

GRUMPY LITTLE CHRISTMAS



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MARIKA RAY

GRUMPY LITTLE CHRISTMAS

MARIKA RAY

Grumpy Little Christmas

Copyright © 2023 by Marika Ray

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

First Edition: November 14, 2023

Cover Artist: Shanoff Designs

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-950141-65-4

Original Paperback: 978-1-950141-66-1

CONTENTS

[Grumpy Little Christmas](#)

[Description](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Marika Ray](#)

[About the Author](#)

GRUMPY LITTLE CHRISTMAS

by Marika Ray

DESCRIPTION

With my country music career spiraling down the drain and a nasty public breakup to boot, I'm just looking to hide away at a rustic ski resort over Christmas, pretend the festive season doesn't exist, and rethink my whole life. Is that so much to ask?

Aksel Lund is a modern-day Viking who should be gracing magazine covers with his smoldery frown, not running the Havenkirk Ski Lodge like a tyrant. Unbeknownst to me, this map-dot town in Idaho doesn't have a spa or know how to be chill about Christmas. Aksel's eight-year-old daughter drags me to every single Snowmass celebration because I don't have the heart to tell her no.

Her father, on the other hand, has no heart. When he's not criticizing my music, or saving me from hurtling down the slopes, or arguing with me over my excessive luggage—it's only five suitcases, calm down—he's dodging my questions about why he's a single dad and why he keeps getting phone calls from creditors.

I may be a celebrity—which is akin to the grinch to him—but I know a thing or two about hard times. And Havenkirk looks like it's about to be sold off to the highest bidder the

second the decorations come down. If only Aksel would let me help save the lodge.

And if only Aksel didn't make my heart twist painfully in my chest and leave me panting whenever he turns that glower on me. If only I truly loved the season and could pull a Christmas miracle out of my guitar.

Turns out a miracle is what I need to get Aksel out of my heart, too.

Author's Note: Grumpy Little Christmas is a steamy small-town romance with low angst, high heat, and one grumpy alpha hero. If you like melt-your-marshmallows banter, gingerbread contests, snow sledding, mistletoe kisses, tender daddy-daughter moments, and lazy hot tub nights leading up to the sweetest holiday love affair between the two most unlikely people, then this is the romance for you!

CHAPTER ONE



Morgana

“WHATEVER YOU DO, don’t go on your phone!” Janna’s squeal brought me out of a dream with a barely clothed Fabio-type fan about to lick my toes while I tried to keep performing at a live concert in front of thousands of screaming faceless people.

I shoved the eye mask up on my forehead and tried to blink away the confusion. Lifting the sheets, I double-checked that my toes were indeed dry.

“Ugh,” I muttered, letting my head fall back on the satin pillow. I could have slept another ten not-quite-blissful hours if she would have left me alone.

My assistant fluttered around the room, presumably grabbing the clothes I’d need for the day ahead. I used to ask her the night before to give me the rundown for the next day, but I’d given that up several years earlier. It only brought me a pounding headache and hours of staring at the ceiling, wide awake while my anxiety levels soared to new heights.

I frowned and sat up against my white oak headboard—made for looks, not comfort—when her first statement finally

pierced my brain fog. Don't look at my phone? This could only mean one thing: the paps had gotten an unattractive shot of my ass and posted it gleefully, not caring that a woman approaching forty didn't need a reminder that metabolisms were hard to keep under control as one aged. This, sadly, was not my first rodeo with bad ass shots.

Nothing to do but look at the damage and get it over with. I reached around and snagged the phone out from under my pillow, where it had ended up last night when I fell asleep with it still in my hand. It didn't take long to find the photo, but it sure as hell wasn't my ass everyone was talking about.

It was much, much worse.

I shrieked at the top of my lungs. Janna ran over, trying to grab the phone from my hands. "I told you not to look!"

I smacked her away and scrambled to my feet, nearly pitching over when the mattress dipped wildly. Ripping the sleep mask from my head, I threw it as hard as I could. Clearly not realizing the gravity of the situation, it only sailed a measly foot and a half to land on my bedside table. Wholly unsatisfying.

Know what else was unsatisfying? Finding out your boyfriend of eleven months had broken up with you.

Publicly.

And already had another girlfriend. Younger, prettier, and more relevant.

"That mothertrucker!" I hissed, reading the post he'd left on his social media page at some ungodly hour when my lawyers weren't awake to make him take it down before the public got ahold of it.

"I know. Such a jerk," Janna agreed.

I glared at her. She whipped her hands up and backed up a couple feet. Smart girl. I was not a mean nor abusive employer, but I was known to gesticulate wildly when excited and I was excited on a regular basis. And this situation was making me...quite excitable.

Everett Eberhard—not his real name, by the way—was a mere B-list actor when we met last Christmas at a party in Burbank. I'd just recorded a song to be used in a new movie and the director had wanted everyone involved in the project to come together at his house for a simple meal. Nothing about Hollywood was simple and neither was the conversation that flowed between Everett and me. He'd intrigued me, which wasn't an easy task these days. I'd never dated an actor before and felt that perhaps now was my time to give it a go. We went out a few times before being seen in public together and we'd had fun. The fact that his stardom had shot through the stratosphere was a welcome side effect. At least for him. We were the "it couple" but with each movie offer sent his way, he got more aloof and cold with me. Me! The woman who'd slingshot his career and made him the current heartthrob to millions of women.

"Your trip, Mo!" Janna gasped, her hands coming to her cheeks in horror. "I better call Fifi. She's on her way over with all the ski gear."

I flopped back on the bed in a cloud of satin Egyptian thread counts that promised a chafeless sleep even with rigorous activity and groaned. My birthday trip. The one Everett had given me to the mountains in Idaho. Apparently, though I was not a good skier by any stretch of the imagination, Everett had decided that I'd love a trip to a boutique ski resort run by an ex-Olympian skier. Did I mention Everett loved to ski?

Red-hot rage filled my vision and I flipped over, snatching for Janna's hand before she could get my personal stylist on the phone. "Wait!"

Janna lowered the cell phone and eyed me wearily.

I'd put up with a lot dating Everett. I'd tried to convince myself that all the media attention could patch the holes in the actual relationship. And for awhile, it did. But our relationship had died months ago. I was just too stubborn to admit it. Or maybe just too busy to analyze it enough to see the warning signs that littered our entire eleven months together.

"I'm going on that trip." I popped back up and swung my legs over the side of the bed, determined with this new course of action.

"But..." Janna trailed off, following me as I raced around the room to find something to wear today that said "I'm not devastated over this breakup and in fact have someone better waiting in the wings" instead of my actual situation which was "alone and single and having an identity crisis over the Christmas holiday."

I stripped down to my underwear and began to shimmy myself into a rhinestone-studded one-piece denim getup that always made me feel like a close cousin to Dolly Parton, my country-singing idol. There was even a five-inch fringe on the arms. Fringe did something to my soul, y'all.

"Oh Lord have mercy, not that!"

I spun to find Fifi Bolden in my bedroom doorway, arms full of ultra-fashionable black attire that fit her personality. The woman was a genius when it came to style but she lacked the happiness gene.

I had to jump to get the jumpsuit past my butt. I'd have to ask Janna to contact my chef and make sure he lowered my carbs. Again.

“What’s wrong with it?” I grouched, not in a mood to deal with Fifi today.

She sailed into the room, depositing a truckload of black and dark gray outfits onto my unmade bed. “The mood should be somber. I have five designers that have offered their funeral line for the concert tonight.”

I gaped at her. “Funeral line? No one died, Fifi!”

She shook her head at me, disappointment clear in the lines that didn’t form on her face. The woman needed to back off the filler.

“But to the public, someone did. Their beloved couple has broken up. We need to project a somber mood for at least twenty-four hours.”

There was so much wrong in that one statement I wasn’t sure where to begin. “There is no ‘we’ here. It’s me. Hi.”

“I’m the problem, it’s me,” Janna sang under her breath.

I rolled my eyes—Janna could never read the room—and abandoned the jumpsuit with it bunched around my waist. My barely there boobs jiggled as I walked over to square off with Fifi. She was used to seeing me naked as I was fitted for dresses and was completely unfazed by my nudity now. “And it was not a death. It was a betrayal. He broke up with me over *Instagram*. Who does that?”

The cords on Fifi’s neck tightened. “Lacking class, for sure, but we must have you reappearing with your head held high. Make him look like the bottom feeder that he is.”

I inclined my head. “I agree with your assessment of his character, but I don’t want to fuel the rumor that I’m devastated. I want to focus on the Christmas concert tonight and then leave for my trip to Idaho. I could use a break actually.”

“No, no, no. You cannot leave. Not until we get shots of you stepping out with someone else. Someone better than Everett. Where is your agent?” Fifi looked exasperated. “Mack should be orchestrating this.”

I frowned. Yeah, where was Mack? You’d think he’d be all over a scandal with one of his most famous clients.

“Um, Mo?” Janna’s voice came from behind me. “You have a ton of text messages, but looks like Mack tried to call a minute ago. Didn’t leave a message.”

The door to my bedroom burst open again and there was Mack, his tie askew and no socks with those loafers. “Jesus, Mo, put on a damn shirt, would you?”

“Knock on the damn door, would you?” I grumbled, spinning to find something to wear. Fifi lifted a painfully thin arm to offer me a black chiffon blouse. I scowled at her and walked over to my closet to disappear inside the cavernous space for something more suitable. Something more fiery. Something that matched the rage bubbling inside my chest. Funeral, my ass.

“Everett Eberhard. More like Neverhard,” I spat under my breath, fingers dancing along the top row of hanging shirts until I found the one I wanted. It had a distinct bohemian vibe with the fringe all along the bottom edge. Layer on a dozen necklaces of different lengths, a pair of kiss-my-ass jeans, kick-his-ass-to-the-curb boots, and my ass was ready to face the day.

Fifi lifted her nose in the air when I exited the closet, but handed me a fur-lined suede jacket that would pair nicely with the snowy conditions outside. Janna had two cell phones to her ears, highlighting what a PR cluster today had turned out to be. Mack, on the other hand, looked positively gleeful.

“Got three gossip sites and one major news station on hold, Mo. What’s your official stance?” He tried and failed to dampen the smile. “I suggest you take the high road. Sad over the dissolution of your relationship, but finding solace in the holiday season.”

I nearly snorted. “I’m not sad. I’m pissed.”

Mack pulled a phone from his pocket and jammed it to his ear, ignoring me entirely. “She’s upset, of course. Who wouldn’t be? But her attention is completely on the Christmas benefit tonight. You’ll be there, won’t you?”

I huffed and spun around to address Janna. “Why am I singing tonight? Who signed me up for this concert? Can I back out? Claim to be sick?”

Fifi sniffed. “Wrong move, Morgana. Be seen. Head held high.”

Janna put both phones to her shoulders and hissed, “Fifi’s right. Now pick out a dress for tonight and then we can be seen going out to brunch before the hair and makeup team arrive.”

“I keep telling you, Mo. If you’d put out an original Christmas song, you’d be the new Mariah Carey, immortalized forever as the best country music song of all time.” Mack took a break from his phone long enough to guilt-trip me about not working hard enough. Funny. I’d been putting out platinum albums every other year like clockwork since I got my lucky

break at twenty years old. Me and hard work were well acquainted, and my agent's bank account knew it.

I swiped at my bangs and debated just clipping them back and being done with them. Why did I let my hairstylist talk me into curtain bangs last week? The last thing I wanted to be known for was a Christmas song.

Joanna and Willy Davis had always gotten good and drunk on Christmas Eve, leaving me to sleep under the Charlie Brown Christmas tree and wish for better parents. Santa never delivered.

Seemed to me that Christmas was just a time to get your hopes up, thinking your life should be like all those holiday movies they put out on television, only to discover the day after Christmas that you were living in the same fishbowl of frustration that you'd always been. And now you had credit card debt to add to it. No, thank you.

"I'll wear that one." I pointed at the first dress I saw on the bed.

Fifi raised an eyebrow, but pulled that one aside. "I'll get it steamed while you eat and pick out the accessories."

I nodded once, truly done with the day. All I wanted to do was go hide somewhere like Backwoods, Idaho, and lick my wounds. Which was insanely not like me. I was always the one looking for the party, ready to live life to the fullest, but today's debacle had somehow knocked me off-kilter.

Janna held open my bedroom door, still chatting away with whomever was on the other end of the phone. She motioned with her head for me to hurry up. I blew out a long breath, tucked my hands into my jacket pockets, rolled my shoulders back, and channeled my inner Miranda Lambert when she lit

everything on fire in her “Kerosene” song. I’d do what my team wanted me to do today and God willing live to see another day.

But tomorrow? Tomorrow was for me. I’d head to Idaho for ten days, avoid the ski slopes and anything that resembled Christmas, and regroup away from the public eye. I’d return to Tennessee a new woman. And if the songwriting gods were with me, I’d return with several new breakup songs to record too. I was going to channel some Taylor Swift energy into eviscerating my ex in the form of a song.

“What restaurant are you going to? I’ll submit an anonymous tip to the press,” Mack called after us.

I let out a frustrated growl and let Janna deal with Mack. Why did it seem like nothing about my life was actually real? Just temporary relationships, fake friends, and orchestrated moments.

Except the frustration. That was very, very real.

CHAPTER TWO



*A*ksel

“FIVE GOOOOLDEN RINGS!”

I’d ignored the first four days of this Christmas song, but Imogen was not going to let me sink back into dreamland. I groaned and tried to pull the covers over my head. Eight-year-olds shouldn’t have lungs like that of a full-grown opera singer.

Little hands grabbed at the covers and began to tickle under my chin when I wouldn’t let go. “Dad, come on! You know I’ll only sing louder. It’s Christmas break!”

I huffed out a breath and flopped back the covers to see my daughter’s eager face staring down at me. Her blue eyes could melt the icicles around my heart with a single glance. I wasn’t normally this much of a scrooge—okay, I was, but not about Christmas. I usually loved Christmas. It was just that this Christmas was not particularly merry or bright.

“Which means you should be sleeping in, not terrorizing your father!”

Imogen scrambled to her stocking feet and began to jump on my bed in the most annoying fashion possible. A headache

was already brewing and I hadn't even had a cup of coffee yet today.

“*Farmor* said you'd want to be up early to greet our new guest.”

“Agh, don't remind me,” I groaned, pushing back the covers like I was getting up. Instead I lunged for her and tackled her to the bed to return the tickling favor. When she finally screamed stop, I let go of her and stood up, stretching out my back and bending my left knee a few times to loosen it up. The body didn't move like it used to, especially not on a cold winter morning.

“Let's go help get the place ready. I'm sure this famous couple will be an absolute delight.” I was being sarcastic, as usual. Imogen was used to my grumpy sarcasm. It rarely phased her, as evidenced by her continued smile, showing off her two crooked front teeth and a dark hole next to them that would hopefully one day hold an adult tooth.

“I think it's an actor and a singer. And I'm sure they'll be lovely. At least that's what *farmor* said.”

I snorted and reached for clean jeans in the dresser on the opposite wall. Imogen's grandmother thought everyone was lovely. I should know. She frequently declared I was lovely and I was the grumpiest son of a bitch in the state of Idaho.

“Get out of here so I can get dressed.” I tilted my head toward the door, and even though she groaned out a complaint, Imogen crawled off my bed.

“I've seen you in your tighty-whities before. I don't get what's the big deal,” she tossed over her shoulder.

“You're eight now. That's the big deal. And I don't wear tighty-whities,” I grouched.

Imogen's tinkling laugh echoed down the hallway after she left the room but also left the door wide open. I couldn't help the slight smile that took over my face. The kid had me wrapped around her tiny finger, but I couldn't let her know it. Otherwise the teen years would be an absolute nightmare. Thankfully, being a crusty bastard came naturally to me.

I got dressed in jeans, my favorite sweater—the one my mother said reminded her of my father when he was younger—and black boots fit for several feet of snow though I probably wouldn't be out in it today. We'd had a storm come through two days ago and dump on us. Great problem to have for a ski resort, but as they frequently did, my parents were talked into a bad business decision to book the entire resort to a single celebrity and his girlfriend for ten days. Now, instead of running around keeping the ski lifts running for all the skiers who would line our cash registers, I'd be catering to a spoiled asshole and his equally annoying girlfriend. I didn't know who they were—I didn't keep up with celebrity gossip due to having an actual life—but I could guess their types. I'd dated a magazine model one time in my slightly younger and most definitely stupider days.

Imogen looked just like her mother.

“Chop, chop, Aksel!” my mother called from the hallway as she bustled by with an armload of clean sheets and blankets just as I stepped out of my room.

“What, no ice bath today?” I spun out of her way, knowing from experience that she would plow right through me. The woman was small but mighty.

“No time, *sønn!*” She disappeared into a guest room and left me shaking my head. Could have sworn the notes said the

celebrities would be arriving midafternoon. Plenty of time to get the old place spruced up.

I ambled out of the first-floor hallway and into the main lobby, already seeing a crackling fire in the great hearth. It didn't give off much heat to the rest of the place, but it was certainly a cozy sight when guests first arrived. Pappa must have already been put to work. Normally he needed at least two cups of coffee before he got around to stacking the wood and tending to the fire.

“Come on, Dad!” Imogen raced out of the kitchen to grab my hand and pull me with her. “Dagny said if we didn't eat in the next five minutes, she'd throw out our breakfast to get ready for lunch.”

I gasped out mock surprise. “She would do no such thing!”

Dagny would, in fact, do exactly such a thing. She was an old bat who should have retired years ago but stayed on as the Havenkirk Ski Lodge chef out of misplaced respect for my parents. Dagny was my mother's older sister, but she insisted we not call her Aunt Dagny. Something about giving the impression that she'd go easy on us just because we were family.

The kitchen was a bustling cacophony of curses in both English and Norwegian. Dagny had every burner on the two stoves going and darted around like her feet were on fire.

“Fine morning to you, Dagny,” I called out before snatching my plate from the counter closest to me and tilting my head, indicating Imogen should do the same.

“Not a damn thing fine about it, Aksel!” She spun around and graced us with a severe frown. A beep sounded behind her and she jumped in the air. Surprisingly high for someone

midway through their seventh decade in life. “*Faen!* My *kransekake!*”

Imogen let out something between a belch and a sneeze. I spun, pushing her out of the kitchen before she could let loose the laugh I knew she was barely holding in.

We plunked our plates down on one of the many hewn-wood tables in the dining hall. We had the place to ourselves, which was good, considering my eight-year-old spewed forth all the Norwegian curse words she’d already learned.

“Dagny said *faen!*” Imogen dissolved into a fit of giggles, forgetting all about her scrambled eggs and smoked salmon.

I shoveled a huge bite in my mouth and talked around the food. “Ignore your great-aunt. She is old and losing her mind.”

“That’s no way to speak of your elders, Ax.” My father walked into the dining hall and had a seat next to Imogen, giving her a hug and pretending like he was going to eat her breakfast. She snatched the fork from him and began to eat in earnest. I owed all my parenting skills to this man.

“She’s the one who started it, cursing in front of Imogen.”

Pappa wiped his hand through the air. He looked good, healthy. Maybe a little stressed based on the way his bushy eyebrows were pinched this morning. After his heart attack seven years ago, I’d taken over all the administrative duties running this boutique ski resort. I’d also given all the ski lessons, organized the guest bookings, and made sure Dagny made enough food for our guests. It was a lot of work and I made many mistakes over the years. Thankfully, most of the staff were family and they forgave me for my oversights.

“Ignore your aunt. She means well and makes a mean smoked salmon.” Pappa clasped his hands and leaned onto the

table. “Did you hear the actor cancelled?”

“What?” I bellowed.

I slammed my hands on the table and half stood. If I could have flipped the table without scaring my daughter or giving my father further heart issues, I would have. That great was my anger over this cancellation. We blocked these ten days on the calendar, which meant zero revenue if these entitled jackasses didn’t show up as planned.

“What is going on?” Mamma flew into the room, a pillow with no sham in her hands.

“I was telling Aksel that the actor cancelled. But he didn’t let me finish.”

I turned my flaming hot face back to my father. “Explain.”

Pappa sighed but continued. “He is not coming, but she is.”

I twisted my face and closed my eyes to pray for patience. “Who is he and who is she?”

“He is the actor!” Imogen piped up helpfully.

I sat back down and folded my arms across my chest. “And she?”

“She is Morgana Mavis.” Mamma sat down next to me, beaming. As if that name meant something. As if I should be jumping up and down for joy.

“And I care why?”

Mamma scoffed. “You are such a grump, Aksel Lund. How you came from my own body is a mystery to me. Do you not turn on your radio at times?”

I frowned. I did not appreciate my own mother disparaging me in front of Imogen. “Yes. To the sports channel to catch the ice hockey games.”

Mamma rolled her eyes and stood, fluffing the pillow. “Morgana Mavis is the reigning queen of country music.”

This was a disappointment, as expected. “So she will be a royal pain in the ass?”

“And you say Dagny curses in front of Imogen,” my father muttered.

Mamma bopped me in the head with the pillow before walking off with a huff. Imogen giggled, reaching up to tug on Pappa’s beard. She’d been doing the same thing to me since she was a tiny baby.

“This is a waste of time and money. They agreed to have two guests. We should cancel on this Morgana Mavis.” Maybe that would teach her a lesson. It was not right to block a small boutique ski lodge for ten whole days and then cancel last minute. Did they not understand that lost revenue, even for ten days, was enough to sink a small operation such as ours?

“Change your attitude, *sønn*. The rental fee your mother negotiated will keep the place running for several months. Two guests or one does not matter to us.”

My father was right. I needed to put my grouchy mood aside and make the most of these ten days. At the very least, we had enough money to get through the holidays without having to make substantial changes. Imogen could get through Christmas without worry and so could my parents.

The first of the year would be a different story, however. Several bills were coming due, like the specialty mechanics who had fixed the one and only black diamond ski lift we had.

We attracted quite a range of skiers every year, but no ski resort could last long if they didn't have at least one run that drew in the adrenaline junkies. We'd had no choice but to fix the lift before the season got started.

The headache bloomed anew. The same headache I'd had all year, going over financials and cutting back the extras until there was nothing to cut and no money to magically appear. This resort had been running in the red for several years, the troubles compounding. Sadly, it wasn't going to get better anytime soon.

In fact, if I didn't pull a Christmas miracle out of my ass this year, we'd be forced to sell the place and end my father's American dream for good.

"Come on, Dad! Let's go feed the reindeer!" Imogen pulled on my arm, reminding me we had chores to do before our guests—er, guest, singular—arrived.

I looked into her eager face, seeing sugarplums and Santa Claus and brightly wrapped gifts under the tree reflected in her eyes. The holidays were still magical to her and I needed to remember that. I had an obligation to protect her innocence as long as I could. Which meant getting my grumpy ass into the Christmas spirit. Pronto.

And there was no better place for the Christmas spirit than Snowhaven, Idaho, home to the largest Christmas celebration south of the Canadian border. If Snowhaven couldn't get me in the spirit, nothing could.

"Ho, ho, ho, pretty *datter!*" I stood and patted my flat stomach, hoping my blond beard was similar enough to Santa to pull it off.

Imogen's peal of laughter and the smile on my father's face made the effort worth it. I'd be the cheeriest, most spirited man-elf in all of Snowhaven this year...even if it killed me.



John Ross: Snowmass starts tomorrow!

Dagny: Ba-humbug

Mayor Nancy Haney: This is our time, fellow citizens! Time to shine the Christmas spirit with everything we've got!

Dagny: Are you capable of texting without exclamation marks?

Mayor Nancy Haney: Are you capable of texting without negativity?

Doc: Ladies, let's focus on what matters: the famous actor cancelled on Havenkirk.

Chief Blade: Aksel is likely to burn down the manger. Everyone needs to keep an eye on him.

Dagny: Don't worry about my nephew. He'll have his hands full with the celebrity's girlfriend, who will be here. Sadly, that means Christmas is not canceled.

Mayor Nancy Haney: And thank the fat man in a suit for that! This town needs Havenkirk to draw people in to spend their money in our little shops.

Dagny: Don't talk about Doc that way.

Mayor Nancy Haney: I meant SANTA, Dagny!

CHAPTER THREE



Morgana

PINE TREES OF EVERY VARIETY, their boughs weighed down with snow, flicked past the windows of the fancy Lincoln SUV as we drove further east into Idaho. I didn't see why they couldn't get an airport closer than Spokane, Washington. If this resort was so amazing, they ought to be able to negotiate a better traveler experience. Not that the vehicle wasn't lovely or the view of the silver fox driver too hard on the eyes, but I simply wasn't a fan of starting my hard-earned vacation with car sickness.

"Bet Mack would love you forever if we got a picture of you and that guy snogging," Janna whispered in my ear, nodding toward our driver.

I adjusted my seat belt abruptly, which meant my puffy jacket elbowed her in the gut. Oops. She let out an oof, but then slid over on the seat a bit, giving me some much-needed room.

"Who says snogging?" I whispered back. I was not going to be kissing anyone on this trip. I was here to lick my wounds, not the inside of some man's mouth.

“Are you sure they don’t mind me coming with you?” Janna glanced around outside, more excited about this trip than she let on. The second I’d asked her to come last night after the concert, she’d been jumping around like a mischievous elf.

I shrugged. “I’m sure they won’t mind. The reservation was for two people.”

“But I already told them just to expect one person.”

I waved away her concern. I’d stayed at so many resorts over the years I couldn’t possibly count that high. They’d adjust. That’s what luxury resorts did. Just like I’d adjusted to singing Christmas tunes at a charity concert when the very thought of the holiday made me want to eat my weight in chocolate and wash it all down with multiple bottles of champagne until I forgot about it.

“Welcome to Havenkirk,” the silver fox upfront interrupted, nodding his head left as we made a turn into a long driveway that had recently been shoveled. The car bounced violently.

“Woo!” Janna cheered, as if the bumpy cobblestones were something to be happy about.

My phone dinged, pulling my attention away from the site of a quaint lodge up ahead that must have been where the staff stayed for the ski season.

“Oh, for cripe’s sake,” I grumbled. Everett had posted another picture of him and his new arm candy, his nose buried in her slender neck while she smiled dreamily in Saint Lucia. “That mothertrucker took her to Saint Lucia, Janna!”

Janna didn’t even respond. Her nose had created a spot of fog on the inside of the window as we bounced around this

ridiculously long driveway.

“Janna! Saint. Lucia.” I enunciated clearly.

She finally spared me a glance. “Oh. Well, that’s not nice.”

Not nice? The man had broken up with me over social media and then took his new side piece—main piece?—to the very island I’d been begging him to go to with me. He’d had more excuses than I could fill a book with. I had even been hinting that he book us a trip there for my birthday. But where did he book? Freaking Backwoods, Idaho. If my insides weren’t jostled beyond repair from this cobblestone drive, I’d be pissed. As it was, nausea bubbled up instead. I really should have taken Dramamine.

I gripped the phone, rolled my lips inward, and tried to stifle the scream. Everett did me dirty and so had this stupid holiday every year. I shouldn’t even be surprised at this point. I was so over Christmas.

My door swung open and I realized we’d finally come to a stop. I turned my head to see an older man standing there with his hand outstretched. He had a beard that begged to be displayed in a beard magazine for all the other bearded men to lust after. He was old enough to be my father, but that didn’t stop me from admiring the way his gray hair only made him more distinguished. I tried out a smile and felt like it was a bit broken at the moment. I took his hand instead and let him help me out of the vehicle.

“*Welcome* to Havenkirk, my dear,” the man said in a thick accent. He let my hand go once I was on my feet safely in the snow, but continued to train a smile on me that felt real, not forced.

I could feel myself smiling back despite my very dim expectations for this trip. “Thank you.”

A woman ran out from the front doors, pulling my attention from the older man. “*Velcome!*” she said in the same accent, her pressed pants and flowery blouse not winning any fashion awards, but quite nice for a woman living so far out of civilization.

It was then that I noticed the lodge in front of me. I realized quickly that what I had assumed was the staff area was actually the main lodge. The place was smaller than anywhere I’d stayed before. The thought instantly made me feel like an entitled snob. Then anger filled the void as I realized that Everett had left me with nothing but a vacation at a dusty lodge that had already seen its glory days. Maybe decades ago.

The lodge itself was made out of logs and timber with a dusting of gray rocks here and there in no particular planned design, making it look like it could have been cast in a *Game of Thrones* episode. Thankfully, it was also decked out with enough Christmas decor to make the place feel homey and welcoming. Not that I liked the festive wreaths that were stationed on every single window, but it definitely softened the place.

“Oh!” Janna squealed, fluttering around like she couldn’t quite take it all in. “This place is amazing! Thank you so much.”

She handed money to the silver fox driver who had pulled our many suitcases out of the back of the vehicle. Well, Janna had one suitcase. I’d brought the rest.

Eyeing the grounds and seeing no other structures except ski lifts in the distance, I had probably overpacked. Who was I

kidding? I always overpacked, even before Fifi began as my official packer and took overpacking to a whole new level.

“*Ve* have your room ready, my dear,” the woman said, taking my hand and tucking it inside her elbow as she marched us to the double doors under the overhang.

My feet got the message, carrying me along with her and assuming someone would get our bags, though I did swoop to pick up my guitar. No one touched that baby but me. I could hear Janna’s excited yammering behind me and was grateful her chatter covered my dark mood. I made it a point to never be rude to staff members who were just doing their best. Being a celebrity was no excuse for poor behavior.

I purposely ignored the mistletoe that had been strategically placed over the entrance, as if previous vacationers would have cozied up to their loved one and kissed before embarking on their vacation. The thought only made me feel more depressed.

The woman grabbed the door handle shaped like a deer stag—that couldn’t possibly be real, could it?—and took us into the lobby of the ski lodge. An impressive fire crackled off to the left, a foot of greenery and tinsel and pinecones nearly hiding the slab of wood that made up the mantel. Chairs and couches took up that side of the lobby, the leather cushions sagging as if thousands of people had sat right there over the years to watch the fire crackle.

A girl, young, if her missing teeth were any indication, ran out from behind the front desk that was little more than a slash of worn wood on top of a pile of stone.

“*Farmor!* I stayed just like you asked!”

“*Vell* done, Imogen.” The woman let go of my arm and put her hand on the little girl’s shoulder. “This is my granddaughter, Imogen. Imogen, this is our guest, Morgana Mavis.”

The little girl was bouncing on her toes before her grandmother got done with the introductions. “I’m *so* happy to meet you! I’ve listened to ‘Light It Up’ like a hundred times!”

My face split into a genuine smile. That one was my favorite song too. Plus the girl talked in exclamation marks and that was something I understood. When I wasn’t exhausted or currently dealing with a public breakup, I frequently found all aspects of life exciting as well.

“Imogen,” the grandmother admonished. “Let’s let our guests get settled first, yah?”

“It’s okay,” I assured her before turning my attention to Imogen. “Don’t tell anyone, but that song’s my favorite too. I wrote it when I was in a bad mood one day. I highly recommend writing or journaling when you’re big mad.”

Imogen giggled, her blonde hair the shade many women in Nashville paid big bucks for. “I get big mad at Dad all the time.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Well, Dad is a man, right? And in my experience, men frequently mess up.”

Imogen giggled some more, taking my hand and pulling me to the left of the check-in desk. “I’ll take her to her room, *farmor!*”

I turned to watch the grandmother open her mouth and then close it again, probably realizing arguing with this much energy bundled in one little body just wasn’t worth it. Instead,

she turned to Janna who had pulled her phone out to snap pictures left and right.

“I didn’t know you were bringing someone. I thought your boyfriend had cancelled. Dad was mad about it at first but then he realized that you were still coming, so he had nothing to be mad about. I’ll have to tell him next time he’s big mad that he should write a song instead.” Imogen babbled faster than I could keep up.

Imogen came to a stop at another wooden door that had the number two painted on it in cursive. She dug in her jeans pocket and then handed me a key. “Here’s your room!”

I put my guitar down so I could get the key in the lock, making sure I could get it open. Normally hotels had key cards these days but perhaps that trend hadn’t hit Idaho yet. The door popped open with a squeak.

“Are we in Havenkirk?” I asked Imogen, just now realizing I had no idea what town we were in. I’d left those details to Everett and then, when he bailed, Janna.

Imogen put her little hand over her mouth and giggled so hard I had to join her. “No, silly. We’re in Snowhaven, Idaho.”

I nodded, feeling a bit foolish. Even a small girl knew where I was. “Thank you. Perhaps I need to take a nap.”

“Oh!” Imogen removed her hand from her mouth and squeezed my arm with surprising strength. “We’re having the gingerbread house competition just outside the lodge this afternoon. It’s the first day of Snowmass. You have to come! You can be my partner.”

“Gingerbread, huh?” That sounded like the last thing I wanted to do. A nap, a bottle of champagne to celebrate the

death of my youthful looks, and my faithful guitar were about the only things that sounded good right now.

Imogen must have seen my hesitation as her hand gripped me tighter. “You have to come! It’s the start of all the Snowmass celebrations! Dad’s supposed to be my partner, but because I’m a kid, I can technically have two partners. Come on, say yes. Pleasssseeeee?”

Damn. The girl whined harder than Fifi when I wanted to wear fringe with paisley. I took a fortifying breath and promised myself that I could still squeeze in the nap now, and the alcohol and guitar session could come later. As soon as I kicked some ass in this gingerbread competition. I didn’t even like gingerbread or frosting—give me chocolate, baby—but I didn’t back down from a competition. I won things. That’s what I did, and this would be no exception.

“Fine. Okay. I’ll meet you out there?”

“Yes!” Imogen let me go and shot both arms in the air in victory. I couldn’t help but smile over her antics. “Okay, bye!”

She raced back down the hallway and I watched ’til she was out of sight. Then I spun and stepped into my room, closing and locking the door behind me. I placed my guitar against the wall and turned in a circle, checking things out. The room was huge, a similar-sized fire crackling in the fireplace across from the canopy bed. There were so many pillows stacked up I could barely see the comforter. The furnishings were sparse, but comfortable looking, and honestly, I didn’t care where I licked my wounds. Just that they were licked.

I let out a whoop and holler that usually sent the crowd wild when I strutted out on stage and made a run for the bed. I jumped, pillows went flying, and I landed right in the middle.

The mattress swallowed me up in a cloud of relaxation. My eyes drifted shut and I found a tiny sliver of bliss. Finally. I could recharge and spend some quiet time contemplating my life.

I had just gotten to that stage where you're floating into dreamland but not quite fully asleep yet when my dreams of quiet bliss were shattered by the obnoxious bellow of a grown man.

“Jesus, Joseph, and Mary! What the ever-loving fuck is all this shit!”

My eyes sprang open and some very unkind thoughts shot through my head. I rolled off the bed, ran to the door, struggled with the lock, and then flung the door open.

There, in nothing but a white towel that was not large enough to do its most basic of jobs, stood a Viking of a man. His face was red behind the beard that was currently dripping water onto my five Louis Vuitton suitcases.

The words died on my lips as I took in the stacks of muscle on a six-foot-five frame. His hands, the size of baseball mitts, were clenched into fists. His broad chest was heaving, sending more water sluicing between the chest hair and outlining the six-pack abs. The man was a goddamn beast.

And he was glaring right at me.

CHAPTER FOUR



*A*ksel

ALL A MAN WANTED after a day of manual labor was to take a hot shower, wrap a towel around his waist, and spend a few minutes admiring his beard in the mirror in between flexing his muscles.

Or maybe that was just me.

Instead, what I got was a towel that was no more than a *faen* hand towel leaving the manly bits barely covered, zero beard admiring due to the fan in my bathroom finally grinding to a halt which left my mirror fogged up, and now my toe was throbbing as if the kick to the suitcase had broken it.

“What the ever-loving fuck is all this shit!”

I’d nearly gone down in a nasty fall. I pushed myself back upright, another bellow on the tip of my tongue. It was the squeak that had me glancing up to find a woman staring at me across the small hallway. A vision in white stood there with her arms folded across her chest, sweeping bangs twitching with every blink of her long lashes. Her lips were full and red and glossier than any lips needed to be. Her hair fell in blonde waves that all the models and online wannabe influencers

wore. I knew this because my mother had recently bought a curling iron contraption and had forced me to look at her celebrity magazine to show me how pretty her hair would be. I thought her hair was fine air dried fresh out of the shower.

Anger bubbled up higher as I caught a whiff of her expensive perfume. Women like her rubbed me the wrong way. “Is this yours?” I pointed down at the offending pile of suitcases in the hallway, where suitcases should not be.

Her gaze dropped lower but I had the distinct feeling she was not looking at her suitcases, but rather at the tiny towel that I just now remembered did not hide much beyond the very minimum thanks to my mother stocking my room with the wrong towels yet again. Both hands immediately came down to cover myself.

The woman smirked, and I did not appreciate that look. I might be even more annoyed by the smirk than the suitcases that were blocking my path. What was smirk-worthy about this fine physique of mine? There were many things that I was unsure about, but my good looks were not one of them.

“Yes, those are mine. You can bring them in.”

She lifted her pert nose in the air and stepped aside to allow me entrance to her room. If the outfit that screamed money hadn't given it away, the air of superiority did it. This was our high-profile guest. The celebrity who was currently two hours earlier than the time of arrival on her room reservation.

Fantastic. This was going to be a bigger disaster than I originally predicted.

I opened my mouth to give her a well-deserved lecture on taking care of her own damn belongings like a goddamn adult,

but snapped my mouth shut when I remembered my promise. I'd promised my parents that I would be kind to our guest. And I'd promised I'd be a happier version of myself just so my black cloud didn't dampen little Imogen's Christmas spirit. My family meant everything to me.

It pained me greatly, but I managed to speak without thunder lacing my tone. "Let me change first."

I spun on my bare feet and slammed my door shut on her open-mouthed shock at my rudeness. Little did she know that wasn't rude at all. That was me actually toning things down for her benefit. A thank-you for my efforts would have been nice.

I pulled off the towel that barely dried anything to begin with and shoved my legs into freshly washed jeans. Next came another sweater, two swipes of my hands through my hair, and I was as decent as it was going to get.

"Ah. Shoes." I turned back around and went on the hunt for my nice pair of boots. The ones I'd bought a few years back, before the resort had begun its rapid slide into financial trouble. With those in place, I opened the door again to an empty hallway.

Well, not empty. Those ridiculous suitcases were still there, but the celebrity woman had entered her bedroom apparently. I gave a tap on the wooden frame and grabbed the first two bags, waiting for her to open the door. She took her sweet time, finally pulling it open just an inch to glare at me from one visible eye. It was a beautiful eye with its icy blue iris and lashes that swept me up and down.

"Do you want them inside your room or not?" I growled. What the hell did this woman pack? These bags weighed more than Imogen.

She swung the door open and I couldn't help but give her the same full-body sweep she'd given me. Her white pants looked painted onto the nicest pair of legs I'd had the pleasure of seeing in person. But for me, it was the bare feet that had me swallowing hard and stomping over to the broad windows with a view of the mountain slopes. I didn't appreciate this snobby celebrity having nicely shaped feet with cherry-red toenails. It made her seem normal. Like us ordinary people who preferred to go around barefoot, and I knew that had to be far from the truth.

"I suppose you expect me to move all of them?" I knew I should bring them all in, but I needed to give her shit to take my mind off her feet. I'd find out later from my father why he didn't leave the bags at the front desk until I could help him bring them into the room. He shouldn't have been lifting heavy things.

The woman crossed her arms again and leaned a shoulder against the heavy mantel of the fireplace. The fireplace I'd give my left nut to have in my own room, but we had to save the nicest rooms for the guests. This suite was the nicest one of all with a living area, a California-king mattress in the bedroom, and a bathroom that was almost bigger than my room. Sadly, this celebrity was probably used to much nicer accommodations. Made me wonder why she was even here in Snowhaven. She and her Louis Vuitton didn't fit in here.

"If it's too hard for you, I can do it myself." Her voice was mocking, but it was delivered with enough throatiness to have my cock sitting up and taking notice.

Down, boy. Not this one.

I scoffed, the sort of noise that should have only come from an angry moose, not a human man who needed to

impress the celebrity long enough for her to stay and spend her money here at Havenkirk.

I stalked back across the room, aware of her assessing gaze on me the entire time. I bent, grabbing one suitcase and putting it under my arm, then grabbed another two suitcases, one in each arm. What the actual fuck did this woman pack for her ski trip? Bricks? Lead dumbbells? Tree trunks?

Dumping all three suitcases on the pile next to the window, I folded my arms across my chest, mimicking her stance, and silently dared her to find criticism now. Her lips were twitching, which intrigued me more than it should. In my experience, women were usually quick to smile or let out a feminine giggle around me. This woman did none of that. In fact, she looked like she was in a competition with me to see who could frown harder. She should check herself. I was more frowny than the frowniest of bastards. I could stand here and frown all day. Just call me the king of frowns. I had a list of reasons to frown longer than Santa's naughty list.

The woman's nose lifted in the air—at this point, if it got any higher, she wouldn't be able to see in front of her—and she tossed her arms down with an eye roll. Oh, please. She'd have to try harder. I had a young daughter who eye-rolled more times a day than she complained about my frowns. I was impervious to eye rolls.

And celebrities who were prettier than any woman had the right to be.

“I shall assume from your attitude that you are not, in fact, the bell boy.” She lost the fight with one side of her mouth and gave me a half smile that had everything below the belt ignoring my command to settle down. “Plus I've never seen bell boys with quite that uniform before.”

If I'd had the capacity to be embarrassed, my face would have heated. Hopefully the ridiculous excuse for a towel had covered most of the private bits.

“Good deductions skills, Watson. I'm Aksel Lund, the owner of Havenkirk.”

Her eyes were the only thing that gave away that she felt anything but disdain. Just the slightest bit of widening. I couldn't imagine what being the owner meant to her—other than cataloguing what an ass I was, along with extraordinarily handsome genes, of course—but she took the introduction in stride.

“Hello, Aksel, I'm Morgana Mavis.”

I lifted one eyebrow. Morgana Mavis, my ass. These celebs created fake names when they became famous. Something prettier and flashier than what their well-meaning parents had given them at birth. I'd bet her name was something boring like Miles Miller.

“Well, Mo. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Her eyebrow lifted now, matching mine, but she didn't call me on the use of a nickname she hadn't given me permission to use. “Yes, actually. I need to find the gingerbread competition. Can you direct me?”

My heart sunk and my dick went the opposite direction. “Yep, I can.”

She sucked in a deep breath, as if she was counting to ten in her head before speaking. “Wonderful. Please show me. Right now.”

I pointed down to the hand-spun rug she was currently standing on. My *farmor* had made that one a few years before

she passed away. “The competition is held outside. You will need shoes, yes?”

Morgana glanced down at her bare feet, lifting her toes and wiggling them like an utter temptress. “Let’s hope you didn’t break my boots when you dropped my suitcases.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes. Barely. “Based on their weight alone, I’m sure you brought more than one pair.”

Morgana walked toward me and I froze like a grizzly bear in headlights. I probably would have rather encountered a grizzly bear, truth be told. Most bears didn’t swing their hips in a sultry rhythm like this woman. I had a feeling Morgana could exude sexiness just breathing. When she was close enough, I could see that her skin really was that smooth and not just a trick of the makeup, she fluttered her fingers in my face.

“Step aside, Viking, and let me get my boots.”

I blinked and did just that, stepping away when I realized she wasn’t coming for me, but for the boots that were in the suitcases at my feet.

Helvete. I needed to get my head screwed on straight. I wiped the stunned expression off my face and replaced it with the scowl I was used to. That was better. I felt more like myself already. Aksel Lund did not let some overinflated celebrity get under his skin.

“You might try hurrying or we’ll miss the whole thing,” I groused, though that wasn’t true at all. We had time, but I liked the way her nose lifted in the air as she jammed her feet into thick socks and snow boots.

She tied the last lace and stood, smoothing down her sweater and reaching for her jacket that lay at the foot of the

bed. “What a relaxing start to my vacation,” she said breezily.

I scoffed, covering it with a cough. As if she needed a vacation from her fabulous life. She was drowning in money and fame, forgetting just how stressful leading a real life could be with responsibilities, a family to feed, and creditors knocking down your door.

I gestured toward the door, that she should go first. “I shall contact the spa and make sure they set aside time for relaxing treatments.”

Morgana’s face lit up as she exited her room and spun to lock it behind us. “Oh, I didn’t realize there was a spa. I might have to treat myself for my birthday. Everyone usually overlooks it with it being so close to Christmas, but this year I plan to treat myself.”

I started walking down the hallway toward the side door, assuming she’d catch up and biting back a smile. We did not actually have a spa. I almost felt bad when she mentioned her birthday, but then again, this was a woman who could get massages every day of her life if she wanted to.

“Come, come. Gingerbread houses wait for no one. Not even celebrities.” Her pants were making a frantic swishing noise behind me as she tried to keep up.

“So you do know who I am, huh?” she said wryly.

“My mother and daughter assure me you’re a famous pole dancer.” I knew she was a singer, but pole dancer sounded like more fun.

“Excuse me?” The little woman scoffed. “I mean, I have taken a swing around a pole a time or two in my life, but professionally, I’m a country singer.”

A sudden vision of the blonde bombshell beside me sliding down a greased-up pole had me instantly wishing I was anywhere but here, walking toward my daughter and half the town I'd grown up with. I was not a small man who flew under the radar. Not to toot my own horn, but when I showed up, all heads turned. And it was not polite to show up to your resort's own all-ages gingerbread competition with a raging boner.

“Dad! Morgana! You're here!” Imogen came running over, looking adorable in a knit hat, boots too big for her, and a broad smile on her face. She would one day hate the pictures, but I thought the vision of her toothless smile was the cutest thing I'd seen in my whole life.

“I promised,” Morgana chirped happily beside me.

“Come on! We're about to get started, and you're both on my team.”

Imogen ran toward the joined six-foot tables that held all the supplies my mother had painstakingly put together for this yearly holiday activity. People I'd known my whole life slapped me on the back and murmured hello as I passed. Most of them also stared at Morgana but didn't approach. The people of Snowhaven were good humans. They most certainly recognized the woman, but they gave her room. Which was more than I could say for her.

The second I made it to the table, Morgana was also there at my side, her perfume tickling my nose and doing nothing to shrink the evidence that my body seemed to want her despite my brain having a running list of reasons to stay far, far away.

“Let's make gingerbread women!” She nudged Imogen who threw her arms in the air and cheered for the absurd idea.

I folded my arms across my chest. “Absolutely not. They are gingerbread men. And you have to make the house first.”

Morgana and Imogen gave me a dismissing look and then bent their heads together when my mother blew the horn, leaving me out of the activity altogether, which was fine by me.

I didn’t want to make gingerbread houses anyway.



Mayor Nancy Haney: She’s even more beautiful in person!

Hig Lindley: Agreed. But she travels with five suitcases. How does one person need that much stuff?

Carol Ann: I withhold judgement until I see her gingerbread men.

Alfie: I withhold judgement until I know what kind of drink she orders. That’ll tell you everything you need to know.

Doc: Wish I knew what type of car she drives. That’s the true judge of character.

John Ross: My students love her music and that tells me all I need to know.

Carol Ann: You just like that pretty assistant of hers...Now quit texting so I can focus on making my gingerbread house!

CHAPTER FIVE



Morgana

“COULD YOU STEP ASIDE, Viking? We need those cookie cutters.” I gestured to the pile of metal cutters in various shapes to his left, wishing I didn’t physically feel each and every one of his frowns.

He’d taken my breath away when I saw him in the hallway. If his bad mood hadn’t been so apparent, I would have thought he was a top-tier stripper Janna ordered for my birthday week. Why else would a man have a physique so impressive? I supposed there were real live lumberjacks still in the world, but the tattoos along one of his ribs and the distinct lack of flannel made me lean towards stripper.

“Sorry, Mo. No gingerbread women.” He folded his arms across his chest, a move that made his muscles seem to inflate by at least fifty percent, but I was not intimidated. Oh, no. His smug smile made me itch to fire back at the mountain of a man.

I crossed my own arms over my chest, squaring off with him. “Oh really? I didn’t realize that the gingerbread men cookie cutters had a giant sch—”

“Schnitzel?” he thundered, cutting me off and making comically wide eyes over my shoulder at his daughter.

Combined with his slight accent, I had to bite back a laugh. I could not laugh. I wouldn’t give this ogre the satisfaction of knowing he’d brought me joy by leaping into the fray to protect his daughter’s innocent ears.

“Yes...*schnitzels*. I had no idea gingerbread men possessed tiny slabs of meat that have been pounded and tenderized before being fried in hot, bubbling oil.”

Aksel grimaced, dropping his arms in a full-body shiver. “*Faen*, woman. You make a man’s schnitzel shrivel talking like that.”

I couldn’t quite help myself. I let a smile loose along with a snort I’d spent the better part of my career making sure never appeared in public. Janna took that moment to snap a picture of us.

“Oh, thank goodness. I was thinking I’d never get a good picture for Mack to post.” She gave me a thumbs-up, already texting the picture to Mack for PR purposes. He’d have it posted across the internet in a matter of minutes. All to show I was unperturbed by the great breakup.

“Who is Mack?” Aksel groused.

Janna squealed, shading her phone from the sunlight and squinting at it. “Such a good pic. Morgana, you look happy and carefree next to the scowling hot guy.”

Aksel dug his thumb into his chest. “Oh, I’m just the token hot guy now? And who is Mack?”

“Guys! Can we please get to decorating the house? We’re being smoked by Carol Ann and she’s older than *farmor*.” Imogen’s urgent voice pulled me from the conversation about

pictures or angry Vikings. I wasn't here to try to answer all his ridiculous questions. He should just be happy my agent would be bringing media attention to his little ski resort.

“Just pour some frosting on it and throw on some candies. It is not hard, Imogen.” Aksel tried to wedge his broad shoulders between us, taking his first interest in the project.

“The frosting has to be warm, Dad.” Imogen held up the bag of icing that was more ice than frosting.

“Give me that.” He snatched it from her hands and put it under his arm, right up in his armpit. Sure, there was a thick sweater in between the frosting and his skin, but still.

I wrinkled my nose. “Oh, great. Armpit frosting.”

Aksel leaned in close, dropping his voice. “Would you rather I put it in my pants and let the schnitzel warm it up?”

My mouth dropped open into a shocked circle. Sadly, my brain was not shocked. She went traipsing down that path, envisioning what I could do with a bag of frosting and freedom inside this man's pants.

“Ugh!” I turned and grabbed for the cookie cutters I needed. I was here to lick my wounds and finally relax, not spar with an irritatingly hot guy who made my blood pressure rise just frowning at me. I did not like this man, no matter that my body parts said otherwise.

“That is a well-built gingerbread house, Imogen.” The woman from this morning joined our group. Aksel might be the owner of Havenkirk, but this woman seemed to be the backbone of keeping it running.

“Excuse me, I didn't get a chance to properly introduce myself. I'm Morgana. And you might be?” I held out my hand

and she shook it, though her hand was quite warm against my frostbitten fingers. Her smile was equally as warm.

“I’m Ingrid, my dear. Aksel’s mother. We’re so happy to have you here at Havenkirk.”

Aksel let out a snort so soft I almost didn’t catch it, but I did catch Ingrid jabbing her elbow into his ribs. He let out a soft grunt that made me bite my lip to keep from smiling. So even his own mama found him irritating. I felt vindicated.

“I’m happy to be here.” It was mostly true. “I was wondering if you could book me into the spa for tomorrow? Maybe a massage and facial? I’d love to de-stress right away. A relaxing vacation is just what I was needing.”

Ingrid’s warm smile faded as quickly as my relationship with Everett. “Oh, I’m so sorry, my dear.”

Imogen let out a trill of laughter. “We don’t have a spa, silly! Oh! But maybe Dagny could give you a massage. She’s always punching the bread dough. *Farmor* says she has strong hands. Like a bull.”

I frowned, not only because I’d never seen a bull with hands, but also because Aksel had said he’d call the spa. Understanding dawned. That asshole Viking in the cable-knit sweater had purposely made me believe there was a spa on-site.

I turned to him, crossing my arms over my chest and pinning him with the stare that usually made Janna cry. It did not have the same effect on him. He just pressed a cookie cutter into the rolled-out dough as if he wasn’t part of the conversation. As if he gave a crap about the gingerbread competition suddenly.

“Interesting. I’m surprised a ski resort doesn’t have a spa. Sadly that will factor into my review.”

That got his attention. He snapped upright and glanced nervously at his mother, who was wringing her hands. A twinge of guilt had me softening. I didn’t mean to make her feel bad. It was her son that deserved to feel bad.

“Perhaps the other amenities will make up for the loss of a spa.”

Imogen squealed. “Those are perfect, Dad. Ready for the oven!”

Ingrid took the tray of gingerbread men and hustled away to bake them. Imogen ran over to the table in the middle of the event to find candies to decorate our house.

“The armpit frosting is ready.” Now alone, Aksel handed me the bag of melted frosting, a sheepish smile shining through the beard.

“You’re an ass. You know that, right?” I hissed, accepting the bag of frosting.

He shrugged his massive shoulders. “We all must be good at something, yes?”

This guy. I couldn’t believe his arrogance. How he could have a thriving ski resort when he was such a jerk was beyond comprehension. Thankfully, I was quite adept at handling assholes. I’d been dating one for almost a year, after all.

“Maybe you should ask yourself why you feel the need to be a jerk.”

“Maybe you should ask yourself why you feel the need to pack five suitcases for a short trip.”

I stood taller. I needed absolutely every outfit in there. “Maybe you should ask yourself why you’re so angry I packed five suitcases when it has nothing to do with you.”

Aksel did the arm-folding thing again, leaning in closer. “Maybe you should ask yourself why you expect everyone else to cater to your five suitcases instead of doing it yourself.”

“Maybe you should ask yourself why you care so much that I lift my own suitcases.”

Aksel opened his mouth to reply.

“Hello?” Imogen tugged on his arm, a bowlful of bright candies in her other hand. “Can we spread the frosting before it freezes again?”

Aksel shot me one last glare before turning to help with the project. I pumped out frosting and let them decorate, choosing to keep my mouth shut for the time being. I wasn’t into making gingerbread houses but I also wasn’t going to ruin it for a little girl. Even I wasn’t that much of a grinch.

It was not much of a surprise that we took third place. If Aksel had left me to work with Imogen alone, I was sure we would have taken first. But as it was, he kept glaring at me the whole time, which did not help me do my best work. He was sweeter than pie to his little girl—which did catch the attention of my lady bits, but I shut her up quickly—while being frosty and rude to me.

I didn’t know why he instantly hated me, but honestly, I didn’t have the emotional capacity to deal with him right now. I was here to relax and get over this public breakup, not figure out why a Viking liked to frown. By the time I made it back to my room, I was ready to call in room service for dinner and call it a day.



“He’s out-PR’ing you, Mo.”

I gasped. That weasel of an ex-boyfriend would not out-PR me, the woman who’d made him the star he currently was. Morgana Mavis did not lose. I also did not want to hear about every detail of his trip to Saint Lucia with his new girlfriend. I huffed, pushing aside the tray of food I’d inhaled. For once I wasn’t worried about my diet. I had time once I was back in Nashville to worry about fitting back into my skinny jeans.

“Fine. I’ll do all the wintery, Christmasy things and you get all the pictures.” I flopped back on the bed, wishing I could let all this social media stuff go. I just wanted to write songs and sing, not deal with the public.

“I’m glad you said that.” Janna laughed from her chair by the window and I knew it was fake. That tone did not bode well for my immediate future. “I took the liberty of booking you ski lessons tomorrow. That’ll make Everett jealous.”

“Janna,” I whined. “I’m going to break my face.”

She put her fork down, rubbing her stomach and groaning. “Damn, they know how to make good food here. And no, you won’t break your face. That’s why we got you lessons.”

I rolled my eyes. She hadn’t seen me on skies before. I’d gone with Everett once and spent the entire morning on the bunny hill—while he went off on black diamond runs—before giving up and drinking the afternoon away back at the lodge.

“Let’s hope the ski instructor is nicer than the owner,” I grumbled.

“Oh! Speaking of...the comments section went crazy for Aksel,” Janna said, sitting up again. “Apparently women like the brooding, bearded look.”

I snorted. Of course they did. Who wouldn’t? Except they didn’t know what an ass he was beneath all those muscles, the cable-knit sweaters that were surprisingly masculine, and the stunning beard that my inner thighs very much wanted to make their acquaintance with. My brain drifted to the sight of him with just a towel on. My stomach swooped, and had he been anyone else, I would have been tucking that memory away for when I was finally alone in my room. The man had missed his calling as a model.

My phone buzzed and I glanced at it. A text message from Mack flashed at me.

Mack the PR attack: Get more pics with that giant man. The press thinks you’ve moved on, which is exactly the vibe we need. If you can get him without a shirt on, even better.

I grimaced. “Did Mack get ahold of my phone again?”

He was constantly changing his name in my contacts. Not even my personal phone was off-limits. Literally nothing in my life was private. Janna even scheduled my Brazilian waxing appointments for me.

Me: I don’t like him. And stop getting into my phone.

Mack the PR attack: No one said you had to like him. Just get some steamy pics with him.

Me: Can't do it, sorry. I'm skiing tomorrow.

Mack the PR attack: Great. Get pics of that and then warm up in the hot tub afterward with the giant. Preferably with your top on, but maybe straddling him with his beard in your cleavage.

I threw my phone to the foot of the bed. I was not going to construct a fake seduction just to make Mack happy. Sure, I'd done it in the past, but look where that got me. Dumped by Everett Neverhard and staying in a ski resort in the backwoods of Idaho without hope of a massage in sight.

“Oh!” Janna squealed. “They have ornament painting the day after. Do not panic, I already signed you up!”

I shut my eyes and prayed for sanity. Sometimes a girl just wanted to rip the deer antlers off the front door and stab her assistant with them.

I wouldn't, of course.

I doubted I'd be able to get them off the door.

CHAPTER SIX



*A*ksel

“ARE YOU FARKING KIDDING ME?”

The voice that had grated on my nerves for the past twenty-four hours ruined the lovely view of the mountain. At the snark in her tone, I regretted stoking the fire in her room the night before, the ungrateful wench. Her hands had been cold as ice out there making gingerbread men with my daughter. Begrudgingly, I’d gone to her room and added some wood to the fire while she took a picture holding the third-place trophy. Perhaps I was feeling bad about the spa misunderstanding. I’d felt enough regret to last me a lifetime. I did not need to feel any more of it. Especially not for the celebrity woman who had her well-proportioned lip snarled up to her nose at the moment.

“You booked ski lessons.” I spread my arms wide, my ski jacket keeping out the chill I craved. “I’m the ski instructor.”

Morgana marched toward me, lifting her booted feet comically high out of the snow bank. Her cheeks had twin spots of color staining them. Her breath puffed out in a white cloud, drifting up toward her deep blue knitted ski hat. Blonde hair nearly covered the matching scarf around her neck, but it

was the ski jacket that caught my attention as she lifted a finger in my face. The jacket was bright white with a fringe along the arm like a cowboy had gotten hold of it, stamping it with his own western style.

“You’re the owner!”

I nodded at the daft woman. “Yes, owner and ski instructor. What the fuck are you wearing?”

Her perfect light brown eyebrows drew together, but at least her accusing finger dropped away from my face. “What the fuck are *you* wearing?”

“I asked first.” I pointed at her and made a circle in the air. “Ski jackets do not have fringe.”

She huffed and a cloud came out of her nose. Like a bull. “This one does, Mr. Clothing Police.”

“It looks dumb, but I will still teach you to ski.”

Morgana looked at the young woman next to her. “Do you see why I don’t like him?”

The woman pasted on a smile and approached, looking far more appropriately dressed. She put out her gloved hand and I shook it. “We didn’t properly meet yesterday. I’m Janna.”

“Aksel Lund. Pleasure to meet you.”

Janna took her hand back and smiled up at me. “I don’t know, Mo, he seems quite nice. Handsome too.”

Morgana traipsed past us, not so accidentally bumping into my arm and barely holding on to her skis and poles. “Okay, sure. Whatever. We’re here to ski. Let’s do this.”

“How about you help Morgana, and I’ll trail behind getting pictures?” Janna made a face that specifically said *sorry about*

my boss.

I nodded and went after Morgana before she got to the ski lift and didn't even have her skis on. "Drop it and step into your skis," I ordered, rushing to catch up.

She stopped in her tracks and dropped the skis, the poles also falling to the snow. She put one foot in the front clip and tried to step down, wobbling and flailing her arms. I reached her side, grabbed her arm, and held her steady.

"This is why you keep the poles in hand. Use them for balance."

She looked up at me, entirely too close now that I was holding her. She smelled like flowers and leather, a combination I did not think I'd like and yet did.

"You didn't say that."

"Use your head, woman."

"Don't call me woman," she snapped.

"Are you not a woman?"

Morgana wrenched her arm away from me, having successfully snapped her boot into the first ski. "Of course I am, but my name is Morgana."

"Is it?"

She looked up at me with so much fire in her eyes, I wondered if she'd melt all the snow around us before we got to ski the hill. "Do you always answer everything with another question?"

"Isn't that what you just did?" I bit back a smile. Sparring with her was making my morning.

“Argh!” she yelled, turning away and bending down to get her poles and get her foot into the second ski.

I did not look at how well she filled out her ski pants. I was staring at her simply to make sure she didn’t fall over and require my assistance.

“Do not take a picture right now, Janna!” she yelled from her bent-over position. Janna let out a musical chime of laughter from behind us that made me like the woman.

“Have you never skied before?” I asked the back side of Morgana, trying to remember all the questions I would ask any skier here for lessons.

She finally straightened with a huff and a click, her boot finally engaging with the ski. “Once. And I was terrible.”

“Ohh,” I said mockingly. “The great Morgana Mavis is terrible at something?”

Her eyes lost focus and I wondered where she was in that head of hers. “Lots of things, actually.”

That felt a little too honest and not in line with the way we teased each other. I had no interest in sharing honesty with a celebrity who probably didn’t know the definition of the word.

“Come. Let’s get on the ski lift.” I took hold of her arm and pulled us in the direction of the chair that had looped around. “Janna, you’re okay getting the chair behind?” I called behind me.

“I got it! Smile, Mo!”

Morgana looked over her shoulder and shot a practiced smile to Janna. I did not bother to turn around. They did not need my mug in the photo. I was not the famous one.

“Sit!” I barked as the chair came right behind our legs.

Morgana did not sit, probably too busy trying to argue with me. But ski lifts wait for no one and she did have to sit as the bar swooped her up. One pole slipped from her hand and fell to the snow, left behind as we lurched forward.

“My pole!” She turned around to look at the dropped pole, teetering dangerously close to the edge of the seat.

I rolled my eyes and prayed for patience. This was worse than taking Imogen’s friends out skiing. My arm came across her chest, just below her collarbone, or what was most likely her collarbone. She had a lot of layers on and I couldn’t exactly tell. She slammed back against the seat.

“Sit back, woman!”

“Okay, okay. Sheesh.”

“When we get to the top here, I want you to simply stand up and let me drift us off to the right.”

“I can do it.”

“No, you can’t.”

“I can do it!” she argued.

The top of the bunny hill came up under our feet and I stood, reaching for Morgana. The woman wrenched her arm out of my reach, stood for approximately half a second and then wobbled dramatically before falling on her ass and popping one of her skis off.

“*Faen i helvete*,” I muttered. I leaned back and grabbed her arm, hauling her off of the snow and back onto her one ski. “Clip in and maybe try doing what I say, yeah?”

Janna came up behind us, sailing off the ski lift like a pro. “What a gorgeous morning!” she sang brightly.

“Jesus,” Morgana muttered under her breath, but I heard her, given that she was still tucked to my side as we made our way to the top of the bunny hill.

Janna let out a whoop and skied down the bunny hill like she’d been born in skis. We both watched her go.

“I do not think she needs lessons.”

Morgana huffed, looking down at her own skis. “Snowplow, live to see another day. That’s my motto.”

I stared at the side of her face. “You need better mottos, but that will do for now.”

She dug her one pole into the ground and pushed, barely moving a few inches, already angling the toe of her skis inward like a piece of pie.

“Ease up on the snowplow so you can actually get going, huh?”

“Shut up! I’m just trying to survive right now.” She did uncross her skis a bit though and gained just enough speed to call it skiing as she slid down the hill in the funniest crouch I’d ever seen. I followed behind, shaking my head as the fringe from her jacket waved in the wind like some kind of white flag of surrender.

“Lean right!” I called from right behind her. She needed to end her run closer to the ski lift or we’d be here all day as she tried to traipse through the snow in skis. She leaned left.

“Your other right!”

She finally leaned right and I felt safe enough to ski by her side to the ski lift. “Let’s try it again?”

She managed to stop and pick up her abandoned pole, her breath already coming in steady puffs. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I

got this.”

“Smile!” Janna shouted again. This time we both turned toward her for the photo, though I did not smile. I was not having fun. Not at all.

The next lift came around and we both sat. At least the woman was capable of learning from her mistakes.

“At the top, let me help you off.”

She sighed but didn’t argue, which I took as a good sign. The ground came up under our skis and I stood, pulling her up with me. I had everything under control, but the woman began to panic at our speed, her arms flailing, poles swinging wildly from the straps that kept them on her wrists. One clipped me in the back of the knee and we both went down in a mess of limbs, skis, and poles.

“Oh my God, hilarious! I got that on video!” Janna yelled from behind, sailing off her own lift chair and then skiing backwards. “You guys good?”

I’d gone down first, flipping so that Morgana landed on me instead of the packed snow. Several years of ski instructing had made that move automatic. Her legs were straddling my hips and her head was on my chest. While there were layers and layers of padding between us, I couldn’t help but recognize the blister of heat that raced through me at the position.

“You alive?” I grumbled, not happy with myself for feeling anything but disdain for this woman.

Morgana began to shake and a spike of worry hit my chest. Was she crying? Shit. Maybe she’d hurt herself. I couldn’t handle a lawsuit from a celebrity right now.

“Mo!”

She lifted her head and I let my head fall back to the snow in relief. She was laughing. The woman had made me fall off the lift, and while I was worried about her safety, she'd been laughing her head off.

“Oh my God! It was like watching a tree go down in the forest!” She clapped both gloved hands to her mouth and threw her head back laughing even harder.

I bucked my hips. “Get off, woman.”

Her hands slapped down on my chest as her laughter cut off abruptly. She scrambled off of me faster than Imogen comes down the stairs on Christmas morning, as if recognizing for the first time that she was sitting on a particular part of me.

She cleared her throat and stood up. I did the same, willing everything to settle so I wasn't tenting my ski pants. Why did the annoying woman have to be so pretty?

She looked at the bunny hill. “Maybe I should practice a few more times?”

I shook my head and prayed yet again for patience. And safety. Gesturing to the hill, she went ahead of me, snapping on her skis and snowplowing down the mountain. We did that four more times before she successfully got off the ski lift without assistance and without falling on her ass. Janna claimed she had enough pictures and went off to ski the more challenging runs, leaving just the two of us.

“Think you can try a blue run to end the day?”

Morgana looked up at me and blew out a deep breath. “Maybe?”

I nodded, deadpanning. “Stunning confidence. I like it.”

She snickered and followed my lead as we went across to another lift. We both got seated and took in the views as the chair began to lift much higher up the mountain. There was something I'd been meaning to ask and what better time than when she was stuck on a chair lift with nowhere to go and nothing to stab me with?

“Why did your boyfriend not come on this trip?”

Morgana sighed and there was so much emotion behind it I had another case of the regrets. “He broke up with me right before.”

“Ah. He couldn't deal with your grumpiness either. Or your suitcases.”

Morgana leveled me with a look that would have hurt a smaller man. “And where's your wife? Oh, that's right! She couldn't stand your assholery.”

I frowned. “Assholery is not a word.”

“Says the asshole,” she said under her breath. Recovering quickly, she pasted on a smile I did not care for because it was fake. “But this was my birthday gift from the boyfriend, so I came anyway. Nothing like a ski vacation to get my heart patched up, right?”

“But you do not ski. Clearly.”

Morgana hit me across the chest with her pole before I had a chance to get my hands up in defense. “Shut it, Viking.”

I growled. “No shenanigans on the lift.”

Morgana made a noise with her mouth and I noticed her cheeks were turning pink. She was too pale to be out here much longer. “That's a made-up rule.”

“Are you wearing sun block?”

“Yes, Dad, I am,” she answered mockingly.

I grunted and told her to get ready to get off. She made it off the lift again, and I felt like that held good promise for this run. We paused at the top to take in the view.

“Take it slow. Snowplow all you want but practice shifting your weight. I’ll be right next to you.” This was the part of instructing I loved. The moment when the newbie skier got to try out their skills and realized they were better than they thought.

Morgana’s head bobbed up and down as she looked at the slope ahead of us. “You sure I won’t die?”

I puffed up my chest, knowing exactly what she needed. “I am an Olympic skier born to another great Olympic skier. I will not let harm come to you no matter how badly you ski.”

Morgana snorted. “Jeez. Ego much?” She gave me a shove with her elbow and tipped her skis down onto the run.

I stayed close to her, coming to a complete stop on occasion to wait for her to catch up. I knew how she was doing from the sounds she was making. A shriek when she was going too fast and forgot to snowplow. A whoop when she leaned a certain way and it worked. A wobbled gasp when she got to a bump in the run and had to adjust out of her half-squat position.

We were fifty yards away from the bottom of the run when she let out a shriek to end all shrieks. I looked over my shoulder to see her racing down the hill with a terrified look on her face.

“Snowplow!” I hollered.

She tried, but her skis just kept going wider. Any wider and she’d be skiing down the hill in the splits.

“*Faen*,” I spit, skiing over so that I was in line with her, just a few feet in front.

The tips of her skis came alongside the outside of mine and then she full-body-slammed into my back. I grabbed her arms around my waist and tried to come to a stop, which wasn’t easy with a monkey on my back, a pole jabbing me in the kidney, and two out-of-control skis that looked ready to get jumbled up in mine and take us both out.

I managed it, of course, being that Olympic skier I’d bragged about. We’d done some insane drunk skiing after we won silver that one year. There’d been about ten of us in a conga line like this going down a black diamond. Not that I’d retell that story now. I was a responsible father with a ski resort that was about to go under. Drunken ski escapades seemed like another lifetime ago.

We’d come to a complete stop just twenty yards from the bottom and still Morgana didn’t let go of my waist. I twisted around enough to see her face buried in the back of my ski jacket.

“Mo?”

She grunted.

“You can let go now. We are stopped.”

She lifted her head and opened her eyes one at a time. After she verified my statement, she snatched her arms from around me and shuffled to back up and get her skis under her again.

“I think I’m about done skiing for the day, Aksel.”

I frowned. That might be the first time I’d heard her say my actual name. “We have twenty yards and then we’re done.”

She was already shaking her head, her legs quaking in her ski pants. “Nope. No, I’m done. Right now.”

She wedged her pole in the back of her ski and popped her boot out, then the other.

“It’s literally right there.” I pointed to the bottom, clearly visible from here, but she wasn’t having it.

She just scooped up her skis and poles and began to climb sideways down the hill. I huffed, realizing that she was serious about climbing the whole way down like some kind of billy goat on a steep cliff.

The patience I’d prayed for either never arrived or fled quickly, because I was done too. I skied up beside her, stooped low and grabbed her around the knees. With one easy toss, she was over my shoulder, the skis and pole digging into my side. The pain was worth it, just to hear her scream and shout and try to kick me in the nuts with her heavy ski boots. She was feistier than a wet cat in a paper bag.

Even so, we made it down the hill in a matter of seconds and I deposited her to the ground just outside the cabin where we kept all the ski equipment.

“Are you done?”

Morgana dropped her skis and poles to the ground and grunted, face red as a tomato. “Ugh!”

Then she stormed off and left me to clean up. And that right there was why I didn’t like celebrities. The tantrums. The entitlement. Their attitudes of letting the “little people” deal with all the responsibilities.

It was a perfect reminder for me. No matter how amazing she looked in her western ski outfit, she was still a celebrity and not someone I should look at twice.



Carol Ann: I heard screams from the ski lift today. What the hell are they doing out there at Havenkirk?

Dagny: Whatever you do, do NOT ask Aksel about Morgana's ski lesson. I can't deal with anymore bickering between those two.

Carol Ann: No kidding. We almost didn't need to use the ovens to bake our gingerbread cookies. Those two spit fire around each other.

Doc: Sounds like a match—no pun intended—made in heaven.

Chief Blade: Sounds dangerous. We've all seen Aksel after heartbreak. The town can't take that again. Keep those two away from each other.

Dagny: Good luck with that...

CHAPTER SEVEN



Morgana

I PULLED my hat off and stuffed it in the pocket of my jacket, nearly pulling out a few hairs in the process. I was done. Done with this ski resort. Done with people telling me what to do. Done with expectations that made me feel like I was dancing to someone else's tune every day of my life and not my own.

I flipped off the mistletoe hanging over the front door of the resort and yanked on the deer antlers. Warmth from inside hit me like a wall, pulling me in and helping my shoulders peel away from my ears. Irritation at Aksel and my inability to ski slowly drained away the closer I got to the roaring fire.

A giggle caught my attention and I noticed Janna sitting on one of the leather couches, a man sitting curiously close to her. I tried to look away and veer toward the fireplace unnoticed, but Janna was too quick.

“Hey, Mo! Over here!”

I sucked in a deep breath for patience and walked over to them. Fake smiles came naturally after you'd been in the public eye for as long as I had. I held out my hand and the stranger shook it.

“John Ross, Aksel’s best friend. Nice to meet you, Morgana. Janna has had some lovely things to say about you.”

I raised an eyebrow. Not about what Janna might have said about me, but because of the connection to Aksel. “Oh really? I wasn’t aware the Viking possessed the sort of personality that led to friends.”

John blinked, clearly not ready for me to fire right out of the gate like that, but recovered quickly. He tossed his head back and laughed the kind of laugh that made you join in even if you didn’t want to.

“Oh, he’s a Viking through and through but under the gruff is a heart of gold. He just doesn’t like anyone to know it.”

“Quit telling my secrets, Johan.”

I swiveled to see Aksel joining us, an easy smile on his face that transformed the way he looked. That was the money shot. He could have booked endless modeling gigs with that smile. Not that I’d ever tell him that. It was getting hot in here, so I took off my jacket and threw it over one of the chairs off to the side, leaving me in a tight-fitting Henley shirt. I shoved up the sleeves to keep from sweating.

“I thought it was John,” I said with a frown.

Aksel turned to me and the smile left as quickly as my enthusiasm for skiing when I took my first fall today. “We are Norwegian,” he explained as if I was younger than his daughter. “John is Johan. We have been friends since first grade, so he is family. Hence the Norwegian name.”

“They adopted me because Ax was gone all the time skiing and they missed having a son. Now that he’s back, I barely get invited over.” John was clearly teasing.

“Acht,” came a guttural sound from behind Aksel. “You are welcome anytime, my *sønn*.” Ingrid came up to the group to put her arm around John’s broad shoulders. “In fact, many days I prefer you to Aksel.”

I tittered while Aksel crossed his arms over his chest, his tell that he was irritated. “Thank you so much, Mother. Just what a son always wishes to hear.”

“Are you familiar with Morgana’s music?” Janna jumped into the fray with an abrupt subject change. She wasn’t the best at reading the room, but she was always my biggest champion. I’d learned the hard way that loyalty meant everything.

John touched her arm, leaning into her in a way that made my eyebrows go up my forehead. Janna’s return smile could have lit the entire ski resort. What was happening here? Was my assistant working on a Christmas fling?

“I have heard her music. My mom used to listen to her all the time.”

Ouch. The fake smile stayed in place. Barely. His *mom* used to listen to me? I was only thirty-eight. Hardly an old-timer musician but lately I’d been feeling like I was the grandma of country music and comments like that weren’t helping.

It was Aksel’s turn to chuckle which pissed me off even more. “And I have never heard it.”

His mother leaned over to offer a kind smile. “Imogen and I love your music, my dear. Some of that new stuff they are putting out hurts my ears. Your voice is like an angel.”

I reached out to put my hand on his mother’s arm, warmed by her comment. Fans tended to forget that under all the

celebrity and awards and press, you were still a human being with feelings and problems and a desperate need to feel worthy. In fact, I'd guess that the more accolades you collected, the more you needed reassurance. "Bless you, Ingrid."

Aksel snatched my wrist, pulling my hand away from his mother. "What is this?" he asked rudely, his thumb rubbing across the inside of my wrist. My pulse leaped.

I shook my head at him, almost used to his rude nature by now. "It's a tattoo," I said slowly, as if I was speaking to someone younger than his daughter. Turnabout was fair play, and all that.

He gave me a deadpan look and flipped my wrist over to inspect it. It was a simple black and gray tattoo of the award that meant everything to a country artist.

"Why a rocket?"

I snatched my hand back and rubbed it against my pants to clear away the ghost of his touch. "It's not a rocket. It's a CMA Entertainer of the Year award, which I won in 2013."

"That's like the highest award you can win," Janna whispered excitedly.

Aksel frowned, pursing his lips. "Wasn't that like ten years ago though?"

I rolled my eyes, thoroughly done with this man. "Thank you for the math lesson, Captain Obvious."

"I do not know this Captain Obvious, but I do know this award is given every year, yes?"

Ingrid turned to Aksel with her hands on her hips. "How did you grow up not understanding when to shut your big

mouth?”

John and Janna laughed at the tiny woman putting the big man in his place. I wanted to laugh also, but his teasing had touched on a bruise I kept concealed under layers of fringe and patchwork confidence. I'd been releasing albums like a crazy woman looking to hit burnout and yet I hadn't won the award in ten years. All evidence pointed to the dreaded thought I was grappling with in my head.

Morgana Mavis wasn't relevant any longer.

“Oh! I know!” Janna stood up quickly, talking over the arguing going on between mother and son. “Let's get your guitar, Mo! You can show Aksel what he's missing by not listening to your music.”

“No. Absolutely not.” I tried to push Janna to sit back down, but she wasn't having it. The girl was surprisingly strong. She slipped by me and ran down the hallway in the direction of my room.

I frowned, feeling backed into a corner yet again. “She has a key to my room?”

Ingrid looked at me worriedly, forgetting about Aksel. “She said she was supposed to have one. Was that incorrect?”

I tried to smile and put her at ease. The last thing I wanted to do was worry the woman who was so kind to me. “No, no. It's fine. She probably should have a key to make sure I don't snooze through my alarm.”

Aksel snorted, and I ignored him. I didn't understand his problem with me, but I wasn't going to bash my head against a brick wall trying to figure it out. I had enough shit to figure out while I was here in Idaho.

Janna came running back with my guitar held high in her hands. She handed it to me reverently. She, of all people, knew how much I cherished that guitar. I'd received it as a gift when I was eighteen years old and bartending in Nashville to keep food on the table, staying up late every night writing songs that wouldn't leave my brain. I'd met a man named Baz who took me under his wing. He wasn't an agent, but he moved in all the country artist circles. He saw my talent and looked past the rough childhood, slipping my tracks to his friends in the industry. Baz was the only reason I even had a career today.

I ran my fingers over the smooth wood, remembering the day Baz had given me this baby. How I'd burst into tears and he'd laughed, acting like I was being ridiculous even though he had a distinct shine in his own eyes. Sitting down in the leather chair, I let my fingers run over the strings, reconnecting with them like an old friend. My eyes drifted shut, the people in front of me faded away, and the music poured out like it always did. This was where I went when insecurities came on too strong. It was where I found peace. A place that never judged, never left me lonely.

The first song drifted into a second, my fingers warming and moving more nimbly with each note. The third was Imogen's favorite, the one that had won me that CMA award. When I strummed out the last note, I blinked open my eyes as if awakening from a deep sleep, seeing Imogen standing directly in front of me, her hands clasped below her chin, her look of rapture making me smile.

Imogen jumped up and down, clapping and cheering. More claps joined hers and I noticed I had a ring of people around me. Aksel stood off to the side with his arms crossed over his chest and a deep frown marring his handsome face. Ingrid stood there with a proud smile and tears in her eyes while her

husband had his arm around her shoulders. Janna was snuggled up to John, her head on his shoulder. She shot me a wink, always my supporter. Even the little old lady who worked in the kitchen and never spoke to me was there, a wooden grin breaking up the lines of her face.

“That was so good!” Imogen snagged my attention again. “Wait ’til I tell everyone at school that I had a private Morgana concert!”

I laughed, putting the guitar aside and pulling her into a hug. “Not sure how cool that would make you, but thank you just the same.”

“Did you write those songs?” came Aksel’s booming voice.

The joy of getting lost in music faded a bit. “No, not those three.”

Aksel huffed. “You are a good mockingbird, I will give you that. Able to sing everyone’s songs but not your own.”

Ingrid cried out, pulling away from her husband to smack Aksel on the chest. “What is wrong with you? Leave before I kick you out myself.”

Aksel looked affronted. “I am the owner.”

Ingrid pulled herself up tall—and still only came to just above Aksel’s waist—and opened her mouth to yell at her son, but her husband put his hand on her shoulder. He hadn’t spoken much since I got here, and he’d seemed just as kind as his wife, but his eyes were currently spitting nails at his son.

“You may own this place, but I am your father. If you can’t be a kind human being, you may leave and not come back until your attitude changes. Am I clear?” His accent was so thick I had to concentrate to understand him.

Janna looked at me and widened her eyes communicating how awkward things had gotten.

As for me, I felt like I might burst into tears at any second. Not because Aksel was getting reamed by his elderly parents, or because he said mean things, but because everything he'd said tonight rang true. I let go of Imogen and grabbed my guitar, standing quickly.

“It’s okay, everyone. It’s time I went to bed anyway.”

I walked out of the room with my head held high. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ingrid push Aksel, but he stubbornly did not chase after me. Which was fine by me. My head was held high but the hallway wavered in front of me. Tears blurred my vision and I’d rather die than let anyone—especially Aksel—see me so weak.

The lock required that I wrestle with it before letting me into my room. It seemed that everything was against me these days. I shut the door behind me and let the first tear fall.

Along with worrying if I was relevant enough to make it in Nashville at thirty-eight, I worried more that my creativity had bled out of me with every night I’d spent on the road these last twenty years. I hadn’t written and produced my own song in almost eight years. I’d even gotten to the point that I left my notebooks at home when I went on the road. Try as I might, not a single creative line came to me anymore. It was like the spigot of creativity had been permanently turned off. For a kid who’d grown up writing songs in the dark while her parents fought, who’d learned to write lyrics before book reports, songwriting was my lifeline.

Music was my first and only love.

And if I didn’t have that, who was I?

CHAPTER EIGHT



A
ksel

“FOR FUCK’S SAKE, MAMMA,” I groaned loudly.

I could see my breath in the early morning air. I could also see my mother’s head bobbing in the river that ran across the southern portion of our land. Which meant she was also naked under the surface, doing her morning polar plunge.

“W-watch your m-mouth, young m-man,” she hollered back from between clenched teeth. The water was probably just above freezing at this point in the season. While I thought my mother was a badass for still plunging in her elderly years, it didn’t mean I wanted to actually see her do it.

“I’ve told you a thousand times that this is my area. Yours is on the other side of the lodge.” I shook my head. I should have had coffee before coming out here.

“Bagh!” she yelled back, clearly doing whatever she damn well pleased.

I huffed again and grabbed my towel, trudging through the snow to the river on the other side of the lodge which was out of direct sight. I’d come out here this morning to dip in the freezing water and obliterate Morgana’s pretty face looking

stricken, an image that hadn't left my head all night long. If I didn't know better, I'd think this weird indigestion that plagued me was guilt. Or remorse. Or some other weak emotion I had no use for. It wasn't my fault she got her feelings hurt so easily.

Pulling my sweater over my head, I tossed it on the ground and unzipped my jeans. I pushed the denim down my legs and toed off my boots. Once completely naked, I ran into the water. The first touch of water to my feet took my breath away. It made no sense but the water felt colder than the snow. Breathing like a bull, I lowered down into it, determined to stay for three minutes. I huffed and puffed and let out a few grunts. Polar plunging year-round wasn't for the weak, which was why my people had done it for centuries in water far colder than this. I looked forward to teaching Imogen how to do it safely once she was a little older.

Every time around minute two, things shifted and got easier. My heart rate came down, my breathing leveled out, and happy endorphins kicked in. By the time I stepped out of the water after three minutes, my skin was bright red. I let out a whoop and jumped up and down in the snow, feeling like I could take on the world. Shivers wracked my body, but I didn't bother covering up. I'd warm up quicker just by moving and letting my body regulate its own temperature. Nothing like almost freezing to death first thing in the morning to clear your mind of all the garbage.

I eventually got dressed and headed inside for breakfast with my parents. Imogen came downstairs just as I was finishing my plate, already dressed for the day in an ugly Christmas sweater and green striped leggings. Just the sight of her was enough to calm the beast inside of me that wanted to grunt and scowl and holler all day.

“Good morning, *datter*.”

Imogen put her arms around my neck and gave me a hug, her wild blonde hair teasing my nose. I inhaled deep, taking in the scent of my little girl. She was growing quick, but for now, she was still my baby.

“Are you ready, Dad?” Imogen pulled back, bouncing on her toes.

The only thing I was ready for was to send the email I should have sent months ago. The email to the real estate developer who had inquired about our interest in selling our property. Six months ago I’d nearly bit his head off in email form, telling him to shove his offer up his ass and light it on fire. Now, I was in a different place and hoping he was still interested. I thought perhaps I could sell off half the land, which included the slopes, while still keeping the lodge. Perhaps just selling a portion wouldn’t actually kill my parents due to heartbreak and disappointment.

“Daaaad,” Imogen groaned. She tugged on my arm. “Today’s the ornament painting.”

I brightened, thinking I might be able to get quite a bit done today in the tiny office in the back of the lodge while she was busy painting with the townsfolk who always came for the event.

“I did not forget.”

Imogen crossed her arms over her chest. Pappa guffawed, probably at the fact that she looked like a mini version of me.

“Fine. I forgot. But I’ll be sure to swing by and check out your creations now that you’ve reminded me.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Mamma chimed in, rising from the bench to stack her empty plate on top of Pappa’s. “You and

Imogen are a team. I have to clean Morgana's room this morning."

"But—"

Pappa put his hand down on mine where it lay on the table, giving it a pat. "Make me a pretty one, would you?" The twinkle in his eyes pissed me off.

"Why don't you—"

"I'm helping your mother today. Have fun, you two." Pappa came around the table to kiss the top of Imogen's head before leaving to go play golf on his computer. I'd bet my last dime he wasn't going to help Mamma with the housekeeping. I really couldn't argue with him though. The doctor had said he needed daily rest and low stress.

"Come on, Dad!" Imogen tugged on my sweater harder.

I gently unpeeled her fingers from my sweater and pointed to the bench. "Eat first. Paint later."

She sighed like I'd asked her to forgo Christmas altogether. "Fine."

I left her there to get her breakfast, hoping to duck in and snatch the plate before Dagny even saw me. The woman was more ornery than me. Sadly I didn't hide or sneak very well at six foot five, so she spotted me. Dagny swung her spatula at my fingers when I approached the huge island counter, thinking I was trying to swipe a second helping.

"It's for Imogen," I was quick to add, genuinely fearful of my aunt. Though if she truly wanted to kill me, she probably would have put poison in my food by now.

She stilled, the spatula slowly lowering to her side. "Well, in that case, make sure you grab a muffin."

I narrowed my eyes at her, making sure she kept that spatula down while I selected a muffin from the basket on the counter. “That’s a lot of muffins, Dagny.”

She’d once baked for three days straight when she was angry about something. If she was starting up another bake-a-thon for some reason, I’d need to schedule a bake sale for the town just to unload the heaps of pastries.

Dagny didn’t bother looking up from the huge pot she was now stirring. “I didn’t know our guest’s preference, so I made a batch of every flavor.”

I rolled my eyes. Bake sale it was, then. Perhaps the ornament painters would get hungry before they completed their souvenirs.

“She looks like a raisin bran fan.” Only health nuts and weirdos liked shriveled raisins and enough fiber to make your stay in the bathroom a memorable one.

“Actually, I hate raisins.”

I spun around to see Morgana standing in the kitchen doorway, her hair in some kind of knot on top of her head, a few strands escaping to curl around her fresh face. She wasn’t wearing makeup today and proved my theory correct: most women looked better without that crap they painted on.

“Well, good morning, dear. I’m Dagny.” My aunt used a kind voice I’d never heard before, welcoming a stranger as if she wasn’t known for being the dragon of the kitchen.

Dagny wiped her hands on a towel, tossed it on her shoulder, and approached, hand outstretched. I stared at the side of Dagny’s head, wondering what game she was playing at. Morgana shook her hand, returning her smile.

“I’m Morgana. Nice to meet you, Dagny. My assistant has been going on about your food.”

Clearly I must have caused internal damage with my cold plunge today. Dagny’s cheeks took on a pink hue I didn’t think she was capable of. Was today opposite day, that annoying game Imogen tried to play with me at least once a week?

“Agh, it’s nothing.”

“Not nothing. You baked five dozen muffins just this morning,” I grumbled, wondering what a man had to do to get his own aunt to smile at him like that.

Dagny turned, giving me a one-eyed beady look as she marched back to her stove. “Ignore my nephew. He’s not part of the welcoming committee.”

I gaped at her. “And you are?”

“Bah!” Dagny grabbed the hand towel off her shoulder and swiped it through the air in my direction. “Go feed Imogen and get out of my kitchen.”

Morgana let out a bubbly laugh that under different circumstances, and from a different person, would have made me glance appreciatively at her. She shot me a wink and grabbed a muffin from the basket, following me out to the dining hall. She didn’t seem upset with me at all this morning. Perhaps I’d wasted a perfectly good night of sleep worrying about her feelings. I would not make that mistake again.

“Mo!” Imogen leaped up and ran to Morgana, hugging her waist with all the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old with her favorite celebrity.

“Good morning,” Morgana said on a laugh, hugging my daughter back.

I looked away, not used to seeing my daughter hugging a woman who was right around the age of her own mother. It brought too many questions to mind, namely if Imogen would be better off with a mother figure and not her grouchy old dad.

“Today’s the next Snowmass activity! You ready?” Imogen barely let Morgana sit down before launching into it. I leaned against the wall, not wanting to sit down like the three of us made some kind of cozy family unit.

“Uhh...” Morgana looked up at me and then back at Imogen. “Sure?”

“Woohoo!” Imogen threw her hands in the air.

“Eat, *datter*,” I barked, not wanting to dampen her enthusiasm, but if no one reined her in, she’d be all enthusiasm and no nutrition.

Imogen must have made a face because Morgana bit her lip and choked back a laugh. The two of them bent their heads and kept up a steady stream of conversation while they ate, ignoring me entirely, which was fine by me. I used the time to read through my emails on my phone. I had yet another email from the company that had fixed our ski lift. This time the tone was decidedly unfriendly as they threatened to send a debt collector after me if they did not receive payment by mid-January. I’d have to deal with that today also. Perhaps they would accept payments. Small, monthly payments. Stretched over thirty years like a mortgage.

By the time we made it outside to the tables to paint ornaments, I was in a bad mood. How could one be expected to be jolly when everything was crumbling around one’s head?

“Say nutcracker!” Janna’s bubbly voice snapped me out of my dark musing. She’d just taken a picture of Morgana with

my daughter.

“Hey!” I marched over. “Do not post that.”

Janna looked up, the smile dying on her face. “Oh, but it’s so cute!”

“No pictures of Imogen.” I did not allow Imogen to have social media yet, and I would not allow her image to be splashed all over some celebrity’s page.

Janna shrugged. “Okay. How about one of you and Morgana, then?”

Well, shit. I’d stepped right into that one.

Morgana lifted her eyebrow, as if to challenge me to say no. I bared my teeth and stepped up to her side. “Sure.”

Janna held her phone up and snapped a few. “Okay, now let’s try smiling, Aksel.”

“I am,” I protested through my teeth.

“Dad, you look like that time you ate a bad shrimp. You were in the bathroom for—”

“That’s enough,” I snapped, refusing to acknowledge the heat that was creeping up the back of my neck.

I put my hand on Morgana’s back, leaning in close to get this stupid picture over with. I tried to bring to mind something that made me happy. Sadly, all I could think of was Morgana’s face when she played her songs last night. Contrary to what I’d said after, she’d taken my breath away. Her voice. The intense focus. The nimbleness of her fingers. The sheer beauty she’d created with a single instrument and her voice.

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Janna purred, snapping photo after photo. “You two look so cute together.”

Her inference felt like a splash of freezing river water to the face. I stepped back and cleared my throat. “You can get my autograph later.”

Janna’s head snapped up. Morgana’s mouth fell open.

“Did you...did you just make...a joke?” Mo looked like she might fall over.

I rolled my eyes, not wanting their attention on me. Especially Mo’s. It made me feel like my sweater had grown too tight. “I do not joke.”

“Maybe you should,” Morgana snapped. “Maybe then you could hire and keep employees who aren’t your family members.”

It was my turn for my mouth to flop open. Janna raised her eyebrows and put her arm around Imogen’s shoulders, steering her away from us, which was for the best.

Then I remembered last night. “Have you been holding on to that one for awhile?” I said wryly.

Morgana dropped her paintbrush on the table. “You shouldn’t dish ’em out if you can’t take ’em.”

Her meaning was clear. I’d sent some zingers her way last night and now she was paying me back. She wasn’t in a bad mood this morning. She’d been biding her time until she could strike back. I could respect a woman with strategy.

I grabbed her elbow and pulled her all the way over to the last table, away from everyone else. I didn’t need my neighbors hearing our conversation and changing their opinion of me.

“Morgana.”

“Yes?” Her pert little nose went in the air. Her scarf today had little black skulls on it. Not exactly normal Christmas attire. Not that you’d catch me in an ugly Christmas sweater either.

“I would like to say...that...” What the fuck *was* I trying to say? “I may regret some of the things I said last night. Perhaps, in my own way, I was a bit too harsh for your fragile ego.”

Her nose scrunched up, her eyes shooting darts up at my face. “My fragile ego? Was that...was that an *apology*?”

Her face cleared and she burst out laughing. Though it hurt my pride a bit, I could see why it might be funny. I hadn’t apologized to someone in awhile. Perhaps I was a bit rusty.

“Apology accepted.” Morgana was barely able to get the words out as she tried to hold the rest of her laughter in. She finally won, standing tall and schooling her features finally. “I’m just here to relax, Viking. I can’t be fighting with you the whole time when I have some serious shit to figure out.”

That I understood more than most, but I hadn’t expected the world-famous singer to have so many problems she needed an entire vacation in Idaho to sort things out. “What—”

“You gonna spend all day snogging or are you going to paint some goddamn ornaments?” Carol Ann grouched, walking by with her perpetual frown.

I frowned right back. I would not be out-frowned by an old lady with a cane. “You clearly do not understand what snogging means.”

The blasted woman blew a raspberry from her crepey lips, the blinking of the Christmas ornament necklace she wore

around her neck making them change colors. “Neither do you if all you’re doing is wasting time talking.”

A peal of laughter had me turning back around. Morgana was folded at the waist, holding herself up with her hands on her knees, laughing.

At me. As per usual.



Doc: I think it's time we place bets.

Mayor Nancy Haney: On when the town goes under? Word on the street is that Aksel just had a guy come out to appraise the property.

John Ross: That is untrue. Aksel has said nothing of the sort.

Doc: I meant about Aksel and Morgana knocking boots. Coming down the chimney. Aksel sporting a candy cane in his pants around Morgana's juicy package.

Carol Ann: That's highly offensive, Doc.

Carol Ann: I give them two more days.

CHAPTER NINE



Morgana

I WAS DETERMINED NOT to let that beast of a man get under my skin. I already felt like I was dodging enough by staying out of the public eye and trying to escape Imogen. The kid was cute, but I had zero interest in anymore Snowmass activities. I needed time and solitude to sort out the kinks in my life plan that had me feeling doubly grouchy this Christmas, which I couldn't do if I was letting the handsome Viking take up precious brain space. Too bad his looks didn't match his ogre-like personality. He'd be easy to forget if nature didn't have such a wicked sense of humor.

Tucking my hair under the orange ski cap a fan had knitted me a few winters ago, I pulled open the door to my room and peeked out. Today's agenda included a long walk and solitary confinement in my room sans cell phone. Aksel's comment the other night had been percolating in my brain. Along with solving all my career and personal life problems today, I'd spend a few hours on the guitar and see if any new songs magically emerged.

The resort was quiet, just the hiss of food steaming coming from the kitchen. The fireplace crackled in the lobby area but

no humans were about while I slipped out the front door. The air was colder here than in Tennessee, the type of cold that steals your breath and pumps adrenaline into your blood. I started out trekking through the snow toward the copse of trees toward the northern side of the property. The ski slopes extended up into a clear blue sky from the eastern part of the property. The slashes of the white snow through the pine trees looked beautiful from here, but I knew how treacherous those runs were up close. I was officially done with trying to ski. Let's just officially cross that off the list of things Morgana Mavis could do. I had to know when to fold 'em, and those ski slopes had tried to fold me first.

My breath puffed out odd-shaped clouds as I walked, my heart hammering while I worked up a slight sweat under the jacket and ski pants. When I couldn't see the lodge any longer, I turned around and came back through the tree line. There was something about nature that always brought me back from the brink of emotional despair. Everything seemed doable when it was just me and some trees and the occasional hummingbird.

With the influx of oxygen to the brain, I resolved that part of fixing my life required saying no more often. No to fame-thirsty men who wanted to use my celebrity to slingshot theirs. No to my agent when he pushed me for a new hit Christmas song. No to Fifi when she tried to take away my fringe. I liked a good fringe, so sue me.

A splash had me looking up and realizing I'd walked a lot further south than I intended. A small river lay in front of me, craggy rocks making up the riverbed, making the whole thing quite uninviting. Another splash had me ready to race back to the lodge in a dead run, thinking a wild animal was about to attack.

Instead, a vision of male Viking pornography rose from the depths of the river like I'd conjured him from lust alone. I had a moment where I thought perhaps I was standing on the set of the *Aquaman* movie, but this dreamboat was all golden tan skin, only a smattering of tattoos, and long blond hair slicked back from the kind of forehead that could tangle with a buck and come out unscathed.

He scrubbed his thick hands over his face, eyes still closed and head tilted up to the heavens. Water sluiced down over his thick neck, between his mountainous pec muscles, and scattered through his abs. His reddening skin was covered in goose bumps and there was no towel around his waist to collect the water this time.

A myth, passed down by lesser men, was quickly dispelled.

There was no shrinkage in cold water.

The Viking was hung like a horse and built like a god. With the personality of a mule.

Shame, really. Because I'd forgotten how to swallow and may have pushed back menopause another ten years just by looking at him. My body returned to its primal conditions and wanted to mate instantly.

Thankfully my good senses won out, hewn from time spent around celebrity men who were usually more handsome than they had any right to be. If meeting Henry Cavill last year hadn't melted me into a drooling puddle of lust on the floor, certainly a has-been ski instructor in Nowhere, Idaho couldn't take me down.

But then he began to stalk toward the embankment, muscles rippling and...things...swaying in an intoxicating

rhythm. Sadly, I must have made a noise because he froze, one hand on the clothes laid out on a rock. His gaze locked on mine and time stood still.

In the back of my mind, I knew it looked bad. He probably thought I was stalking him. At the very least peeping on his morning bath. Although what normal human bathed outside in the middle of winter? I was just trying to get some exercise when his naked self accosted me. Yeah. That was more like it.

“You gonna keep staring or turn around so I can get dressed, country princess?” he drawled, looking completely unaffected by my presence.

I let out an involuntary squeak and spun around. His laughter had my jaw dropping. I didn’t think he possessed the diaphragm muscles necessary to facilitate laughter. The deep chuckle echoed off the trees and made a fire burn brightly in my core. Or maybe it was the vision blazoned across my brain of him standing in his element, completely naked.

“Or you could come on in and try a cold plunge yourself.”

I didn’t care for the laughter still in his voice. It felt like it was directed at me. “I’m not a Viking. We don’t run around in the snow naked. Are you dressed yet?”

He let loose his chuckle again and I turned with a huff. He was completely dressed in jeans and sweater, looking at me like I was the idiot outside in my birthday suit.

“If you’re scared, just admit it,” he said quietly. Tauntingly.

“I’m not scared,” I snapped. Very little scared me. Except my career that might be teetering on the edge of relevancy.

His hand swept toward the water. “Then let’s see if you can cold plunge.”

I had just made the resolution to start saying no.

“Fine, then.” Naturally, I disregarded all the guardrails I put up to keep myself out of ridiculous situations that would only harm me in the long run.

I unzipped my jacket and dropped it in the snow. My shirt was over and off my head before I worked through the logistics of skinny-dipping in freezing temperatures. My skin immediately puckered into goose bumps. Aksel stood there watching me, his arms crossed over his chest like he was waiting for me to back down. Undeterred, I pushed my ski pants down and toed off my boots. Standing in just my bra that was mostly useless with no cleavage to speak of and the underwear I wouldn't be caught dead in normally—cotton and plain black with full back coverage like my granny used to wear—I walked toward the river.

The rocks bit into my frozen feet. A gentle breeze came through the trees and my teeth began to chatter. I hadn't even hit the water yet and I was ready to rip those deer antlers off the front door and fight Aksel with them. There were better odds of my surviving that. Why, oh why, did the man have to dare me?

“I hate you,” I bit out, lungs already pumping in fear.

“You don't have to do it, Mo.” His voice came from right behind me.

I looked over my shoulder and saw him reach for me, as if he wanted to pull me back. I'd only taken a handout once and it was the best thing that ever happened to me. You'd think I'd take more of them, but I was determined to never take a helping hand again in order to balance out the universe. To pay my dues. To balance the karma scales.

So, like an idiot, I leaped.

Into the coldest fucking water I'd ever felt. The river wasn't deep, so I only went nipple deep before my feet hit the bottom and my survival skills kicked in. My eyes shot open, my lungs seized, and every vessel in my body shunted blood to my extremities so I could sprint out of the water. I didn't account for the rocks, however, and mostly just spun my wheels while yelling all kinds of things I had no awareness of in the moment.

Aksel didn't wait for me to take his hand this time, he just trudged into the water in his jeans and hauled me out by my arms. He placed me on a flat, dry rock, his hands rubbing up and down my arms. It took several minutes for my hollering to simmer down, during which I felt his chest rumbling with laughter. If I could have unlocked my elbows and slugged him, I would have. As it was, my arms were hugging my torso and praying for hypothermia to miss me.

"You're worse than a little boy," he said on a laugh when I'd quieted down enough to be heard.

I took my life in my own hands and tilted my head back. My neck didn't snap and I took that as a good sign for living past this bad decision. "You are the devil masquerading as a modern-day Viking model, tricking women into ice baths."

The man had the nerve to not look the least bit concerned with my assessment. He just shrugged his massive shoulders. I would have thrown off his hands that were still rubbing my skin, but it felt too good to stop him.

"I thought it might help your disposition."

I gasped, anger providing all the heat I needed to step away from him.

“You are a terrible person.”

He shrugged again. “I’m aware.” He wagged his eyebrows and I almost forgot why I was mad at him. “Maybe this will change your mind.”

He went around me and walked in the direction of the lodge. “Come on, country princess, keep up!”

I growled, which only made him release that chuckle again. With my limbs still shaking with cold, I grabbed my clothes, shoved my feet in my boots without lacing them, and ran after him. He didn’t stop until he rounded the right side of the lodge, heading to an area I hadn’t explored yet. When I finally caught up to him, he was pulling back the cover of a hot tub.

“Oh my God, move.” I threw my clothes on the ground and shucked off my boots as I ran. I bumped Aksel out of the way and practically threw myself headfirst into the hot water.

Every cell in my body rejoiced, releasing endorphins that felt better than an orgasm. I shivered, this time from immense pleasure and leaned my head back against the edge. The water rocked dangerously and I peeled one eye open to see Aksel climbing in. He’d kept his jeans on but lost the sweater. His feet tangled with mine once he was seated, having taken up half the damn hot tub with his broad shoulders.

“You are very dramatic,” he drawled.

“And you are very...northern European,” I answered, lamely.

I closed my eye again and tried to just focus on the hot water warming my core and the jet digging into my back. I could stay here all day. Aksel was a good person to have in the hot tub if I couldn’t be alone. He was stoically quiet.

Until he wasn't.

“You know I used to dare everyone at the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City to cold plunge with me. A few of the guys did it, but not one woman.”

That sounded strangely like a compliment. I lifted my head and tried to ignore the instant swarm of butterflies in my stomach from seeing a wet Aksel sitting across from me.

“A private concert from an Entertainer of the Year and multi-platinum record albums multiple years in a row didn't do it for you. It was a five-second cold plunge that earns your respect?”

Aksel frowned. “Two seconds at most.”

I flicked water at him and he bit back a smile.

“Where is Imogen's mother?” I asked out of the blue, figuring if he wasn't currently yelling at me, it was a good time to ask the question that had been at the back of my mind.

Aksel looked like a storm cloud hovering over the hot tub. “We're not together.”

“I assumed due to no ring and no sign of her. But why doesn't she see Imogen?” I'd wanted to be a mother years ago. Figured I'd get to it eventually until eventually never came. Even without personal experience I couldn't understand not wanting to be a part of your own child's life in some capacity.

Aksel was staring into the water as the jets sent bubbles flying across the surface. “She was a model with a drinking problem. She signed away her rights to see Imogen and it is better that way. Some people are not cut out to be parents.”

While I could agree with that statement, it still hurt my heart to think of Imogen being without a mother. She was so

bright and happy, I couldn't imagine a parent not wanting to be part of her life. Perhaps some of that pang in my chest was also directed at Aksel. For the way he'd stepped up as a single dad to raise an amazing daughter. He seemed like an asshole, but he'd done right by his child. There was something supremely sexy about that, which was not where I needed my brain to go while I was half naked in a hot tub with him.

“My parents weren't cut out for it either. But there was no one to sign their rights away to.” I scooped up a handful of foam from the surface of the water. If Aksel could share a piece of himself, I could too. “I always wondered if no parents would have been better.”

Aksel's foot tapped mine below the surface of the water. “You deserved more than that.”

I smiled wryly. “Life isn't about who deserves what. You do what you can and hope for the best.”

Aksel nodded slowly. “You should write a self-help book with just that line. Highly motivational.”

When I shot water at him this time, it was a deluge.

CHAPTER TEN



*A*ksel

I WAS CURSED. That was the only explanation. I'd slept like shit, my brain alternately replaying what Morgana had said about wishing she'd had no parents and the image of Morgana lunging from the stream, soaking wet, nipples that could cut glass on full display, and steam blowing out her ears. I'd never seen a more beautiful woman.

I had zero use for women. Other than my mamma and Imogen, of course. But beautiful women who made me want to ditch my life of responsibilities and bed a woman who irritated the snot out of me? I had no use for such a distraction.

But then she'd gone and made me feel things for her—besides lust, which quite frankly, was shocking to me. I wanted to find her parents in Florida and knock the margaritas out of their hands for how they'd treated Morgana. I wanted to find her ex-boyfriend and let him get acquainted with my fist.

Feeling things was not on my agenda for the day. Or for any day in my future. I had a ski resort to save, a roof to keep over my family's heads, and an annoying holiday to get through without pulling the wondrous smile from my daughter's face.

I scrubbed my hands over my face and steeled myself for another day with an intruder in our midst. Her assistant, I didn't mind so much. And if John coming over every day was any indication, he didn't mind Janna so much either. I rolled my eyes. John was always catching feelings.

"He said what?" I heard Morgana shriek with laughter from inside the kitchen.

My head dropped to my chest. Of course she was already awake. And of course she was talking to my family as if she wasn't a snake in pretty clothing. As much as we might have had what my mamma would call "a moment" in the hot tub yesterday, I needed to remember who she really was. Celebrities didn't operate like normal people. They were selfish. And no amount of time spent on the ski slopes in Idaho would change them.

"He told him to shove his offer up his *rasshøl*," Dagny's voice rang out.

I pushed open the swinging door to bark at Dagny to stop cursing. Instead, I skidded to a stop. Morgana tossed her blonde head back and laughed, sitting on the island counter with her legs crossed and her bright turquoise boots swinging. Dagny had a towel slung over her shoulder, ignoring the steaming pots on the stove behind her. The old woman was making some kind of expression. I could see her teeth, but she didn't look threatening. Her lips were tilted up at the corners. If I had to guess, I'd say Dagny was smiling. I'd never seen her smile before, so it was merely a guess, of course.

"Where's the salmon?" I barked, feeling at odds with the merriment these two were displaying. There was nothing to be merry about. Dagny was the one family member I could count on to keep her head about her. She didn't like anyone, so it

was safe to assume she would never harbor a soft spot for Morgana, but clearly, Dagny was just another victim to the Morgana-effect. Everyone fawned all over this woman, and it was a disappointment to see that my aunt was no different.

Morgana's laughter dried up instantly. So did Dagny's smile. Good. It had freaked me out.

"Well, good morning to you too, Viking. Another day, another chance to terrorize the locals?" Morgana's boot began to swing harder. It was annoying.

"You are not local."

Morgana's hand fluttered to her chest where she wore a coral shirt that hurt my eyes. It also had a fringe diagonally across the chest. Was there a rule in Tennessee that every article of clothing had to have a fringe? "Oh, thank you for reminding me. I had almost forgotten."

"You know what else is forgotten? My breakfast," I thundered, ignoring Morgana with her colorful fringe and sending Dagny a pointed look.

The old woman just bared her teeth at me—it was a grimace this time, not a smile—and turned back to her stove. "If you didn't give me a roof over my head, I would have poisoned you years ago, *nevø*."

"Oh sure, talk tough now, *tante*," I drawled, gloating when her back went ramrod straight. She knew what I meant. Smiling with the guests? Ridiculous.

I spun on my heel and almost let loose a groan when I heard the *tap tap* of boots following me out to the dining hall.

"You seriously just talk to your aunt that way?" Morgana sounded offended on Dagny's behalf.

I stopped suddenly. Morgana hit my back and bounced off. I turned around and almost laughed when I saw her four-inch fringe in a tangle. “Dagny is the one who taught me how to be such a grump. If anyone deserves to be talked to that way, it’s Dagny. Plus she has a bake sale to prepare for. She does not have time to socialize.”

Morgana’s nose went in the air and I braced for bullshit. “Is it normally this quiet around here?” She twirled a single, careless finger in the air.

If I hadn’t been so busy dragging my jaw off the floor, I would have noticed that she’d changed the subject.

“Is it this quiet? Normally?” I really needed to lower my voice as Imogen was probably still asleep, but I couldn’t seem to help myself. “No, my sheltered country princess. This is normally our busiest season. The time where we rake in all the cash we need to sustain us over the rest of the year. But a certain someone booked the whole resort and then cancelled at the last minute. So I deeply apologize for the quiet, but we manage the best we can.”

By the time I wound down, I was towering over the singer, irritated that she did not drop my angry gaze, nor did she look contrite. She simply looked like she was searching my soul for answers I did not even know myself. And no one searched my soul, not even me. Some dark shit lurked there, better left to the dark recesses of whatever body part housed my tattered soul.

“Don’t you make money on Snowmass?”

I scoffed, stepping away. “Enough to cover expenses. We do not get rich on the backs of our neighbors. Maybe they do it differently in Nashville.”

Morgana dropped my gaze then, her eyelashes fluttering down to her cheeks. I felt like I'd kicked all five of her suitcases instead of just spoken the truth. I huffed again and stalked to the front door. I would skip breakfast today. The door slammed behind me and cold air rushed to cover my skin, red with anger. The last thing I needed was a celebrity poking her nose into my finances and presenting to the world what a loser I was. I lay awake each night thinking of my failings and shortcomings. I didn't need her to shine a spotlight on them during the daytime.

My father's dream had been to build a world-class ski resort here in the free United States of America. All I'd done by taking over was extend the inevitable death of his dream. Idaho would never be the ideal destination for skiers. Too many other places offered steeper slopes, bigger resorts, and fancier towns. Quite often bankruptcy was the result of reaching for that American dream.

“Aksel?”

I'd been so lost in my self damnation I hadn't heard Morgana exit the lodge behind me. I didn't bother turning around. I had no need to see yet another look of disappointment on her face. Her hand landed on my back, a whisper of pressure between my shoulder blades.

“I'm sorry. I didn't know Everett booked a private vacation and that meant you losing out on paying customers. I'm happy to book more ski lessons.”

My head dropped forward. Just remembering how she'd felt lying across my lap when she'd fallen off the ski lift was enough to remind me that lessons were a bad idea.

Morgana let out a laugh, her hand still on my back, rubbing in a circle now, like she was unaware she was trying

to soothe me. “Yeah, you’re right. That’s a terrible idea. Maybe we could just open up the ski lifts to the public? I don’t mind sharing the lodge. I’ll just stick to my room.”

I shook my head. “Thank you, but no. It is too late to open the lifts. Everyone has already made their Christmas plans. And you shouldn’t have to be afraid to leave your room.”

Her hand left my back, and I finally turned around. Morgana hovered in the doorway, the deer antlers certainly poking her in the back. She let out a full-body shiver and began to rub her arms over the thin long-sleeve shirt she wore.

“Perhaps if you focused less on the fringe and more on the weather appropriateness of your clothing, you wouldn’t be shivering.”

I’d meant to just think it, not say it out loud, but my filter had some serious holes in it.

Morgana’s lips pursed and I couldn’t help but stare at them, wondering how they always looked so soft, even in this cold weather. Shouldn’t they be chapped by now? Imogen’s always were. I had to constantly remind her to put chapstick on.

“Just when I think you might have a human bone in that mountain of muscle, you go and say something so highly offensive I can’t help but dislike you.”

Good. That was exactly what I wanted. If she hated me, she’d be just as offensive back and it would remind me to steer clear of her temptations.

“*Herregud!*” My father’s voice rang out from inside the lodge. I could see him pointing at us from the two-inch gap where the door had not closed fully. “You two are standing under the mistletoe!”

Morgana's eyes widened as she looked up. I heard Imogen squeal from somewhere inside while I groaned. What a time for my daughter to wake up and come downstairs.

"No, we are not!" I shouted back.

"You are, Dad!" Imogen squealed. "You have to kiss her or there will be bad luck."

I frowned, silently cursing Mamma for putting up the mistletoe when I told her every year to stop that shit. "That is not what not kissing under the mistletoe means, Imogen."

"I think it means the woman will not marry," Mamma's voice joined in.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered, putting my hands on my hips. Having my entire family witnessing my every move was getting on my nerves.

"Well, I can't say I'm sad I won't marry. That ship has sailed, you know what I mean?" Morgana laughed, but it sounded all wrong.

"Kiss, kiss, kiss!" Imogen began to chant.

I had no choice but to kiss Morgana or hear about it for the rest of my life from my disappointed daughter. And I didn't want Morgana to be cursed, right? Kissing her was the only way out of this situation.

"Morgana," I said quietly.

She quit looking up at the mistletoe and looked at me. "What are you doing?"

I stepped closer, crowding her against the open doorway. "It means nothing." A shot of honey and leather hit my nose right as my hand slid into the nape of her hair.

Her eyebrows shot together. “What—”

She didn't get to finish her question. My lips were on hers and I lost all ability to think. Leave it to the irritating celebrity to be the one woman on the face of the planet who wiped my brain and left my knees feeling like Santa's bowl full of jelly.

Her lips didn't move. She froze, just standing there while I laid a chaste kiss on her lips that had me thinking of nuns and elves and the raw salmon I didn't get to eat this morning just so I didn't sport an erection that would forever sentence my daughter to psychiatric appointments.

I pulled back, feeling like a second and a half of lip-lock was enough to satisfy our audience and push away any generational curses. It was also just short enough that I could keep from throwing the woman over my shoulder and taking her somewhere without an audience to kiss her like I wanted.

Morgana's eyes hadn't even closed. The only sign she was even aware that we'd kissed was the red staining her cheeks. Here I was about to embarrass myself and she acted like she might throw up in her mouth over our chaste kiss.

Morgana jerked back and my hand fell away from her neck. Unfortunately, the damn fringe on her shirt got tangled up in the zipper of my sweater, binding her to me. My eyes rolled to the heavens, only to catch on the stupid mistletoe that had gotten me into this mess.

She slapped ineffectively at my chest, like that would do anything besides anger me further. I wanted out of here more than I wanted to save her shirt. I batted away her hands and lurched back, thinking the fringe would give, but the damn thing was made of something sturdier than cotton. A rip broke the awkward silence and Morgana let out a strangled gasp.

I looked down the same time Morgana did. Her shirt was ripped from neck to navel, her gorgeous breasts on display again, this time in an almost see-through lacy number that had me gritting my teeth. There was no hope for it. I had to get out of there. Right now.

“Shouldn’t be wearing fringe,” I muttered, shaking my head.

“And you shouldn’t be kissing innocent women,” she hissed back.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be standing under mistletoe.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be such an asshole!”

She and I glared at each other, both of us breathing hard and clearly unhappy. Without even thinking about the consequences or our audience, I reached out and traced my finger over the lacy edge of her bra. She didn’t have much in the way of cleavage, but what she did have felt soft as silk.

Morgana grabbed the edges of her tattered shirt and yanked them closed on a gasp.

But not before I saw the goose bumps that lined her skin at my touch.

Fuck. What was I doing? I reached up, grabbed the bundle of mistletoe, and yanked it off the nail that had held it over the doorway. With a flick of the wrist, it landed in the snow behind a giant shrub where it should have been the whole time.

And this time, when I stalked off, I made sure I went somewhere I couldn’t be found.



Dagny: This is not a drill. They kissed.

Dagny: And then they had an argument and Aksel walked off.

Doc: Bingo. Did I call it or what?

Mayor Nancy Haney: The bet was sex, Doc. How can we determine if that is happening?

Chief Blade: Best be offering up some legal suggestions, y'all. If I have to arrest some Peeping Toms this Christmas, I'm not going to be happy.

John Ross: Leave it to me. I know the perfect way to get Aksel stirred up enough to make a move. Going to need your help, Hig.

Hig Lindley: You know I've got nothing better to do. I'm in.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Morgana

I'D HAD wardrobe malfunctions before, sometimes in front of thousands of live fans, but nothing mortified me quite like Aksel seeing me in a ripped shirt. Okay, mortified wasn't quite the way to explain it. It was more about being crazy turned on by a bad kiss that had me feeling mortified. Even my best kiss hadn't come close to that barely there lip-lock with Aksel. Had I become so desperate in my old age that a kiss from a man who hated me was enough to turn me into a pile of pulsing want?

After he stalked off—and what was he pissed about? I was the one with the ripped shirt—I was left to navigate my way back inside the lodge, nod to Imogen and Lars like I hadn't just flashed Aksel my breasts, and race back to my room with what was left of my shirt. I found a thick red sweater Fifi had packed me, sadly with no fringe, but enough thickness that maybe it wouldn't be ripped in two by a Viking with a bad mood.

By the time I got my heart rate to settle down enough that I could emerge from my room with some level of dignity intact, Imogen was racing down the hallway toward me.

“Oh good! I was just coming to get you. The carriage is here!” She grabbed my hand and tried to drag me down the hallway, only stopping when I had to double back and get my jacket.

“Whoa there, little lady. What are you talking about?” The last thing I needed was another Christmas festivity when I was feeling like the grinch’s older cousin.

Imogen’s eyes looked ready to pop out of her head with excitement. “The horses! The carriage! It’s my almost favorite day!”

I wrinkled my nose, charmed by her enthusiasm despite my best efforts not to be. “Almost favorite? Maybe I can be involved in your absolute favorite instead.”

As we walked into the lobby, the front door gaped open, letting in a flurry of cold air. I looked away quickly. I didn’t want to see that spot where Aksel had kissed me, but I had no choice. Lars had his arm around Ingrid’s shoulders as they stared out the door at the braying horses. Janna ran in from outside, her snow gear a coordinated pink from head to toe that made me groan. Way too girly and not one fringe in sight.

“Mo! Come on!”

I shook my head. Between her and Imogen I had a feeling I’d be attending every single Snowmass activity at Havenkirk whether I wanted to or not. Imogen squealed and tugged me harder. I stepped through the doorway, trying with all my might not to look down to see if the offending mistletoe was still in the snow where Aksel had thrown it.

And I failed, of course. I not only looked down, I squatted down and rescued that little sprig of greenery from the snow and tucked it into my pocket. I swiveled my head left and

right, making sure no one noticed. Everyone seemed focused on the four horses pawing at the snow, their huffs of breath in the cold air creating little clouds around their nostrils.

John stood by the decorative wooden carriage, his arm around Janna as she bounced up and down. Our driver from the airport trip was also in attendance but I couldn't remember his name. Several more people were there, faces I remembered from the gingerbread contest and ornament painting. I was also acutely aware of Aksel being missing from the group. A man dressed in a three-piece suit and fur jacket stood up on the front of the carriage and addressed the assembled crowd.

“Welcome to the Snowmass carriage rides!”

The crowd cheered and I looked around in awe. These people really did go all out with their Christmas cheer. What must it be like to be someone who had fond memories of the holiday?

“Our first tour begins in just a moment, with another group going out every thirty minutes. Please help yourself to hot chocolate and pastries hosted by the lovely Havenkirk Ski Lodge while you wait.”

Then Janna and John were hopping up into the carriage, their backs to the driver and horses.

“Get up there, Morgana!” Imogen squealed. She pushed me, her little hands on my back.

“Wait, aren't you coming too? And why am I first?” I loved horses, but I preferred to be on their backs, not in a carriage being carted around in the snow while I froze my ass off.

Imogen giggled, still pushing me until I'd pulled myself up and into the carriage. “You're first because you're our special

guest, silly. And I always go last because *farmor* says it's polite since we are the hosts."

"But—"

"Mind if I join you?" A deep voice interrupted my next question. The silver fox driver who'd taken us from the airport to the lodge stood there, shooting me a smile that should have made my panties go up in flames but for some reason did nothing. Maybe it was too cold out for spontaneous panty fires.

"Sure," I said quickly, scooting over on the bench to give him room. He swung up into the carriage and squeezed in next to me.

Janna beamed at me from across the carriage, snuggling into John's side after snapping my picture. The silver fox—I really did need to get his name—settled a blanket around our laps right before the driver let out a whistle and the horses lurched forward. This felt oddly like a double date and I wasn't happy about it. This vacation was for getting my head screwed on straight, not to be thrust into the path of disarmingly handsome Idaho men.

John and Janna began whispering to each other, leaving the silver fox and me out of the conversation. Talk about awkward. The rhythmic crunch of the horses' hooves into the snow and the ringing of the bells lining the reins was not enough to fill the silence.

"So, uh, I'm sorry. I didn't catch your name," I finally asked.

The man so close to me that our shoulders were mashed together tossed me an easy smile. "Hig Lindley. I own the coffee shop in town. Rich Grinds."

I frowned. “Then why were you our chauffeur, Hig Lindley?”

He shrugged, the close proximity making my own shoulder jiggle. “I like to keep busy. Plus I have the nicest car in town, so I get tagged to drive whenever a high-profile celebrity is in town.”

“That happen a lot? Celebrities in town?” From what Dagny had said this morning, they didn’t get a lot of high-profile guests. Or any guests at all, for that matter. Between that and the fact that all the employees were family members, I got the distinct impression that the lodge was running on fumes.

“Not as much lately, but years ago, yes.”

“And why is that?” I found I had a desperate need to know what was happening here at the lodge. If Aksel had a weakness, I needed to know about it. Fair was fair since he’d already found one of mine. He hadn’t been afraid to point out the barren desert of songwriting I’d produced over the past few years.

Hig’s steely eyes looked guarded. It was remarkable really. His eyes matched the gray strands that were coming in at his temples, confirming that men just got more handsome as they aged. Bastards.

“Perhaps that is a question for Aksel, not the coffee guy.”

“Oh! Speaking of, where is Aksel?” Janna jumped into our conversation before I could pump Hig for further information.

“Haven’t seen him,” I said quickly, hoping word of our kiss hadn’t spread through the lodge like a venereal disease.

“The ladies on your social have been requesting more shots of Aksel.” Janna narrowed her eyes, looking back and

forth between me and Hig. “Though I think they might like Mr. Sexy Silver Fox too.”

Hig cleared his throat. Could he be more embarrassed than me right now? Sadly, mortification and I were already well acquainted.

“There he is,” John supplied, pulling us both from a stammering response. We followed the direction his arm was pointing.

There, off in the distance, was Aksel. Janna sighed dramatically and I had to swallow hard so as not to drool on myself. He was chopping wood in a pair of jeans, boots, and a thin Henley that did nothing to block the sight of his muscles rippling and shifting as he flung the ax through the air like it was light as a feather. The wood cracked and split like a lightning strike, tumbling to the snowy ground, only to be replaced by another huge chunk that had Aksel immediately swinging again. He looked angry. Like an avenging Viking about to plunder a town and choose his spoils.

“Can you pull closer, sir?” Janna asked our driver. “I have to get a picture of that.”

John didn't seem bothered by her preoccupation with getting pictures of Aksel which probably meant he was a well-adjusted, mature guy who didn't have jealousy problems. Which, turns out, was the opposite of his best friend. When we pulled up close enough for Janna to get a few good pictures, Aksel noticed us. He did a double take, his eyes narrowing in on Hig. His chest was heaving from exertion and a few strands of hair had come out of the leather knot he kept at the back of his head. Aksel just stood there, breathing hard, glaring at Hig, and holding the ax in his hand like there was something other than wood he wanted to chop.

“Um, could we keep going before he takes a shot at me?”
Hig quickly asked the driver.

The driver chuckled, then whistled to his horses. They lurched forward again, leaving Aksel in our rearview. As for me, I could barely catch my breath. The man sitting next to me was handsome, successful, and everything I should be attracted to, and yet I felt nothing. Aksel was a single dad with a serious attitude problem, was probably sitting on a failed ski lodge, and altogether wrong for me in every way, and yet I couldn't seem to breathe properly whenever he was around.

I'd finally hit that dreaded age.

I was officially having a midlife crisis, and I wanted to hump Aksel's tree-trunk thigh more than I wanted to keep my weak grasp on dignity. I looked out the carriage and tried to focus on the winter wonderland before me instead of the dark storm behind me, his angry gaze drilling a hole in the back of my head.



The carriage ride did me dirty. I might never be warm again. Why anyone wanted to live in a place that dipped below zero degrees was a mystery to me. I waited until the lodge quieted, all the sounds and voices dissipating until all I heard was the occasional creak of wood as the house settled into slumber. Wrapping the jacket tightly around my torso, I crept out of my room and tiptoed down the hallway and out the back of the lodge, making a beeline for the hot tub before my exposed skin froze.

The jacket dropped to the wood deck and I scrambled up the stairs. When my feet hit the warm water, I let out a moan. Little goose bumps trailed all the way up to my scalp where I had my head tilted back to the moon. Now this was the vacation relaxation I needed.

“Boo.”

I yelped, my feet slipping on the slick bottom of the hot tub in my haste to get away from the murderer that was surely here to slice and dice me. Hands grabbed my arms, and while they kept me upright instead of a face-first dive into the water, I instantly felt claustrophobic. Trapped.

My knee jabbed upward before my brain caught on to the familiar slope of his shoulders or the hair that was loose from its leather strap. Aksel let out a grunt that made me proud of my defensive skills, right before I felt bad for jabbing him in what may have been the family jewels. It was dark and I couldn't tell where my knee had landed. I pushed away the guilt and slapped his bare chest.

“What the hell, Aksel? I thought you were a murderer!”

His chuckle greeted me, a flash of white teeth in the dark night. He hadn't turned on any lights on the deck or in the hot tub. No wonder I hadn't seen him. He finally let go of my arms, sinking back down into the water like a crocodile after it lunged for its prey.

“Sit down before you freeze.”

I wanted to get out, just to oppose his appalling habit of telling me what to do, but the water felt too good on my legs and my teeth were already starting to chatter from the rest of me being exposed. Bikinis weren't made for snow in Idaho. With my head held high, I sank into the water and had a seat

on the opposite side of the hot tub. Shivers wracked my body, and I had a feeling it had little to do with the temperature change. More like awareness of the man across from me.

Aksel sat there with the water up to his bearded chin, just staring at me from the shadows. I couldn't see his eyes, but I could feel them. I loved it and I hated it. Normally holding a handsome man's attention would light me up, but not this one. Never this one. This one had the charm of a caveman.

“Not a lot of women in this part of Idaho?”

“Excuse me?”

I shrugged, the placid water rippling over to his side of the hot tub. If I had to share an intimate hot tub with the man, I was going to default to hiding behind the shield of humor and sarcasm.

“Just seemed like there must not be a lot of women around here if that lame kiss was anything to go by.”

There was shocked silence and then a snort. “My apologies again, country princess. I should have kissed the hell out of you in front of my father and my daughter, yes? Given you my tongue and flicked the nipples that were begging me to touch them? Is that what gets you off? An audience?”

As if they heard their name, my nipples decided to test the boundaries of the tiny triangle swimsuit top. Staying in this hot tub was a mistake. I couldn't stay here and listen to him talk about my nipples without daring him to do something about it instead of just talk. And that...well, that would be a huge mistake. I didn't need a fling with a backwoods single dad to add to my publicity nightmare.

I cleared my throat. “All I'm saying is I've had better kisses from my kindergarten boyfriend than the one you gave

me this morning.”

The water shifted violently, a wave of it heading over the rim and down to the deck below. Aksel floated right in front of me, his arms bracketing my legs, his hands gripping the seat bench below me. I could see his eyes now and they were positively blazing.

“Beg me to do it again and I’ll prove to you I’m no kindergarten boyfriend.”

I scoffed. “Beg? Please.”

Aksel leaned in closer, the brush of his hair against my cheek. He inhaled against my neck and I reacted with another shiver. He had to have felt it. A rumble came from his chest and I knew he knew that I wanted that kiss. But I wouldn’t beg for it. Not ever again.

I put my index finger in the dip between his pec muscles and pushed. He floated back an inch or two, giving me space. Twisting, I leaned over the edge of the hot tub to where my jacket lay on the ground. Aksel groaned behind me, and I silently thanked Fifi for packing me a swimsuit that didn’t cover but the bare minimum of my spectacular ass. I may not have had much in the chest, but I made up for it in the trunk.

You couldn’t have wiped the smile off my face when I spun back around with my gift in hand. It was the mistletoe from this morning, a little worse for wear having spent some time in the snow, but the meaning was clear.

“How about a do-over, Viking?” I asked in my sultriest voice.

I held the mistletoe over our heads, daring him to take me up on my offer. It was a bad idea. Maybe my worst.

And I’d never wanted anything more.

Aksel rose out of the water, snatched the mistletoe from my hands, threw it over the railing into the dark, and grabbed my arms. Next thing I knew I was pressed up against the full length of Aksel's body, every hill and valley burned into my brain and setting my blood on fire. The man was huge, towering over me when I wasn't even that small to begin with.

“Just don't talk, woman,” he ordered.

His mouth swooped down and covered mine, his tongue flicking along my lower lip before dipping inside and exploring as if I was his first and only meal of the day. His hands, the ones that I discovered had calluses that tickled my skin, explored down the length of my body, settling on my hips.

My initial reaction was to bite that tongue of his for telling me to be quiet, but then my head felt like it had floated away from my shoulders. If my hands hadn't been gripping the hell out of his shoulders, my knees would have buckled. I'd been kissed plenty in my life but none of those men had ever devoured me like they'd lost their mind over tasting me.

And I fucking loved it.

“See? Better when you don't talk,” Aksel murmured against my lips.

His tongue plunged back in and I met him stroke for stroke. His hands slipped over my hips to the globes of my ass, squeezing and releasing. I leaned into him, my hips rubbing shamelessly against the erection that strained to defy the barriers of his swim trunks and breach mine.

One hand dipped underneath my swimsuit to squeeze my flesh. A tiny mewling noise hit my ears the same time that

Aksel drew back. He was breathing hard, his own hips grinding against me.

“Dammit, woman,” he bit out, his body freezing into one hard ball of tension.

He slid his hand from my swimsuit, let me go, and held his hands in the air like I was attempting to rob his bank. He backed away and then turned to exit the hot tub. I watched him go, too overwhelmed by everything that had just happened here to find something snarky to say.

As he walked away, the Viking got his wish.

For once, I remained silent.

CHAPTER TWELVE



A ksel

Me: I need beer. You up for it?

John: I mean, I haven't had breakfast yet, but maybe by noon I'll be ready. Everything okay? You looked kind of angry when we went past you yesterday.

I GROWLED and flopped back on my bed. Another night, another fucking headache from tossing and turning. If it wasn't remembering every detail of that kiss in the hot tub, it was straining to hear the guitar coming from Morgana's room across the hall. She'd been going at it late into the night, a melancholy tune floating across the airwaves and making my guilt increase exponentially.

I did a lot of shit that wasn't exactly socially acceptable. People who knew me gave me a pass as they knew I was a good guy underneath all the grunts and scowls and bad behavior. People who didn't know me gave me the stink eye and, on more than one occasion, the middle finger. But kissing Morgana had been the stupidest thing I'd done in a long while.

She was hot. Like, stupid hot. Between her hair, her eyes, her generous curves in that wet swimsuit, and the way she could run her fingers over a guitar. It was a seductive package. Which was still no excuse for reacting like I had.

I'd met plenty of attractive women over the years and exactly twice had I let myself be swept away by them. The first time was when I met Imogen's mother. The second time was Morgana. Imogen's mother and I ended badly, and so would this thing with Morgana. Fuck, she was only here for seven more days. I just needed to keep my dick in my pants—and my tongue in my own mouth—for seven more days. I was pretty sure I could do that. Like, fifty percent sure.

Me: One o'clock at Broskis?

John: Sounds good. But you better tell me why there's a stick up your ass.

Me: Your American phrases are vulgar.

John: Actually learned that one from you, asshole.

I chuckled and shoved the phone in my pocket. One of these days I'd thoroughly corrupt my best friend, the town's most eligible elementary school teacher. Sitting up, I reached for my boots, choosing to exit my room with just my socks on. Boots weren't conducive to sneaking, a fact I hoped Imogen didn't learn until she was at least thirty.

I kept my gaze trained on Morgana's door, but it didn't creak open. I darted around the corner into the lobby and smacked straight into Mamma.

"*Herregud!* Watch where you are going." The towels she'd been holding fell to the floor.

I bent over and helped her pick them up. She smacked my hands away and refolded them a thousand times nicer than I could have.

“Sorry, Mamma. You’re just so light on your feet.”

“You stink from being so full of shit, *sønn*. Why are you holding your boots?”

It was no wonder she and Dagny were sisters. Both sharp-tongued Norwegian wenches. “No reason.”

Mamma narrowed her eyes. I hated when she did that. The woman could see far too much. “You lie like a rug.” She sniffed. “But I’m too busy to worry about you right now. Morgana requested towels so she and Janna could paint their nails. I wish we had a spa to offer her.”

I opened my mouth to retort something about the woman whose fortune outnumbered ours by a hundredfold not needing a spa for a quick vacation, but decided against it. Guilt from last night was turning out to be a better filter than anything I’d tried before. Morgana was none of my concern. I needed to just steer clear and get through these seven days.

“I will be back later this afternoon. Could you make sure Pappa keeps Imogen entertained?”

Mamma patted me on the arm. “It’s nice to see you take some time off. You are usually so busy I worry about you.”

I cringed internally, giving her a quick nod before stepping away. I’d been working since before the sun came up most days for the last few years, doing all the jobs that still needed doing even after I’d laid off most of the staff. Gardening, maintaining the runs, upkeep on the lodge, runs to town for food staples, keeping the books, and overseeing the

reservations. Not to mention the actual ski lessons that I was supposed to be giving as the head ski instructor.

I found a parking space easily outside of Broskis since it was just after the usual lunch hour crowd. Their play-on-words business name in a ski town was creative, but it was their massive selection of craft beer and non-fussy interior that kept me coming back. Plus, the owner, Alfie Fraser, was the kind of man you wanted to support. Every tourist who left his bar left as a friend. Alfie met every one of my frowns with an equally energetic smile.

“Aksel, you devilishly handsome man! Been awhile since you’ve darkened my door.” Alfie’s booming voice hit me the second I swung open the door and stepped inside. Peanut shells crunched under my boots, adding to the charm of this place. My mother couldn’t stand Broskis, saying it was a pigsty.

I had a seat on a cracked leather barstool on the far end of the long wooden bartop. Only a few guys sat at the bar, nursing a beer while scrolling through their phones or staring at the television that hung on the wall behind Alfie’s bald head. I knew most of them by name but didn’t bother saying hello. Normal etiquette wasn’t required in this bar. Yet another reason to like Broskis.

“Been busy, but I needed a beer today.”

Alfie shot me a knowing smile. “Ah, yes, beer therapy. That is where I excel. Light or dark, Lundie?”

“Dark as my soul.”

Alfie shook his head comically. “Not sure they make beers that dark.”

I cracked a smile and he got busy pouring me a beer I was sure to like. The door opened again, letting in John with a crack of sunlight behind him. He spotted me once his eyes adjusted and came over to sit in the barstool next to me.

Alfie slid my beer to me, then looked at John. “How about an IPA for you, fella?”

John looked at my dark beer and grimaced. “Yes, please. None of that shit that puts hair on my chest. The ladies don’t like that anymore.”

Alfie walked away shaking his head. “What is this world coming to?”

I took a sip and nearly groaned at the deep hoppy flavor that slid down my throat and warmed my stomach. John didn’t waste any time.

“So what’s with the beer emergency?”

I shrugged. “I just wanted a beer.”

“Bullshit.”

“That’s the second person to call me on my shit today,” I muttered, taking another sip.

“Did Milana contact you again?”

Alfie slid the beer to John and raised his eyebrows so far up his head they could have doubled as a toupee. At the mention of that name, he spun around and hustled away from us. Everyone in town knew Milana, either personally or by reputation. No one disliked her more than me.

“No, thank the gods.” I took a gulp of beer. I needed to be good and drunk to talk about my ex-wife. She reappeared every now and then when she got bored in between shoots in exotic locations, inquiring about Imogen and then never

showing up when she made plans to visit. I'd quit taking her calls or middle-of-the-night texts years ago. I would not allow her complete lack of mothering skills to affect my daughter. My daughter. Not ours. Milana had never been involved in raising Imogen.

John didn't seem phased by my dark mood. He'd been my friend since I arrived in Snowhaven in elementary school, choosing to look beyond my perpetual bad mood. That was John for you, always seeing the silver lining, even if one didn't exist. He'd also been there to witness the whirlwind that was my affair with Milana. The ink hadn't even dried on the wedding license before I was filing for a divorce. John had had quite a few beers with me right here in this bar during that whole fiasco.

“Then what's with all the ax wielding and the beer?”

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “I kissed Morgana.”

John choked on his sip of beer. “Jesus, Ax. That's great!”

I spun on him. “No! That's not great. She's a famous singer, John. *Famous*.” I emphasized the word until he caught my meaning.

“Oh, you mean because of Milana?”

“Could we just stop saying her name?” I rubbed my chest, feeling like I was getting indigestion.

“Sorry, but she is the mother of your child.” John took another sip of beer.

“Yes, she carried her for thirty-seven weeks before handing her over and forgetting about her. More like an incubator than a mother.”

John winced. “Yeah, you might be right. Forget about Milana. Why are you so angry about kissing Morgana?” He slammed his glass stein of beer on the bartop, practically giddy with a realization. “Wait. Morgana was sitting next to Hig in the carriage. You were pissed yesterday because you were *jealous?*”

“Could you lower your voice?” I hissed, looking around but only seeing one head tilted in our direction. “I don’t need the rumor mill activated over an unfortunate accident.”

John stared at me, then nodded his head. “Right, right. I always forget how easy it is to slip and find myself kissing a woman. Terrible accident.”

“Fuck off,” I muttered, no heat behind it.

“There you are!”

I turned, seeing Janna sauntering into the bar, looking so far out of place I could have laughed, had I been the type of person to laugh easily. She wore black leather pants, an ugly Christmas sweater, Ugg boots with little puff balls on the side of them, and a scarf that I was pretty sure had sequins. Every single person in the bar turned to watch her snuggle into John’s side.

I glared at my best friend. “You invited a chick?”

John gave me an apologetic look before turning to Janna. “You were supposed to give us an hour.”

Janna looked at her wrist, which did not have a watch on it. “Oh, shoot. I keep losing track of time on vacation. Sorry! Mind if I join you?”

And then she sat her ass right down on John’s lap with a smile from ear to ear. In the bar. When there were twenty other

barstools she could have chosen and it was clear she was interrupting something.

Jesus Christ, this was a disaster.

John cleared his throat. “Uh, Aksel was just telling us about—”

“Did you want to order food?” I interrupted loudly. If he told Janna about the kiss, I might have to kill her and she seemed like a nice enough girl. A little too chipper for my taste but John seemed to like her.

“About the reindeer for tonight,” he finished, leaning around Janna to give me a pointed look.

I let out the breath I’d been holding. “Oh right. The reindeer.”

Janna put her hand on my arm and I stared at the inch-long nails with white snowflakes painted on them. “Morgana will be so excited.”

“She doesn’t seem to be that excited about the holidays,” I floated out there. I closed my eyes and berated myself. I was digging for information when I’d just resolved to avoid her.

Janna’s laugh tinkled like wind chimes in the bar. “Oh no, she hates Christmas, but I’m determined to change her mind. I mean, anyone who hates Christmas sounds like a total scrooge, but believe me, Morgana is a saint.”

I snorted before I could snatch it back.

Janna’s fingers tightened on my arm. “No, I’m serious! She’s the best! I’ve worked for several country singers and she’s by far my favorite. She’s fair, she’s loyal, and while she can be a bit snippy at times, she’s just a softie underneath.”

Oh, I knew how soft she was. I shifted on the barstool, determined to forget about what her skin felt like under my fingertips. The way I could squeeze her luscious ass and still need another hand or two to hold it all.

Janna let go of me and took a sip of John's beer. She made a face and then giggled. "Honestly, I'm so glad she took this vacation. She really needed it."

I snorted again, but Janna ignored me.

"She works so hard it's ridiculous. So many of her assistants have quit because they can't keep up with her. If she's not performing, she recording. If she's not recording, she's writing songs or sifting through all the songs submitted to her. Or making appearances to keep Mack happy or learning a new instrument to keep her creative juices flowing. The woman is insanely talented, but I think she's exhausted."

Janna slouched and John rubbed her back. "Honestly, she's become my best friend. She keeps getting snubbed by the industry and it's pissing me off."

That got my attention. "What do you mean 'snubbed'?"

Janna took another huge gulp of John's beer. "She's had more platinum albums than most artists for literally two decades and yet she's only won Entertainer of the Year once. Once!" Janna's voice kept getting louder. "And this whole breakup thing with Everett. Ugh! I could kick that guy in the nutcrackers for treating her like that."

John flagged Alfie for another beer. Janna was doing a number on his. The more worked up she got, the more she drank. And the weirder her insults got. Did she have a thing against cursing?

“Even right now, she sent me away so she could spend more time writing songs. On her vacation! The woman is a work horse.” Janna banged the bartop with each word.

I frowned, staring at my own beer. The woman Janna described sounded nothing like the gorgeous, flighty, irritating woman I’d met. Morgana was just like all the other celebrities, self-absorbed and out of touch. Which was why I had no business kissing her. I’d been down that road once, and while I got my greatest gift out of that mistake, I didn’t intend to make the same mistake twice.

But what if Janna was right? What if I’d misjudged Morgana like everyone else? What if she was hardworking, deserving, and selfless? Then I’d be just another asshole treating her like dirt and that suddenly didn’t sit right with me.

“Will you excuse me for a minute?” I got to my feet, not waiting for an answer which was good because those two lovebirds didn’t give me one.

I moved into the hallway that led to the bathrooms and pulled out my phone. It took a couple calls before I got the person I wanted, but it didn’t take long after that to make all the arrangements. I was lucky they were available on such short notice, but then again, I sent a lot of business their way when tourists came through the lodge.

Janna had forgotten her beer and was straddling John when I came back out. His hands were under her sweater and I didn’t intend to stick around to see what base he got to before Alfie threw them out. I shoved my phone in my pocket and left.

I just had to sneak around my own lodge for the rest of the day and avoid Morgana. I still didn’t know if I was wrong about her, but until I figured it out, I intended to keep all my

body parts to myself. And the best way to ensure that happened was to avoid her at all costs.



Alfie: You should have seen his face!

John Ross: Janna was spectacular. I wasn't sure if Ax was going to puke or burn down the bar when she sang Morgana's praises.

Alfie: I had my extinguisher ready.

Chief Blade: Guys, I said legal. I might need to drop off this group chat so no one accidentally incriminates themselves.

Mayor Nancy Haney: Relax, Chief. Janna's been posting pics of Morgana and Aksel and it's getting traction online. I think with a couple more posts, we might get some bookings for after the holidays. This could turn things around for Havenkirk and, by extension, Snowhaven. We just need to keep up the pressure.

Dagny: I'll see if I can arrange a sleepover for Imogen. Maybe while the cat's away, the mice will play?

Doc: I've got an idea.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Morgana

“OH MY GOSH, SANTA!” Imogen’s squeal was high pitched enough to make the reindeer stomp their hooves and huff breath out of their nostrils. Heads swiveled in our direction but most of the townsfolk just smiled and went back to talking.

I’d been dragged, yet again, to a Snowmass festivity. I was beginning to think I had no backbone whatsoever around eight-year-olds with big, pleading eyes and the level of enthusiasm that could power an entire city.

Imogen dropped my hand and ran forward, getting in line with the rest of the town’s young people, eager to whisper their requests in Santa’s ear. Imogen waved frantically from behind the red velvet rope.

“Come on, Morgana!”

I trundled over, feeling stiff from sitting most of the day. I’d been hunched over my guitar, sudden inspiration hitting like it hadn’t since the good ol’ days of my twenties. All it took was one magical kiss, a Viking who made me want to take up boxing to get out my aggression, and a little map-dot town that left me with nothing to do but create.

“What are you going to ask for?” Imogen asked, already bouncing on her toes.

My eyes went wide. “Oh, I’m not sitting on Santa’s lap, kiddo.”

“Morgana! You have to! Santa’s not just for kids, right?”

“Uh.” Well, crap. She had me there. I wasn’t sure how to answer that without trouncing through territory that wasn’t mine to trounce. Imogen’s excitement level seemed to indicate that she still believed in Santa, and it wasn’t my business to relieve her of that belief.

“I’m so going to ask for an iPhone.” Imogen, thankfully, had moved on while I argued with myself in my own head.

“An iPhone for an eight-year-old?” Man, I was thankful those hadn’t been around when I was eight. All the trouble I could have gotten into with a tool that powerful in my hand...

“I know, right? I’m practically ancient! All the other kids in my class have had one since first grade.”

I stared down at Imogen. Clearly I’d missed a few things being out on the road and performing while the rest of the childbearing population dealt with the new frontier of technology and their kids.

“Oh! My turn!” Imogen squealed again and darted off, nearly taking out the hired photographer getting these interactions on film.

I looked around for Aksel, but didn’t see him. Lars and Ingrid were missing too, though they were probably running around selling off the pastries Dagny had spent all day and night baking for tonight. The lodge had smelled like the inside of a bakery. I may have texted Janna and gotten her to sneak me a cookie or two late last night.

As Imogen put both hands on Santa's face and forced him to look at her, I felt like I wasn't equipped to be left alone with an eight-year-old. Did I tell her to calm down? Or just let her run amok? Thankfully the conversation between the two remained civil, and other than that loud kiss that Imogen left on Santa's cheek, she hadn't done anything too abnormal. I moved aside to collect Imogen, but Santa lifted his white-gloved hand, pointing at me.

“Ready to sit on Santa's lap, young lady?”

Oh shit. I knew that voice. And those eyes staring at me with irritation and maybe a little bit of lust too. Or maybe that was just my own out-of-control lust that was making me see things that weren't there. Aksel Lund made one hell of a lusty Santa.

“I'm good, thanks.” I backed away with a fake smile, even though Imogen was trying to grab my hand. Dodging left and then right like some kind of elf high on sugar, I managed to get around her. I knew how strong she was and there was absolutely no way I was letting her drag me back over to Santa. Not with the whole town here to witness either our argument or the way we seemed to always eye-fuck each other. Either were entirely possible. I already knew what Aksel looked like without his Santa suit, which was affecting my decision-making. The further I stayed away, the better.

Imogen caught up to me by the front door of the lodge where the bake sale tables were set up, tall heaters pumping out delicious heat in between each table so clusters of people could buy, eat, and chat while the kids got their time with Santa.

“I don't think Dad—I mean, Santa—is going to give me what I asked for.”

I spun in the snow. That sneaky little kid. “You knew he was your dad the whole time?”

Imogen giggled. “Sure I did. He was asked to do it last minute this year because Doc came down with the flu or something.”

“Doc is the town doctor, I presume?”

Imogen frowned at me. “No, why would you think that?”

I grinned. Damn, she was a trip. “I don’t know, silly me. But your dad as Santa? Doesn’t that seem kind of...?” I didn’t know how to say it without her feeling like I was talking badly about her father.

“Kind of awesome?” she supplied. “I mean, he’s not very good at the *ho, ho, ho* thing, and he doesn’t smile nearly enough to be convincing, but he’s doing okay.”

I glanced back at Santa, seeing an eager little boy on his lap, staring at him like he’d hung the moon, and an infant in Santa’s other arm, screaming for his mama. Aksel winced, but he didn’t yell.

“Yeah, he’s doing okay,” I agreed.

“You need to try the lemon bars, Mo!” Janna came up behind me, John trailing behind her.

He gave a little hand wave, looking a little embarrassed. I was used to that. Strangers who knew who I was either acted embarrassed around me or like we were best buddies. Neither reaction was ideal, but that was the price I paid for success.

“I have not. Yet.” I eyed the tables and snatched up a lemon bar and a chocolate chip cookie while leaving cash on the table. I’d had one of those cookies last night and knew how heavenly they were. “Just don’t tell Steven.” My trainer was

known for putting me through workouts that made me cry. The man was sadistic, and thankfully, back in Tennessee where he had no knowledge of my dietary indiscretions.

Janna made the motion of zipping her lips. “What happens in Idaho stays in Idaho.”

We stood there and ate our treats, saying hello and meeting various people from the community while John made the introductions. None of them seemed weirded out by my celebrity status. Only one grandma asked for a selfie because her kids would never believe her without photo evidence. I let her take the picture, hoping if it got leaked somehow, it wouldn't cause Mack to freak out. I made sure I didn't have cookie crumbs on my face though because Steven was just sadistic enough to enlarge the picture, see the evidence, and make my life hell when I got back home.

“Did you save some for me?” Aksel's voice came from behind, the timbre of it strumming some chord inside me that felt startlingly harmonious. He came beside me in his street clothes and I could smell that woodsy scent that emanated from him. Maybe it was his hair products or perhaps beard oil. Maybe he rolled around in wood chips every morning, who knew? I was curious, but not enough to ask him outright.

Imogen tossed him a slice of fruitcake covered in plastic wrap.

“Ew. You actually eat that?” I couldn't name one person who actually liked fruitcake.

Aksel unwrapped the foul pastry and shoved it in his mouth, taking a huge bite while leaning into my face. Just the scent of the fruit and spices was enough to make me gag.

“Dagny makes it just for me this time of year.”

I shook my head slowly. “And to think I liked her.”

Aksel swallowed down the lump of cake. “Ready for your birthday tomorrow?”

“It’s your birthday?” Imogen squealed, pressing in between us. “Are you going to be twenty-one? Dad says that’s a magical age.”

I let loose a laugh, seeing Aksel look away like he might be embarrassed. “Some might call twenty-one magical, especially those who love alcohol.” I nudged him with my elbow. “But I’ll be thirty-eight tomorrow.”

Imogen wrinkled her nose, the light dusting of freckles bunching up. “Wow. No offense, but that’s kind of old. Like my dad.”

Aksel put his hand over Imogen’s mouth. “Okay, that’s enough out of you. Don’t you have somewhere to be? Other people to terrorize?”

“Actually I do!” Imogen grabbed Aksel’s sweater. “I was waiting ’til you were done being”—she looked around as if just now remembering little kids could be in hearing distance—“done working. Mia asked me if I wanted to spend the night at her place. Please, please, please?”

Aksel sighed, taking another bite of fruitcake and chewing slowly while Imogen waited for his answer. The man liked to torture everyone apparently.

“Dad!” Imogen whined. “Please?”

“Okay, fine,” he started, but Imogen squealed, cutting him off before hugging him and then throwing her arms around my waist, like I had something to do with her father’s decision. “Bye! See you all tomorrow!”

“Wait!” Aksel barked at her back as she ran off into the crowd. He sighed and turned back to me. His eyes shifted, warming into something that reminded me of an inferno the longer he stared.

“Why didn’t you ask Santa for what you wanted?”

My mouth instantly dried up. My brain went in a perverse direction, picturing exactly what I wanted and it looked suspiciously like Aksel, naked and eager for me. Which was plain stupid. The last thing I needed was another man getting into my head—or other body parts—and distracting me from my career.

“Uh, yeah, no. Santa can’t give me what I want.”

If anything, his glower got hotter. “We’ll just have to disagree about that.”

Was Aksel *flirting* with me? The idea was insane. “I think we disagree about most things.” I brightened, remembering something that I’d wanted to discuss with him. Maybe this would get the conversation back on track. “Hey, I was thinking today about what you said about Snowmass and not making money off of it. I thought maybe we could do a little mini fundraiser right after Christmas. Maybe recoup some monies you lost out on this season.”

Aksel might have been Santa after all. As if by magic, Aksel scowled and the very air around us grew colder. “A fundraiser? I don’t need a fundraiser.”

“Are you sure? It could help pay for maintenance and whatever you need around here.” I’d done this very thing several times before. Host a quick impromptu concert, have people pay to get in, greet them after, make a little money while making the fans happy. If it was going to a good cause, I

was game to give it a try. Reading between the lines of what Dagny and Hig had said, it seemed that Aksel and his family needed the influx of cash.

Aksel moved so quick, I had whiplash. He leaned in close, the woodsy scent making my head spin. “Leave it alone, Morgana,” he snapped.

And then he stalked into the lodge and slammed the door, the deer antlers shaking in his wake.

I stayed outside and made idle chatter with people whose names I couldn’t remember until I felt enough time had passed that I could slip to my room without being offensive. The whole time, I ran over the conversation with Aksel in my head, unsure where I’d gone wrong.

By the time I changed into my robe and eased to the floor to lean against the bed and strum my guitar, I slipped into the zone and forgot all about that disagreeable Viking.

Good riddance.



“Happy birthday, my queen!” Janna singsonged, charging into my room far too early for a vacation day.

I tried to cover my head with the covers and return to my dream of a cabana boy with magic hands and a bucket of tanning oil, but she was too quick. And too loud. “Rise and shine, birthday girl! I have banana nut pancakes. Your faaavorite...”

Pushing the covers back, I took a tentative sniff. Oh, heavens to Betsy. She somehow scored my favorite breakfast. “Any eggs?”

“Nope! Not one gram of protein in sight. Just sugar and carbs,” Janna trilled. Damn, she knew me well. I should give her a raise in the new year. “Hey, what’s all this?”

I nearly tripped and fell out of bed in my scramble to snatch the papers from Janna’s hands. Those songs and scribbles weren’t meant for anyone’s eyes yet.

“Oh my God! Morgana!” Janna rounded on me, clutching the papers so tightly there was no hope of snatching them back without ripping them in half. And considering I hadn’t written my own music in years, those pages were worth their weight in gold. “You started a Christmas song?”

I grimaced. “No, no. I wrote a breakup song. Finished it last night.” I flipped through the pages until I found the one that held the completed lyrics. “See?”

Janna pulled away from me and flipped back to the top page where the first line I’d written was plainly some garbage about mistletoe. “But then what’s this one?”

“It’s nothing!” Panic seized me and I leaped for the papers, getting my hands on them right as the door opened again.

“Happy birthday, Morgana!” Ingrid’s sweet voice had me freezing in place. I probably looked like the stereotypical out-of-control celebrity, ripping papers out of my poor, downtrodden assistant’s hands.

I let go of the papers and pasted on a smile. “Good morning, Ingrid. Already done with your cold plunge?”

She swiped her hand through the air. “Not today! Too much fun planned. *Vill* you eat quickly and then come with

me?”

I pulled my robe tighter around me. “Uh, well, I was planning to just camp out here today.”

Ingrid looked horrified. “Agh, no, my dear. You have a full day at the spa planned.”

“What? I thought Snowhaven didn’t have a spa?” I swore to Santa, if that asshole Aksel had lied to me again...

“*Ve* brought the spa to you.” Ingrid beamed, and I didn’t have the heart to interrogate her. Plus, any kind of spa sounded heavenly if I was being honest.

So I sat down at the little desk in front of the window that looked out at the steep slopes I hadn’t skied on and ate my pancakes, moaning with each bite. Janna looked scandalized by my love for flat pastries, but I didn’t care. I hadn’t had pancakes in years and I intended to enjoy them.

When I was so full I thought I might have actually hurt myself, Ingrid dragged me from the room. I now knew where Imogen got her dragging skills from.

“Come, come!” Ingrid took me up the stairs and down a long hallway, ending at a door that looked exactly like the one that opened into my room. “Enjoy!”

Ingrid threw open the door and watched me take in the guest room. The curtains were closed and candle flames danced in the breeze from the door opening. A massage table took center stage, blanket upon fuzzy blanket stacked on top of it. Soft music flowed from speakers I couldn’t immediately find. A woman with her hair tightly pulled back in a bun and dressed in light purple scrubs smiled and motioned me to the table.

“Shall we start with the facial and move on from there?” she asked, voice soft and serene.

“Oh, Ingrid. Thank you.” I gripped the old woman’s hand, but she just patted my back.

“It wasn’t me, dear. Go enjoy.”

And with that, I started my nearly all-day spa service, feeling like a wet noodle when I was done. I’d been rubbed, buffed, exfoliated, and oiled within an inch of my life. The masseuse, Daisy, was getting one hell of a good tip from me. She spoke so softly and yet had the arm strength of an ox. And not once had she asked me about my music, which was a sign of a true professional.

Even though Daisy wouldn’t tell me any details, I’d deduced that if Ingrid hadn’t planned all this, then it must have been Janna. That girl was definitely getting a raise.

When I got back to my room, still in a fog of relaxation that not even the best weed could give me—and I’d tried a few times over the years—Imogen was sitting on the floor with her back to my door.

“Hey,” I called softly. I wasn’t sure I’d ever use my full-volume voice again. My sound guys would simply have to turn my microphone on max from now on. I made sure my robe was tied tightly and hoped I didn’t have too much oil in my hair.

Imogen squealed and popped up, rushing headlong into me. With an audible oof, I returned her hug.

“I wanted to wish you a happy birthday! When I got home from Mia’s, you were already in the spa room. And then you weren’t down for dinner and I thought I might not be able to tell you.”

I rubbed her back. “You are the sweetest. Thank you.”

She beamed up at me and my heart felt like it might melt into a puddle right there in the hallway. “Actually, Dad’s sweet for calling in Daisy, but I’m pretty sweet too.”

My jaw lost all control and flopped about like a fish out of water. “Your dad?”

Imogen’s eyes opened wide. “Oh, no. I wasn’t supposed to say that. It was a secret. Don’t say anything, please, Morgana?”

I blinked, brain trying to process that gorgeous oaf of a man doing something as nice as putting together a spa day for my birthday. Everett, my boyfriend, hadn’t even remembered it was my birthday. He’d only put this trip together because I kept hounding him about my special day.

“I won’t, sweetie. Your secret is safe with me.”

Her shoulders dropped on a relieved sigh. “Thank you, Mo. I’ll go ask Dagny to bring your dinner to your room.” And with that, she skipped down the hallway, not realizing she’d dropped a bombshell at my bare feet.

Spinning around, I raised my fist and knocked on Aksel’s door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*A*ksel

THE KNOCK on the door pulled me out of this ridiculously addictive book about a war in space between alien factions. I wasn't even sure what I'd been reading, I just knew I needed to transport myself away from Havenkirk, where bill collectors didn't call constantly and throaty-voiced celebrities didn't kiss me like she couldn't get enough of me under the mistletoe even though I knew we had no future and no business kissing. And I certainly didn't need to second-guess the favor I'd called in for her today.

Pulling my hair back, I tied it with one of Imogen's many forgotten scrunchies. I should have put a shirt on, but Mamma had seen me in my birthday suit too many times when she trotted onto my territory during cold plunges to worry about it.

"I already ate—"

The words died on my lips when I swung the door open and saw someone who looked like Morgana on my doorstep. She had the same white-blond hair, but it was piled on top of her head in a messy bun, strands escaping to tickle her cheeks. Her irises were the same blue, but they lacked the snapping fire I usually detected in them. Morgana looked like she'd

been drugged and lubed within an inch of her life. There was even a pillow crease across her cheek. Despite her unusually casual appearance, I thought she looked fucking hot. Maybe hotter than she'd ever looked before.

“Aren't you supposed to be at dinner?” I snapped, forgetting that it was her birthday or that I'd been trying to do something nice for her. All I could focus on was what she might or might not be wearing under that heavy robe and how quickly I could get my hands on her silky skin. So I resorted to what I always did when fighting with my baser urges: I was rude.

A little bit of the sleepiness in Morgana's eyes faded and I chastised myself for being the one to make it disappear. I backed up and opened the door wider, indicating she could come in. I didn't want her to come in. But I also desperately did. And that pissed me off. But I'd just been rude and maybe inviting her in would negate the rudeness. Frankly, I was a mess in black sweatpants and a purple hair scrunchie.

Morgana lifted her nose in the air and swept inside, looking like a country princess in a bathrobe and bare feet. She twirled around when I closed the door with a soft click. I realized the error of my ways the second we were alone in a bedroom together with only a thin layer of clothing keeping us apart.

“Have you been avoiding me?” Her voice was quiet, even throatier than usual and with a hint of vulnerability in her tone.

“No.” I folded my arms across my chest, noticing how her gaze dropped to take in my chest. I scowled harder, willing my dick to get the message. He wasn't needed in this conversation, so he could just settle down.

Morgana's gaze came back up to meet mine, her lips twisting in a smirk. "Sure seems like you are. Do you hate me so much you have to sneak around your own place to avoid me?"

She didn't look away, but I could see the hurt in her eyes. The woman had a spine of steel from two decades of major success, but she could still feel pain. And somehow my rejection of her had caused that hurt to be there. I could have kicked her out of my room had she been her bullshitting, insulting self. I could have sparred with her verbally and sent her on her way, taking my erection in hand and dealing with it on my own after she left.

But standing there so bravely even while she ripped away the fighting we'd hid behind since she'd gotten here to ask a real question? I was a weak man.

"Hate is a strong word."

Morgana took a step closer, her bare feet probably freezing on the rug despite the heater pumping all day and night. She lifted a hand to rest it on my crossed forearms, the motion making the neckline of her robe split. The skin between her breasts was exposed, and while it wasn't scandalous in any way—I'd seen more boobage on Mrs. Claus last night—I had to physically force myself to keep from reaching out and feeling just how soft she really was under all that bluster.

"Then why do you dislike me?"

The woman would not leave this alone. And I was irritated, naturally.

She licked her bare lips and I lost my cool. I took a step closer, my foot brushing against her toes, and leaned over her.

She tilted her head back and didn't drop my gaze. *Helvete*, I could see even further down her robe now.

"I do not dislike you or hate you, Morgana. You simply irritate me."

"Why?" she asked quickly.

I shook my head. If I knew why, I could have sorted this out on my own and kicked her out of my brain. Instead, she was burrowed in there like the pillow under my Santa suit.

"I don't know why, woman! You irritate me with your suitcases and fancy things, but then you sing like a goddamn angel. You ask me too many questions, but then boldly cold plunge in a freezing cold stream. You can't ski for shit, but you make my daughter gingerbread women. You insult my kiss and then make me kiss you again."

Her jaw dropped open. "I didn't make you kiss me again. I just—"

"Insulted me to get what you wanted. Yes, I know. And I fall for your bait every time."

Her mouth snapped shut and her eyes narrowed. "And why is that, Viking?"

I narrowed my eyes right back at her. She had to feel my erection. It was pressed between us and she wasn't running away. "Because when you call me Viking, I want to set you across my lap and do naughty things to you."

Morgana licked her lips again and I was done. I put my hands on both sides of her face, my hold not as gentle as a gentleman should.

"What did you ask Santa for?"

Morgana blinked once, and when she fluttered her eyes open, the fire was back, blazing hotter than ever before. I wanted to puff out my chest and shout to all of Snowhaven that I'd put it there.

"I never got to sit on his lap." Morgana's low voice made me shiver.

I stroked my thumb across her bottom lip, dragging her mouth to the side. She darted out her tongue and gave it a lick, sending my pulse flying. I had a feeling this woman would fuck like a wild animal, giving as much as she took. It had been a very, very long time since I'd been with a woman. The downfall of being a single dad in a small town and living with your parents. Sure, I'd had a few flings over the years for physical release, but not one of them had gotten under my skin like this woman.

"Come sit on my lap and tell me what you want."

I released her immediately, smiling smugly inside when she swayed, as if she'd lose her balance without me holding her up. I stalked over to the chair by the window, where I'd been reading before she knocked on my door. I had a seat, stretched out my legs, shifted my erection, and patted my thighs.

Morgana's eyes were hooded as she stared at me. I knew the very second when she decided she was going to take me up on my offer. Her nose went in the air and she pranced over to me, the country princess back in action. She knew her worth and also knew I was not teasing. Not now.

When she stood before me, she didn't hesitate. Her hands came to my shoulders and she lifted a leg. Sadly, the robe was long enough that I could not see what she wore underneath. The smell of flowers and oil permeated the air between us. She

straddled me, looking me right in the eye as she sat down, directly on my erection. I hissed and she smiled so smugly I wanted to cheer for her success. She'd gotten under the Viking's skin alright. The evidence of my desire was clear.

She leaned up, but I put my hands on her hips and held her back from kissing me. It was killing me to have my hands on her luscious hips and not take advantage, but there was a game to play. The same game we'd been playing since the day I kicked her suitcases and got my first look at the intruder.

“Nuh-uh, woman. You have to ask Santa for what you want first.”

Morgana pouted for just a second before rocking back, knowing exactly what she was doing to me as she moved about on my dick. “Hmm. Let's see. I have always wanted a puppy.”

I rolled my eyes. Not this again. “That's what Imogen asks for and Santa says no.”

Morgana pouted again, but with more irritation behind it. “Santa's not supposed to say no.”

“This Santa does.” I squeezed her hips, pulling her up higher and then pushing her back, the pressure of her weight on my dick making my eyes want to roll back in my head. Plus every time she moved, that stupid robe opened an inch wider. “Ask me for something I'll say yes to.”

Morgana reached up and pulled the scrunchie out of my hair, her fingers sifting through my shoulder-length strands and making my scalp tingle. She continued to wiggle on my lap, a look of innocence stamped across her beautiful face. “Well...I guess I could ask for...”

“What, woman?” If she didn’t stop rubbing against my dick and playing with my hair, I was going to turn her over, flip this robe up, and redden her ass.

Morgana leaned in close to whisper right in my ear. “Santa baby, give me an orgasm.”

My eyes slid shut as I savored that request. “Fuck, yes.”

And then I batted her hands away from my hair, cupped her jaw, and kissed her like I’d been wanting to ever since I walked away from the hot tub. Her tongue met mine, equally as eager to explore the other. Teeth clashed and I twisted her head to the side. I felt her hands skate over my arms and shoulders, the groan in the back of her throat making everything burn out of control. This woman fucking undid me.

But she’d asked Santa for an orgasm, and I’d be the one to give it to her.

Leaving her mouth, I trailed kisses along her jaw. Morgana tilted her head back, inviting me to go further. With a growl of frustration, I pulled the robe off her shoulders, exposing her breasts and pinning her arms behind her.

“Your breasts are fucking perfect.” I hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but perfect breasts deserved to be recognized. “Fuck the Entertainer of the Year award. These babies are the Boobs of the Decade.”

Morgana let out a choked laugh, only cut off when I cupped one breast and dipped my head to pull her nipple into my mouth. She didn’t have heavy breasts, but her responsiveness to my tongue flicking her nipple was everything. She ground down on my erection and moaned, her head tilted back, eyes squeezed shut. I gave both sides

attention before I let my right hand explore down over the belt of her robe.

I flicked the flap of the robe out of my way and dove my hand underneath, where she was pressed against me. And that settled that. The woman was not wearing panties.

“Fuck, woman,” I grunted, feeling her wetness coating my fingers even before I’d gotten the lay of the land.

“Yes, exactly,” she shot back quickly, so breathy I thought maybe that should be what she recorded next. Men would line up around the world with their wallets out to hear her talk in the midst of an orgasm.

I slid one finger inside of her, fusing my mouth to her breast. Morgana groaned, shifting her hips to give me better access. She was warm and wet and oh so tight. Scented like a flower on her skin, but there was the scent of her arousal on top. She could bottle that too and sell it.

Her fingernails bit into my shoulders, her moans growing increasingly louder and closer together. I slid a second finger inside of her heat and she grabbed my hair in her fist and held me against her breast. She did not need to worry. I wasn’t going anywhere until she fell apart on my hand and I got to hear the rush of air in and out of her lungs while she came. My erection pulsed insistently against the back of my hand, desperately trying to be part of what was happening. I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on her orgasm before my own.

“Oh my God, Aksel.” Morgana’s hand tightened in my hair to the point of bringing pain. I smiled against her breast, my teeth biting down gently, knowing I had her right where I wanted her.

“Hey, Dad?”

We both froze, my teeth clamped on Morgana’s nipple and my hand up her pussy. There was a knock on my door, followed by another loud call from Imogen.

Morgana let out a peep so quiet I wouldn’t have heard it if I hadn’t felt the vibration of it against my face. She pushed my shoulders hard. I lurched back in the chair and Morgana scrambled to get off me, doubling over and shivering when my hand slid out of her.

“Dad! I can’t find Morgana. Can you help me look for her?”

Morgana pulled her robe tightly around her with her face on fire and her hair an even bigger mess than before. I looked down at my hand, wet from her body, and wondered why the hell these things happened to me.

Wiping my fingers against my pants, I stood. Probably happened because I let my guard down and kissed the celebrity right here in my home. Right where my daughter could have barged in and been scarred for life. Right when I was supposed to be focused on providing one last happy Christmas memory for my family.

I adjusted my erection, the reality of what I’d done already dousing it in cold water. I looked over at Morgana. She was staring at my chin, unable to meet my gaze. Good. Looked like she knew this was a mistake too.

“Hide in my closet and then come out after I get Imogen into the lobby,” I whispered under my breath.

I didn’t wait for her to nod that she understood. I marched to the door and focused on what I should have from the beginning.

My daughter.



Dagny: I don't know for sure, but something's gone down with Aksel and Morgana.

Doc: Let's hope someone went down. If you know what I mean.

Mayor Nancy Haney: Jesus. We all know what you mean, Doc.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Morgana

“WHAT THE ACTUAL EFF JUST HAPPENED?” I muttered to myself as I leaned back against my door and let out a sigh of frustrated relief. I was safely back in my room and Imogen hadn’t seen me splayed out half naked on her dad’s lap, but I was still shaking.

I’d been right on the cusp of the best orgasm of my life when the little elf showed up. It was my fault really. I knew she was bringing me dinner. It’s just that I got so carried away when I was alone with Aksel. How was a woman supposed to ignore all those muscles on display, the intriguing pattern of dark tattoos that lined his skin, that gleam in his eyes, the twitch in his jaw as he told me he actually liked me, the black sweatpants that didn’t hide his long, thick erection even a little bit? And then to growl at me to sit on his lap?

Come on. Every woman in the world would have straddled that stallion and dealt with the consequences later.

Darting across the room, I ditched the robe and scrambled into my ugliest, warmest, thickest pair of sweatpants and long-sleeved sleep shirt. Adding my favorite orange Vols sweatshirt and a pair of slippers, I figured my outfit screamed middle-

aged woman relaxing, not letting herself get fingered by the Viking. A wobbly laugh escaped my lips. That would make a good old-fashioned romance novel title.

A knock sounded and I jumped. Taking a deep breath and schooling my features back into the relaxed zen I'd been in earlier, I opened the door. Imogen looked up at me with so much concern in her blue eyes, an extra layer of guilt weighed me down. Aksel stood behind her with a tray that probably held my dinner but I wasn't looking in his direction. Ever again.

"I was worried you got lost or just left without telling us!" Imogen threw her arms around my waist and buried her face in my stomach.

I hugged her back, wondering what trauma had caused this young girl to immediately go to that conclusion in her head. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. I was just taking a quick stroll around the property. I didn't mean to worry you."

She lifted her head, and as if she was finally seeing I was okay, she smiled, all concern and worry washed away. "Dagny gave you an extra big piece of her *kransekake* since it's your birthday."

I flicked my gaze up to Aksel finally, keeping it at chest level. But that was also a mistake, because holy crap, the man had a chest artists could use as inspiration for a sculpture. Stepping back, the two of them came inside my room. Imogen darted around, directing Aksel on exactly where to put the tray. Then she pushed him away while she fussed with something on the tray.

"Go, Dad," she whispered loudly enough I could hear. What was that little munchkin up to?

Aksel gave me an apologetic look. Good. He should apologize. Never tell a woman to sit on your lap and promise orgasms when there was a chance of being interrupted. “Nice sweatshirt.”

I frowned down at my outfit. “Thank you.”

This was more awkward than that awards show when Fifi had me wear a one-of-a-kind dress from an up-and-coming designer and I showed up only to find that another artist who had a hit that was currently dominating the charts was wearing the same dress. Fifi had given that designer an earful, but not before I went to the bathroom and tore off the sleeves, hoping that would make it look different enough. Spoiler alert: it didn't. I was gossiped about in the celebrity magazines afterward with one of those hideous “who wore it better” polls. Second spoiler alert: it wasn't me.

“Okay!” Imogen clapped her hands, and Aksel and I turned toward her. She'd lit candles that were precariously perched in the cake. My gaze snagged on the cake, heart squeezing in my chest.

Imogen whacked her dad on the arm, and to my horror, the two of them began to sing the happy birthday song. Imogen added some dance moves and Aksel looked like he wanted to die a swift death. His voice cracked and was never in the right key, but Imogen wasn't half bad. With a little vocal coaching, she could be quite good.

As they sang the last line, my throat felt like it was closing. I couldn't remember the last time anyone had sung me the happy birthday song. Half the time growing up, my parents forgot my birthday altogether. Ever since then, I'd preferred to celebrate my birthday alone. Even coming on this trip was an attempt to just forget I was turning another year older.

As Aksel's voice stopped and Imogen held that last note a little longer, I cheered. This might be the sweetest thing anyone had done for me in forever. Add that to the spa day and I was feeling a bit overwhelmed. I walked over to the desk to blow out the candles, closing my eyes and wishing for the same thing I wished for every year: happiness. And for me, that meant another hit song, another platinum record, and that damn Entertainer of the Year award.

When I opened my eyes again, Aksel was pulling Imogen to the door. Which was a good thing because my eyes were suspiciously wet and no one needed to see that.

“Have a great birthday, Morgana!” Imogen gave me one last smile so big it showed all her missing baby teeth. Aksel simply frowned at me and closed the door.

I looked at my dinner but decided I wasn't hungry. When I was feeling lost or uncertain in the past, I grabbed my guitar and strummed it out. So that's what I did, perfecting the breakup song I'd written the night before and then shifting gears to try out a new melody that had been running through my head all day as I lay on the massage table. A melody that would go perfectly with the mistletoe lyrics I'd started. I paired the lyrics with the melody, smoothing out the missed notes and adding in a bridge that totally worked. Time flew by as it always did, my dinner growing cold and the moon rising high in the sky.

A knock on the door made me gasp. Knocks on doors might always startle me from now on. I put the guitar aside and stood up, stretching my legs out and groaning at how tight my back had gotten. I swung the door open, stunned to find Aksel standing there in the same black pants, but a matching shirt. Part of me was sad to see those tattoos and muscles

covered up. The other part of me was glad he'd taken away some of the temptation. His eyes looked tired and his hair was down.

“Oh, shoot. Was I keeping you up?” I meant because of my singing and guitar playing, but the single eyebrow that winged up on his forehead told me he was reading into that question.

“The song is good.” His deep voice didn't betray any emotion, good or bad. “I can't make out the words but the melody is catchy. It's now stuck in my head.”

I grinned. Always a compliment wrapped up in an insult with this one. “That's good. All the best songs are super catchy.”

He leaned his bulk against the doorframe and I worried for the structural integrity. “I would like to hear the words.”

I paused, thinking things through, but ultimately deciding to throw caution to the wind anyway. Big surprise. I pulled the door open wider and Aksel stepped through. It had to be late. No sounds of any kind were coming from the lodge, and I could barely see with just one lamp burning in my room. Closing the door, I felt the same tension enter the room that was always there when Aksel was around.

“Is this like your own version of the Cinderella hour?” I said wryly as he stood awkwardly by the love seat in front of the fireplace.

“Excuse me?” he growled.

I shrugged, biting back a smile. “You know. Like, at midnight you change personalities and become actually friendly? Nice? Not quite so growly?”

“Ha ha, woman. Not my fault you were playing your guitar late into the night. Now sing me your song so I have words to

go with the mind-virus tune.”

I grabbed my guitar and had a seat on the couch. “I take it back. You’re just as grumpy after midnight.”

Aksel sat down next to me, so close his leg pressed against mine. I strummed a few chords to push away the nerves that always came when I performed in front of people. No amount of experience or success made the nerves go away, but the music always did. I launched into the song quietly, voice coming in right on cue.

I don't want you under the mistletoe,

There's only one way this can go.

The song was about longing at Christmastime, but I couldn't seem to find a conclusion to the story. I stopped after the second chorus, finally opening my eyes to see Aksel staring at me. Why I felt more insecure singing in front of a man with clearly no musical background was beyond me.

“That bad, huh? I haven't written a third verse yet. Might just scrap the whole thing.” I made to stand up.

Aksel grabbed my hands and kept me seated, guitar jabbing him in the gut. “It's really good, Mo. You have a talent that stuns me.”

I blinked. Well, holy crap. Aksel wasn't the kind of man to hand out compliments like that. Just raw and direct, no hidden criticism to blunt the good. And more importantly, I'd needed to hear that. I hadn't written my own songs in so long, I wasn't even sure if I could. To have written one and a half was a true Christmas miracle.

“Thank you.”

His thumb stroked back and forth on my wrist. “I’m sorry I mocked you before. About the songwriting. I was an ass.”

I couldn’t help the smile then. “Finally. Something we agree on!”

He grinned back and we had a moment.

Which was probably why my mouth opened and I dumped all kinds of things on him that I normally wouldn’t. It had taken Janna three long years of being at my beck and call and leaping through trust hoops for me to hand her this information. All it took Aksel was one almost-orgasm, two make-out sessions, and countless insults to gain my trust.

“My parents have never cared about my music. Even after I won Entertainer of the Year. They brushed off the news and said they had to get going to their next tee time. As long as the checks keep coming, they don’t really care. I almost wonder why they had a child if they had no intention of parenting.”

Aksel gently took the guitar from my hands and set it on the ground beside the couch. “Birthing someone doesn’t make them family.”

I glanced at the side of this face as he stared into the fire. His jaw was clenched tight. I had a feeling he was talking about his ex-wife. Giving birth to Imogen didn’t make her a mother in his eyes. And he might be right. Surely caring for and nurturing a child, even when it was difficult, made one a parent, not the simple act of birth.

Reaching up, I put my hand on his back. I felt his muscles tighten and then relax. “You’re a damn fine father, Aksel Lund.”

He turned his head to look at me, hair falling forward. The fire lit the strands from behind, making them appear golden.

The man really should have taken up modeling, not skiing.

“Imogen is the one and only thing in this life that I can honestly say I’ve done well. You though. You’re a household name, Mo. So much talent you sell out stadiums. Give people songs to sing when they celebrate. Tunes to hum for comfort when they mourn. You’re a success in every way, and your parents are fucking idiots.”

My throat did that thing again, this time with a distinct burning in the back of my eyes. I wanted to thank him for today, for quite possibly the best birthday I’d ever had, but he moved, sitting back in the love seat and putting his arm around my shoulders. His other hand guided my head to his chest and he...well, he *snuggled* me.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d simply snuggled with another human being. His fingers played with my hair, untangling the little knots from the day and sifting gently through the strands until my eyes started to slide shut. The crack of the fireplace as logs shifted and burned down low added to the soundtrack of Aksel’s steady breathing. And before I could protest the intimacy of it all, I fell asleep right there in the Viking’s arms.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



*A*ksel

MY NECK WAS FUCKING KILLING me. For once it wasn't the surge of adrenaline that came at three in the morning from all the stress pressing in on me that woke me up. The early morning insomnia had picked up this week. Probably because I'd received a reminder letter from the ski lift company that my days were dwindling. I needed to pay up by January fifteenth. Sadly, barring selling a kidney, I had zero hope of producing the dollar amount I needed to keep the creditors away. The money I'd had to borrow against the lodge had gone to necessary maintenance and even that pool of money wasn't enough to cover it any longer.

Morgana shifted against me, her fingers on my chest, moving as if she was playing a guitar in her dream. Based on the moonlight that still streamed in through her window, it was still nighttime. I should be panicked over the thought of sleeping with a woman overnight. Of not being in my bed in case Imogen needed me for some reason in the night. But that normal wave of stress never came.

Instead, I looked down at the woman entwined around me on this cramped couch and wondered what she saw in me. I'd

been nothing but rude to her since she got here, purposely pushing her away with my words and my frowns so that this very thing wouldn't happen. I had no room in my life for a relationship with a woman. And especially not with a woman who would cause a rush of fans to surround her if she went out in public in most cities of the world.

Morgana was beautiful, but not in the ways most fans saw her. Sure, she had big blue eyes, perfectly curled blonde hair, and the fashion sense that screamed rich eccentric, but it was the vulnerability in her eyes that killed me. The way she lost herself so completely in her music. The heat that snapped and crackled when I pushed her too far, born from a deep-down sense of confidence that she'd had to build despite—or because of—her parents' lack of involvement. All of that was sexy as hell.

I'd kissed her because she was pretty. I'd slept with her in my arms all night because she was so much more than that.

And that's the thought that made me begin to unwind myself from her body. She frowned in her sleep, disturbed by the shifting of the cushions as I awkwardly got to my feet. I looked down at her in the moonlight and knew I had to get the hell out of there or I'd do something even more stupid.

She was going to wake with an ache in her neck too, a fact I couldn't ignore, even in my haste to get out of this room. Reaching down, I scooped her up as effortlessly as I put Imogen to bed for years on end.

Her arms came around my neck, eyes blinking open. I carried her to her bed, able to pull her sheets back and deposit her there before she'd formed words.

“Go back to sleep, country princess,” I whispered.

Her eyes blinked closed as she curled into her pillow. I didn't miss the way her lips tipped up in a smile, even as she drifted back to sleep. I hesitated just for a moment, lost in the decision of if I should stay or go. There was no decision to be made, really. I had to go. I had absolutely nothing to offer this woman, and she had only heartbreak to offer me and my daughter.

I made my feet move, closing her door softly and only going to my room long enough to change into work clothes. There was no way I could go back to sleep now. I'd rather head out to the gazebo and start cleaning the area for the Christmas Market this evening. Every year we invited all the crafty people in Snowhaven to come sell their wares at our market. What better last-minute gift than something homemade from someone you knew?

While I couldn't save the lodge, I could make this last Christmas one to remember for my family. And while I couldn't get the woman, maybe I could turn her holiday into something magical. Morgana deserved to have a bit of the holiday magic given to her, just like she transported people to a magical place with her music. The woman wasn't the selfish celebrity I thought she'd be. She was exactly who Janna described, and someone in her life needed to make sure she got a taste of magic too.

“Did some of Santa's elves help you?”

John's voice interrupted my thoughts. I looked up from the broom I was using to get every last spot of dirt off the wooden gazebo floor to see him approaching, the sun already higher in the sky than I thought. My stomach let out a growl, reminding me I'd missed breakfast.

“Just cleaning up for tonight.” I leaned the broom against the decorative post that my father’s best friend had carved with his own hands. He’d passed away when I was little but I still remembered his big beard and booming voice. A couple times a year I found my father in this gazebo just staring off into the distance. When I questioned him, he said this place brought him comfort, a way to still feel his friend. Yet another blow when we would have to sell this land.

John clapped his gloved hands together and had a seat on one of the benches I’d already cleaned. He eyed the plastic tubs I’d brought out here earlier from the shed. He knew they were filled with Christmas decorations. “Wow. Never thought I’d see the day you got festive.”

“It’s not for me,” I grumbled, embarrassed somehow from just cleaning.

John smiled and the look on his face made me grit my teeth. The guy was perceptive and I’d known him my whole life. “Is it for a certain blonde-haired crooner?”

I scoffed and picked up the broom again. “Who says ‘crooner’ these days?”

“Aha! So it is.” John stood up and got in my face, undeterred by the broom I used as a shield. I wanted to use it to brush the stupid grin off his face. “I thought there was something between you two.”

“There’s absolutely nothing between us.” The denial was quick.

“Come on, Ax. You’re a dad, not dead.”

I spun around, giving him my back. I was not having this conversation. John, though, decided we were. He stepped around me and snatched the broom out of my hand. I was so

surprised by his move, I let him take it from me. For such a passive guy, that was pretty aggressive. I was almost proud of him. If it hadn't been *me* he was messing with.

“You deserve to have some happiness, you know.”

I scrubbed a hand over my face. I was too hangry to be having this conversation. “I am happy,” I snapped.

John just smiled wider. “Yep. Sure sounds like it.”

“Look, Morgana is beautiful, and she's more like Janna described than I originally thought, but she's only here a few more days. Her life is back in Tennessee, not middle-of-nowhere Idaho with a single dad in financial trouble.”

John tilted his head, still staring at me like I'd grown a Rudolph nose. “Whoa. You've really thought this through.” I opened my mouth to deny it, but he beat me to it. “Yeah, yeah. It's nothing. Sure. Keep telling yourself that, but I've never seen you like this about a woman. Well, besides Milana.”

“Exactly!” Anger bloomed hot and heavy in my chest. Anytime I had to rehash anything to do with that woman, I lost my cool. “Morgana is a celebrity too. She's driven to be successful in her career and has no place for me or Imogen or this lodge.”

John clapped me on the shoulder. “Then just let yourself have some fun with her through Christmas. You're clearly attracted to each other. So act on that and leave the feelings out of the discussion. Keep it physical.”

I sighed, wondering when I'd started thinking feelings had to be involved to have sex. Maybe around the time I became a single dad and realized that one day some jackass would look at my daughter and want to have sex with her without feeling anything for her but lust.

But Morgana and I were adults, way past the age of raging hormones. We could simply talk about it and decide to act on our physical attraction. No sleeping over. No songs sung by the fireplace. No deep conversations where we spilled our guts. Just sex. Plain and simple. Or hot and spicy, if my prediction was correct about Morgana.

“You’re right.”

John smiled. “Of course I’m right. Now how about I help you so we can get this gazebo set up and you fed? If your stomach gets any louder, it’s going to attract a grizzly bear.”

I didn’t see Morgana until the Christmas Market was in full swing later that evening. I knew the moment she made her way over to the gazebo. People I’d known my whole life parted for her, tossing her smiles and friendly greetings they never gave me. Probably because I had a perpetual frown while Morgana smiled at everyone like the trained professional she was. The basket she carried over her forearm was already weighed down but you’d never know it from the time she spent with each person before moving on.

“Did you buy one of everything?” I asked as soon as she was in front of me.

Her smile changed as she looked up at me. It was just as brilliant, but there was a secret quality to it. Like she was remembering me tucking her into her bed early this morning. “You know it. I do love a good crocheted beer koozie.”

“Said no one ever,” I whispered back, quietly enough none of my fellow citizens could hear me and be offended. There was hope for me yet.

Morgana slapped her hand on my bicep, leaving it there longer than necessary. Of course, I flexed for her, as every

warm-blooded male would. She pressed her lips together to keep from laughing.

“I think it’s exactly what my agent, Mack, will appreciate for Christmas.” She smirked and I knew this Mack fellow wouldn’t even know what a beer koozie was.

I thought back on what John and I had talked about earlier. Fun. It was a concept I was willing to try. I hooked my thumb over my shoulder.

“If you’re all done with your shopping, want to see what I set up over at the ski cabin?”

Morgana didn’t hesitate. “Sure, although I have no idea what the ski cabin is. It’s not a place where I have to actually ski, is it? Because I’m not sure I’m up for round two.”

“Believe me, no one wants you skiing, especially me.”

The woman snatched her hand from my bicep and gave my stomach a whack. I grunted and she lifted her nose in the air. “Show me the way, Viking.”

I was careful to keep some distance between us as we walked through the rest of the market, nodding hello to neighbors and stopping not-so-patiently when Morgana was dragged into a conversation. Imogen had already gone through the market with her *farmor*, which meant she was probably inside the lodge already, wrapping up her gifts like she did every year. If I could finally get Morgana to myself, I might have ten whole minutes with her before someone came looking for me.

I leaned into Morgana, bending down to whisper in her ear, “Can we speed this up?”

She rolled her eyes at me, but said goodbye to Doc who had miraculously recovered from the flu in time for the

market. I had a feeling he was just tired of playing Santa and had hoisted the responsibility off on me this year.

I snatched the basket off of Morgana's arm, letting out a growl when she tried to protest. The woman walked faster when she wasn't lugging her basket of gifts. We finally made it to the cabin where we kept the ski equipment, the lights off and the place locked up tight, just like I'd left it.

"Oh, I know this place!"

"Yes, it's where you dropped your skis and walked off."

Morgana turned to me, biting her lip. "Yeah. That was a rough day. Sorry about that."

I waved a hand through the air. We'd both been a bit rude, but an apology wasn't why I'd brought her here. "I hope you don't mind, but I found a bit of holiday decorating I thought you'd like."

Morgana looked back at the cabin and scrunched her face up. "Really? Where?"

I grabbed her by the arm, put the basket down in the snow, and pulled her over to the doorway. "Look up."

She tilted her head back, her long hair hanging down her back from beneath the ski cap she'd probably bought from Carol Ann based off the clashing colors and uneven rows of yarn. I knew the moment she saw it. Her lips tilted up into a sultry smile and her eyes danced as she looked back at me.

"Mistletoe? Did you do this?"

I scoffed, placing my hands on her hips and pulling her into me, wishing her puffy jacket wasn't quite so puffy. "Definitely not."

Morgana let out a laugh just as I bent my head and snatched it from her with my lips. I wanted her joy to somehow spread to me as the kiss flamed hot between us. I didn't have to tease her mouth open. She was right there with me, her tongue dueling with mine, her hands grabbing me with a grip that would have stung had I not been wearing a thick sweater.

This kiss wasn't like the others. I wasn't confused or tortured about touching her this way. I wanted her. She wanted me. If this kiss was anything to go by, sex would be incredible. And as much as I liked her and feared that I could fall for her if I let myself, I was willing to take the chance for one night with her. One night to bury myself between her legs and make her scream my name. One night to make sure she knew that the men in Idaho might be from small towns, but we kissed like we fucking meant it. One night to ruin her for all the shitty celebrity boyfriends that would come after me.

I pulled back just enough to kiss a path along her jaw while she panted.

“I have a proposal.”



John Ross: Who placed their bet on December 21st?

Carol Ann: Me! What did I win?

Dagny: Nothing, you old goat. Until we know they did the deed, no one gets anything.

Mayor Nancy Haney: And just how do you propose we find out if they did the deed?

John Ross: I think we'll all know when they do the deed.

Hig Lindley: Yeah, the dude might smile for once.

Carol Ann: I know quite a few women who'd pay good money to see that.

Chief Blade: His smile or them doing the deed?

Dagny: Good God, the elves have run amok. We're not deed watchers, Chief. Just hopeless romantics.

Hig Lindley: Can we please stop saying "do the deed"? It's creeping me out.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Morgana

AKSEL WAS hot on any given day. Like, the kind of hot that you hear whispered about between girlfriends, but not sure truly exists. Except he does exist in all his long-haired, single-dad, growly, shoulders-wider-than-the-doorframe glory. This unicorn of the male species just comes with a shit personality.

Until last night when it was confirmed that he does not, at least all the time, have a shit personality. I could have sworn I cuddled with a teddy bear last night. One that played with my hair and warmed me from the inside out. One that looked remarkably like Aksel Lund. My little-girl heart was currently tripping over herself that he'd hung mistletoe just so he could kiss me again.

His light eyes were dancing, that soft tilt to his lips that hinted at a smile absolutely doing me in. "I have a proposal."

"Yes," I said instantly.

He grinned, reward enough for instant agreement. His fingers tightened on my hips and I swallowed the moan that wanted to slip out of my mouth. I could feel him through all

the layers I was wearing. This man wanted me more than a kid wanted a tree full of presents on Christmas morning.

“I’m serious. I propose that we see—”

“Dad?”

“Sweet baby Jesus, kid. You run fast.” John’s voice was audible over the gasps of air he was currently sucking in as he ran through the snow, just a dark shape in the shadows.

Aksel let go of my hips like he’d been struck by lightning instead of simply hearing his daughter’s voice somewhere in the dark between the ski shed and the main lodge.

“Imogen? What is wrong?”

Aksel stepped away from me and I wanted to stomp my boot in the snow to demand he come back. But I wasn’t a monster. Of course his daughter came before making out under the mistletoe.

Imogen barreled into his body, hugging him tightly. John joined our circle a few seconds later, bending over to put his hands on his legs and catch his breath.

“I want to buy this one gift for Mia and *farmor* won’t let me!” Imogen looked exactly like what I imagined I looked like when Fifi wouldn’t let me wear yet another dress with a fringe.

Aksel looked over at me with an apology in his eyes. I gave him a soft smile, the best I could manage when I really, really wanted to go back to two minutes ago when we were kissing.

“Come on. I’ll help you buy it.”

John stepped closer as the four of us began to traipse back to the Christmas Market, Aksel and Imogen in the lead. There

was something warm and wonderful about seeing such a big man have his arm around his little girl, a softie for big blue eyes and buck teeth.

“Sorry. Tried to hold her back, but she insisted. And she’s fast,” John whispered.

I looked at him in surprise. “You knew we’d be out here?”

John shrugged and looked away quickly. “I helped him hang it.”

I wasn’t sure what feeling flooded my chest at that confession, but it felt a lot like people who got all crazy on Christmas spirit. Hopeful, touched, a little mushy and corny. I tucked that feeling away, clutching it close to examine later.

I didn’t get a chance to finish that conversation—or our kiss—that night. With half the town at the lodge and Imogen so hopped up on sweets and hot chocolate, there was no chance for privacy. I left the party with John and Janna whispering in a dark corner, all smiles and giggles. As I pulled back the covers and slid into bed, I realized I was feeling lonely.

One night with Aksel’s arms around me and I’d become dependent on them. How could I miss a man who irritated me so much?



Cold plunging was good for you. I’d read about it on the internet last night when I couldn’t get to sleep. Which was the only reason I was out here traipsing across the sludgy snow as

the sun came up over the mountain. Health. Yep. That was it. It had nothing at all to do with a six-foot-five man who was stuck in my head like a song lyric I couldn't quite get right.

As I cleared the tree line where we'd cold plunged before, I saw his back to me, standing over by the river. He was still dressed and his hair didn't look wet, so I was fairly certain I'd caught him before he went in. A grin split my face and I felt more alive than I'd felt on a stage in front of thousands of screaming fans.

"No, the letter said January fifteenth. It is not even January," he growled.

That's when I realized he had his cell phone jammed to his ear. He began to angrily pace, oblivious to my presence. My steps came to a halt, that shot of joy I'd felt earlier draining away at the anger in his tone.

"Really? Right before Christmas you want to move up the due date? That is bullshit and you know it." Aksel paused, his gaze staring out over the river. "I will have your money on January fifteenth like we agreed and not a day before!"

He pulled the phone from his head and let out an angry shout that had the birds flying from the trees above him as it echoed across the land. Shivers ran down my skin that had nothing to do with the chill in the morning air. I took silent steps backward, blending in with the trees before I turned and ran back to the lodge. There would be no cold plunge today. No kissing under the mistletoe either.

Not when I knew Aksel and this lodge and his sweet family was in financial danger.

Not when I could do something about it.

I skidded to a halt in the kitchen, finding Dagny and Ingrid arguing over the Christmas Day menu. They both looked up in shock.

“What is wrong?” Ingrid immediately came over to grab my arms.

I sucked in a breath to try to slow my heart rate. Maybe Steven was right and my body missed his sadistic qualities. Could a woman get completely out of shape in the space of a week?

“I’m okay, promise. Just had an idea that I’m excited about.”

Dagny put down the wooden spoon she held like a fifth appendage and came around the huge island. “What’s this now?”

I slid out of Ingrid’s grip and held her hands, really warming to the idea. “How about we put on a concert two days after Christmas? That’s my last day here and I thought what could be better than to give the town a free concert after they’ve been so gracious having me here? I mean, I’d love to ask for donations for the lodge, but that would be entirely optional. The town gets music and community. The lodge makes a few dollars to keep the lights on after I blocked off your busiest season.”

“Oh, Morgana.” Ingrid’s eyes were swimming in tears. “You do not need to do this. We have loved having you here, and quite frankly, having a Christmas season with just one guest has been a blessing to my tired feet.”

Dagny wiped her hands on the towel that was permanently thrown over her shoulder, coming to bump Ingrid out of the

way the way only a sister can. “Wait one second, Ing. This is a good idea.”

I smiled at the grumpy woman. “Right? It’s perfect! I just need your help to plan it. And to keep it a secret from Aksel.”

Ingrid frowned. “Oh, I don’t know about that. He does not like secrets. I do not know if you’ve noticed, but my son is not exactly a ray of sunshine.”

I swallowed a laugh. “I noticed. But you know this can help the lodge, and helping the lodge is helping Aksel, right?”

Dagny and Ingrid shared a look before Ingrid looked back at me. “You make a good argument. Tell us what to do and we’ll get it all arranged.”

With a smile, we went over to the island and began to talk about what we’d need for a concert for the whole town. How to advertise it. What food to supply. How to raise money. All of it.

My phone rang, and when I looked at the screen, it was a video call from Mack.

“I’m sorry, ladies. I really need to take this.” I’d been dodging Mack’s calls for days, just wanting a few days to relax. But sending him that handmade video of my new breakup song last night had stirred the hornet’s nest.

“Go, go! We have plenty we can do.” Ingrid waved me away.

I stepped into the dining hall and then out the back door, hoping for some privacy. Mack wasn’t exactly the guy you wanted around an impressionable eight-year-old. He’d never learned to filter out the obscenities, and I had a feeling he had no interest in trying.

“Good morning, Mack,” I said breezily.

“Fuck, yes, it is! Did you write this?” The guy wasted no time, which made him an excellent manager, but sometimes I wished for a little small talk. Some sense that he cared for me beyond the dollars I lined his pockets with. Then again, you can’t buy a friend.

“I did.” A sense of pride had me standing taller.

“It’s fucking gold, Mo. Gold, you hear me?” His dark eyes took on a gleam that I knew all too well. He was already seeing the dollar signs, which was usually what I wanted too, but it felt different this time. “How soon can we get a flight out so you can get to the recording studio?”

I nearly bobbed the phone. “Oh, I’m not coming back until December twenty-seventh.”

Mack quit shoving paper around on his desk and put the phone so close I could see he needed to lay off the alcohol or his nose would be one giant broken blood vessel soon.

“Mo. It’s the first song you’ve written in years. And it’s a kickass breakup song! We need to get this out. ASAP. The press is just starting to die down about you and Everett and there’re rumors swirling.”

I frowned, my gut clenching like it always did when he talked to me about my public image. I was never enough and then sometimes I was way too much. There was no winning.

“What rumors?” I didn’t want to ask, but I knew he’d tell me anyway.

“Just some ugly ones about Everett cutting you loose for someone younger. The usual gossip. People love to see a celebrity slip, Morgana. You know this. Which is why we need to get this song out so everyone can see that you’re strong and

fucking resilient. You aren't licking your wounds, you're celebrating being done with Mr. Douche canoe."

I leaned against the side of the building, staring off into the woods, wishing I could just frolic amongst the trees. Talking to Mack was a reminder that my time here at this idyllic ski lodge was coming to an end, way sooner than my mental health wanted it to.

"I'll record it on the twenty-eighth, Mack. Everyone's busy with Christmas anyway."

He sighed like I'd just told him that Macallan had quit making scotch. "Fine. But maybe you could work on a Christmas song while you're tucked away in the frozen tundra?"

"It's Idaho, Mack. Not the Arctic."

"Same shit hole," he grumbled. "Seriously, can you keep the magic going and write a Christmas jingle? I'll never harass you again for a song."

I blew a raspberry through my lips. "Oh, sure. Mack never harassing? It'll be a cold, arctic day in hell before that happens."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do." Aksel's voice from behind startled me.

I turned, hoping to keep the camera off of him. I didn't need Mack seeing Aksel in the flesh and asking him to pose with me for more photographs they could leak to the media. It felt imperative that I keep those two parts of my life separate. Aksel stood there in the dirty snow, looking like an avenging Viking, his arms crossed over his chest and his scowl on full blast.

"Hey, I gotta go, Mack."

“Work on that Christmas jingle, Mo! I’ll be waiting for it!”
He hit the disconnect button and his image blinked away.

I shoved the phone in my pants pocket, shooting Aksel a smile. “Hey, good morning.”

“Who the hell was that? Why is that guy pushing you for a song?”

I blinked. “That’s my agent. It’s kind of his job to harass me.”

Aksel shook his head. “No. It is his job to get you good contracts, not tell you what to do on your vacation.”

While his comment held some truth, the fact that Aksel was defending my right to relax was making me want to laugh. “Oh, so now it’s okay for me to relax? Pretty sure when I got here you called me a spoiled brat.”

Aksel had the decency to look a bit embarrassed. “I did not say that.”

“You implied it.”

“And you said I was an ass, yet you kiss me frequently.”

He was suddenly so close I had to tilt my head back to hold his hot gaze. “Maybe you shouldn’t snuggle me and then I wouldn’t kiss you so much.”

He scoffed. “I do not snuggle, woman.”

I grinned. He was adorable. “You do and you do it so well. Do you practice at night? Hugging your pillow? Is that how you got so good at snuggling?”

He didn’t take the bait. He just studied me far more than I felt comfortable with. “Someone needs to stand up for you against your shark of an agent.”

I lifted an eyebrow. I'd been in this business since I was eighteen. I could handle myself. "And that someone is you?"

Aksel tilted his head. "Maybe for now. Which is what I wanted to speak to you about."

"Your proposal?" I remembered what he'd said before we got interrupted last night.

He dipped his head, a strand of hair slipping from the knot on the back of his head and resting over his cheek. "I say we indulge ourselves while you are here."

Oh, heck yes, I liked the way that sounded. "Indulge? Could you be more specific?" I was going to make him say it. I wanted to hear it from his own lips that he wanted me.

His hands gripped my hips, pulling me into him. His warmth radiated through our layers, especially when he dipped his head to whisper in that gruff voice of his.

"I want to fuck you up against the door, Morgana. In the hot tub. In front of the roaring fire. And maybe outside somewhere like an animal. I want to bury my face between your thighs until I've memorized your taste. I want to hear you scream my name as my cock fills your pussy. I want you under me, over me, all around me while we indulge in each other's bodies. Is that specific enough for you?"

I licked my lips, searching for words and coming up empty. I nodded and Aksel bent his head to scorch me with another one of his kisses.



Me: Hey, Fifi, sorry to text on your time off, but can you overnight me a dress? Not too fancy... but lots of fringe.

I was too busy to notice she never texted back.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



A ksel

I'D HAVE to give Mia and her mother free ski lessons for how often they allowed Imogen to sleep over. But I'd deal with paying them back later. Much later, when I wasn't trying to clear the lodge so I could finally get Morgana naked. By the time I got Imogen fed, packed, and dropped off at Mia's house, I came back to the lodge to hustle my parents and Dagny out the door for the Christmas Cheer-Beer, the one and only Snowmass event held off the premises at Broskis.

"Well, I don't see why you don't ride with us, *sønn*," Mamma asked over her shoulder as I physically pushed between her shoulder blades to hurry her up.

She was taking her sweet time, not realizing her son was in agony. I couldn't very well tell my mother I had a serious case of blue balls that needed tending to. She knew—I didn't ask but I assumed she knew—that I hadn't had a relationship since Milana. I'd barely had sex since then too. Nothing like heartbreak and a newborn to kill a man's libido. I was so long overdue I thought I might explode if they didn't get in the *faen* car right this second.

"We won't be saving you a seat," growled Dagny.

“I wouldn’t sit with you anyway,” I growled right back.

Pappa shot me a look over their heads, which I waved away. At least for the evening, these grumpy ladies were now his problem. The trio finally got in the car, Pappa driving slow over the slushy snow as he made his way down the long driveway to the main road. As soon as their taillights disappeared, I spun on my heel and ran back inside, locking the front door and sucking in a deep breath to try to calm myself down. Since when did I act like a kid on Christmas morning, running to unwrap his present with not one other thought in his head?

Since Morgana, apparently.

I pushed off the back of the door and strode to the hallway where our rooms were located like I was stalking my prey. Nothing and no one could stop me from taking what I wanted tonight.

When I reached her room, I could hear the faint sounds of her guitar. I didn’t bother knocking and, thank the Nordic gods, she didn’t bother locking her door. At the squeak of the hinges, her head popped up from the couch where she was sitting, her guitar on her lap, hair loose around her shoulders and that robe I’d come to love so much covering her. The fire crackled and popped in the fireplace. The flames cast a golden hue to her face that highlighted her cheekbones and flawless skin. I shut the door behind me and locked it, never taking my eyes off of her. She was gorgeous, even in no makeup and barefoot. In fact, I’d say she was prettiest without all of the things she wore that distracted from the fire in her eyes and the determined set of her jaw.

Morgana was a hell of a woman. The kind my mother always said to watch out for. Milana had been like that too, a

firecracker in a pretty package. The difference there was that I'd allowed myself to fall in love with her when she had no intention of loving me back. Lesson learned. I would not be repeating my past mistakes. I'd feast on Morgana's body, giving us both the release we wanted, but I'd be keeping my heart locked away. The only happy ending for us would be this one night together.

She stopped playing, moving the guitar aside. I took a few steps into the room, suddenly knowing how I wanted her first.

“Take off the robe. Let me look at you.”

She stood slowly, not looking one bit shy. With steady hands she untied the knot at her waist, letting the flaps of the robe flutter open. That one strip of skin was more erotic than seeing everything all at once. My jeans felt like they got two sizes too small in an instant. With a raised eyebrow and a pout to her lips that told me she knew how beautiful she was, not in a conceited way but in a way that only mature women can exude, she pulled the ends of the robe off her shoulders and let the material fall to her feet.

Fucking Christmas balls.

She was stunning. Like, *steal my breath and seize my muscles worse than a cold plunge* stunning. Her nipples were already stiff and begging for my mouth to return to them. Her waist dipped in before flaring over luscious hips and an ass that had me biting my lip. She was shaved or waxed, just a small strip of hair left to keep me from seeing all of her. I'd felt her pussy with my hand, but it wasn't enough. My mouth watered, just thinking of tasting her.

“Sit down,” I managed to order, coming further into the room.

Morgana tilted her head. “Take off your shirt.”

Fucking hell, the woman was always negotiating. “On three.”

She grinned. “One, two, three.” She sat demurely on the couch and watched as I stripped my sweater over my head and tossed it aside. She licked her lips and my dick jumped.

I stood just two feet from her, still taking in all her features, part of me still stunned she’d actually agreed to this. This was far better than any present on Christmas morning. “Spread your knees.”

She inhaled, a slight pink hue spreading across her skin. “Take off your boots.”

I grinned. Why did her arguing make me so turned on? Was it some masochistic flaw in me that needed a woman to be difficult in order to want her? “One, two, three.”

She let her knees fall to the side, baring her pussy to me. With the flicker of the fire lighting the way, I could see she was already wet. I got my boots off in record time, tossing them and my socks in the direction of my sweater all while never losing sight of this woman spread out for me so beautifully.

“Touch yourself.”

She paused, as if that wasn’t what she was expecting. Then her nose lifted and she issued her own order. “Lose the pants, Viking.”

This time, I moved first, gladly unzipping and pushing down my jeans. My dick enjoyed it too, allowed to finally spring free.

“No underwear?” Morgana choked, her gaze bouncing from my face to my cock.

I smirked. “Surprise. I do believe I told you to touch yourself.”

She jumped, her hand coming down to her pussy, her index finger immediately circling her clit. I dropped to my knees between her legs, wanting a close-up view of the best show I’d ever watched. My hands traced up her calves.

“Aksel,” Mo breathed.

I glanced up at her face, seeing her cheeks flushed and her eyelids already drooping. “Need help?”

She nodded, a sweet look of innocence that I knew was a game. This woman wasn’t innocent at all. She knew exactly what she wanted, and she knew I’d give it to her.

“How about this?” I put a hand on either knee, pushing her legs further apart so I could fit my shoulders through. “You sing me a song—without stopping—and I’ll give you what you want?”

Her mouth dropped open, but she quickly snapped it shut. “Fine. Better make it happen before the end of the song though.”

That little devil. Always issuing challenges. She met me growl for growl and I fucking loved it.

“Sing, little mockingbird.”

When she opened her mouth for the first note, I dove in, licking her in one long swipe. Her taste bloomed on my tongue. My ears filled with the sound of her sweet, raspy voice singing a song of hers I’d heard before. My hands traveled up her torso to cup her breasts. Her nipples begged to be touched,

so I paid them attention too, even as I licked her pussy, alternating short quick tugs with long strokes. Her voice wobbled when I sucked on her clit, pulling the nub into my mouth and flicking it with my tongue. I did it again and her voice did the same little wobble that made me want to smile.

My right hand trailed back down her torso so I could lewdly spread her wide open for my face and tongue. She gasped and I lifted my head. She immediately went back to singing her song, as if the momentary pause had never happened. With a grin I dove back in, this time with two fingers sliding inside her and curling upward.

Morgana's hands came to my head as her voice wobbled again. Her fingers combed through my hair and tossed aside the leather strap that kept my hair confined. Then it was her nails on my scalp causing goose bumps across my skin. I stroked in and out of her, my mouth sucking harder on her clit. It was with a high-pitched shriek during the second chorus that Morgana sat forward, folding over my head and pulling my hair so tightly I'd worry about going bald if I didn't have so much hair to begin with. She shuttered and shook, her pussy milking my fingers.

When she began to ease, I kissed her pulsing flesh, promising I'd come back later for more. Morgana finally let go of my hair and flopped back against the couch. She opened one eye and glared at me.

“I didn't get to finish my song.”

I shrugged and stood, feeling mighty pleased with myself. I held her gaze as I put my two fingers in my mouth and sucked them clean. Her cheeks went fire-engine red, her gaze darting away to my cock. She went to grab for it, but since she

was orgasm-drunk and slow as a sloth, I was able to pull away quickly.

“Get on the rug, woman.”

She looked up at me, fire dancing in the reflection of her eyes. “You sure like to order me around a lot.”

I grabbed the base of my cock and gave it a tight squeeze. I watched her eyes drop down immediately. “You sure like it when I order you around.”

She pouted and then grinned. “I guess I do.” Then she stood and drilled my chest with a nail. “But only in the bedroom.”

I gave my cock a tug and she dropped the finger from my chest to swipe across the tip of it. When she put her finger to her own mouth and sucked, I nearly lost all control right then. “Rug, woman.”

“Okay, okay,” she drawled with a cocky grin.

She sauntered over to the rug in front of the fireplace and had a seat before lying down and bending one knee up. She looked good enough to eat. Again. She also looked like she’d make an excellent model for a nude calendar. The woman was all sex appeal and confidence.

I growled and stalked over, stopping only to grab the condom I’d placed in the back pocket of my jeans. I’d had to stop at the store in town after I dropped off Imogen. The box I had at the back of my closet was surely expired.

Dropping to my knees once again between her legs, I rolled on the condom and looked at the way the light from the fire danced across her skin. “How would you like to be fucked, Morgana?”

She bit her lip and looked me up and down. “Hard, deep, and not too fast.”

I could do that. I could do way more than that too. She just had to keep looking at me like she couldn't get enough of me and I could find the strength to go all night. I might not be a young twenty-year-old any longer, but I had a deep need to fuck this woman until whatever this was between us was gone.

Morgana let her knees fall to the side to give me room. I notched my cock at her opening and slid in just the tip. She sighed and I had to screw my eyes shut to keep my body from rutting like a wild animal. I placed my fists on either side of her head and dipped low to suck on a nipple. Morgana flexed her hips and more of my length slid inside of her heat.

“Fuck, you're hot. So warm, woman.” I gave her praise against her breast, her breath hitching as I slid even further inside her.

“I want all of you, Viking,” she said on a breathy moan.

“I'll give you all you can take, woman.” Pulling my head up, I watched her face as I pushed all the way in, bottoming out inside her body with what felt like heaven on earth.

Her head tilted back on a silent gasp. Her back bowed and her tits were in the air, begging me to play with them. So I did. For just a moment though because as Morgana looked back at me, there was a gleam in her eye that told me she was ready for it all. I put my hands on her shoulders and pulled almost all the way out, only to slam back into her body. Increasing my pace, we incrementally slid across the damn floor. With every thrust that tried to move her away, my hands kept her steady enough to keep pumping.

My knees were on fire, but the rest of me was experiencing some kind of out-of-body bliss. I hissed as I felt Morgana clamp down harder around my length. If she didn't give me another orgasm soon, I might not be able to hold on much longer. It had simply been too long for me and she felt far too good.

“Give me another one, woman,” I growled.

“Work for it, Viking,” she shot right back, the little hitches in her breath coming faster.

I let go of one shoulder, slowing the pace, but making sure each thrust hit her deep. I found her swollen clit between us and circled it, mimicking the way she'd touched herself earlier.

“Oh, yes. Just like that. Please, Aksel.” Morgana began to chant, her eyes squeezing shut.

“Look at me or I stop,” I ordered.

Her eyes shot open, her breath coming fast now. I saw it before I felt it. The second her eyes glazed over and her jaw went slack. The moan coming from her mouth was low and long, just a musical whisper of release on her breath. Her body squeezed my cock rhythmically and all hope for holding out was gone. Every muscle in my body curled up tight, and with a shout, I joined her, tumbling over the edge into bliss.

Being the ass I was, I didn't move my weight off of her. I knew she could take it until we'd both recovered. We lay there in front of the fire, both of us sucking in air like we'd run a marathon. When her breathing had evened out and I felt like my muscles might be working again, I blinked my eyes open and lifted my head to look down at her.

She poked me in the ribs. “Anyone ever told you you weigh a shit ton?”

I poked her right back, making her squeal and squirm underneath me. She froze, her gorgeous blue eyes widening.

“Again? Already?”

I gave her a tiny thrust, happy to know my dick was in perfect working condition. “Vikings go all night, sweetheart.” My knees sent up a dire warning. “But maybe we could move to your bed?”

Morgana smiled, reaching up to push my hair away from my face. “Thank God. I think my back has rug burn.”



Mayor Nancy Haney: Did anyone notice Aksel and Morgana aren't here?

Dagny: They said they'd be right behind us.

John Ross: Janna is here and she said Morgana's phone is off, which is highly unusual.

Hig Lindley: Aksel's phone is off too.

Carol Ann: Should we go TP the place and sneak a peek in the windows?

Mayor Nancy Haney: Carol Ann!

Carol Ann: Oh, shut up. I'm old, not dead.

Chief Blade: I said no Peeping Toms! PS - Who guessed December twenty-second?

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Morgana

IF RELAXATION WAS my aim with this vacation, I'd finally found it. Which was strange because I'd been woken up repeatedly last night by a brute of a Viking. Perhaps it was the record number of orgasms flooding my cells with oxytocin. I had the warm and fuzzies all right.

I stretched out one leg and nearly groaned at the muscles that pulled in my thighs. Aksel's arms tightened around my waist, pulling me fully into his hot body. Like, physically hot. The guy was a giant heat rock.

"Shh," he whispered into my hair, sounding like he was still asleep.

His dick was not, however. It was currently poking me in the back like a gentle morning love tap. How he could be ready to go again after all the sex overnight was a mystery to me. Not that I wanted to compare, but Everett Neverhard had always been a one-hit wonder and he'd been a decade younger than Aksel. Perhaps Aksel had been right about Vikings and their stamina.

"Go back to sleep, woman."

I snorted softly. “I would but you’re about to induce a hot flash.”

Aksel released the arm lying atop me and threw back our covers. “I better get you naked if you’re hot.”

And then he was rolling me, settling between my thighs with a sleepy frown that somehow looked adorable now instead of irritating. Great. I was sex-drunk. Aksel frowning at me should not have me squirming and wishing he’d ease the ache between my legs.

My stomach chose that moment to let out a mighty growl. Aksel looked down at my stomach, his golden hair falling across his face. “Perhaps you need sustenance before I debauch you again.”

I grinned, feeling absolutely rested and slightly euphoric. Had to be all the Christmas spirit in this quaint little town. “Debauch? I like the sound of that.”

Aksel put his hands by my head and did a push-up, stopping to kiss me quickly and then he was crawling off the bed, gloriously naked and not at all looking like he thought to cover up. His ass in motion was a thing of glory, all muscle and smooth, tan skin. If cold plunges needed a model to convince the world to try that form of torture, Aksel would be their poster child.

“I’ll find pants and sneak some food out of the kitchen.”

“My hero,” I called after him, just to see him roll his eyes over his shoulder.

He snatched his jeans off the floor, covered his junk, and cracked the door open to peer out into the hall. He paused and then tilted his head back to look at the ceiling.

“What’s wrong?” I sat up, pulling the covers over me in case anyone was out there. They didn’t need an eyeful of naked middle-aged woman.

Aksel let out a sigh, his chin dropping to his chest. Then he threw the jeans off to the side and squatted down. He stood with something in his hands, turning to shut the door and walk back over to me. He held a basket of some sort, a hand-woven cloth across the top.

“Breakfast is served,” he said dryly, flipping me a notecard that read, *Make sure you feed her, xoxo Mamma.*

My eyes felt like they bugged out of my head. “Oh, crap.”

Aksel set the basket on the bed and came over to sit down next to me. “Well, you weren’t exactly quiet at two in the morning.”

I rounded on him, not only embarrassed that we’d been found out, but now incensed. “It’s not my fault! I woke up to your face buried in my lady parts.”

Aksel tried and lost the struggle. A grin split his handsome face. “Lady parts? Seriously?”

My stomach let out another growl and Aksel pulled back the cloth to expose muffins, scrambled eggs in a glass dish, and a small plate of raw fish. I winced.

“I’ll take the eggs and muffins.”

Aksel scoffed, but he handed me what I asked for before unwrapping his disgusting fish. He dangled a piece in the air with his fingers, dropping it into his mouth while I tried to ignore him.

“How do you think Vikings go all night?”

I took a bite of banana nut muffin and tried to visualize something else. “I was hoping to keep that a mystery.”

“Hmm,” Aksel growled. “You Americans would rather eat sugar than animal. It’s weird.”

“Oh, please. You’re American too.”

He tilted his head, his accent coming through stronger. “Because of a piece of paper when I was young, but I was born in Norway. My soul is Norwegian.”

“And your taste buds.”

He grinned, finishing the last piece of fish. “And my cock.”

I felt the blush take over my face. The man had a right to be cocky. His cock was cocky-worthy. “I don’t mind that part.”

Aksel pushed the basket away and plucked the rest of my muffin out of my hand. He crawled over me on all fours, pushing me back down into the mattress.

“Hey! I was eating that!”

He dipped his head and slid his face along my jaw. If I wasn’t mistaken, he was...sniffing me. “And I want to eat *you*, woman.”

“Not with that breath.” I couldn’t actually smell anything but I had to combat his instant sex appeal in some way. It was part of how we communicated. It was just our thing.

“I’ll give you ten seconds to get in the shower while I borrow your toothpaste. I’ll make you forget all about your breakfast.”

I opened my mouth to protest the borrowing of my toothpaste and the ordering me around but then thought about what Aksel could do with warm, soapy water and that Viking cock of his and decided to shut the hell up. Pushing my finger into his chest, he gave me more room. I moved to roll out of the bed, but he slapped my ass.

“Hey!” That actually stung.

Aksel grinned at me as I stood next to the bed rubbing my stinging ass cheek while glaring at him. “I bet my handprint looks pretty on your skin. Walk to the bathroom and let me see it, woman.”

I shook my head, but decided playing nice was to my advantage. Plus, I kind of liked that spanking, if I was being honest. I turned, tossing him a sultry look over my shoulder and then walked across the room as if I was on stage in front of millions. I knew my ass gave good jiggle. And based on how quickly Aksel scrambled out of bed and ran to catch up to me, he liked it very much too. I yelped and slid into the shower, turning on the water and then yelping again as the cold water pelted my overheated skin.

“Quit your screaming. The pipes don’t even have ice in them.” Aksel scanned the various products strewn across my countertop until he found my toothpaste. He squeezed out a dollop on his finger and put it in his mouth.

“Not a Viking, remember?” I huddled in the corner of the shower until I felt the drops turn warm.

He walked over to me slowly, eyeing me up and down. “Oh, I remember. You’re one hundred percent country princess.”

He stepped into the shower and closed the glass door behind him. We could have had ten more people join us in here and we still would have fit. The glass slowly began to fog from the heat and I quit my shivering. Aksel had a look to his face that held all my attention. Last night, I'd had glimpses of it in the firelight, but daylight was something else. He looked like he wanted to devour me. He'd already had me seven different ways and yet that hunger was still just as potent.

“Come here,” he said quietly.

I stepped over to him, running my hands up his chest. His body was magnificent. Rugged, perfect symmetry, powerful. My fingertips got to his neck, playing with the ends of his hair. My breasts brushed against his chest and I was lost in the same sensations I'd felt last night. He felt so right, so electrifying under my touch.

His rough palms settled on my hips. “Jump, baby.”

With his shoulders as leverage, I did, knowing he'd catch me. His hands kneaded my ass, his cock hard and ready but trapped between us. My legs came around his waist and he backed us into the wall, the water streaming onto our legs.

“Shit.” He dropped his forehead to mine. “Forgot the condom. Hold on.”

I shook my head and gripped him tighter. “I'm on birth control and I've been tested since the last time. I'm good if you're good.”

Aksel hissed. “My daughter was unexpected. Swear to me.”

His meaning was clear. I looked him right in the eye. “I swear I'm on birth control. I'm thirty-eight years old and have managed to never be pregnant.”

He paused, assessing if he could trust me. When he let go of my ass, I figured I didn't pass the test, which hurt more than I thought it would. But then he was using his hand to line up his cock before thrusting inside in one quick pump. I groaned, leaning down to kiss his shoulder. Relief, the kind that comes from having feelings for another person and knowing they believe in you, flowed through me as he began to move. The tile was cold, but Aksel was my heat, keeping me pinned in place and chanting his name.

This time I didn't make him work for it. I was already so desperate for another round with him and his pubic bone was rubbing against me with every slippery, deep thrust, I came in a ridiculously short amount of time. Aksel claimed my mouth as I gasped for air, his tongue thrusting inside my mouth the same time his cock entered me. His groan started as a rumble in his chest and then a stuttering of his breath as his forehead pressed to mine. The man looked me right in the eye as he came, a moment so intimate it made my own orgasm prolong.

We stayed there for several minutes, both of us catching our breaths. I didn't know what he was thinking but I was trying to shake away the feeling that we'd just shared something deeper than fucking. I couldn't fall for this man. He was not going to be part of my life longer than a few more days. I came to Havenkirk to get my life in order, not to fall for a man all wrong for me.

When Aksel pulled out of my body, I refused to let myself feel sad. The night was well and truly over. This was it. I let my legs slide down his body, busying myself with finding the soap and getting cleaned up. The best way to tamp down the oxytocin was to face reality head-on. There was no space in my life for warm and fuzzies. Hot and sexies, yes. But the rest of it was a problem.

We showered together silently, both of us not looking too long at the other. Aksel stepped out first, finding fresh towels and handing one to me. “I believe you have a breakfast to eat. Imogen should be back soon.”

I nodded and gave him a smile as I wrapped the towel around me. I could do this. I could act normal and not fall apart like a pathetic schoolgirl over the first boy to pay her any attention. I’d dated plenty of men, for Santa’s sake. This would be no different. “What’s on the Snowmass schedule for today?”

Aksel exited the bathroom, talking loudly enough I could hear him. “Nothing. That’s done. The town wraps presents and mostly stays home with family.”

As I stared at my reflection in the mirror, hair a wet mess around my shoulders, I let myself feel the pain I always felt around this time of year. Families. Everyone spent time with their families. Mine had apparently never gotten the memo about that tradition.

Aksel, dressed in jeans now, came back in the bathroom with another muffin and held it out for me to take a bite. My heart dipped some more. This irritating man could be so sweet when he wanted to be.

“My ex loved Christmas. Part of why I don’t care for it.”

My gaze darted to his face. He wasn’t looking at me, almost embarrassed to talk about something so personal. He’d literally seen parts of me that never saw the sunshine but talking about his ex made him shy.

“Do you miss her?”

His head came up then, fire in his eyes. “No. Not at all. I wish she was a mother to Imogen, but she is not capable. It’s

better this way. I guess I just miss the idea of a normal, happy family unit.”

I nodded slowly, pushing that familiar pain down until it was manageable. “I get that. I wished for that too. Figured I’d have time to make my own family, but then my career took off and it just never happened.”

Aksel held out the muffin and I took another bite. Grabbing my hairbrush, I began to comb out the knots. “Why do you let that Mack guy push you so hard?”

I eyed him, seeing the hard set of his jaw. Something warm spread over me. Aksel had gotten protective of me before and I quite liked it. “I was the one who pushed hard. I hired Mack because I knew he’d push just as hard as I did.”

Aksel watched me put a series of lotions and potions on my face. “Do you see yourself backing off anytime soon?”

“No,” I answered immediately as I always did when someone even hinted at that. Then I figured we had an expiration date, so as long as we were being vulnerable, I’d tell one person the thoughts that had been swirling in my head. “That’s not true actually. I’ve been tired for awhile now. I question when enough is enough. When I can throttle back or retire for good. But I love creating music. It gives me energy and purpose. It’s the touring and marketing and social side that wears me out.”

Aksel pushed a bottle or two out of the way and hopped up onto the counter, still holding my muffin. “So, why don’t you just write songs? Let everyone else sing them and deal with the stuff you don’t like?”

I quit getting ready and just looked at him, at a loss for a decent answer to that. “You ever do something for so long you

just keep doing it because you don't know how to do anything else?"

Aksel's head dipped in a quick nod. "I had RBF before RBF was a thing."

I barked out a laugh. "You have one intimidating resting bitch face, that's for sure. I don't think Botox could even stop that frown."

Aksel grinned back at me and we had another moment. Then he shoved the muffin in my mouth, ruining it. "Get dressed and let's go play in the snow when Imogen gets back. It must have dumped a couple inches last night."

I tried to chew around the huge bite. "Huh? Aksel Lund wants to play in the snow?"

He hopped off the counter, looking delicious in just a pair of jeans and his wet hair dripping onto his massive chest. "Maybe it's time we both learn to do something different."



Me: My darling Janna! Can you do me a huge favor and head into town for the following gifts?

Janna: Good morning! Wow, you want me to buy Christmas gifts for you? Are you feeling okay? How do I know you haven't been kidnapped and this isn't even you texting me right now?

Me: Just get the gifts, J.

Janna: I'm on it!

CHAPTER TWENTY



Aksel

“REALLY, DAD?” Imogen’s face looked like that one time last year when I’d let her get three scoops of ice cream after I picked her up from school. Normally, I didn’t condone ruining one’s dinner, but she’d broken her finger the day before and if anytime called for ice cream before dinner, it was when you were in pain.

“Grab your sled and we’ll meet you at the bunny hill.”

Imogen jumped up in the air with a whoop and then threw her arms around my waist. Then she dashed off, snow flying off her boots as she ran to the shed. Her blonde hair trailed behind her in the breeze, no longer the fine baby hair she’d had for so long I worried she might grow up to be bald. She was growing up right before my eyes. I should have been having sled days with her before this. It took an annoying woman with fears of her own to make me realize I needed to let loose more often.

“Ah, to have so much enthusiasm and energy so early in the morning,” Morgana drawled, standing next to me in her white snow pants, tan work boots, and a sweater that looked like it came straight from Dolly Parton’s closet. She had a

terrible eye for western fashion and yet it was so quintessentially her.

I leaned in closer, just to get a whiff of her scent. “I think we do pretty good in the enthusiasm and energy department.”

She grinned up at me, winking before she darted off in Imogen’s direction. “Last one to the shed is a dirty elf!”

“Ho, ho, ho,” I bellowed.

Today might have been the first day in a long while where I felt joy. Just pure happiness untethered from responsibilities and failures. I pumped my arms and legs, having to slow to a jog when I caught up to her so quickly. She swore she had a high-profile trainer back in Tennessee, but I knew some cold plunges and raw fish for breakfast were what she needed to get in great shape.

Morgana wasn’t one to lose, even a silly race to the shed, and I may have underestimated her because I was staring at her ass while she ran. Seriously. The woman should just back her way into every room. Shake her ass on stage. Pop a hip and give it a jiggle in her next interview. She’d surely win another one of those rocket awards she wanted so badly.

While I was admiring her assets, the woman shoved me. Hard. I had to break my forward momentum to stay on my feet. By the time I was headed back in the right direction, she was sliding into the shed, a triumphant smile on her face.

“Who’s the dirty, grumpy elf now?” she called out.

I could hear Imogen’s tinkle of laughter coming from the top of the bunny slope.

“You cheat, woman! Santa is going to put you on the naughty list.”

Morgana stuck her tongue out at me and stepped inside the shed to grab her sled. I followed her, pushing her up against the old wooden shelving and floating in the bliss of seeing her cheeks pink and her eyes flashing with life.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, trying to look over my shoulder.

“Sneaking a kiss in the ski shed. Duh.” I leaned down and captured her lips before she could protest like I knew she would. She was warm, familiar, exciting. A whole night with her and I still wanted her as badly as I had before I’d gotten her naked.

“Hurry up!” Imogen’s voice came faintly from the hill.

I pulled away from Morgana, satisfied beyond reason by seeing the way her eyelids had gone heavy and her hands gripped my sweater. Perhaps this crazy desire for more wasn’t all one-sided. Sadly, I’d be the one sporting an erection the whole time I was trying to sled today.

“Try not to stare at my ass in front of my daughter, yeah?” I flashed Morgana a cocky grin, grabbing the sled on the shelf next to her head and spinning around to exit the shed.

She gasped and threw something at my back. It bounced off and rolled until it hit the wall of the shed. Damn woman had thrown a pole at me. I chuckled and climbed my way up the hill, knowing Morgana wouldn’t be far behind me. I could have offered to carry her sled, but I knew she’d refuse just to spite me. Served her right for cheating.

“Can I go, Dad?” Imogen looked ready to jump right out of her boots. Growing up at a ski resort, she knew better than to go down any hill, on skis or otherwise, unless there was an adult present.

“Show us the way, *datter!*”

With a grin as wide as the mountain range before us, Imogen sat on her sled, grabbed the handles and shoved off with her feet. She really caught steam about halfway down, her laughter turning into a delighted squeal. I plopped my sled down and waited until Imogen got to her feet at the bottom. Morgana huffed and puffed her way to the top.

“Last one to the bottom is an ugly reindeer!” I pushed off and left her in my dust. I leaned a bit and got the sled spinning as it went down the hill. Morgana huffed and Imogen giggled. When I finally got to the bottom, I saw Imogen at the top of the hill again, looking up at Morgana.

“If you lean back, you’ll go even faster!” she tried to give Morgana advice.

“Uh, well, I’m not sure that’s what I’m after,” Morgana replied, looking as uncertain as she did on skis.

I stood up and dusted the snow off my pants, frowning. I hadn’t considered that Morgana would be afraid of sledding. Perhaps she just didn’t know how, but what kid grew up in an area with snow and didn’t learn to sled?

Imogen dropped her sled and held her hand out to Morgana. “We can go together until you get the hang of it. I’ll help you.”

And with my heart beating some kind of painful rhythm in my chest, Morgana held my daughter’s hand and they both sat down on the sled, Imogen in front of Morgana.

“Hold the handles and hold on to me.”

Morgana followed instructions, and when Imogen pushed off, her eyes went as wide as saucers. Imogen took the hill

pretty slow, which was a good idea. By the time they got to the bottom, Morgana was laughing.

“That was fun!”

Imogen stood up and offered Morgana her hand again. “I know, right? Now you and Dad go together. He’s really good.”

Imogen ran back up the mountain, leaving Morgana and me in awkward silence. I wanted to sled with her, but I was currently having a swallowing issue with my throat. I’d never seen my daughter with someone who could be a mother figure. It was doing weird things to my chest. The sight of those two together was making me wish for all kinds of things. Things that were definitely not part of the fuck-and-forget-them plan Morgana and I had agreed upon.

“You don’t have to,” Morgana began, stepping back and dropping her gaze to the snow.

“Stop.” I lurched into motion, grabbing her arm and the sled, tugging them both up the hill. I could sort out my head later.

Imogen flew by us, squealing as she went. I plopped the sled down in the snow and pulled Morgana down with me. I was a sucker for getting my hands on her any way I could. She wiggled back on the sled, her ass rubbing against the very erection I was trying to make go away. I groaned and she laughed. She knew exactly what she was doing.

“Got a giant candy cane in your pocket, Viking?”

“Shut up and hold on to the handles,” I growled while also burying my nose in her hair just so her scent would surround me. I pushed off, holding her around the waist, wishing I could shove my hands under her sweater and explore her breasts. Perhaps another day when we were alone.

We flew down the mountain, much faster than she'd gone with Imogen, but Morgana just laughed and whooped. Gone was the fear and in its place was the confident, fun woman I'd come to know.

When we were almost to the bottom, Morgana leaned to the right and the sled hit a small bump I was trying to avoid. Everything happened at once. The sled felt like it was on slick ice, shooting left while our bodies leaned right. And then there was no more sled, just a heavy blanket of snow and two bodies hurtling out of control. I banked left as hard as I could, keeping Morgana's body on top of mine. I essentially became her human sled until we came to a stop.

We both lay there while I assessed our bodies for injuries. Morgana must have been in shock because she just lay there staring up at the sky with her head on my chest. Then she began to laugh, her whole body shaking with it. Oh shit, maybe she was crying.

“Are you hurt, woman?”

Her shriek was definitely laughter. “No! That...was...awesome!”

I pushed her off me while rolling my eyes. Morgana was an adrenaline junkie at heart. She sat up in the snow, eyes so bright I wanted to take a picture of her just so I could remember what she looked like all lit up inside.

“That was so cool! You guys went flying in the air for a second!” Imogen shouted from the hill above us.

They were both adrenaline junkies, God help me. I stood, holding my hand out to Morgana. She took my hand and came up when I tugged, but she bent over with a gasp.

“What is it?” I was instantly pulling her into my arms, dread filling my gut.

Morgana grabbed her ankle. “I think I might have twisted it a bit. The heel of my boot hit something when we flew off the sled.”

Imogen slid down the hill at our feet, hopping off quickly to see what was wrong. “Here. Sit on my sled while Dad looks at it.”

That was a good idea. I lowered Morgana to the sled and carefully inched her boot off her foot. By the time I got her sock off, her ankle was a little bit swollen but not black and blue.

“It’s not bad,” I declared.

Morgana wrinkled her nose, looking at her ankle. “Guess you’ll have to carry me everywhere.”

Her gaze met mine and we shared a heated look. I was thinking maybe I should keep her on her back all day and night. You know. To heal her ankle.

“Better kiss her boo-boo, Dad.” Imogen broke up the stare down with a hand on Morgana’s shoulder. “He always tells me that’s the ultimate healer.”

“Kisses, huh?” Morgana’s wry smile turned to my daughter. “How many? Like ten? Twenty? A hundred?”

Imogen laughed. “One, Morgana. Only one.” Then she darted off to collect our sleds, not one complaint about our sled day coming to an end.

Morgana turned back to me with a fake pout on her lips. “You heard the woman.”

I leaned over her foot, tracing my finger along her instep, across her toes, and down to her ankle. With two thumbs digging into her arch, I kissed her ankle, right where the swelling was obvious. I kept my mouth there despite Imogen's insistence that one kiss was enough. With Morgana it would never be enough. Her answering quiet moan told me she felt the same way.

When Imogen came back, I busied myself putting Morgana's sock back on, readjusting the situation in my pants when neither girl was looking. I hopped up and held my hands out to Morgana. Once she was standing on one foot, I gave her my back.

"Hop on, woman."

"Uh, not sure I can get up there with one leg."

"I'll help!" Imogen giggled again. "I can push your butt."

Morgana snorted, but she jumped, Imogen squealing as she helped push from below. By the time I got Morgana settled on my back, the two of them were giggling so hard I worried they might pee their snow pants.

"Come on, you lazy sledders." I had Morgana on my back and two sleds in one hand.

"Can we make a snowman right by the front door?" Imogen asked, dragging her own sled behind her.

Morgana whined. "Dangit. I want to make a snowman."

"Let's get Morgana set up in a chair out front and under a pile of blankets. She can be the supervisor."

Imogen cheered and ran ahead of us to drop her sled at the shed and race to the house. I dropped our sleds too, silently reminding myself to come back to the shed later and clean up

properly. Morgana held on tighter to my neck, her thighs squeezing my waist in a way that was making my ski pants impossible to move in.

“This is fun. I should have hurt my ankle earlier.”

I huffed. “Just don’t tell Mack I’m responsible. He’ll threaten me with a lawsuit for hurting his money train.”

“Fuck Mack,” Morgana shot back in a heavy Southern drawl.

I winced. I knew what she meant, but it conjured up visions in my head that I preferred not to have. Mamma came out of the house with a chair, depositing it in the front yard and darting around my back to fuss over Morgana. Imogen had obviously run inside and spread the news of Morgana’s injury.

“Oh, my poor dear. Are you okay?”

I got Morgana settled in the chair, tucked under so many blankets I could barely see her face peeking out from behind them. Mamma went back inside to prepare lunch for us once Morgana had convinced her that it was just a small sprain and she’d be good as new tomorrow.

Imogen and I made a champion snowman, complete with a carrot nose and two dark rocks for eyes. Imogen even ran back inside to get him a scarf of hers, making him look “quite dashing” according to her. When she was satisfied with her creation, we plopped down beside Morgana.

“Morgana, am I ever going to see you again?” Imogen asked out of the blue.

Morgana’s gaze shot to mine, hesitation clear in her voice. “Well, I live pretty far away, but I could come back to visit next time I need a ski vacation. And who knows? Maybe you

and your father can come to Tennessee for a visit. I can teach you how to play the guitar.”

Imogen gasped, already leaning into me. “Please, Dad?”

I put my arm around her little shoulders and held her close, wishing that I had the kind of money that would allow me to say yes right away. “We’ll see.”

“We have a ski day for the town between Christmas and New Years. It’s funny seeing old people ski. Some of them are actually really good!” Imogen laughed, unaware of the tension from her innocent questions. “What about you, Morgana? Do you have a tradition with your parents?”

I saw Morgana wince. Her parents were not her favorite topic. I opened my mouth to change the subject, but Morgana beat me to it with a lift of her nose in the air.

“No family traditions, but I usually record a bunch of songs in the studio the week between Christmas and New Years. The recording studio is always pretty empty that time of year. Perfect for recording.”

Imogen frowned, looking so much like me I would have laughed if I hadn’t known Morgana was struggling. “Nothing with your family? Like, giving each other gifts? Or even just dinner where they make you eat yucky things every year?”

Morgana gave my daughter a soft, sad smile. “No. Some families aren’t like that. That’s what makes your family so special.”

Imogen sat with that for a moment. Then she flung off my arm and reached up to grab Morgana’s hand under the blankets. “You should totally fire your parents.”

Morgana tossed her head back and laughed.

I wanted to laugh with her, but I was too pissed on her behalf to manage it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Morgana

LYRICS WERE FLYING out of my head like I was back to being that hungry twenty-year-old, living off scraps from the bar and a bone-deep desire to make it in the country music industry. By most people's standards, I'd made it already, so maybe that's why the hunger had since dried up. But a week with Aksel and his family had lit something new inside me. I excused myself early from dinner and headed to my room to wrap the presents Janna had bought for me. Instead, she wrapped and I had a nearly all-night-long jam session with myself.

By the time I made myself put the guitar down and go to sleep in the early hours of the morning, there were pages of notes strewn across the floor with scribbled lyrics and matching tunes. I dreamt of standing on stage with my trusty guitar, the spotlight blurring out any of the faces before me. In fact, it felt like it was just me and the guitar on that stage, singing my heart out simply because it felt good. Felt right. Felt like the best thing I'd ever done.

“Merry Christmas Eve.”

The rumble of a whisper in my ear woke me up. I wasn't afraid, but I was disoriented. When heat enveloped my entire body, I knew it was Aksel who'd climbed in bed with me, wrapping his arms around my waist. I let myself sink back against him, feeling what it would be like to wake up on this holiday in his arms. What it would feel like to actually celebrate Christmas with loved ones instead of paid employees.

My heart ached at the thought, even as my head sent out an alarm. Loved ones? No, that was not what Aksel was. There was no way I could feel that sort of emotion about this irritating Viking. There was no world in which a singer from Tennessee could find lasting happiness with a single dad from Idaho. A dad who was decidedly hot, but also had his own hangups.

"Can you be quiet?" Aksel whispered, his hands moving up my torso to cup my breasts.

A familiar trill of desire ran through me. That one night—and morning—had not been enough to get him out of my system. That spark of desire had been there between us all day, even with Imogen with us. I pressed my hips back and he hissed.

"I'll try," I whispered back.

His hands left my breasts to push down my sleep shorts. He climbed over me, pulling the shorts off my feet and turning me onto my back. His hair was loose and he looked like some ancient Viking, coming home from fighting in some distant land and needing to soothe himself in the body of his woman. He shoved down his pajama pants but didn't bother taking them off.

Aksel grabbed my knees and spread me apart for him, somehow still gentle in his urgency. He notched himself at my entrance and pushed in, slow and steady until he was fully seated. The man was huge and I had been dead asleep when he came in. It would take me a bit to adjust. He collapsed his upper body over me, his forehead against mine, our harsh breaths mingling.

“I can’t stay away,” he admitted, his eyes looking deeply into mine.

“I don’t want you to stay away.”

His smile was heavy on the gloat scale. He began to move, his thrusts slow and deep, a quiet coming together of two desperate people in the middle of the night. His skin was hot and smooth under my hands, his muscles bunching and releasing as he moved over me. I squeezed my thighs around his waist and lifted my knees so I could take him deeper. I wanted him to hit so deep that I remembered him years from now when this vacation was just a distant memory.

Aksel dipped his head and peppered kisses along my jaw, my neck, my collarbone. It was like he was trying to brand every inch of my skin with his mouth. When he got to my breasts, a tiny moan escaped my mouth. He felt so good I knew this would be over far faster than I wanted. I wished we could stay just like this for hours. Watch the sun come up while he filled my body.

“Shh, woman.” Aksel lifted his head to stare down at me, watching the way my breath was coming in pants, how I could barely keep my eyes from fluttering shut. “So fucking beautiful.”

His compliment made my eyes widen. Aksel was not one for paying compliments when he could ridicule or tease

instead. But before I could do something stupid like thank him, he placed his hand over my mouth. I glared at him, but he just gave me an impish grin. The implication was clear. If I couldn't be quiet, he'd take matters into his own hands. Never mind the fact that he'd been the one whispering and making more noise than my one little moan.

His thrusts increased in pace, the slide of his body over mine, the way he kept his hand over my mouth. It was all too much. I felt the delicious moment when everything I was feeling froze in the air right before detonating. I was moaning then, all sounds caught in his hand while I thrashed below him. Why did every time with Aksel feel better than anything I'd ever experienced before?

He waited until I began to still before dropping his head to the pillow. His whole body shuddered, yet not a sound came from him. The man lay atop me, shaking and shuddering, pressing me into the mattress with his weight for long minutes. I should have been pissed, but I liked his weight too much to complain. When he'd recovered, he tucked me into his side again, whispering, "Merry Christmas Eve."

And damn if he wasn't correct. It was the merriest.



I wanted to go back to a few hours ago when Aksel gave me one last squeeze before climbing out of my bed. I'd been half asleep, but that hadn't stopped me from feeling his large hands tucking the blankets around me before he snuck out of

my room. It was such a sweet thing to do. A thing a loving parent might have done.

Not that I knew what that was like.

“Merry Christmas, Mom,” I said into the phone with all the cheer I could muster.

I didn’t call my parents often. Major holidays. Birthdays. And they called me only when they ran out of their monetary allotment early. I’d learned years ago giving them an allowance of sorts was best for all parties. It kept them happy with their little golf retirement lifestyle in Florida and I was free to live my life without their dark cloud looming.

“Oh, is it Christmas already?” I could hear things jangling in the background.

“Yep. December twenty-fourth. Christmas Eve.”

“Huh. Okay. Well, we have our tee time in ten minutes, so I’d better go.” Rustling came from her end of the line. “Get in the golf cart, Frank!”

I squeezed my eyes shut and wondered for the millionth time why I even bothered calling. Trying to manufacture some sort of affection between us was hopeless. Imogen was right. I needed to fire my parents.

“All right, I’ll let you go. Tell Dad merry Christmas.”

“Okay, Morgana. Don’t do anything crazy, honey.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I replied, though she’d already hung up.

I stared at my phone, wondering why their obvious lack of love for me was hitting harder this year. Maybe it was the breakup with Everett. Maybe it was where I was in my career. Maybe it was seeing Aksel and his family. They sparred with

each other, but the affection was just as obvious. They were there for each other, not some vaguely familiar voice on the end of a brief phone call.

Throwing my phone on the bed and putting all that behind me, I put on my favorite pair of jeans—they made my butt look like a twenty-year-old—and a red and white sweater with a fringe that went across the chest and around to the back. I'd worn it for the last few Christmases, much to Fifi's horror. Which reminded me, I still needed a dress for the secret concert after Christmas, and Fifi hadn't texted me back.

I sighed and walked out of my room, adding another task to the list of things I needed Janna's help with. Excited voices came from the kitchen. I followed, feeling like I could use some holiday cheer to make me forget about my annual call with the parents. When I stepped into the room, everyone was there, bustling around the island, narrowly avoiding getting smacked with Dagny's hand towel.

"Morgana!" Ingrid was the first to see me. Her face lit up with a smile and she rushed over to pull me into a hug. "Merry Christmas!"

My eyes instantly filled with tears. I hugged her back—probably scaring her with how hard I gripped her. Then I felt Imogen plow into us, throwing her arms around us both. The tears turned to laughter, all of us giggling and saying Merry Christmas over each other.

"We'll never finish the Christmas cookies at this rate," Aksel complained, pulling us off of each other. Despite his grumpy remark, he tried to examine my face.

I ducked my head and wandered over to the countertop to see what they were making. I couldn't let Aksel get a good look at me when I was still swallowing back tears. Emotions

were already too heightened with him around. I couldn't afford to have more leak down my cheeks. Not when all of this was temporary.

Lars cleared a spot for me. "Imogen likes to make the kind you add frosting to. I've told her that is very American of her, but she likes what she likes, you know?"

He shrugged and shot me a wink while handing me a bag of yellow frosting. Lars was a charming, quiet man. I could see how much of Aksel's good looks came from him. Although Aksel's spicy personality was all Ingrid.

With a mix of Christmas songs and a few Norwegian ones thrown in they all knew the words to, we spent a few hours decorating cookies. By the time Dagny took the last batch out of the oven, I was ready to jump out of my skin from the sugar consumption. Steven was going to have his work cut out for him when I returned to Tennessee, and I was one hundred percent okay with that. What was the point of the holidays unless you let loose and ate your weight in frosting?

"Oh! Let me get my guitar. I finished my new Christmas song and I want to see what you think."

"Really?" Imogen looked up at me with multicolored frosting smeared across both cheeks.

"I mean, it's not as good as 'God jul igjen.'" I shrugged one shoulder.

"Your accent is so good, Morgana." Ingrid clapped.

"It's okay," Dagny admitted.

I snorted and walked away to get my guitar. I had a feeling that was as good of a compliment as Dagny could give. Aksel caught up to me once I entered the great room, lacing his fingers through mine and pulled me down the hallway to our

bedrooms. When we got to my door, he backed me up into it, his eyes heated.

“I wanted to decorate your tits with frosting and lick them clean,” he said so low I wasn’t sure I heard him right.

“That would have been a hell of a Christmas Eve family dinner,” I drawled.

“Did you really finish your song?”

I nodded. “I did.”

Aksel leaned down and kissed me, slow and simple. “I can’t wait to hear it, then.”

I smirked. “Even if there’s no frosting tits?”

Aksel winced. “I shall miss that delicacy, but I will enjoy hearing your voice again. Just know the whole time you’re singing your song, I’ll be imagining you naked, my tongue between your legs.”

A moan escaped my throat. “Well, crap.”

Now it was Aksel’s turn to smirk. He pulled back and reached around me to push my door open. “Now get your guitar, woman.”

“Yes, Viking.”

I wasn’t fast enough. He smacked my ass before I got inside and found my guitar. He chased me the whole way back to the fireplace in the great room, but clearly let me win as he never caught up to me.

My breathing hadn’t returned to normal by the time I was seated on the stone hearth and everyone had gathered around me. I had a feeling my breathing would never be normal around Aksel. With his playful side burning bright in my

mind, I closed my eyes and launched into my new song, a quick and lively number about finding love under the mistletoe.

This amazing family all stood and clapped, cheering louder than a full stadium of fans when I finished. I couldn't wipe the smile off my face, not even when a pesky tear joined the mix despite my efforts to keep it pushed down.

I looked over to lock gazes with Aksel. He was the only one not cheering. Instead he looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time. His eyes were glistening and he was smiling. The grumpy Viking was just standing there, smiling at me, not caring that everyone could see his happiness. His happiness for me.

"That was so good, Mo!" Imogen climbed onto the hearth next to me, her gaze worshipful as she handed me a simply wrapped gift.

"Thank you, but what's this?" I put my guitar down carefully and examined the small package.

"It's a tradition that we get each other one handmade gift for Christmas Eve."

Instant panic hit. "Oh, I didn't know that. I only have gifts for tomorrow."

"We wanted to do this for you." Ingrid put her hand on my shoulder. "You've brought music and joy this Christmas. That is gift enough."

"Open it!" Imogen squealed.

I snuck one more look at Aksel and then attacked the wrapping, pulling the string off and taking my time with the paper. I didn't get a lot of gifts for the holidays. Mostly, I was the one giving them out. The paper fell away and I gasped.

It was a drawing. Colored pencil on plain white paper. A hulking man with a frown, a woman in pink smiling with yellow hair, and a smaller girl with yellow hair next to her. All three held hands with colorful sleds at their feet.

“It’s us from yesterday!” Imogen announced.

If the drawing wasn’t sweet enough, the words at the top wrapped around my heart and squeezed.

A new family tradition.

The picture wavered as I barely held it together. I squeezed Imogen tight, wishing she knew how much this picture meant to me. I wasn’t sure what all I said the rest of the night. I was only aware of the ache in my heart, the lump in my throat, and the deep knowing that this would be the best Christmas I would ever have. A long line of empty Christmases lay ahead of me. Who would have expected to find happiness with this found family in the backwoods of Idaho?

And who would have thought that Morgana Mavis, at age thirty-eight, would finally find the one to steal her heart?

A Christmas miracle was happening right in front of my eyes: I was most definitely in love with the Viking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



A ksel

“WE WISH YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS, we wish you...”

Imogen kept singing as she jumped on my bed, her voice getting louder with each verse of the annoying song. Morgana’s Christmas song was a thousand times better.

“Ugh,” I groaned, trying to pull the covers up over my head, but not able to because I became engaged in a tug-of-war with my daughter.

“There’s no being grumpy on Christmas, Dad!” Imogen let go of the sheets to flop down next to me, her little hands finding my face and making me look directly at her. She was adorable in her early Christmas morning excitement. “Time to open presents!”

“If I go willingly and without complaint, will you at least let me get a cup of coffee in me before you start opening?” Negotiating with eight-year-olds was like negotiating with a terrorist.

“Only if you take less than five minutes to get that coffee.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Only if we wake up Morgana too.”

Imogen scoffed. “Of course.”

A smile crept onto my face. I loved this kid, and despite the financial stress I was facing, I loved seeing her so excited. “Then get off me and let’s wake the house up.”

Imogen’s face lit up right before she let out a squeal that only reindeer could hear. She scrambled off the bed and I followed, grabbing the first sweater I could find, which didn’t match at all with my pajama pants, but Christmas morning was for blurry eyes and mismatched clothes.

With Imogen pulling on my hand, we went to Morgana’s room first, knocking on the door until she opened it, looking delightfully sleepy.

“Ho, ho, ho!” I bellowed, making Imogen giggle.

“Merry Christmas, Morgana!” Imogen squealed. “Come on! Time to open presents!”

Morgana, being a kind woman instead of the snotty celebrity I thought she’d be, smiled down at my daughter and nodded. Imogen ran down the hall to get her grandparents while I stole a moment alone with Morgana. I eyed her pajamas, ones I hadn’t seen before. I groaned, for more reasons than one.

“Even your pajamas have fringe?”

Morgana lifted her nose in the air, pushed her hair behind her shoulders, and transformed into the country princess right before my eyes. “Merry Christmas to you too, Aksel.”

I wanted to slide that silk right off her body, celebrating Christmas in my own way. I wanted to be somewhere else, where my family couldn’t find me and demand I give my attention elsewhere. I wanted to be someone else too.

Someone who actually had a shot at dating this woman for real.

“Merry Christmas, Morgana.”

I held out my palm and she placed her hand in it. Lacing our fingers together, we walked out to the fireplace, finding a cracked leather couch to sink into while we waited for Imogen to come down with my parents. The Christmas tree twinkled in the corner, a stack of presents under the branches that was considerably higher than when I’d snuck down here last night to place Imogen’s gifts.

I ran my thumb over her soft skin, wondering how I’d gotten to this place. How I’d let a beautiful woman back in my heart. Sure, I tried to tell myself this was just physical. As I lay in bed last night and refused to sneak into Morgana’s room again, I realized with startling clarity that this thing between us was way more than that. And I really, really didn’t know what to do with that realization.

“Should we wake Janna?”

Morgana rolled her lips in. “Um, Janna spent the night at John’s apparently.”

My jaw dropped. My best friend had clearly left out some details about his feelings for Janna. Although I’d done the same when it came to details about Morgana, so I couldn’t exactly be mad about that.

“Let me get some coffee going.” Mamma was clearly thinking the same way I was, knowing she’d require caffeine to handle the level of Imogen’s enthusiasm.

We could hear the three of them traipsing down the stairs, but still Morgana and I didn’t let go of each other. Imogen dashed into the room and straight to the tree, having a seat on

the floor and gaping over the pile of presents. Morgana's grip on my hand tightened but neither of us released the other. My father came into the room and tipped his head at us before selecting his own seat and sinking into it with a contented sigh.

"Merry Christmas," he said kindly.

"Merry Christmas," we both said back at the same time.

Mamma came in with a tray of coffee for all of us. Morgana let go of my hand to take the proffered coffee cup but not before Mamma got a peek at us and shot me a wide-eyed grin and a thumbs-up that was not so sneaky.

"What can I open first?" Imogen gave us exactly one sip before she was bouncing back and forth between the brightly wrapped gifts.

"Perhaps Morgana should open the first one, yes?" Mamma chastised Imogen lightly.

Imogen grabbed a gift and ran it over to Morgana. "Sorry. You go first."

Morgana tried to hand it back, but Imogen insisted. "Okay, fine. I'll go fast so you can get to yours." Morgana ripped the paper off and gasped. "A scarf?"

"It is not much, but I made it with a long fringe on the ends. And pink is definitely your color." Mamma dipped her head, embarrassed at the simple gift.

Morgana looked like she was going to burst into tears. She leaped off the couch, wrapped the pink scarf around her neck, and gave my mother a tight hug.

"I love it. Thank you so much. I'll treasure it."

I sat forward and tried to clench my jaw hard enough that the sight of Morgana getting emotional over a handmade gift didn't make me lose my shit on Christmas morning. What kind of childhood did she have if a simple scarf made her beam like that? Mamma had made me countless scarves over the years and I had never burst into tears over them.

Imogen tore through her gifts, remembering to hand out everyone else's gifts periodically too. Pappa had made Morgana a wood carving of that Entertainer of the Year award she loved so much. Morgana also cried over that, hugging her scarf, wood carving, and trinkets from Imogen to her chest.

"This one is heavy!" Imogen exclaimed, pulling a box from the wall next to the tree.

I stood up and carried it for her, placing it at Morgana's feet. "I hope you like it."

Morgana looked at me with questions in her eyes, like she couldn't believe I'd gotten her something. Then she put her other gifts aside and tore off the paper. The plain cardboard box popped open easily and then she was laughing.

"You bought me skis?"

I shrugged. "And poles. I believe you will learn to ski at an expert level like you do everything else. A good pair of skis is essential."

I definitely shouldn't have spent money I didn't have, but Morgana was worth it. Plus I got great discounts as a ski instructor.

Morgana stood, wiping her wet cheeks before throwing her arms around my neck. "Thank you, Viking," she whispered in my ear.

“I believe you can do anything, woman,” I whispered back, which seemed to make her cry harder.

“Wait! There’s one more for me!” Imogen’s voice had us breaking apart and sitting back down.

Morgana grabbed my hand and held it between us, partially hidden by the gifts and wrapping paper. Imogen shoved one last box into the center of the room and clasped her hands under her chin.

“Who is it from?” Pappa asked.

“From Morgana.” Imogen said her name with hero worship in her tone. It looked like my daughter had fallen for the same woman I did.

“Go ahead, sweetie. Open it!” Morgana smiled, looking just as excited over Imogen opening her gift as she’d been to open her own.

Imogen tore through the ribbon and paper, lifting the lid off a fancy box. I couldn’t see what was inside, but I did see Imogen flop back down on the floor, her face a mask of shock. She was eerily silent.

Morgana let go of my hand and sat forward, clearly alarmed. “If you don’t like it, we can exchange it for something else.”

Imogen looked up at Morgana and a fat tear ran down her cheek. Now I was alarmed, jumping to my feet to see what had made my little girl cry. There on the floor was a brand-new guitar that looked like it hadn’t come from the same store where I bought everything from toilet paper to electronics. This instrument looked like one a professional would use.

“I love it and I love you!” Imogen said on a wobbling voice before jumping up and tackling Morgana in a messy

hug.

The two of them laughed and cried, talking over each other about lessons and songs and practice and notes and all kinds of things that I did not know my own daughter was interested in.

“If you’re not careful, she’ll break both your hearts.” Mamma patted me on the back as she passed, calling loudly over her shoulder, “I’ll wake Dagny so we can get breakfast going.”

With that ominous thought rolling around in my head, we spent the rest of the day eating, drinking, and watching Morgana give Imogen a crash course in guitar lessons. I slipped away right after dinner to implement my own plans. I was about to make a plea that would most likely result in massive rejection, but there was too much on the line to not go for it. I owed it to my daughter to try. I owed it to myself to not be the miserable grump I’d become since the divorce.

As soon as I put Imogen to bed—with zero confidence she’d actually go to sleep and not stay up all night on her new guitar—I pulled Morgana away from the fireplace.

“Excuse us, please,” I told my parents. They looked at each other with a knowing grin.

“What’s going on, Viking?” Morgana asked, jogging behind me as I tugged her to the back door and out into the starry night.

“I have one last surprise for you.”

The woman deserved a million surprises to make up for her shitty childhood. I could give her ten more Christmases just like this one and still not pour enough love and attention on her. Attention she deserved. Real attention. Not fan adoration. As lovely as all that was, I had a feeling that

Morgana was lacking in real relationships in her life. If she was willing, I was offering to be one of them.

We cleared the side of the lodge and Morgana let out a gasp. “Oh my gosh, Aksel. It’s gorgeous.”

The gazebo nearly outshined the stars. I’d strung a bazillion white twinkle lights up, around, and through it. A small speaker hidden under one of the benches was playing soft music. One bench held blankets and another had a bottle of champagne and two glasses. I pulled her into the center of the gazebo and let her go only to pop the cork and fill our glasses. Handing one to her and taking one for myself, I lifted my glass in the air.

“To making Christmas festive, even in trying or unusual circumstances.”

Morgana grinned. “I’ll toast to that.” Our glasses clinked together and then we drank.

Morgana’s eyes twinkled as brightly as the lights. “To grumpy Vikings and beautiful country singers.”

“To handsome ski instructors and women who can’t cold plunge.”

Morgana scoffed, but she took a sip anyway. “To sexy Idahoans and the Tennesseans who come back to visit often?”

I took the glass from her hand, putting both glasses back on the bench so I could get my hands on her hips. I needed to feel her against me as she promised to come back. “Are you saying you want to see me again?”

Morgana tipped her head back to look up at me. “Oh, no, sorry. Just the sexy Idahoans.”

I pulled her hair and she yelped. “Keep it up, woman, and your ass will be as red as Rudolph’s nose.”

Her eyebrows climbed her forehead. “Hmm. That’s a mighty tempting offer.”

I pulled her fully into my arms, beginning to sway back and forth to the music. She tucked her face into my chest, her hands coming up to slide into my hair. This woman had me tied in knots. Had I been a decade younger or if she wasn’t a famous musician with an entire life across the continent, I wouldn’t be questioning the fact that I was falling head over ass in love with her. She was the exact woman I’d want to start a life with. The woman I’d put a ring on and spend the rest of my life dating.

But that’s not who either of us was. We had baggage—and despite the five suitcases, I was pretty sure I had more than Morgana.

“I’d like to see you again too, Morgana.” The words felt like baring my soul to a wild animal and letting them sniff around. I was opening myself up to a hurt that might destroy me.

Her hands tightened in my hair, pulling out the leather band so she could grip the strands. “This is the best Christmas I’ve ever had,” she whispered, also baring her soul. Her being happy over this holiday that she hated was the best gift she could have given me.

“Mine too.”

Imogen’s too, but I didn’t add that. It was clear we all developed feelings this holiday season, but it was the question of what to do about it that haunted me. There was no easy way forward.

“Come back and visit us,” I whispered to the top of her head, knees willing to buckle should I need to drop to them and beg for her affirmative answer.

Morgana sighed and leaned her full weight into me. “I will, I promise.”



Dagny: We placed the wrong bets.

Carol Ann: What's that supposed to mean?

Chief Blade: We already gave the pot of money to Nancy.

Mayor Nancy Haney: And I spent it, so no take-backsies.

John Ross: I think what Dagny means is that our bet on when the two would do the deed was shortsighted.

Hig Lindley: I thought we agreed no more “do the deed” talk??

Doc: Uh-oh. This smells like someone caught feelings.

Dagny: Exactly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Morgana

“ANY CHANCE we can sneak back to my room?”

We hadn’t exactly declared our feelings for each other, but just hearing Aksel say he wanted to keep seeing me was enough to have my feet dancing on air, not this beautiful wood floor of the gazebo. I’d had men take me on extravagant dates in the past—one even flew me to Paris to have a picnic dinner at the Eiffel Tower—and yet none of that could top the romance of this evening. I didn’t need the grand gesture, I needed the sweet simplicity from a man I knew would only give me the God’s honest truth. Aksel would never sugarcoat anything and that honesty was a potent aphrodisiac.

The answering chuckle rumbled in his chest before Aksel pulled back enough to gaze down into my face. “How do you feel about something a bit more natural?”

I grimaced, even though a little thrill ran through me at his suggestion. “Like, with bugs and dirt and snowy weather conditions?”

Aksel pulled an arm from me to grab a tiny remote next to our champagne glasses on the bench. With a slight click, the

twinkling lights blinked out and only the faint light of the stars and moon outside the gazebo were left.

Aksel let go of me completely and rearranged the blankets into a bed of sorts on one of the benches. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, he finally spun around and shot me a wink so lascivious I nearly drooled on myself. Without warning, his hands went to his jeans and he let them drop to his feet.

“No underwear again, Viking?” My gaze was solidly on the erection that seemed to beckon me closer. Quickly, I looked over my shoulder in the direction of the lodge, but didn’t hear a soul around us.

“It’s still Christmas, woman. You can sit on Santa’s lap one more time.” Aksel had a seat, looping his hands over the back of the bench seats like a king ready for his reward.

I toed off my furry boots and stepped out of my jeans, barely feeling the cold night air. I’d worry about frostbite later. With a saunter I’d perfected with professional training from choreographers, I stepped up to him, placing one foot on his right side, letting him look his fill. The man let loose a growl and sat forward, tracing his fingertips over the satin of my panties.

“Already wet for me,” he said smugly.

I reached down and gripped his cock, barely able to get my fingers around him. I gave his length a firm tug, meant to get his attention. “Already hard for me.”

“You going to tell Santa what you want?” he asked, voice a hard scrape of vowels and consonants. I slid my thumb over the tip of him, spreading the moisture there. He hissed and I felt like the sexiest woman alive.

I let go of him to put my hands on his shoulders and sit on his lap, his erection pinned between us. Leaning in so that our chests were pressed together tightly, I whispered in his ear, “Make love to me, Viking.”

It was as close to admitting feelings as we’d come. As close as I could get to articulating the actual feeling lodged in my heart, beating harder and faster with every hour I spent with this man. I didn’t know what our future held, but I knew I needed to feel his love, even if the word wasn’t actually spoken.

Aksel didn’t answer, he just reached between us, ripped my panties off me and lifted me up. With a firm thrust upward and a slight release of his hands on my hips, he was inside of me. I groaned, dropping my forehead to his shoulder. Nothing felt as good as being filled to the brim with Aksel.

I didn’t know who moved first, but I lifted, he pulsed his hips, and soon our movements were right in sync, a rhythm as natural as the landscape around us. The heat between us kept us warmer than a bonfire could, whispered words making the passion that much richer.

“So tight, so perfect,” Aksel whispered as he leaned back and gazed at where we were joined. “I could just watch you all damn day and night. Even in sleep I dream of you coming on my cock.”

“Aksel,” I keened, legs burning as I accelerated my pace.

He kept leaning against the bench backing, watching me bob up and down on his cock like the Viking king he sometimes acted like. With a hazy look, he lifted his arm and held his finger on my clit. Not moving.

“Is this what you want, woman?”

“Yes! Please, Aksel.” The more I moved, the more his finger slipped and slid over that bundle of nerves.

It took a remarkably short period of time for me to feel everything crash together. The wave of pleasure that swept my feet out from under me also made my limbs weak. At the first whimper, Aksel immediately leaned forward and gripped my hips, taking over the frenzied lift and slide of my body. I let my head drop back and surrendered to the intense jolt of liquid lightning that just kept coming. A sting came from my nipple, immediately followed by the soft scrape of a tongue and then the warmth of Aksel’s mouth. The Viking had bit my nipple and I was too far gone to snark at him about it.

And then he was gripping my hips to the point of pain. His bark of pleasure echoed in the night, followed by the hoot of an owl somewhere unseen. His huge body shook and I held on to his shoulders, not sure if I was holding him up or if he was holding me from sliding away.

Long moments later Aksel kissed my shoulder and whispered fiercely, “This is not over.”



Me: Any chance you can come to my room?

Janna: Right now?

Me: Yeah?

I didn’t even have to wait five minutes before Janna tapped lightly on my door and crept in, her hair bundled on top of her

head and a hideous green mask on her face.

“Did I wake you up?” I asked quietly, aware that the whole lodge seemed to be asleep.

“No. I was just texting with John.”

I patted the bed and Janna crawled up next to me, pulling the blanket from the foot of the bed to wrap around her. She was the closest thing I had to a best friend and had never let me down once. If there was anyone I could trust, it would be her.

“John, huh? Things getting serious there?”

Janna’s smile created a crack in her mask. “I don’t know. I mean, it can’t go anywhere really. My life is in Tennessee with you and his life is here in Idaho. But we’ve decided to enjoy every last minute that we have together.”

I grabbed her hand and squeezed. “I love that. I’m glad you found someone, even just for a short while.”

Janna squeezed my hand. “And what about you and Aksel, huh? Please tell me the sex is amazing. That man would make bank with an Only Fans account.”

I opened my mouth to deny anything like I always did, but then reminded myself that this was Janna and I needed someone to talk to. She’d see through my lies anyway.

“The sex is fucking amazing.”

Janna’s mouth dropped open and then she shoved me with a giggle so loud I was sure she woke the whole lodge. But then it got me laughing and soon the two of us were just lying on top of each other, laughing our heads off.

“I knew it! The steam was practically coming off you two whenever you talked. Or argued is more like it. Angry sex is

the best sex.”

I sat back against the headboard and sighed. All the sex with Aksel was the best sex.

“What’s with the sigh?” Janna peered up at me and I could practically see the hearts dancing in her eyes. They hadn’t been there when I told her I was dating Everett. In fact, if I remembered correctly, she’d rolled her eyes.

I looked over at the fireplace, working up the courage to give voice to the feelings that had been brewing for awhile now. “Well, he and I have the same location issue you and John have.”

I felt Janna shrug. “So? Just enjoy your last two days here with him.”

The idea of only having two more days with Aksel made me feel like I was about to puke. Or crap my pants. Neither one was a good feeling.

“Well...” How could I put this in a way she’d understand but without making myself look like a lovesick fool? At thirty-eight, you’d think I’d have learned to guard my heart by now.

Janna nudged me with her foot. “Well what?”

I turned to her and laid it out. “I think I’m in love with him, Jan. I can’t stop thinking about him. We laugh together, we tease each other, but he also does really sweet things for me. But it’s only been ten days! Like, who falls in love in ten days?”

Janna sat up and held my hands in hers. “Who cares how many days? If you love him, you love him. Haven’t you been looking all over for love and never found it? Your number one song is literally about that exact scenario, Mo!”

Tears flooded my eyes and I'd never been more embarrassed. "I know, okay? I just...I don't know what to do with all of this."

"Does Aksel feel the same way?"

I shrugged, blowing out a huge breath. "I don't know! We haven't exactly said the words but he said he wants to see me again. Said this isn't over."

Janna's face melted into a puddle of puppy love. "Then it's not over. Maybe it's time for you to shift into part time with your music. We can take a look at your calendar and find a way to make it work."

I was shaking my head before she'd even finished talking. "I don't know how to do part time, Janna. What even is that?"

Janna lost the puppy dog look in the blink of an eye, now looking like a pit bull. "You're Morgana Freaking Mavis. You can make your schedule anything you want. If you want part time, do it! If you don't know what it looks like, pave the fucking way!"

I blinked at the language out of this little-ray-of-sunshine girl. My giggling, happy-go-lucky assistant was nowhere to be found. And damn if I didn't respect her even more by seeing this version of her.

"You're right."

"Of course I'm right!" Janna snapped, standing up on my mattress and throwing off the blanket, really getting into it. "Tomorrow we start Operation Part-Time Mo. I'll block whole weeks off. Weeks that you can fly back here and boink that burning hunk of love."

I snorted. She was funny when she was fierce. "Okay. Let's give it a shot. No harm in trying, right?"

Janna finally smiled, hands on hips. “Darn tootin’.”

I burst out laughing. “Well, you’ve certainly made me feel better. How about we get some sleep so we can schedule our asses off tomorrow.”

Janna flopped back down to the bed, bouncing once before rolling off and getting to her feet. “Night, Morgana. Love looks good on you.” Then she gave me a hug and skipped out of my room.

Her enthusiasm had somehow taken hold of me. Maybe there was a way this could work. Maybe, with just the right amount of time off, I could do it all. Maybe love was worth shifting my focus. Maybe my restlessness with my career was less to do with needing to accomplish more in that arena, and everything to do with finding a different arena.

Before I could second-guess my instincts, I crept to the door, opening it to look left and right. I tiptoed to Aksel’s room and twisted the handle. Unlocked. On feet light as a feather, I crept to his bed and slid under the sheets to cuddle up to his massive back. The sheets smelled like him, a scent that reminded me of home. A true home with warmth and love.

“Morgana?” he whispered, voice thick with sleep.

My hand swept up his torso, memorizing every bump and dip of his muscles. I never asked Santa for anything as a kid. I knew I wouldn’t get it, so what was the point of asking? But if there was one Christmas wish I needed to come true, just once in this lifetime, it was this one.

Please, Santa, let Aksel love me.

“Aksel, I have to see you and Imogen and your parents. I’ll make time in my schedule to come back often. I can shift to something more part time. I can work from here whenever

possible. I just...I can't..." Tears threatened to close my throat.

Aksel turned over in bed, his big hands cupping my face, his nose so close it brushed mine. "I know. I feel it too. I'd already decided to tell Imogen and my parents tomorrow. I want to be able to hold your hand whenever I want. No more hiding. We'll make this work."

Relief flooded through me so strongly it stole my breath. Aksel kissed my forehead and tucked me into his chest. The steady beat of his heart and the warmth that pulsed off of him like a heater had my eyes fluttering closed.

I had no dreams that night because I was already living one.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



*A*ksel

I STOMPED the snow off my feet at the door, my body heating so fast from my cold plunge that I was now sweating below the sweater and jeans. Mamma ran by with a stack of towels in one hand and the cordless phone in the other. She widened her eyes at me and tried to jerk her head in the direction of the main living area. When I saw Pappa hustle behind her with his breakfast plate shoved under his chin while he walked, I knew something was up. My father was not one to take breakfast standing up unless there was some emergency. Dread lined my gut. Would the collection agency send someone out the day after Christmas?

Kicking into gear, I followed them, picking up Janna's excited voice above the ringing of the phone in Mamma's hand. Multiple cell phones were also ringing, adding to the cacophony of noises. Then I heard it. The strumming of Morgana's guitar and her throaty angel voice.

Morgana herself came around the corner with her phone in her hand, her nose nearly on the screen. "What did you do?"

Janna was on her heels. "I just posted a five-second clip! I had no idea it had gone crazy until I turned my phone on this

morning.”

“What’s happening?” I asked loudly, trying to be heard over all the phones ringing.

Morgana flicked her head up to see me, then immediately looked back down at her phone, the clip of her song playing again. “Janna posted a video to my Instagram.”

Janna looked up at me, baring all her teeth in an excited grin. “Morgana broke the internet!”

“Okay, okay. That’s a little much,” Morgana argued, but the ringing of Janna’s cell phone cut her off.

Janna immediately answered, squealing and then passing the phone to Morgana. “Mack.”

Morgana rolled her eyes, but took the phone, pressing it to her ear and walking toward the fireplace. I had no idea what the big deal was.

“Janna, I don’t get it.”

Mamma’s phone rang again and she answered it, then handed it over to Janna who pressed it against her shoulder to answer me.

“It means the public loved Morgana’s new Christmas song! Mack probably wants her to go record it right now, along with the other songs she’s been working on.”

I frowned. I’d heard her playing her guitar in her room at all hours, but she hadn’t mentioned more than two songs she’d written. “Wait. What other songs?”

But Janna had already pressed the phone to her ear and walked away, jabbering on about needing a car service ordered to take them to the recording studio. I frowned, lost and

confused. I thought I still had two more days with Morgana. Was she planning to leave today?

My own cell phone vibrated in my back pocket. I pulled it out and saw an unknown number. I answered, thinking it might be the lift company and I was in the perfect dark mood to give them an earful about trying to collect their balance before the due date.

“Is this Aksel Lund of Havenkirk Ski Lodge?” the voice in my ear asked.

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

“Hey, I’m a reporter for the *Tennessee Star*. Can you confirm that Morgana Mavis is at your establishment?”

I looked around the room, seeing everyone scrambling to communicate with phones pressed against their ears. Gone was the peace of Christmas yesterday. In its wake was barely controlled chaos. A sense of dread that had nothing to do with our financial situation hit me. I stumbled backward and fell into a leather couch.

“Mr. Lund? You still there?”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah. Still here. And so is Morgana, but that’s all I can tell you. Good luck with your story.”

I hung up and closed my eyes. I needed to talk to Morgana and figure out what all this meant. We weren’t celebrities around here. We weren’t used to fielding calls from reporters. More important than all of that bullshit was the question of her staying as scheduled.

I leaped to my feet and walked over to where she was arguing with Mack. She glanced up at me, but immediately dropped my gaze. I sat on the couch beside her and listened to the one-sided conversation.

“Yeah, I know, but Christmas is over anyway. I can record it at my leisure for next year.”

She rested her head back against the cushion and sighed. Not a good sigh, either. A frustrated sigh that one makes when resigning themselves to something they don't actually want to do.

“Morgana.” I knew I was interrupting but I felt like someone needed to talk to her before Mack got his claws in any further.

She held her finger up, her eyes finally coming back in my direction, pleading with me. For what, I didn't know. A few more minutes to talk? Or was it a plea for me to grab the phone, tell Mack to fuck right off, and hang up?

I went with a version of the latter, grabbing the phone from her hand, hitting the red button, and holding the phone hostage in my lap.

“What the fuck is going on?” I growled.

Morgana's eyes had gone round. “Did you just hang up on him?”

“Someone needs to do that to him more often.”

A shocked laugh slipped out of Morgana's mouth. “You're probably right.”

“Morgana.” I grabbed her hand. “What's happening?”

Her eyes went soft, her gaze dancing around my face, as if she was memorizing me. That sense of dread increased to the point I wanted to break someone's face just to burn up some of this nervous energy. Too bad Mack was currently a thousand miles away.

“They want me to get in the recording studio right away. So we can use this current momentum.”

“To sell more records.”

She nodded, finally looking into my eyes. “It’s what I do.”

“So everything last night about visiting, taking time off, working part-time? That was bullshit?”

Morgana’s nose lifted in the air, the softness of her eyes turning to a blue ocean of fire. “No. That wasn’t bullshit, but I have to strike while the iron is hot. And going part-time is not the same as quitting altogether. Trust me. You are my priority, but right now, I need to deal with my career.”

“Mo! You cool with the studio in Los Angeles? We’re closer to that one than your normal one.” Janna’s voice interrupted.

Morgana squeezed my hand. “Trust me.”

Then she looked past my shoulder and told Janna that was fine.

Rage, the kind that was no longer willing to listen to reason, flared hot and bright in my chest, my lungs, my hands. I jumped to my feet and stormed out of the lodge. I waited until I got to the ski shed before tilting my head to the sky and bellowing my displeasure.

“Fuck!”

Birds took flight from the tops of the trees and the echo of my own voice came back to me. Sure, there was anger there in my tone, but it was buried under a thick layer of hurt and self-blame. I’d set myself up for this. Again. I knew Morgana was a famous singer. I knew she had a life beyond this shitty little

ski lodge. I knew she'd leave me behind. And yet I'd still fallen for her.

My gaze snagged on the limp bundle of mistletoe still hanging from the nail above the doorway of the shed. I snatched it down and threw it as far as I could. It went only a pitiful few feet before fluttering to the ground.

I turned in a circle, hands on my hips, at a loss for what to do. When I'd gone through something similar to this when Milana left me for the bright lights of modeling, I'd had baby Imogen to take care of. I'd immersed myself in her and the lodge, finding solace in both. But now Imogen was old enough to take care of herself for the most part and the lodge was just a month or two away from being sold to cover our debts. There was nothing to distract myself with.

“Fuck!”

Maybe I'd just become the crazy guy in town, screaming obscenities at the sky and bemoaning all things Christmas. I turned in another circle and my gaze snagged on the lodge. The wreaths Mamma had hung on every window seemed to mock me with their festive greenery. I was not festive right now and I didn't appreciate innate wreaths trying to force their fucking festivity on me. I stalked over to the building and ripped one of the wreaths off the window. I even tore the red bow off the bottom edge, grinning gleefully at the destruction. Who was fucking festive now, huh?

“You okay, bro?”

I spun to see John walking up the drive. Damn. I hadn't even heard his SUV pull up to the lodge. I'd been too busy scrooging Christmas.

“I’m fucking great,” I growled, trying to remember where I put the ten-foot ladder. That window on the second floor had a wreath on it too.

“Uh, okay.” John came up next to me. I could feel him studying me and I didn’t like it.

“How about you quit staring at me like a lovesick girl and help me take these fucking decorations down, huh?”

John scoffed. “Dude, it’s only December twenty-sixth.”

“So? Christmas is over. Time to rip this shit down and get this place sold.”

“What?” John grabbed my shoulder and turned me around to face him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I sighed. I knew I was being a dick and I couldn’t seem to stop myself. “I can’t make the payments, okay? I’m going to have to sell the place just to get the creditors off my back. The rest don’t know yet, so I’d appreciate you keeping that between us.”

“Oh my God, Ax. I mean, I’d heard rumors, of course. It’s a small town and people talk, but I didn’t believe them.” John shook his head. “There’s got to be a way to save the lodge.”

I wanted to pull my hair out. “You think I haven’t explored every fucking option out there including selling my own kidney? This place is my parents’ dream. My father got sick and I took over, just to run it into the ground. You don’t think I’ve tried everything already?”

“Hey, hey.” John grabbed me by the shoulders and got in my face. He was mild mannered by nature, but we’d never been afraid of calling each other on our shit. And right now, John looked pissed.

“It’s not only your parents’ dream, Havenkirk is what built this town. People who come to ski need a place to buy a beer, grab groceries, see a movie. You go under, the whole town suffers.”

“Not fucking helping,” I managed to ground out between clenched molars.

John shook me. “You’re not listening. The town is invested in Havenkirk. You’re in trouble. Okay, I get that. Ask the town for help, dumbass. Every single person in Snowhaven would jump in to help save the place.”

I shoved his hands off me. “I’m not asking for a handout. I made this mess and I’ll get us out of it, even if it means selling. Maybe there’s a company out there that wants to make this a huge ski resort. Could transform the town in a way we can’t even imagine. Maybe this is for the best.”

John shook his head, looking sadder than I’d ever seen him. “The Lunds no longer running Havenkirk is not what’s best for this town. If you got your head out of your ass, you’d see that.”

“Fuck off,” I snapped, throwing the wreath in the snow and stalking off to the woods. I wasn’t fit to be around anyone at the moment. And I sure as shit didn’t need to hear more bullshit from a guy who hadn’t spent the last year agonizing over this dilemma.

I’d gone over the numbers, looked at alternative uses for this land, mapped out selling off pieces. Nothing would staunch the bleeding enough to save the place. Selling was the only way out that I could see.

And why the hell would a successful country singer—a household name with millions in the bank—make time in her

busy schedule to come see a homeless, broke, grumpy-ass single dad in Snowhaven, Idaho? She should drop me like a worthless, bow-less Christmas wreath. I wouldn't blame her in the slightest. In fact, I'd encourage it. She could do a million times better than me. In the back of my mind I'd always known it. Now I was finally faced with the reality of it.



John Ross: Red alert!

Chief Blade: What's going on?

Carol Ann: More sex? Jeez, these two are busier than rabbits!

John Ross: Not about that, Carol Ann. Bigger and not a guaranteed happy ending. We need to meet up. Everyone available tonight at six?

Hig Lindley: I can open up Rich Grinds. Decaf coffee for all.

Mayor Nancy Haney: I could make that work if I throw a pizza at my teens. They're ornerier than a pack of wolves after practice.

Doc: Should I bring beer too?

John Ross: As much as you can fit in your truck.

Chief Blade: Oh, shit...

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Morgana

“OKAY, got the recording studio booked for when we leave Idaho.” Janna passed me a sheet of paper with her scribbled notes on it. “Mack seems to think that with this buzz going for the Christmas song, if we hit them with a new release of the other song you wrote, we can build hype over you writing your songs again. Which might lead to a whole album, right?”

Stress, the kind that highjacks your heart rate and makes you nauseous, was doing a number on me already. “Janna. That doesn’t sound part time.”

She lifted her head from her phone screen, eyes wide. “Oh, crap. Yeah. I almost forgot about that.”

“Yeah.”

She nodded, eyes glazing over as she thought it through. “Okay, well. We can record the one song, then fly back to Tennessee to meet with Mack. Inform him of your decision. Then we can work out the logistics of putting together an album. Slowly. Part-timey.”

I rubbed my forehead. “There is literally nothing about putting together an entirely new album that I’ve written myself

that is part time.”

“Morgana? Can I ask you a question about our little thing tomorrow?” Ingrid’s sweet voice interrupted. She looked scared to ask me a question. The lady who’d hugged me yesterday and given me a homemade scarf was suddenly too shy to talk to me like a normal person.

Inwardly I sighed. This was not how I wanted my last two days of vacation to go. I wanted peace and quiet and more time spent in Aksel’s bed with his strong arms and dry wit making me feel like everything would just work itself out because we’d will it to be so.

“Sure, Ingrid. You can ask me anything at anytime.” I looked over her shoulder, searching for Aksel. In the craziness of this morning, I realized I hadn’t seen him in awhile and it was definitely past noon.

“Hello? Can someone get my bags before they ice over out there?”

A familiar male voice rang through the lobby, echoing off the river rock fireplace where I currently stood. As usual, his tone was entitled, snotty, and presumptuous, which was how I knew for certain it was him. My heart stopped and then restarted again, anger and disbelief giving me renewed energy.

“Everett Eberhard?” Imogen squealed from somewhere in the lobby.

I pushed past Janna—who’d gone so white I almost lost her entirely to the white cable-knit sweater she was wearing—and marched right up to the unfairly handsome man standing just inside the front door. His jaw could cut glass, but only because he’d had cosmetic surgery, a little fact he didn’t let out. His clothes were impeccable and all wrong for the casual

setting of the lodge. The fucker even had the audacity to be tan from his recent Saint Lucia visit.

Everett's gaze flickered to me, the irritation on his face morphing into a warm smile that might have fooled me a year ago. Hell, maybe even a month ago. Now, I could see that it was fake, the edges straining from forcing it. It was the same smile he gave the camera.

“Darling! I’ve missed you so much and here you are, on this vacation I planned for us, just waiting for me to arrive.” He extended his arms and walked to me, as if expecting a hug or perhaps air kisses.

He was lucky I wasn't wearing my snake-skinned boots with the steel toe or I would have kicked him in the junk by way of greeting.

I held up my hand and kept a solid six feet between us. Didn't need his personality cooties floating over the airspace and infecting me. “What the hell are you doing here, Everett?”

His smile faltered and he dropped his arms. “Oh, sweetheart, are you upset? I can explain all that ridiculousness with Karolyn.”

My eyes felt like they might fall out of my skull. “Explain you dumping me on Instagram right before Christmas and taking her on an exotic vacation and posting incessantly? Well, hell, I actually might want to hear this. For purely entertainment purposes, of course.” I crossed my arms over my chest and waited.

And waited. And waited.

The front door burst open and Aksel stood there, his chest heaving, some of his hair falling in his face, and dirty smudges marking his chest. He looked from me to Everett and his face

took on a hard mask of anger. He looked like he'd just come home from pillaging the land to see a fox in the henhouse.

“Who the fuck is this asshole?” he ground out.

Everett turned fully toward him, giving him a once-over and apparently coming to the same conclusion I had. Everett was a puny little bitch next to the Viking. Everett shifted so that he was next to me, as if thinking I'd protect him if the occasion called for it. He'd never been the smartest of the bunch.

“Aksel, watch your mouth,” Ingrid chastised her son.

“Yeah, Dad. Jeez. Potty mouth much?” Imogen piped up behind me. “It's Everett Eberhard. He was in that movie we saw. You know the one where he was a spy and he had to climb the Empire State Building to—”

“That's enough,” Aksel snapped.

“Everett was just leaving,” I said quietly in the awkward silence, backing away from him and gesturing to the door.

Everett, never one to understand the word no when he heard it, held up his hand. “Actually, I talked to Mack yesterday and he told me about your charity concert tomorrow and I wanted to be here to support you. You know I always support your concerts, smoochie.”

My nose wrinkled. At the hideous term of endearment and his obvious lie. “You've never been to one of my concerts.”

He fluttered his manicured hand through the air. “Be that as it may, I'm here now, darling. For you. For us.”

“Charity concert?” Aksel boomed, cutting off any more of Everett's bullshit.

I flinched, realizing the cat was out of the bag. I'd hoped to spring this on Aksel tomorrow morning, preferably when we were still in bed together and my wandering hands and mouth could soothe away his irritation. Leave it to Everett to ruin something else in my life.

Walking quickly to Aksel, I put my hand on his chest, feeling the rapid fire of his heartbeat. "Your family and I are putting together a little thing for tomorrow. Just some fun for the town."

"Sounds like a great idea. The town would love that," John said from behind Aksel where he'd snuck through the door. He came around to stand next to Janna, his eyes trained on Aksel though.

Aksel's breath was huffing through his nose. He trained his icy blue eyes on me and gripped my wrist. "I said no charity concert."

I swallowed, the realization finally hitting me that Aksel was going to be pissed about it no matter how I chose to tell him. "I know, but we also both know you need this."

"Mack seems to think this place is about to be sold off to the creditors. If anyone can save it, it would be Morgana." Everett, needing to find a way to be the big man on campus when he clearly wasn't, inserted himself in the conversation at the very worst time.

"Sold off?" Ingrid cried.

"What is this about, *sønn*?" Lars asked in a voice I'd never heard from the man. A clap of thunder would have been more gentle.

Aksel flung my hand off his chest, steam practically coming out of his ears. He opened his mouth and his quiet

words, dripping with sarcasm, fell across my skin like a lashing. “Thank you so much, Morgana. You’ve really helped. Why don’t you take your help back to Tennessee, huh?”

“Daddy?” Imogen’s voice was the one that broke me. The wobble in it, complete with a sob at the end. She rushed forward and Aksel caught her, picking her up and walking away from the group.

I slapped a hand across my mouth and paced away to look out the window at the endless sea of snow. Anything to avoid looking at the damage I’d just done to this family. What the hell had just happened? How did everything get so off track in one day? Voices came from behind me, but I couldn’t seem to hear anything but a mad rush of wind in my ears. For the last ten days I’d had such peace. Such relaxation and fun. And then today, all the stress of my real life came rushing back.

With a single hard hit to the chest, I realized I didn’t want this life. I didn’t want the boyfriend of no substance, the constant stress, the social media worries, the scheduling nightmare, the pressure of meeting fans’ expectations. I’d shouldered all that stress for two decades.

And I was done.

All of it—the stress, the nerves, the nausea, the headache—floated away in an instant. The minute I said those words in my head, I knew. In my soul, I was done. If I ever sang another song in my life, it would be on my terms only.

“Morgana, sweetheart. Let’s get out of here, huh? The vibe is all wrong in this place.” Everett bumped my shoulder with his as he stood at the window.

I turned slowly, looking at him one last time and promising myself I would never put up with subpar people in my life

ever again. “Everett, I should never have dated you and I will never date you again. Get the hell out of my sight before I find my snakeskin boots and mess up your pretty tan.”

His jaw dropped. “But—”

“Everett! You have exactly twenty seconds and I’m only giving you that long because I don’t want to have to walk all the way back to my room to get those boots.”

His upper lip curled unattractively. “Fine. I should have stayed with Karolyn anyway.”

I nodded. “You really should have. She’s absolutely beautiful and probably young enough still to put up with your bullshit before she knows better.”

Everett huffed and walked off. He sailed through the front door, and then let out a curse as his designer wool jacket got caught on the deer antlers. Any other time, I would have laughed, but my heart was currently experiencing a nosedive.

I knew what I didn’t want. Sadly, I knew what I did want, but I’d messed that up too. Aksel’s angry face flashed through my brain and I let out a sob. Without a backward glance at everyone who was currently standing around whispering urgently to each other about the shitshow that was my life and now theirs too, I ran to my room and slammed the door. Tears fell down my cheeks so fast I couldn’t swipe them all away.

I knew Aksel. He was angry, yes. But more than that, he was hurt. He used anger as a defense mechanism the way I used overscheduling myself so I never had to focus on my pain points. I paced the room, no longer seeing the fine wood furniture or the crackling fire in the hearth. All I saw was Aksel’s face and the sound of Imogen’s sob. Without even realizing what I was doing, I threw all my clothes in my

suitcases without taking time to fold and hang, zipping them shut and crying the whole time. I actually couldn't remember the last time I'd cried like this. With shaking hands, I pulled up Hig Lindley's contact info and shot him a text, asking him to come to the lodge as soon as possible.

Grabbing the two largest suitcases, I rolled them into the hall, studiously ignoring Aksel's door. He wouldn't want to talk to me right now. He'd need a day or perhaps fifty to calm down first. I wheeled the suitcases to the front of the lodge. Ingrid saw me first, breaking away from Lars to stop my progress.

"Are you leaving?" It might have been my imagination, but there seemed to be new worry lines bracketing her clear blue eyes.

I nodded, looking at her forehead. I couldn't bear to look her in the eyes and watch the disappointment take hold. "Yes, I think that's best. I'm sorry to cancel the charity concert, but I don't think Aksel is going to allow that to happen."

The woman reached out and pulled my hand from the suitcase handle. She waited so long to say something I finally had to look her in the eyes. Her lips tilted up in a soft smile.

"It is okay, *vennen*. He will forgive you, yes? Do not leave."

Another tear escaped the iron fist I had on my tear ducts. "I have to leave. He does not want to see me. Maybe I can come back later and try to apologize."

Lars came up beside his wife and put his arm around her shoulders. "Our son is a prideful man. But he also has a soft heart in that big chest of his. Do not wait too long to come back. Even the softest of hearts can harden."

I nodded, not sure what I could promise them. They'd seen the way he flicked my hand off him, like the idea of me touching him was revolting. I was afraid his heart had already hardened to the point of never letting me in again.

"Thank you for everything. I'll still do what I can to support the lodge."

Ingrid squeezed my hand. "Just take care of you and we will be happy."

These people were too good. Everyone in my life looked to me to support them and yet here they were, in dire need of financial support or they'd lose everything, and they were worried about me instead.

A sob escaped and I ran out the door with my two suitcases racing behind, needing to get outside before I lost it entirely. Janna and John were there, huddled together like two lovebirds next to John's truck.

"Come on, Janna. Let's go," I said through the tears.

Janna broke away from John. "What? I thought we had two more days?"

"I thought we did too, but we have to go. Aksel is never going to forgive me."

"I don't know about—" John tried to say.

The gray SUV pulled up into the driveway, a concerned Hig Lindley behind the wheel.

"We don't even have the studio booked for two more days," Janna interrupted, clearly becoming upset.

Well, join the party. I was standing outside in the snow with tears freezing on my cheeks. Upset was an understatement. Try utterly heartbroken.

“I don’t care, Janna!” My voice was rising, and just like my tears, I couldn’t seem to control it. “Let’s go!”

Janna put her hands on her hips, shaking her head. “No. I’m not going. This isn’t just about you, Morgana. I’ve got two more days with John.”

Anger flared hot like a lifeline, burning away the ache in my chest. “Janna St. Claire, get your ass in the car or you’re fired!”

Janna gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

“I so fucking would! Just try me!” I screamed back.

Janna growled and then grabbed John, dragging him back into the lodge. “Enjoy life without me, Morgana! I quit!” she called over her shoulder, right before the door closed behind her and a wide-eyed John.

I huffed, feeling like I’d just run a marathon and got run over by every single one of Santa’s reindeer. “Fuck!” I yelled into the cold air.

“Now that sounds just like Aksel,” Hig drawled behind me.

I spun around and shoved my suitcases at him. “Don’t say his name.”

“Okay...” He stored my suitcases in the back and climbed behind the wheel like he was dealing with a ticking time bomb. “Where to?”

“Airport.” I couldn’t even look out the window at the lodge. If I saw it disappear as we drove away, I knew I’d break into a thousand pieces and never be able to put myself back together. So I stared at my hands where I was currently

clenching them in my lap so hard my skin was turning white from lack of circulation.

The car ambled down the driveway and I could have sworn I physically felt the increasing distance from Aksel and his family tugging on my heart.

“Didn’t you have five suitcases?” Hig asked from the front seat, studying me from the rearview mirror.

I shook my head. “Don’t be ridiculous. Five suitcases is too much for one person.”

And I meant it. From here on out, I was turning over a new leaf. I was going to get to know Morgana Mavis again. The new and not-quite-improved version. The one that remained heartbroken but went on with her life because that’s simply what she did. I would tuck my heart away and carry on. Always had and always would.

It just seemed to hurt a little bit more this time around.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



*A*ksel

“DAD, WHAT DID MORGANA MEAN?”

Imogen was old enough to sense the tension in the room. Old enough to know that something was very wrong. I had hoped to postpone this conversation until after the New Year, but Morgana and her idiot boyfriend had forced my hand.

I sat on the side of my bed and patted my hand. “Sit with me.”

Imogen squared her shoulders, looking so old and brave I wanted to cry. “Fine, but you better tell me. We don’t lie to each other, Dad.”

That had been one of the first lessons I’d taught my daughter. It was her and me in this great big world and we should never lie to each other. And I wouldn’t. She deserved to know the truth. To prepare herself for the inevitability. She sat next to me and waited patiently. She also knew her father was not a man of many words and sometimes it took me longer than normal to find the right ones.

“The lodge is in debt. That means we owe people money that we do not have. In these situations, it is best to sell the

place to pay back our debt. Morgana had wanted to put on a charity concert to help raise money for the lodge.”

“That’s brilliant!” Imogen bounced, grabbing my hand.

“No, Imogen. It is not brilliant. We do not accept charity. Charity is for families who have lost a loved one. Or experienced a devastating accident. We are simply a family who can no longer stay in business.”

“But...but where is the town going to host Snowmass if the lodge isn’t open?”

I shrugged. “I do not know, but they will figure something out.”

“But where are we going to live?”

I had already given that some thought. “I will find a house either here or in another town in Idaho. A smaller home for us and in a place where I can get hired as a ski instructor.”

There was a knock on the door before Imogen had processed all of that.

“Come in,” I called.

Mamma poked her head inside. “Can we come in and talk as a family?”

Dread and disappointment and failure filled my veins. What a fool I’d been gallivanting around with a celebrity when my entire personal life was in ruins.

“Of course.” I stood and gave Mamma the bed and Pappa the chair.

“Why is this the first we’re hearing about selling the place?” Pappa asked, sitting forward and looking worried. “I knew we had some debts but none too great.”

I folded my arms across my chest and resigned myself to speaking the entire truth, no matter how painful it was. They were my family. They deserved to know everything. I could no longer carry it on my shoulders alone.

“The debts were not so great, but then the black diamond ski lift broke down. They had to basically rebuild the whole thing. They’re not happy about our outstanding bill and have threatened to send it to creditors at the first of the year.”

Ingrid let out a sigh and wrapped her arms around Imogen. “We can sell off some equipment. I have some jewelry from the old country that might be worth something.”

“And I can run a bake sale and Mia will do a lemonade stand! I’m sure she would!” Imogen piped up, such eagerness in her tone it hurt my heart.

I looked over at the two girls in my life. They both had wide blue eyes shining with love and a misplaced belief that I could pull us through this rough patch. It was more than a patch. It was a multi-year-long era of troubles. This lodge had always run just barely in the black, but add in long-term maintenance that finally had to be done and we hadn’t been profitable for a few years now.

“I love you for it, I really do, but this is beyond that.”

My father sucked in a long breath and blew it out. I looked over at him and studied his face. Out of all of them, his health was the one that would suffer the most from the stress. I would speak to Mamma later to remind her to monitor him closely for signs of his heart failing him.

“Aksel, this ski lodge was my dream.”

Shame had my chin dropping to my chest. I’d let down my pappa.

“My dream, Aksel, not yours. I should have sold the place after my heart attack, but I stubbornly could not give it up. I forced it onto you and that was my fault. I’m sorry, *sønn*.”

My head popped up, and I stared at him in disbelief. I came over to his chair and put my hand on his shoulder. “It was my honor to keep your dream alive, Pappa. No apology necessary.”

My father shook his head. “No, Aksel. As your parent, I want *you* to go out and find your dream, not live mine. You and my precious Imogen should be off on your own adventures, not tied to a dilapidated lodge and an old man.”

Imogen slid off the bed and ran over, sitting on Pappa’s lap and throwing her arms around his neck. “We go on adventures all the time. All four of us. We’re like the three musketeers, but four of us. If it were just Dad and me, it would be boring.”

“Hey,” I managed to respond despite my throat closing with emotion. How did the worst conversation turn into my family becoming even closer?

Mamma slid her arm around my waist and rested her head on my shoulder. “Perhaps it’s time for all four of us to go on a new adventure together.”

I squeezed her tight, but couldn’t seem to get my mind to rest with that thought. All I could think about was that they were being too kind. Too understanding. They should be mad, just like I’d been. They should be upset that I’d let this happen. Instead, they were trying to bolster *me*. The one who’d ruined their dream. It made no sense.

“I’ll start looking up ski lodges in Idaho. Maybe there’s one nearby that needs an instructor who curses like a sailor,” Imogen said, sliding off of Pappa’s lap.

“I’ll call that realtor Nancy Haney always talks so highly of,” Mamma said, letting go of me with one last squeeze.

“And I’ll go call some of my old friends in the business. See if anyone is looking to buy a ski lodge, huh?” Pappa stood up and smiled.

They all walked out of my room, chatting amongst themselves like I hadn’t just dropped the death blow. What the fuck was wrong with them? I followed them out, stopping in my tracks when I saw Morgana’s door open. Ignoring my family for the moment and feeling just angry enough to do some damage, I stalked into her room to let her have it. Three of her ridiculous suitcases were on the bed, but there was no sign of the woman herself. I could still smell her perfume, so she couldn’t be far. Ignoring the bed where I’d mistakenly thought we were making love, I marched into the lobby.

“Where is Morgana?” I called to my family.

Mamma turned around and sent the others to the tiny office in the back where I kept the computer. She started wringing her hands together, which I took as another bad sign.

“She is gone,” she said simply.

What? I had just snapped at her merely thirty minutes ago. And her luggage was still here. “Gone?”

Mamma nodded. “Yes. We asked her to stay but she said she felt it was best if she left.”

“But her suitcases are still here.”

“Yes, well, we can ship those to her later.”

I snorted. Just like the celebrity to let the little people do the work because she couldn’t be bothered. “Or we could sell her shit on the internet and save the lodge with the proceeds.”

“Aksel.” Mamma looked disappointed in me. Really? I just told her we were losing the lodge and this is what she chose to be mad about?

“I’ll take care of it for her, not that she deserves it.”

I looked over to see Janna and John sitting on a leather couch in front of the fireplace. “She left you here?”

Janna’s eyes narrowed. “She tried to fire me, so I quit.”

I shook my head. That made no sense. Morgana had always said such great things about Janna, how she couldn’t survive without her. I ran my hands through my hair and pulled on the strands.

“I think even my brain hurts.”

I hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but there it was. My heart felt like it was one giant pulsing bruise. My pride was in tatters and my brain could not compute one more damn thing.

“Anyone up for Broskis?”

John looked at Janna and then back at me. “We’re in.”

I looked over at Mamma. She rolled her eyes, but nodded. “Go. We’ve got Imogen. Maybe you’ll get whatever this is out of your system so you can be the son I know you can be.” She waved her hand around, as if the black cloud I felt over my head was a real thing and she didn’t care for it.

I rode with John and Janna while he promised to be the designated driver. Said Janna and I had more shit to drink away. There was no truer statement. Broskis was packed, considering everyone had the day off after Christmas and most people needed a break from the family by that point. We took seats at the bar, John nursing his one light beer while Janna and I went for the hard stuff.

“Cheers.” Janna and I clinked glasses.

I shot back the whiskey and closed my eyes at the burn. That one was for the look on Imogen’s face when she heard the news about the lodge.

“Another one,” I called to the bartender, barely letting him get his hand off the glass before shooting it back. That one was for my father, letting go of his dream with grace.

The next shot was for the lodge I’d grown up in and the pain of losing it to someone who’d probably tear it down and put up some monstrosity that lacked all charm. All the rest of the shots were for Morgana and the damage she’d done to my heart. The beauty of it was that by the time I could barely stay seated on the barstool, the alcohol had numbed everything. Now I was just drinking to make sure it didn’t come back.

“You two should get married,” I slurred, pointing to Janna and John. Then pointing to the vision of Janna and John next to them. Surely I’d pointed to at least one real person, right? I closed one eye, and sure enough, there was only one Janna and one John. Awesome. Just needed to use one eye the rest of the night.

“Dude, are you winking?” John clapped my on the back, and I nearly slid off the damn seat.

The leather seats were highly polished today. I’d have to talk to Alfie about cutting that shit out. This was a bar. We didn’t need polished seats. We needed peanut shells on the floor and sticky shit we didn’t want to identify.

“I think I lost my best friend,” Janna wailed, slumping against John.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. She’s a weepy drunk?”

John shot me a look but I didn't catch it with my one eye.
"Shut up, Ax."

"No, you shut up." I went to poke him in the chest, but ended up poking Janna in the eye.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry 'bout that." I slid from the barstool and swayed on my feet. "I mean, all I been doin' is saying sorry today." I turned to the bar at large. "Did ya' hear dat? I sorry, erylone! Sorry, sorry, sorry."

"Sorry son of a bitch," someone shouted back.

"Hey! Fuck off!" I shouted back but it came out more like, "Hgh! Fuh f."

"Okay, I think we're done here." John shoved me forcefully back in my seat, but then Janna slumped dangerously and he was busy propping her up. "A little help here, Alfie?"

I heard a chuckle that pissed me off. I tried swinging, but forgot which eye I was using and so both of them were actually closed. I ended up hitting something that hurt my knuckles real bad. After that, everything went delightfully dark and not one part of me felt pain. I forgot all about my worries, my failures, and the mess I'd left of my personal life.



Alfie: Jesus, that went south fast, though I have to say, that Janna girlie can knock 'em back.

Chief Blade: You're lucky Aksel didn't start a fight. Nothing short of my taser can take that boy down.

Hig Lindley: Morgana was just as much of a mess, though it was more weeping and snapping at people.

Carol Ann: Think there's still hope for those two?

Mayor Nancy Haney: I think we need to focus on more important things.

Doc: What's more important than finding true love? (Or really good sex?)

Mayor Nancy Haney: Oh, I don't know. **MAYBE WHAT WE MET ABOUT AT RICH GRINDS?**

Carol Ann: I hate it when she goes full caps lock.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Morgana

“HELLO?”

I didn’t know why I called out when I stepped through the door to my house in Knoxville, Tennessee. No one was there and no one had traveled with me, which might be a first in my adult life.

The heat flipped on with a quiet hum and everything looked the same since the day I’d left. Except it looked all different. All wrong, actually. The decor I’d let my decorator pick out looked like it should be in a magazine spread and yet it lacked all warmth. I had to rub a spot on my chest that ached, wanting a rock fireplace and worn leather couches that sagged in the middle from years of use.

Instead, I let go of my suitcases and walked on stiff legs to my bedroom. Dresses were still laid out on the bed, as if my bedroom was locked in time to almost two weeks ago. The dress I’d worn to the Christmas concert was in a wrinkled heap on the floor. Clearly Fifi had not come back the day I left town to clean up, which was unlike her. In fact, I hadn’t heard from her the whole time I was gone. Warning bells clanged in my

head, but there were so many bells currently clanging I couldn't distinguish them from all the others.

I climbed up on the bed and pulled the side of the comforter over me as I lay down and stared at the wall. When I'd left here to go to Idaho, I'd felt like I was hitting a rock bottom of sorts. I'd been stressed out, disgruntled about the trajectory of my career, and dealing with the public fallout of Everett dumping me. Now that I was back, I realized what rock bottom actually felt like. It felt a lot like giving up. Not caring. Hurting so much that you couldn't be bothered to go on.

I'd had a lot of time to think on the flight home and not one of those thoughts had lifted my dark mood. Mostly I'd chastised myself for all the mistakes I'd made. All the people I'd let influence me and take advantage of me. Then I thought of all the people I'd left behind in Idaho, especially the Viking I'd fallen in love with and then destroyed with a family secret that wasn't mine to spill.

My phone let out a shrill ring, and I fished it out of my pocket to silence it without even looking at the caller identification. Everything could wait. Everything had to wait. I didn't plan on flying back to the recording studio appointment Janna had made in California. I didn't plan on making my own recording studio reservation here in Tennessee. I planned to sit my ass right here for the rest of eternity and sulk.

Wait. I pulled my phone back out and pulled up the grocery delivery app that I used while in town. I needed to order some basic necessities like copious amounts of wine and ice cream. Maybe a bag of salad mix for good measure. I'd let it rot in the refrigerator but at least the grocery delivery person

wouldn't think I was totally letting myself go. With that task done, I lay back and closed my burning eyes.

My phone kept buzzing in my hand, disturbing my ability to veg out and wallow in my misery. With a sigh, I blinked open my eyes and took a look at the screen. Twenty-seven texts from Mack. Jesus. The man was a menace.

I opened the string and ignored most of it, stopping on the picture he attached about half an hour ago. Pinching my fingers, I zoomed in. And then gasped.

“That bitch!”

Fifi Bolden, my stylist, the one currently on my payroll for an ungodly amount of money, was pictured on one of the celebrity gossip sites with her new full-time client, Kat Morris. Kat was an up-and-coming country artist with big boobs and a tiny waist and not one wrinkle or sun spot on her young skin.

I threw my phone across the room and found out that I did, in fact, have more tears left to shed. It felt like everyone was against me. I'd somehow surrounded myself with people who didn't actually care about me. They cared about my money and fame, and when either looked like it might run out, they got out of dodge.

The only people who actually cared about me were Aksel and his family. And I'd ruined that.

I wasn't aware of the days and nights passing. The blackout curtains remained tightly drawn and the hour or the day didn't really matter. I drank wine straight from the bottle, ate ice cream from the carton when my stomach growled, and strummed my sticky fingers across my guitar strings. Chords and lyrics flowed out of me in direct proportion to my tears.

Sometimes I just wailed, other times sweet music came forth like a divine comfort to my battered heart.

At one point, when all the wine bottles were empty and my head was no longer deliciously fuzzy, I forced myself into the shower. Only because I was sick of my own stink. Back in another bathrobe and wet hair streaming down my back, I sat on the floor next to my guitar and looked at all the paper strewn across the room, half- or fully written songs on all of them. Grabbing a clean sheet of paper, I made myself write out numbers one through ten on the side.

“Come on, Mo. You have to have some skills beyond songwriting and singing.”

If my career was to fully tank like everyone around me was predicting, I needed to have a life plan in place. Sure, I had plenty of money saved and invested in various industries to not worry about my income, but I’d go insane without something to do. Too many hours to rehash every second with Aksel and Imogen and then beat myself up for my mistakes. I tapped the pen against the paper and wracked my brain for things I liked to do outside of music. When more than a half hour had gone by and my list was still completely empty, I had yet another existential crisis.

“Okay, fine.” I stood up with the piece of paper and tried to breathe through the panic clutching at the last bit of mental stability I had left. “How about a list of good qualities? Or things that are important to the lady. Maybe we can parlay that into actual skills later.”

Yes, I’d sunk to the level of talking to myself in the third person and plurally.

“Oh! That’s a good quality! I’m creative.”

I wrote that next to number one and then paced the room, hopping over pieces of paper. Surely I could come up with nine more. I was on a roll, baby.

Without thinking about it too much, I wrote family down for number two. I didn't actually have any family, but I wanted one of some kind very much. In fact, that's probably why my staff betraying me hurt so much. I'd begun to view them like family. I blinked away the tears stinging my eyes and wrote out more things I wanted.

Love, the kind that steals your brain and turns your body into a pulsing heartbeat of want. A cold plunge to wake up every cell in my body. A purpose outside of myself. A calendar free from obligations for every second of every day. A life outside of the public eye. A crackling fireplace to end my day. A hug from an old woman. The enthusiasm of a young girl discovering the world around her. The thrill of trying new things I was terrible at.

And then, when the list flowed onto the back of the page, I sat down and did what I did best. I wrote it all in a song so I could sing it to myself in my head any time I wanted. I didn't want to forget anything on this list. Maybe I wasn't anywhere close to achieving these things, but from now on, I would never forget what I truly wanted. No amount of swaying from outside people could deter me from fulfilling this song.

Then I got some water because I was crazy dehydrated.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



*A*ksel

WHEN I WOKE up on the floor of my bedroom with the world's worst hangover and zero recollection of the night before after the third shot with Janna, I had a come-to-baby-Jesus meeting with myself. Sure, I'd hit rock bottom. Sure, my family was upset. Sure, I was a failure in pretty much every category there was for a man to fail in, but no one died. And wasn't that a pisser of a situation to be in? Making yourself feel better about things because no one had fucking died. Shit's gotta be pretty bad.

I pulled off my sweater and eyed the river, barely trickling now due to how cold it had gotten right after Christmas. Jeans in the snow, boots left behind and I was ready for the torture. Cold plunging took some mental power on any given day, but about to puke up whiskey and someone whacking the inside of your skull with an anvil? Pure torture.

With a growl, I raced in, gritting my teeth and reveling in the pain as tiny icicles dug into my skin and made every square inch of my body ache with cold. I deserved this. I deserved to feel the pain of failing. My family was so quick to pump me up, tell me it was okay, and how we'd just move on.

Where was the anger? The pointing of fingers straight at my chest? It seemed like I was mad enough for all four of us.

I'd pay my dues in the icy river to clear my head and then I'd fucking man up. I'd call the realtor to come out and check the place out. I'd start selling off the ski equipment and try to pay off what I could of the debt we owed. Then I'd find a new job and a place to live.

And not at any time during all of that would I allow my brain to drift toward Morgana.

I stood up in the river and threw back my head to howl at the treetops before lunging for the embankment and the towel I left there. Once that was around my waist, my teeth started to chatter. I bounced up and down until blood came back into my extremities.

"You're easy to find when you make so much noise," my father's voice said from behind me.

I turned and saw him picking his way carefully over the rocks to stand in front of me. He was the one who taught me to cold plunge, only giving it up when the doctors said it was bad for his heart condition. My father had already given up so much due to his health, and now I was forcing him to give up the rest.

"Maybe if I get it all out, I won't drink so damn much," I muttered.

Pappa chuckled. "It took both John and Hig to get you inside the lodge. You were singing Morgana's new Christmas song at the top of your lungs."

I cringed, leaning to the side to wring out my wet hair. "I'm sorry, Pappa. That won't happen again."

“Ah, a man needs to blow off steam every now and then.” He batted away my apology. “Hey, listen, I wanted to catch you when Imogen couldn’t hear.”

My stomach, the one that was currently ready to unleash last night’s binge, twisted painfully. “Sure.” I grabbed my sweater and pulled it over my head. I had a feeling I should be at least partially dressed for whatever Pappa had to say.

He put his big hands on my shoulders. The same hands that had taught me how to ski, how to fish, how to do everything. His light eyes locked on mine and didn’t let me look away.

“Your mamma and I have talked. We wish to go back to Norway. Without us here, you and Imogen can have a chance to live your dreams. Go on adventures. Be your own family, you know?”

Shock and anger amped up the nausea. “No, I do not know! Father, no.” I backed away from him and slashed my hand through the air. “No. I do not agree with this.”

My father’s face dropped and so did his gaze. “It is not for you to agree with. The decision has been made. I simply wanted to let you know so you can make plans accordingly.”

Panic pushed all the other emotions to the side. I lunged at him and now I was the one putting hands on his shoulders. “Pappa. I do not accept this. You and Mamma mean everything to me and to Imogen. If you leave, we will be devastated. This family needs to stay together!”

Pappa reached up with one weathered hand and patted me on the cheek. “You have been a good boy, Aksel. You have never kicked us out of the nest to go live your own life, so we will kick ourselves out.” His eyes filled. “It is decided.”

And then he turned and walked away from me, his gait off-balance and his back hunching forward. I knew without a doubt that if my parents went back to Norway, I would not be seeing them again. My father's health was not good and that big of a move would accelerate the end of his life.

I shook my head and grabbed my jeans off the ground. No. I would not accept this. They were not leaving. I would find a way to stop this asinine idea before it got too far. I would speak to Mamma. Certainly she could see the folly of this plan. Once dressed, I marched back to the lodge, determined to make a new plan for my life, one that fit my parents as well. I would make them see. All would be fine.

Imogen slouched through the lobby, headed for the kitchen.

"Hey, *datter*. Would you like to look at houses with me today?" I caught up to her only for her to roll her eyes, step through the swinging door to the kitchen, and let it hit me in the face. Well, that could have gone better.

I pushed the door open and followed her to the island where Dagny was sliding a plate to her. "What a fine good morning that was," I said sarcastically.

"Well, there's nothing fine about it, so why act like it?" Imogen smacked her hand down on the counter and Dagny lifted her eyebrows.

I approached with caution. "There are some challenges, but nothing we can't overcome together."

Imogen sneered at me. "Did you read that on the back of a cereal box?"

I stood up straight. I'd had just about enough. "Imogen. Watch your mouth."

“Why?” She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head back to glare at me. “You’re selling the lodge and making me move from my home. We might go to a different town, so I’ll never see Mia again. And you made Morgana leave too! You ruin everything! You’re the literal worst!”

She stormed out of the room without her breakfast. I stared after her in disbelief. Imogen and I had never had an argument where we raised our voices. Okay, I’d raised my voice plenty of times, but she’d never raised hers. She was too young for this to be the dreaded preteen stage, wasn’t it?

Dagny made some tutting noise with her tongue. “She’s not wrong, no?”

I growled and grabbed a muffin off the counter, stuffing it in my mouth so I wouldn’t say something to make her hate me too. I stormed out of the kitchen, heading in the opposite direction Imogen had taken. She needed some time to cool off and I was finding I did too.

Chief Blade stuck his head through the front door, stepping inside the lobby when he saw me striding through. “Hey, Aksel, just swinging by to make sure you’re still alive.”

I chewed my muffin and frowned. What the fuck was he talking about?

He put his hands on his utility belt and rocked back and forth on his heels. “I helped the boys get you in the truck out at Broskis last night.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah.” He raised his bushy eyebrows. “Based on your ramblings, it’s come to my attention that you have a situation on your hands.”

I gripped the muffin too hard and some chunks broke off and fell to the floor. Had I been talking about Morgana? The lodge? My family? “You’ll have to be more specific, Chief.”

He took a few steps closer, his voice dropping low. “As a kid, I remember my parents talking about your father building the ski lodge. He was some kind of local celebrity around here. The great Lars Lund, Olympic medalist, coming to our tiny town to build his empire.” He shook his head, soft smile on his face as he reminisced. “The whole town came alive because of him. It’s not exaggerating to say that the town became what it is today because of your father.”

I didn’t know what Chief Blade’s aim was with this little chat, but I had enough guilt weighing me down already to never get back up off the floor. But Chief was a good man. I wasn’t going to be an asshole to him. Especially not after he helped me in my intoxicated state last night.

“My father is one of a kind, that’s for sure.”

Chief nodded. “He really is. But so are you, Aksel. You grew up here. The hometown boy left to go to the Olympics and the whole town showed up in USA gear to watch your runs together. Your father is like the godfather of this town, but you’re the local hero. And this lodge is the glue that holds the whole town together. You get what I’m saying?”

The muffin was a balled-up mess of dough in my fist. “Nostalgia won’t pay the bills, Chief.”

He held his finger up, his eyes suddenly laser focused on me. “You know what will though? Running some town-wide fundraisers to save the place.”

I was shaking my head before he’d finished. I quit though when he smacked me on the arm. I stared at him in shock. The

guy had never assaulted me before, though that smack was weak. He'd have to do better if he wanted to actually hurt me.

“If there was a way to save the lodge, would you take it?”

I opened my mouth to argue but he beat me to the punch.

“Or would you hide behind your big pride and refuse it?” He smacked my arm again, and it was starting to piss me off. “This town comes together to save their own. That’s just the way we do things for those we love. You refusing our help is basically turning your back on this town. Saying you’re too good for our help. Is that the legacy you want to leave us with, Aksel?”

He lifted his arm to smack me again and this time I abandoned the muffin to snatch his hand before it touched me. The fucker just grinned.

“There’s the fighter who came from a tiny town in Idaho to take the gold medal.”

I let go of his hand and sucked in a deep breath. I didn’t like him calling me out on my bullshit pride, but I had to admit he was right. Why was I fighting so hard against outside help? Why did I feel like I had to do everything myself? Clearly I couldn’t. The place was in over its head in debt. If asking for help could save the place, could I swallow my pride enough to let it happen?

I stooped to pick up the muffin mess on the floor before Mamma yelled at me for it. Standing back up, I shot a hint of a smile at Chief. Somehow paying off my debts was only half my problem. “You got any sage advice about women?”

Chief backed away, hands up. “Whoa. I don’t go there. Men who’ve been divorced twice aren’t really who you should turn to for advice on women.”

I shrugged. “Might be a good cautionary tale.”

Chief chuckled. “Tell you what, you stick around town and I’ll take you to Broskis to tell you my whole story. Then you can pour me into a truck and take me home.”

I didn’t promise because I sure as hell didn’t know what my future held, but it sounded like something I wanted to do. The beer, the storytelling, and also the sticking around.

Just wasn’t sure how to do all of that.



Chief Blade: I think I got through to him. Or pissed him off. Can never quite tell with that guy.

Carol Ann: He’s got resting grump face, for sure.

Dagny: He smiled a lot more when Morgana was around...

Mayor Nancy Haney: Speaking of, anybody got her number? I want to see if I can convince her to come back and do that concert. That would pull in people from all over the county and be our best bet for raising most of the money we need.

Hig Lindley: I got her number. Just gird your loins. She can be pretty mean when she’s upset...and she’s really upset.

Mayor Nancy Haney: I have two teenagers. I know how to deal with sarcasm and insults. As long as she doesn’t call me “bruh,” I’ll be good.

Alfie: I’m kinda pissed about this current generation twisting things. I might have to change my bar to Bruhskis just to stay relevant.

Carol Ann: You sell alcohol, dumbass. You'll always be relevant.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Morgana

Me: Figured I'd be the mature one and communicate clearly. You're fired.

IT TOOK LESS than five seconds for Fifi to text me back.

Fifi: You can't fire me when I already quit. Check your email.

I scrambled to get to my inbox, scrolling through and not seeing anything from her. Then I checked the junk mailbox and there it was. I cringed, seeing that she'd quit on Christmas morning and I had missed the email. Kind of apropos that it went to junk though.

The hurt, immature side of me wanted to rant and rave and tell her I thought her dresses had sucked, but what was the point? She'd moved on and so should I. Glancing down at my trusty bathrobe, I realized I didn't need a full-time stylist any longer. Essentially, I was retired, right? If you go part-time or shift your job title, does that mean you're retired or is it merely a lateral move?

Yes, those were the thoughts I was having as I contemplated my life while the days between Christmas and New Years marched past, completely uncaring that my world had unraveled. I stuck out my bottom lip in a misguided flare of defiance and lifted the phone back to my face. It only took a shockingly short amount of time to find at least five outfits I didn't already have that showcased a country fringe. I added them to the cart and pressed order. Take that, Fifi. My smug smile felt good for a second, then I realized there was no one left in my life to see it and it faded away.

My fingers itched to text Janna. She was my person in so many ways beyond just a personal assistant. I should have told her that. I should have treated her better. Definitely shouldn't have threatened to fire her. I slumped face-first on my bed. I was an idiot.

My bedroom door burst open and I screamed, flipping over and clutching the lapels of my bathrobe. But it was just Mack, striding into my private bedroom like he owned the place. The lines around his eyes were less evident this morning and there was even a smile on his face. Guess the holiday break had been good to at least one person.

“What the heck, Mack?” I lay back on the bed, trying to slow my rapid-fire heart rate.

“You didn't tell me you were back!” Mack had a seat on my bed, completely unaware of personal space or professional boundaries.

I rolled my head and shot him a dead-eyed glare. “I'm not back.”

The agent I'd had since the very beginning of my career finally paused to study me. The easy smile slowly left and the lines around his eyes were back.

“Start talking. You have something scary going on, I can tell.”

I pushed up to sitting, deciding that if I wanted to be taken seriously, then I needed to have this conversation upright. Preferably not in a robe that had a chocolate ice cream stain on the front, but beggars can't be choosers and all that.

“I—”

Literally nothing came out of my mouth after that. Tears welled up in my eyes and Mack looked even more alarmed. How could I explain all that had happened in the last two weeks?

“What?” He grabbed my arms and gave me a little shake. “Just tell me or I'll assume the worst.”

I batted his hands away and wiped my cheeks. “I want to go part-time or perhaps just write songs.”

Mack's shoulders slumped. “You're having a midlife crisis.”

“No!” Now I was pissed along with being sad and depressed. “I'm tired right down to my pinkie toe, Mack! I need to slow down. Pump the brakes and find myself again. I can't do that when I'm going a million miles a minute. And I need to find a way to give someone down on their luck a million dollars without them noticing.”

Mack blinked. And then blinked again. “Oh shit, you're serious, aren't you?”

“Dead serious.”

He blew out a long breath and rubbed his hands on his suit pants. “Okay.”

I frowned, waiting for the explosion I knew was coming. Not to toot my own horn, but I was Mack's number one client. Me quitting or even going part-time would seriously put a dent in his income. And Mack was most definitely not the type to take that kind of news quietly.

"Okay?" I pushed to my feet and stared down at him. "Where's the cajoling me back into the rat race? Where's the raised voice? The hair pulling? The teeth gnashing?"

Mack stood up too, offering one of his real grins. The type that wasn't there to manipulate someone into doing something he wanted. "These veneers can't handle teeth gnashing."

I rolled my eyes.

"Despite what you might think of me, I want you happy, Mo. When you first came to me with that guitar and a pair of shorts you had to have found at the secondhand store, you said you wanted Entertainer of the Year. We got you that, right?"

I nodded, still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"And when you had that baby sitting on your shelf, you looked at me with designer clothes and plenty of bling on each of your fingers and you said you wanted another one. That's been my entire goal because it was your goal." He put his hands on my shoulders. "If your goals have changed, then my goals have changed. Easy as that."

"Seriously?"

Mack chuckled, squeezing my shoulders. "Seriously. You've made me a rich man, Mo. What more do I need? Somehow, someday, over the years you've made me genuinely like you. I want to see you happy."

I nodded, slowly wrapping my brain around someone in my life actually wanting what I wanted. Actually being there

for me. “I’d be happy if I went part-time. Slowed way down. Got back to making music I love. If it makes me exhausted, I’m not doing it, including Steven. He’s gotta go.”

Mack let me go and grabbed his phone, striding over to the set of chairs by the broad window with views of the trees and just a hint of a river winding through. He had a seat and gestured to the other chair. “Come on. Let’s fire Steven and map out a schedule that works for you.”

And we did. Amongst the arguing over records, appearances, concerts, and scheduled vacations and downtime, we mapped out a plan that lit a fire in my belly once again. My heart was still a tangled, bleeding mess, but the rest of me was energized.

When both of our stomachs were growling and the sun had shifted far to the west, we put our phones down. I was beyond happy with how this was going. Perhaps I could manage to find some happiness in this industry still.

“I wrote some songs,” I said coyly.

Mack looked around at all the papers strewn across my floor. “I was assuming that, but didn’t want to press.”

I stood up and grabbed my guitar, shifting through the papers with my foot until I found the one I wanted. “I think the biggest part of what makes me happy is the songwriting. I wrote this one, but I don’t want to produce it.”

This song was about losing someone you never had. It was about Aksel and there was no way I could rip my heart out of my chest every time I was forced to sing it at a concert or an appearance. Leave that to someone else.

“Sing it for me?”

I nodded and sat back down next to Mack with my guitar. I strummed out the first bars and then launched into it, fumbling with a few of the notes, but getting the gist of it. By the time I finished, Mack was at the edge of his seat, eyes sparkling.

“It’s perfection, Mo. I already know of a singer who’d snatch that up.”

My heart let out a tiny lurch of a heartbeat, trying to strum up some enthusiasm for what I knew would be a hit song for someone else.

“There’s a difference in your songwriting when you’re writing from the heart versus writing to win that award. Focus on the heart, Morgana.”

Mack’s compliment brought tears to my eyes. “I tried to focus on my heart and it got broken.”

Mack put his hand on mine where it lay on the neck of my guitar. He gave it a companionable squeeze. “I can’t help you with that. My own love life is a mess, but I do know if the guy who broke your heart let you go, he’s an absolute fool.”

I shot Mack a sad smile. No, Aksel was no fool. All the blame was on me and I had to live with that. Perhaps some good had come of everything though. Maybe one day I’d look back on this Christmas and smile warmly, thinking about how a Viking from Idaho had helped me turn my professional life around.

“I don’t mean to push, but let’s get you in a recording booth tomorrow to lay that one down. I can farm out the track and hopefully have it sold before the New Year.”

And there he was. Mack, the agent, was back.

“Okay. Let me know what time so I can actually take a shower and look presentable.”

Mack wrinkled his nose. “That would be nice, yeah.”

I smacked his arm and walked away to pick out my fringiest outfit.



A knock on my door interrupted me in the middle of a new song later that night, this one slightly less dark than the rest I’d been creating. I figured it was Mack, though knocking wasn’t his style. Only a few people had keys to my house: him, Janna, and Steven the masochist.

“Come in!”

The door opened and Janna stuck her head in. My breath caught in my throat and my eyes filled with tears. She looked like she’d been having a rough few days just like me. I put the guitar to the side and jumped to my feet.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” she said back, coming in and closing the door behind her.

“I’m so sorry,” I blurted out. Janna sucked in a deep breath and I took the opportunity to say the things that had been swirling in my head the last few days. “I was an absolute idiot to threaten you. I was distraught and took it out on you which was not fair. You’re not just my assistant, you’ve become my best friend, Jan. I totally understand if you can’t forgive me and never want to work with me again, but I can’t live with myself if we can’t at least try to be friends again.”

Janna came closer. “I had some things planned that I intended to say to you.”

I put my arms out to the side. “Hit me with them. I deserve it.”

Janna’s face crumpled, and before I could blink, she was pulling me into a tight hug. “I can’t now that you apologized so nicely!”

I hugged her back. “I can take back the apology if you want to say your things.”

Janna just added a blubbery laugh to the tears. “No! Just don’t be mean to me ever again.”

Another piece of the puzzle that was my life came together. Janna was back. “I promise you I will never be mean to you. Maybe a little testy because that’s just who I am, but never mean.”

Janna pulled back, looking a wreck, but a happy one. “How about I be your assistant and your best friend?”

I smiled, face nearly splitting. “Sounds perfect, but only if you accept a raise.”

We hugged on it, but this time when Janna pulled back, she looked upset again. “I miss John.”

The breath whooshed out of my body. I felt that statement from my toes to the top of my head. “I miss Aksel.”

Janna pushed her hair behind her shoulders. “What are we going to do?”

I hadn’t quite figured this part out, but I’d received a text today that had set the wheels in my brain turning.

“I think I owe the people of Snowhaven a concert.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



*A*ksel

IMOGEN IGNORED me with the ferocity of a preteen who'd had her feelings hurt. Mamma kept giving me sad, searching looks. Pappa shot me the kind of brave smile and thumbs-up that made me want to level the ski lodge with my bare hands. When I went into town to grab some more flour for Dagny and to scope out the realtor's office, everyone gave me a wide berth, having heard through the rumor mill that I was "in a mood."

Sadly, I was not in a mood. I wasn't in a funk or having a moment.

I was fucking pissed.

And if I was truly honest with myself, I was hurt, bordering on heartbroken. I'd somehow fallen for the country princess. I knew right from the start she'd break my heart, and I'd been correct. One visit from her boyfriend and she'd spilled my secret like she had no heart inside that chest of hers. Which is why I told her to leave. She'd never love me back the way Imogen and I needed. She had to leave so I could put my own heart back together without her throaty temptress voice pulling me back in. I'd mistaken a goddess of music with a

warm-blooded woman who had the capacity to fall in love with a down-on-his-luck man.

“Aksel?” Mamma’s voice broke me out of my thoughts.

I’d been scrolling through job openings, most of which did not require Olympic-level skiing skills. More like data entry and other soul-sucking requirements. Mamma stuck her head in my door and glanced down quickly at my ancient laptop before studiously ignoring it.

“Doc is here. Said he needs you.”

I frowned. Why the hell would Doc need me? Surely if he’d been at Broskis the other night and I’d said or done something in my drunken state to offend the man, John would have told me. Plus, I actually liked Doc, despite him bailing on playing Santa this year. I figured I’d be a lot like him once I got old. He ran the local auto repair place, ornery, but funny as hell.

I shut the laptop and slid my feet into a pair of boots, leaving them unlaced to clomp out to the lobby to find Doc. He stood by the hearth, holding his grungy baseball cap in his hands while he stared at the flames.

“Doc? Everything okay?” I asked, coming up alongside him.

He startled and then grinned, showing off that missing tooth in the front. He’d famously lost it in an altercation with a bighorn sheep. No one seemed to have the exact details, but ol’ Doc always carried a shotgun in his truck now.

“Oh, I’m fine, Aksel. Just dandy.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, studying the man to see why I felt like his words were a complete lie. “Okay...”

Doc nodded, that cap going round and round in his hands.
“Just dandy.”

“Cut the bullshit, Doc. Why are you here?”

Doc lost the fake grin and threw his hat on the ground.
“I’m no good at this, okay?”

I dropped my arms. I didn’t have time for this. I had a life to put together and a broken heart to ignore. “Good at what exactly?”

Doc threw his hands out wide. “You need to get your shit together, Aksel.”

I blinked. “Did you just read my mind?”

“I sure hope so, because you really screwed up.”

“I’m aware,” I drawled, wondering why Doc was so worked up over my shortcomings.

Doc stooped down and scooped his hat off the floor, then had to hike his jeans back up to his thick waist. “You young kids just don’t get it.”

“I’m forty-one, Doc.”

Doc snorted like a goddamn horse. “Exactly. Just a kid. You think you have all the time in the world to get things right, but you don’t. You think ‘to hell with her, I’m better off without her’ and you just get busy at some job that numbs your brain and steals your days and pretty soon you lift your head up and your damn knees hurt just climbing out of bed and you’ve lost all your hair and you’re so damn lonely you wonder why you’re even still living!”

My eyes went wide. “Doc...”

“No! Don’t try to tell me I’m overreacting. I’m the only one with any goddamn sense around here and I’m too old to enjoy this newfound intelligence. So listen real good and maybe you can avoid my mistakes. I was engaged once, did you know that?”

I shook my head. I actually hadn’t known that. I thought he’d been a grumpy single guy his whole life.

“I was too young and stupid to think she’d want to build a life with a lowly car mechanic who could barely scrape enough pennies together to buy her a ring that didn’t turn her finger green. I blew up the relationship rather than have her do it for me. Ended up with the same result: she was gone. And I’ve been lonely every damn day since then.”

I could relate. “I’m sorry to hear that, Doc.”

He swiped his cap through the air. “Heard she got married a few years later and had a bunch of kids and now grandkids just east of Boise. I’m happy for her while being perpetually pissed off at myself. That’s no way to live, let me tell you.”

I nodded, irritated that he was telling me this story because of Morgana leaving like she did. I didn’t like my friends and neighbors knowing my business but that was a small town for you. I couldn’t blame him for wanting to dispense some hard-earned wisdom, but I didn’t have to like it.

“Well, thanks for that, Doc. I’ll keep that in mind.”

He studied me, the bushy gray eyebrows above his faded blue eyes drawing together. He must not have liked what he found because he snorted again.

“Listen, I repair cars all day every day. I know when something’s broken, and you’re all fucked up, kid. Swallow your pride, get your head screwed on straight, and drop to your

knees to beg that woman to come back. The details of this life don't matter, but if your heart is off, everything is off. You got me?"

He didn't wait for an answer, just walked off, nodding goodbye to Mamma, who stood over by the front desk, shamelessly eavesdropping.

"Did you get all that or should I write it down for you?" I snapped, being the asshole I was known for. The difference was this was my mamma.

She lifted a single eyebrow, looking none too pleased with me. "You disappoint me, Aksel."

And then she, too, spun on her heel and walked out on me.

I rubbed a spot over my chest, feeling like I'd truly hit rock bottom and had no one to blame but myself. My life was in shambles, my family couldn't stand me, everyone in town avoided me when they weren't trying to beat me over the head with the life-lesson stick, and my heart felt like it might not recover.

I slumped down into the leather couch, letting the sights and smells of the familiar lodge burrow in deep. I'd grown up in front of this hearth, fell asleep on these couches before Mamma carried me to bed. Those hills had been where I'd learned to ski. I'd chosen to raise my daughter in this same place.

This land was my home through and through and yet all I could think about were the places where Morgana had been. The exact stone on the hearth where she'd sat and played that first song. The couch we'd sat on and held hands for the first time. The river where she'd cold plunged with me, her stubborn nose in the air. The hot tub that had seen her

delicious body. The floor that held her scribbles and notes and lyrics. The nail above the front door that hung the mistletoe that got her to kiss me.

The details of this life don't matter, but if your heart is off, everything is off.

“Fuck,” I muttered, dropping my head into my hands and staring down at the wood floor. Doc was right. I was all fucked up and kept trying to stay busy working on all the little details. The only thing that could help was addressing the matters of the heart.

I stayed on that couch for the next several minutes that turned into an hour. Ideas and words, apologies and commands, begging and prideful requests...they all blended together until I couldn't figure out what to say. How to reach across the country and talk to the one woman who held my heart hostage in one of her many suitcases.

I pulled out my phone and scrolled to Morgana's name. I couldn't seem to get my finger to hit the giant green button. I knew whatever I managed to squeeze past my lips would be wrong. My words were always wrong, especially when talking to the woman who made beautiful music with hers. So I resorted to a text.

Me: I really wish we could have gotten to talk before you left. Yes, I know I told you to leave, but since when do you do what I tell you?

I hit send before I could overthink it. No answering bubble appeared. After another hour of staring at my phone screen and googling how to delete a text message after you send it, I shut my phone off and made myself go back to job hunting on my laptop.



“What the hell is all this?”

I wasn't in the best of moods, which was like saying the river was cold this time of year. No shit.

Pappa slapped me on the back, looking quite dapper in a dark gray sweater. Pierce Brosnan had nothing on my father. “The town has come out to help us, Aksel. This is what a community does. Remember after my heart attack?”

I looked out at all the people I knew, setting up tables and laughing as they placed their wares out for display. The space heaters were pumping out enough hot air to thaw the snow all the way across the front of the lodge. I hadn't gotten around to taking all the window wreaths down, so the place still looked quite festive.

“I remember visiting you in the hospital, yes.” That had been one of the worst days of my life. Right up there with the day Milana had walked out and left me and Imogen behind. Add Morgana's face when I told her to leave. That day was at the top of my shitty-days list.

“Yes, and when I came home, someone different showed up at the house at five o'clock every night to bring us dinner. They kept it up for almost two solid months.”

I looked over at my father to see his eyes shining as he gazed out at his community. “I don't remember that.”

“A town always has each other's back.” Pappa finally looked over at me. “You remember donating half of your

sponsor money to Carol Ann's daughter when she got the breast cancer diagnosis?"

I shrugged that away. That had been years ago and back then money hadn't been tight. Donating it was an easy decision. "It was nothing."

"It's not nothing. It's community. Give and take. That's how humans thrive."

I nodded, knowing that my views had already started to change. If this fundraiser could help pay some debts and help my parents to stay in Idaho, then I was all for it. My parents deserved to stay with these people they'd known practically their whole adult lives. It wouldn't save the lodge, but it might make the move a little smoother.

"Speaking of thriving," I started, staring at a spot in the snow. "I texted Morgana. She hasn't texted back."

Pappa clapped me on the back. "Have faith, *sønn*."

He walked off, shaking hands and giving hugs to everyone he passed by. I wished I could be that easygoing, that well-liked by others. I just didn't have it in me to smile so damn often, but for the first time in a long time, I at least wanted to try.

I turned around to head back inside the lodge, figuring the last thing this fundraiser needed was my black cloud, when I heard a voice call out above the rest, stopping my feet and my heart.

"Morgana!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Morgana

IT WAS ONLY an inkling when the plane landed. Then the ride over in Hig's SUV with the trees whipping by and the glimpses of the snowy mountaintops made the inkling more of a rushing river. Seeing all the people of Snowhaven in front of the ski lodge turned it into an avalanche.

I missed this place.

For the first time in forever, a place had captured my heart and made me feel at home.

The crowd of people all turning in my direction and tossing out hellos and hugs like we were the best of friends finally parted and there he was.

Aksel.

In my favorite white cable-knit sweater, a pair of jeans, and his fancy black boots. His hair was loosely pulled back, a strand of his golden hair falling over his chiseled cheekbones. He was all kinds of gorgeous and familiar, but it was his eyes that had me frozen in place. They were searching me, up and down, before landing on my face and saying all kinds of things I was hoping wasn't just my wishful thinking. The fire that

snapped at me was gone, replaced by a warmth that felt like the world's greatest hug.

“Morgana! You're back!” Imogen came squealing out of the lodge, coming in so hot she nearly bowled me over when she hugged me. I wrapped my arms around her and tore my gaze from her father.

“Pretty sure we planned a concert, right?”

Imogen raised her head and beamed a toothless smile at me. She'd lost another one in the short time I was gone and I found myself about to cry over missing that precious moment. “I knew you'd come back.”

And then the tears did come, because this little girl looked at me like I'd hung the moon when I hadn't taken her own feelings into consideration. I didn't deserve her adoration. In my own distress I'd left without saying goodbye.

I crouched down so that we were looking at each other, face to face. “Imogen, honey. I'm sorry I left like that. I promise you I will never leave without saying goodbye ever again. Do you forgive me?”

“Of course I forgive you. Dad makes me mad too, so I get it.” She rolled her eyes and I pulled her into a hug, willing my tear ducts to quit their leaking. My heart squeezed in my chest. I'd somehow fallen in love with this little girl too.

“Imogen?”

I heard his deep voice, the timbre of it making my whole body shiver. It had only been a week and I'd missed everything about this grumpy Viking. We both looked up. Aksel held out his hand for Imogen.

“May I speak to Morgana?”

Imogen took his hand and I stood up. “Sure, but only if you’re nice to her.”

Aksel looked like he might pop a blood vessel with how hard he clenched his jaw. “I’ll be nice,” he managed to promise.

“Lars just put some logs on the fire inside.” Carol Ann wagged her eyebrows, shamelessly eavesdropping. “Bet it would be a nice, private area to talk.”

“Will you allow me ten minutes?” Aksel wasn’t barking orders or calling me *woman*. I must have lost my mind as I seriously missed his grumpy nature.

“Sure.” I fell into step next to him, wishing there weren’t at least two dozen sets of eyes on us as we walked into the lodge.

“Welcome home, sweetheart.” Ingrid pressed a quick kiss to my cheek as I passed her. I squeezed her hands and shot her an apologetic smile. I had apologies to extend to her too. I’d left everyone without a concert to help save the lodge. Not exactly my finest moment.

Aksel grabbed the deer antlers and held the door for me. I didn’t dare look up to see if anyone had replaced the mistletoe. Now was not the time for that. We already knew how compatible we were when it came to the physical side. It was everything else that needed work.

The fire was indeed roaring, the snap and crackle of the wood a cozy backdrop to what was sure to be an uncomfortable conversation. I had a seat on the leather couch directly in front of the hearth and waited while Aksel got settled next to me. He was a big man and this couch wasn’t

built for him. His knee pressed into mine and I rejoiced in the feeling. God, I'd missed this man.

“Aksel.” I couldn't wait to spit out everything that had been spinning around in my head. “It took seeing my life's choices hurt you and your family to make me realize what they'd been doing to me. I'm sorry you were the collateral damage necessary for me to wake up. To make changes. To take my life back. I've been letting everyone else run my life for so long I didn't know how to run it myself. And part of taking my life back is being honest with how I feel about things. I love you, Aksel. I didn't want to.”

Aksel snorted and started getting antsy, but I had so much more to say. I gripped his hand and held it on his thigh, needing him to really hear me.

“I didn't intend to fall in love with the grumpiest asshole I'd ever met and yet here I am, stripped down to a simple woman, no cheering fans, no money to be made, no awards on my shelf...just showing my heart to a man and hoping he can find a way to eventually forgive me.”

I found I was breathing hard. Telling the truth and being vulnerable wasn't easy.

“Are you done?”

I searched my heart and realized that I was, in fact, done. “I think so. For now. But I reserve the right to—”

“Got it, woman,” Aksel barked.

I smiled so wide my skin hurt. This, well, this was familiar. Aksel squeezed my hand.

“Wait here.” And then he got up, leaving me by myself on the couch, my heart on the table while he walked away and left me hanging. I died about three long and painful deaths on that

couch before he was back with a long, flat box with a bow on top. He placed it on my lap and sat down next to me again.

“Open it.”

I blinked, wrapping my brain around the fact that he'd gotten me something. Here I thought he was unaffected by my declaration of love and was trying to find a way to tell me to leave.

“Well, hold on. Maybe I want to take it all in.”

Aksel scrubbed his hand across his face. “For fuck's sake, woman, open the damn box.”

I huffed, not offended in the least. Aksel had gotten me a gift and I was going to savor that. I pulled the lid off and pulled apart the tissue paper to find a suede turquoise dress. Grabbing the shoulders of it, I lifted the dress out of the box and gasped. There was fringe along the bottom hem and across the entire front of the wrap dress.

“What...what is this?”

I felt Aksel studying me. “I have been searching for a job. A place to live. You know, important things. And yet I found myself buying a dress online. For you.”

I crushed it to my chest, tears welling up. “I love it.”

Aksel looked uncomfortable. “I knew you would. I had to buy it for you.”

“Why?”

Aksel took the dress from my hands, threw it in the box, and placed it on the floor at our feet. Then he took my hands in his. “Because we're not done.”

Hope pressed against my ribs so hard I couldn't breathe. "We're not?"

"Hell no. I thought I wasn't good enough for you. That you couldn't possibly fall for a single dad about to lose his whole life." Aksel dropped my gaze and I wanted to wrap him in my arms until he understood I loved him beyond all that. I'd been where he was, and God willing, it was only temporary. Everyone deserves love, even in their worst hour. "Still can't believe it, but what I do know is that I love you too."

"Aksel," I whispered, so happy to know he felt the same.

"I'm rude most of the time, I'm not a morning person until I've gotten in the ice, I do not possess a filter on my mouth, I'm not even particularly jovial unless I'm forced to play Santa, and I raise my voice more often than I should. But I also will never let anyone steamroll over you, including myself. I'll give you all the space you need to create your art because the world needs that. The world needs your voice and your words to remind us of the light in the world. Otherwise, we'd all just be grumpy old men like me."

Tears were slowly rolling down my cheeks and I didn't even pull my hands away to wipe them. Aksel wouldn't hold my crying against me. He'd tease me, sure, but then he'd tell me all the reasons he loved my tears while he undressed me and showed me in a very physical way how much he liked me, tears and all.

"I kind of like your grumpy-old-man act."

One side of Aksel's mouth pulled up into a grin. "That's because you're a sick puppy."

I sat up straight. "Oh! Speaking of, don't kill me, but I brought a labradoodle puppy with me on the plane. For

Imogen.”

Aksel screwed up his face. “Why the fuck would you do that?”

I shrugged. “Every little girl deserves a puppy to grow up with. And get this! His name is Randolph, which is—”

“Wolf in Norwegian,” Aksel finished for me.

“Yes! How cool is that?”

Aksel sighed but it wasn’t one of his pissed-off sighs. More like resigned to the chaos. “We will speak of this later.”

“Good, because I promised the town a concert and I need to go put on this dress.” I let go of his hands and stood. He stood up quickly, looking confused.

“Right now?”

“Yeah. Didn’t Mayor Nancy tell you?”

Aksel looked pissed again and I wanted to pull him to my old room and get him naked and do dirty things to him that would wipe that frown right off his handsome face. Sadly, there was not enough time for all that. Yet.

“Tell me what?”

I smiled and picked up my new dress. The boots I was wearing would look amazing with this color. “That they invited me back to do a concert, and I said yes because I was already at the airport headed back here.”

Aksel snagged my hand when I turned to go to my old room. “Hey. Where does this leave us?”

I shrugged, feeling pretty confident about where my life was headed. Aksel loved me. What was there to worry about?

“You said it, Viking. We’re not over. We’ll figure it out. Just like the lodge.”

Aksel tugged on my arm, pulling me into his chest. “I’ll figure it out in time, but I can’t live without you, woman.”

I grinned, looking up at the man who’d irritated me so much just a few weeks ago. I felt light as a feather, knowing my future held more of Aksel and Imogen and Ingrid and Lars. They were the trophies I needed in my life, not to collect dust on the shelf, but real live people to love. “And I can’t live without you.”

Aksel reached around and smacked my ass. “Now hurry up and get in that dress and do your concert so I can get my hands under that fringe quicker.”

I lifted up on my toes and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I love you.”

Aksel nipped at my bottom lip, his big hands grabbing my ass and squeezing. “And I love you. So fucking much.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



*A*ksel

MORGANA HAD ME STARSTRUCK. I knew the firecracker who cornered me on my shit. I knew the woman who wanted to sleep in and wear a bathrobe all day. I knew the artist who lost track of time with a guitar in her hand, creating music that spoke to my soul. I knew the sweetheart who made my daughter promises and told me she loved me with tears streaming down her cheeks. But now I knew Morgana Mavis, the performer.

She strutted across that gazebo stage like she owned the damn world, inciting crotchety residents I'd known my whole life to stand on their feet and dance. People had come from all over the county and the next one, thanks to Mayor Nancy and her crew. They'd put out a social media post about Morgana putting on a charity concert and the people had come. I'd literally done nothing. In fact, I'd done everything to stop this from happening, and yet here I was, standing off to the side of the gazebo watching the woman I love put on a show that blew my damn mind.

Morgana sang for over an hour and, even then, stayed for three encore songs. When the crowd chanted for her to sing

another one, I mounted the two steps to drag her off, ever her protector. But she just smiled at me, clearly energized by her performance.

“Mind if I borrow Imogen?” she asked, microphone behind her back as she spoke just to me.

I looked over at my daughter in the front row, her eyes looking up at Morgana with hero worship. I gave a nod and Morgana reached out her hand to her.

“Come play with me!”

Imogen squealed and jumped away from my parents, running up the stairs and hugging Morgana.

“I have one last song—and I mean it this time! Imogen Lund is going to help me on the strings.” Morgana handed her guitar to Imogen and showed her which chords to play.

Imogen studied her fingers like her life depended on it, but she managed to strum out one chord and then the other. When she had a rhythm down, Morgana launched into a song I’d never heard. Apparently the crowd hadn’t either because they weren’t singing along. They were, however, swaying side to side and had their phones overhead, recording the whole thing. I tried to melt into the shadows in the back of the gazebo, but halfway through the song about unexpected love, Morgana grabbed my arm and dragged me to the front.

With my daughter playing the guitar and Morgana singing in the gazebo my father’s best friend had built, I leaned down and placed a kiss on Morgana’s lips because I couldn’t wait any longer. She missed a line of the song, but the wild explosion of cheers from the crowd made it worth it. Plus, Morgana looked up at me similar to how Imogen looked at

her. I didn't deserve her adoration, but I was highly motivated to be a better man who did.

Morgana ended her concert with so much cheering and whistling I thought I might lose my hearing. I felt like I'd run a marathon and all I'd done was watch her sing. How did she do this night after night for close to two decades? Imogen put the guitar down and stood next to me, her arm around my waist. The golden-haired puppy I never wanted and probably would come to love broke free from Mamma and joined us in the gazebo. Morgana wouldn't let us hop down from the steps, instead keeping us there with her while the crowd cheered, like a little family unit.

She and I hadn't worked out all the details of what this would look like, but there was no way in hell I was letting this woman go without trying everything in my power to keep us together. By the time I got Morgana safely back in the lodge and away from her fans, it was way past Imogen's bedtime.

"Dad," she whined. "It's still Christmas break. There is no bedtime."

"Oh really?"

"Duh."

I opened my mouth to argue this ridiculous logic, but Mayor Nancy swept through the front door, Carol Ann hot on her heels.

"I've got a total!"

Morgana had kicked her boots off, but she was still sporting the dress I'd bought her. "How'd we do?"

Mayor Nancy held a piece of paper in front of her like we were at some important award show. "The grand total of

tonight's donations from the craft sale and the concert are ninety-five thousand dollars!"

Imogen screamed and Morgana jumped up and down. My brain couldn't compute the number. I snatched the piece of paper from Nancy and read through the line items. Sure as Santa was jolly, the total was ninety-five thousand dollars, nearly enough to pay off the company who fixed our lift.

Morgana grabbed my arms and spun me around, excitement and worry mixing on her face. "Is it enough to stay? Enough to at least make a dent in what's owed?"

I nodded, still stunned. "It'll pay off most of the lift costs. I'm not sure about the rest, but I imagine we have a chance now."

Morgana's face blossomed into the widest, happiest smile I'd ever seen. And then I couldn't see her well because my eyes were malfunctioning. She pulled me into a forceful hug and it felt like she might be crushing my chest. I was overwhelmed and pretty sure I didn't deserve Morgana, but was bastard enough to want to keep her for myself.

"I love you, woman," I whispered in her hair. She only held me tighter.

Imogen ran around the lobby with the new puppy, both of them so hyper I feared they'd never go to bed. Mayor Nancy and Carol Ann stood there with my parents, watching us celebrate.

I kept my arm around Morgana and pulled her to my parents. "Will you stay? If I can get the rest of the debt covered, will you stay?"

Pappa, with his arm around Mamma, nodded. "We will stay if you want us still. It should be your choice, *sønn*."

I looked down at Morgana and knew my answer. “Please stay. We’re family.”

My parents launched themselves at us and Imogen joined the mix with a squeal. The puppy barked its head off at all the noise. Carol Ann finally broke up the group hug and picked up Randolph.

“There’s a few people outside who wanted to talk to you, Aksel.”

As a unit, we moved to the door after Morgana slid back into her boots. I had a feeling I wouldn’t be letting Morgana out of my arms for a very long time. This woman had made the impossible possible, a gesture I would never forget. She was selfless in a way I could stand to learn from.

Mayor Nancy flung open the front door and there stood half the damn town. They let out a cheer when they saw us in the doorway. Chief Blade came forward, apparently the spokesperson for the group.

“Morgana, thank you for coming back and putting on the concert. We know our little fundraisers can’t do nearly as much as you can, so we appreciate the help. You see, the thing is, the Lunds are our family. We’ve all grown up together and the lodge has brought business into our little town. And without the charm of the small town, the lodge might not attract as many skiers. We have a symbiotic relationship.”

“Seriously, Chief? Symbiotic?” Carol Ann groused from behind me.

Chief cleared his throat. “What I mean is, we’re not letting them go without a fight. I know it’s going to take more than one fundraiser to save the place, so we’ve been talking out here about how we can put on a series of fundraisers over the

next year to get you over the hump. Aksel, will you let us do that?”

I looked around at all the happy, hopeful faces behind Chief Blade. People I'd grown up with. People that depended on the lodge. People who loved my family. How could I not accept their help?

“Of course. But I think we should try to work on townwide campaigns to drive more tourism. That would help everyone's business, right?”

“Actually.” Hig Lindley pushed his way through the crowd to stand next to Chief Blade. “I have a business plan here you might want to look at. Goes along the lines of what you're talking about.”

I nodded, feeling odd about talking so freely about my financial troubles, but loving that I could trust the town I'd grown up in to have my back. “I'd love to.”

Mayor Nancy pushed out of the doorway and addressed the crowd in her booming voice. “That's it, then, folks. Our Christmas miracle has arrived in fringe and cowboy boots. The Lunds and the lodge are staying!”

The townsfolk went crazy and I had one of those moments where you want to freeze time and tuck away the memory to view years later. I'd been against it, but everyone had trudged on anyway, going around me to save the lodge. And I was damn grateful.

Everyone began to disperse after shaking our hands, clapping us on the back, or pulling us into hugs. Hig stayed behind, pulling me and Morgana aside.

“I didn't want to go into the details in front of everyone, but I have deep enough pockets to make an offer. What if you

bring me on as a partner and we make this place both a ski and a hunting lodge? All my country club friends are into hunting these days and we could accommodate both here. With a big enough capital infusion, we could add some amenities.”

“A spa, perhaps?” Morgana drawled. I snorted, but the idea was a damn good one.

Hig handed me a folder. “Take a look at my offer. When you’re ready, we can meet up and discuss.”

I studied the man I’d come to know the last few years and considered a friend. “You have enough money to do this?”

Hig shrugged. “Don’t want it getting around, but I’m a trust-fund baby. And that trust fund was massive. I buy businesses to turn them around and this lodge has so much potential. I have no interest in running it day to day, but I’d love to see it thrive.”

“Why would you do that?” Morgana asked. It was a fair question.

Hig looked out over the group of familiar people all scattering to their cars. “Snowhaven has become the home I never had. I’ve come to realize that home and family and belonging matter so much more than the money. So, I’ve dedicated my life to putting it to good use.”

I had newfound respect for my friend. “And that fancy car,” I teased him.

Hig shrugged, but there was a grin on his face. “I do like a fancy car, but I use it as the town rideshare, so it’s put to good use.”

I stuck out my hand and he shook it. “Thank you for the offer. I’ll read it over right away and call you to discuss.”

Hig's grin turned sheepish. "One more thing. Can I get a selfie with you, Morgana? There's this woman I've been talking to online and she loves your music."

Morgana laughed and posed next to him while I rolled my eyes. "Seriously? You want a selfie with my woman to get laid?"

Hig tucked his phone back in his pocket. "Hey, I'm pushing mid forties. I gotta pull out all the tricks to find love at my age."

I put my arm around Morgana and inhaled deep, just to surround myself with her scent. "You should try being rude. Worked for me."

Morgana jammed her boot heel down on my foot. Hig laughed and took off. Mamma said she'd take care of tucking in Imogen. We were going to let the dog sleep with her since she had no school the next day. Pappa and Dagny turned off all the lights and locked the doors. Which left Morgana and me alone.

I pulled her into the room she'd had before she left, the fire already burning hot thanks to my father and his foresight. My hands cupped her cheeks while my whole body stilled. I just wanted to look at her in the firelight. Convince myself that she was really here. That she actually loved me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, legs feeling weak with gratitude.

She furrowed her brows, hands coming up to hook in the belt loops on my jeans. "What for?"

"I told you to leave, and I will regret that every day of my life."

"Aksel..." She wrapped her arms around my waist and leaned her weight into me. "You were hurt. And angry. I get

it.”

I shook my head. My thumbs traced across her silky smooth cheeks. “You made a promise to my daughter and I will make one to you. I will never tell you to leave ever again. If we get in a fight, which I’m pretty sure we will—maybe even on a daily basis—I will always stick around to work it out with you.”

Morgana smiled, her eyes going glossy. “I will too, Viking. In fact, I think we should forget about the past and focus on the future.”

I leaned down and skated my lips across her jaw. “One happy family?”

Her fingers tightened on my waist. “One happy family.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Morgana

MY EYES FLUTTERED open at the brush of something across my face. The first light of day barely peeked through the drapes, but I didn't need light to know Aksel. I could smell his shampoo mixed with some manly scent that only he possessed. But mostly it was the heat of him. He burned hot like a heat rock, my own burning fireplace to huddle against when the snow fell outside. And now that heat was lying on me like a blanket, slowly inching down my body. His soft hair was down, tickling my skin as he went.

Already desperate for him, I said good morning with a groan. We'd spent most of the last week in this bed, only leaving when we absolutely had to in order to not embarrass Imogen. When she mentioned how we must be getting sick with all the naps we were taking, Aksel and I decided to spend the whole day with her to avoid a birds and bees talk. It was the last day of Christmas break and we wanted to soak in the time with her anyway before she went back to school.

But as Aksel dragged his beard down my stomach and wedged himself between my legs, I figured this sunrise hour

was just for us. He threw back the covers and settled there, his gaze moving up my body to my face.

“I want to see you,” he said quietly, his normally deep voice even deeper from sleep. “We should make twenty-four-seven nudity mandatory.”

I reached down to run my fingers through his hair. “Bit awkward greeting your parents that way.”

His mouth hitched to the side. “Just say you were about to take a cold plunge. They will understand.”

I tightened my fingers in his hair. “We gonna talk the whole time, or did you have a reason for being down there?”

A gleam entered his eyes. He shook his head slowly, his bearded chin purposely rubbing against my flesh. I inhaled sharply, already feeling very needy. I tried to move further down the mattress to get more friction, but Aksel wasn't having it.

“So greedy.”

I pulled on his hair, just enough that I knew he felt it. “For you, yes. Always greedy.”

His cocky grin made my stomach flutter. “You want my tongue or my cock today, woman?”

“Both.”

Aksel flicked his tongue and it glanced off my clit. I gasped, but he gave me nothing more. “I hope you always stay greedy.”

And then with a growl, he let loose the Viking side of him, plundering me with his tongue, his fingers, his face. Every surface was a tool to drive me mad. My fingers left his hair and grabbed the sheets instead. I knew from experience that

Aksel was in control right now and it was best to just hang on for the ride.

When two fingers slid inside and he pulled my clit into his mouth to flick back and forth with his tongue, I knew everything would be over quickly. I turned my head to the side and tried to muffle my cries in the pillow. My core clenched and everything froze for a glorious second, right before that feeling exploded and pulled me down with it. Pops of light and color dotted the back of my eyelids. Pretty sure I broke a nail gripping the sheets so hard, but that was nothing new around this man.

Aksel pulled away and crouched over me, grabbing my arms and pulling them overhead. “I suggest you hang on.”

My eyes fluttered open and I found my hands against the headboard. When Aksel put an arm under each knee and bent my legs way back, I did exactly that: hung on. He entered me without finesse or warning, a testament to how out of control he was. Him seeing my pleasure always drove him wild and I loved it. He filled every inch of me and more, that tight feeling of being consumed by him making the pleasure spiral in my belly once again.

His jaw clenched hard, the muscles on the side fluttering under the pressure. A bead of sweat dripped down the side of his forehead, right where a lock of hair was hanging in his face. His hands were probably leaving little bruises on my hips I’d see tomorrow. His eyes were intense, staring down at me like he was afraid to blink and I’d be gone. His thrusts were slow and deep this time. If his entry was rushed, his rhythm now was downright lazy.

“I love you, Morgana.”

I dared to let go of the headboard with one hand, smoothing back his hair. “I love you too.”

He trailed one hand up my torso, lingering on my nipple. Then he pulled out nice and slow and then plunged back inside on a grunt. “Will you take my last name or keep Mavis?”

My whole body was quivering, legs burning from being stretched so far. Perhaps I shouldn’t have fired Steven. “Huh?”

Aksel reared up, pulling out slowly and watching where we were joined. He flicked a glance up at me. “When we get married, will you take my last name or keep Mavis?”

My brain was having a hard time keeping up. Felt like all my blood flow was currently at the spot he was staring at. “I’m, uh, not sure.”

Aksel continued to thrust nice and slow, his gaze on us. “Might want to think about it. Soon.”

I opened my mouth to ask more questions, but Aksel dropped his hands to my hips and began to thrust so quickly I had to firm up my grip on the headboard. Within seconds I was keening into my arm, the second orgasm sneaking up on me, probably because the idea of marrying Aksel was now in my head.

With a roar he didn’t bother to smother, Aksel draped himself across me and shuddered, slowly catching his breath, but keeping his full weight on me. I loved it when he did that. He trusted that I could take it, and I could. He might be a Viking, but I was a country princess with mud on her boots.

When our breathing was almost back to normal, I raised a hand and smoothed it down his back, loving every dip and bump of muscle. “You know Mavis isn’t even my real name.”

Aksel lifted his head to stare at me.

“It’s true. I was born Morgana Davis, but very early on, Mack suggested I change it to sound more celebrity-like.”

Aksel placed a kiss on my forehead, still inside me. “I think Morgana Lund sounds very domesticated.”

I shook my head at him, agreeing inside, but unable to let that comment stand. “What am I? A cat?”

Aksel shrugged, an impish smile tugging on his lips. “I do like your pussy.”

I shoved his shoulders, but the massive man didn’t even budge an inch. “You talk to your mama with that mouth?”

“After she caught us in the gazebo yesterday, she already knows I like your pussy.”

“Aksel!”

With a booming laugh, he pulled out of me. I reared up and smacked him on his gloriously naked ass. That led to retaliation however, and pretty soon we were engaged in a serious naked wrestling match that put the covers on the ground and the puppy outside our door barking at the commotion.

If this was life with Aksel and his family, I wanted it. Last name and all.



“I’m surprised this isn’t part of all the Snowmass traditions.” I blew on my hot chocolate before taking a tentative sip.

The whole town was out at Snow Drop Lake for ice-skating. Mayor Nancy had even bought me a pair of gloves in the town's red and green colors. She was an interesting person, but I could see myself becoming friends with her. Carol Ann had swooped by and scoffed at Aksel's double-blade ice skates. He was only wearing them to make Imogen feel better that she hadn't graduated to a single blade yet. Of course, seeing the big guy do something so sweet for his daughter made me fall even further in love with him, if that was even possible.

Imogen flew by with Mia at her side. Both of them were giggling so hard I didn't know how they saw the skaters in front of them. Ingrid and Lars also skated by, holding hands and going a much more sedate pace. They waved at us with eager smiles every single lap, and while Aksel rolled his eyes, I grabbed on to that little gesture and tucked it away in my heart.

"I think it's just one last hurrah for the kids before school starts." Aksel's arms tightened around my waist as he held me from behind. His whole front side was radiating so much heat I felt like I had a space heater at my back. "You ready to try out your skates?"

I wobbled on my skates just standing there on solid ground. Sports with speed weren't really my thing. Had he forgotten my skiing attempt? "I'm just getting a feel for them right now."

Aksel grabbed the hot chocolate out of my hands so quickly I didn't have time to protest, but when he tried to drag me onto the ice, I let out a squawk worthy of the gossip magazines. Thankfully, I trusted that no one here would have

their phone out recording my tantrum. Snowhaven had my back and I had theirs.

The bastard was strong though, and because I had legs like Bambi, I found myself on the ice and paralyzed with fright before I could get out of it. He tugged me forward, swallowing laughter as I felt my eyes go wide. My fingers grabbed on to him so tight I hoped I left marks on his skin. He skated backward a full lap, pulling me behind while I half stood, half crouched. My thighs were on fire from the extended squat but there was no way I was standing up. If I fell from this height, I might not break anything.

Aksel came to a stop and my legs wobbled as I bumped right into him. Skates, apparently, didn't come with brakes. He held on to me and I could feel his body shaking from suppressed laughter.

The Christmas music blaring out of the speakers set up on opposite ends of the lake switched mid-song from a lively jingle to Bing Crosby's "I'll Be Home For Christmas" at a much softer decibel. Aksel dropped to his knee on the ice and I almost opened my mouth to give him shit for falling. Served him right for skating backward like some kind of show-off.

But then Chief Blade screeched to a halt right next to Aksel with a blur of ice shards. He stuck a microphone in Aksel's face and his voice echoed over the icy lake.

"I never ask Santa for anything. I don't believe in someone gifting you everything you need or value. That's what hard work is for. But then you showed up at Havenkirk. All five suitcases with you."

I heard the crowd tittering with laughter but I was in a state of shock and confusion. What the hell was going on? And why had everyone skated off to the side of the lake?

Aksel squeezed my hand and that's when I realized he was holding my hand while down on one knee. I gasped and he shot me a *get with the program* look that would have had me furious if I wasn't so off-kilter by what I finally realized was happening here.

“And somehow, even while being the grumpiest bastard in all of Snowhaven, you fell in love with me. Now if that's not a Christmas miracle, I don't know what is!”

The crowd rang with laughter again, but I was too focused on the tiny black box Aksel took out of his pocket and flipped open. There, on a bed of velvet, was a simple gold band with a design engraved around it.

“I don't see any reason you'd want to marry me, but I do have amazing parents and the sweetest daughter in Idaho, so perhaps that'll sway you.” Aksel lost the grin and I felt like he was finally speaking only to me. “I didn't believe in miracles until I fell in love with you. Wherever you are is my home. Wherever life takes you, I want to be by your side. I got my Christmas wish by meeting you, but will you grant me another wish? Will you marry me, Morgana?”

Chief Blade moved the microphone into my face, which made me feel right at home, except this time I wasn't singing. I was promising to marry the most annoying man in Idaho who actually was also the sweetest under that prickly exterior.

“Yes, Aksel. I'll marry you, but only if Imogen says yes.”

Aksel swiveled his head, searching for his daughter. “Imogen?” he called, the microphone catching his words and echoing it through the speakers.

Imogen skated out from the side of the lake. “Jeez, Dad. This is embarrassing. You couldn't do this at home?” But her

giddy face told a different story.

“So, what do you say, *datter*? Should we be a family?”

Imogen smiled up at me and gave me a wink. “Definitely!”

I put my arm around her and nodded to Chief to put the microphone back in my face. “We say yes!”

The whole town erupted and the music was cranked again. People flooded the lake as they began to skate, peering over at the three of us as we hugged it out. Aksel somehow got the ring on my finger, but I was too busy wiping away happy tears to see it properly.

“So does this mean I can call you mom?” Imogen asked, looking adorable with her missing teeth and her knit cap askew on her head.

I glanced at Aksel, but when he didn’t protest, I answered. “You can call me anything you’d like, but mom would be amazing.”

“Sweet!” Imogen hugged me again, then her dad before skating off with Mia.

I tried to turn back to Aksel but forgot I was on skates. My arms pinwheeled and I braced for impact on the ice, but Aksel pulled me against him at the last second.

“Whoa, there, woman. No broken bones before our wedding.”

I got my arms around his neck and held on for dear life. My heart was pounding and I wanted off this ice. Anywhere private where I could take a ride on Aksel’s lap with my new ring gleaming in the moonlight.

“Figured we can buy you whatever diamond is fitting for a country princess. But this ring is from my great-grandmother.

Her initial was A and her husband's was M. I thought it appropriate to take something from the past, especially when it felt like you and me were meant to be."

I nearly started crying again. "You're a closet romantic, Aksel Lund."

"Shh. Don't tell anyone." With a grin transforming his handsome face, he leaned down and kissed me. I forgot about the people, the ice, the decisions we'd have to make in the future to balance my career and his. All I felt was love for this man and this town. They'd saved me from myself.

Christmas had brought us both a miracle.

EPILOGUE



*A*ksel

IF THE COLD front held up, there'd be snow in Nashville tonight, which was rare for November. I couldn't believe it had almost been a full year since I met Morgana. Time had flown by. Days that were filled with laughter, love, hard work, travel, and phone conversations late at night when Morgana was out of town, which wasn't as often anymore. We'd agreed to live in Idaho during the school year and Tennessee in the summer. But we would always spend Christmas in Snowhaven. There was no way we'd miss a Snowmass celebration.

Morgana's new album had gone crazy—and I liked to think I'd had a carnal influence on those songs—but she'd held fast to her “no long tours” rule. I joined her on some of her concert stops, but mostly she toured alone. Which she said just incentivized her to do less and less touring.

“You two ready for this? Just smile and walk. Don't stop and don't look directly at the cameras or you'll lose your vision.”

Imogen squealed on the other long bench seat in the limousine, looking way too old in a dress and platform

sandals. Her hair and makeup had been professionally done by Morgana's makeup artist. My daughter was so excited to be in a limousine she couldn't sit still. I kind of knew the feeling but my excitement was for seeing Morgana in her element. This award show meant a lot to her, and they'd even asked her to sing her hit Christmas song.

I squeezed Morgana's hand. She looked stunning in a bright red sparkly dress with so much goddamn fringe hanging from it I'd already gotten my watch stuck in it once. Her legs were on display, all curvy and begging for my hands to stroke that soft skin. Don't even get me started on her heels. Those things should be illegal out in public. I told her yesterday she couldn't wear them and that had caused one of our heated arguments that ended in the kind of sex that had me agreeing to anything she wanted.

"You're going to win that award," I assured her.

Her songs had been all over the radio the whole year. There was no way some other jackass could win Entertainer of the Year.

Morgana smiled, her painted-red lips glowing like Rudolph's nose. "I don't care either way. I'm just happy you two are here with me."

"Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?" I leaned in closer and inhaled her perfume. She smelled like home.

"Only a handful of times," she drawled.

I ghosted my lips across her cheek, needing to touch her but not wanting to mess up her makeup. "I'm falling down on the job, then."

"You guys are so gross," Imogen whined. She said it so often we just sort of ignored her now. One day she'd have a

boyfriend and he'd better treat her the way I treated Morgana. Like a country princess.

The limo came to a stop and Morgana took a deep breath. "You know what I love? No matter how tonight goes, I'm going home with you."

"Damn right, woman."

She kissed me quick and then got out of the car as the attendant opened the door and held her hand, leaving me to scramble to get the red lipstick off my mouth. Lights instantly flashed and the photogs screamed her name. Imogen's eyes widened, but then she stepped out too. I was the last man out, pretty sure I had most of the lipstick off. With Morgana in the middle, the three of us moved up the red carpet, doing what Morgana had told us to do. Smile, walk, don't look at the cameras directly.

By the time we made it inside, I needed a drink. Maybe two. Morgana looked like that chaos outside was just a stroll in the park. Imogen and I found our seats, both of us hugging Morgana goodbye. Her song was the first one of the night. It took all my flagging energy to keep Imogen calm as she spotted her other favorite country singers filing into their seats in their finest attire.

The lights finally dropped and then the show began. The host got the show under way and then there was Morgana in the spotlight, her red dress a beacon of Christmas cheer. She launched into her song and I heard everyone around me sing along. I smiled so hard my cheeks ached. She'd written that song at Havenkirk. And that mistletoe in the lyrics? That horrible first kiss under the mistletoe was what brought us together. For a woman who disliked Christmas, she sure knew how to bring the Christmas spirit. As soon as she hit the last

note, I was on my feet, clapping and whistling for my woman. I didn't care if it wasn't proper behavior at an awards show, that was the love of my life up there.

Morgana slipped into her seat next to me a half hour later, this time in that turquoise dress I'd bought her last year. Cowboy boots were on her feet and the red lipstick was gone.

"Hey, you still have that dress?" I whispered.

Morgana snuggled into my arm. "Of course I do. It's my favorite."

Fuck, I loved her.

Sad to say, I may have caught a little catnap during some of the acceptance speeches. No one warns you how long these awards shows are when you don't get commercial breaks to get a snack or pee. At some point Morgana elbowed me hard and I straightened in my seat, blinking awake.

"It should be up next," she whispered.

I held her hand in her lap and then grabbed Imogen's hand with my other. Connected. It was the three of us, no matter what name came out of the host's mouth.

"And now, for the granddaddy of awards...Entertainer of the Year!" The host was really drawing this thing out, talking about winners from past years and what it takes to even get a nomination. Then she announced all five nominees, Morgana included.

I could feel the cameras and the spotlight on us, catching our reactions. I squeezed Morgana's hand. She turned and smiled at me, looking calm as fuck when I was a mess inside.

"And this year's Entertainer of the Year goes to..."

My breath caught and I might have wished some not-so-nice things on that host for drawing things out.

“Morgana Mavis!”

The audience erupted and every single cell in my body squeezed out a heartbeat. Imogen screamed in my ear. I looked over at Morgana and she looked at me, and for a second, there it was, just us two alone in a theatre. She leaned in and so did I.

“We did it,” she said in awe.

I shook my head and cupped her face. “No, woman, *you* did it. Now get your gorgeous ass up there and accept that award.”

She kissed me and hugged Imogen before standing and heading for the stage. I’d never been so proud of another human being. She ran up the stairs in her boots, not even waiting for the attendant that holds your hand to make sure you don’t trip. Her turquoise fringe swung in the air with every step.

My fiancée was a badass country princess.

Morgana took the award, shook hands, and then took the microphone. She held the award high in the air. “This is to all the nine-year-olds learning to play guitar.”

Imogen squealed. “She means me!”

“This is to all the eighteen-year-olds bussin’ tables and hoping for a break. This is to all the women who fight to be the best version of themselves. And this is most definitely to the women who start to think that every new gray hair means they’re less worthy. That with every wrinkle to appear, they’re less relevant. That with every candle that’s added to the birthday cake, somehow they’ve lost the thing that makes

them special. No one defines your worth but you. Thank you for listening to my music, and thank you to the Viking who irritated me enough to get me to show up for myself. I love you.”

And then she was walking off the stage, award in hand while I didn't think I'd ever get over this moment.

“Dad, are you crying?” Imogen asked, leaning over to get in my face.

I swiped a hand across my cheek and discovered I was, in fact, crying. That was also the exact moment a photographer took our picture and put it up on the celebrity gossip sites. I'd won a gold medal for skiing years ago and barely got any press beyond my small town. But the moment I was caught bawling over my fiancée, I became an internet sensation with memes pouring in by the second. I was what some person somewhere called “book boyfriend material,” a nickname I was never able to ditch no matter how much I growled about it.

But I didn't care because that night, Morgana, Imogen, and I flew back home together in a chartered plane, that glass award wrapped in a blanket and tossed in one of Morgana's suitcases—she only brought two for this trip.

“Are you going to get another tattoo now that you have two awards?” Imogen asked, her eyes threatening to droop shut as she slumped in her airplane seat. It was most definitely past her bedtime.

Morgana grinned and shot me a look that had my blood heating. “I think your dad should get a tattoo with me.”

I frowned. “I'm not the one who got the award.”

Morgana shrugged. “You were the inspiration for most of the songs on that album.”

I snapped my fingers. “I knew it!”

Morgana laughed, Imogen fell asleep, and I dragged my fiancée to the back of the plane to reward her in my own personal way. Morgana had done the impossible: reached a pinnacle in her career in her own way while putting me and Imogen first. Pretty sure I owed her a lifetime of orgasms I was all too happy to give.

WANT to see what Morgana gives Aksel as a wedding gift? Click [here](#) to grab the bonus epilogue!

ALSO BY MARIKA RAY



Scan the QR code to go to Marika's Amazon page!

Steamy Holiday RomCom

Grumpy Little Christmas - Standalone

Steamy RomComs - Blueball Band of Brothers:

Grumpy the Bear - Blueball Band of Brothers #1

S'more Than a Feeling - Blueball Band of Brothers #2

All Steamy RomComs Set in Hell:

Grumpy As Hell - Hellman Brothers #1

Bro Code Hell - Hellman Brothers #2

Friend Zone Hell - Hellman Brothers #3

Cougar From Hell - Hellman Brothers #4

Falling First Hell - Hellman Brothers #5

Matchmaker From Hell - FREE Novella

Ridin' Solo - Sisters From Hell #1

One Night Bride - Sisters From Hell #2

Smarty Pants - Sisters From Hell #3

[Ex Best Thing](#) - Sisters From Hell #4

[Love Bank](#) - Jobs From Hell #1

[Uber Bossy](#) - Jobs From Hell #2

[Unfriend Me](#) - Jobs From Hell #3

[Side Hustle](#) - Jobs From Hell #4

[Man Glitter](#) - FREE Novella

[Backroom Boy](#) - Standalone

Steamy RomComs:

[The Missing Ingredient](#) - Reality of Love #1

[Mom-Com](#) - Reality of Love #2

[Desperately Seeking Househusbands](#) - Reality of Love #3

[Happy New You](#) - Standalone

Steamy Hockey RomComs with Sylvie Stewart:

[Hot Flashes and Hockey Slashes](#) - Hot Flash Hookups #1

[Mood Swings and Hockey Flings](#) - Hot Flash Hookups #2

Sweet RomComs with Delancey Stewart:

[Texting With the Enemy](#) - Digital Dating #1

[While You Were Texting](#) - Digital Dating #2

[Save the Last Text](#) - Digital Dating #3

[How to Lose a Girl in 10 Texts](#) - Digital Dating #4

[The Text Before Christmas](#) - Digital Dating #5

[Head Over Cleats](#)

[Falling For Mr. Safety](#)

Sweet Romances:

[The Marriage Sham](#) - Standalone

[The Widower's Girlfriend](#)-Faking It #1

[Home Run Fiancé](#) - Faking It #2

[Guarding the Princess](#) - Faking It #3

[Lines We Cross](#) - Nickel Bay Brothers #1

[Perfectly Imperfect Us](#) - Nickel Bay Brothers #2

[Steamy Beach Romance:](#)

1) [Sweet Dreams](#) - Beach Squad #1

2) [Love on the Defense](#) - Beach Squad #2

3) [Barefoot Chaos](#) - Beach Squad #3

* Novella - [Handcuffed Hussy](#).

4) [Beach Babe Billionaire](#)- Beach Squad #4

5) [Brighter Than the Boss](#) - Beach Squad #5

* Novella - [Christmas Eye Do-Over](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marika Ray is a USA Today bestselling author, writing small town RomCom to make your heart explode and bring a smile to your face. All her books come with a money-back guarantee that you'll laugh at least once with every book.

Marika spends her time behind a computer crafting stories, walking along the beach, and making healthy food for her kids and husband whether they like it or not. Prior to writing novels, Marika held various jobs in the finance industry, with private start-up companies, and then in health & fitness. Cats may have nine lives, but Marika believes everyone should have nine careers to keep things spicy.

If you'd like to know more about Marika or the other novels she's currently writing, please find her in her private [Reader Group](#).

If you want to take your stalking to the next level, here are other legal-ish places you can find Marika:

Join her Newsletter -

<http://bit.ly/MarikaRayNews>

Amazon - <https://www.amazon.com/author/marikaray>

Goodreads - https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/16856659.Marika_Ray

Bookbub - <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/marika-ray>

TikTok - <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMJvnQ2Cv>