie was helping with that too, though I knew I’d have to face those feelings sooner or later.

Later was preferable.

“Do you have a different day you’d like me to set it for?”

I considered this. Mom would be tickled pink that I, yet again, wasn’t leaving. She’d managed to convince me to stay plenty of times since the funeral, what with guilt-tripping me over leaving her so soon and enticing me with the will and trust being read.

Mom had no other hold over me now, not once this fundraiser was over. Chase and Jordan were still here to help her if she needed it.

Regardless, I couldn’t invite Goldie to stay at the ranch and then abandon her. I also couldn’t leave when I hadn’t yet found the lockbox.

I was so sure it’d been stashed away at the cabin somewhere. Where had Dad left it?

“Just hold off on the flight, Rita.”

“Will do, sir. Just let me know, and I’ll get everything lined up for you.”

“I appreciate that.”

There was another pause. Usually, Rita ended calls with punctuality. She was all business, and I liked that about her. “Am I missing anything?”

“I also expect a bonus for every cancellation you’ve had me make the past few weeks.”

I grinned at her facetious tone. Undoubtedly, these cancellations weren’t good for my reputation.

I wasn’t sure what else I could do. I paid her well enough. She really was an amazing assistant.

“I’ll be sure to bring you a lollipop.” Maybe Hawk would be good for something from Ever After Sweets.

Thinking of Hawk brought the memory of my text convo with Grey around again.

“Actually, there is one more thing.”

“And that is?”

“Can you skim through my email for anything from Sigma Phi Rho that contains attachments? I’d also like my correspondence with Sean Dayton in one file.”

After the fallout with Grey, with Will in jail, a lot of the other guys had requested copies of their contracts containing Pact details. I’d been among them.

I’d had a hard time believing the story of Will going ballistic and physically attacking Bria, but the truth was against him. The police had investigated the frat then. The fraternity president had to provide proof of The Pact.

The outlined consequences for breaking an oath of lifelong bachelorhood were all pretty laughable, so the police didn’t really put much stock in them. I mean, who would, when those consequences included things like streaking through a public area, drinking shots, or confessing dark secrets?

Nothing but the streaking was anything anyone could be imprisoned for.

The frat president, Sean Dayton, had explained that Will had taken it too far. He'd then agreed that we each had a right to access the contract we'd each signed.

One of the guys had been good about emailing everyone the contract with their signatures on it. This had dispelled a lot of bickering and frustration, but it hadn't put a stop to it completely.

Many of the guys were appalled to find out what they'd actually signed.

I suspected a lot of them had been like Grey. They'd assumed The Pact was a hoax, something hokey to sign to deflect hazing and to get the upperclassmen off their backs.

I hadn't given the contract much thought—after Danica, I was content to stay single the rest of my life. I hadn't thought to see if Grey had received a copy of the contract.

Apparently, he hadn't.

I'd get Rita to send the contract to me, and then I'd forward it along to Grey so he could see the terms for himself.

"Emails from Sean Dayton," Rita said, voicing my request back to me. "You got it. Have a good day, sir."

"You, too. Thanks, Rita."

I ended the call in time to glance up and find Goldie descending the stairs. The sight made my heart skip. The other reason I'd hated leaving her on some random front step had been sheer sympathy. My heart had gone out to her—as asinine as that might seem. Mom couldn't fault me for not wanting to abandon a woman in need.

Goldie had changed into a blue shirt that drew attention to her curves in a way I hadn't anticipated. Heat shot into my chest, and I worked to keep my attention on her face rather than scoping her out in that shirt and her slim jeans as I wanted to. She'd also tied her hair on top of her head, which emphasized the heart shape of her face.

“Hey there,” I said, meeting her at the bottom of the stairs.

“Hey. Thanks for waiting. Sorry I took so long.”

“Not at all,” I said. “I was taking care of some phone calls.”

“That’s good. You’ll have to tell me where you work.”

My throat went tight. This was a topic I tended to avoid with women who didn’t know it otherwise. Thinking about The Pact so much also had my back up.

It’d been ten years. There was no way its terms still applied today, and even if they did, who was going to keep tabs on me to ensure I stuck to them?

No one was going to hold me at gunpoint and force me to streak through downtown Chicago or something.

“Sure thing, but let me get you to Kimmy’s,” I said. “She said she’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Where does she live?” Goldie asked.

“There, actually.” I sauntered to the window and pointed at the glass and the two houses nestled beyond the barn. “My mom and Jordan sleep at the farthest one. The other is Kimmy and Chase’s place.”

A red car pulled into the wide gravel lot. “Wow, that was fast.”

“We’d better head out there. Ready?”

She chewed her lip and nodded.

I did what I could to brush away my uncertainty. The Pact was no longer in place. I was dating a fine-looking woman; after we went golfing, I was taking her to a gala, and frankly, I couldn’t wait to see her in whatever getup Kimmy might come up with.

So why was I so plagued with unease?

I COULDN'T IMAGINE WANTING to live this close to my parents. Even though I'd gotten a job teaching in the same town, I'd opted for an apartment and only visited my parents on holidays or whenever obligations required.

After Mom's dishonesty and behavior over this letter, though, I was tempted to move farther than that.

Adrian and I made our way to the door. We passed his brother Jordan slouching behind the reception desk. Jordan was talking on his phone this time. He barely glanced up when a man wearing a flannel shirt open over a t-shirt and jeans, and a swooping cowboy hat entered through the front door.

I didn't have to be told to know—this was the third Bear brother.

What was with this family's genetics? They hit the jackpot as far as looks went. This brother had similar features, though his face was a tad narrower than Adrian and Jordan's, and his nose was different.

"Goldie, this is my brother, Chase," Adrian said.

Chase tipped two fingers to his Stetson before he removed the hat and inclined his head at me. "Nice to meet you. You're from Wisconsin?"

I stiffened. How much had Adrian told him?

"Saw your plates," he said, crooking an elbow in the door's direction.

A slim woman entered behind him, trailed by two young girls no higher than their mom's waist.

“This is Kimmy and our girls, Lacey and Lizzie.” The two little girls giggled and hid behind their mom’s legs. Kimmy was pretty, bronze-skinned, and so smiley I couldn’t help but return it.

Chase turned to Adrian, and though I was sure he meant to keep the question out of earshot, I heard it anyway.

“I can’t believe you brought a girl home. Does Mom know?”

“She does now.”

“What about—?” Chase cut off at an elbow to the ribs from his wife.

“I’m Kimmy,” Kimmy repeated, nudging Chase aside and jutting her hand in my direction. “I hear you need a dress for tonight.”

“I—if that’s okay.”

Kimmy fluttered her lips. “Are you kidding? Come on. I have several. You can look them over.”

Adrian was captured in conversation with his brothers. Attention diverted, I tucked a hair behind my ear and followed her out.

“We’re going!” Kimmy called over her shoulder. “I’m leaving the girls.”

Chase waved his agreement, and the girls continued dancing around their dad.

The afternoon had grown warmer since the last time I stepped outside. A gentle breeze swayed the daffodils and tulips on either side of the porch, and I followed Kimmy down the steps.

I veered toward her car, but Kimmy kept a straight direction, trekking down the dirt path toward the barn. Birds chirped, and the faint smell of hay and manure wafted over me as we passed.

“Are you from here?” I asked.

“Born and raised,” Kimmy said, beaming. “Chase and I were high school sweethearts.”

If she was from here... Two Pines was small. Was it everyone-knows-everyone small?

“Do you know someone named Bethany Harold?”

“Harold,” Kimmy repeated pensively. “Harold. Doesn’t sound familiar, but I don’t know everyone in town. It’s a small place, but not that small.” We walked several paces more until we approached the first of two homes nestled a short distance from the B & B.

“Here we are,” she said, leading the way.

I followed her in through a side door that led into the garage.

A laundry room greeted us, along with the scents of fabric softener and the sound of a load rumbling in the dryer. The floor was strewn with shoes, clothes, and toys.

The house’s interior was what I’d expected. High-end, luxurious, and cozy. Unlike the main house, however, it wasn’t as tidy.

Toys continued a scattered path across the carpet as we went from one room to another. Dolls and their clothes, stuffed animals, books. The sight brought a smile to my lips.

“My dresses are all in here.” Kimmy guided the way down a brief hallway and into what appeared to be the master bedroom.

This was a private, personal space—especially for someone I didn’t know—but the same thought didn’t seem to cross Kimmy’s mind.

“That man hasn’t taken me anywhere fancy in a long time. It’s about time he gave me an excuse to buy something new.” She smirked as she opened the door into the largest closet I’d ever seen.

Organization was clearly something Kimmy was good at, with Chase’s shirts, pants, and shoes in precise order on one side, and dresses, shirts, and other clothing on the other.

“What about this one?” She plucked a coral dress from its place and brandished it on its hanger as though she were an employee in a store.

It was pretty, but I wasn't a fan of the mermaid style. I'd never actually worn anything like that, but I imagined the skirt clinging to my legs made movement difficult. I felt like a fish out of water as it was. I didn't need to go adding a mermaid dress to the mix.

I shook my head. At my lack of enthusiasm, she slid it back into place with an, “Ooo, I have it. I wore this one a few years ago.”

She displayed the dress against her own body, holding the hanger just below her chin. The dress was ivory satin with an embroidered bodice and flowing skirt.

My interest piqued. “That one is exquisite,” I said.

“Here.” Kimmy pointed to the door to my left. “You should try it on.”

I went to the indicated door, closed and locked it, and began to change.

I'd never worn anything like this. The fabric was like silk against my skin. The skirt flowed with each of my movements, and one sleeve hung just off my left shoulder. This was exactly the kind of dress I'd imagined wearing in my days of pretend, of princesses, and play.

This was my childhood fantasy come to life before my eyes.

It seemed fitting, since every moment with Adrian had a similar tinge.

“I want to see,” Kimmy called through the door.

Tentatively, I stepped out, loving the dress more with every step. I'd never gone to prom. I'd never gone to anything that might be in the neighborhood of *fancy*. Wearing a dress like this was an entirely new experience, and I couldn't keep the smile from my lips.

“You look amazing,” Kimmy said. Her lips bloomed into an appreciative grin.

“I love it.” I swayed from one side to the other. “Are you sure you don’t mind me wearing it?”

“Are you kidding? Not at all. Come on—I think I’ve got some earrings you can borrow too. What size shoe are you?”

After helping me get fully outfitted, Kimmy drove me up the road to the *big house*, as she called it. She said she didn’t want me to carry the dress all that way, since it didn’t have a bag anymore. Kimmy chattered the entire time, which put me at ease.

“I’m glad Adrian found someone like you, you know? We all thought he was going to marry Danica, but between us girls, I never saw him with her. There’s just something about Danica that rubbed me the wrong way. Plus, he’s been so secluded from the family for so long.”

“Secluded?”

I hadn’t gotten that impression, though I wouldn’t put it past him. He had said something about leaving again. About not living here.

I wondered if he had a rocky relationship with his parents like I did with mine.

“It’s sad that his dad’s passing had to be the impetus to bring him all the way back here, but now that he is, between you and me, I think he’s having a hard time leaving again.”

“I can only imagine.”

I’d never lost anyone close to me. Adrian didn’t seem to be mourning on the outside, but I suspected he might be hiding those feelings as men often did.

“His dad passed away six weeks ago,” Kimmy affirmed. “That’s why this fundraiser is such a big deal this year. It might be the last one they do, unless the three Bear brothers can get things together and help their mom keep it up.”

Remorse struck me. No wonder Adrian’s mom had seemed less than pleased that he’d brought a girl home. She was

probably still grieving the loss of her husband.

My tentative plan to bake something for Mrs. Bear solidified. I had to do it.

A new band of guests had arrived in the parking lot, removing suitcases from an SUV. I suspected living somewhere like this, running a B & B, kept life interesting. They probably met all kinds of people who stopped in from all over the U.S. The idea felt like such an adventure to me.

Kimmy pulled up beside them, letting her car idle beside the one they'd driven before. I suspected that was Chase's, and this vehicle was hers.

"This was seriously awesome of you," I said. "Thanks for letting me borrow the dress."

"You're welcome." Kimmy gave me a secretive smirk. "I can't *wait* for Adrian to see you in it."

The thought sent a little twinge of excitement through me. I had felt completely refined and stunning in this dress—and I agreed with her there. Was it shallow for me to admit I felt the same?

After I hung Kimmy's dress in the closet, I scampered downstairs to find Adrian waiting for me on the couch. His nieces sat on his knees, one on either leg, and he was bouncing them and chanting something about barber shops and the chair going ker-plop, to which he'd then gently knock each girl back and catch them again.

Their giggles filled the space, and my heart went all squishy at the sight.

"Got a dress?" he said, blushing when he realized I'd been watching him play with his nieces.

Honestly, if a guy wanted a girl's attention, all he had to do was show that he was good with kids. This girl, anyway.

And to be caught off guard while doing it? Even better.

"Got one," I said. "Kimmy is great."

Kimmy beamed and sidled in. "Your jaw is going to drop."

“I’m counting on it.” Adrian winked.

He gave Kimmy a hug, high-fived the girls, fist pounded his brother, and then claimed my hand and strode with me out to his Hummer.

I couldn’t wait for the dance tonight, but for now, we were going golfing.

Time for my game face. Not that I had one of those, but if I did, it would be cute.

Fingers crossed being cute would be enough.

“ARE THE GUYS ALREADY THERE?” I asked.

“Maddox and Duncan are,” Adrian said, resting a hand on the Hummer’s handle. A little beep sounded, and he opened the door for me, waiting for me to climb in before striding to the driver’s seat.

“Hawk is waiting for us. There he is.”

Though I was tempted to check my email and see if Aunt Bethany had replied yet, I peered out the windshield just as Hawk strode down the porch steps to the white sports car parked a few places down from my truck.

“He seems—”

“Goofy?”

“Nice.”

Adrian chuckled and drove onto the dirt road. “He’s a rare one, for sure. Super genuine guy. You’d never be able to tell he’s—”

“What?”

The side of Adrian’s jaw twitched. “An only child.”

“That’s not what you were about to say.”

“Sure it was.”

“What? What is it? Tell me.”

“The golf course isn’t far.”

“Adrian.”

He peered at me, a fake innocent expression on his face. “Usually, I prefer to bring my own clubs, but since they’re in Chicago, we’ll have to buy some.”

“All right, then. Keep your secret.” He smirked, and I went on though I was dying to pester him to know. What had he been about to say?

“Chicago? Is that where you live?”

“Yes,” he said, turning the corner.

Trees appeared and fencing surrounded a spread of grass laden with small hills.

“I got my business degree and stuck around once my business took off.”

“What do you do?” I asked.

“Investments,” he said, slowing down the narrow road between a long stretch of trees lining either side.

I slid open the screen on my phone and checked my email.

Still nothing. Where was she? Why hadn’t Aunt Bethany said anything since I left Wisconsin? I huffed and was grateful Adrian parked and got out of the car before he could ask me about my frustration.

A long stretch of rolling green lawn blanketed the ground. A small building was positioned at its end, making me think of a clubhouse. The sign out front brandished the name *Riverside Golf Course*.

Hawk strode toward us, hands in his pockets, and piquing my curiosity. What had Adrian been about to say about his friend earlier? They’d cut off their conversation once before too, when Duncan had been talking about his private jet.

The concept of private jets was too befuddling to believe.

“Beautiful day for golf,” Hawk said, grinning.

He was sunny himself, and something told me it took a lot to get someone like him down. Blond and tall, he looked trim and fit in a pair of jeans and a salmon-colored polo shirt.

“It is,” Adrian said. “Have you heard from Duncan and Maddox?”

“They’re on nine.” Hawk headed toward the clubhouse, and Adrian snatched my hand, keeping me close to him.

I warmed, loving the touch. Even if this wasn’t going to last, I was going to enjoy it as long as it did.

“Nine?” I asked.

“Hole nine,” Adrian explained, holding the door for Hawk and me to enter.

A long desk greeted us, along with several displays of golf clubs, polo shirts, gloves, and collections of golf balls beneath the counter.

Hawk rolled a set of golf clubs toward us. The caddy had a fat price tag on it, featuring an exorbitant amount for a collection of sticks with fat ends.

“Don’t want to rent,” Hawk said by way of explanation, winking at me and then wheeling them to the counter.

I gaped at Adrian, but he just shook his head. “Don’t mind him.”

“What does he have against renting?”

Maybe they didn’t rent clubs here...

Adrian didn’t answer but, to my surprise, he guided me to the same area Hawk had picked his clubs from and selected a set of his own.

“Here we go. You know, you’d look cute in one of those.” He indicated a pink polo shirt behind me.

“You’re not buying me a shirt just to golf in.”

“Why not?”

I didn’t feel that needed an explanation. I gestured to the clubs. “Are you buying those?”

“I like to have my own clubs.” Adrian gave me that smirk and wheeled his set to the counter as well, pulling out his wallet.

I intercepted. I apologized to the guy at the counter and pulled Adrian aside.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“It’s too much.” I knew I had no right to tell him how to spend his money, but these clubs cost more than I made in two weeks.

Adrian inhaled. “I know this is strange to you, but—” He hesitated. Turned his face away as if reprimanding himself. “I’m good for it, I promise.”

“Adrian...”

“Come on. The guys are waiting.”

Sure enough, outside the window, Maddox and Duncan had pulled up in a golf cart and were shooting the breeze with Hawk, who had brandished one of his new clubs and was offering it for their perusal.

I had no right to lecture this man. Whether the purchase was exorbitant or not, it wasn’t my place to call him out on it—even though I really, *really* wanted to. Who spends this much money on golf clubs at a place he was going to be leaving soon?

Still, the concept made me a little squeamish.

He wheeled the clubs out the door and down the cement dip to Duncan’s golf cart.

“This driver is lightweight,” Hawk said, gripping a club with a fat head and looking at it as though it were a prize winner.

“About time you got here,” Duncan said, shifting his attention from the golf club. “We made it through one round already.”

“You two up for a new game?” Adrian said, sliding his free arm around my waist.

I fizzled under the touch. It was a reminder that he wanted me here with him. Otherwise, I’d feel all kinds of out of place.

“I am,” Hawk said.

“You haven’t even played yet,” Maddox pointed out.

“Yeah. But new clubs means new game.” Hawk rested a hand on his clubs.

I shook my head. I didn’t know this man well, but I liked his cheerful, easygoing attitude.

Duncan, on the other hand... Though he was wearing sunglasses, something told me he was scowling under those bad boys.

“You go on,” Adrian said, jutting his chin toward the green. “Goldie and I’ve got our own cart.”

“Don’t drive off and ditch us,” Hawk said, adding his clubs to those on Duncan’s and Maddox’s cart and climbing on.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“We got a cart?” I asked once they were gone.

He gestured toward the lineup of at least five gray-and-black golf carts and offered me a little black key. “Sure, you want to drive it?”

“Are you kidding?”

I snatched it from his hand and went to the cart number indicated on the key. Adrian laughed at my excitement.

The cart didn’t go very fast, but something told me they weren’t meant to. The slow pace was ideal. We meandered along the grass, following the guys until they stopped at the first hole.

Maddox, Duncan, and Hawk each swung. I squinted, attempting to see where the golf ball landed, and I could suddenly understand why they made them either white or bright colors.

“You’re up,” Adrian said, offering the club with the fat head to me.

“Me?”

“You’ve never golfed before?” Maddox asked.

“I haven’t,” I said, taking the club from Adrian and feeling uncertain.

A few of the guys tilted their heads or blinked in confusion. It’s no wonder, considering how I’d admitted to loving the sport when we’d talked about it earlier. Loving something was not the same as having experienced it for myself.

Hawk seemed to recover the quickest. He sidled in closer.

“Adrian,” he said, “here is the perfect opportunity.”

Adrian stared at his friend. “What does that mean?”

“Look at her, holding the club. She doesn’t know what she’s doing—or she’s making us think she doesn’t.” He rested his hand on his hip.

Maddox cottoned on and joined in. “Everyone knows how this goes, man. You see it in movies all the time. Scheming girl plays that she doesn’t know how to shoot the gun or nock the arrow. So the guy uses teaching her as an excuse to put his arms around her.”

“Who says he needs an excuse?” I quipped.

All four men gazed at me. Adrian’s approving smile made me tuck my bottom lip into my teeth.

I couldn’t be certain, but I’m pretty sure his jaw dropped. I knew what they were getting at, and believe me, I was all for it.

The guys whooped at that. Even Duncan smiled, a feat that rendered him slightly unnerving.

“There you have it,” Hawk said, before clapping Adrian on the back. “Teach her how to golf, buddy. Teach her how to golf.”

Hawk patted Adrian’s shoulder, and the three of them drove their golf cart to the next hole, laughing.

Once Adrian and I were alone, I couldn’t wipe the smile from my cheeks. “I like your friends.”

“That’s good, because I’m ready to choke them after this.”

“Why? You heard him.” I quirked my head to the side.

Adrian analyzed me. “You want me to teach you to golf?”

“You said you would.”

He chuckled, his shoulders shaking. My heart pounded in anticipation as he edged in closer.

“All right, then. Watch and learn.”

He positioned himself behind me. My entire body lit up everywhere we touched. I was transfixed by every one of his movements. The way his chest warmed my back, the feel of the soft skin of his left arm touching mine. He slid his hand over mine.

“Now, your hands—”

My right side was lonely. “Aren’t you supposed to put both arms around me while you show me this?”

His eyes glittered with sultry amusement. “You’re asking for it.”

Moments passed, and then he repositioned himself, placing both arms around me, cocooning me in so my back was against his chest.

I nestled in. A quiver took over me as his scent snaked in and turned my joints to jelly.

“Now,” he said, and then cleared his throat.

Was it just me, or did his voice sound breathier than usual?

“Plant your feet about shoulder width apart.”

I did so. He readjusted himself, holding me closer. His breath stroked my neck.

I was on fire, tingling and skyrocketing all at once. Adrian made matters worse. He leaned in, resting his cheek against mine.

The feel of his scruff prickled. His warm hands held mine, forming so his fingers splayed across my skin, positioning my hands to hold the club differently.

I inhaled, working to keep the fireworks razzing through me from taking over completely.

“Good, just like that.” His voice grew husky. Deepened.

The result trembled clear into my belly.

“Now, turn your head,” he said softly.

I did.

“A little more. A little more. More.”

Soon, our noses were practically touching.

“Like this?” I breathed.

“Still more.”

Quietening, it dawned on me what he was getting at.

I turned my face fully until I was gazing right into his eyes. Their warm brown engulfed me. His sweet breath stroked my lips.

“There,” he said.

My throat grew thick. I was ensnared by the rapture in his eyes.

“Now what?” I asked, and my voice was breathier than usual too.

Adrian’s arms were around me. He stared at me with desire.

I wasn’t just toast. I was the melted butter slathering all over it.

“Now, I’m going to kiss you.”

“This is part of golfing?”

“It is when you’re around.”

He hovered his lips over mine. I shivered in his arms, gripping hard on the club’s handle, willing myself to stay upright because he was stealing the strength from my knees.

“Once you’re ready, you lift the club, sway your body—”

I could hardly think. His mouth teased mine with every word he spoke.

“—and swing.”

I tried to respond, but only a sound made its way out before his lips slid over mine.

Adrian’s mouth was supple. He kissed me slowly, intentionally, melting every synapse in my body so that my nerves sloshed and muddled. His kiss was coercive and disorienting. I was putty in his hands.

The club slipped from my grip, fell to the grass, and I turned to face him more fully. Adrian welcomed me. His hand flattened against my back, pressing me to him. The other skimmed my cheek, touching me delicately as his mouth continued grazing mine.

I’d never been kissed like this. So intentionally. So staggeringly.

“I love golf,” I said as the kiss slowed.

A chuckle rumbled from within his chest, and he wrapped me more fully in his arms, deepening the kiss. I responded, keeping up with him before letting the tempo slow. I pulled away to meet the smiles in his eyes.

“You’re a natural,” he said.

I punched his shoulder. “Shut up.”

Laughing, he placed his hands on my cheeks and kissed me again. And I let him, hoping I wouldn’t regret that fact.

KISSING ADRIAN WAS INDULGENT. Every time was like taking another freshly baked cookie from the batch when I'd already had what should have been my fill.

Though I tried my hand at the game, I could never get my ball close enough to the hole for it to mean anything. With the amount of time it took me to putt, we would have been out there all day.

I ended up watching Adrian play the entire course. My contribution was to sneak in several more kisses and mini makeout sessions every time we returned to the golf cart.

Adrian explained the game to me as we went, but mostly, our time was spent kissing in between holes.

I couldn't get enough of him. Even so, a warning blared inside of me. As much as I loved each kiss, I suspected that was equivalent to the amount of regret I'd have for it later.

We made it back to the ranch in time to start getting ready. I showered, dried my hair, did my makeup, and slipped into the dress. It was like feathers against my skin.

I stood straighter, my shoulders intuitively leveling. My legs seemed longer, my waist thinner. What was it about the perfect dress that seemed to shift my jagged pieces into place?

I wasn't sure what to do with my hair. After trying a few things, I decided to twist it into a braid and then pin that braid along the base of my neck.

No matter what I did, I couldn't shake away the afternoon's residual delirium. My skin heated at the memory

of our kisses, at the prospect of being with him that evening, of dancing with him.

I couldn't let myself get too swept away. This wouldn't last. At least, that was what I told myself every time I felt unsure.

But I didn't like that reminder.

I'd hear from my aunt by tomorrow. I'd be out of here.

After my afternoon spent with Adrian—and kissing him—I didn't want to go anywhere.

I gave myself a once-over in the mirror, startling at the pink in my cheeks, the glow in my skin, and the bright anticipation in my eyes. A nervous glance at my phone told me it was nearly seven. I had to get out there.

I clenched my stomach muscles against the butterflies and stepped out into the hall. Kimmy's shoes were a half size too big. They slid on my feet with every step I took, but I didn't have many other options. I'd have to make these work.

Soft chatter greeted me as I descended the stairs. I paused to squinch my toes deeper into the heels to keep them from falling off.

Several guests milled in their various groups below. Some were gentlemen in cowboy boots and hats, ready to enjoy the sunset, others in more stylish attire were clustered in conversation at the base of the stairs.

The man with his dark hair slicked back, his beard trimmed, and the tux cutting him with precision though? He made my heart hammer and tango.

Adrian.

He was smoking hot on a regular day, but in a tux? It gave him the effect of a spotlight. I had a hard time looking anywhere else—

And that was when my foot caught.

My toes lost their grip. I clung to the banister, but not before my shoe went flying straight toward the crowd below.

Toward Mrs. Bear.

Commotion resulted. Mrs. Bear threw up her hands and released a shriek. Adrian bolted up toward me as my feet slipped completely.

“Heads up!” someone called below.

“Mom,” Jordan shouted, barreling into her before the shoe struck.

I lost sight of the hubbub as Adrian’s arms gathered me to him and I was inundated with that cologne of his. His body was warm. His hands assessed my face.

“You okay?”

I was so mortified, I ignored the question. Gripping his shoulders, I asked what I felt to be more pressing. “Your mom. Is she okay?”

Clutching the banister with one hand and me with the other, Adrian peered behind, giving me a view of the chaos below. Jordan and Chase were on either side of their mother, helping her to her feet. Her hair was disheveled, but that was the worst of it as far as I could tell.

“You good?” Adrian called.

Looking like a teenage version of my date, Jordan gave a thumbs up. “She survived the attack.”

Adrian nuzzled my cheek with his nose. “See? She’s fine.”

Perfect. He didn’t need to lose another parent so soon. Death by shoe. That would make quite the prognosis.

So much for making a good impression on Mommy Dearest tonight.

I’d hoped to get on her good side. My shoes had other ideas.

“Are you coming or not?” Mrs. Bear asked.

She wore a stunning black gown with a full, ruffled skirt, and thanks to Jordan’s ministrations, her hair was mostly back in position.

Still facing me, Adrian's hand was at my waist. He leaned in. "What do you say? By the way, you look amazing."

I squirmed inside. Before I could do more than smile, Jordan's voice climbed to us.

"Isn't that Kimmy's dress?"

Adrian took my hand and helped me descend. "Perceptive," he said sarcastically.

"I'm just borrowing it," I said before turning to their mom. "Mrs. Bear, I'm so sorry about my shoe. I never meant for anything like that to happen."

She sniffed and wouldn't meet my gaze. "I understand."

Sure, she understood. Whether she believed me or not remained to be seen.

Adrian squeezed my hand, but I knew it was going to take more than an apology to make things right with her.

I was really racking up a bill here. Cookies to make up for breaking and entering, more cookies to cover the cost of the vase. What was I going to do for a shoe assault? Brownies?

"Are you a spy?"

"Seriously?" Adrian sounded like he wanted to smack his brother. Mrs. Bear only watched with curiosity.

"What?" Jordan lifted his hands and gestured to my ensemble. The dress roved across my body like water. "This is the kind of thing spies do. Show up unannounced, looking smoking hot in a borrowed dress. Knocking their shoes off in an inadvertent attempt to take out their enemies."

"I didn't do that on purpose," I insisted and then cringed.

Great. Which part?

Hearing my statement afterward, it only sounded more ludicrous. I'd made it sound like part of the accusation—aka, lobbing my shoe at my date's mother—had been intentional. And that I agreed that she was my enemy.

“I agree with the smoking hot part of that statement,” Adrian said, smirking at me.

His eyes strayed from my face, down to my feet, and back up again.

Mrs. Bear coughed as though she were choking on a drink.

My cheeks scorched. *Smoking hot* was going a bit overboard, especially from a sixteen-year-old. His brother on the other hand? Adrian’s smile widened, rendering him more handsome than ever.

What was it about a man in a fine-fitted suit? I wanted to drink in every aspect of him like he’d done to me.

Mrs. Bear glowered at her sons. “That’s going a bit over the top, isn’t it?”

Was she referring to Jordan’s comment or Adrian’s?

“I like her,” Jordan said, twirling a set of keys around his fingers. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to pick up Taylor.”

“I expect to see you for the entire length of the fundraiser,” Mrs. Bear called, rotating to follow his trajectory to the door.

“Got it, Mom,” Jordan called without glancing back.

He pushed through the front door and trotted down the steps outside. His headlights disappeared when another set of headlights took their place.

Seconds later, Chase took the porch steps two at a time and popped his head in. He was also looking gallant in a tux, but neither Bear brother shined like Adrian did.

“Ready, Mom? Hiya, Goldie. The dress looks great.”

I smiled and waved at him. “Tell Kimmy I said thanks.”

“You can tell her yourself when we get there.” Chase held the door wider for Mrs. Bear and offered his mom his arm to guide her down the porch steps and toward the car.

“Shall we?” Adrian held a hand toward the reception desk and the door.

“Um.” I lifted my skirt enough to display my shoeless foot.

“I’m on it.” Adrian crossed to where my shoe had flown.

The ivory heel lay on its side on the carpet feet from the stairs’ base. He bent for it and returned.

I expected him to set the shoe on the floor so I could then slip my foot in, but he bent his knee. For some reason, the sight of this handsome man kneeling in front of me launched my heart into my throat and sent my bloodstream into space.

“Your foot, my lady.”

I swallowed, lifting my skirt just enough for my toes to be visible. Adrian’s warm hand cupped my ankle, sending a tingling thrill up my calf. He paused, guided the shoe onto my foot, stroked my ankle a single time, and then released my foot and rose to his full height.

I was breathless. Weightless. Featherlight became an entirely new concept to me as I floated in the captivity of his eyes.

Wordlessly, he took my hand and led the way to the door.

The sky was a wine spill, mixed with shades of amber and gold. I took a moment to inhale the scents of honeysuckle and manure and the spread of simplicity all around me. Baldwin was a farm town too. The smell reminded me of home—except this place with these people felt more comfortable, more like home, than Baldwin ever did.

The setting sun had cooled the evening. Even so, I was grateful I’d opted for an updo with my hair. Between Adrian’s attention and the mortification of my unforeseen clumsiness, I was going to run a fever.

Chase, Kimmy, and Mrs. Bear were all gathered around their car.

“See you guys there,” Adrian called from beside his sleek Hummer.

“I expect the same of you, too, you know,” Mrs. Bear said.

The back door of Chase's car remained open. She rested a hand on the side and pegged a poignant glance at Adrian.

"I know you like to leave early, but I'd like you to remain the entire time."

Adrian nodded, opening the passenger door to his car. I did my best to make my way to him in these heels, but they slid around my feet with every step. There was a very good chance I'd remove them as soon as we arrived. And this dress was fabulous, but why did I have to pick a gown that was likely to show every stain or smudge I came across?

With the help of the interior handle and Adrian's hand, I levered myself up onto the sleek leather seat. I inhaled the new car smell as my thoughts drifted to the golf clubs that were no longer in the back.

"We're not riding with them?" I asked as Adrian climbed into the driver's seat and cranked the ignition to life. The smooth machine purred.

He slid me a look. "I want you all to myself."

The pit of my stomach burned. "I'm good with that."

In fact, it was really too bad we had to go anywhere at all. I was tempted to suggest he make for the mountains again where we could sequester ourselves at the cabin and enjoy more of the kisses we'd shared earlier. But obligation, and all that.

Besides, considering the amount of energy our closeness created, we were better off not being completely on our own.

Two Pines was small and unimpressive, the kind of town least likely to stand out on any map. The largest building, from what I'd seen anyway, was maybe the courthouse, but even then, that was no place to hold an event like what I was picturing this to be.

"Where is this going to be held at?"

"At the high school gym," he said, turning onto the paved road that led back into town. "It's the largest place around here to fit everyone into one location."

I couldn't help but notice landmarks, which were my tried-and-true method of navigation. A pawn shop with paint peeling on the exterior. A landscape company in the shape of a large barn, offering samples of rock and mulch in piles behind ropes.

The same gas station we'd passed on the way to Aunt Bethany's house remained on the corner, which meant she wasn't far. A little thought hitched in my chest.

"I wonder if my aunt will be here tonight. You said the whole town usually comes?"

"I don't know about the whole town, but I wouldn't be surprised if you saw her."

Too bad I didn't know what she looked like. I'd asked Mom to show me a picture, but that had worked about as well as a car without keys.

A large tiger was painted on the outside of Two Pines High School, along with bold, white letters identifying the school and its mascot. It appeared to be about the same size as my high school had been. Single level, brick, made for a small student body.

The parking lot was filling faster than a Michaels on a Saturday afternoon. Chase's car was parked a little ways off, while Chase and Kimmy waited for Mrs. Bear to exit and join them at the door.

"Your mom didn't have to come early to set up?" I asked.

"She set some of it up earlier today. She's got a crew to do the rest for her."

"Wouldn't that be nice?" I muttered, grateful he couldn't hear me since he was getting out of the car.

The Bear family owned a substantial ranch with a bed and breakfast, land, horses, and multiple houses. They drove insanely nice cars and ran fundraisers to support needs in the town. Their son went around buying brand new, exorbitant golf clubs for a one-time round and rescuing stranded women in cabins.

Just who were these people?

“I hope you’re hungry,” Adrian said, standing beside me with his hands rumpling his suit jacket to tuck them into the pockets of his slacks.

I pressed my hand to my stomach. “Famished,” I admitted.

I hadn’t eaten anything since our lunch earlier. I peered at the newest car pulling into the lot and was surprised to find Hawk behind the wheel.

“Hawk is here?”

“Yeah. The others had to get back, but he decided to stick around for tonight.”

“Are you sure I can’t contribute tonight? Pay for my ticket or something?”

“I’m sure,” he said, offering an arm.

Right. Date. Fake boyfriend.

Or...was he in earnest?

Our kisses earlier had felt bona fide enough. If we’re being honest here, I was hoping for more once the night ended.

That thought alone had me bracing for heartbreak. No matter how dazzled I was by him, I couldn’t forget that this was anything but real.

UNEASE CRAWLED over every inch of me. The newness of this trip overall was off-putting. How many times had I dreamed of a night like this? Entering a stunning event in a pretty gown on the arm of an incredibly, hauntingly handsome guy?

It was only a façade. To live your dream only as make believe carried its own kind of danger.

I couldn't dwell on that. I was here, and Adrian was remarkable. I had to make the most of it while I could.

Soft jazz hit my ears and warmth sank into my cheeks the moment we stepped into the high school's main area. The lights were low. Candles and white, twinkling light strands trailed along the hallways and decorated fake trees on either side of a table.

"Hey, Mr. Bear," a girl sitting behind the desk said. Her hair was in two braids and freckles sprayed across her nose. "We just saw your Mom and Chase."

"Awesome. We're taking two seats." He offered tickets from within his jacket.

He already had the tickets? Why would he have two tickets already if he wasn't already planning on bringing someone? He'd seemed insistent otherwise, but had he meant to invite whoever this Danica was, after all?

Was I about to walk into a trap?

"Wait up!"

I peered behind to find Hawk approaching in a tux of his own. He looked dapper and lively, with his cheeks flushed and a fresh gleam of what I assumed was excitement in his eyes.

“Dude, Goldie, you look gorgeous. Hey, man. Looking good yourself.” He offered Adrian a hand.

“Thanks,” Adrian said, shaking with his friend. “You got your ticket?”

“Got it. I forgot it in the car and had to run back.” Hawk fanned his ticket and his teeth all at the same time.

I relaxed around Hawk, glad he was there. Maybe he could be a buffer for me with Mrs. Bear.

The girl inserted the tickets into an open box and then gestured to the table beside her.

“Want to get in on the raffle? There are tons of amazing items inside, made by people all over town.”

Adrian looked at me as though the decision were mine.

“I didn’t bring my purse.”

“It’s on me. You’re my date, remember?”

I really disliked him insisting on doing so much for me. Letting me stay at his very expensive bed and breakfast for free. Paying my way in. Now raffle tickets? Who could afford one luxury after another like this?

“I’ll take some,” Hawk said, digging a large bill from his wallet. I gaped at the same time the girl did before she shook it off and counted out his tickets.

A memory I’d long forgotten flashed through my mind. I’d been nine when my school had thrown a Halloween carnival. I’d begged to go, but my parents insisted they had no extra money for any of the games with prizes.

Eventually, I’d managed to convince Dad to take me, but it had turned out worse than if I’d just stayed home. Instead of getting to play the games, I’d had to stand aside and watch others win and lose until eventually all the prizes were gone.

I'd determined then and there that I'd never be in that position again. I wasn't going to rely on anyone else for things I wanted to do. I was going to make sure I had enough.

And right now, I didn't have enough for raffle tickets.

"I'm okay," I said, "but if you want to get some..."

"We'll take a hundred."

My eyes widened.

"Yes, sir," the girl said, smiling. Like Hawk had done, Adrian pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of his wallet and handed it to the girl as she counted out red raffle tickets and tore them from their large spool.

"You planning on winning everything here?" I joked, doing my best to push aside my discomfort.

Adrian folded the tickets and stuffed them inside his inner jacket pocket.

Tables lined the gym walls and were covered with homemade goods, from hand-knitted scarves and hats to goat's milk soap in colorful bars and fragrances. Bath bombs, washable bibs for babies, and handcrafted wall-hangings with clever sayings were also among the displays, along with really cool 3D-printed objects.

There were wreaths for every holiday, cake pops, candies, and cookies, impressive paintings, and stunning quilts I could never hope to make.

"I like to be generous when I can," Adrian said. "The town needs this event. Too many people are counting on it."

"Kimmy said this might be the last time you'll hold it."

Adrian shook his head. "We can't let it be the last one."

The thought warmed me. For someone who claimed impartiality to his home, he at least cared for the town and its citizens.

"Check that out." He indicated a massive basket overflowing with candy and delectable treats all in

coordinating colors: solid pinks set off with black and white stripes and the logo *Ever After Sweets*. “Hawk provided that.”

“He donated it?”

“Hand-picked, bruh,” Hawk said, coming up from behind. “What do you think?”

“I think it looks amazing,” I said.

My mouth was literally watering over the chocolate confections in their cellophane wrapping within. One in particular called out to me—it was square, smothered with icing, and zigzagged over with pink stripes.

“Let’s put some tickets in for that one, then,” Adrian said, and he tore several off to place in the jar in front of the candy basket. “Anything else striking your fancy?”

Together, Adrian and I wandered along, scoping out the offerings and placing tickets in the jars in front of things we wanted. He paused several times to greet people who seemed truly excited to see him. In fact, not many were seated yet.

Most attendees were doing what we were—wandering along the tables and admiring the handmade and otherwise-made gifts available for the raffle.

“Where do you want to sit?” Adrian asked as he slipped some raffle tickets in another jar. “They’ll be serving dinner first.”

I spotted Mrs. Bear, Chase, and Kimmy moseying along and catching people in conversation. “You want to sit with your mom and brother?”

“We don’t have to. I told you, I want you all to myself tonight.”

My stomach did that fizzle thing again. I wasn’t sure what to say.

After an awkward jerking of his head, he seemed to find the back wall rather interesting. I focused my attention on his family again, wondering what had caught him off guard.

A pretty brunette was now talking to Mrs. Bear. She wore a white top and a yellow skirt. She and Mrs. Bear laughed a few times before they glanced around the room.

I suspected they were looking for Adrian, and when both pairs of eyes landed on him and stilled, I knew I was right.

“Let me guess,” I said, leaning in closer. “They’re sitting by Danica.”

His eyes slid in their direction as Danica smiled and sank into one of the empty spots next to Mrs. Bear.

“Looks that way.”

I wanted to ask why he had such an aversion to her. Danica seemed nice enough—from this distance, anyway—with her smile and poise and lack of sharp or other threatening objects in hand.

He’d mentioned knowing her too well to want to date her anymore, but was that all there was to it?

Adrian’s tone shifted. “That’s where my dad would be sitting if he were here.”

I followed the direction of his gaze to where his mom was. Sure enough, with Chase and Kimmy sitting across, Danica had taken the place Mr. Bear would have if he were here.

Pain pricked my heart. I’d had grandparents pass away, and that had been difficult, but I’d also been just a child when it had happened. I placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Is that hard for you now that he’s gone?”

His eyes were glossy and serious. “Harder than I thought it would be.”

“Why? I hope that’s not a stupid question—and I don’t mean to pry—” I guess that was the kind of thing people said when they asked nosy questions, wasn’t it?

I could understand him being sad over his father’s death, but he was the one who sounded like he hadn’t thought it would be that hard to lose him. He and his brothers all seemed

really close. Even their mom, though she didn't like me much, seemed close to him. Had his dad not been part of that?

Adrian rubbed the back of my arm. "I'd like to talk about this later, okay? It looks like everyone is getting seated."

"Sure," I said, eager—okay, *dying*—to know more after that.

I wanted to change the subject, to put him at ease.

Before I got the chance to, Hawk wove himself between us, putting his arms around our shoulders.

"Where to, chief?"

"Wherever you want," Adrian said. "Lead the way."

"You got it. I love these small-town things." Hawk sauntered to the end of the table farthest from the front where a jazz band was situated on a makeshift stage.

Taking my hand in his, Adrian followed, leading me with him. I sizzled at the number of eyes that followed us and the fact that he was holding my hand in front of everyone.

The jazz band appeared to be made up of teenagers. They each wore dress shirts and pants set off by sparkling cummerbunds and matching bow ties. Several held saxophones, trumpets, and trombones, while a girl settled herself at the piano, and a boy took the drum set in the corner.

"High school band?" I asked.

"Our jazz band is pretty good. Having them play here is a nice way to get their parents to donate and attend."

A man in a dark cummerbund and tie stood in front of them, holding up his hands. I suspected he was their teacher.

"It looks like they're going to get started," I said.

"Then we'd better sit down."

He waited for me to sit before he slid in across from Hawk. Adrian didn't appear to be the least bit bothered that we were so far from his family.

I snuck a peek back at them. Chase and Kimmy were laughing about something with Jordan and the pretty girl with red hair next to him, but Mrs. Bear's scowl deepened in our direction before she rose.

My heart thumped in my chest. Was she going to come over here? Was she going to reprimand Adrian in front of everyone? He was a grown man, for goodness' sake.

To my relief, she made her way to the microphone on the stage.

"Welcome, fellow residents of Two Pines, to our twelfth annual fundraiser event. In honor of Matthew's death—and his life—we acknowledge the effort that went into preparations and the number of you who have come out to show your support for him and for us."

Beneath the table, Adrian's hand found mine again. I clasped it, grateful for the reassurance of his touch.

I also suspected he needed it as much as I did. His dad's death had to be bothering him more than he was letting on. I wished we could sneak away now because I couldn't wait to ask him more. I wanted to help him if I could.

"We're truly touched by the many people who reached out to share their condolences and fond memories for Matthew and for all the ways he touched their lives."

"Your dad sounds like he was a great guy," I said, leaning over to whisper.

"He was." Adrian ran his thumb over my skin.

"I'm sorry he's gone."

His lips pursed. He readjusted then, letting my hand go so he could settle his arm around my waist and pull me close to his side. I sank into him.

"Want to get out of here?" he said in my ear.

I froze. I glanced up in his direction, peered to the stage where his mom was talking about the many contributions Matthew Bear had made to the community and the fundraiser's history.

“But—your mom.”

His resolve dimmed. He relaxed his hold against me once more. “You’re right. We should stay.”

“Behave, you two,” Hawk whispered from across the table, pointing his finger accusatorily at the both of us and winning a smile from me. “There’ll be a quiz after this.”

I snickered, and Adrian shook his head.

“Thank you to those of you who donated prizes. Be sure to purchase raffle tickets at the door. In Matthew’s honor, let’s make sure this is our best year yet. Winners will be drawn toward the end of the evening. We’ll start once everyone is seated, and then your prime rib will be served.”

Polite applause followed, and people strolled along to take their places. Before long, the meal was served, delivered to the tables by men and women, both teenaged and middle-aged, garbed in black dress clothes.

We ate in polite conversation with those around us. Hawk offered several goofy remarks that made us both laugh, and this time it was my turn to slip my hand beneath the table and find Adrian’s. I tilted in, hoping I didn’t have onion breath.

“I’m so grateful to not be stranded on the curb of my aunt’s house right now,” I said. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“Of course,” he said. “Maybe you can check there again tomorrow.”

“I keep wondering if she’s here.”

I glanced around as if in hopes that someone might leap and pronounce themselves Bethany Harold, but not only was the gym dark—lit only by twinkling strands of lights along the folded-in bleachers, fake trees, and latticed scaffolding decorating the space—I didn’t have a clue what she looked like.

“Do you see her anywhere?” Adrian asked.

“I’m not sure what to look for, to be honest.”

“You’ve never met her before?”

“Not yet. I tried searching social media, but apparently she’s not on it. On any of it.”

Talk about living in a bubble. I tried picturing a version of Mom, but even that did little good. Not all siblings looked alike.

“Strange.”

I could tell from the interest in his gaze that he wanted to ask more questions. He didn’t, though, and I was glad—for the same reasons I suspected he hadn’t wanted to talk about his dad.

It just wasn’t the time. I didn’t want to go into everything here.

“I’m not on social media either,” he said instead.

“That’s too bad. I was hoping to stalk you.”

His grip on my hand tightened. “You can stalk me in person.”

I glanced around as uncertainty continued coursing through me.

“What’s wrong?” Hawk leaned over to make himself part of our conversation. “You keep looking around like someone is about to attack.”

“She’s—” Adrian began, but Hawk cut him off.

“I know what it is,” he said.

My eyes widened. I peered down at the ivory dress, hoping nothing had spilled.

“No one is dancing.” Hawk beamed, gesturing to the open area behind him between the tables and the stage. “You two better get to it. Show everyone how it’s done.”

The band played a zippy rendition of Glenn Miller’s “Little Brown Jug” and was starting into a bluesy song I didn’t recognize.

“Yes, the lack of dancing is what has me so thrown off,” I said sarcastically.

“We’d better fix that.” Adrian wiped his mouth with his napkin and stood, offering me his hand.

“What—you’re serious?”

“Is that a problem? You’re done eating, aren’t you?”

I rose cautiously, keenly aware of people gaping in our direction again. In the vague lighting, Adrian looked even more tempting. My heart began to pound.

“Not really, no. No problem.”

I was trapped in his gaze and suddenly wished I’d taken him up on his offer to leave. Because I was sure the minute Adrian’s arms were around me, I’d be mush.

goldie

I FELT like an unknown celebrity on *Dancing with the Stars*. Adrian led me out onto the dance floor—and we were the *only ones* out there. Elephants tromped in my veins. I felt every eye on us and sensed the myriad of questions trolling through each of their brains:

Who was this woman?

What was she doing with Adrian Bear?

Adrian didn't seem to have the same reservations. The saxophones blended in harmony to the soft shade of drums and singing trumpets, and he claimed my waist while keeping my other hand in his.

“Don't worry about anyone else,” he said, smirking at me with that beguiling twist in his mouth that I so wanted to kiss. “Just keep your eyes on me.”

“I could stare at you all day long.”

He laughed and talked me through the steps. His feet knew right where to go, and though I didn't have the first clue about the moves to a slow swing dance like this, with his strong hand at my back, his firm body leading, and the way he turned me out and held me to him again, it made me feel like an aficionado.

“You know what you're doing, I'll give you that,” I said. “Dancing lessons?”

“For a few years,” he said, swaying me to the sound of crooning trumpets. “You?”

“If you count bungling around in the kitchen with my dad, then yes. Dancing. No lessons—just making things up as we go.”

“That definitely counts. Your dad sounds awesome. What does he do?”

“He’s a bus driver.”

The admission had never brought such nervous heat to my cheeks before. I’d never been embarrassed by what he did, but here in this dress, seeing how Adrian and his family lived, the thought made me feel the slightest bit ashamed.

And then I felt ashamed for being ashamed.

I loved my dad. He’d been the tender one in my childhood while Mom had been the exacting one, demanding perfection at every turn and doling out criticism when I fell short.

Which happened a lot.

“That’s cool,” Adrian said.

“It is?”

“Sure.”

It took several moments before I realized the song had ended. I was too ensnared by the softness in his regard for me.

“I miss him,” Adrian said, staring off.

I could have made a joke about his abrupt change of topic, about how he could possibly miss my dad, but it was a good thing I caught on fast. He wasn’t talking about *my* dad.

He was talking about his.

“I’m sure it’s been hard for you. How did he die?”

Adrian’s throat worked through a swallow. He adjusted our position so rather than holding me in a traditional dance pose, he placed his hands at my waist and pulled me to his chest. His heart beat against my ear, quick and steady.

“He had cancer.”

I rested my head against his chest. “I’m so sorry.”

We stood together in the middle of the dance floor, barely moving though it felt as though a monumental shift was taking place right beneath our feet. Energy magnetized the air between us.

He held me, resting his head against my hair, his hands stroking the silk at my back. They glided up to the exposed skin at the base of my neck, sending prickles down my spine.

The confusion of the past several days washed away. I was brimming with clarity in a way I'd never experienced before, and my entire body hummed.

It took several moments before I fell back into reality. The song changing to something more upbeat and fast-paced may have had something to do with it. I peered around, surprised at the number of couples lindy-hopping and swinging in time to the lilting jazz.

“Looks like your tactic worked,” I said.

“Sweeping you off your feet?”

I lifted my chin to indicate the other couples around us. “Others are dancing now.”

He gave me a barely there smirk. “I hadn't noticed anyone else.”

My mouth parted. The humming intensified, filling me with fizz. I couldn't look away.

He made me feel wanted. Desired. For a moment I was the absolute center of his attention, and it made my breathing frenzy.

The surrounding crowd's clapping snapped me back to reality and then Hawk was there. He swooped in, stealing my hand from Adrian's and grasping my waist.

“That's it. I'm cutting in.”

Adrian smiled, stepping back. I laughed, grateful for the interruption, for the chance to inhale regular air and make sense of what was going on.

Hawk swept me around the dance floor. “So you’re from Wisconsin?”

He pronounced it strangely, emphasizing *con* to sound like *can* the way some natives of the state did.

I chuckled. “Yes, I am.”

“Tell me, Goldie.” Hawk swirled me away from him and drew me to him again.

He was every bit as talented of a dancer as Adrian was. While Hawk was good-looking in his own way, with his blond hair swooping upward, his attractive features, and blue eyes, I was unaffected. He didn’t call to me the way Adrian did.

I wasn’t sure anyone had ever called to me the way Adrian did.

“Does being from Wisconsin make you a fan of cheese?” Hawk finished.

I laughed. “We are notorious for it, I guess. Have you ever had Wisconsin cheese?”

“I can’t say that I have. Maybe that’s something you’d better ask Adrian. You know, before you let things go too far.”

“Can’t risk being with someone who doesn’t like cheese the way I do, is that what you’re saying?”

“I mean, it’s the little things that make a relationship work.”

I laughed again. He was goofy and jovial, making small talk about small towns and the lack of women to dance with because they were already taken.

He wasn’t wrong. From the look of things, most of the women here had come with dates.

“What about you?” I asked. “What are the qualities you’re looking for in a girl? Cheese fetish?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “I can’t be with her if she doesn’t like a good slice of Colby jack.”

“Noted. Anything else?”

“Fun socks.”

“You mean she has to wear them?”

“I mean, she has to like the fact that I wear them.” He paused our dance long enough to lift his pant leg. Sure enough, rather than a sophisticated, boring pair of plain socks or even possibly argyle, his were bright purple and smattered with...

“Are those Pop Tarts?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

My laughter bubbled. Hawk beamed at me, twirling me a final time before the song ended. We stopped on the dance floor, applauding the jazz band.

Adrian stood on the sidelines, eyeing me with intense, burnished eyes, and my thoughts went haywire.

It’d been too long since I’d had an actual relationship. Even the last one with Tyler Hart had been more like I was being used rather than adored or appreciated. I wanted someone who would listen to me, who would value my opinions—someone who looked at me the way Adrian kept looking at me.

I wanted to soak in his adoration, his curiosity, in this sense of being valued for who I was. Which was so ironic, considering the fact that Adrian didn’t know me all that well.

The thing was, I wanted him to. I wanted him to know how much I loved pizza on Friday nights, and reading, and how much I loved teaching. I wanted him to know I was feeling braver with him than I’d ever felt.

My body apparently didn’t care that I barely knew him, either, because once the dance ended, I was back in Adrian’s arms, and my whole being responded to him way too enthusiastically.

I liked being held by him. I liked his large build, his warmth, and becoming the north star of his world—if only for the moment. And I wanted the alone-time I hoped was coming.

I berated myself. I was reading too much into this. What good would getting closer to him do? I was leaving. He was leaving.

We were both *leaving*.

Hawk clapped Adrian across the back and lifted his pant leg to display his socks again at Adrian's request.

"Dude," Adrian said. "You should have worn your toupee socks."

"I'm saving those for a special occasion," Hawk said, gripping his lapel with forced sophistication.

I didn't get the chance to ask what toupee socks were. Across the room, a blonde, middle-aged woman caught my attention, and I inhaled sharply.

It wasn't the hair alone, or even her facial features, which I couldn't completely discern. It was the way she carried herself. Confident. Speculative.

She reminded me of Mom.

"Aunt Bethany?"

Could this be why she hadn't been home earlier? Maybe she'd been part of the crew Adrian had talked about, the decorative committee for this fundraiser. In a small town like this, with an event like this, it made total sense.

"Did you say something?" Adrian asked.

"Will you excuse me?" I said distractedly. "I'll be right back."

"I'll meet you by the raffle table?" His voice sounded antsy. It drew me back to the realization that his arms were still around me—and he didn't want me to go.

Tingles tangoed up my spine.

Braving the room's attention, I tiptoed up and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Sure."

He gave me a boyish smile and walked me off the dance floor.

I'd see if it was her. Part of me hoped it was while another part hoped it wasn't because I knew once I found her, I was done spending time as Adrian's girlfriend.

GOLDIE SAUNTERED TOWARD THE BATHROOMS, and I loved the way her hips swayed in that dress. I had to admit, she had me in a daze after that dance—both the one she and I shared and watching her with Hawk.

She was graceful and lovely. My blood was laced with the after-effects of holding her in my arms.

It was good she stepped away for a few moments. I had to clear my head.

What was I doing? All thoughts of The Pact aside, I really did want to get back to Chicago, to manage my company on site now that I was done helping Mom. But with Goldie at the ranch, with the way she'd let me kiss her on the golf course and how temptingly she'd kissed me back, after dancing with her tonight, I couldn't leave.

I'd have to handle things from here a little longer.

From the minute we met, I knew she was a knockout—I'd just never expected her to purée my brain the way she had.

Her sympathy for my dad's passing was more genuine than I'd anticipated. I hadn't been able to help myself. I'd needed her as close to me as possible, and she'd let me hold her while emotion had coursed through me.

Now, I wasn't sure where she'd gone. The sight of her was blocked by dancers.

Dad would have loved this. He'd always loved drawing a crowd for a cause, as he would say. Matthew Bear's generosity had been one of his finer qualities.

Heck—to the casual acquaintance, Dad had seemed like a saint. But for me? He was the thumb constantly pushing me down.

I still hadn't come to grips with the fact that he'd died without resolving some of the many issues we'd had when he was around. That fact ate at me more than I wanted to admit.

But being around Goldie? She helped me forget that.

“Well, well, well.”

Her voice was like the punchline of a bad joke. Against my will, I turned to find Danica Foster sneering at me.

She wore a white blouse with a frilly yellow skirt, and the combination of the two made her look like a cupcake. Her brown hair was coiled at the back of her head, and her dark makeup made her features stand out in the low lighting.

“Danica, how are you?” Might as well be civil.

“Doing just fine, Bear. How about you? I've been wanting to catch up since your dad died.”

She threw it at me so casually it hit my chest like a fast-pitch baseball. I hoped she didn't notice my inhalation.

This was no sympathy statement like Goldie's had been. This was her usual disillusioned way of handling breakable things with all the care of a drunken postal worker.

“I've been busy.”

“So your mom tells me. So have I. It's been good to keep up on things with her at work. Though it's weird now with your dad gone.”

“You worked for my dad?”

What was the old man thinking, hiring her? Then again, it may have been Mom's influence. Why was Mom so insistent the two of us get together?

Danica rested a hand on her hip. “Your mom and dad gave me a job when I got fired from Golden Corral. I'm the one who's been helping your mom with this event. How do you like the decorations?”

She couldn't pull that. I knew full well there was more than one person helping. Mom had a whole crew of lackeys.

I wanted to end this conversation as quickly as possible. Non-committal statements worked best.

"They're nice."

Danica rubbed a hand along my arm. "I told your mom how much I've missed you."

No wonder Mom was trying so hard to push me toward her again. I suddenly wished Goldie was still here. It was time to ramp up this girlfriend thing.

It wasn't like Danica hadn't seen us dancing together, but I'd kiss Goldie here and now, if for nothing than to prove to both Danica and Mom how *over* Danica I was.

Using Goldie like that wasn't cool, but in all reality, I'd kiss her here and now, regardless.

With the coy, come-at-me gazes she's been giving me all evening, it was all I could do to keep my hands to myself.

"I'm here with someone, actually." I stepped away from Danica's tentacles. I intended to end this conversation politely but firmly. "Did my mom tell you about Goldie?"

Danica snorted. It was an unusual name, I'd grant her that, but my defenses flared. The emotions only regurgitated the same irritation I'd felt with her ten years ago. The same frustration when Dani hadn't shown a spec of interest in my studies, when she'd bashed the details of the business I'd wanted to start, when she'd insisted I work for my dad and live close to home—close to her.

This woman was the reason I'd signed that ridiculous Pact in the first place. She'd burned me—badly.

The frustration I'd felt with her had been all the reason I needed to keep women at arms' length, to agree to lifelong bachelorhood rather than shackle myself to a meddling, uncaring woman like her.

That was just it though. In my irritation with Danica, in dating all the other women I'd met since, I hadn't known a

genuine, caring woman existed.

Before I could say anything, Goldie headed toward me. Though she was among strangers, I'd never be able to tell. She carried herself with composure and class in that dress. I was completely lost in the sight of her.

An impulse took over me. I gave Danica a parting nod before making my way toward her.

Danica didn't get the hint. "Is that her?"

"It was nice talking to you, Dani. Have a good evening."

There. That should be crystal clear.

I took several more steps, battling the tension in my chest being around her created, when her voice crawled after me. "I hear you're looking for something of your father's."

I stiffened with all the instinct of a prey sensing its predator was near. She was *following* me.

Not only that, but suspicion skewered through me, leaving several holes in its wake.

She didn't.

Mom wouldn't have.

She wouldn't have shared news of my missing inheritance with Danica.

I turned to find Danica simpering, her glossy lips pouting in fulsome triumph.

"Tell me you're joking," I said.

Danica strutted closer and ran a hand up my lapel. I was disgusted, but I didn't pull away.

"Lockboxes can be tricky. If you need help looking, you know how good at finding things I am."

The memory rippled in my mind's eye. I'd lost my keys once in high school, and Danica and I had searched. We'd ended up knocking our heads together—literally—as we'd both searched beneath my bed and then teased about that very

line. How good she was at finding things. And then we'd had our first kiss.

I wasn't playing this game. Part of me was tempted to give in, to ask where the lockbox was.

How could she even know it existed? Why would Mom confide that in Danica, but claim to not know where the lockbox was?

It made no sense. Mom wouldn't do that to me, not with something this serious.

Danica had probably only heard the lockbox was missing, not where it was, and she was using that to get to me.

I wondered what was inside the stupid thing. Chase had been bequeathed the house he and his family lived in, along with the barn and the horses. Jordan had been given land as well, along with the fish hatchery on their property.

It wasn't that I felt entitled—but I did want to know what portion of Dad's business had been segmented and given to my care. It couldn't be the Bed and Breakfast. That was Mom's.

What had he left for me?

Part of me feared it was nothing. I feared he'd left me some kind of letter inside stating how I didn't deserve to inherit anything because I hadn't taken his advice the way he'd wanted me to.

I'd snubbed his counsel and followed my own direction, a fact that had eaten Dad up while he'd been alive. He'd never failed to bring that fact to my attention as often as he could, which was another reason I stayed far away.

My guilt threatened to erupt, to take over, the way it had done during the funeral. I'd been a wreck as I'd stared at his casket, as I'd heard the eulogies and the awesome, sentimental things people had to say about him. With every fond memory, one thought rampaged:

I'd wished I'd been granted that side of my dad, but I hadn't.

I couldn't focus on all that here. Not if I wanted to keep it together.

The relief I felt reaching Goldie's side was palpable. I couldn't account for why she had that effect on me, but I wanted to tear her away and get as far from here—from nosy people and imposing memories—as I could.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

Boy, were her lashes long. I was swept away in her blue eyes, in the clarity and escape they promised.

I slipped both of my arms around her waist, drawing her to my chest and breathing her in. Her hair smelled fruity and musky all at once. She surrendered in my arms, and that was enough to entice me closer. I found myself lowering my nose to where her smooth neck met her shoulder.

She giggled. The sound nearly undid me.

“Adrian?” Her voice tickled my ear. “What's this all about?”

Right. We were in a public place.

Grimacing, I peered back to find Danica's murderous scowl in Goldie's direction.

While I'd considered using Goldie as a ploy to get my ex to back off, what happened just now had been purely natural and non-premeditated. Having Goldie this close, I hadn't noticed anything at all except her.

“Sorry,” I said, toning it down a notch. I lowered my arms and stepped back. “Fake boyfriend, remember?”

A shimmer of hurt flashed across Goldie's expression. She pressed her lips together, and I winced, hating how it sounded.

I knew all we had was this week. My words implied how false my actions had been when really, it hadn't felt fake at all. And I wasn't sure what I was going to do about that.

goldie

DANCING WITH ADRIAN WAS DELIRIOUS. The man knew just how to step, how to cast his glance in a carefree way to display his superb jawline, and especially how to hold me when the songs were slow.

More than once I was tempted to close the distance and lay my head on his chest, but I couldn't let the stardust of the evening—with its live music and twinkling lights—make me forget reality.

Adrian had used the word *fake*.

That was all this was.

I also couldn't forget how jarring it'd been to hope for a glimpse of Aunt Bethany only to find the blonde I'd seen was too young and didn't look anything like Mom at all. If I didn't find my aunt, what was I going to do? Return home and admit defeat?

I wasn't sure how much time had passed before the band's peppy rendition of "Jump, Jive, and Wail" stopped. After the applause, Mrs. Bear crept up to the stage.

"Thank you, Two Pines High School Jazz Band, for tonight's wonderful music." She paused for more applause.

It was true, they were good. Not that I was any great judge of that, but it sounded good to me.

"And now, it's time to begin our raffle."

Already? I supposed I'd been sidetracked in Adrian's arms for a while now.

Hawk said goodbye to the woman he'd been dancing with and moseyed over to my side.

"Mine's the best one up there," he muttered, licking his lips as though eager to be reunited with the basket and its contents.

"Then I hope you get it," I said.

He snorted. "Me? Why would I put in to win my own prize?"

"Because I can tell you love it so much." I laughed.

Adrian joined in, and Hawk snickered.

"Don't tell me. It has cheese in it," I added.

Hawk elevated his chin. "Shouldn't a man love what he created?"

What he...created? "You put the basket together?"

I thought it was from Ever After Sweets.

Hawk tucked a hand into his pocket. He'd shed his tux jacket at some point during the evening. The look for him was a good one.

"You could say I supervised."

I was clueless all over again.

Adrian chuckled. He waited as if for a nod of approval from Hawk before tilting in.

"He owns Ever After Sweets, Goldie," he said low in my ear. "That's why he brought the candy basket. Someone on his staff assembled it for him to bring with him."

My eyes widened. My mouth gaped. "You—"

No wonder he'd had the loot to buy a new set of golf clubs.

Suspicion snaked through me. First, Duncan, with his talk of a private jet. Then, Hawk owning not just a candy store but an entire franchise of them.

Adrian sure had some wealthy friends. Had he bought the clubs so he could save face? He'd said he was into investing, but I wasn't exactly sure what that entailed.

I narrowed my eyes at him, but he just laughed at me and turned his attention back to the stage. One by one, prizes were presented. Fishing poles, coolers, table runners, and quilts.

Foolish as it was, my hopes rose every time the number on a raffle ticket was called out. I couldn't remember which items Adrian had put in for aside from the candy basket, which was granted to a middle-aged man who seemed less than enthused about it.

"He'll thank me later," Hawk said in response to my skeptical expression.

Finally, Mrs. Bear invited Danica to the stage to present a wooden sign with the word *Home* assembled in darker wooden letters.

"Matthew would have loved this one," Danica said sweetly as though she'd known Mr. Bear as well as anyone in the room.

I wondered what Adrian thought about that.

As for me, I secretly agreed with whatever the late Mr. Bear was speculated to have felt. I loved the sign's simplicity and imagined how it might look on my wall above the thrift store table Lois and I had found.

Danica swirled her hand into the jar. She removed a ticket and read.

"It's you," Adrian said, offering one of the many tickets in his hand.

"Me?" I couldn't believe it. "I won?"

I leaned in for verification. Sure enough, the numbers on the ticket he offered me matched the ones she'd read.

"You should have put that one in for that candy," Hawk muttered.

Adrian ignored him and grinned.

“Here!” he called out, loud enough to be heard. Then he took my hand and lifted ours together like we’d come out on top during a boxing match.

Applause became a cacophony in my ears. I couldn’t help the grin stretching over my face. My thoughts raced. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d won anything.

“What are you waiting for?” Hawk said, pushing me from behind. “Get up there.”

I kept my grip on Adrian’s hand. “Come with me.”

Together, we climbed to the stage to retrieve my prize. I was too happy to care about the downturned expression on Mrs. Bear’s face. Begrudgingly, she handed it to me.

The sign was made with stained wood and hand-painted letters. I held it up with admiration until, lowering it, I noticed the glare on Danica’s face.

“Don’t mind her,” Adrian mumbled, tugging me down the stairs and back to the gym floor.

The minute we returned to our seats, Hawk stole the sign from my hands and perused it.

“It’s missing something,” he said, handing it back to me.

“Oh, yeah? Like what?” Adrian smirked at his friend and waited for the response.

“Like a map or the *picture* of a house or something. Just the word on its own is kind of anticlimactic.”

“No need to get that specific,” I said. “It’s the simplicity of the thing that makes it stand out.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” I smiled at Adrian, completely elated.

This evening was more than I’d thought it would be. What was it about winning a prize that made you feel like you were on top of the world?

“Thanks again for coming,” Mrs. Bear said from the stage. “The proceeds for tonight will help to build a new

playground!”

People cheered, and I was caught up in the celebration as well. What an awesome thing for the town to band together to build.

The collective good cheer was invigorating. It filled me with a sense of what it might be like to belong here. It was unifying, in a way, to applaud with them over a communal cause.

All at once, people came out of the woodwork, gathering dishes and clearing tables, putting up chairs. The music stopped as the band members trailed down the stage and toward a side door.

“That’s that,” Hawk said.

“You ready to go?” Adrian asked me.

I nodded without looking at him. My attention was fixated on Danica and Mrs. Bear sharing secrets on the stage. Their glances trailed in my direction too many times to be coincidental, and it dampened the high spirits I’d experienced earlier.

So much for feeling unified.

I shouldn’t care a whit about what they were talking about. In fact, I wished I didn’t.

But I did. Mrs. Bear didn’t like me; that much was clear. I hadn’t done anything to deserve that dislike, but—

Scratch that. I had, in fact, done many things to earn her dislike.

The thing was, she just wasn’t aware of them.

What was she going to do when she found out I’d broken her vase? For all I knew she was a health nut who wouldn’t accept brownies as compensation.

I could just keep it to myself, but I wasn’t a fan of lies—evidenced by the way I flinched every time Adrian acknowledged people on the way out of the gym and introduced me as his girlfriend from back east.

I'd have to tell her. And I'd have to think of something she'd like better than homemade goodies. Adrian might have a few ideas.

The longer we strode together in front of everyone as we left the gym, the more I couldn't shake the feeling that I wanted Adrian to stop holding my hand.

Lying to his mom was one thing. Lying to the whole town? How could we set things right with so many people, especially when I'd felt so connected to them tonight?

Whatever this was between us wasn't real. It could never be real. Until I found my aunt and learned exactly what was going on, I couldn't allow myself to trust anyone.

COLUMNAR STREET WAS COMPLETELY DEAD. The corner street lights, the abandoned bikes in yards, and the occasional porch light were the only indications that anyone lived in any of the houses. Apparently, those who attended the fundraiser hadn't made it home yet.

A few bugs flitted in the porch light beside Bethany Harold's door. I wrung my hands. My toes slid in Kimmy's poorly fitting high heels as I held my skirt to keep it from sweeping the ground. Adrian lingered near the wrought-iron railing surrounding the porch, looking like he'd escaped from a fairytale.

My pulse wasn't going to be the same after this weekend was over.

"Are you sure this is the right address?" he asked.

I exhaled through a small opening in my lips. "I'm sure."

Setting his jaw, Adrian climbed the steps and pounded on the door a few times. He swept his tux jacket back to rest a hand at his waist and leaned in closer to the door.

"Maybe you'll have better luck tomorrow," he suggested.

I gritted my teeth in frustration and took the steps a little too quickly, nearly losing one of Kimmy's shoes again. I was tempted to remove them the way I'd done in the gym.

With as tall as these were, they could pass for weapons to the highest bidder. They wouldn't make it past security in an airport, that was for sure.

"I don't think she's here," he said.

I shot him a smile, a poor attempt to hide the discomfort swirling inside of me. “You’re right. I’ll try again tomorrow. Do you mind if we head back?”

“Not at all.” He offered me his arm.

The fifteen-minute drive flew by, probably because my thoughts were leaping in all directions. Polite conversation with Adrian also helped.

It was the kind of nonsense conversation that people on a momentary bus ride might exchange. The state of the weather. The last book they read. Inconsequential, really, but it meant a lot because I got the feeling he was doing it to help distract me from my disappointment.

The ranch was shadowed and hushed, being lulled to sleep by chirping crickets and hooting owls. My feet slid in my shoes, and I couldn’t wait to change out of them—and out of this dress, for that matter. It was lovely, but confining, too. I was ready to change into something comfortable, tuck into bed, and escape into sleep.

I exited the car as Adrian circled his way around to me, and the sight of him buttoning his jacket scattered all thoughts of sleep away in an instant.

I reached for my hair only to remember it was tucked at the base of my neck. I did my best to brush the action off. It was totally normal to stroke my neck, wasn’t it?

“I had a great time,” I told him, mesmerized by how he looked in the moonlight.

“I did too. It was much better with you there.”

We stared at one another at the foot of Rustic Ridge’s porch. The air was cool, but it was Adrian’s direct attention that gave me goosebumps.

“Thanks, by the way,” I said.

“For what?” He stepped closer.

“For everything you’ve done. I—”

He took another step, heating the molecules in the air around me and making me stammer.

“I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“You’re helping me, too, you know. You made what would have been a torturous evening incredible.”

I laughed away the force of his attention. “It wasn’t that bad.”

He inched toward me. His eyes were so intense, so glistening and hypnotizing. His hands settled at my hips, and he stroked the silky fabric at my waist, twisting me in knots.

“Trust me, if you hadn’t been there, it would have been exactly *that bad*.”

His proximity had the same intoxicating impact it’d had all evening. I kicked off Kimmy’s heels, lowering myself a few inches. Scooping them into my hand, I climbed a step where my feet rested flat against the cold wood.

“Because you miss your dad?” I asked. “Or because of Danica?”

“All of it,” he said. “What about you? You’ve had quite the day.”

I chewed my lip. He stared at it like he wanted to do the same. Heaven help me.

“I—I have. Nothing has gone how I planned since I met you.”

“And you’re rolling with the punches.”

“Trying to,” I said.

How could he look so fixedly at me? It was as though he cared—genuinely cared—about the answer to his question. About me, and how I was faring.

He stroked the skin of my arm. “I’m sorry your aunt wasn’t there.”

I dipped my head. The day’s exhaustion mingled with disappointment, and yet with something delicious and bashful,

too. Something that made me want to give in to his attention.

“Do you have a room here, too?” I asked. “Where are you staying?”

Tension crackled through the air between us. This was the moment of truth after every date, the moment where goodbye could be final or where it could start something I wasn't completely sure I could handle.

Adrian seemed to sense the same thing. He climbed another step, heating the air with his nearness.

He pointed in the direction of Chase and Kimmy's house, past the barn, breaking the moment.

“Just up the road. Remember I pointed out my mom's house? I'm staying with her and Jordan.”

A gentle breeze tossed a strand of hair into my face. Adrian brushed it aside and allowed his fingers to linger on my cheek, to stroke my skin and slide his thumb across my lower lip.

“I'm glad it was you in the cabin,” he said, voice rumbling.

I trembled. His eyes lowered to half-mast. He edged closer, his warm breath hitting my cheeks and spiraling my thoughts.

I lifted my chin, feverish and eager, when the screen door crashed open behind him.

I jerked at the sound. Adrian did as well, and it only succeeded in him securing his hands more firmly around me before loosening them again and turning to see who had roared onto the porch.

Mrs. Bear's nostrils flared. She looked from Adrian to me and back again.

Adrian took the interruption in stride. “Hey, Mom. Nice job tonight. You had a great turnout.”

Her nostrils flared. She sniffed and inspected the porch's roof. “It was nice, wasn't it?”

I didn't wait any longer. I was sure she was about to say something about how put out Danica was about finding him

with me instead, or that she'd start asking me questions, and I wasn't up for either.

"Thanks again for inviting me," I said to Adrian, giving him an overdone smile.

I directed one at his mom as well before dashing inside.

An older man with glasses sat behind the reception desk. He greeted me with a friendly smile.

"Good evening."

"Hi," I said, eager to skip past him and make for the stairs.

The screen door slammed in my wake. Moments later, Adrian's mom was climbing the stairs behind me.

"Goldie," she called softly.

My eyes closed. I wasn't ready for any more curveballs today, but I rotated on the steps and faced her. She was pretty, but she looked tired.

I was sure planning an event like the one this evening took a lot of strain and energy. I considered mentioning my admiration in that regard, but she wrapped her hands around her shoulders and fake-shivered.

"Brr. That was a cold goodbye if I ever saw one." She sounded a little too pleased about that fact.

I suspected she knew exactly what she was interrupting when she barged out of the door.

"Everything okay between you and my son?"

Actually, my goodbye with Adrian had been tropical from where I'd been standing. Maybe I shouldn't have slunk away so fast. Would he have kissed me right there in front of his mom?

Why did I get the sense that I was being baited?

"Do you always accompany your guests to their rooms?" I asked.

I wasn't sure how else to politely let her know I wasn't in the mood for any more conversation, not if she was going to

antagonize me about who her son chose to take to events.

Mrs. Bear glanced at the wooden sign in my hand. “I haven’t had much of a chance to talk to you yet, and it looks like you and my son are fairly close. It was really nice to have you at the fundraiser. And you even won a prize! You know, our Danica Foster painted that sign.”

Of course she did. I suddenly wished I’d never won it.

A small part of me wished Adrian had never dragged me into the middle of whatever this was. Clearly, his mom was playing some kind of game here and I’d walked into it willingly.

“She’s *your* Danica?” I couldn’t hide my skepticism.

Mrs. Bear shrugged and scraped the banister with a pointed fingernail. “She was going to be, but not now that Adrian has you. I never told you how happy I am that he brought you home.”

I had the impression I was a mouse being cornered by a cat and retreated a step higher, adding distance between us.

“Oh? That’s sweet of you to say, but I hope you don’t mind, it seems like just the opposite. I get the feeling you don’t like me much, Mrs. Bear.”

I was too tired to beat around any more bushes.

Adrian’s mom angled her head and conferred a would-be loving expression on me. I would have bought it if not for the slivers of ice in her brown eyes. Eyes like her son’s, though Adrian had never looked at me with malice like this, not even when he’d found me in his cabin.

“Not at all. I keep bugging that boy to settle down, so the fact that he has a steady girl is so heartwarming. I do wish he’d mentioned you before, though. He never told me how you met.”

I glanced up the rest of the stairs. My room was in sight. I was so close.

If only I’d made it inside before this uncomfortable confrontation. I should have talked Adrian into walking me

inside—then, I wouldn't have left myself open for the pouncing.

He and I hadn't gone over this. I supposed it wouldn't be wise to tell Mrs. Bear *exactly* how we'd met. I hated lying to his mom, but I wasn't sure what to say.

"Maybe you should ask Adrian. Sorry, I'm pretty tired. Travel, and all that." Which was entirely true.

Mrs. Bear's lips lifted into a plastic smile. "Of course—you poor thing. Go on up and get some rest. We can get to know one another better tomorrow."

She pulled me in for a side-hug and trotted down the stairs.

I stared after her, stunned. What was that all about? While Mrs. Bear had faked smiles and attempted civility, it was almost like some kind of sugary interrogation.

I recalled seeing Mrs. Bear speaking with Danica after the fundraiser and had a sneaking suspicion the two of them were up to something. Whenever my mom acted fake-nice like this, it was because she wanted something from me.

I felt as though I'd been plunked onto a sofa with too many cushions, the kind that was hard to work your way out of once you sat down. Anything that made Mama Bear this mischievously soft couldn't be good.

goldie

NO MATTER which way I lay, I could never get quite comfortable enough for a good night's sleep. The mattress had a bit too much pillow for my tastes. It wasn't like Adrian's bed back at the cabin. That had been the perfect in-between of hard and soft, just the way I liked it.

Still, I managed to snare a few decent hours of rest.

I rose early and read through several of my students' term papers. Thoughts of Adrian and my missing aunt made it difficult to concentrate, though.

I also wondered how the sub I'd secured on such short notice was faring with my rambunctious tenth graders. While I missed teaching those kids, I had to admit, it was nice having a break from them too.

My stomach rumbled. I considered going down for breakfast, but every time I peeked out the door, Mrs. Bear could be heard in the main area below. She had her crew there, clearing away the boxes and things that had undoubtedly accumulated while she'd been planning the fundraiser.

I had the feeling that Mrs. Bear was also lingering on the hopes of that little chat she mentioned the night before. I still hadn't worked out what to say to whatever questions she might ask, so as soon as nine-thirty hit, I sent Adrian a text.

Me: Good morning! Last night your mom asked how we met. What should I tell her?

Adrian: Good point. Saying I met you in my bed is probably not the best approach.

My cheeks caught fire, and the most delicious burn settled into my stomach. He had the tendency to do that to me. Never mind that it was the truth or that it had been completely innocent.

Me: Probably not.

Adrian: How about a company getaway?

Me: What company?

Adrian: Bear Financial Investments.

Me: Yours?

Adrian: Mine.

Financial investments. Not for the first time I wondered what that entailed. Stocks? 401 Ks? People's firstborn children? No wonder he was loaded.

Me: But I don't work for you.

Adrian: I could change that.

Of course, he could. This was coming from the man who proposed we be boyfriend and girlfriend for convenience's sake. I sent him a joke-face emoji.

Me: I'll just tell her it was a chance meeting and we hit it off right away.

Adrian: Did we hit it off?

Me: Sure. You found me irresistible.

Adrian: And you found me completely charming.

Me: More like hot.

Adrian: Another thing I wouldn't mention to my mom.

I chuckled. Definitely not. I could just imagine how that conversation would go.

Adrian: What else?

Me: What else what?

Adrian: What else did you think of me?

Attractive, appealing, generous, and completely disarming. I wasn't about to admit any of those to him, though. I couldn't let myself get used to this, no matter how helpful he'd been.

Most of the men I knew didn't do something for nothing. At least I'd been able to help him with his Danica problem.

Me: Nope. Your turn.

Adrian: My turn?

Me: Tell me what you thought of me.

I knew I was asking for it, but I was also curious. What had he thought when he'd discovered me there?

Adrian: I thought you were a gorgeous dream. I was sure you'd be gone by the time I woke up, but when you were still there, when you'd made me breakfast, I knew you were something else.

I read the text a few times to make sure it said what I thought it did. I lost the feeling in my fingers and toes. He made things worse when he texted again.

Adrian: I'll be stopping by in a few hours. I'd like to see you again. Is that okay with you?

He wanted to see me. Was he for real?

Me: Sure, I've got nothing better to do.

Ugh. That hadn't come out right. Still, I'd already sent it.

Adrian: I want to hang out with my girlfriend.

He sent a winky emoji.

His statement deflated the elation from his earlier confession. The reminder stung. I flung my phone onto the bed.

His girlfriend. Sure.

I stifled a yawn. I hadn't completely caught up on sleep from my road trip, so I settled myself within the blanket and closed my eyes. Ten minutes wouldn't do any harm.

When I awoke, the clock read closer to noon.

"Two hours?" I said, rubbing my eyes. Man, I must really have been tired.

Readjusting my clothes and running a brush through my hair, I decided to brave the lower level. I opened the door a crack.

Unlike the instances when I'd checked before, the smell of bacon, eggs, and pancakes no longer wafted from below. The

sounds of gathered guests, banging dishes, and Mrs. Bear's commanding voice were missing as well.

Phew.

Anticipation trickled in. I peered out the window, which offered a view of the front yard, parking lot, and barn. People were already coming and going, strolling along to admire the flowers, retrieving things from their vehicles.

One vehicle, I noticed, was blessedly absent. The coast was clear. Mrs. Bear was nowhere in sight.

Since my stomach was growling, I decided to risk it and head downstairs. The lobby area was mostly cleared except for a girl reading a book at the reception desk and a man perusing his phone at one of the tables in the dining area.

Adrian exited the kitchen with a bottle of Coke in each hand. My heart gave a little flip. *I thought you were a gorgeous dream.*

"There you are," he said in such a warm way it made my stomach burn, especially considering our flirty text conversation.

He'd said he wanted to see me. *Me.*

"Morning," I said, twisting my hair over one shoulder.

"I was just heading out to enjoy some sunshine. Want to join me?" He offered me a Coke.

I decided not to mention that this was my first time downstairs and that I hadn't yet eaten. Coke for breakfast it was.

"Sunshine is good. I was hoping for more golf lessons. The clubs are optional."

The edge of his lips did this adorable quirk. "I'm down for that."

"Is your mom here?" I couldn't help the question.

We had to make up for lost time, since we hadn't gotten a goodnight kiss on the porch last night. I wanted to make sure she wouldn't be around to interrupt anything this time.

“She headed to town to return a few things. She’ll probably be gone for a while.”

Relief sifted over me. “Sunshine and golf?”

“Sounds good.”

He led the way out. The sun was already baking the air. It was warm for April.

A friendly, wide swing saved me a spot, and I settled myself onto it while Adrian perched himself against the railing across from me and stared toward the mountain in the distance.

“It’s amazing here,” I said, kicking a little to move the swing.

He pivoted, resting a hand on the porch’s supportive beam. Glancing out, he took a sip from his Coke. Nearby, a weeping willow dipped its fingertips into the glassy pond at the edge of the drive. Horses grazed at the base of a hill, and peace settled over me.

“I never wanted this,” he said.

“The bed and breakfast?”

He took another sip. “No. This.” He gestured widely, indicating the surrounding land.

“Why wouldn’t you want this? You’re so secluded here. It’s a gift. Everywhere else is so busy, so rushed to keep pace with the rest of the world. Here, though. It feels different.”

Adrian bent to rest his arms on the railing. I rose from the swing and stood beside him.

“I wanted that faster pace,” he said. “I wanted the opposite of seclusion. To be immersed in the high life, the glamor of it, the streak of fast cars and high rises and gossip columns. My dad never understood it. Why would I crave that kind of attention when I had a perfectly good inheritance waiting for me here?”

He gestured to the full scale of the ranch surrounding them. The emerald haze of grass, the grazing horses, the lazy

trees and widespread solemnity.

“That would be my question, too,” I said. “Why did you leave?”

“I needed the right place to build my business, where other savvy investors were doing the same. I moved to Chicago, where I attended business school. I invested well. I was thriving like a good metaphor.”

I sipped my Coke. “What happened? Why did you come back?”

Squinting through the sunlight, I centered my rapt attention on him.

Adrian tipped the glass bottle to his lips. “My dad died. I’ve spent as much time here as I could to help my mom, to help my brothers. Aside from my business, this ranch, my family, is the only stability I have left.

“But I need to head back. My team has been handling everything, and things are managing just fine this far, but I want it to stay that way, you know? Plus, I miss Chicago. This is—it’s just too stifling here.”

I touched my throat. The ranch’s full glory ranged before us, seeming to go on for miles and touch the tips of the sky.

“To me, this is the opposite of stifling.”

He lowered his head. “I miss the thrill of the city. I like standing out on the balcony after a successful day of negotiations. With the city spread below me, the cars, the buildings, it glitters like Christmas.”

I angled my head, considering. I was sure that was true, but I suspected that there was something else.

It didn’t make sense for him to dislike this place as much as he claimed to, just because Chicago was sparkly and fast. There had to be more to it.

“Does it have to do with your dad?”

Adrian fidgeted under the question’s pressure. It wasn’t as though it was my business. But I had to admit, I didn’t like the

idea of Adrian returning to that life.

We weren't much more than acquaintances who had killer chemistry and liked kissing each other. He owed me nothing. But here in this country time bubble of fields and lemonade, birdsong, and an indulgent view of his sculpted arms, chiseled jaw, and eyes that teased, I couldn't help wondering what things would be like if I really were *with* him.

Adrian Bear was a full-fledged hottie with decent manners and a kind heart. What would it be like to have moments like this in permanent ink?

This isn't real, I reminded myself. Last night was a one-time thing.

Why should I want him to stay here when I myself would be leaving for Wisconsin in less than a week? He was just a nice guy helping me out while I waited for my aunt's return email—which, for the record, still hadn't come.

That was all.

He glanced away, not answering. I pursed my lips.

Too hot. Too cold. Too big. Too small. From the way I saw things, Adrian's life here in Two Pines was just right. What was it about his home that made him want to leave?

He seemed to get along great with his brothers, and well enough with his mom. That only led me to conclude it had something to do with his dad.

He still didn't answer.

I lowered my head. "Adrian, I'm sorry. I never should have pried. I'm already overstepping as it is by taking advantage of your hospitality."

His hand closed over mine. The gesture was so natural, it caught me by surprise. Was this a fake boyfriend move, or was it sincere?

"You're not taking advantage."

He met me straight in the eye until, feeling the sincerity behind the words, I nodded. He glanced at our hands, and

when I didn't pull free, he wove his fingers into the vacancies between mine.

My stomach sizzled. I couldn't do this. I needed to leave, to find a hotel and wait for my aunt's email where I was more comfortable. Yet, I still couldn't let go of him.

"And you're not prying," he went on. "Things between my father and I weren't the best. Our relationship was always strained."

"That must have made his passing harder for you."

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "You know, I haven't been able to tell anyone this. It's felt like a betrayal of his memory somehow. How do I admit that yes, I grieved my dad's passing, but the emotion I've been fighting has been the massive regret I've had for years?"

"Regret about what?"

"The fighting. The things I said. Things he said. We never resolved any of that, you know? It's eaten at me since the funeral."

"He's not gone completely," I said, resting my hand on his shoulder. "I believe he's still watching over you. And he knows—"

"Don't."

"What?"

"Don't say he knows how I feel. Then he'll know how much I hated him."

"I don't believe that. Don't mistake hurt for hatred."

Adrian swallowed. I could tell by the strain in his eyes how hard he was trying to keep it together.

"It's okay to have bad feelings toward him," I said. "I think you need to feel what you're feeling, and that's why it's so hard for you."

His eyes glistened. A tear leaked from the corner, and I lifted my finger to wipe it away. He caught my hand and pressed a kiss to the inside of my wrist.

“Everything in me is so complicated. I loved him. I hated him. I’m hurt by him, but I also hurt him too. It’s such a mess.”

“Sounds like it’s family,” I said. “My family has our fair share of problems too.”

I wasn’t going to go into all of those, not when he needed to work through his own emotions.

Adrian pulled me into a hug, and this one felt different from others we’d shared. It seeped into me somehow, like he was clinging to me for survival.

“You’ll have to tell me about them sometime,” he said as he burrowed his face into my neck.

I held him and from the trembling in his shoulders, suspected he was working through more of that emotion. After a handful of minutes passed, he pulled away and wiped his eyes.

“My brothers and I have been helping our mom resolve Dad’s business affairs, find passwords to his accounts, settle the family trust, that kind of thing. I’ve had to keep on top of my business affairs, too, and I’m trying to find a different route to deal with that since I’ve been out here so long.”

He shook his head. “Sorry. I didn’t intend for our conversation to take this serious of a turn.”

“I don’t mind,” I insisted. “Though I can’t say I’ll be that much help. Business was never really a strong suit of mine.”

He smiled. “What do you do in Wisconsin?”

“I’m an English teacher.”

“My worst subject.”

“Tenth grade.”

“My worst year.”

I laughed and punched him in the arm. “Liar.”

He settled his arm around me. “I’m only lying about one of those. Which is it?”

“You mean which admission was a lie?”

His lips twisted. With his sunglasses perched on his head, his eyes blazing with mischief, he looked every inch the temptation I’d seen in my dreams.

Good grief, but he was handsome.

I tried to think of the best approach. “All right, then. Pop quiz. Shakespeare was...”

“An evil genius.”

“And writing papers?”

“An acute form of torture, though necessary for success in documentation, business plans, and many other important ventures.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Writing them is torture? Try grading them.”

Adrian tipped his head to one side. “You win that one. Do you really read all of those?”

“Every single one. In fact, I brought a stack with me that I need to get through before I head back.”

“Ugh, you’re right. That is torturous.”

“I like it. I like helping those who are struggling, and I’m amazed by their creativity.” I stared at the watch on his wrist. “You know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think you liked English classes. I think you hated tenth grade for the same reason you wanted to leave home.”

It was a shot in the dark, but after last night, after seeing how his mom pried into his life, after his recent admission about being rocky with his late father, I suspected being here was hard for him because he couldn’t be *himself*.

It was the same way I often felt. Judged at every turn. High school tended to do that to a person, to make them feel less than enough, no matter how good they were. I couldn’t imagine anyone finding Adrian Bear not good enough.

His brow twitched just enough to show he was impressed. He faced me, pressing his hips to mine so I was pinned between him and the railing, and he slid his arms around me.

“You win.”

I fluttered inside. “Of course I do. What do I win, exactly?”

Mrs. Bear’s car pulled into the gravel lot. Tension coiled inside of me instantly, but was soon dispelled by Adrian’s lips against my throat.

“How about dinner?” he said in my ear.

“Dinner sounds...”

Mrs. Bear’s car door slammed, but Adrian didn’t pull away. A notion sank into my chest. This show of affection was probably only that. A show, to convince his mother he was over Danica.

It was nothing more.

If we went back to town, however, that would give me another opportunity to stop by my aunt’s house. I could also bring my bag and check into a hotel then, but my bank account shouted at me from here. I didn’t have a hundred dollars or more a day to spend on a room.

Adrian retreated in time for me to nod my agreement, and I was struck by the splendor of his smile. This trip was definitely not turning out how I’d planned.

GOLDIE WAS a risk I swore I'd never take.

I stood at the base of the steps inside the main house and watched until she stepped into her room above and closed her door. Our conversation on the porch played on repeat in my mind. I couldn't believe how perceptive she was.

Being around her liquified my defenses. When was the last time I'd felt so comfortable around a woman? So willing to bare my soul and my skeletons in one fell swoop? That fact alone should make me turn tail and run as far from her as I could.

I'd sworn to maintain lifelong bachelorhood. I'd never considered backing out of that pledge with any other woman I'd been around—not until I'd met her.

She'd been so calm, so collected as I'd told her about my life in Chicago, as she inquired about my father. Talking about Dad usually opened up old wounds that I had no desire to relive. Much like my desire to avoid the cabin and its memories, speaking of Dad had the same effect.

Yet, I found I was kind of eager to tell Goldie everything. Like confiding in her would help somehow.

I liked being with her, chatting with her, holding hands and drinking Cokes. For a brief moment as she spoke, I'd seen the ranch as Goldie saw it. Magical. Charismatic. Enchanting.

I wasn't ready to see the ranch that way. I wasn't sure I ever could.

Maybe it had more to do with her company than anything else, but she'd woven a web around me, for sure.

The more time I spent around her, the more my resolve to remain a bachelor began to dissolve. For years now, living alone, being my own man, had been all I wanted. But now that I'd spent so much time with her, I was starting to envision her in aspects of my life that had previously been blocked.

Waking up with her in the morning and talking about our plans for the day. Sharing heartaches and troubles—and good times, too. Laughing together. Joking. Dancing. And definitely more kissing. That wasn't to mention falling asleep in one another's arms...

How could I consider any of these with The Pact still hanging over my head? Not to mention how many times I'd sworn I'd stick to it.

The guys would give me all kinds of crap about this.

I made my way back to the kitchen to deposit my empty Coke bottle into the recycle bin. I hadn't yet gotten the emails that Rita promised me, but I wouldn't begrudge her that. She had a lot on her plate, and undoubtedly, it took time to rifle through my inbox and file everything into one place.

To say I was anxious to read the terms of The Pact was an understatement. I'd always thought they were harmless—until Will had used The Pact as an excuse to attack someone.

No one else would be that obsessively stupid, would they?

The sound of a door opening behind me stole my attention, and Mom bustled out from what used to be the mudroom just off the kitchen, where my brothers and I would kick off our shoes and boots after a long day of mucking out stables or riding horses. Now, it'd been converted into a laundry facility with several machines to be used at guests' convenience.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Danica is coming over later,” she said without any other preliminaries.

I withheld a groan. There weren't many times I wished Mom could read my mind. In fact, it was a good thing she couldn't. Right now, though, it would be so much simpler if she could just understand my feelings without my having to explain them.

"I'm with Goldie, Mom. She and I have plans tonight." Mom had seen us on the porch. She'd seen us at the dance, too. Why was she pushing this so hard?

While the living room had been expanded and converted to a dining area, filled with smaller, round tables for guests to enjoy their meals in quietude, our family's old dining table was still in its place behind the line of stools at the bar. Mom set down her box on the table and gave me a syrupy smile.

"I'm sorry, but I just don't see it. You and her."

"What is it about *us* that you don't see?"

She opened the box and began rifling through tablecloths and linens within. "It's all happened so rapidly. You never said a word about her in the weeks since you've been home, and then now, you're all over her? Why haven't you told me about her before now?"

I folded my arms. I wasn't about to go into this, not when I felt like both Goldie and I had given Mom decent answers to the same question. I didn't have to answer to her.

I changed the subject to one I felt was far more pressing. "Did you tell Danica about Dad's lockbox?"

Mom snapped down the box's cardboard flaps and gaped at me. "Why would I do that?"

The dismay on her face seemed sincere, but the shift in her expression was abrupt enough to make me question it.

"Are you sure you don't know where it is? I get the feeling I'm being manipulated."

If similar situations hadn't happened in the past, I wouldn't go there, but Mom had been known to twist her way around me to get what she wanted. Like the time she asked me to bring Chase and Jordan their lunches while they'd been roping

cattle. I'd arrived out in the field to discover my brothers hadn't been there at all—but Dad had.

She'd set me up for a lecture I'd been trying to avoid.

Or there was the time she'd asked me to show her how I signed my name to prove that I'd learned cursive. I'd then discovered she'd forged my signature to get me into the FFA club I hadn't wanted to join.

If Dad's death hadn't been legitimately proven, I would have believed she'd staged it just to get me to come back home again.

Mom sniffed and opened the box again, directing her attention at the tablecloths she'd just disregarded. I stepped forward and placed my hand on hers.

That did the trick.

She lifted her eyes to meet mine. Her expression was wiped clear of everything but irritation.

"Mom," I said, knowing I needed to word this carefully. "I know you want me to settle down here, and you think Danica is the key to that, but she's not. Please stop trying to force her on me."

"I'm not trying to force anything. I'm just trying to get you to remember how happy you were with her."

I scoffed. Happy? Danica was selfish. She put down my ambitions and criticized me for wanting to start a business. She'd pushed me to the point where I never wanted to seriously date another woman again.

"Danica isn't a good fit for me. She tried controlling everything I did. She wasn't willing to compromise with me at all and felt like I should do whatever she wanted. That's not the kind of relationship I want to be in."

Mom frowned. "A nice girl like that? She wouldn't."

"She did. We tried being together. It didn't work out. I was anything but happy with her. But with Goldie—"

A noise scuffed up Mom's throat. She held a hand in my direction. "Please. I saw very well how you are with her."

"She listens to me. She makes me feel like I can tell her things and that she won't end up using my feelings against me later on. She's great, Mom. You should get to know her. Give her a chance."

"And where does she live? She's not from here."

I cringed. I knew where Mom wanted this conversation to go. She wanted to know if Goldie might be the key to getting me to stay, too.

How could I tell her Goldie was from Wisconsin and would be heading back in a few days? How could I tell her that we had no definite plans for any kind of future together?

Did I want a future with her?

The same resounding resolution I'd contemplated earlier embedded into the center of my chest with more fervency than I expected. Heck, yeah, I wanted more with this girl. Her conversation, her kisses, her incredible ability to make me feel like I could take on anything.

Holy cow. I *wanted* her.

"No, she's not from here," I said, treading carefully.

"Then I don't want to get to know her. Why are you so determined to leave? Why are you so unsatisfied here?"

My exasperation flared. "Dad never understood this, either. Do you really have no idea why I left in the first place?"

Goldie got it, and she had only been around me a matter of days. How could my own mother not see it?

If I'd questioned my desire to be with her before, those uncertainties all fled in an instant. Goldie *got me*. I could confide in her because I knew she'd never throw my feelings back in my face.

I did my best to keep my voice calm so the passing guests heading up the stairs wouldn't overhear.

Mom pinched the bridge of her nose, inhaling a few times before lowering her hand and looking at me. “You’re my son. I want you close.”

I knew how heartbroken she’d been when Dad died. That same sadness swam in her gaze now. Gingerly, I took her hand and guided her away from the box, pulling her into a hug.

“I love you, Mom. But my life is in Chicago.”

“Your life belongs here.”

Frustration spiked through my veins. Here, I thought Mom was opening up to me. I’d thought maybe this time she would hear me. But she was just like Dad—stubborn and insistent. Nothing would change.

I was a grown man with a highly successful business, yet in that moment, I felt like a rebellious teen.

It was *my* life! My parents had never appreciated that. They’d never cared that I’d accomplished so much. It was why I’d been so determined to make something of myself, to prove to Dad that my value didn’t lie in horses and ranch work.

Now, more than ever, I was determined to return to Chicago. It wasn’t even that my business needed me in order to thrive. In all honesty, I’d be fine if I never worked a day again.

But I liked to be in the thick of things, especially since a few of my clients had abruptly pulled their accounts. It wasn’t enough to cause alarm, but I really did want to get back soon.

The thing was—I didn’t want to go alone.

The more my conversation with Mom continued, the more she tried to talk me out of being with Goldie, the more I was sure I’d do anything to keep her. Something told me she’d support me. She had a way of validating me while still showing me truths about myself I’d turned a blind eye to.

She made me want to be a better man in a way that didn’t condemn me for my faults.

And the chemistry that sparked every time we were together was cosmic.

Mom sniffled and stepped back. “About Danica. I wonder if you two could talk. She might even—”

I kissed Mom’s cheek and snatched a bagel from the counter. That wasn’t going to work. She needed to get the hint.

“Sorry, Mom. I’ve got to go.”

Danica could come over all she wanted, but I wouldn’t be here when she did. I was with Goldie, and it was time for me to figure out how to make that status last a little longer.

My confusions and doubts settled. Though I hadn’t yet had the chance to peruse its terms, I was done with The Pact.

I was choosing her, and if that meant facing some consequences, so be it.

My only remaining worry was how those consequences might affect *her*.

goldie

I WASN'T sure if this was a posh dinner date or not. Two Pines wasn't exactly a thriving metropolis. I guessed it had about as many restaurants as Baldwin had, where the nicest place to go was the local Dairy Queen.

Even so, this was a *date* with Adrian Bear.

I sifted through the clothes I'd packed. There wasn't much by way of nice things, but I wasn't about to beg an outfit off of Kimmy again. She'd retrieved her dress after Adrian and I chatted on the porch earlier.

Scouring through my clothes, I opted for a loose floral shirt with three-quarter length sleeves and my favorite pair of jeans.

I checked my phone for the zillionth time that day, but there was still no email from Aunt Bethany. Three days had passed since I'd contacted her. Since I'd left home.

Why hadn't my aunt replied?

The worst sense of worry seeped in. What if the letter was a spoof? If that was the case, Mom wouldn't have freaked out about it the way she had, but still, the suspicion wouldn't go away.

If Aunt Bethany wasn't real and hadn't sent me the letter, who had? And why?

I did my best to staunch the unease. "It will be fine," I told myself, trying hard to believe it.

I would find answers eventually. For now, I had to focus on what I could control. Tonight, that was spending time with

Adrian.

Adrian Bear. That man could take an ordinary afternoon, shake it up like a snow globe, and make everything gleam. He certainly made everything inside of me glow.

The anticipation of being with him built. It made me full-on flutter at the prospect of his undivided attention and the things he'd say.

My hand still tingled where he'd held it; the spot on my neck shimmered where he'd kissed it. He'd opened up to me more than I ever thought he would. Had his affection on the porch been genuine or just part of the show for his mother?

At least I wasn't stuck grading papers as I'd thought I would be. I wasn't one for sight-seeing—not on my own, anyway. Knowing my track record, I'd get lost all over again.

Good thing I had someone like Adrian to keep me company and show me around. He was tall and tantalizing, with dark hair, great teeth, kissable lips, and a killer smile. My whole body thrummed with anticipation. I checked the time, then my hair, when a soft knock rapped on the door.

Nerves jangling like bells, I headed from the bathroom to the door, stopping to grab my purse along the way. I opened it to find Adrian in designer jeans, a dark blue polo, and tousled hair. He smelled like cologne and teasing possibilities. My heart banged in my chest.

His gaze raked down my frame and back up again. "You look amazing, Goldie Bybanks. Are you ready to go?"

"I could say the same about you."

Jordan passed behind Adrian with an armful of towels and sneered at us. "Get a room already," he called over his shoulder.

"Don't mind him," Adrian said. "He's just jealous because I'm the one with the hot date."

Jordan's voice trailed after him. "Actually, Taylor's coming over later."

“Be that as it may, she’s got nothing on you.” Adrian swooped in and took my hand.

I giggled, joining him as we made our way down the stairs. We passed through the dining room, the reception area, and out to where Adrian’s Hummer was parked.

The sky was a painting of serenity. Clouds soaked up the splash of purples and oranges. Stars had already started to poke through the darkening blue canvas, and the moon winked in reply. I hugged my jacket tighter with my free hand.

“Where are we headed?” I asked as Adrian paused to open my door. I held onto the inner handle to prop myself up onto the leather seat.

“It’s a little place, but the food is amazing,” Adrian said, climbing into the driver’s side. “Ever heard of Stano’s?”

“Like SpaghettiOs?”

Adrian laughed and backed out of the drive. “Nothing like SpaghettiOs.”

He left one hand on the stick shift while the other was propped on the steering wheel. Leaning casually back, he was the picture of confidence and style. How did he get to be this way? What was it about men in spiffy cars that made them hold themselves so appealingly?

I was totally staring at him. I couldn’t help it.

“Any word from your aunt?” he asked as we sped toward town.

“Not yet,” I said. “I promise, I’m not making that up just to stay at your B & B.”

He chuckled. “I keep hearing you say things like that.”

“Like what?”

“You promised me you weren’t a criminal. You promised that you weren’t usually clumsy. You promised that you’re not a liar.”

“I’m not.”

“I never said you were. But you are adorable.”

I fluttered my lips.

“I’m serious. You’re missing one, though.”

“What’s that?”

He slid me a sideways look, still keeping tabs on the road. “I promise you’re not an inconvenience.”

“Is that all?”

“Nah. Some of the others I’m thinking right now, I can’t promise or verify at all.”

“Like what?”

He stroked his fingers through mine. “Well, maybe I can guarantee a few of them. I promise you make me crazy. I promise you make me think about you more than I should. I promise I’ll kiss you again before the night is over.”

I squirmed at the prospect. “That’s a lot of promises.”

“I’m a man of my word.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

We sat in silence for a few moments before he asked, “What are you going to do until you hear from her?”

“I was thinking, if you have time, maybe you could give me a tour of your ranch.”

His fist tightened around mine. Almost too tight. I suspected he didn’t realize he was doing it. “It’s not that fascinating.”

“It is to me,” I said. “I’ve only ever seen anything like it on TV. I’d love to see the grounds.”

I wondered if something like that might help him too. If he could see what he was walking away from, would it make a difference for him? Would it help him make peace with his past?

“Okay, then,” he said, turning the corner toward a part of town I hadn’t yet seen. “You tell me why you drove halfway

across the country to see an aunt you could have just called on the phone, and you've got your tour."

"Deal," I said. "But only once we're seated."

Stano's was a small place that I probably wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't pointed it out. It was tucked away behind a larger and more up-to-date law firm entitled Johnson, Washbuckle, and Wilson. That was a doozy of a name if I'd ever seen one. I pointed it out to Adrian, who laughed.

The parking lot was crammed with cars. Inside, the venue was stuffy and crowded, and there wasn't much room in the waiting area, which gave me a convenient reason for cuddling against him. Adrian nestled his arm around me, not seeming to mind in the slightest.

A waitress approached and welcomed us, announcing it would be at least a twenty-minute wait. From the way the seats were filled, I wasn't surprised.

"We also have seating outside," the waitress added, "if you're interested."

Adrian glanced at me. "What do you think? It's a nice night."

"Outside sounds good to me."

The waitress led us through the cramped tables, the clatter of dishes, and the noisy heat. A narrow exit was hidden behind the farthest booth where an elderly couple was seated and enjoying their meals.

Cool air was a welcome change. The veranda out back was sedate, quiet, and peaceful. Soft guitar music wafted beneath a latticed scaffold where fat bulbs offered mediocre light. But the music wasn't wafting from a speaker.

A live performer wearing a cowboy hat, flannel shirt, and jeans was perched on a stool behind a microphone. Low lighting and live music? This was definitely more romantic than inside had been.

"Sit wherever you'd like," the waitress directed.

"Where to?" Adrian asked.

I pointed to a vacant table near the trickling water fountain and pavestones serving as the man's stage. His guitar case was open at his feet, and a small amplifier hanging at his belt spread the music across the intimate garden.

Instead of sitting across from me, Adrian took the metal seat right next to me. I thrilled at that. This wasn't going to last—so we were soaking in as much of the moment as we could.

After giving us time to peruse the menu, the waitress returned with our drinks. Simultaneously, the guitarist on his landscaped stage ended his song. I lifted my hands to applaud him when I was greeted by crickets.

I peered around. Did they not clap for people's performances around here?

When the waitress left again, Adrian settled his chair closer in, spilling his heat over me. "So?"

I chewed my lip. Right. Our deal.

"My whole life it's been only my parents and me. I never had cousins. No living grandparents. No other family. I always thought we were it, the only Bybankses around. But then, at the beginning of the month, I received this letter. Who sends letters anymore?"

"Sure," Adrian said, giving me his full attention, which blazed straight through me.

The waitress delivered our salads, and I thanked her before continuing, leaving my cobb salad with ranch dressing untouched.

"This letter was from Bethany Harold."

"Okay," he prodded.

I wondered if he could tell how unraveled I was feeling confessing all of this. I'd only told two other people—my parents, and Lois.

Lois had been supportive. My parents... not so much. Adrian wasn't likely to shoot me down like they had, but saying the words out loud was still nerve-wracking.

“Harold was my mother’s maiden name.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah,” I said on an exhale. “Bethany claimed she was my mom’s sister. She—well, look.”

I unzipped my purse and pulled out the correspondence. I handed it to Adrian as he took a bite of salad. Still chewing, he took it and scanned the contents.

I knew the letter by heart now.

Your mom insisted I stay out of your life and for good reason. I agreed to it long ago, but it’s time. You’re an adult, and if I don’t do it now, I’ll always regret it. I’d love to meet you. To explain in person.

Jacey won’t be too happy about me contacting you like this, but as far away as I am, I would love to meet you. If you feel in your heart you could make the trip, would you consider coming here to Two Pines? I’d be happy to provide a place for you to stay. It would mean a lot for me to get to know you, as I never had any children to call my own.

Email might be best. If you’re interested, please let me know.

Love, Aunt Bethany

Adrian’s forehead crinkled. He passed the letter back to me. “But she hasn’t responded to you?”

“No. And I emailed her almost immediately.”

“Was your mother really that bothered?” he asked. “That she contacted you?”

I took a bite of my salad. “Yeah. We had the juiciest argument we’ve had in a long while.”

Which was saying something. The memory of her words, her shrill tone, shrouded me, and I hunched my shoulders in an attempt to ward it away.

“Why?” he asked. “Why wouldn’t she want you to meet your aunt? Why did she lie to you about her existence? A lie

of omission, I guess, if it was something she just kept from you, but still, a lie.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “That’s why I’m here. That’s why I drove out here in spite of my terrible sense of direction, and why I did it without even having heard back from her. I have to know.”

“You mean she didn’t email you back before you left?”

“She did. She replied to the first email I sent, saying I was always welcome. I sent her another to let her know I was leaving and—nothing.”

“Strange,” Adrian said. “Do you know anything about her? What she does for work?”

“No, and my mom would be annoyingly superior if I called to admit as much to her. She’s already giving me the silent treatment. I haven’t heard from her since I left either.”

Not since the call informing me she was coming over to burn the letter. She was angry that I hadn’t been there when she arrived.

Lois had relayed the situation to me after the fact. When she’d discovered I wasn’t there, Mom had barged into the apartment, insisting on seeing for herself. Then she’d stormed out, noticed that my car was gone, and rounded on Lois for letting me go without speaking to her first.

Like it was my roommate’s responsibility to keep tabs on me.

“And I thought things with my dad were bad,” Adrian muttered. He winced and then squeezed my hand. “I’m sorry—that wasn’t very sympathetic of me. I don’t mean to insult your mom.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t think that at all.”

The soloist sang softly about being so in love, and I felt the weight of Adrian’s hand in a way I hadn’t before.

For some reason, I had the urge to free myself from his grasp. We were acting the way people who were actually

dating acted. But this romantic façade between us wouldn't last. I knew what it was like to be lied to.

How long could I keep this up?

“What's wrong?” Adrian asked.

“I never meant to impose into your life so much. You—I worry—”

I wasn't sure how to say it. Why was he showering me with so much? Help, affection, attention. I hated thinking it, but did he think he was entitled to because I'd imposed?

“I don't want to take any kind of advantage,” I said.

“I feel like we've talked about this. If I'm the one initiating things, then you aren't taking advantage by accepting them.”

“But I feel like I am. You didn't initiate me being at your cabin. I—” I stared around us, not wanting to ruin the romantic evening but on the warpath all the same.

“I just met you, and I'm swept away by you kissing me and doting on me—” I drew in a breath. “But I want it to be real, Adrian, not because you think I owe you or something. I don't know what's real here. I have no way to return so many favors, unless you like baked goods, and I—”

He barked a laugh. “Baked goods?”

Heat squirmed in my stomach. “I like to bake. I thought I could make something in exchange for room and board. I know it won't be enough, not by a long shot, but at least it would be something. But you—”

“Goldie,” he said pointedly, wiping his mouth with his napkin and setting it on the table.

He adjusted his seat again to face me a little more fully, scraping it on the cement. “You want to know why I'm paying so much attention to you?”

“Yes.” The word came out a little too loudly. It was crammed with so much relief, and imploring, too, that I was chagrined by the number of heads who turned in our direction before going back to their own meals.

I longed for his answer and dreaded it all the same.

Adrian tilted his head toward me. "I'm paying so much attention to you because I want to," he said, smiling up at the waitress and waiting as she set our dinner plates down.

The smell of my steak and steamed broccoli tantalized me, but Adrian enticed me even more, and I kept looking right at him, craving what he had to say.

"But why do you want to?"

"You know I think you're beautiful," he said. "I'm not the kind of guy who holds favors over a woman's head. I'm not touching you, kissing you, dating you, because I think you owe it to me. I asked you to be my girlfriend because I wanted you."

"Why?"

"Your laugh, your smile. That kiss on the golf course? Dancing with you? It's like I can't get enough of you. There's just something about you that drives me wild."

He didn't elaborate or specify what that *something* was, but the word hooked straight into me.

Something.

He had something about him that drove me wild too. Maybe it was the brilliance of him beneath the stars. Maybe it was the bullseye of his attention on me or the way his knee brushed mine, the way my mouth went dry, the way my palms clammed.

"That *something* tells me it wouldn't have mattered how we'd met. If I'd bumped into you at the store or even if I'd just seen your truck pulled off and had stopped to see if you needed help.

"I would have asked for your number anyway. You're making me rethink things. Things I thought were solid in my life. You're making me want something different than I thought I did."

My heart was a mallet. My lungs were drums. "And the room at the ranch? Dinner tonight?"

“I’m a generous guy. When you have a lot, you want to give it back. Or, I do, anyway.”

“I can’t pay you back,” I blurted.

He smiled. “I never expected you to.” Then his forehead creased. “Where is all this coming from?”

I rested my elbow on the table and pointed to the letter. “That thing brings out all my insecurities, I guess. Nothing in my life has felt stable since I got it, and I like you—I like what we have going here—and I just needed—a little grounding.”

“Consider yourself grounded. I’ll spend the rest of the week proving it to you.”

The rest of the week. That was all we had.

I wanted to tell him I wanted more. More time, more everything. But I also worried how it might sound since we’d just gotten done talking about money. I definitely didn’t want him thinking that, because he kept buying me stuff, it was the only reason I was here tonight.

Even if he hadn’t showered me with generosity, I’d still want to be with him, but I couldn’t find the words, so I let them settle between us as we finished our dinner in silence.

goldie

ADRIAN WASN'T AS AFFECTIONATE as we'd finished our dinner, as the cowboy had crooned love ballads and was met again by only silence. I was a rebel and lifted my hands to applaud him anyway. Several surrounding tables joined in as if they only just realized the music was live.

Gratification had slipped down my spine. I was no musician, but I had an idea of the courage it must take to play in front of others.

The urge to touch Adrian tormented me the entire drive back to the ranch, but I couldn't initiate it. Though he had said sweet things, I wanted his touch to affirm everything—and he didn't reach for me.

I didn't know how to read his signals, which left me to draw the worst conclusions.

He wasn't really interested in me. This dating scheme was just a ploy to keep him off his mom's radar until he returned to Chicago.

I was glad I hadn't mentioned wanting more with him after this. Confessing as much would have just made me sound pathetic.

He was only a reach away, but I reminded myself I wasn't here in Montana for romance. I would find my aunt, and I was going back home, too.

Still, I needed conversation. "Is Hawk still around, or did he head back home?"

"He left this morning."

Crickets.

“He was going to stay until the purchase went through, but he decided to get back to straighten a few things out at his corporate office.”

“What purchase?”

“He was out here looking at buying the ski resort.”

I choked on my spit and sat up in my seat. “He wants to *buy* a ski resort?”

Adrian’s smile made an appearance. “Outlandish, I know.”

I couldn’t fathom something like this. I skimmed through what I knew of the handsome blond man. He was lighthearted; he liked laughing; he was Adrian’s best friend who happened to own a chain of candy stores.

That was about it.

“He can’t be more than thirty. What the heck is he going to do with a whole resort?”

“Go there,” Adrian said, as though this concept weren’t as preposterous as it sounded.

I whistled. “He must really like to ski.”

His laugh helped loosen my reservations that had been building up since we’d left the restaurant. Maybe he wasn’t distancing himself as much as I thought. Maybe it was all in my perception.

I was overthinking things as usual.

Adrian offered to stop by Aunt Bethany’s house, but again she was out. I swallowed my disappointment. I was running out of time, and I still had nothing to go on.

What was I going to do if she never answered her door?

He pulled into the ranch’s drive and exited. I did the same, closing the passenger door, and my gaze instantly lifted upward.

Stars shined like silver flecks on an exquisite gown. The more I tried to grasp it all in one glance, the wider the sky

spread.

“What is it?” Adrian leaned against the Hummer beside me, tilting his head upward as well.

“The sky seems like it could swallow you up, right here.”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and bent one leg to prop his shoe against the car. “It does. I guess I don’t really take the time to look. Most of the time, I do what I have to here and leave as quickly as possible.”

“I still don’t get that. If I lived somewhere this amazing, I’d never want to leave.”

Adrian stepped away, making me feel cold. I’d done it again. I’d pushed him too far tonight, and he was going to distance himself from now on.

It was for the best, I told myself. We’d have to get to this point eventually.

“It’s complicated,” he said after a few moments.

He’d shared some of that with me earlier, and I swiftly regretted my insistence on his home being amazing. I hadn’t said any of this to degrade him for wanting to leave. His emotions were pretty raw right now. I really was just remarking about the stars.

He looked right at me, trapping me. “You’re making this hard on me, you know.”

“What?”

“I want to walk you to your door.”

“It’s inside,” I said, thinking of Jordan eavesdropping, of their mom’s displeasure she threw at me anytime she was around.

I couldn’t help but remember the tension that had sizzled between us as he’d accompanied me to my room before we’d gone golfing. That was before so much had happened between us. What would he do for our goodbye this time?

The minute we went in there, we were asking for an audience.

He probably understood the same thing.

“So it is,” he said.

“So...I’m not sure it’s a good idea.”

He went quiet.

Leaving him was going to be hard enough as it was. I didn’t see any reason to make things more difficult by adding goodnight kisses to the mix. Might as well end things here.

“I had a nice time tonight. Good night, Adrian.” Steeling myself, I turned toward the porch.

“I promised you a kiss.”

I peered back at him but kept walking. A kiss was both the best and the worst idea right now. I’d been all for it when we’d had our Cokes earlier, but I felt as though we were on a crash course—one I needed to get off asap.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Rejected,” I heard him mutter with a little laugh, and then he neared. ““Oh, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?””

My inner nerd did a jumping jack. *Romeo and Juliet* was something I could recite from memory, thanks to playing Juliet in high school. How could he know that speaking in verse to me was the swooniest thing he could possibly have done?

“Did you just quote Shakespeare?”

He grinned. With one hand in his pocket, with moonlight playing on his brow, he was temptation itself.

Someone hand me a fan.

“I told you he was an evil genius. My earlier attempt to get your attention didn’t work. And English major that you are, I figured verse might be the way to your heart. That’s the only part I could remember from the movie.”

I laughed. Fair enough.

“Or the only way you could think of to get a kiss,” I said.

He didn’t deny it.

I was reeling. Business tycoon. Possible billionaire. Shakespeare enthusiast.

I couldn't go to him and give him what he wanted. This wasn't smart; it was only going to cause heartache for us both later.

I didn't listen.

I'd been a thousand percent honest about not wanting to take advantage of his hospitality and generosity. I didn't want to get attached to him only for him to turn to the next woman who had *something* about her.

But I couldn't deny the tug of attraction I felt anytime he was nearby. Our kisses on the golf course had been sweet and scintillating. The idea of sharing more with him now was far too intriguing. Too dangerous.

Everything in me told me to ignore the impulse.

"How about a hug?" I suggested.

Was that disappointment that crossed his brow?

"You sure you can handle it?"

My mouth matched his half-smile. Body pulsing, I made my way across the gravel to his cocky stance. Unexpectedly nervous about touching him, about pressing my body to him, I swallowed.

He waited, hands in his pockets. "I don't want you to think this is all I want from you," he said.

"Oh?"

"Because it's not. Just because I like kissing you doesn't mean I don't like other aspects of you, too."

"It's just a hug," I teased.

He smirked and crossed his arms over his chest. Moonlight glinted on his handsome features. "Show me how it's done, then."

"How—what's done? Hugging?"

A nod.

What was I supposed to do, squeeze around him like a tree trunk?

“A hug involves two people.”

“Does it? I wondered.”

“That means you put your arms around me.”

“Uh-huh.” He took a step. One hand came free from its pocket.

“And I put mine around you.”

“I like where this is going.”

I wanted to sock him, but at the same time, anticipation was building. The wind stirred hints of his cologne toward me, making this all the more agonizing.

I couldn't do this cold contact. I needed something from him. Gently, I reached for his hand.

“Wait,” he said.

I withdrew like I'd touched the silver on a seatbelt in the summertime. “What?”

His eyes were serious. “You believe me, right?”

“About what?”

“You believe—you have to know being with you, wanting you, isn't payment for anything. Man, the fact that I even have to say that is revolting.” He grimaced and then swore under his breath. “Not touching you is killing me here. But I won't do it if you think that.”

Though I'd had the thought that he was doing all of this for a few “favours” from me, I wasn't about to admit as much. The fact that he mentioned it now explained why he'd withdrawn during dinner and the drive home.

I needed to fix this.

I grabbed his hand. His skin was warm, and I stared at our fingers as they connected. A sense of surety, of rightness, spilled through me. “I believe you.”

Desire shrouded his eyes, and I answered its call. Forget the hug. I was going for the gold.

I tiptoed up and pressed my mouth to his. It was the only way I could think of to show him I meant what I said, too. I wanted the awkwardness between us to blow away in the wind. I wanted to get back to our regular easiness together.

It worked. The man might as well be filled with electricity for all the charge he had on me. Adrian's arms wound around me, and he answered my kiss with several of his own, opening his mouth against mine, extending it and making me soar beneath the stars.

Once the kisses slowed, I got my hug. His arms enfolded me, and I nestled against his chest while that same feeling from earlier sank in, warm and soothing and reassuring.

I'd never been held like this. Not by my last boyfriend or by any of the other dates I'd had walk me to my door.

This was so much more than a hug. It was more like slipping my hand into a perfectly fitted glove.

Crickets chirped, stars twinkled, and my pulse flew off the charts as something inside of me shifted. I was being transformed by him in a way I couldn't quite explain. I wondered if he could feel my heartbeat as I lost myself in his.

"Best hug I've ever had," Adrian said, his eyes smoky in the moonlight.

"Me, too." I tilted my chin up to receive another long, lingering kiss that only confused me all the more.

I wasn't sure what was going on. I didn't know what to do because the more time I spent with Adrian, the more time I wanted, and I knew that could never happen.

adrian

GOLDIE WAS GOING to be the death of me.

My mind was a tornado of thought. I hadn't wallowed in a mire of confused feelings like this since Dad had died, and that was saying something.

I was lost in its swirl until I stalked past the barn, past Chase and Kimmy's house to Mom's and to the room I was using there. I hadn't grown up at that house—it'd been built only a few years ago.

No, the room I'd grown up in as a kid happened to be the same space Goldie was occupying at the main house, but I wasn't going to say as much. Much as my mind wandered, I couldn't go there.

Fortunately, Danica was nowhere in sight. I half expected Mom to have her over, ready to spring on me as soon as I got back from my date. I wasn't sure I'd be on my best behavior if she was—not after that goodbye with Goldie.

Now, I was at liberty to mull through the mire. With the bedroom door closed, I rested my back against it, tipping my head up and running my hands through my hair.

This was madness. I'd never expected anything like this, not even when I'd resolved to let The Pact go.

She was taking over me.

Our conversation at dinner made its own meal of my insides. She kept talking about how worried she was that I was only showing interest in her because I felt entitled to after her

few faux pas. I'd hoped after our kiss tonight, that would be enough to show her that I was really into her.

In fact—

I lowered my hands under the pressure of realization.

The detour sign on my return to Chicago was going to stay up a little longer.

Rita was going to hate me for this.

My business would flounder—

Actually, that last one wasn't true. I had enough sway from here, enough systems in place, and enough dollars in my bank account to keep things afloat longer than Venice.

I had lost a few accounts—I could get them back, I had no doubt about that. But this realization hit me like an insane, rampaging rhino all the same.

I was *really into her*.

I'd sworn I wouldn't fall in love. I'd even signed my name to that pledge. I'd had to memorize a few lines from Shakespeare during my drama class in high school, and another one sprang to mind at that—

“What fools these mortals be.”

I'd certainly been a fool to make a promise like vowing to never fall in love. I hadn't seen Goldie coming, though, and if I had, I would have kept the pen as far away from that paper as possible.

The thought of leaving for Chicago had always loomed in the future like a desirable thing, but now I dreaded it. I dreaded going to sleep because it meant one more day would be over, and we'd be one day closer to leaving.

I hadn't wanted to leave her tonight—I'd wanted to keep kissing her. I'd wanted to follow her up to her room, cuddle with her, hold her, talk about all the things we had left to say and be together through all the thoughts that were better left unsaid.

It would be easy. Being with her would be like breathing.

We fit together. Even when she had concerns tonight, we'd discussed them and moved forward like water around a boulder.

She had a whole life I knew nothing about—a life I wanted to know everything about. Visiting Wisconsin hadn't ever held any purpose for me before now, but the state was suddenly the most interesting of the fifty because it held her home. It held secrets about her life, her upbringing. It held her.

For so long, I'd been going through the motions, doing, acting, because it was my default setting. I worked hard, consulted with clients, managed their finances as well as I would have handled my own. I'd gotten up, headed across the city, then come home and slept—and I'd done it all over again and again for years.

A new future began to flash before me. One where I rose because it meant I'd be seeing her again. Where I worked because it fulfilled me. Where I couldn't wait to come home again because it meant hearing about her day too.

Being around her made my life feel intentional again. She invigorated me.

We only had a few more days together. If I wanted to convince her to keep our relationship once her time here was over, I had to do something for her—to let her know she was wanted. *Really* wanted.

An impulse took over me. I leapt onto the bed—much like I'd done the night Goldie and I'd met—and whipped my phone out of my pocket.

“Hello?” Rita's voice was groggy.

I flashed a look at the clock on my bedside table. Ten o'clock? I hadn't realized it was so late. If it was that late here in this time zone, that meant it was nearing midnight in Illinois.

“Sorry for calling so late.”

“Mr. Bear?”

“Yeah, it's Adrian. Can you look into something for me?”

“I’m not a secret agent,” she said dryly.

Shuffling sounds followed. I pictured her reaching for the notepad I knew she kept on hand at all times.

I laughed. “I know, but can you?”

A long pause.

“I compiled those emails,” she said. “Is that what this is about?”

“I—oh. Thanks for doing that, but no. This is something else.” Truth be told, I’d almost forgotten my last request.

“Ten more bonuses, boss.”

“Ten more lollipops,” I said in agreement.

I’d arrange things with Hawk. Rita was a fan of Ever After Sweets. Her arm could totally be twisted by the promise of candy.

“Her name is Bethany Harold...”

I ran her through what I knew of Goldie’s aunt, which admittedly, wasn’t much. I supposed that was what I was paying Rita to do—find out everything else.

We hung up, and then I swiped my phone open and tapped my email. Sure enough, there was a new file in the side tab labeled *Sean Dayton Correspondence*.

“Bless you, Rita,” I muttered, tapping on it. I’d be so lost without her.

Mind refreshed and eating up the renewed feeling of purpose, I began my search. Several emails brought back spurts of laughter and fond memories of my time at the fraternity, including Sean’s reminder of the time we’d first started hazing the newcomers by kidnapping them and taking them to the mausoleum.

So many good times. Most of the guys had been good sports about it, especially because we hadn’t done any of the dangerous drinking games or embarrassing feats of vandalism against other fraternities.

Tiredness began to drag at my eyes when I tapped one of the last remaining emails, and there, at the bottom, was a document labeled *The Pact*.

Hungrily, fighting the sleepy haze clouding my brain, I skimmed through its contents. I dove through, searching for key words and sentences, for some kind of escape clause that indicated that The Pact only lasted the duration of our time at Sigma Phi Rho.

But then—there. At the bottom.

Signee understands that bachelorhood is mandated. This agreement is binding throughout the duration of his life, with no exceptions, even if he discovers the location of Hamunaptra or is captured by the Loch Ness Monster. Changes in life, including graduation, relocation, or extended time with a loving partner, won't account for adjusting his position on this agreement.

Any show of long-term affection is prohibited, including and especially matrimony. Signs of devotion that defy the pledge to lifelong bachelorhood will be dealt with expeditiously.

Retribution will be swift and left to the discretion of the existing presidency of Sigma Phi Rho, including but not limited to:

- 1. Causing signee to streak naked in public while chanting ridiculous mantras about the supremacy of single status.*
- 2. Drinking his age in shots.*
- 3. Revealing life-altering secrets of the darkest and most preposterous nature.*
- 4. Paying an undisclosed amount to benefit those who keep 'The Pact.'*

Every single one of them was ludicrous. It was almost as though whoever had written this had been drunk. For all I knew, he may have been.

And then there. Along the line, in the final paragraph of the contract. I read the words with a sinking, sour feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I, the undersigned, agree to consign the decisions of my heart and my life to the discretionary partners of Sigma Phi Rho, past and present. I agree to the terms of this contract and sign on risk of pain, loss, and even ignominious death.

And I'd signed my name.

Adrian Rutherford Bear

I slammed my phone onto the bed while a thousand emotions warred within me. Signing had been ceremonial. It'd been conditional for men who wanted to not only join the fraternity but also to receive its funding.

Many of us had the underlying suspicion, because of its ridiculous nature, that The Pact was a joke.

Grey had thought so; it was why he and many others had gone ahead with it.

Will was the only one who'd taken The Pact too seriously, and it was because he'd felt jilted. He'd pledged bachelorhood, severing himself from the girl he loved, only to have her pass away before either of them had graduated.

Will had counted those years wasted. He'd gone nuts, attacking Grey's girlfriend because if he couldn't have the girl he loved, then no one else should be able to, either.

Why—why had I ever signed it?

I'd been angry. I'd been ridiculous. I'd been young, insouciant, and slap happy to sign a document this stupid and serious and, apparently mortally binding, over something as fleeting as a breakup and a bitter heart.

Grey had shown worry after he'd signed it. Worriedly, he'd asked if it was legitimate.

"It's for life," I'd told him, though the statement had been more to make him squirm than because I thought it was valid.

The truth was, I hadn't known what the answer was. I'd signed because I'd been livid at Danica and needed the document as an excuse to keep my distance from her. I'd wanted the validation of doing something to bar her from me in as many ways as I could.

What would Goldie say if she knew what I'd done?

Nothing, not even marriage, could nullify the terms of this contract, as ridiculous as its terms were. How could I offer her anything now?

There had to be a way around this.

I tried to shake this worry off. Adhering to this any longer was nonsense. No one in the frat would act on this.

How many of them were even still adhering to this agreement? Bachelorhood wasn't mandated. There was no decree out there that could force me to keep my distance from Goldie.

I brushed my teeth and slipped out of my shirt, ready to hit the sack and allow sleep to render the issue irrelevant. But no matter how many times I tried to tell myself this reckless signature of mine no longer mattered, I couldn't shake a sinking, dark feeling:

I'd bound myself to keep my distance from the woman I was falling in love with.

And there was nothing I could do to change that fact.

goldie

DREAMS OF ADRIAN made sleeping on the too-cushy mattress more like a restless daze. His arms around me, the sound of his voice, the way he made my stomach flutter. Everything was more amplified in my dreams. He was leaning in to kiss me just before my eyes popped open.

I awoke with splashes of both yearning and disappointment.

And a huge desire to see him again.

I dressed eagerly. My steps were light. My outlook was downright dizzy at the possibility.

Maybe it was good I hadn't gotten ahold of Aunt Bethany yet. If I had, none of this would have happened. Adrian would just be a guy who'd helped me into town instead of someone who was shaking up my existence.

People I hadn't yet met were seated at tables—families with small children; men and women sitting alone. One couple was captured in conversation with Chase, who was bent to their table and pointing things out in a pamphlet he was displaying. An image of a horse was on its cover.

Mrs. Bear wasn't anywhere in sight, and for that I was grateful. I wondered if she knew what had transpired last night. How sweetly Adrian had kissed me. How deeply he was affecting me.

“Morning, Goldie,” Chase greeted as I took a seat at a nearby table.

A woman wearing a white chef's apron over her jeans and t-shirt approached.

"Eggs and pancakes, please," I ordered.

I longed to get back in a kitchen. It'd been too long since I'd baked anything.

If I didn't hear back from Aunt Bethany this afternoon, I'd ask Adrian about baking for his mom. Food was the best AC to cool the air between people—and I did want to show my thanks.

I was enjoying the delicious swirl of pancakes soaked in syrup when Adrian entered. He was flanked by Kimmy, who wore a yellow sundress, and her two girls. I barely saw any of them, though...because Adrian was in a cowboy hat.

I got a sweeping image of him out on the range, soaking in the sun, bronzing his tannable skin, commanding the range, dominating his horse, bossing the cattle, and being so very in charge it was completely mouthwatering.

"Adri, Adri!" the youngest girl called, offering her tiny hands.

He scooped her up and carried her to where I sat.

"Good morning," I said, totally checking him out and not caring that anyone else got a full-fledged view of my near-on-drooling. "You look like you've been busy."

"Yep. I took these rascals for a horse ride."

The little girl threw her arms around his neck and gave him a squeeze that somehow squeezed my heart at the same time. Adrian set her down, and she scampered to her mom and dad.

Adrian took the empty chair across from me, oozing masculinity. Or maybe that was the sight of his muscular contours visible in the shirt he wore. He rapped his fingers on the table nervously, which then made me wonder what he had to be nervous about.

"Want to see the horses this morning?" he asked.

Aside from horses I'd driven past or seen in movies, I'd never seen them in person. Up close. The idea filled me with excitement.

"I'd love to." I began stacking my empty cup and utensils on my plate, searching for a cart or something to place them on.

"Sandy will get that," Adrian said, standing, taking my hand, and pulling me to my feet. "Come on."

It felt strange leaving my mess for someone else to clean, but I glanced at the other tables and saw a young girl wearing a black apron busing tables and clearing away dishes. If that was her job, that worked for me.

The minute we stepped outside and treaded down the porch, I found myself in Adrian's arms. "I've been thinking about you all day."

Bring on the flutter. I was melting, dissolving, turning into goo. "I dreamed about you."

"Oh, yeah?" His voice tickled. "And?"

Heat camped in my cheeks. I gave him a sly glance. "You were hideous."

He smirked. "Not possible."

"No, no, it was. I wasn't into you at all." I couldn't lower the corners of my lips.

"I'll show you hideous."

He lugged me against him and began tickling me, which earned him a chorus of squeals and ended in a delicious kiss. He gazed into my eyes, resting his hand on my cheek and stroking it.

"Horses?" I said breathily, needing to get back on track before I lost all of my senses completely.

"Horses."

"Funny that you have all boys in your family, and now, your brother has all girls," I said.

Once the heat of our moment siphoned away, the morning air was far cooler than the afternoon we'd spent together the day before.

"My mom thought so, too. She was over the moon about having some girls around."

"And your dad? Was he excited about having girls around?"

The mood around him instantly hardened. I could swear I heard his jaw grind.

"I'm not sure he got excited about anything."

"You want to tell me why he makes you so tense?" Even now, after he was gone?

Adrian swallowed, hesitating so long I kicked myself. We'd had a beautiful start to the day—and then I had to go and ruin it by mentioning his dad.

Moments later, he answered. "Even though my brother got married first, I'm the oldest. Technically, I should have been the one to start taking over the ranch, handling the business side of things while my mom ran the B & B. But I don't want it. I don't care about the inheritance, which he thought should matter the most to me.

"I know it sounds petty, but I always wanted him to care about what I was interested in, not the other way around. I'm a businessman, not a ranch hand."

"Are you sure about that?" I flicked a finger against his hat with its sweeping brim.

His gaze skimmed upward, and he removed his hat. "This? This is just for the girls."

"It's for me, too."

"Oh, yeah?"

A shrug. "It does you a few favors."

His eyes smoldered. "The hat's a win."

He placed it back onto his head and then scooped me into his arms, dipping me back. I laughed and clung to his muscular shoulders before he kissed me hard and then set me back on my feet again.

“It’s so a win. In fact—you claim not to like it here, yet you seem so at home at the same time. What’s really bothering you, deep down?”

It was an extremely personal question, but I couldn’t help asking it.

He cast his gaze toward the horizon before entering the barn. Horses lined up in stalls, their heads peeking over the barriers. They were in every shade, from white to black to tan and even paint horses with splotches of color in between. I was surprised how many stalls there were.

Adrian stopped to pat a curious black stallion’s nose. The horse nuzzled in, welcoming the attention.

“The memories,” he said. “There’s too much of my old man in this place.”

“I get it.”

And I did. Things were making more sense now: why he loathed this place as much as he did; why he kept doing everything he could to prevent his mom from having any say in his life.

I’d never been around horses much before, but I found I liked them, despite the smell. They were calming in a way. The black stallion’s eyes were wary as I approached, but I copied Adrian, brushing a palm against its smooth neck.

“Makes me sound heartless, I know,” he said.

I continued stroking the horse. “Actually, I understand more than you know. My mom is pretty controlling and dominating.

“I’ve always been scared to take off on my own, but I’m twenty-seven. I knew it was time, and now that I have, I feel so brave. It’s one reason I haven’t wanted to call her—I don’t want her to ruin my victory with her cynical remarks.”

I expelled a breath and added, “It’s one reason I don’t want to go home.”

Friction filled the air. His gaze hooked me, immersing me in everything he was. His hand landed on mine, still stroking the horse. “I don’t—”

Before he could finish, voices crept nearer to the barn’s entrance, cutting him off. Adrian peered over my shoulder and then took my hand, pressed a finger to his lips, and guided me farther in, taking an entrance in the center of the line of stalls.

“What are you doing?” I asked. And what had he been about to say?

“Shh,” he said with a beguiling smirk. “Looks like it’s Jordan and his hot date. I don’t want to throw off their day.” He nosed in so his breath tickled my neck. “Or to have them ruin ours.”

Jordan and Taylor’s soft voices grew louder. In all reality, we could have stepped out of the barn, but Adrian was treating this like an adventure.

I wasn’t about to pass up an *adventure* with him.

His hand rested on my back, and together, we receded deeper into the shaded space, completely out of sight. The younger couple was visible through a gap in the wood, a gap that kept us shadowed. Though I smelled the coolness in the wood and the scent of animals and feed, Adrian’s nearness rendered them both irrelevant.

I was close to him. So close.

Hidden as we were, I brushed my cheek against his face. “You were saying?”

His hand stroked my spine, making the hairs on my nape stand on end. “I don’t want you to go, either.”

My heart banged against my ribs. His eyes glittered in the darkness.

“What if we made an addendum to our relationship? Let’s keep this up. Be my girlfriend. Even after you go.”

I couldn't wrap my head around what he was saying. That had been part of my dream too. How could he be saying this while I was awake?

"I—how will that even work?" I whispered.

"It will because we want it to. I'll visit you in Wisconsin. You'll come to Chicago. We'll make it work."

"How? Private jets?"

I almost snorted at the notion, remembering the outrageous suggestion Hawk had made about flying to Vermont and back in one day.

"You think you're joking, but it's a possibility."

Yeah, just like traveling at the speed of light was a possibility.

"Adrian—"

He stopped my arguments with a kiss. "Just think about it, okay? Think it over before you give me an answer."

The air grew thin. I couldn't concentrate on anything. My mind was still too razed by his request. Continue dating Adrian? I waited for an argument to surface, but nothing came.

When I opened my mouth, all I said was, "Okay."

His grin was irresistible. "Okay." He lowered his voice and tilted in. "You should know something else, though."

My defenses sparked. "What's that?"

"I had my assistant look into Bethany Harold."

The hum of his deep voice in the darkness stirred through me. I'd expected more sweet nothings. This was so not nothing, but it still sounded *so* sweet. He wanted to help me look for my aunt?

"You have an assistant? Why would you have her do that?"

"I know her absence is really bothering you, and I wanted to help."

My surprise faded fast. Using his resources to help me? That was completely gallant.

He was having a hazy effect on my thought process. “And your brother accused me of being a spy. Sounds like he had the wrong person.”

“I would set the record straight, but it looks like he’s a bit preoccupied at the moment.”

I leaned closer for a peek through the gap. Jordan and Taylor faced one another, their gazes rapt. It really was thoughtful of Adrian to give them a moment alone—or what they thought was a moment alone.

I would have preferred not to be within eavesdropping or peep-holing distance, but under the circumstances, we couldn’t leave without calling attention to ourselves now.

Something told me the scent of manure, animals, and feed never completely faded, no matter how much time a person spent in here. I didn’t mind, though.

In the moment, in the dark, the only thing I was aware of was Adrian. How close he stood. How heat from his body thrummed and awakened mine. How he wanted to keep dating me.

I hadn’t given him an answer yet because I really didn’t know what to say. He made being together sound like it was easy. I was pretty sure the distance of several hundred miles would make a relationship anything but.

A horse chuffed nearby. Jordan dipped toward Taylor for a kiss, and then the two pulled away and strolled back out through the open doors.

“The coast is clear,” I whispered, needing some fresh air myself. I still needed time to consider.

I wasn’t sure why I couldn’t just tell him yes. Things were too up in the air with my aunt right now, with my mom, with my doubts about Adrian. What was I going to do?

He made no sign of moving. Instead, his eyes glinted with undisclosed humor.

“Kissing in the barn can be pretty romantic,” he said suggestively.

I slanted my gaze at him. I would have folded my arms if there was room. “Exactly how many kisses have you had in this barn?”

He tilted in. His breath tickled my cheek. “I’ll tell you in a minute.”

Oh, boy. I was in trouble.

He paused.

I pulsed.

His hands went around me. “Goldie,” he said, and for some reason, the sound made me cringe.

If he wanted more of a relationship with me, that meant I had to tell him something I’d never told anyone before. Something that seemed crucial if we were going to get any closer.

“Goldie isn’t my real name, you know.” My hand skimmed against his abs, and I shivered at their rock-hard feel.

“Oh? What is it?”

“Gabrielle,” I said, closing my eyes and resting my cheek against his. “My mom loved the name, but it turned first to Gabby. Then, because of my hair, my dad started calling me Goldie, and it just stuck. Even I use the name all the time now.”

His fingers stroked my hair, lifting it from my neck. The touch shivered up my spine.

“These highlights of yours are really something. I know a lot of women pay for hair like this, but I’m guessing you didn’t.”

“I love my hair.”

“Me, too,” he said. “That’s not all I like about you. Gabby,” he said as if trying it out. “I’m glad you told me your name.”

My heart picked up speed. Pressed against him as I was in the confined space, I slipped my hand behind his hair and tiptoed. My body enflamed, palpitating at the prospect, at his

touch, his nearness and his breath, until my lids fluttered closed, and I pressed my mouth to his.

It was sunshine, pure and vibrant and pulsing. It was the sky and seclusion. His hands stroked my jaw as his lips coerced mine, enticing me closer. I pivoted for better access, and his hands traveled along my side, cupping my jaw, keeping me fastened to him.

“That,” he said, “is definitely a favorite part of you.”

“What?”

“You need me to show you again?” He kissed me soundly, willingly, without reserve, the way he did everything. Adrian was kind and generous, he was thoughtful and spoke his mind, and his kisses were just as absorbing as he was.

Slowly, I pulled away and nestled against his chest. “This is so surreal to me. It’s like a story from a fairytale. Who would have thought I’d meet the most gorgeous guy, sleep in his cabin—”

“That was memorable.”

I punched his shoulder. “And be living in this daydream right now? It’s almost like it’s someone else. Not me.”

“Oh, it’s you, all right.” He kissed me once. “And me.” Twice.

“I like the sound of that.”

I kissed him back. Longer and longer, I lost myself in his affection.

His lips whispered against my skin. “Tell me more about you. Everything I don’t know.”

“I’m not that interesting.”

“Trust me. You are exactly that interesting.”

“I love to bake.”

His nose teased my temple. “So you’ve told me.”

My lashes fluttered. I did my best to keep my thoughts on track.

“I’d like to bake something for your mom.” The words *before I go* nearly slipped out, but I held them in. I didn’t want to ruin whatever this was with talk of endings, not when it felt like my life had just begun.

“Okay, then. I think she would like that. What did you have in mind?”

“What about monkey bread?”

Adrian sputtered a laugh.

“I’m serious.”

“Monkey bread isn’t a thing.”

“Yes, it is. And it’s delicious.”

His thumb caressed my jaw. “All right, then. When are we making it?”

I stepped back and wove my way out of the nook we’d found. The enclosed space, his hands around me, they’d prevented me from moving much, and I needed some ventilation to clear him from my senses.

It was brighter outside, and not just because of the sunlight. “I think you mean me. When am I making it?”

“A gentleman doesn’t allow a lady to make monkey bread alone.”

I quirked a brow. “That’s not Shakespeare.”

“I never said it was.”

I laughed. “Fine. Tonight?”

I really needed to correct those papers. I’d also like to stop by my aunt’s house again. Time was running out. I couldn’t have come all this way for nothing.

With a glance at Adrian and a finger to my swollen lips, it wasn’t *completely* for nothing. What was I going to do about his request to keep dating?

“My mom and Jordan are heading out to an FFA meeting tonight. Future Farmers of America. We’ll have the house to ourselves.”

My breath hitched. “The house, as in—?”

“As in my house. Where I’ve been staying.”

Not the bed and breakfast.

His house.

I forgot how to breathe altogether.

I paused before a collection of saddles hanging on pegs on the wall. “Are you sure you don’t have anything better to do than keep me company? You said your business needs you.”

“My business will be fine. I delayed my plans, and tonight, I have no other agenda than monkey bread—and there’s something I’d like to tell you.”

I wanted this to be sincere. I wanted to believe he was as interested in me as he seemed to be. A warning wedged itself into my chest, though.

I knew better than to let myself get closer to him. It would only make things harder when my time here was up. When his time was up.

Jet planes, dating long distance—it would never work. That meant I’d make the most of what little time with him I did have.

I couldn’t begin to imagine whatever it was he wanted to tell me. Or why he couldn’t just say it now. The thought made my mouth go dry.

“Fair enough. Eight o’clock?”

He wove his fingers through mine, lifted my hand to his lips, and kissed it. “Can’t wait.”

adrian

I WALKED GOLDIE—NO, *Gabby*—back to the main house. Her cheeks were filled with a becoming blush, and I burned with pride because I was pretty sure I had something to do with that. Our kisses were amazing.

If only this afterbuzz was enough to dispel the worries I still had.

I was glad she'd opened up to me. Admitting her name seemed like a big deal to her, and if that was what it took to get her to keep going out with me, so be it.

Gabrielle fit her, I decided. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.

She waved to me before heading inside, and I turned on my heel with a little zip-a-dee-doo-dah in my step. I'd never been one for whistling, but I could probably bust out a tune right about now.

A message from Hawk appeared on my phone. I'd texted him about getting some candy sent to Rita for her sleuthing help.

Hawk: I'll have my PA get on it. How's it going with blonde?

I chuckled.

Me: Trying to convince her to keep dating me.

Hawk: Sounds serious. Is she going for it?

Me: She's deciding.

Hawk: That's it, dude. It might be time to give her the truth.

Me: About what?

Was he talking about The Pact?

Though I'd promised Grey I'd send him a copy of that contract once I found it, I hadn't been able to bring myself to look at it since the other night. And I hadn't broached the subject with Hawk at all.

He and I had been close at the frat, too. In fact, it was thanks to the frat that we'd become friends at all.

The Pact had been a joke to him. I doubted he put any stock in it now whatsoever. Why I did, I couldn't tell.

Actually, I knew. I couldn't shake the fact that the day after Grey had backed out, Will had physically attacked Bria.

The thought of anyone hurting Gabby made my blood boil. It triggered protective instincts in me that I didn't know I had. If anyone came near her because of my brash actions from *ten years ago*, they'd find themselves more than sorry.

I'd die before I let anything happen to her.

My steps slowed, and I stared at the horizon, watching it blur as my gaze unfocused.

Whoa. That thought was unnerving. Mostly because the truth of it burnished inside of me with more clarity and brightness than sunlight glinting on a crack in the glass.

Maybe it was time to contact Grey again. I wondered if he'd heard from Will at all since he'd been released. Grey and Bria had gotten married and had three kids. Had Will made any threats to either of them again?

Hawk: Time to tell her you're loaded. She'll fall at your feet.

I chuckled but not as much as I would have if this were a normal situation, a normal conversation.

I peered toward the pair of horses in the corral and did what I could to bring myself back to Hawk's wavelength.

Money. He was talking about telling Goldie how rich I was.

I'd done the best I could to keep myself from being too extravagant while we were together. The golf clubs may have been a bit overboard, but I'd figured those weren't as big of a deal as buying my own personal golf course or something.

Now, that was an idea...

Me: No way. I want her to like me first.

Besides, it would come out skeevy. If I told her I was a billionaire just to get her to date me? That was the wrong approach. I wanted her to be with me because she wanted to.

And I really wanted her to want to.

She'd been so hesitant, so skeptical. In all reality, managing a few states' difference between us would be no big deal at all. I could fly out to her or bring her to me anytime. I'd almost spilled the beans when she'd mentioned the private jets.

Hawk: It's The Pact, isn't it?

An ounce of tension dripped from my shoulders. He'd acknowledged it. He remembered it. Maybe bringing up my concerns wasn't as harebrained as I thought.

I strode to the corral and rested my shoulder against one of its wooden posts.

Me: Maybe.

After I'd graduated, after Sean was gone, Hawk had become president of the fraternity. He'd carried on the

tradition of The Pact, more as a ploy to light a fire under some of the other brothers living there than anything else.

Competition always served as a good motivator.

I wasn't sure if it had still continued now that we were gone, but that didn't matter now as much as making sure no one was going to hunt the rest of us down for not adhering to it.

Hawk: You know none of us took that seriously when we made it.

Me: Some did. You remember Grey and Bria?

Hawk: That was a one-time thing. No one is going to care that you're dating Goldie. Are you falling in love with her?

I wasn't used to thoughtfulness from Hawk Danielson. He acted half-baked most of the time, goofy and lunkheaded. I knew it was his way to keep from taking life too seriously. He didn't normally ask questions like this, which was why I didn't mind answering.

Was I falling in love with her?

Me: Yeah, I think I am.

Hawk: I doubt you have anything to worry about. Think about it. Who's going to uphold The Pact after all this time?

Me: You're probably right. I've been freaking myself out.

Hawk: Have you told her how you feel?

I imagined having this conversation in person. Hawk would make a few jokes, give me a hard time, but he'd sober up. He'd clap me on the shoulder and wish me luck. He'd prod

me to be a man and tell her straight up. Beneath that wacky veneer, he was an authentic and reliable confidant.

Me: Not yet.

Hawk: What are you waiting for?

I wasn't sure what to say. What *was* I waiting for? More time with her? To see if she felt the same? I wanted to ensure her safety, for one thing, and that meant making sure this contract was, in fact, invalid.

My phone rang, jerking me from my response. The ranch hand stepped out of the barn and glanced in my direction—probably hearing my ringtone too. He lifted a hand. I gestured back.

After texting Hawk that I'd talk to him later, I answered. Rita spoke without an initial greeting.

"I found her."

It took me a few blinks before I remembered who she was talking about. Right. The late-night request I'd made.

"Bethany Harold?" I asked. "Who is she? Where is she?"

"She's a woman on your father's payroll."

This surprised me. First Danica, now Gabby's aunt?

I rested a boot on the wooden fence's bottom rung. "She worked for my dad?"

"Still does," Rita said. "As for her background—I'm assuming you wanted info on her background?"

"Give me everything you've got."

Turning away from the corral and the dust the horse was kicking up, I quickened my pace toward Mom's house. It was true, I wanted to know as much as I could. Anything that could help Gabby with her search.

I couldn't help but refer to her by her real name. Goldie had been too literal a name for her. Gabby was much better—

not only suited to her features, but to *her*.

“Bethany was born in Deer Lodge and moved to Two Pines when she was twelve years old. She never married, no school or education or anything like that, and she’s lived there ever since.” Rita spoke as if in recitation. “She did have a baby and placed it for adoption years ago, and she’s mostly kept to herself.”

“A baby? How long ago?”

Rita paused before continuing. “Looks like about twenty-eight years ago. Her sister was the one who took the baby and moved to Wisconsin.”

I lost the ability to breathe. “Are you saying what I think you are?”

“That depends,” Rita said. “What do you think I’m saying?”

I didn’t answer her, but my mind screamed it so loudly I could hardly think.

“What was the baby’s name?” I had to clear my throat to get the words out.

Gabby had told me she was twenty-seven. This was too coincidental to be a fluke.

“It doesn’t say. Why do you ask?”

I sank against the side of the barn, unsure of how or when I’d returned to it. I’d been heading past the barn toward Mom’s place after dropping Gabby off, but my mind wobbled. I must have taken a subconscious detour. The call, my text conversation with Hawk, they’d both thrown me completely off.

I tried to return my thoughts to the matter at hand. This baby that Rita referred to—maybe it was Gabby’s sister.

It had to be—it couldn’t be what I thought.

Except Gabby had told me herself—she was an only child. No cousins. No extended family.

“You say Bethany works for my dad. Any chance you have a contact number for her?”

“You’re going overboard, boss.”

“I promise it’s not anything suspicious.”

“This whole thing is suspicious,” she grumbled, but she read me the number.

I repeated them in my mind and then transferred them to the notes in my phone.

“Thanks, Rita. I owe you one.”

“More than one,” she said before hanging up.

My brain was a propeller, spinning faster and faster and threatening to take me forward too quickly. This couldn’t be what I thought it was. As much as I tried to discount my suspicions, the clues were all there before me.

If what Rita said was true, was this Bethany Harold really Gabby’s mother? If so, how could I even tell her something like that?

goldie

I MADE my way through a few students' papers, laughing out loud at one young man's parody on cowboy boots versus high heels. There were only a few of these left to go, and the kids really had outdone themselves. My little teacher heart was proud—which only made things harder.

The more time I spent with Adrian, the more I envisioned a life with him. That meant leaving Baldwin behind. Leaving my students behind.

I could do that if it came down to it, couldn't I?

I checked my email more often than was verifiably healthy, but no emails had come from Aunt Bethany. Which left the evening with Adrian. Alone, in his house.

The pit of my stomach curled. I braved a visit to the grocery store in town to gather the ingredients we needed and to fill my truck with gas. Fortunately, I'd made the trip with Adrian often enough, I now recognized a few landmarks.

After returning, I ate dinner in the dining room downstairs and then sat on the porch swing with a sense of change in my bones. Something about tonight was different. Maybe it was the lightheaded cloud I'd been walking on since meeting Adrian.

I couldn't remember ever feeling comfortable enough with someone to admit my real name. I hadn't even told Lois! To everyone, I was Goldie Bybanks.

But to Adrian...

I wasn't sure what I was. More than that, I wasn't sure what I wanted to be.

Okay, I take that back. I knew exactly what I *wanted* to be to him. Girlfriend, through and through, no ifs ands or buts. I was Gabrielle, and he knew it.

I wanted to grant his earlier request—I wanted him to know me so that I could then find out everything about him, too.

However, possibility wasn't on this spectrum. Though Adrian had expressed frustration with Danica, and how she wasn't willing to move to Chicago to be with him while he ran his business, I could sympathize with her a little bit.

I wouldn't mind moving, not really. As much as I loved my students, they would be moving on with their lives eventually, too.

Leaving Baldwin would mean more distance between me and my parents, and that could only be a good thing, too. But that was a serious step, one that we shouldn't pursue until things between us had been going much longer than they currently had.

Which meant dating in the meantime. Which meant long distance. Which meant torture.

I would agonize over him, over the fact that he was in Chicago and whether or not he really was keeping away from other women. The distance would drive me insane.

How was it fair to do the same thing to him? Not that I dated all that much in Baldwin; I really didn't. But he wouldn't know that. All he would have would be my word.

Sooner or later, one of us would meet someone else. Because we were so far apart, it wasn't fair to expect either of us to not pursue happiness if it presented itself. My heart couldn't handle the uncertainty.

That settled it. My answer would have to be no.

Resolving on that brought a sickening pang to my stomach. I didn't want that. I didn't want to let him go. But I

didn't know what else to do.

In the distance, Mrs. Bear and Jordan ambled down the path near the barn and to the parking lot where Mrs. Bear's car was. I waited until they drove away, and then, groceries in hand and tennis ball in my throat, I passed the barn, passed Chase and Kimmy's, and approached the Bear residence on the outskirts. Fading sunlight cast a golden, purple glow along the grass.

Adrian was on the porch, his hair gloriously windswept and a shadow of stubble speckling his jawline. He carried a bundle beneath one arm and beamed at me.

"I was just about to come pick you up."

He offered me the bundle. It was a package wrapped in brown paper.

"What's this for?"

"Open it."

I placed my bag of groceries on the step and tore into the brown paper wrapping. Inside was a pair of cream aprons with little green chili peppers on them.

"Matching?" I smiled at him.

"Not quite. Would you rather I take the ruffled one?" He fanned it out and held it to his chest.

I laughed. It was just that much different from the squared-off version in my hands. "Don't knock the ruffles. I take it you don't bake much."

"No better time to start. Here."

He slipped the apron over his head and tied it around his waist. Then he did the same for me, allowing his fingers to linger on my waist as he rotated me to tie mine. He then whipped out his phone and crept in close.

Man, he smelled good. My heart pounded as he pressed his cheek to mine.

"Smile," he said, but I already was.

Smiling came so naturally with him. The phone made a snapping sound, and he rotated it for us both to see.

The image of my face with his cemented him into my heart more firmly, and it made my earlier resolve twist its knife into my gut.

“We look good together,” he said.

“Will you send me a copy of that?”

I was asking for it. For future anguish, for the prospect of what could have been to torture me on cold and lonely nights when I would undoubtedly pull up that picture and stare at him and remember kissing him and wish I’d made a different decision. A decision I knew wasn’t possible.

I had to tell him tonight. I couldn’t be his girlfriend.

He took a minute on his screen and then said, “Done. Now, then. Ready to go? What do you have here?”

Still in his apron, he bent for the bag of groceries.

“Supplies,” I said, opening the door.

The house was much as I expected. I wondered if this house and Chase’s had been built at similar times. The carpet, the layout, the granite on the counters—they were all similar to Chase’s. This one was just sans toys.

“It’s so nice in here,” I said, circling on the kitchen tile and taking in the cabinets’ dark shades and the luxurious, stylish space. “It reminds me of Chase’s house and of your cabin.”

“After Mom decided to renovate the house and turn it into a B & B, she hired similar builders for this house and the others.”

He leaned against the counter. I flattened the recipe on the countertop beside him.

“What’s first?” he asked.

I chewed my lip. First, I should be straight up with him. I should tell him what I’d decided: we needed to end things.

Once I went home, once he went home, we would call it. But I couldn't bring myself to say as much.

"We assemble the ingredients..."

"Perfect." He rubbed his hands together.

"But we do it one-handed."

He quirked a brow. "Is that specified in the recipe?"

"Nope. Just my recipe with you." One last adhesive to make tearing the bandage off that much more painful.

"Okay, then." He tucked his hand behind his back. "One-handed it is."

I did the same, tucking my arm behind my back. Together, we approached the ingredients on the counter.

"It would take forever if we made our own bread dough," I said. "I got some refrigerated biscuits that we'll use instead."

"Too bad. I was looking forward to making bread dough with you."

I smacked him. He laughed and lifted his hands before tucking one behind his back again and picking up the can of biscuits.

"Exactly how am I supposed to open this one-handed?"

I edged in, leaning against his arm as I offered my available hand to peel at the blue flap. "Teamwork."

His eyes sparked. He held the can, and I peeled. My hand brushed his, as was the plan, and I delighted at the many excuses to touch him. Together, we pounded the can against the counter until it popped. Even though I knew it was coming, it still startled me.

"I think you're onto something here with this one-handed thing," he said.

Our fingers had to touch as they peeled pieces of refrigerated dough apart and placed them on the pan.

The touch alone was one thing. Add to it the sticky texture of the dough between our fingertips, and the intimacy rose to

an intriguing level, becoming almost provocative. It tingled straight through my arm with every stroke.

I kept waiting for openings, or for him to bring it up, but he never did, and I couldn't. I was having too much fun with him to ruin anything with my rejection. So I brushed it aside the best that I could.

"Now, we need sugar," I said, turning to the small bag I'd picked up from the store.

I could have used Mrs. Bear's ingredients, but that kind of defeated the purpose.

Just like using Adrian's own food to cook him breakfast had—but we wouldn't go there.

"How much?" Adrian dug the measuring cup from its drawer and joined my side again, sneaking in a touch.

I had a hard time opening the container. Adrian lifted his hand, pushing against me as he did so. With his help to measure the correct amount and scrape it evenly off the top, we turned to pour the collected sugar into the bowl—and collided.

Sugar went everywhere. It splattered across Adrian's chest and sprinkled my nose, making me sneeze several times with embarrassingly loud clarity.

I waited for censure, only to find Adrian's eyes gleaming at me. He swept a bit of sugary dust from his shoulder. I began my search for a dustpan when his arm wove around me, securing me to him.

My reservations walloped me, smashing into me from all sides. "Maybe this was a bad idea," I said.

"This is the best idea you've ever had."

My eyes narrowed. I couldn't think being held by him as I was. "How do you know the sum total of all my ideas?"

"Intuition, remember?" He tipped his head closer.

His gaze tripped to my mouth, intensifying my pulse to sprinting levels. We hadn't been this close since our moment

in the barn, and while we were now in a kitchen with a vaulted ceiling and bright lights gleaming around us, I felt no less secluded.

“You planned this, didn’t you?” he said.

“Spilling the sugar?”

“I’ll spill some sugar.” He pressed his lips to mine, and this was definitely not one-handed.

With his arm securely around me, his other stroked my jaw as he deepened the kiss, sending my mind to another plane completely, a plane where only the two of us existed, where I wanted to do exactly this, be alone with him and feel him pressed against me, taste him for the rest of my life.

But I couldn’t. I couldn’t have him for the rest of my life—and the moment crashed around me, making that evident.

I pulled away, breaking free from his embrace. “I can’t.”

“What?”

I almost ran my hands into my hairline, but thought better of it. They were covered in sugar and butter and traces of him I didn’t want to let go of but had to.

“You asked if I wanted to be your girlfriend after this? I can’t. I don’t think we should.”

Pain flashed across his eyes. The playful mood between us severed. “Why? What brought this on?”

Tears stung my eyes. Where did those come from? I blinked hard and fast, wishing them away. I wished I could keep my flapping heart under control.

“I don’t see how it will work. You live in Chicago. I live in Wisconsin. We have different lives.”

“That distance doesn’t matter to me.”

“It did with Danica,” I said, hating myself but knowing it needed to be said.

His brow hardened. “If she were the right one, we could have made it work. She wasn’t. You are.”

“How can you even know that? It’s only been days.”

“I’m not sure that really matters. I’m not asking you to marry me. I’m asking you to keep dating me, and I think the distance won’t be that big of a problem.”

“What if you meet someone else?”

“Who says I will?”

“Chicago is a big city, Adrian. You’ll be busy with your life. I don’t want to hold you back from anything.”

“You won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Neither do you. I want you. Even if I do go home, I’ll just be thinking of you.”

“How can you even know that?”

“Because it’s all I’ve been able to do since we met.”

His insistence quietened me. He captured my hands in his.

“You shared your name with me. That was special. I wanted to share something with you too—I guess now is as good a time as any. Rita found your aunt—”

From its place on the counter, my phone chimed, tearing me away. It wasn’t the sound of a text or a call. It was the honking notification of an email.

Only one thing could have wrenched me away from Adrian, and it was *that* sound.

“Gabby?” Adrian said.

I couldn’t think about anything he was saying. I cleaned my hands off on a towel and swiped against the screen.

My heart banged at the sight of the little red *one* over my email icon. I tapped on it and gaped at the name I’d been waiting to see for over a week now.

Bethany Harold.

“It’s her. She finally emailed me.” I held the phone to my chest. This was everything. This meant I wasn’t crazy, and this

trip hadn't been for nothing.

I met the desperation in his gaze. "I'm sorry, Adrian. I have to go. I'll help you clean this up, but she finally contacted me, and I'm—" I hesitated. "Can we finish discussing this later? I need to go."

His shoulders shrunk. He reached behind and began untying his apron. "Go ahead, Gabby. I've got this."

"What did you call me?"

His lips lifted in a sad little quirk. Flecks of sugar dusted his cheek. "Your name, isn't it?"

My name. My *real* name.

I wanted to go to him. To ignore the nagging siren call of my email, to finish our conversation, but this was why I'd come all this way. I'd tried so many times to contact Aunt Bethany, and now that she'd replied, I had to respond.

Still, I couldn't just leave him. "Where's your broom?"

He snared me by the elbow. Pain crossed his features, but he pressed a tender kiss to my temple. "I mean it. I've got this. Go do what you need to do. Just promise you won't write me off completely. Not yet."

My mouth hung open, but I didn't know what to say. "Thank you," I said, turning and heading back outside.

I hoped Adrian would be open to continuing our conversation, but the truth was, I had to get out of there or I'd lose my nerve.

adrian

IN ALL THE times I'd rehearsed what I'd wanted to say to her, I never imagined she would turn me down.

I swept sugar into a pile in the kitchen's center. The evening left on a sucky end. Its magic hadn't lasted long, yet it'd been long enough to let me know I hadn't been wrong in my feelings.

I was falling for her. I couldn't erase the expression on her face when she'd realized I'd called her by her name.

Why, then, had she said what she did? She didn't want to date me after this? I couldn't accept that.

I wasn't about to.

I'd hoped telling her what I'd discovered about her aunt might make a difference, but the timing had been off. Wouldn't it be better for her to hear the truth from its source? Part of me wished I could be there when she did.

That hadn't been the only thing I wanted to reveal to her. Hawk had asked if I'd told her how I felt yet—and tonight, I was planning on it. I'd tried—and my efforts had failed.

Agony tore through me with every move I made and every mess I cleaned. Tossing the biscuit can into the garbage. Sweeping sugar into the dust pan.

She didn't want me. After everything we'd been through, she didn't want me.

I hadn't expected that—and I didn't know what to do about it.

When an investment wasn't working, I pulled out. When a client needed more convincing, I upped the ante. That was probably why Hawk had suggested what he did, but I didn't want Gabby to want me for my money, or for all the things I'd done for her.

I wanted her to like me for me. Because that was how I liked her, too.

The door opened, and Mom and Jordan entered. I withheld a groan. The last thing I wanted to deal with right now was Mom's doe-eyed view of what my life should be like—especially now, after I'd basically been rejected.

Jordan stomped straight to his room without a word of greeting, but Mom sauntered in and rested her hands on the back of a barstool.

“What's this mess?”

I considered and decided the truth was best. I knew she didn't like my girl, but I had to do what I could to fix that as well.

“Goldie wanted to make something for you, but she got some news and needed to leave unexpectedly.”

Was that hope that entered Mom's eyes? Figures. “Leave? As in...?”

“As in, she'll be back to her room later.”

I hoped so. A small part of me worried I'd never see her again after our argument, but she wouldn't take off and leave for home without saying goodbye, would she?

I had to find a different way to present my argument, that was all. I had to show her that a long-distance relationship could work. Maybe it was time to follow through with Hawk's suggestion after all and tell her I could make it work without a single snag.

Mom removed her jacket and draped it on the stool. Her mouth was in its usual downturned position.

“You're getting in over your head with her, Adrian. I don't believe you've known her very long.”

I'd been with many women who may have fit this description, but not Gabby Bybanks. There was a time I'd dated and let women go without a second thought. That was no longer the case.

If I wanted Gabby to be more than my flavor-of-the-week, I had to come clean. It was time to tell Mom the truth.

"We're not really dating. I told you that because you wouldn't believe she was actually with me, and then Goldie agreed to be my girlfriend when I asked her to."

Mom's eyes turned shrewd. "I knew it. I knew you couldn't possibly have known her that long. You two are unbelievable. Be careful about women like her, women who want to tell you lies and expect free hotel rooms."

"She's a school teacher, Mom. She came out here to find her aunt. She's not a gold-digger."

I'd had plenty of those. Those women were drawn to me only for my money, begged me to buy them things, dragged me to events, and were beyond eager to be seen in the public eye.

Gabby did exactly none of those things. From the start, she'd made it clear she had no interest in my fortune. She probably had no idea exactly *how* rich I actually was.

All the more reason I didn't want to tell her. All the more reason I should.

Maybe she was right to end things with me. Maybe it would be better to let this spring fling be nothing more than a fling.

It didn't feel like just a casual relationship, though. Not for me.

I hoped it wasn't for her, either.

"She needs to go. She's a distraction."

I stopped sweeping and gripped the broom. "A distraction from what, exactly? She's the reason I stayed the past few days, Mom."

“I know you want something to happen with Danica. I know she’s been your favorite, and I sometimes feel you like her more than you like me,” I added with a laugh.

I laughed because it was true.

“But that’s not going to happen. Danica and I had our shot. We tried. We weren’t a good fit.”

“Danica seems to think otherwise.”

“So that means I should just give up my reservations about her? That’s not how it works.”

Mom gave me a direct glower. “What exactly is it that bothers you so much about her?”

She tossed an empty wrapper in the garbage and dusted her hands as if it’d been riddled with disease.

“I was ready to move forward with her,” I said, hoping this time Mom would actually listen to what I had to say. “I was presented with a business opportunity. An opportunity that required me to stay in Chicago to get things running.”

“You could have done that from here.”

I inclined my head. “I could have, but not as easily. I needed to be where my associates were—where my classes were. I was still in college when this all happened. It was the chance of a lifetime, and Danica wouldn’t support me in that.

“I would have for her. When I realized she wouldn’t do the same for me, I started to get the feeling she’d be that way more and more as our relationship deepened, so I ended it before it could get there.”

Gabby had asked me what would be different, and I hadn’t been able to pinpoint it under the heat of the moment, but I knew it now. She and I got along so well. She was sweet. She was aware of me even as I was aware of her.

Her reason for wanting to end things had been because she’d been worried about *me*.

Which, of course, only made me want her more.

I wondered how things were going for her. Had she made it to her aunt's yet? Had she discovered the truth?

Mom was silent for a moment. "You felt Danica didn't support you."

"She didn't. I need a woman who's on my team." A woman like Gabby.

Thoughts about The Pact clattered through my brain, but I pushed them away.

Mom didn't argue, which was a first for her. Instead, she settled herself on a barstool. Her demeanor was accepting rather than defensive.

"And this Goldie person? You think she can be your cheerleader? Your support team? You hardly know her."

I dusted more sugar from my shirt and didn't fight the smile that curved my lips upward at the sight despite the pang that accompanied it.

"She's the most down-to-earth person I've ever met. She's sweet, which I love. Easy to talk to, fun to be around. She makes me feel like I'm the most important man *she's* ever met."

Not to mention how she made me feel physically. Strong, capable, ready to conquer the world just for her. Every time she kissed me, my entire world turned upside down and continued to do so every time she was around.

I wasn't ready to let that go.

I couldn't believe Mom was listening to me about this. She was hearing me—really hearing me—for what was probably the first time in my life.

Maybe Dad had been one of the reasons Mom couldn't ever find it in herself to support me. Because he never had.

"I think I understand," Mom said.

She stared at her clasped hands before lifting her eyes to mine.

I swallowed. “I also think you should give Gabby a chance.”

She shook her head slightly. “Gabby? I thought her name was Goldie.”

“Goldie is a nickname, I’ve come to find out. I want to call her by her real name. Gabrielle.”

“Pretty name,” Mom said without reservation.

Her tone almost had an apologetic ring to it.

“I thought so, too.”

Silence collected between us. I tapped the dustpan over the garbage can, hearing the sugar tinkle against the rest of the disposed items. I sifted through the remaining contents in Gabby’s grocery bag, placing a few in the fridge and leaving others on the countertop.

Mom collected a long, slow breath and allowed it to exhale. “Adrian? She’s not the only person I need to remedy things with. There’s something you should know.”

I returned the dustpan to its place in the closet and faced her. Something in her tone made my stomach clench.

“What is it?”

Holding an apologetic grimace, she rose from the barstool and crossed the kitchen to me. She placed a hand on my forearm.

“You’re sure you don’t want anything more to do with Danica?”

Confusion rippled over my brow. “I’m sure.”

Her chest rose and fell. “Then I need to ask for your forgiveness. I know where your father’s lockbox is.”

I STOOD ON THE DOORSTEP, half-expecting the same response I'd gotten the other dozen times Adrian and I had dropped by: to ring the doorbell and wait in agony only to have no one respond and return to my truck.

This time, though, footsteps responded. This time, the sound of a lock being turned erupted like a rocket blast and shot my pulse into the sky with it.

A woman stood in the open doorway, her blue eyes welcoming and repentant all at once. Her hair wasn't just blonde. It was golden. Like mine.

"Hello, Goldie," she said. "That's what your family calls you, isn't it?"

I examined my aunt's face, attempting to catalog similarities. The shape of her mouth, her cheekbones, her eyebrows. I found traces of resemblance in the line of Bethany's hair and the tilt of her almond eyes. They were like my mom's.

I lifted my chin. "You knew I was in town."

Her smile fell. "I did."

"Why didn't you contact me? Why didn't you let me know?"

Bethany pushed the screen door open and held it. "Please, come in. I'll explain everything, but we'll be more comfortable sitting down inside."

Stepping inside felt strange, like walking through a memory I didn't know I had. I scanned for anything

recognizable, anything to make this situation less discomfiting. Yet, no matter how hard I tried clasping onto something sensible, being here was disconcerting.

The house was dated. It was clean but old. Wood paneling lined the walls, rendering the living room and kitchen darker than they might have been otherwise. The faint smell of an animal also coated the air, making me wonder if Aunt Bethany had a dog or a cat.

A gray, fluffy cat made its appearance, strutting haughtily over to rub itself along the couch. It looked at me with curiosity in its yellow eyes.

“Why don’t we go into the kitchen?” Bethany suggested with a smile and a hand in that direction.

I walked on eggshells toward a squat table situated beneath a lamp made of different-colored glass. A plate of cookies sat at its center, along with what appeared to be a photo album.

For some reason, the sight of the book got my back up. What was she going to show me? Pictures of her and my mom?

Did she have some outlandish story that might explain why she and my mom had been at odds all these years?

I slipped into a spindle-backed chair. Bethany took a seat across from me and pushed the plate in my direction, but I declined. I sat in a puddle of awkwardness and questions and decided to get right to it.

“Why haven’t I known you?”

Bethany stared at the rejected refreshments, interlocking her hands before her. “Your mom wanted it that way.”

Honesty. This was what it felt like to receive answers. I hadn’t realized I’d been bracing myself for an argument like Mom would have pitched until pain pinched in my shoulders and told me I was clenching them.

“You’re sisters?”

Again, I inspected her, noticing more similarities in their appearances. The shape of their brows, the line of their lips

and cheeks. I had to admit, Aunt Bethany's countenance was significantly more pleasant than Mom's was.

She sat so easily in her chair, looking so relaxed. Her smile was easy as well, and having it directed at me helped loosen the strain in my shoulders as well.

"We are. It's why I had this ready for you. I thought you might want to see some pictures."

"Proof, you mean."

Unlike the cookies, I didn't decline the book when it was presented to me. Bethany flipped to stained photographs displaying two young girls, one with brown hair, one with blonde, laughing in dress-up clothes, blowing bubbles, running through a sprinkler.

"Jacey would hate me for this, but you've been on my mind for years, Goldie. I needed to tell you the truth."

So much for the relaxation I was starting to experience. My frame turned to ice. "What truth?"

Bethany flipped the photo album's page. There were fewer pictures of Mom here. Instead, many images of a teenaged Bethany appeared, with friends, at school, with a good-looking young man. Then one image captured my attention.

Bethany was pregnant, with one hand resting on her stomach. She looked far too young for that responsibility.

"You had a baby?"

The air between us constricted.

"I did. See? There she is." She pointed to a picture of a pretty baby with fat cheeks, long lashes, and a single tooth in her gummy smile.

Suspicion crept into the crevices between my bones.

It was the same picture I'd seen in my own baby album back home in Wisconsin.

My heart began to pound.

“This makes no sense,” I said, unable to bring myself to look anywhere but at the pictures. “I’ve seen all these before.”

“I was in no shape to be a mother. I was barely seventeen, and my boyfriend left town once I told him the news.

“Jacey had been married for a few years by that time. She and Jared had been trying for a while to have a baby but were struggling with infertility. So she offered to care for my baby and raise her—raise you—as their own.”

My vision blanked. Her words grew in size and swarmed around me.

Bethany couldn’t be saying what I thought she was. It couldn’t be true.

With painstakingly noticeable effort, I lifted my gaze to meet hers. “Are you saying you’re my—mother—my birth mother?”

Bethany’s eyes glistened with tears. “I didn’t want to tell you this way. For years, I wanted to come to you, but Jacey told me to stay away.”

I pushed the album away from me. Disbelief rattled through me like a freshly launched pinball. It coursed through my bloodstream, making it impossible for me to remain still.

My thoughts whirred. My mouth parched. I could hardly make sense of this, and yet, the pounding in my chest seemed to verify everything anyway.

“Why now?” I managed. “Why are you telling me this now? It’s been twenty-seven *years*.”

“Your birth father and I have been in contact with one another over the years, and word reached me last month that he’d died in a car accident.”

I blinked, feeling hollower than ever. “Oh, my goodness.”

This news should affect me more than it did. It was sad to hear that someone died, but this man—whoever he was—had been my *father*.

I should have known him. I should have been devastated by this news, the way Adrian had been over his father's death. But whoever he was, he was a stranger to me.

A stranger.

Bethany went on, sounding desperate and sad. "I realized how short life is. He had so many regrets, Gabrielle, about you. He regretted not wanting to try and make things work. He regretted not trying to be the father you needed.

"You have family on his side, cousins around your age, and he wished you could have known them, too."

Cousins. I had cousins. I had *family*.

This news gusted in my chest, stealing my breath.

"And now, he's gone." A tear trickled down Bethany's cheek, and her lower lip trembled. "I wanted to make things right with you. And with my sister," she finished.

I couldn't breathe. I had a different father. A different mother. I had cousins.

My mom had never told me.

Thoughts raged through my brain. I felt so disconnected, so wayward. I was drifting and searching for something steady, something I could hold onto, yet the more I grappled, the more distant steadiness was.

My mom had *lied* to me. Did everyone lie? Adrian had been so quick to scheme up his fake girlfriend proposition, never thinking twice about it.

My parents had known I wasn't really theirs. They'd pretended all my life. Throughout school, throughout plays I'd been a part of, contests I'd won, failures, breakups, they'd masqueraded through all of it.

Bethany's gaze was tangible on my skin. I knew she was waiting for my reaction, but I was too stunned to do much. Inside, I was kicking and screaming like a child.

"I've tried repairing the breach between Jacey and me, but she always insisted I stay away, that you never needed to

know. She said it would rattle you too much, but I don't like secrets, Gabrielle."

"Neither do I," I managed.

"I've wanted to fix things between us for so long. Her pride would never let her welcome me in, not as long as you were in the dark about all of this. But now that you know, maybe she'll let me talk to her again. She'll—"

I was speechless. I could well believe it of her, of Jacey Bybanks, to keep her own sister half a country away because of pride.

Irritation at my mom simmered. It wasn't an unusual feeling, but this time, it was more heated.

No wonder she'd tried to control everything she could in my life. She'd been trying to keep me under her tether.

Bethany rose. "I'm sorry to do it like this. I would have preferred a much different approach, where both of your parents were on board."

My body was humming. I was a livewire running through an electric fence, buzzing, waiting to zap anything that dared touch me. I tried thinking of arguments, of ways around this, but deep inside, I knew it. I knew it was true.

"And the reason you weren't here when I got to town?" I said, my voice softer than I intended. "I emailed you several times. I stopped by every day."

Bethany had the decency to lower her head. "Your mom contacted me. She told me to ignore your emails, that you'd come back home if I did. I didn't want to. I replied to the first one you sent. But I was working with the fundraiser on the day you arrived, and then I was cowardly after that. I was scared."

I bit back a scoff. "Scared?"

Of me? She was the one who contacted me and invited me here!

"I know it sounds silly, but this isn't exactly an easy thing for me. I loved you. I wanted you. I couldn't keep you, and I've thought about you every day for years, wishing I could

send you cards on your birthdays or call you to see how your life was turning out. I guess I was scared I'd mess this up, too."

She wrung her hands and stared at me with pleading eyes.

I couldn't process it all. In all the times I'd wondered why my aunt had been ostracized, why my aunt had asked me to travel across the country to see her, I never would have imagined this.

"I need to go," I said, rising so fast the chair scraped hard on the floor. "I need to think this over."

Bethany gripped the back of the chair beside her. Her eyes were wide, her face pale. "I understand."

I made for the door, pausing at the sight of the gray cat sleeping lazily on the back of the couch. Like it or not, my time here in Montana was up. It was only fair I let her know as much.

I turned back to face her.

"You should know, I'm leaving. They gave me two weeks off, but it took three days to get out here, and I've waited three more since searching for you. I have to make it back in time if I want to keep my job. I have to leave."

In all reality, I could stay a few more days and still be fine, but what was the point?

More so now than ever. I needed to speak with my—well, with the woman I'd *thought* was my mother.

Bethany folded her arms. "I understand. Thank you for telling me. And Gabrielle?"

I paused at the door, keeping my gaze on the blue paint.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Sorry she'd given up on me? Sorry for contacting me at all? Sorry for avoiding me?

I couldn't be sure, but in the moment, I didn't want to know.

I'd had enough bombshells for one day. It was like cold oatmeal, bland and lumpy and distasteful, making me want to spit out every bite I'd been fed.

I couldn't digest this. Not now. Maybe not ever.

I turned the knob and headed back out to my truck, ready to leave Two Pines behind for good.

adrian

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd willingly come here again. Then again, I never thought Mom would entrust my inheritance to Danica freaking Foster, either.

So many memories were regurgitating, of ten, even twelve years before, back when I'd thought things could be different. I'd thought I could, in fact, set up my business while living at the ranch, to be closer to my family.

Mom had been converting our home to the B & B then, while Dad had been working on constructing a pair of homes. One for Danica and me. One for the rest of them.

But the closer Dani and I got to matrimony, the more choked I'd felt. It was as though a rope had been tied around my torso, securing my arms to my sides, and I'd been gradually dragged toward the edge of a cliff. I couldn't take that plunge with her. Not then—and certainly not now.

Seeing the house Dad had already begun to build had been the last straw. I'd been tired of Dad trying to control everything I did.

Never mind that I wasn't sure I wanted to live next door to my parents, in the house Chase and Kimmy ended up inheriting instead. Never mind that I was trying to get my own two feet on the ground. Never mind that Danica seemed to confide more in my mom than she did in me. It wasn't the kind of relationship I wanted.

Standing here on Dani's sidewalk, I was reminded of all the reasons I'd left.

Even so, the feelings I'd had then didn't make their usual appearance. I expected the typical impatience to get out of town, to leave this all behind and make for Chicago as soon as I could. To solitude and busyness and distraction.

Gabby was my hesitation now. I meant what I'd told my mom when I'd confessed my feelings.

The problem was, I wasn't sure what to do about those feelings, especially not when Gabby had rejected my offer to date long distance.

I hoped things were going well with her aunt—who may or may not be her birth mother. I hoped she would understand why I hadn't told her the truth myself.

What would she do once I told her about The Pact?

I'd intended to last night. I'd planned on spilling everything, including how hooked I was on her.

Resting my sunglasses on my head, I gritted my teeth and made for the door.

Danica jerked it open at first knock. She looked casual in jeans and a knotted gray t-shirt. "You came," she said brightly. "I've been waiting all day after your mom told me you wouldn't be there—"

"It's no use," I said, resting a hand on the door jamb.

I couldn't believe how badly I was trembling. Out of anger, frustration, flat-out disbelief, I wasn't sure.

"I loved you once, but I don't anymore, Dani. I've moved on. I need you to accept that."

Her lips flattened into a thin line. She folded her arms and cocked her hip. "And if I don't want to?"

"You can't force a hard chair to feel like a soft one. Please. I think you have something that belongs to me."

I expected her to deflect. To play coy. To dredge up old memories and attempt to coerce me inside.

Instead, her mouth gaped. "Your mom told you?"

“She did. Which means I think you know it’s over for good this time.”

I knew how harsh it sounded, but I’d tried to help her get the hint in much nicer ways than this so often before now and she refused. If there was anything I’d learned in business, it was that bluntness was sometimes necessary.

It would be better for Dani in the long run, too, not to think fondly of me. It was how I’d let plenty of other women down in the past as well, only this time, it wasn’t so I could keep my pledge with The Pact.

This time, it was so I could break it.

As soon as I was done here, I was calling Gabby. I was telling her I loved her.

Danica pouted her lip, inhaled, and nodded in defeat. “I’ll be right back.”

She didn’t invite me in, and that was just fine. Preferable, actually. I waited on her porch, tossing my key fob from one hand to the other impatiently.

Minutes later, Dani returned with a gray lockbox under one arm and passed it over. My blood split, scattering in all directions inside of me.

I couldn’t believe the shock, the relief, washing over me now that I finally had this thing in my grip. All the questions I’d had since the trust had been read spiraled through my mind: of Dad’s vast fortune; of all the other things he could have bestowed to his firstborn son, he’d given me a container no bigger than a shoebox.

“You never should have kept this from me.”

She lowered her head, clasping her hands in front of her. “I know. Your mom thought it would be the catalyst to getting us to talk again. I agreed, Adrian, but I shouldn’t have.”

At least she was being humble now. “Thanks for being honest with me,” I said, placing a hand on her shoulder. The touch seemed to have the desired effect. She lifted her soothed, sorrowful gaze at me.

“Do you want to come inside?” The question sounded feeble.

I took a cleansing breath. “I think you know the answer to that.”

She dipped her chin. “I guess you can’t blame me for trying.”

“You’ll find someone else, Dani. You deserve someone else.”

She shrugged in an embarrassed kind of way. “Who knows? It’s nice of you to say, everything considering.”

It meant a lot to have her acknowledge the state of things instead of trying to ignore them and force old feelings to be what they used to. While I was ready to turn around and leave, I didn’t want my departure to be as brusque as that. Still, sometimes brusque was best.

“Thanks, Dani. I’m glad you gave this to me.”

The phone in my pocket buzzed, as did my eagerness to get back to my car. I tipped a finger to my forehead. “Goodbye.”

“Good luck with her. With Goldie.”

Goldie. *Gabby*. Lockbox tucked under my arm, I nodded and turned away toward my awaiting car.

Now, more than ever, I wanted to get back to her. To see her again and tell her about the lockbox. I was ready to tell her everything.

A quick glance at my phone displayed a text from her:

Gabby: She told me the truth. I’m assuming you knew since I think you tried to tell me before I left. Thanks for everything. It was great meeting you, but I think it’s time I went home.

I stared at the words, reading them over and over.

I’m assuming you knew.

That meant she'd spoken with her aunt. That meant Rita's discovery—my suspicion—was true. Bethany Harold had, in fact, given birth to Gabby. I could only imagine how Gabby was feeling right now.

I wasn't going to communicate over a message, not with something like this. Not when there was so much to say.

Chances were, Gabby was emotional—and for good reason. No, this wasn't the time for a text. I pushed her name on the phone.

Several rings made me suspect she wasn't going to answer, until she picked up.

"Hi, Adrian." Her voice was choked.

I wasn't sure what to say. "How are you?"

"Why did you do this?"

Confusion rippled over me. "Do what?"

Had something else happened? Had Mom said something to her? I was planning on telling Gabby that I'd spilled the truth about us to her—I just hadn't gotten around to it yet.

"Why were you so nice to me? Why did you help me? Let me stay with your family? Why are you so nice?"

I tried to wrap my head around where this was coming from. Undoubtedly, she'd just received a shocking bit of news from Bethany Harold, but we'd *already* talked about why I'd helped her.

Was that still bothering her? I couldn't think how to bring the conversation around.

"You think I helped you just because I'm nice?"

"I know you are. I saw how you interacted with your nieces. How you bought a gazillion raffle tickets just to help out a town you claim you hate."

My throat worked. "I still don't know what you're asking."

She huffed through the phone. "Why me? Why did you even care? You could have left me on that mountain. You

should have left me. If only I'd stayed lost."

The pain in her voice was tangible.

"Gabby."

I wished I was there with her. Idiot. I should have *gone with her*. The spilled sugar could have waited. I should never have sent her to that lion's den on her own.

"Where are you? Let's meet up. We can talk."

"Why?" she demanded.

Something told me she wasn't asking about meeting up. I got to the point.

"I did it because something about you struck me, and I didn't want to let you go, Gabby."

"My name is Goldie."

"You told me yourself, it's Gabby. I want to call you who you really are. Gabrielle Bybanks, a woman with sunshine inside of her, a woman who glows and warms people just by being near them.

"You are like sunlight. Not gold, but *sun*. You're Gabrielle, and I'm going to call you that."

"No. Don't. Please don't."

I could hear the heartache in her tone. I longed to reach through the phone and hold her. No one should be alone after finding out news like what she'd discovered.

Idiot.

"She's my birth mother," Gabby blurted. "Bethany Harold. She's my real mom. I had a dad, too, a different dad—and he's dead now." Her voice broke.

My heart broke right along with it.

"Gabby, I'm so sorry."

"I can't be your fake girlfriend. I should never have agreed to it. Does everyone lie? I thought I was getting to know you, but maybe I don't know you at all."

“I’m sorry,” I said, the words snagging in my throat. “I never should have suggested you being my girlfriend the way I did. I didn’t see our relationship that way. It was never a lie to me. Believe it or not, I do care about being honest.”

“Most people don’t, I guess,” she said. “My mom didn’t, apparently. Or, rather, the woman I thought was my mom.”

Anxiousness to make this right coursed through me. “I told my mom the truth, right after you left. I told her I just met you and how hard I’m falling for you.”

“Adrian—”

“I mean it. You’ve come to mean more to me in these last few days than I ever thought possible. Please don’t leave—” I was going to leave it there, but I amended the thought. I knew she had to get back. “—without saying goodbye.”

Without letting me see her one last time. I needed to see her. Talk to her. Convince her.

“I’m saying it now. Goodbye, Adrian.”

I made a last-ditch effort before she hung up. “Don’t go yet. Take a detour, come to the cabin with me. There’s something I want to show you.”

She waited long enough to reply that I thought maybe, just maybe, she was going to give in. Her voice came through more muffled than before.

“I can’t. Bye, Adrian.”

“Gabby? Gabby!”

She didn’t respond. She’d ended the call.

I darted the rest of the way to my car. I’d intended on opening the lockbox right away, but this couldn’t wait. I had to get back to the B & B before Gabby headed for home.

goldie

MY LIFE HAD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN. It was so common for me to take a wrong turn here and there, to find myself displaced without meaning to be. But I'd never felt more lost than I did now.

I managed to make my way back to Rustic Ridge, to gather my students' papers into my portfolio and stuff my belongings into my duffle bag. I managed to mutter to Jordan at the reception desk that I wasn't coming back. I topped off my truck with gas, and then, despite the late hour, I was on the road.

Part of me wanted to wait for Adrian, but I rammed that part way off of my emotional grid. I couldn't handle anything else right now. I couldn't cope with him or his family.

I couldn't be in the same town with a woman who'd cast me aside. I didn't want a relationship with anyone, not when everything ended in betrayal or displeasure or angry quarrels.

What I really wanted was to close my heart to anyone ever again.

I thought of Adrian's confessions about his family, about his failed relationship with Danica, how they were the reason he'd opted to build his company several states away. Was there a family anywhere that got along?

What was the point of family when this was all it turned out to be?

There was one good thing that had come from Bethany's revelation: I'd been excited about my late father's side of the

family—about the cousins I'd never known I had. I'd considered getting to know them, but would that only end in more hurt feelings?

What if they didn't want to meet me? Why put myself out there like that?

As if to add insult to injury, my phone blinked Adrian's name.

He was calling me.

I gripped the steering wheel, clenching, waiting for the call to pass. I couldn't talk to him right now. What would I say? He would ask why I'd left. He would pitch the same argument he had when we'd attempted making monkey bread earlier. He wanted a long-distance relationship.

How could I have a relationship with anyone right now?

The road was before me, and I drove with more confidence, more purpose, than I ever had. There was that, at least. At least this time, I knew exactly where I was going.

Too bad it did nothing to appease the sorrow eating at my heart. I wanted to pull a rapid U-turn, veer back to Two Pines, and bask in his arms. I wanted to cry to him, tell him all my sorrows, have him kiss me until everything faded and life felt like it was worth living again.

But that wouldn't fix anything. It would change nothing. He was from a different state. He had his own life, his own problems, and I couldn't see myself fitting into any of it.

I wasn't going to answer. I had to let him go.

I drove. And I drove. Adrian called me several more times. He texted.

I ignored every single one.

I stopped for the night at a hotel on the border between Montana and South Dakota. The room was clean; the bed was comfortable; but with how ramped up my emotions were, and how erratically my thoughts raced, sleep was a long time coming.

The next morning, I dressed and repacked my bag. I sluggishly made my way down for some complimentary breakfast. I was adrift, going through the motions, barely aware of anything but the ache in my chest.

It was probably not the best condition to be driving in, but I didn't have many other options. I had to get home. I had to move on, to forget.

I had to figure out what to do with the information that had been given to me.

A newscaster shared the weather forecast on a large screen TV. Several other guests milled about the offerings. A mother stooped to help her child retrieve a fat sausage. For all of these people, it seemed as though life was no big deal. But for me, it felt as though mine had been knocked off its axis.

The timer on the waffle maker in the hotel's cafeteria gave off a twanging beep. Using a plastic fork, I pried the newly cooked waffle from its griddle and set it on my plate. With some syrup, sausages, and eggs in place, I shuffled my way to the nearest vacant table.

I cut into my confections when a text appeared on my screen. My heart caught. I both longed to answer and dreaded it. I didn't know what to do about Adrian. I—

A quick glance told me the text wasn't from him. In fact, I didn't recognize the number.

Unidentified: He made a promise before he met you.
One he never should have broken.

Confused, I swiped the screen and stared. It wasn't unusual to get texts from unknown numbers, though most of the time they were political or spam for weight loss programs or pronouncements that I'd won a billion dollars and all I had to do was give the person all of my personal information.

Yeah—those were laughable.

Most of the time I ignored them. This, however, sounded a little too personal.

Someone had made a promise before he met me? Was this person talking about Adrian?

I shouldn't reply. I should just leave it alone. But for whatever reason, I couldn't help myself.

Me: Who is this?

Unidentified: I'm the watchman.

I almost snorted. I should have known. It was a joke. Someone had gotten ahold of my number—a teenager, probably—and they were using idle words and riddles to troll me.

Me: Whatever that means. Don't text this number anymore please.

Unidentified: Adrian signed it. Because of you, he's going back on his word.

Curiosity won out. How did this person know Adrian? How did they know me?

For a fleeting moment, I suspected it was Danica. Had she convinced Mrs. Bear to give her my number? They had my information in their records for my stay at the B & B, but that was supposed to remain confidential.

Was she talking about some kind of prenup? Maybe he'd signed something years before, something to pledge himself to her.

Me: Whatever he signed, it no longer applies. It's hard to let go, I know, but you need to.

It wasn't that I cared. I had no more investment in him than she did at this point, but if Danica held on to him this much, she was only setting herself up for disappointment.

A spark of pity flickered in my chest for her. From the sound of things, I suspected she was holding on to the hope

that she still had a chance with him.

Even if I weren't in the equation, from what he'd told me, he didn't want anything more to do with her.

Unidentified: It's good that you left, but it still doesn't change the fact that Adrian broke his word.

Rolling my eyes, I tapped the power button on my phone and took a bite of my neglected breakfast. Danica clearly had some issues—issues I had no obligation or inclination to deal with. If she texted me again, I'd block her number.

I already had enough to juggle right now. I didn't need to add jealous exes to the mix.

Assuming the texts were from his jealous ex.

adrian

IT'D BEEN a full day since Gabby had left. I'd called a dozen times an hour. I'd texted. She hadn't replied to a single attempt.

I should probably stop.

She was angry—that much was evident. I should have told her the truth when she'd first come to my house last night. I couldn't figure out any other reason why she would be so upset with me.

Then again, it wouldn't have made anything better, and I wasn't entirely sure it had been my place to tell her something that important. She was feeling betrayed, and I couldn't blame her.

With the lockbox perched on my bed, I could understand the feeling.

I hadn't really grieved Dad's death. Part of me didn't want to open the lockbox. It almost felt as though Dad was doing all of this to mock me. He'd always belittled my business ideals.

It hadn't mattered how much I'd achieved; no matter how many smart investments I made, they weren't Rustic Ridge. They weren't home, which meant it was exactly what I wanted, because I knew how much it got under Dad's skin.

Guilt. That had been the hardest thing about Dad's death. Guilt festered within me about every recent conversation we'd had—they'd all ended with frustration and stabbing arguments.

It wasn't that I hadn't wanted to settle down; I'd just wanted to make sure it was with the right woman, on our terms rather than Dad's. Dad had never listened long enough to grasp that or care.

Now he was gone—and I'd never apologized for my part in those misunderstandings. I'd never gotten anything from him, either. No apology, no attempts to understand.

Matthew Bear had left me nothing but a cold, gray box.

I ran my hand through my hair and tapped my phone. It rang a few times before Rita picked it up.

“Whatever it is, I'm not doing it.”

I smiled in spite of myself. I loved her dry comments. “Hi, Rita. Good to hear from you, too. I'm calling because I need a flight tomorrow. It's time to come home.”

“You're sure this time?”

I peered out the window, noticing the absence of Gabby's white truck in the parking lot. It was time to move on like I should have done weeks ago. I needed to get back to my business. Back to my life.

Without her.

“I'm sure.”

I took my time packing up my belongings and strolling across the ranch for the final time. I stopped in at the barn, looking in on the space where Gabby and I had hidden, where we'd shared amazing kisses. I petted my favorite horses' noses and said goodbye to the guys working as ranch hands.

That evening, I bade my family goodbye. I stopped by to hug my nieces, my brothers, and then went on to the big house to hug Mom. I parked the Hummer at the airport, making sure Chase would pick it up, and I boarded my private plane and headed for Bear Financial's airfield.

Rita was waiting for me near the car she'd arranged. Her gray hair was pulled into a ponytail, and she wore a stylish jacket and jeans. She rested a hand on her hip and held up a sign that read, *It's about time.*

I chuckled at the sight, warmed by her. “Good to see you, Rita.”

“You, too, sir. It’s good you arrived when you did. I used the sleuth skills you inspired in me and discovered this.” She handed me her device.

I’d been keeping tabs on Market Sentry and managing as I could from home, but I hadn’t been able to check the listings yet that day, and one day in the stock market could mean life or death for a person’s business, depending on how it was run. I’d made sure it was never the latter option.

I skimmed over the stock reports. From yesterday to today, my numbers had plummeted. More than I’d ever seen. “When did this happen?”

“This morning,” she said. “That’s not the worst of it. Over half of your clients have withdrawn their accounts.”

“Half?” I was shocked.

I’d lost clients here and there for various reasons over the years, but never so many in such a short amount of time. This felt too staged, too abrupt.

What was going on? And what was I going to do about it?

I gazed at the familiar hangar where the pilot would store my jet, at the long stretch of asphalt, at the city’s distant skyline and the sparse trees planted along the edge of the runway. I’d used the inheritance I’d received from my grandpa in the first place, and it had taken ten years to build Bear Financial Investments.

The guys from the frat had offered to pitch in and help. Duncan was a boss at investments. Even our buddy Prince Henrik, who had flown to the U.S. for a semester or two during college and had joined the fraternity so he could gain a truly American experience, had offered to donate something to my company before he’d returned to his home country after graduation.

But this? This loss could provoke uncertainty in my remaining clientele. It could build distrust in my company.

More people might withdraw their accounts from me, and that didn't bode well.

I had enough capital that I'd never have to work another day in my life, but I still cared about Bear Financial's reputation. What about my employees and those who would lose their jobs if this business went under?

Luckily, I hadn't bought on margin. I knew enough about how the fluctuating share prices affected things. Hopefully, the market would rebound, and I could recoup my losses, but still, I had to make sure this wasn't as drastic as it could be.

I never should have stayed in Montana as long as I had.

Several men circled the jet I'd just vacated, taking care to secure the wheels and whatever else it was they did to care for the aircraft. Absentmindedly, I pulled the bouquet of lollipops from my pocket. Hawk had hooked me up and had them sent. It no longer seemed the right time to give them to her, but I did anyway.

“As promised.”

Color flushed in Rita's cheeks. She gave me a sardonic smile, took the lollipops, and turned. “The car is waiting, sir.”

“Thanks, Rita.”

I waited for her to slide into the back seat first before I joined her. I inhaled the familiar scent of leather and new car, rubbed my hand along the cool seat, and stared out the window in a daze, wondering what I was going to do.

We rode together to my office, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't manage to settle my brain on the problem at hand, large-scaled though it was.

Thoughts of Gabby kept resurfacing. They bombarded me as we arrived back at the tall building that hosted the string of offices my employees worked in. They hounded me as I loosened my tie and walked the length of my office. They nagged me as I paced, then strode to the window and stared down at the canals, at the busy streets, at the buildings streaking the skyline.

Loneliness cascaded through me. Abruptly, the water seemed dirtier, the streets more claustrophobic. The glamor of my life here wasn't holding up its luster.

I found myself missing the quiet, open range. The drivers who went ten under the speed limit. The town where everyone knew everyone.

I hadn't realized what a light Gabby had been for me until that light was dimmed. Until that light deserted me.

I knew I could fix my business, even if it meant losing out on a few customers. But what did all of this, the fast pace, the high-rise office, the spacious apartment, matter if I didn't have someone to share it with? Someone with golden hair, a sweet smile, and the uncanny ability to flip my life upside down while giving me exactly no desire to turn it right side up again.

I wasn't sure what to do about her.

If she truly wanted things to be over between us, I could respect that. I'd try to, anyway. I had a business to remedy, customers to placate, and investments to restore.

My phone vibrated. I couldn't help the hope swirling in me. I checked the screen only to have that hope deflate.

The message wasn't from Goldie. It was from a number I didn't recognize.

Unidentified: Don't think because she left that all is forgiven.

My defenses went on alert.

Me: Who is this?

Whoever it was didn't respond.

Uneasy prickles lifted the hairs at my nape. I got feelings about people, about things, but I couldn't account for this. Who had sent the message? And what did they mean?

They were talking about The Pact, I had no doubt of that. I swore and tapped Rita's number. Was it Will? Had he

contacted Grey too?

“Sir?”

“Rita,” I said. “Can you track numbers? If I got you a phone number, could you find out who that number belonged to?”

“I’m really in the wrong profession,” she muttered, sounding dubious. “You might want to rethink having me as your assistant. These requests you’ve been making lately are better suited to private investigators.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I muttered, missing the derisive humor in her tone until it was too late. “You may think you’re joking, but this is urgent, Rita.”

Her tone shifted as though she was beginning to take me seriously. “What’s wrong, sir? Are you being threatened? Are you in danger?”

I stared out the window at the city bustling below. Putting her on speaker, I skimmed back to my messages and looked over the brief one-liner I’d just received.

Don’t think because she left all is forgiven.

Did whoever sent this know I’d fallen in love with Gabby? If so, I had to find out who sent this. I had to put a stop to whatever they were planning. And I had to hope they’d leave her out of it.

“I could be,” I finally replied.

Or worse, Gabby could be.

HARD AS I tried to root him out, Adrian wouldn't leave my mind. While he'd been sweet and generous, and so affectionate and amazing, I'd been so harsh during our last phone conversation.

Every time he called since, I'd wanted to answer, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. His life was in Chicago, with his business. A relationship between us wouldn't work, and I couldn't afford to open up to anyone else again.

I regretted how I'd parted with Bethany, too. Finding out the truth had been hard on me—but I couldn't imagine how difficult the conversation must have been on her.

Bethany had admitted she wanted to make things right, but I couldn't focus on anything else. Not until I made it home and spoke with my mom.

The screen lit up on my dashboard. This time, I did answer.

“Hey, Lois.”

“Girl, I haven't heard from you in days. I just wanted to see how you're holding up with Ted Bundy. He's hot, isn't he?”

I laughed. This was just what I needed, Lois's lighthearted take on things. I needed lighthearted right about now. “I'm headed back as we speak. And boy, do I have a story for you.”

“Please tell me it has something to do with Mr. Hottie.”

Lois listened, responding with just the right amounts of *ohs* and *whats* and *oh, my goodnesses*.

“Your aunt is really—?”

“My birth mom. Yeah.”

I knew Lois couldn’t understand what I was feeling. She’d been raised by two parents who loved her and treated her like she was their everything. Still, it meant a lot that she was listening.

“What are you going to do?” Lois asked.

I exhaled, gripping the steering wheel and staring at the road. “I’m going to talk to my parents, first of all. I want to know why they hid this from me, you know?”

“I totally know,” Lois said. “And then?”

“And then...” I considered. “I’ll figure it out as I go, I guess.”

“Good luck,” she said, commiserating. “And drive safely.”

“Thanks, Lois.”

After driving for another handful of hours, the Baldwin exit was a welcome sign. I trekked my way toward the town’s opposite end and pulled into my childhood home’s driveway.

Nostalgia hit harder than the time I’d been struck in the jaw by a softball while dashing for home base. It was jarring, harsh, and sudden, and it stole my breath.

This might never have been my house if things had gone differently. What kind of life would I have had being raised by Bethany in Montana instead?

My name would have been Gabrielle Harold. I might have known Adrian Bear longer then, seeing as how we would have lived in the same town. I might have attended school with him. I might have seen him dating Danica or even been one of the girls he’d avoided. I might have had a mother I could get along with instead of one who was constantly disappointed in me.

“There you are,” Mom said when I entered.

She was at the sink washing jars. Being a gardening nut, she was preparing for canning season to come later that summer.

I knew the ritual by heart. Her hands were dipped in the sink water, and her arms were spattered with soap.

“I’ve been worried sick about you.”

I set down my keys. Tiredness swept over me, but I was too pent-up to go anywhere else. “Since when are you ever sick or worried?”

“Since you took off without a word. I considered flying out there, you know.”

My fists clenched. “Why? So you could keep Bethany from telling me the truth? Why did you shut her out? Why did you keep her away from her own daughter?”

Mom’s jaw dropped. She lifted her hands from the soapy water, shook off the suds, and dried them on a nearby towel.

“You are *my* daughter. I never wanted any confusion on the subject, and knowing Beth, I knew she’d try and take you back if I took you to visit her.”

“So you decided to pretend she didn’t exist.”

Mom stood soldier stiff. “I thought a clean break would be good, yes.”

All the emotion from the past week and a half crushed me, weighing more than if I were buried by a mountain of sand. “You should have told me.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

I was startled. My head reared.

“Sorry?” How many times had I ever heard that word from her lips?

Never.

Mom closed her eyes and inhaled. An exercise in patience and self-control I’d witnessed many times—especially in my honor.

“Goldie,” she said in her too-calm tone.

“Is that why you never call me by my name? I thought it was because of my hair. My golden hair. Now I’m starting to

think you didn't want to call me by the name she gave me.”

Another exhale. Mom still didn't look at me.

“Did you name me Gabrielle, or did she?”

“She did.”

I felt like screaming. I knew it was childish, but I couldn't help the sensation. I worked to keep my voice level.

“Do you have any idea what it's like finding out your mom isn't really your mom?”

Mom's lids lifted. “You were never supposed to find out.”

Hearing as much killed me. She'd lied to me! And she didn't care.

I still would have been living a lie if it hadn't been for Bethany's interference. The realization blind-sided me, and I had to take a few moments before I could respond.

“I did find out, Mom. You lied, even if it was a lie of omission. And it hurts me. Our whole family dynamic hurts me.”

I snatched my keys from the counter and stormed out. I swiftly understood what made Adrian despise his beautiful home, what made him want something else, to be somewhere else.

I wanted to hurl Baldwin and its little house and the lies which created my memories there right off the map. Lois had asked me what I would do next, and I knew now.

I had the school year to finish. Just one more month or so, until the end of May. And then I was done. I was gone.

My apartment was across town. I was more than eager to get out of my truck, to haul my bag inside, collapse on my bed, and just let the world disappear for a while. I glanced over at the empty passenger seat. I'd propped the sign I'd won from the Bear family's fundraiser there, and for some reason, the single word it boasted shouted at me from where it sat:

Home.

I'd planned on hanging it up in my apartment, but it no longer fit there. I wasn't sure where I could hang it now, where it would actually feel like that word applied.

I pulled into my usual parking spot and hauled my things out. Warning prickled along the top of my spine. I approached the door to my unit, pausing with my hand on the knob, and turned back.

A car was parked in one of the temporary stalls in front of the complex, and a man sat inside it. The cab was shadowed, so I couldn't make out much about him other than his hair was cut short and he was watching me.

With one hand draped on the steering wheel, he eyed me with brooding calculation. My gaze collided with his, and he lifted a few fingers in a semblance of a greeting.

The sight of him unnerved me. The prickles that had disturbed me moments before increased their pace. I lifted my chin and then turned back to my door, determined not to give him another thought.

Getting lost had always been a joke, something I did by accident. It had also happened far too frequently for my liking. And now? Even though I was home, this was the most lost I'd ever felt in my life.

goldie

I PROPPED my arms on the edge of the table holding my fish tank and watched Ripley coast back and forth in the water to catch the tiny pebbles of food I'd dumped in there for him. The uncanny unease I'd experienced when I'd found that man watching me wouldn't leave me alone—but when I'd gone out to my truck for my phone charger, he was gone.

I did what I could to brush off the unease and let my thoughts drift to another man, one I couldn't seem to *stop* thinking about.

“Everything okay?” Lois asked as she straightened her polka dotted shirt. Her brown hair was done up in pretty curls.

“Why do you ask?” I said.

“You're not usually this fascinated when you feed him. He'll get it all. Don't worry.”

“I'm not worried,” I said. “At least, not about Ripley.”

I'd gotten the beta fish with its pretty jewel-tone fins when I'd first moved into this complex.

Bobby pin in her teeth, Lois peeked at her appearance in the mirror near the door. She pinned her hair back away from her forehead, leaving the rest of her mahogany locks draping down her back.

“What are you worried about then?”

“Everything,” I said with a sigh. “I just...”

I wasn't sure how to put my feelings into words. I'd been adrift since I got home. How could I still be the same person

on the outside and yet feel so different inside?

I was still me—yet I didn't feel like me at all.

“I just wish I knew who I was.” Where I belonged. Where I was going.

“You're Goldie Bybanks,” she said, sinking onto the couch's armrest beside me and resting her hands in her lap.

I snorted at this, but I didn't want to tell her the truth about my name. Explaining it now seemed as though it would stir up my confusion all over again.

“You're a school teacher,” she went on. “A fish-keeper. And a good friend. And I think you need to get out.”

“Get out where?” I asked.

Ripley had nabbed the little pebbles on the right side of the tank. Now he flutter-swam for those that had settled on the left side.

She rose to her feet. “Come for a walk with Sam and me.”

I stood too. Pins and needles shot down my legs and into my toes. I must really have been kneeling for a long time.

“I don't know—that's kind of your thing.”

She and Sam went out walking together almost every day. She didn't usually get this dressed up every time, though. It made me wonder if they had something else going on afterward.

“Sam won't mind. Come with us. Get your mind off things for a while.”

I wanted to use my students' papers as an excuse for why I needed to stay here, but she knew full well I'd finished grading them.

“I don't want to impose.”

It was her turn to snort. “Please. We don't care if you don't.”

Before I could reply, her phone was already to her ear. “Sam? Change of plans. Goldie's coming with us...” She

meandered to the back of the apartment, so the rest of their conversation was muddled.

I inhaled, staring out the window at the radiant sunshine outside. Maybe she was right. Getting out of this place, getting out of my own head for a while, might be nice.

Guess I'd better get ready. The honking sound of an email emitted from my phone as I headed toward my room across from Lois's. Once in my room, I swiped it open, and my heart gave a little lurch.

The name Bethany Harold was in the *sender* line. I hadn't heard from her since I'd gotten back home a few days ago.

I had heard from Adrian many times—he called so much I lost track. His texts had gotten more insistent lately, too. I didn't answer any of them. I wasn't ready to take on anything else yet, not when I was still trying to process the truth of everything.

I wasn't sure I was ready for whatever Bethany had to say either, so I pocketed the phone and met Lois as she stepped out of her room, beaming.

“He's good. Sam said he doesn't care if you come. What?” She segued so fast I hardly followed.

“What do you mean ‘what’?”

“You look like you saw a ghost. What's that look for?”

“I—”

Should I tell her about the email? She'd insist I open it. I wasn't ready for that.

I forced a smile. “Nothing.”

Lois narrowed her eyes. Then, as if thinking better of it, she shrugged and grabbed her keys. “He'll be here any minute.”

The sunshine was a welcome change to the chilly winter we'd just gone through. Winters in Wisconsin could be brutal.

I zipped my jacket, slipped into my shoes, and with my hair tied in a messy bun, I grabbed my own keys and followed

Lois outside.

Sam pulled into the same parking stall the creepy man had used earlier. I shuddered away the sensation being watched had given me and meandered along the sidewalk toward him.

The minute he climbed out of his car, Lois gave a little squeal and ran into his arms. Sam captured her, holding her close. I slowed my steps to give them a few moments.

“Finally getting your priorities straight,” Sam said to me.

He was handsome, with dark, roguish hair and blue eyes, which sparked with secret delight every time they veered in Lois’s direction.

I smirked at him. “I figured I’d see what the big deal for you two was. You go walking enough for the rest of us.”

Sam pocketed his keys. He looked so down-to-earth, with his backward baseball cap, jeans, t-shirt, and skater shoes. Lois and Sam muttered to one another for a few moments, and then the three of us headed off down the sidewalk toward the park.

I enjoyed the motion, the smoothness and simplicity of simply walking, the sound of Lois’s laughter as she strode ahead of me beside Sam.

I didn’t mind being a tagalong. In fact, I was glad to not have to be part of their conversation. This walk was exactly what I needed. The cool air on my cheeks, the additional energy from exerting myself in a way I didn’t usually do, the sense of power that came from propelling my legs even in a small way.

This was so what I needed.

We made our way to Windmill Park and strolled around the sidewalk encircling the block several times. Then we stalked farther along the creek that ran through Baldwin.

Trees were budding, their leaves turning from brown to green. Birds chirped in the treetops above us, and I inhaled, breathing in the clean air, letting it rejuvenate me.

Finally, Lois and Sam situated themselves near a park bench. Lois’s cheeks were pleasantly flushed, and a glint of

excitement gleamed in her eyes.

She really was so pretty. Sam's skin held a similar glow, and I wondered if mine did, too.

"I can see why you two do this so often," I began.

"It's amazing. I love our morning walks," Lois said.

She shifted to clasp Sam's hand. A rapid, unexpected tinge of jealousy struck me. Maybe it wasn't jealousy—it was longing.

I hadn't been able to stop thinking about Adrian since I left Montana, and the truth was, I missed him. I sank onto the bench beside her and pulled my phone out of my pocket. A form of habit more than anything else.

As if on cue, my phone chimed. From the angle at which I held it, they could both see the selfie Adrian had taken of us appear at the same time his name did.

"That is the cutest picture," Lois said.

I grunted, not wanting the reminder of him, of that night. He'd bought matching aprons. He'd done so much for me in the short time I'd been there.

I tapped the side button and pocketed the phone.

"You're not going to answer it?" Sam said curiously.

"It's complicated."

"Who is he?"

I was grateful to know Lois hadn't spilled my story to him. She really was a rare friend.

"You can tell Sam. He's trustworthy. Maybe talking it over will help." She nodded at me encouragingly.

I'd already talked things over with her, though I hadn't yet told her Aunt Bethany had emailed.

I slid Sam a look. "You sure you want all the gooey details?"

"I don't mind," he said.

The pressure mounted, and I surrendered. I told them everything, including a few more details than apparently I'd even told Lois.

"You never said he kissed you on the golf course!" she said with a happy little noise. "That's adorable."

"It was," I said, wriggling inside at the memory. "Everything he did was amazing."

"Yet, you're ignoring his calls." Sam's tone implied he didn't understand.

"That's the complicated part of things. When I went there, I found out—"

I told him everything else. Aunt Bethany being my birth mother. My parents lying to me my entire life. Adrian's offer of a long-distance relationship. By the time I finished, Sam and Lois both eyed me with knitted brows and matching frowns.

If I shared the rest of what was bothering me, would they ever look at me the same?

goldie

SAM BROKE the tense silence between us, though his words cast more doubt on the situation.

“I get it,” Sam said, staring at the sidewalk a moment with his free hand on his knee. “I get why you pulled away. But it sounds like he helped you a lot.”

“He did,” I agreed, squirming slightly under his and Lois’s attention.

I wasn’t sure how to explain anything else to him to help him understand. Not when I hardly understood it myself.

“I just need some time.”

“Did he lie to you?” Sam asked.

I flicked through my memories. Lie directly to me?

“Not exactly. But after what my parents did, after this whole thing with my aunt, how can I trust anyone?”

Lois adjusted so she looked more directly at me. “Who did he lie to, then?”

“Well, to his mom and everyone else every time he claimed I was his girlfriend. Except...”

My mind wandered. Adrian hadn’t *really* lied about that.

After calling me honey in front of his mom, he’d been completely upfront about it, explaining his reasoning. Calling me that had been done in part to protect *me* from his mom’s scrutiny after I was found in his family’s cabin.

He'd been completely straightforward. He'd asked me to be his girlfriend, and after some deliberation, I'd willingly agreed.

All this time I'd been simmering over his dishonesty, but had he really been dishonest?

Something inside of me began to puddle. For all intents and purposes, I had been his girlfriend. He'd found excuses to hold my hand, hide away in the barn, give me the most mind-blowing kisses I'd ever had.

We'd gone on dates. We'd shared parts of ourselves we'd never shared with anyone else. If that wasn't boyfriend-girlfriend material, I wasn't sure what was.

With dawning realization and a nugget of guilt in the pit of my stomach, I met Lois's expectant gaze. "It wasn't just some fake claim. I think he really did see me as his girlfriend."

Which meant...

He cared about me. He'd said as much, but I hadn't known how to believe him.

The sly, pensive gazes, the playful banter, the kisses and confidential conversations. They'd all been real.

"See?" Lois said, nudging me with her elbow. "He's not as bad as you were thinking."

My heart slammed against my ribs in an unprecedented way. All this time I'd been so confused; I'd been so sure it'd been an act.

Though there were times I doubted his motives or sincerity, I realized he'd never given me any reason to think it was a farce. He'd treated me like I was special and important from the start.

"So it wasn't really a lie," Lois finished.

"It felt like it was." My shoulders sagged. "I just—I'm so hurt by the deception."

"Rightly so," Sam said, leaning forward to speak over Lois, who sat between us. "But holding onto it isn't doing you

any favors. Your aunt wanted you to know the truth. Your parents were wrong to keep it from you, but holding that against anyone now is only hurting you.”

Lois smiled and reached for my hand, giving it a squeeze as if to soften the bluntness of her boyfriend’s words.

“You’re right,” I said, feeling the truth of that settle into my bones. “Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to at least talk to him. Get things sorted out.”

“If you don’t do it now, you’ll always wonder,” Lois said. “Look how long your aunt-mom waited. Look at all that lost time. I’ve never seen you like this over a guy. What if you answered his calls? What if you gave him a chance?”

“How many times has he called you?” Sam asked.

“Three, sometimes four times—”

“Well, there—”

“A day,” I added.

Sam’s eyes boggled. “Bruh. He’s crazy about you.”

“Yeah?”

He rolled his eyes and then gestured to the phone. “The next time he calls, answer it. No guy in his right mind would call a woman that many times if he wasn’t. You don’t want him to give up, do you?”

“I—”

No, I didn’t. I didn’t want the calls to stop.

Lois’s sympathetic gaze snared mine. “Answer it,” she said. “Or maybe try calling him.”

I inhaled and gazed at a passing car. A man holding the end of a leash ran behind his dog. Across the lawn, a group of people tossed a frisbee. I watched them as well, chewing the side of my cheek and thinking.

“That’s not all of it,” I said, needing the purge. “You know the aunt I mentioned? I’d been really angry and hurt by her too, but she emailed me this morning again.”

Lois's brows shot up. "She did? And?"

"I haven't checked it yet."

Lois leapt to her feet. "What are you waiting for?"

"I got it just before we left this morning and haven't had the chance to."

"So open it," Sam said.

Like it was that easy.

A jolt of nerves rushed through me. Needing the movement, I stood as well and met both of their gazes. They both nodded back at me with encouragement.

"Want me to do it for you?" Lois suggested.

I shook my head. "I got it, thanks."

Fortifying myself, I swiped the screen, noticing a text from Adrian as well.

Adrian: Please talk to me. I haven't told you everything, and there's something else you should know.

I inhaled. He'd been hinting at something like that for a few days now, but I hadn't put much stock in it. I'd figured it was a dangled carrot to get me to give in.

But Sam was right. I couldn't keep ignoring Adrian, and I didn't want his attempts to contact me to stop. It was time. I owed him that much.

Fingers trembling, I tapped out a reply.

Me: I'll call you later, okay?

Adrian: Is that a promise? I miss you. I want to hear your voice.

My heart fluttered. A small smile lifted the corner of my mouth as I remembered our conversation about promises.

I'd loved his promises that night.

He'd promised to kiss me.

He'd promised I drove him wild.

Me: Yes. It's a promise.

Then I swiped open my email. My heart pounded so hard it hit my sternum. I tapped *open* on the email, barely noticing Lois and Sam's soft conversation from their position on the bench.

Gabrielle,

I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since you left my house. I know the news was a shock to you, and I don't blame you for being upset.

I spoke with Jacey, and she agreed that we were wrong to keep you in the dark about this for so long. I don't know if our motives for doing so make any difference at this point. We should have been upfront with you.

You may not want anything to do with me after this, but I just wanted to reach out and let you know, I'm here. You might have questions—about your birth father, about me. I'd be happy to answer anything you'd like. I want to get to know you, but only if you're open to that. Maybe we can become friends.

I hope you can forgive me.

Bethany

Tears stung my eyes, but I didn't let them fall. It was almost as though everything had frozen.

"So?" Lois prodded, peering at Sam before giving me the stink-eye. "We've been sitting here for an eternity. Are you going to tell us what it said?"

I chuckled at her exuberance and placed a hand on my cheek. Words failed me, so I slid the phone to her. Sam leaned in and the two of them reading side by side was so cute.

"She sounds nice," Sam said after a few minutes.

“Imagine that. You have a whole separate family somewhere,” Lois said, handing the phone back to me.

“I know. That’s what’s gotten to me, too,” I said, trembling inside. “I want to ask her about my cousins. I don’t even know my birth dad’s name.”

“No time like the present,” Sam said. “We can head back to your apartment if you want. If you need time to sort your thoughts.”

“I’d like that,” I said, high on the resolve gushing through my veins.

Having their support and encouragement meant so much. I wasn’t used to that.

If I’d opened this email around Mom, she would have been freaking out and telling me to ignore it. I decided I liked having support better than rejection any day.

The three of us made our way back to the apartment. Lois climbed into Sam’s car, leaving me alone to do what I needed to do.

I considered calling Adrian first, but that wasn’t something I wanted to rush through. So I replied to Bethany.

I asked so many questions, and to my relief, Bethany answered almost immediately. I’d almost expected to wait days like I had the last time I’d tried communicating with her.

Maybe she was trying to make up for leaving me hanging for so long while I’d been in Montana.

She gave me more insight into her situation—a seventeen-year-old girl with a penchant for rebellion, a boyfriend who had left; it hadn’t exactly been a stable home for a baby.

Bethany had finished high school after I was born. She’d been able to get an associate degree, buy a house, and manage her life better than she would have under different circumstances.

Your birth father’s name was Jax Carroll. He had a wonderful family. His siblings have also passed away, but his mother lives in Westville, Vermont, which is where he was

from. I've been in touch with his brother and sister over the years before they died and still connect with their daughters on social media.

Ella Embers and Adelle Carroll are around your age. I'm sure they would be happy to know you and wouldn't mind at all if you reached out to them.

She then sent me the links to their social media profiles. I soaked in as much of their faces as I could. I didn't feel like a stalker so much as an explorer.

Ella Embers was pretty with brown hair. Sure enough, she looked to be in her twenties like me, maybe a few years younger than me I'd guess. I searched her face for signs of resemblance but didn't find many, aside from the almond-shaped eyes I shared with Bethany. She looked like the picture of Jax that Bethany had attached in the email, though.

Adelle Carroll was beautiful, too, with such light blonde hair it could have been platinum. Her social media profile had fewer pictures than Ella's did, which made me suspect she was more reserved.

I had cousins. I had family. For some reason, the feeling of being adrift spun me a little closer to the proverbial shore.

The tears that had stung my eyes earlier came on with full force. They streamed down my cheeks, and any reluctance I'd felt earlier vanished. I wanted to know these women if they were open to that.

I typed out two identical messages and let Ella and Adelle know who I was. I briefly explained my situation, that I'd just discovered Jax was my birth father and told them how excited I was to learn I had cousins.

While waiting for a reply, I stared at the selfie Adrian had taken of the two of us in our chili pepper aprons. If I needed courage to do this, Sam's words provided it. He'd said Adrian was crazy about me. I had to bank on that.

Adrian himself had said he wanted to hear my voice. I could do this.

I tapped his number. The dial tone droned—

and droned—

and droned.

The sound of his voice in his answering message unraveled me. I wished there was a repeat option so I could hear him introducing himself and asking the caller to leave a message over and over. As it was, disappointment sank into my stomach.

He didn't answer. Why—why didn't he answer?

Maybe he didn't want to talk to me, after all. Maybe he figured it was his turn to ignore me, to give me a dose of my own medicine.

I hoped he wasn't that petty, but for all I knew, he was.

After the phone call ended, I went back outside for more of that fresh air that had helped me so much. The sun was higher in the sky, the air was warmer, and I sank onto the edge of the sidewalk in front of the apartment mailboxes, stretching my legs and basking, wondering, hoping Adrian would call me back.

The sound of footsteps scuffed the pavement. I closed my eyes when I heard it. The low, menacing voice crawled to me.

“I get it, you know,” he said. “Adrian always went for the pretty blondes.”

I stiffened, but before I made it to my feet, a rough hand clasped over my mouth.

adrian

I BOPPED my fists together as a way to dispel the energy coursing through me. Rita offered me a Dr Pepper, but I declined. With the way I was quaking, I'd probably spill it all over the place.

I'd spent what felt like eons staring at my phone and waiting for Gabby to call like she said she would. But she didn't—and now, it was time to meet with the board.

Rita blended in with the other men and women in the boardroom. Some sat in gathered swivel chairs, but most stood and stared up at the screen the way I did.

My whole company was based on today's outcome. The market hadn't yet rebounded. If the numbers didn't show, I'd have to let off a hundred employees. I couldn't do that to them.

Rita and I had also been working on contacting the mass number of clients who'd pulled their accounts in the last week. I couldn't credit such a sudden exodus.

Fortunately, a handful of them answered and offered replies to their reasoning for leaving. They cited a company named Wolf Industries—and one client even shared the logo.

My heart nearly stopped when I saw its design.

The three Greek letters of Sigma Phi Rho were more familiar to me than a map of my hometown. Whoever designed this had added a wolf symbol.

It was too close for comfort. I'd contacted Hawk immediately and had run it past him.

“Plenty of frats used Greek letters,” he’d said. “It’s just a coincidence.”

I found I couldn’t agree with him. The same feeling in my gut telling me not to leave Chicago back in college, not to accept my dad’s guilt complex, not to marry Danica, and not to let Goldie go plagued me now.

I knew its warning signs. It filled me with indecision, with sick foreboding. “I don’t know, something about this feels wrong.”

“You and your gut feelings,” Hawk had said with a snicker.

“Don’t knock it, man. You know I rely on my intuition a lot, and it’s telling me something is wrong. Something is off about this.”

“Like what?” Hawk had challenged.

I’d tried to give him a valid answer, but I didn’t have one. I couldn’t explain how empty this made me feel. It was as though a valuable possession was about to slip through my fingers, and I was powerless to stop it.

“I don’t know. But I’ll figure it out.”

After that, I’d looked up Wolf Industries. Their site was basic and utilized the same symbols for its logo, but it lacked many tabs and menu options that would render it legitimate.

I’d lost a barrage of clients—to a *fake* company?

Who started it? And why?

I had my lawyer look into it immediately—not just for retribution on my part, though I wanted that. I also couldn’t in good conscience leave subterfuge like this alone so this jackwad could target other innocent companies too.

“Honestly, don’t people do their research?” I muttered, looking things over.

Anyone could tell the site was bogus. I’d bet the impressive reviews listed from customers on its homepage were fabricated.

Regardless, Rita argued that the site looked acceptable. My lawyer affirmed as much, saying that if the investors working at Wolf Industries could offer better rates—which they appeared to—then of course people were going to switch.

I wasn't about to lower my rates. People got what they paid for with me, and the guidance and assistance I offered was worth every penny. They'd learn their mistakes in switching companies soon enough.

Grinding my teeth, I dictated a form letter I wanted Rita to send out to all the customers who'd departed from Bear Financial. It was about all I could do at this point.

A few accounts returned to us, which helped my instincts settle, but not completely. The sight of that insignia rubbed me the wrong way—and I couldn't figure out why.

In any case, the fact that we'd lost so many clients made the results of today weigh heavier than it already did.

With my fists clenched and my chest pinched, I stared at the large screen as numbers flickered in their columns. I'd reallocated funds. I'd made phone calls, adjusted investments, and made exorbitant promises I hoped I could keep.

Today was the day to see if my efforts would pan out.

"It'll happen, sir," Rita said encouragingly, offering me the same can of Dr. Pepper.

This time, I took it and sipped gratefully, unable to take my eyes from the screen.

Ten more seconds. Eight. Five.

Two.

One.

The numbers shifted. The margin flickered from red...to black.

The room exploded with cheers. My chest soared. I'd done it. I'd gotten Bear Financial Investments back on its feet. My associates clapped me on the back, passing from the room with congratulations and appreciative nods in my direction.

“Thanks for all the hard work,” Gerald from marketing called as he pocketed his phone.

“And you.” I saluted him with my Dr. Pepper and then tipped it back for a much-needed gulp.

I didn’t realize how thirsty I was. Not only that, but I was unpredictably tired. So much emotional and mental strain and tension from trying to recuperate after so much had crashed. It was definitely taking its toll.

Rita seemed to feel it, too. She pushed a few of the wheeled chairs back toward the table. “Congratulations, sir,” she said.

“Thanks, Rita.”

“Anything else you need from me? If not, I think I’ll head home for a soothing bath.”

I smirked, still trying to wrap my mind around this outcome. I’d been so stressed, so worried, unsure of what I would do if my efforts didn’t work.

But they had. They *had* worked, and now, it was time to breathe a little easier.

If only I could repair things with Gabby as easily.

“We’ll need to alert the employees,” I said, absentmindedly glancing at my phone. “Send out a notification that the crisis has been averted.”

Aside from a few texts from Hawk and Duncan, a notification that I’d missed a call stole my attention from everything else.

Sound muffled. Sight blurred. I saw nothing but her name.

Gabby Bybanks had tried calling me.

Because of my business crisis, I hadn’t been able to answer.

“Sir?” Rita said. “Did you hear a word I said?”

I ripped my gaze away from the picture I’d set as her profile. It was one I’d captured without her knowing, a side

profile view of her looking stunning, sun-kissed and pensive, with her chin propped on her fist as she gazed out at the ranch from Mom's porch.

"She called," I muttered.

For days now since she had left, I'd been checking my phone, hoping she would.

And she had.

Did that mean she was ready to talk to me? Or was she going to ask me to stop calling her? I hoped not. I'd do everything I could to convince her. Heck, I'd even—

I lifted my gaze to Rita's. She'd been prattling on about how I should take some time to celebrate. I should go home, kick back, watch some TV, or do whatever it is I do to have fun.

The only person I wanted to honor this victory with had been silent for days. However, I was on a high from my victory, from the fact that her name was on my screen.

I also couldn't forget the threatening text I'd received days ago. I'd hoped Gabby would let me talk to her, warn her, tell her about The Pact and about Will.

He hadn't made any additional contact with me. For now, I let it go and focused on the matter at hand.

I'd salvaged this company and saved hundreds from losing their jobs. It was time to salvage things with Gabby, too.

Be that as it may, I wasn't about to do it over the phone.

"Rita, there is one more thing I need before you go."

She yawned behind her hand but pulled out her phone, ready to mark it in. "And that is?"

"A flight."

If she was surprised, she didn't show it. "Where to, sir?"

"Wisconsin."

Gabby had been right about me. My life in Montana *was* a good fit. I'd thought my life here in Chicago matched me like

a fine suit, but now that I was back, the city was starting to feel a little too tight.

I stared out the window of my office high rise, getting the same sense I'd had since coming back here. Something was missing. For all its fast pace and grandeur, Chicago was lacking something.

I was out of place here, like a chair I couldn't completely sink into.

With Gabby's help, I'd seen the cabin, the ranch, for what it was. I'd appreciated the seclusion of it, the magic of nature enveloping the town and the home I'd once despised.

The tranquility of the horses and the splendor of the mountains and fields. Rather than feeling misplaced, being at the ranch was like a chair made *just* for me.

I wanted that. Not necessarily at the ranch—I wanted a place of my own like it.

And I didn't want it alone.

I paced, waiting for Rita to fill me in on the flight details, when my phone pinged. The minute I saw the message, I nearly dropped the device.

Unidentified: Clients aren't the worst thing that can be taken from you. If you want to see her alive, come to the Wisconsin Crystal Caves. Come alone.

Anger flooded me. Anger, panic, and fear all at once. He had Gabby? *Who?* Who was this?

I could only assume it was Will. A million possibilities flooded me, including images of Goldie's body lifeless against the rocks.

"Rita!" I called, my voice loud and prominent.

I hurriedly tapped out a reply, though with my fingers shaking as they were, it took longer than it should have.

Me: If you hurt her, I'll kill you.

“Sir?” Rita.

I gripped the phone so hard it was a wonder I didn't crush it. My nostrils flared, and I stared at my assistant's startled gaze.

“I'm calling the police. I need you to find out where the Wisconsin Crystal Caves are—as quickly as you can.”

I only hoped I'd get to them in time.

goldie

MY HEAD ACHED. I blinked and waited for my vision to focus. My last memories were vague. I'd been outside. I'd been...

A strange man had approached me, clapping something over my mouth. He'd knocked me out—he'd—

“Happy to see me?” a man said.

I whirled my head back too quickly. Stars danced over my vision. With a groan, I attempted to lift my hands to cradle my throbbing head, but they were tied in front of me with what looked like zip ties.

“Who are you?” I demanded. “What—where are we?”

I peered around in an attempt to regain my bearings. I didn't recognize any of this. We were in some kind of cavern. Stalactites hung from the high ceiling, and a chilled breeze swept goosebumps across my skin.

I pulled at my restraints, attempting to free myself, but they were tied fast.

A small fire crackled a few feet from me, wafting smoke in my direction. The man standing on its other side stalked closer to me. I attempted to lift my head for a better look, but the pain throbbing inside my skull doubled.

He bent at the knees and crouched before me. I'd expected to see someone in his fifties or something, but this man looked to be in his early thirties, about the same age as Adrian.

“I don't mean you any harm. If Adrian hadn't broken The Pact, neither of us would be here.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He didn’t tell you?” The man laughed heartlessly, the motion emphasizing lines near his eyes.

“That’s so like him. Adrian was always at the top of his game. Guys like me, we had to scrape our way through, but not Adrian. Adrian Bear, Grey Phillips—all those losers at the frat walked around like they owned the place.”

My disquiet elevated. “You know I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The Pact,” he said point blank. “We pledged ourselves we’d never fall in love. I saw the way he looked at you. It was my job, you know. I was the silent watchman. I was tasked with making sure the guys stuck to what they’d agreed to.”

I inhaled. “You’re the one who texted me.”

He acted as though he hadn’t heard me. “I took my job seriously. I still take it seriously. We’ve moved on, but some things don’t. Some things aren’t meant to. People should keep their promises, don’t you think?”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I still had no idea what he was talking about. Adrian had mentioned his fraternity, so I assumed this man had been part of the band of brothers who’d lived together during their time in college.

But a pledge to never fall in love?

Adrian had never mentioned anything like that.

“I’ve checked in with all of the guys. Every single one of them—and you know what? They’re not trustworthy. Not a single one of them.”

“No one can promise not to fall in love,” I said, attempting to keep on his wavelength.

“Yes, they can!” he shouted. “I did! They all can, too. And they’re going to stick to their word if I have anything to do with it.”

Suspicion crawled through me. What had happened to make him so bitter?

Had he taken this pact of theirs more to heart than anyone else? And he was feeling vindictive because he was the only one who had?

Whatever the case was, I couldn't stay here. I had to get out—but that might be a little more helpful if I knew where I was.

“What are you going to do to me, then?” I asked. “Why bring me into this?”

“I didn't bring you into this,” the man said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. “Adrian did.” He peered at his phone and paused to tap his thumbs across the screen.

Adrian. My heart pounded his name.

The man chuckled and stood. He fanned his phone in my direction. Though I couldn't read the screen from here, I could tell he'd been texting someone.

“And you're in luck—he's on his way.”

* * *

The man fed me stale crackers. I was hesitant to drink the water he offered, but my mouth was parched. Reluctantly, I opened my lips and allowed the surprisingly cool liquid to trickle over my tongue.

My backside ached. My head throbbed. My wrists were raw against the tight zip ties. I'd dozed off for a while, long enough to wake again to renewed sunlight at the cave's mouth.

My captor paced, tapping his phone against his leg. He went one direction, then another, then circled around and started all over again. I attempted to push to my feet, but he caught sight of my movements and dashed back, shoving me down with his shoe to my shoulder.

I hit the rock with a thump.

“Let me go,” I said. “If this is between you and Adrian, why keep me here?”

“You're the bait,” he said with a grin.

Before he managed to rise, the sound of footsteps approached. The man shoved a hand over my face. I inhaled the scent of dirty skin and jerked free just as Adrian appeared at the mouth of the cave.

He looked fearless and daring, wearing jeans, boots, and a t-shirt. He lifted the sunglasses from his face and took a few steps into the cave.

My heart climbed into my throat. “Adrian!”

“You okay?” he called to me. “Did he hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” I called.

“Quiet,” my captor shouted. He whipped a knife from a holder attached to his belt and darted it in Adrian’s direction. “You came.”

“You knew I would,” Adrian said. “This is between you and me. Let her go; leave her out of this.”

“She’s the reason you’re here.”

“Come on, Will,” Adrian said, lifting his hands as though to placate my captor. “It’s been ten years. Don’t tell me this is because of The Pact.”

Will grappled the knife with both hands and directed it at Adrian. “You agreed to it. You signed a document stating that I was within my rights to enact punishment however I see fit.”

“That portion of the contract is in breach of the law, and my lawyer is going to help me fight its terms. You’re not in charge of Sigma Phi Rho,” Adrian said. “You never were. I can’t believe you’re still ruining your life over this.”

“What do you mean ruining my life? I’m fulfilling my life’s purpose. I gave up Celia for the frat—for you. I lost her—I lost everything. I spent my time in jail imagining moments just like this one.”

Adrian snarled, a sound that sounded like laughter. “No one forced you to let her go. It’s a pointless pact. It was a hoax, something to give us a reason to mess with the lower classmen.

“You just got out of jail, man. Looks like you’re about to land yourself right back in it again.”

“I’m not going back there.”

“Then you should have left well enough alone.”

“You fell in love!” Will snapped. “I couldn’t leave that alone.”

“Yeah, I did.” Adrian’s eyes skidded to mine.

That look was packed with so much meaning, it drilled into me, skewering straight into my stomach.

Though fraught with danger, the moment stilled.

He fell in love—with me?

How was that possible? And why was Will acting like loving me was some kind of crime?

My body tremored. Will’s attention was fully on Adrian. He hadn’t allowed me to stand before, but now that his back was to me, I pushed to my feet.

I took a tentative step past the fire, closer to the two men. Closer and closer.

“I’ll talk to the guys,” Adrian said.

Something told me he was deflecting, giving me time to move in.

“I’m disbanding The Pact. It’s done. It’s over. You need to let it go.”

“I won’t,” Will snarled. He lunged closer.

Adrian shirked back, dodging the knife thrust. I released a shriek and covered my mouth with my bound hands.

There wasn’t much time. If Will was desperate and insane enough to attempt physical injury, I had to act. With Will’s attention on Adrian, I took advantage of his distraction. I edged in closer behind my captor.

Adrian gave me a subtle nod.

I wasn't really sure what to do. I'd never in a million years thought I'd be in a situation like this, but I'd seen plenty of movies. I'd have to wing it.

Gritting my teeth, springing off the moment's adrenaline, I leapt. I lifted my bound hands around Will's neck and hoisted myself onto his back. If all I could do was provide a diversion, I'd do the best job I possibly could.

My actions threw him off balance. He dropped his knife. Adrian dove for the weapon.

Will fought against my grip. I wasn't sure what to do now that I'd become his turtle shell. With my hands bound as they were, and without anything to ground myself on, I couldn't easily extricate myself.

"Watch out!" Adrian shouted.

He darted toward us, but too late, Will staggered backward, lunging me against the rock wall.

The air knocked from my chest. I gasped, grappling for breath as stars danced before my vision.

With his handsome face bent into a fearsome scowl, Adrian rushed forward and punched Will in the face. The impact knocked him to the ground, and he landed hard on my left leg.

I released a cry, but Will didn't move.

"Are you okay?" Adrian asked.

His hands made careful work against mine. He lifted my bound wrists away from Will's neck and then I was in his arms. I trembled, wishing I could clutch him.

"My leg," I said. "My leg hurts, but I'm okay."

"I'm so sorry," he said, showering kisses on my cheeks, my neck, my mouth.

His hands roved, checking my face, my shoulders, my arms and legs.

"I knew he was out of jail, but I didn't know he was so far gone to stalk us. I never thought he'd attack you. I never

thought anything like this would happen.”

Footsteps sounded, and several more people appeared at the mouth of the cave. Adrian’s body relaxed against mine.

“I told them to wait—and now, I wish I hadn’t. I should have had them come with me from the start.”

“Who?”

“The police.”

Sure enough, the man and woman filing into the cave’s mouth wore police uniforms, utility belts and all. Their guns were poised and ready.

“Mr. Bear?”

“Over here,” Adrian said, directing them to where we sat.

The police placed handcuffs around Will’s wrists and then made quick work of looking us over. My leg wasn’t broken, only sprained. By the time Will came to, they had cut the zip ties clasp my hands together and had hauled Will out. He spat expletives the entire time.

We gave them our stories, and I was interested in the details Adrian shared about this so-called Pact he’d made back in college. Now wasn’t the time for that conversation, though. For now, I was just glad he was here. I was glad we were both okay.

I’d have to peg him for details later and hope he told me everything.

goldie

SLEEP SLIPPED FROM MY EYES, making me aware of just how sore I was. I shifted beneath the blankets only to still once more because every move I made hurt. Shifting my legs was mildly excruciating, and my back was badly bruised.

But that wasn't the only reason I went stock still.

From the simplistic pattern of my floral curtains and the familiar pictures and quotes hanging on the wall, I was in my bed back home in Baldwin.

Only I wasn't here alone.

Black hair, feathered lashes, teasing lips, hands resting peacefully on his chest as it rose up and down. I'd fantasized about this face. I'd imagined every aspect I could summon, and when I couldn't remember those, I'd stared at the selfie he'd taken of us for longer than was mentally healthy.

Lightness puffed in my chest, threatening to lift me where I lay. My awareness climbed sky high.

Adrian Bear was here. Asleep in my bed.

I watched him for a few moments, inching closer just to be sure. He'd changed into a different t-shirt, a soft gray with the Bear Financial logo on the front. He was so easy on the eyes, with his torso rising gently up and down, his strong forearms and hands revealing small scrapes from his altercation with Will.

Our short time apart hadn't erased the memory of his features. His lips parted slightly. Scruff itched along his

jawline. The freckle I'd noticed near his left ear. It was really him.

I wasn't sure how to move without exploding to pieces. His nearness had the most overwhelming effect on me. Inhaling, I breathed in that scent of his and reveled in it, all while disbelief clamored through me.

What was he doing here?

He stirred and opened his eyes. They were just as deliciously brown as I remembered. After blinking a few times, he trailed the back of his hand across my cheek.

"You're sleeping in my bed?" I said.

"Just returning the favor."

I giggled. I couldn't help it. I couldn't stop, but really, what else was I supposed to do? My insides were squealing.

"What are you doing here?"

He pushed himself up on his elbow. It wasn't the eyes so much as the devotion in them, the shape of him, the way he tilted in my direction and gazed at me as if there was no one else he'd rather be with.

"After Will's attack yesterday? I wasn't about to leave you alone. I needed to make sure you were safe."

The air between us whirred. His fingers brushed my hair away from my face and grazed my cheek once more.

The touch was a shock wave that made my brain babble. I was hyper-aware of his fingertips, of his skin, of the flecks of intensity in his eyes.

Throughout our entire, brief relationship, I'd constantly questioned the reality of him. I couldn't have dreamed this moment up, not with the way my blood raced or the way his gaze penetrated me.

He was here. He was real.

"How are you?" he asked. "After yesterday. Are you okay?"

I snuggled into his side, breathing him in and basking in his embrace. “I’m fine,” I said.

“Come on,” he said, his voice rumbling in his chest as I rested my cheek against it. His fingers stroked the skin of my arms. “How are you, really?”

“Shocked,” I admitted. “I caught him watching me—and then when he showed up behind me, I didn’t have time to panic before I was knocked out. The next thing I knew, I was all groggy and tied up in that cave.”

“I still can’t believe he did that.”

“Why did he?” I asked. “You promised you wouldn’t fall in love?”

He stared up at my ceiling, the muscles on his throat working as he swallowed. “We called it The Pact. It was stupid, I know. It was supposed to be a harmless agreement, one we could give each other flak for during our years at the U of C. Nothing more.”

Sounded like something a bunch of college-aged boys might do on a dare or something. “What made Will take it so seriously?”

“I don’t know,” Adrian said. “I think he felt jilted. But one thing I do know is that I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

“I’m good with that,” I said, nestling in closer.

“I’ll talk to Hawk and the others about dissolving The Pact, and you’re—”

This was news. This time I lifted to my elbow for a better look at his face. “Hawk made it, too?”

“Yeah.” Adrian grimaced. “A lot of us did.”

I tried to imagine what Hawk had been like in college. It was hard picturing someone as put-together as Adrian being flighty enough to sign his heart away on a whim, but I could totally envision Hawk doing it.

Something told me he was every bit as silly now as he'd been then.

"You're right," I said. "That was stupid."

Adrian laughed and enveloped me. He kissed me long and slow. "I wanted to see what you thought about coming with me to Chicago."

"Coming with you—for the weekend?"

"No. Forever."

Forever. The word fluttered as it descended.

I wanted to say yes. I wanted to drop everything and leave right this minute. I wanted to turn my back on this town, on my job, my parents, everything, and devote myself completely to him. But doing so wasn't feasible.

Too soon, my elation withered.

"I can't," I said. "I've got to finish teaching here."

He stroked my hair away from my face again. "Finish out the school year. Then come."

Lying on my side, I tucked my fists beneath my chin. "I'll admit, it crossed my mind. I was going to start looking for jobs there. It's where your business is, your life. I wanted to see where you fit."

Deliberately, he sat up, resting his weight on one hand. "I've lived in many places, but I think it doesn't matter where I go. The thing that was missing in each of those places is you. *You're* my best fit, Gabby Bybanks. You fit me just right."

I pushed myself up as well. My hair tumbled down my side, and I shook my head in disbelief.

"You're sunlight," he went on, reaching for me and pulling me onto his lap.

He'd said something similar as I'd been leaving Montana, but I hadn't been able to process it. "Sunlight?"

He nodded his chin toward the window behind me. "See that sunshine? It completely changes this room. It adds color.

It brightens everything. It's like gold. Like you."

His powerful gaze was filled with revelation and fire and was focused directly on me. He slid his fingers through my blonde hair, letting them run its complete length like water.

"It's not your hair alone that's enlightening. *You* are sunshine, Gabby. You have that effect everywhere you go. I saw it when we went to Stano's and you clapped for that guitarist when no one else would and livened up the audience. When we looked across the ranch, you noticed everything I didn't. You're that way for me, too."

"Adrian," I said, still not knowing what to say.

"You still don't believe me, do you? I know you have a hard time with trust."

I dipped my chin to my chest. His mom wasn't around. This was no fake scenario. He was here, in my room. He had come to rescue me, and he was baring his heart to me.

"I can't believe you're saying all of this," I said. "I thought I'd have to explain myself when I saw you again."

"What is it you need to explain?"

I twisted my hair over one shoulder. "I ignored your calls, Adrian. I—I'm sorry. I didn't know what to say to you, how to tell you why I left Two Pines the way I did."

"Why did you?" he asked.

I drew in a gradual breath that did nothing to slow my heart.

"I was scared," I admitted. "Scared that deep down you didn't really like me as much as you seemed to, since our whole relationship started as a ploy to convince your mom you didn't want to be with Danica."

"At times, I wondered if you really did like me. But then when I realized you found out about my birth mom before me, it made me even more scared. I couldn't believe you didn't say anything."

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was going to tell you, but then you got that email and left. I never meant to deceive you. It’s why I’ve been calling every day. I hoped maybe the next time you’d pick up. Or the next. I know you think people can’t be trusted, but I wanted you to know you can trust me.”

“Why?” I asked.

“You were the first good memory I have of my family’s cabin,” he said. “The minute I saw you there—” He nuzzled in, dipping to press his nose to mine.

“When I crashed in and found you, you shed light into my life. You’ve helped me see things in a completely different way. I was never satisfied with any of it before. I could never see my home for what it was. It took seeing things from your perspective to appreciate just how good I had it.”

I rested a hand on his arm, soaking in his words.

“I told my mom the truth. Then I went to Danica’s, and I told her the truth once and for all—that she deserves to find someone else because my heart is already long gone. It followed you the minute you left.”

My insides whirred and ticked like a windup toy. “You told Will you loved me.”

“I do. I wasn’t supposed to fall in love ever again. You defied that like you do everything else.”

I felt insubstantial, shaking, whirling. His arms remained around me, keeping me together, holding me steady.

“Got any cabins in Chicago?” I asked.

“No. But I have a guest house I can offer you.”

“A *guest* house?”

First jet planes, now this? I placed my hands on his shoulders and looked him straight on.

“Adrian Bear, what aren’t you telling me?”

He grinned, stunning me. “So much.”

His hands slid from my hair to my jaw, and he pulled me gently to him to place a kiss on my mouth. The kiss was budding and cautious, and so filled with the promise of heat it tingled all the way to my toes.

“So what do you say? I know you can’t leave for good yet. Want to come to Chicago with me for the weekend?”

“What—you mean now?”

He grinned, kissing me again. “Yes, now. I have a fast way to get you there and back so you’re back by Monday for school.”

I pulled away too soon. “No way. That joke about Duncan’s—”

“He’s got one, too.”

I curled my fingers into his hair as he pulled me closer. “Let me guess. Courtesy of Bear Financial Investments?” I traced the shape of his company’s logo across his chest. “Don’t tell me you’re some kind of closet billionaire.”

“Billionaire, yes. Closet, no.”

“Adrian,” I chided.

Everything made so much more sense. Duncan’s comment about keeping their identities on the down low. The jokes about buying brand new golf clubs, the snazzy Hummer Adrian had been driving around even though he was only staying at the ranch temporarily.

“Hawk?” I prodded. “Duncan?”

They both owned companies too. And Maddox owned a freaking theme park, for that matter.

Without answering, Adrian slid his arms around me again, giving me another kiss.

“How long do you think it’ll take you to pack?” he asked, releasing me so I could stand.

I ran my hands through my hair and watched him smooth out the blankets on the bed. I was stupefied. No wonder a

hundred dollars for raffle tickets had seemed like pocket change to him.

I threw a handful of things into a bag. He waited out in the living room for me while I gathered my bathroom items, and once I had what I needed, I met him out there with my bag in hand.

“So, to Chicago?” I asked.

He smirked. “Actually, I wondered if you might be open to a detour first.”

THE CABIN NESTLED in the trees exactly as I remembered it. Beams of light sprayed between branches, adding a glow around the place, making it as picturesque as I remembered. Why had he brought me here?

Adrian got my door, and we strode hand in hand down the path. I waited for him to unlock the cabin, and together, we entered the first place we'd met.

Each room was perfectly staged. It was secluded in a way that invited us to settle in, get cozy, and stay that way for a while.

"Well?" I said, circling. "We're here. Are you going to tell me why now?"

Adrian set his bag on the floor. "Remember the day I found you here?"

"Like I could forget it," I said with a grin.

Honestly, who could?

He lifted the flap on his leather bag and removed a square lockbox. "This is what I was looking for that day. It's what my father left me in the family trust."

"Ah, so you did lie to me."

He stiffened, his eyes widening.

"You said it was lottery tickets." I folded my arms, swimming in the delight of making him squirm.

He released a relieved chuckle. "Ha ha," he said, tapping my nose.

“Where did you find it?” I asked, stepping closer to inspect the lockbox.

The room sizzled with awareness of him. Or maybe that was just me. We were completely alone here. Was this really why he’d brought me all this way?

“Danica had it.”

I touched my throat. “Do I want to know?”

“Probably not.”

He padded to the sitting area, set the lockbox on the coffee table, and glanced at me expectantly before offering me a hand. “I wanted to share this moment with you. That’s why I never opened it before now.”

I joined his side. My body temperature ticked up a few notches, the way it always did when I was this close to him.

He placed a hand on my lower back as though comforted by my place at his side.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you sure you want me here?”

A sparkle glinted in his eye. He tilted closer. “I wouldn’t be doing this now if I wasn’t.”

I sought his hand and wove my own with it. “Okay.”

Clearing his throat, Adrian retrieved a small key from his pocket, inserted it into the lock, and turned. It responded with a click. He lifted the lid.

Several wads of paper littered the inside, along with what looked like a letter. Adrian rifled through, looking confused.

Curiosity overtook me. I reached for one of the papers. “May I?”

He nodded.

I opened the topmost folded paper to reveal a stained, red border around a large calligraphy title stating, *Deer Lodge Railroad Company*. Below it, an eagle with open wings filled

the space. Another similarly designed certificate was labeled, *Montana Land Trust*.

“Are these—?”

“Old stock certificates,” Adrian said, perusing another.

Incredible. From the look of these—and the brittle feel of the paper—they had to be extremely old.

“Are they worth anything?” I asked.

“Most stock is traded online these days,” he said. “The least I can do is see if any of these companies exist anymore, but the chance is unlikely. Look at some of these dates.”

He pointed to several corners where dates ranged from the late 1800s to early 1900s, even 1950.

I watched his expression for several moments. His forehead furrowed, his lips downturned. How was he feeling about this discovery?

“This isn’t what you were expecting, was it?” I asked softly, resting a comforting hand on his arm.

His breathing escalated. He spoke without looking at me.

“I don’t know what I was expecting. He left my brothers usable things like places in the company, like the ownership of horses and land. And he gave me a bunch of expired stock.”

“Maybe he thought they still had value,” I suggested, trying to comfort him.

Adrian sniffed and glanced upward at the exposed beams in the ceiling. “I feel like he’s still mocking my career choice. Showing me how quickly something valuable can expire.”

He pushed the lockbox to the center of the coffee table, disturbing the certificates scattered across the surface, and ran his hands through his hair.

“I was never good enough for him. I was only ever focused on money, and this is his way of shoving that in my face, to show me it doesn’t last.”

I couldn't see how this was any different than the inheritance his brothers received. Each of their gifts had monetary value as well. Though I'd never known Matthew Bear, I suspected he had the best intentions when he'd given these to his oldest son.

I placed myself in front of Adrian and took his face in my hands. His body was trembling, his face pained. I waited to speak until his eyes rested on mine.

"I don't care what your father thought of you," I said. "Because the Adrian I know is kind and good. He's driven and ambitious and dead sexy. All traits any father should be proud of—all things money *can't* buy."

A glint of amusement softened his pain. He stroked my cheek. "Especially the sexy one."

"I know. I mean, it's first on my list of Most Important Attributes."

"Then why didn't you say it before?"

A shrug. "I was going for suspense here. I like to keep you guessing."

Adrian stroked my jaw with his thumb and leaned in, searing me with his closeness. "*Always* keep me guessing."

He smoldered at me beneath long lashes before sinking in and pressing a promising kind of kiss to my lips. Though his mouth was on mine, the kiss itself was more widespread, reaching down my spine and into my low belly. It stoked a fire in my chest, urging me to grip his shoulders that much more, to pull him that much closer.

His breath was racing when he pulled away. "Man, my memories of this place just keep getting better and better."

I fizzled inside, smiling and meeting the additional kiss he offered.

"Adrian?"

"Hmm?"

I wasn't sure how to say this. I didn't want to ruin the romantic moment building between us, but I couldn't move forward until I made sure he knew my thoughts. I wanted to help him.

"I know your father hurt you. I don't understand all of it because I never saw your relationship, but from what you've told me, I think it was because you're the oldest."

"I was the guinea pig, you mean."

"It's just how things sometimes are, especially with more than one child in a family. The oldest always seems to get the largest load of responsibility. And where your choices led you away from his expectations, he didn't have any of your brothers to practice on."

I added a smile to the words, hoping he read them as I meant them.

He considered this. "You think he did it because he cared about me."

I stroked the stubble on his cheek. "Yeah, I do."

He sniffed. "That's what my mom insists, too. I just have a hard time seeing it."

That thought saddened me. How could anyone be around this man and not see how absolutely incredible he was?

"I'm sorry he didn't give you something more valuable."

Adrian turned away from me. "I don't want something more valuable from him. Not moneywise, anyway. I was hoping for—"

He rubbed a finger under his nose. He was more fidgety than usual. I suspected he was fighting off emotion.

I voiced what I thought he was trying to say. "You wanted to know that he loved you."

His jaw ticked.

"It's okay, you know," I said. "To admit it. I won't think any less of you. Haven't you heard? Emotions make a man more appealing, not less."

“You’re saying you’ll make out with me if I cry?”

My laugh was short-lived. I stroked his back in soft circles.

“I’m saying, your dad *died*. You’ve just found something of value, something he left for you. I know it’s affecting you, and if you need to, I won’t mind if you cry.”

It was why I wondered if he really wanted me there or not.

His attention returned to the lockbox, and his brow snapped down. “What’s this?” He removed the envelope from the box. It was tucked in the top of the lid.

“Looks like a letter,” I said.

He slid a finger beneath the seal and opened it. His eyes skimmed the lines a few moments before he began to read aloud.

“Contrary to our many arguments, I had great pride in you. I hope you can see that I invested in stocks also.

“Some belonged to Grandpa before me, but I hope this shows I didn’t think any less of you for your chosen business venture. I only wanted you to have a family because I knew that was where you’d find the most joy life could offer. I’m sorry it never came across that way.”

Adrian’s gaze lifted to mine. His eyes were glossy. “Why would he write all this in a letter? Why not just tell me?”

“Maybe he tried to,” I suggested.

“Maybe.” He cleared his throat. “I wasn’t exactly a terrific teenager who would sit and listen to his every word. Every time he started in on my life goals, I shut down.”

I could imagine a studly, brooding, teenage version of the man before me, and my inner child drooled. I rested a hand on his shoulder. “It’s not your fault.”

He read on. “Within this letter, you’ll find the deed to your own plot of land, something I know you once wanted and that I hope you will again. I’ve been saving it for you, for the right time. Maybe whenever you read this will be the right time.

“I love you, Adrian. You know I don’t say that lightly. Dad.”

Adrian folded the letter and pulled another slip of paper from the envelope. It was a written deed for a plot of land, not on Rustic Ridge, but not far from it, either.

“He left me land? Why would he do that?”

I took his face in my hands. “He’s giving you an opportunity,” I said. “To decide what you really want.”

“My life is in Chicago.”

“It doesn’t have to be. School doesn’t start for another few months. I’ll have time to find something. I have time to apply in Chicago, if that’s what you want. Or I can look for jobs closer to Two Pines.”

His gaze focused hard on me. “You’d do that?”

“In a heartbeat.”

His expression turned pensive. He stroked the skin of my forearms as I pulled my hands from his face.

“What about you?” he asked. “What do you want?”

“You,” I said truthfully. “I want to be wherever you are.”

Adrian’s gaze softened. He looked at me tenderly, lovingly, possessively, and the expression rendered me the consistency of melted snow. Cradling my face in his hands, he gave me a succulent kiss that I never wanted to end.

“This plot of land,” he said, resting his forehead against mine. “We could build a house. Not two doors down from my mom and Chase, but a drive away. This is what I always told him I wanted. My own land. My own space.”

“*Our* own space,” I corrected. “Assuming we get to that point.”

“What are you saying?”

“I was miserable without you. And I don’t want to live in a guest house on your land,” I added with a laugh.

Not that I was complaining about his guest house in Chicago. Though he'd only shown me pictures, it was nicer than any hotel I'd ever stayed in, including his family's bed and breakfast.

"You're saying you want to get married?"

"Yeah, I do."

He nuzzled in, chuckling and brushing his lips along my jawline. "You're not the only one. What are we waiting for? Vegas?"

This man was killing me. I needed to distance myself from him. I laughed, using this as an opportunity to step away.

"I am not walking down the aisle in a cheap chapel in Vegas. I want our families to be there."

Adrian remained in the same place he was, looking brooding and gorgeous. The corner of his lip quirked as he took in all of me, and the desire in his eyes wasn't only a physical thing. It was more like I *saw* love there. But it didn't just dance in his gaze.

It blazed.

He crossed the room to me and took me in his arms. "I want that, too. You can't blame a guy for trying."

My stomach burned at the thought that he was as attracted to me as I was to him. I laughed and kissed him before the transition in our conversation led me to a new thought.

"Speaking of families, I wondered if you might be able to help me with something?"

"Anything."

"Remember how I told you I contacted my cousins?"

"Did they reply to you?"

I nodded. The message had come just before we'd arrived at the cabin. "Only one of them so far. Ella Embers—and you'll never believe where she works."

"Where?"

“Ever After Sweets. She cleans the corporate offices in Westville.” I waited, eager to see what his reaction would be.

Interest gleamed in his eyes. “You’re kidding.”

I beamed at him. “I’m really not. And get this—she said she’s open to meeting me!”

I worried she wouldn’t be. After all, we were complete strangers, too.

I wasn’t sure when to go there. I had a job to find this summer, lessons to plan, and a new school year to prepare for once I got said job.

And if Adrian and I were to be making wedding plans, that was an even bigger deal. Still, we could figure out a timeline that worked.

“We should arrange something,” Adrian said. “Have Hawk be there too.”

This gave me pause. “I thought the other guys wanted to remain incognito.”

Adrian lifted a single shoulder. “She doesn’t have to know who he is right away. He’d be open to meeting her.”

“That’s the thing. I already told her I knew him—that I was dating his best friend, and she begged me not to say anything.”

Ella hadn’t explained why, only that she wasn’t comfortable with the idea of meeting the man who owned the offices she cleaned.

Adrian’s brow puzzled. “Really? Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’m not really close enough to her to press anything, you know?”

Hopefully, that would change. She’d sent another message to my phone, one I hadn’t yet responded to since we got here.

“But she invited me out there to meet her anytime.”

“That sounds amazing. What are we waiting for?”

“You mean—” I glanced at the open lockbox on the coffee table, at the old stocks spewing from it. “You mean you’re done here?”

“For now,” he said, teasing a kiss to my top lip and then my bottom lip. I shuddered, clinging to him before I managed to pull away. “I’ve been meaning to go to Westville, anyway.”

“You have? To see Hawk?”

He bent to fold his dad’s letter and place it back into its envelope. “Yeah, he and I have something we’re looking into.”

“What’s that?”

Adrian drew in a long inhale. “After you left, I had a bit of a crisis to deal with at work.”

I joined him at the coffee table, folding stock certificates and handing them to him to be replaced in the lockbox. “What kind of crisis?”

He explained how his business had plummeted almost overnight. He’d lost a slew of clients to a random company called Wolf Industries. He pulled his phone from his pocket and showed me a picture of an insignia.

“This is their logo,” he said.

“It looks...nice?” I said, not sure where he was going with this.

The logo consisted of three Greek letters situated around the outline of a wolf.

He tapped his phone and pulled up another logo. Using the same Greek letters with a different symbol replacing the wolf, I saw his concern.

“It’s almost identical to the Sigma Phi Rho insignia. I think something is going on.”

“Like what?”

“Like this was some kind of personal attack on me. Why else would this company have a logo that’s almost the exact match of the fraternity I joined in college?”

I didn't draw the same conclusion. "Sometimes logos just look the same."

His handsome face was stern with concern. "Not this time. Rita and I contacted those who withdrew their accounts, and many of them shared their reasoning. Wolf Industries not only offered them lower prices, but they also attacked the quality of my character. Something tells me this was a personal attack."

"Your intuition?" I wasn't sure what else was giving him that impression.

Companies lost customers and clientele all the time, didn't they? What else was going on to make him think that?

"Exactly." He scraped the back of his neck. "It just doesn't feel right. I wanted to talk to Hawk about it."

"You think this Wolf Industries company is connected to your fraternity?" I probed.

"I think they targeted my clients on purpose. I think they have a different end in mind than simply expanding their own clientele. It's one thing to want to build their business, but doing so by stealing my customers specifically? I'm not sure. That's why I wanted to talk to Hawk."

"And a phone call wouldn't work?"

I shook my head. Billionaires.

Truthfully, though, he had a point. I admired that he was so driven about this concern he had.

He shrugged, and his face took on a mischievous expression that jumbled my stomach into knots. "That's not the only reason I wanted to go to Vermont. I promised you a trip to Wonderland."

"Really?"

He dipped in for a kiss. "Really. You up for it?"

Wonderland theme park? Was there anyone who wasn't up for that?

The notion of going had been tossed around so casually the day I'd met his friends, I hadn't given it a second thought. I

threw my arms around him before it dawned on me that he meant going to Vermont *today*.

There wasn't time, not with the sun setting soon. I needed to keep my feet on the ground around this guy.

"I only have a few days off—and I was supposed to use them to go job hunting."

"Then next weekend?"

I laughed and rested my cheek against his chest. "I'm not sure I'll ever get used to this."

Adrian secured his hands around my waist and bent to tip his nose to mine. "You're my girl. Get used to it."

"I'm happy to be your anything." Whether we went to Wonderland or not. Adrian Bear was everything to me and more, and I couldn't wait to see what our future together held.

I was also glad to be with him so I could help him figure out what was going on with his company. What could this Wolf Industries mean by targeting his clients?

If Adrian was right, and this was a personal attack, then who else besides Will would be vindictive enough to attack him?

And why?

epilogue

FIVE MONTHS LATER

“LANDING ALREADY?” I asked, gazing out the window in surprise. You’d think I’d be used to this by now, considering how often we made use of his jet. What with traveling back and forth between Chicago, Baldwin, and his family’s ranch all summer long, we definitely put it to good use.

It took an eternity for the school year to end, but finally, summertime struck. In the interim, I’d interviewed and snagged a position at the high school—not in Chicago, but in Two Pines.

“English teacher,” Adrian had said by way of congratulations, kissing me senseless. “My favorite subject.”

I’d narrowed my eyes at him. “I thought you said it was your least favorite.”

“It’s my favorite now.” He’d kissed me again.

Now, Adrian peered past me out the window from his leather seat next to mine. He looked as devilish as ever, with his steel cut jawline, finely formed shoulders, and admiration in his eyes.

“Yeah, it looks like we’re here.” He closed the lid of his laptop.

Quarters were close in a plane this small—and I didn’t mind in the slightest. It made for some good snuggling during our travels.

The pilot’s voice came across the overhead speaker to be heard over the noise of the engine, letting us know we’d made it to Duncan’s private hangar in Westville.

Butterflies made a windstorm in my stomach. Not because of the landing, not even because we were finally going to be seeing Maddox’s theme park.

This was more than just a weekend away together.

We’d come to Vermont so I could finally meet Ella.

Before I could meet her, however, Adrian wanted to stop by and visit Hawk and smooth a few things out. I had to admit, after hearing so much about Hawk Danielson, and how he’d inherited his father’s billion-dollar chain of candy stores, how he’d been so funny and kind at the Bear family’s fundraiser, I was more than curious to get to know him better.

He was young to be the CEO of a successful company. He and Adrian had also been looking into Wolf Industries and who might be behind it. They hadn’t made much headway thus far, which was why Adrian wanted to stop by and see his bestie.

“Will Hawk mind that I’m here?” I asked, standing and enjoying the stretch in my legs.

“Are you kidding?” Adrian said. “We have to show him this sparkly rock.”

He lifted my left hand and kissed the ring there, lighting a fire in my low belly.

We still needed to set the date, but Adrian had barely made it down on one knee before I plowed into him to show him just how adamant I was in my agreement.

I was marrying Adrian Bear. The wedding couldn't come fast enough.

Mrs. Bear was overjoyed that Adrian and I were planning on moving back to Two Pines. I was amazed at how hard she hugged me when we returned to the ranch to show her the letter her late husband had written to their son, the deed, and how Adrian had announced we were going to settle down there after all.

Don't even get me started on planning a wedding with her. To say she was enthusiastic was an understatement. I was just glad she didn't glower at me every time I saw her like she used to.

"I know—it's just—" I wasn't sure how to explain my reservations.

Every time I'd asked Adrian about why Hawk had signed The Pact, he'd told me Hawk would have to tell me himself. These two were going to be discussing their agreement and how to dissolve it. Did that mean I'd be able to ask Hawk about his reasoning?

Because Adrian had to know I was going to ask.

Hawk was good-looking, with his blond hair, charming personality, and model-like physique. What had made him want to sign something so restrictive?

Something told me he wouldn't mind the question. Whether or not he'd answer it honestly was another matter, though.

Why *had* Hawk signed it? Did he love anyone—was that why he was working with Adrian to dissolve it? Or was he simply being a good friend?

The frat brothers had all agreed to suffer severe consequences if they reneged their word, but when it came down to it, they'd all agreed that The Pact had been made in jest. At least, that was what Adrian insisted.

Did Hawk believe he was out of danger?

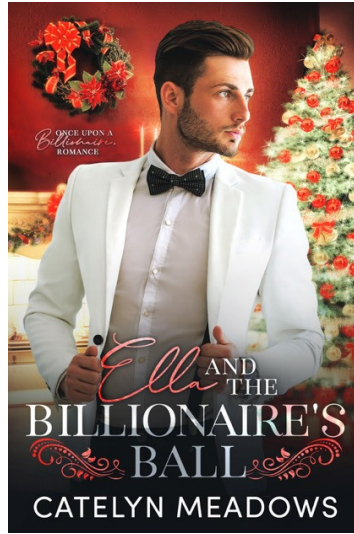
Will had acted so deranged. Would he really let The Pact go that easily?

Now that Will was behind bars, Adrian was certain no one would pose any kind of threat about it anymore. I couldn't be so sure.

The End... For Now

See why Hawk signed The Pact and find out if it gets dissolved in book two, [*Ella and the Billionaire's Ball!*](#)

A romantic setup. A slowly gained trust. And an accusation that could shatter it to pieces.



ELLA

My family relationships are broken enough; the last thing I need is romance.

But when I meet the CEO and owner of the building I clean, sparks don't just fly—they combust.

I try to keep my distance, but Hawk breaks my resistance down a smile at a time. And letting him into my life proves to be more hazardous than I could ever have imagined.

HAWK

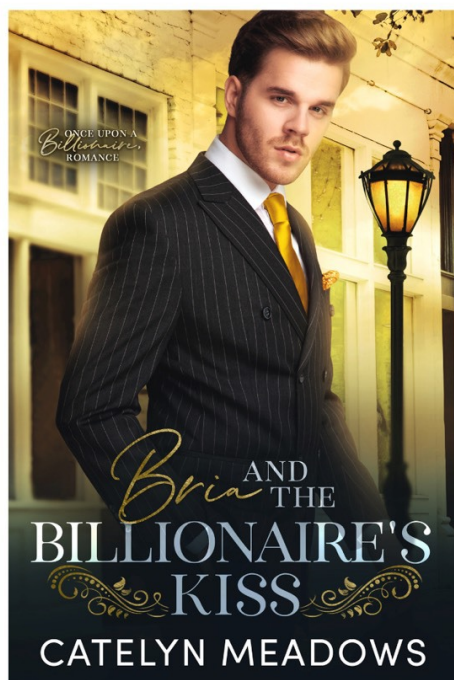
When mysterious threats against Ever After Sweets accuse Ella of being the culprit who's been stealing office supplies, I suspect there's more to the allegations than we can see.

Someone has it in for Ella, and I'm not sure who it is. I have to find out who's framing her before she's put behind bars for a crime she didn't commit.

If you like the blazing chemistry of Anne-Marie Meyer and the heroic romance of Cami Checketts, you'll devour the witty banter, gripping stakes, and fairytale feel of this enthralling series.

Read [Ella and the Billionaire's Ball](#), a Cinderella retelling with suspense, to see if Hawk and Ella can get

their sweet heat HEA amidst all the danger and drama!



GO BACK TO
WHERE IT ALL STARTED.

A subscriber exclusive.
See how The Pact began in this
free novella available only to
members of Catelyn's newsletter.

JOIN NOW AT
www.catelynmeadows.com

Go back to where it all started.

Glimpse Adrian, Hawk, Maddox, and the others during their days at the fraternity and get swept away with Grey, Bria, and The Pact that started it all.

- Sleeping Beauty Retelling
- Forbidden Romance
- Protective Hero
- Small Town
- Secrets That Keep Them Apart
- Origin Story

Available *only* when you join my newsletter!

Read on to find out more!

A tempting kiss. A fledgling romance. And a pledge that could ruin everything.

BRIA

The red flags keep warning me to ignore the chemistry I feel with Grey, but every time we're together, he makes my blood race. I can't stop imagining his lips on mine, and yet, deep down, I know he's hiding something. Something big that could tear us apart.

Something that could ruin both our lives.

GREY

The night of my fraternity hazing, I made an outrageous pledge without really thinking through the ramifications. Now that promise, that *secret*, means letting go of the woman I don't want to live without.

I want to forget the pledge and be with Bria anyway. After all, what's the worst that could happen?

The answer to that question is far worse than I ever imagined, and in the end, I might lose everything: my education, the girl, and the life I've sacrificed everything to have.

If you like the blazing chemistry of Anne-Marie Meyer and the heroic romance of Cami Checketts, you'll devour the witty banter and fairytale feel of this absorbing series.

Join my newsletter for this FREE novella and dive into *Bria and the Billionaire's Kiss* to see how Bria and Grey get their sweet heat HEA!

[Join My Newsletter!](#)

Carroll

FAMILY TREE



join my reader group

I'm BEYOND thrilled that you read *Goldie and the Billionaire Bear!*

I'd love to keep hanging out with you!

If you want to hang out, chat, talk books, get in on some AWESOME giveaways, or just stay up to date with things that I don't share anywhere else—and if you're on Facebook—

—Then RUN! Don't walk—to join my reader group!

Check it out at the link below:

[I'd love to have you join!](#)



Hope to see you there!

-Catelyn

*books by catelyn
meadows*

Once Upon a Billionaire

[Goldie and the Billionaire Bear](#)

[Ella and the Billionaire's Ball](#)

[Alice and the Billionaire's Wonderland](#)

Rosabel and the Billionaire Beast

Hazel and Her Billionaire Tower

Aaliyah and the Billionaire's Lamp

Lily and the Billionaire Prince

Snow and the Seven Billionaire Dates

Juliet and the Billionaire's Cat

The Holden Brothers

[Inheriting the Farmhouse](#)

[Fixing Up the Farmhouse](#)

[Christmas at the Farmhouse](#)

Delivery to the Farmhouse

Working at the Farmhouse

Santa's Radio Romances

[Snowed In at the Cottage](#)

[Snowed In at Harper's Inn](#)

[Snowed In at the Event Center](#)

Harvest Ranch

[Falling For My Sister's Ex](#)

Clean Christmas Romance

[Christmas in Magnolia Glen](#)

acknowledgments

Soooo much gratitude goes to my editor, Rachel Garber, for her excellent eye at catching mistakes. Gratitude also goes to Naomi Naihe and to Kassie Pitts for their editing prowess as well.

Huge thanks to Cindy Hale for her feedback, help, and awesome encouragement, and also for the teasers she helped me find.

I'm also extremely grateful for Rebecca Hamilton for painstakingly going through this book chapter by chapter to ensure it was enticing enough and for pushing me when it needed more work. Thank you for all you taught me!

Thank you to my family for your unending support. Gratitude will always go to my Heavenly Father for the talents, gifts, and time He has granted me to write.

And to you, my readers. Thank you for your support and for reading my books!

about the author



Catelyn Meadows writes small town contemporary romance. From fairytales retold with humor, heart, and hunky billionaires to budding friendships, rustic settings, and dreamy cowboys, she spins closed-door tales that you can enjoy at any time.

When she's not writing about spunky heroines or larger-than-life heroes, she's listening to audiobooks, playing the piano, or roving outside with her farm boy husband and four kids.

For a free book, [join Catelyn Meadows' newsletter!](#)

contents

1. [Goldie](#)
2. [Adrian](#)
3. [Goldie](#)
4. [Adrian](#)
5. [Goldie](#)
6. [Goldie](#)
7. [Adrian](#)
8. [Goldie](#)
9. [Goldie](#)
10. [Adrian](#)
11. [Goldie](#)
12. [Adrian](#)
13. [Goldie](#)
14. [Goldie](#)
15. [Goldie](#)
16. [Goldie](#)
17. [Goldie](#)
18. [Adrian](#)
19. [Goldie](#)
20. [Goldie](#)
21. [Goldie](#)
22. [Adrian](#)
23. [Goldie](#)
24. [Goldie](#)
25. [Adrian](#)
26. [Goldie](#)
27. [Adrian](#)
28. [Goldie](#)
29. [Adrian](#)
30. [Goldie](#)
31. [Adrian](#)
32. [Goldie](#)
33. [Adrian](#)
34. [Goldie](#)

35. [Goldie](#)

36. [Goldie](#)

37. [Adrian](#)

38. [Goldie](#)

39. [Goldie](#)

40. [Goldie](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Ella and the Billionaire's Ball](#)

[More About Bria's Story](#)

[Join My Reader Group](#)

[Books By Catelyn Meadows](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

Copyright © 2024 by Cortney Pearson

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, printing, recording, or otherwise—without the prior permission of the author, except for use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, incidents, or events are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

www.cortneypearson.com