



LINE OF

RESISTANCE

ALASKAN SECURITY-TEAM ROGUE

BOOK 10

JANICE WHITEAKER writing as  
**JEMMA WESTBROOK**

LINE OF BOOK 10  
RESISTANCE  
ALASKAN SECURITY-TEAM ROGUE

JANICE WHITEAKER writing as  
**JEMMA WESTBROOK**

# CONTENTS

[Playlist](#)

[Trigger Warnings](#)

[Prologue](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Looking for more of my books?](#)

Line of Resistance, book 10 in the Alaskan Security-Team Rogue series.

Copyright 2023 by Jemma Westbrook.

[www.jemmawestbrook.com](http://www.jemmawestbrook.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher and copyright owner except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

First printing, 2023

Cover design by Robin Harper at Wicked by Design

# PLAYLIST

## LISTEN ON SPOTIFY

*She's on Fire*

3 One Oh

*Walk Me Home*

P!nk

*What's Coming To Me*

Dorothy

*Quietly Yours*

Birdy

*Don't Know Who I Am*

Rebecca Roubion

*Do I Wanna Know?*

Arctic Monkeys

*Brave*

Sara Bareilles

*Holding Out for a Hero*

Bonnie Tyler

*Come with Me Now*

KONGOS

*Everybody Talks*

Neon Trees

*broken*

lovelytheband

*Alive*

Sia

*Let Me Be Happy*

SM6

*I've Had Enough*

Melina KB

## TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book contains topics some readers might find difficult to read or hear about. These include child abuse, the loss of a parent, violence, and murder.

Please consider skipping this story if you are sensitive to any of these subjects.

# PROLOGUE





## ELOISE

*Please scroll back for a list of trigger warnings.*

NAOMI HAD TO be kidding.

No way would this woman who claimed to be her friend show up with Nate in tow, acting like their double-date was still on.

Eloise shook her head, biting back the urge to succumb to the tears she'd been fighting since Matt called to 'let her down gently'.

Five minutes before he was supposed to be at her house.

"You've got to tell him to leave."

She wasn't normally the kind of woman who bossed adults around. She was agreeable. She was friendly.

She was passive to a fault.

But right now she had to put her foot down. No way was she being humiliated twice in one night. "Tell him to leave."

Naomi didn't seem surprised by her sudden forcefulness.

If anything she seemed amused by it.

"I get where you're coming from, but just hear me out." She wrapped one arm around Eloise's shoulders, leading her away from where Tyson and Nate stood at the small concession stand set up in the lobby of the community theater. "Tonight would be a great opportunity to show Nate how big of a mistake he made."

Eloise didn't have to work to find a frown. "I don't care if he knows how big of a mistake he made." She didn't care about Nate at all.

Definitely not his horribly dimpled smile. Certainly not the lean lines of his terribly muscled body.

And she sure as shit didn't care about his 'tight enough to bounce quarters off it' ass.

"Fair enough." Naomi sighed. "I thought maybe getting to ruin Nate's night would make you feel a little bit better."

Eloise lifted a brow in question. "And you think convincing Nate that he shouldn't have canceled that date he asked me on because I was," she lifted her fingers to make air quotes, "too good for him," she dropped her hands, "will ruin his night?"

That sounded about as likely as her enjoying this evening would be.

Naomi slowly smiled. "Absolutely, I do." She leaned closer, glancing back at where the men still stood. "I also thought he would look real pretty in pictures you could post to your Instagram." Naomi's lips twisted into a scowl. "Show Matt the mouth-breather that he didn't ruin your night."

That made her pause.

She wasn't usually a game player, but the thought was tempting. Especially since this game was technically over.

"I think it's about as likely that Matt will be bothered by pictures of me with another man as it is that Nate will suddenly realize he passed up a great opportunity."

And that likelihood was zero.

It was her own fault. She knew she had a bad picker, but that didn't stop her from chasing wrong man after wrong man, blindly running straight into a broken heart time and time again.

Not that Nate broke her heart. Thankfully that required more than a cancelled date.

He did hurt her ego a little though.

Enough that she didn't hate the thought of him having regrets.

"How did you even convince him to come here?" Eloise couldn't help herself from sneaking a peek at the blonde Adonis who had her attention from the second he stormed into her life nearly nine months ago, decked out in all black and armed to the teeth, ready to rescue her from a scary situation.

Nate was still just as frustratingly good-looking today as he was all those months ago. Still had the same gosh darn dimples that literally had her tripping all over herself the night of the Christmas party at Alaskan Security.

At least tonight he wasn't dressed like he was ready to star in Mission Impossible. Not that his well-fitting jeans and the T-shirt hugging his biceps were any less appealing.

"It wasn't hard." Naomi pressed her lips together before adding on. "He practically ran for the door when he realized it was you we were going out with."

Her heart skipped a little beat. Clearly it had learned nothing from the past two years because it still got all fluttery at the sight of another poor decision.

And that's what Nate was. A poor decision.

"So is he staying, or is he going?" Naomi hooked her arm through one of Eloise's. "Because I'll send them both home if you'd rather turn this into a girls' night."

Eloise peeked Naomi's way. "It could be just you and me?"

Naomi nodded. "Absolutely."

The offer was tempting. She could spend the night licking her wounds instead of forcing herself to pretend she was fine, which was what she would do if Nate stayed. She would act like the evening's events hadn't affected her. Like she wasn't so embarrassed she wanted to cry. Like she wasn't considering the very real possibility that she just might not be the kind of girl men ended up with.

Eloise sighed, her shoulders slumping a little because she knew she couldn't do that to Naomi. She and Tyson so rarely had a night together and they'd gone to a lot of trouble to arrange for a babysitter for Emmett. "It's okay. They can stay."

Once again she would suck it up. Slap on a smile and power through.

Then tomorrow she could wallow. Sit at home in her pajamas all day, eating piles of crap and watching romantic comedies that didn't remotely resemble her love life.

Maybe the comedy part, but only because it was becoming laughable how hard it was for her to keep a man.

Naomi lifted her brows, expression serious. "Are you sure?"

Eloise forced on a smile. "I'm sure. It will be fine."

Naomi didn't look convinced. "If you change your mind, just tell me and I will throw him out of this place so fast it will make him see Jesus."

Eloise's smile turned a little more genuine because she knew Naomi would make good on her offer if she asked her to. "Is that why you really brought him here? Because you hoped I would let you throw him out?"

Naomi's lips lifted in a sly smile. "He deserves it for what happened at the Christmas party."

Eloise accidentally glanced Nate's way again, the memory of that awful, embarrassing moment putting a damper on the tiny bit of optimism she'd almost managed to grab. "It's fine." She stood a little taller, lifting her chin. "I'm over it."

A greater lie had never been told, but honestly what choice did she have? There was no way she could admit that there were times she still lay in bed at night, staring at the ceiling, face burning from the lingering sting of the holiday humiliation.

When Nate made it clear kissing her under the mistletoe wasn't on his list of life goals.

"You ladies ready to go in?" Tyson moved in close at Naomi's side, resting one hand on her back in a possessive touch that really only added insult to injury.

No man had ever touched her like that and not a single one looked at her the way Tyson's dark eyes held Naomi's, filled with adoration and attachment.

"I think so." Naomi turned to Eloise. "Are you ready?"

She forced on a yet another smile. "Definitely."

Naomi studied her a second longer, as if she was looking for any sign of the lie Eloise just told. Her dark eyes barely narrowed before shifting to Nate, lingering until he shifted on his feet.

She shouldn't love his obvious discomfort, but damned if it wasn't turning out to be the highlight of her night. Not that it was difficult to claim that spot.

Naomi finally turned to Tyson, taking the arm he offered before falling into step with the crowd filtering through the open auditorium doors.

"Eloise." Nate's voice was close.

Close enough to send her side-stepping in surprise, nearly colliding with a woman juggling an infant with one arm and towing a toddler with the other.

Nate caught her elbow just before she bumped into them, pulling her close and out of their path.

She sucked in a breath as her body met the solid line of his and heat instantly flamed her cheeks. She inched back, putting a more respectable amount of space between them.

Nate's eyes moved over her face, brows pinched in concern. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She forced her eyes to stay on his. "You just surprised me."

Nate moved in a little closer, lowering his voice as the clog of people continued to filter out of the lobby. “I wanted to talk to you.” The hand holding her arm gentled but didn’t let go. “I want to apologize.”

Of course he did. Because this night wasn’t horrible enough already. Now Nate wanted to add insult to injury. Line up another of the explanations she’d collected over the years.

*You’re too good for me.*

*You deserve better.*

*You are such a good friend and I don’t want to lose that.*

*You’ll make some other man very happy.*

Eloise forced on a smile, just like she did every other time a man hid his own feelings behind false flattery. “There’s nothing to apologize for.” She carefully wiggled free of his hand. “You’re allowed to not be interested in me.”

It would be so much easier if they would just say it.

Admit she wasn’t what they wanted instead of trying to make it seem like her goodness was the problem.

Nate moved in again, claiming all but an inch of the space separating them. “It’s not like th—”

“What the fuck?”

Eloise stiffened at the familiar voice. The familiar tone.

Matt strode across the mostly empty lobby, strangling a bouquet of flowers with one hand. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Before she could blink Nate was in front of her, blocking her body with his, the wide spread of his shoulders making it impossible to see what was happening on the other side.

“Watch yourself. There are kids here.” Nate’s tone was sharp and short.

“Fuck you.” Matt said it louder, making it clear he wouldn’t be letting Nate tell him what to do. “Get your ass out of my way. I’m here to see my girlfriend.”

*His girlfriend?*

Eloise tried to step from behind Nate, but one of his hands immediately shoved her back before circling her wrist, gently keeping her in place.

“If you want to talk to her then you’re going to calm down.” Nate’s thumb stroked across her skin in a reassuring touch. “And you’re going to watch what you say.”

“Who in the hell do you think you are?” Matt was closer now. Close

enough that she could feel the anger and tension radiating off him.

It pushed her closer to Nate's back. She knew Matt had a temper, but up until this moment it had never been directed at her, and now that it was, any hard feelings she had over their breakup were gone.

Long gone.

"Get out of my way." Matt snarled the words out and Nate's body barely rocked back.

"Touch me again and you won't be walking out of here, friend." Nate's voice was cool and calm as the thumb on her wrist continued its steady slide across her skin.

Like this was just another day. And maybe to him it was. She knew what he and Tyson did for a living, in general terms, and suddenly wasn't quite as upset about Nate's presence.

"Eloise, it's time to go." Matt tried to step around Nate, but she barely caught a glimpse of him before Nate shifted, once again blocking him out.

And apparently that was what it took to push Matt over the edge.

She barely caught the flash of a flying fist as he swung at Nate, managing to get one punch in before Nate lunged, releasing her to collect the front of Matt's shirt in his hands, lifting him off the floor and hauling him across the lobby and out the front doors. She watched through the glass as Nate dropped him to the soggy grass, one hand still fisted in his front as he said something that made Matt's eyes go wide.

Then he turned and came back in, wiping at the tiny patch of blood tinting the corner of his mouth. He gave her an easy smile in spite of the bruise already collecting under his skin. "Ready to go in?"

Eloise glanced back to the doors where Matt was picking himself up.

"Don't look at him." Nate stepped in front of her. "Look at me."

She lifted her eyes to his face and the hint of swelling pushing out his lower lip. "You need ice."

He moved a little closer. "What I need is that Christmas kiss you promised me." He lifted one finger and ran it along the line of her jaw. "But I'm still not willing to kiss you for the first time in front of an audience."

# CHAPTER ONE



## ELOISE

BIRTHDAY PARTIES WERE supposed to be fun.

An opportunity to hang out with Naomi and their recently expanded friend group. An afternoon that would offer a peek into the new hierarchy and the chance to figure out where she might belong within it.

*If* she might belong within it.

Instead, she was about two bad breaths away from puking on her snow boots while trying to appear friendly and easygoing and approachable. In her experience, that was the way people liked their friends, and she did everything she could to fit that mold.

Normally.

But right now, no matter how much she tried to focus on the conversations happening all around, her attention kept drifting around the common area in the rooming house at Alaskan Security's headquarters. Nate had to be there somewhere. Lurking. Waiting until she was comfortable to spring from the shadows and pee all over her parade. To remind her of the words he said the last time their paths crossed.

What I need is that Christmas kiss you promised me.

Obviously he didn't need it that badly. She hadn't seen him since he made the claim, proving yet again she simply wasn't the kind of woman men had any sort of lasting interest in. Apparently it was easier to fake your way into friendships than romantic couplings.

"How's the school year been going?" Harlow, one of the women she met through Naomi's connection to Alaskan Security, glanced across the roomful of kids racing around tables covered with party favors, pizza boxes, and cake remnants. "I'm sure you couldn't wait to spend one of your days off with



these things.”

Eloise took a long gulp from the juice pouch she'd been nursing for the past hour, swallowing down the overly sweet and completely artificial strawberry kiwi flavoring. “It's been good.” She stepped back as one of the second graders she saw in her office no fewer than three times a week zoomed between them. “And I don't mind seeing them on my days off.” Her eyes followed Bryson's shaggy head as he wove between adults, playing a game of tag only he was participating in. “They're all really good kids, and I like getting to spend time with them outside of school.”

Bryson continued tearing a path around the space, nearly colliding with Tyson's mother before overcorrecting, losing his balance and falling right into the kitchen island. Catching his head on the corner of the counter, he went down hard, screaming like a banshee before he even hit the floor.

“Gosh darn it.” Eloise scanned the faces of the party goers, hoping against all odds Bryson's dad stuck around, but unsurprisingly there was no sign of him. She gritted her teeth, fighting frustration as she cut through the crowd to where the eight-year-old was crumpled on the floor, one small hand plastered against the spot he hit as giant tears fell from his eyes.

“Hey, buddy.” She reached for him then paused, remembering not every kid liked to be coddled when they were hurt. “Is it okay if I help you?”

Bryson's watery eyes fixed on her face as his lower lip wobbled. “Miss Rivers, I hurt my head.”

“I know.” Eloise gently rested one hand on his back, helping him sit up. “Can I—”

“Hey there, soldier.” A deep, despairingly familiar voice cut her off. “That was one heck of a collision you just survived.”

Bryson's eyes widened as Nate slowly crouched down beside them, looking all kinds of problematic in his black tactical gear and easy smile. “Who—” A shuddering breath stalled his words, wracking his little body as he fought to catch his breath, “—are you?”

“I'm Miss Rivers' friend.” Nate pointed to where Bryson's hand still held his head. “Can I see your battle wound?”

Bryson's chin stopped quivering, but tears continued to rim his red eyes. “I hurt my head.”

“That's not good.” Nate lifted his brows. “Should we head on over to first aid? Check it out and get you an ice pack and a popsicle?”

The little boy blinked away the last of his lingering tears, perking right up

at the mention of his favorite treat. “You have popsicles?”

“I do.” Nate lowered his voice as he leaned closer. “But they’re only for injured soldiers, so you’ll have to keep it a secret.”

Bryson sniffed, but his face pulled into a toothy smile making it seem like the worst of his upset was over. “I can keep a secret.”

“Good.” Nate stood, holding one giant palm out, bringing the damn thing so close to Eloise’s nose she could practically count the callouses roughening his skin. “You need help up?”

The little boy slapped his free hand into Nate’s without hesitation, holding tight as he was hauled to his feet. “Thanks.”

“Sure thing, buddy.” Nate tousled Bryson’s too-long hair. “Ready?”

It was a scene she would normally be thrilled to witness. A neglected little boy finally getting a scrap of the attention he deserved from someone who cared about his best interests. Someone who could be trusted.

Trusted by Bryson anyway.

The second grader turned, offering the same guileless expression that had her wrapped around his finger from day one. “Are you coming too, Miss Rivers?” He took another shuddery breath, his shoulders heaving with the inhale.

Normally she would do anything for Bryson. Find every way possible to help his life be a little easier. A little happier. But there were limits.

At least there should be.

Unfortunately, everyone in Bryson’s life let him down. Put him last. Left him to fend for himself in more ways than she could count. There was no way she would do it too.

Eloise forced on a smile, keeping her focus on the little boy she was probably overly attached to. “Sure.” She stood, spine stiff as she clasped both hands in front of her, fingers clenched tight as she fell in at Bryson’s side, doing her best to ignore Nate’s existence as they filed out of the rooming building, through the connecting walkway, and into the quiet hallways of Alaskan Security.

She’d been there more than a few times, but never saw much more than the rooming building, so at least she was finally getting a better peek at what was turning out to be a pretty mysterious company. To her dismay, everything was disappointingly normal. Boring offices with industrial carpet. Wordless elevator music that filtered through speakers set into flame retardant ceiling panels. Outside of the copious amounts of plants shoved into

almost every corner, there was nothing remotely interesting about it. Definitely nothing to give any hint of exactly what kind of security paid well enough to sustain a business as grandiose as this one.

They passed through a glassed-in entry point before following a long hall that seemed to lead to yet another building. This one was a little different from the others. The walls were painted block and the floors were tile, giving it an almost clinical feel. The scent of antiseptic hung in the air, bringing her back to a time in her life she worked hard to forget.

“You okay, Miss Rivers?” Bryson peeled his hand from his head and reached for hers, palm sweaty and a little sticky. His too skinny face puckered, threatening more tears. “I’m sorry I was running.” His assumption that her bad mood was his fault made it clear she was going to have to work a little harder to hide her unhappiness at Nate’s sudden arrival.

“We just have to make sure we’re careful, remember?” She gave Bryson’s hand a squeeze. “We need to watch out for other people, especially grandmas, so we don’t hurt anybody.”

Bryson somehow managed to look even more pitiful. “I almost ran into Emmett’s grandma.” His chin quaked at the confession, breaking her heart a little.

The little boy was remarkably empathetic and wanted nothing more than to do the right thing. It wasn’t his fault there was no one to help him figure out how to do it.

“But you didn’t.” Eloise reached out to gently trace around the tiny bump forming on his head. “You hurt yourself instead of hurting her.”

“I didn’t want her to fall down.” Bryson sucked in a snotty, wet breath. “I didn’t want her to think I was bad.”

She wasn’t normally prone to violence, but so many of the things Bryson said and believed made her want to cause extreme bodily harm to the person responsible for putting so much weight on this little boy’s shoulders. “I—”

Nate suddenly turned, flipping on the light as he led them into a room that could easily be found in any hospital or doctor’s office she’d ever been to. It was bright and immaculately clean and stocked with high-end equipment. Implements that made it seem like they were doing more than applying Band-Aids here were neatly organized and stocked on a long counter. Packages of sterilized instruments were stacked inside a clear container tucked into one corner and she couldn’t help but stare at the variety of tools.

Nate slapped one hand against the paper-covered examining table, the

sound loud and commanding. “Jump up here, buddy.”

Bryson slid up onto the padded surface, continuing to look brokenhearted and pathetic.

Eloise couldn't help but move in beside him, resting one hand on his back, rubbing in slow circles she hoped would calm his excitable temperament. As sweet and kind hearted as he was, Bryson was also a handful. He was the kid most teachers struggled to manage. He wasn't bad, but he had a level of energy and a lack of control that made him disruptive in the classroom. His need for attention could come across as annoying, and his feelings were exceptionally easy to hurt, so he frequently found his way to her office after being reprimanded by a teacher and bursting into tears.

He came, not because he was sent there, but because he knew she would comfort him. That she would understand what he was struggling with. It was the same reason he wanted her with him now. And regardless of who else was in the room, she refused to let Bryson down the way everyone else in his life did.

Nate settled onto a backless rolling stool and scooted to the bank of cabinets, opening one to reveal a mini fridge. He retrieved a small ice pack and then rolled back their way, using his booted feet to scoot closer. Instead of handing the ice pack to Bryson, he gently rested it against the knot at the little boy's hairline. “Better?”

Bryson bobbed his head in a little nod. “A little.”

“I bet it'll make you feel even better to know that I happen to be good friends with Emmett's grandma, and I can promise you she would never think you're bad.” Nate glanced at Eloise. “Can you hold this for a second?”

Eloise worked her fingers into place around his, being careful not to touch him. Once she had the ice pack handled, Nate turned back to the bank of cabinets and opened the top drawer.

“In fact, I bet Emmett's grandma would love it if you came back for another visit.” He turned toward them again, this time carrying a roll of thin, webbed gauze. “Maybe, you can come visit again, and play with Emmett and his grandma.”

Eloise stared daggers at Nate's face, silently willing him to shut up. However well intentioned, what he was offering would be nearly impossible. She'd been shocked to see Bryson here in the first place. The chances of him coming back, especially now that he would be going home with a knot on his head, would be slim to none.

But Nate just kept talking. “We have tons of snacks and a pool in the basement.”

Bryson’s eyes widened as Nate carefully worked the gauze around his head, holding the ice pack in place. “For real?”

Nate nodded. “For real. You could bring your suit and we could swim.”

Bryson’s expression fell, sending Eloise’s stomach sinking with it. “I don’t have a swimsuit.”

Nate’s eyes dropped from where they were focused on his task to the little boy’s face, holding there a second before moving to Eloise’s. She lifted her brows, offering the glare he missed earlier. Not only had he given Bryson false hope, but he was also reminding the little boy of how little he had in this world. If it wasn’t such a gosh darn tragedy, she’d feel smug about just how far Nate shoved his foot into his stupidly well-crafted mouth.

But nothing about Bryson’s situation amused her. If anything, it made her feel a level of rage she’d never experienced in her life. Enough that she occasionally whispered more than a few of the swears she’d eliminated from her vocabulary just to take the edge off.

“I don’t think that will be a problem.” Nate’s focus shifted back to Bryson, the warmth in his gaze making her consider hating him a little less. “I bet Emmett has an extra pair you could borrow.”

Bryson’s face lit up again, hope springing back to his oversized features. “Really?”

“Absolutely.” Nate finished binding the cold pack in place and stepped back, giving him a once-over. “I think you’re all fixed up.” His head tipped to one side as if he was pondering something. “Was there anything else we were supposed to do while we were here?”

Bryson’s eyes shifted to Eloise, offering yet another hint about the little boy Nate better not disappoint. She was grown. She could handle disappointment—*had* handled disappointment. But Bryson was just a kid. One who was faced with more crapola than most adults. If Nate dangled a carrot in front of this little boy then yanked it back the same way he’d done to her, she would definitely do more than whisper swears under her breath.

Eloise smiled in spite of the murderous thoughts swirling through her brain. “It’s okay. You can remind him,” she reassured him, offering the support he always looked to her for. Food and clothing weren’t the only things her most neglected student had gone without, and for a long time Bryson was young enough he didn’t realize how many social skills he really

lacked. But with age comes self-awareness, and between that and consistent trips to her office, he was beginning to realize not everyone understood him the way she did. It was complicating an already complicated situation.

“You said you had popsicles.” Bryson’s words were soft. Barely a whisper. Proving his eagerness had limits and he carried a wariness he might never lose. Because regardless of Nate’s smiles and calm demeanor, he was still a grown man. And in Bryson’s world, grown men were unpredictable at best, violent at worst.

“I did say that, didn’t I?” If Nate noticed the change in Bryson, he didn’t show it. His words were still as relaxed and easy as ever as he scooted the rolling stool across the room and reopened the refrigerator under the counter. “It looks like we have cherry, grape, and orange.” He craned his neck to peek Bryson’s way over one shoulder. “Pick your poison.”

Bryson’s brown eyes widened.

Eloise immediately stepped closer to his side, resting one hand between his narrow shoulder blades. “It’s just a saying. They’re not really poisonous.” She shot Nate a scowl, once again trying to convey what he was clearly missing. Unfortunately, Nate’s attention wasn’t on her at all. Hadn’t been for most of this whole exchange.

For a split second his jaw clenched and his nostrils flared, but an easy smile quickly smoothed over that tiny flicker of emotion as he pulled out a handful of paper-wrapped treats. “How about one of each?” His gaze continued to rest on Bryson. As if nothing else mattered. “Unless that’s too many popsicles.”

Bryson rubbed his lips together, chin tucking as his eyes shifted between Eloise and Nate. “Cherry is my favorite.” It was another low, soft admission from a little boy who’d never been allowed to ask for what he wanted in life. All he could do was take what was handed to him and learn to live with it.

Nate’s head snapped back toward the refrigerator, but not before she caught another tiny flare of his nostrils. “Two cherries it is then.” He snagged the popsicles free, peeling one open before passing it over to Bryson, expression soft as the little boy slowly took the treat. “What about Miss Rivers? What do you think her favorite flavor is?”

Distracted by the popsicle, his previous uncertainty chased away by sugar and artificial coloring, Bryson repeated the little white lie she’d fed him. “Miss Rivers doesn’t like popsicles. She likes chocolate. That’s why she always gives me hers at lunch. She doesn’t want it to go to waste.”

Eloise closed her eyes, refusing to wince. What seemed like a harmless thing at the time had come back to bite her. As school principal, she should be more careful not to show favoritism. Plus, now she couldn't be seen eating a popsicle on school grounds without exposing her lie, which wasn't a huge issue considering most of the year she felt like a popsicle herself.

Eloise cracked open one lid. She nearly took a step back when her eyes instantly met Nate's. His gaze carried a weight she could feel in all sorts of questionable areas and an intensity she couldn't seem to look away from.

"We should probably go back to the party." Eloise swallowed hard around a sudden tightness clogging her throat. "I'm sure Emmett is wondering where you are."

"Okay." Bryson slid off the table, the protective paper crinkling with the movement as his too-small tennis shoes hit the floor. He wandered past, oblivious to the stare down continuing as he happily worked his way through the first of his two popsicles. Nate stood from the stool as Bryson disappeared into the hall and then suddenly there was no space left between them.

A man Nate's size should not be able to move so darn fast.

Eloise tried to take a step back, hoping to gain a little breathing room. Unfortunately, there was less than an inch to claim before her butt met the edge of the treatment table, stopping her retreat and leaving no way to remove herself from the closeness of Nate's body without all but running from the room.

Which wouldn't happen. She wasn't a coward and she sure as heck wasn't letting him think he flustered her.

Nate had fooled her more than once. Made her think there could be something between them. That he wanted to kiss her. That maybe he wanted more than just a kiss. But, like every other man who crossed her path, he'd changed his mind, leaving her flailing around in the open air of rejection. There was no way she'd give him the satisfaction of seeing her with her tail between her legs, so she did what she always did. She slapped on a smile, expression bright and cheery and fake as hell. "Thank you so much for taking care of him. I really appreciate it."

Nate opened his mouth, no doubt preparing to say one of the many things she'd heard before in an attempt to smooth over the awkwardness between them.

*It's not you, it's me.*

*You're too good for me.*

*I'm just not in a good place.*

But Bryson's little voice cut off whatever bullsnot was about to come out of his lips. "Miss Rivers?"

She snapped her head to the door, wide, fake smile frozen in place as Nate stepped back, putting a more comfortable amount of distance between them. Thankfully it was enough to allow her frozen lungs to finally take in some air so she could avoid passing out at his feet. "I'm coming."



## CHAPTER TWO



## NATE

HE KNEW BETTER than to show up at this damn party. Nothing good was ever going to come of it.

Yet there he was, unable to stop himself from not only convincing Rico to fly out early after completing their last job, but also from finding his way as close to Eloise as possible. She was like fucking catnip to him. And that was before he saw her race to that little boy's side.

A little boy who reminded him an awful lot of who he used to be.

Now, after seeing the gentle way she handled a kid most people would consider an annoyance, the chances of him being able to leave her alone were dropping faster than the first layer of Alaskan snow hitting the ground outside.

And the scowl on her face wasn't helping matters any.

She snagged him the second they stepped into the common area of the rooming house, dragging him by the arm to a quiet corner before spinning to face him, full of piss and vinegar. "You shouldn't have made all those plans with him." Eloise's frown was so deep it creased a line between her dark brows. "It's not fair to offer that kind of stuff to a kid like him." There was a level of ferocity in her tone. It made him wonder just what might happen if he didn't follow up on all the promises he'd made Bryson. What lengths the sweet, people-pleasing principal might go to in an effort to punish him for giving the little boy false hope.

But as much as he wanted to test Eloise's dedication to a child most would do their best to ignore, there was no way he would ever disappoint Bryson. Not only because the kid was clearly desperate for connection, but because he knew what it was like to be young and alone and let down by

everyone you thought would be there for you.

“What makes you think I don’t intend to keep my promise?”

Eloise snorted, rolling her eyes. “Seriously?” She crossed her arms, looking remarkably different from the woman who had a fake smile plastered on her face not five minutes ago as they walked back from the medical wing.

And while both versions of her were more than a little appealing, this particular one made him want to stand even closer. Forget they were surrounded by his family and friends. Chase the scent of honeysuckle and jasmine that lingered in the air around her. Beg for the chance to make up for all his mistakes.

It was a problem. Hell, everything about Eloise was turning out to be a problem. One he didn’t have a clue how to remedy.

“You seem mad at me.” Against his better judgment he moved closer, waiting to see what version of herself she offered next. “Is this about the kiss you promised me?”

He couldn’t stop himself from aggravating her. Not now that he’d seen how fucking adorable an aggravated Eloise could be. She was definitely pissed at him, and not only because of the promise he made to Bryson. This went all the way back to that dumb decision he made at the Christmas party.

He knew better than to allow himself to become interested in a woman connected to his family. It made things too complicated. Too risky.

But Eloise wasn’t initially a threat, and ever since the first night he laid eyes on her—showing up to help Tyson when Naomi’s purse was stolen after the bar they were in caught fire—there’d been something about her big brown eyes and infectious smile that pulled him in.

There was an innocence about her. A softness that made him itch with the need to protect her and the sweet and sunny disposition she had.

Not that there was a trace of it on her beautiful face now.

“Don’t make fun of me. It’s not as amusing as you think it is.” Eloise lifted her chin, continuing to stare him down. “Just leave Bryson alone, okay? You don’t understand what his life is like. Having someone like you pretend to care is only going to make it harder for him.”

There was so much to unpack in her statement. All sorts of things that said more about Eloise than they did about him, but one stuck out more than the rest.

“Someone like me?” It was impossible to tell how she meant it, and part of him couldn’t help but hope he hadn’t completely blown his shot with her.

Eloise rolled her eyes, irritation continuing to take the place of the bright smile she almost always wore. He'd only seen her like this one other time, the night her ex-boyfriend showed up with flowers after canceling a date, and their relationship, at the last minute. The prick clearly had a change of heart and thought all it would take to gain forgiveness was a lame apology and grocery store roses. The possibility had pissed him off, resulting in a moment he wasn't proud of.

But also didn't regret.

"You know exactly what you're like." Eloise's tone dripped with something akin to disgust. "You get by on good looks and charm and no one ever holds you accountable for any of the bullshit that comes out of your mouth."

Her words hit a little closer to home than he'd like, but old habits are hard to break and an easy smile slipped on his lips before he could stop it. "What I'm hearing is you think I'm charming." Nate took a step closer, reeled in by the same invisible something he'd refused to put a name to in the hopes it would eventually unravel. "And handsome."

He learned early on how far charm and a smile could get him. Coasted his way through every high school class on their back. Expected to do the same in college. But that wasn't the way his life worked out, and it ended up being a whole lot harder to bullshit his way into the Marines than it was to get through Intro to Chemistry.

But he did it. By the skin of his fucking teeth.

"Stop it." Eloise's eyes shifted around the room and suddenly her bright smile was back, full and wide.

And fake.

Before he could consider the reason for the sudden change, Naomi was at his side, offering up an interruption and a reminder. He was supposed to be staying as far from Eloise as he could get. Keeping his distance from the woman who was now closely connected to the people he considered family.

"I'm so glad you could make it." Naomi slung one arm around his shoulders, giving him a sideways hug. "Tyson said you were out on an assignment and wouldn't be back until tomorrow."

Nate tried to keep his focus on Naomi, but ignoring Eloise had always been a near impossible feat, so his answer ended up being directed at her. "We got done early and hurried home because I didn't want to miss the party."

It wasn't a complete lie. This family, the one he'd been lucky enough to find his way into, meant everything to him. The more it grew, the more space they took up in his life and the more he was willing to do to keep them there. Nothing was more important than them.

Not even the way he felt about a tone deaf, doe-eyed, elementary school principal.

"I know Emmett's excited you made it." Naomi gave him a pat in the center of his chest. "Especially considering the gift you got him."

He'd been in Florida, cleaning up a lingering mess Alaskan Security had been trying to resolve for years, when he realized it wouldn't take more than a car ride and a single-day pass to the happiest place on earth to make his nephew's day.

Naomi's eyes drift over to where Emmett stands with his classmates, proudly displaying the custom lightsaber he'd spent way too much money procuring. The smile on his nephew's face was worth every fucking penny. The things he would do for the kid knew no limits.

The swell of love and pride he felt as Emmett passed around the overpriced toy dimmed a little at the sight of a shaggy head lingering at the edge of the group. Bryson stood by himself, an outsider looking in, watching with longing and sadness in an all-too-familiar way.

"While you're here," Nate dragged his eyes from the little boy, letting them rest on Eloise a second before meeting Naomi's gaze. "I invited Bryson to come over and swim. Maybe you can help me get in touch with his parents to set something up."

A strange man reaching out to them certainly wouldn't go over well, especially one asking to take their son to the pool. And as much as he would love to figure out a way to get Eloise over for the same play date, it probably wasn't smart for the principal to get involved in a student's friendships. That meant he'd have to go through Naomi, which was probably better anyway. Remembering what was important around Eloise was already a struggle. There was no telling what would happen if she was half naked and soaking wet.

Especially now that he knew there was so much more to her than smiles and an agreeable personality.

Naomi frowned. "You know what, I don't think I've ever talked to his dad." Her dark eyes moved to Eloise. "I think Luke's mom brought him to the party."

Eloise shifted on her feet, looking a little uncomfortable and a lot like she had something to hide. Like maybe she knew there was more to the story.

It was an unsurprising revelation. One he saw coming the second he walked into the party and set eyes on Eloise and the unkempt little boy she clearly cared for.

“That’s no problem.” Nate kept his tone light and easy, just like always. “I’ll figure something out.”

Naomi gave him a wink. “I don’t doubt it.” Her grin held as she walked away, leaving him alone with Eloise once again.

And unfortunately he was going to take full advantage of the opportunity. Because he was weak. Too weak to walk away from Eloise in spite of the problems she would cause in his life.

“What do you know about Bryson’s father?” He cut straight to the point. Normally, he would spend a little more time—dish out a few more smiles—as he coaxed the information out of her. But Eloise seemed to have developed a sudden and irritating immunity to the charm he used like a weapon.

It was yet another development that made her even more appealing than she already was.

“That’s confidential.” Eloise smiled, the fakeness of the expression unmissable now that he recognized it for what it was. Her eyes dropped down his frame, hanging on the gear still strapped to his chest and waist. “I’m sure you understand how confidential information works.”

He laughed. It was impossible not to. He’d gotten peeks of the snark Eloise did her best to hide behind a façade of sweetness and agreeability, but right now it was on full, glorious display.

And it was all for him.

“I do.” He reached up to scratch at an itch crawling along his jawline, but the scrape of his fingers did nothing to ease what was gnawing at his skin. “I was just hoping you would make my life easier by offering up information I can find out anyway.”

“If you can find it out anyway then why are you asking me?” Her tone was a little bit breathless and for a second he didn’t realize why. But then the soft scent of her skin reached his nose, providing unavoidable evidence that once again he was moving closer to her without realizing it.

The woman was like a fucking flame. Bright and warm and alluring. Shining with the promise of scaring away the shadows haunting his past.

But he learned a long time ago that a flame could go out at any moment.

Leaving you alone in the dark.

“I’m asking you because I know you have the information I want.” He skimmed his gaze over her features, lingering a little longer than necessary on the full pout of her mouth. “You could save me the effort it will take to get it.”

The sinful curve of her lips eased higher, this time into a smile significantly more genuine than most of the ones she’d worn before. “Maybe I don’t want to save you the effort.”

“Fair enough.” He worked his hand into a fist, trying to curb the urge to catch the piece of hair teasing at the corner of her mouth. To see if it was as soft as it looked. As he’d imagined it. “Anything worth having is worth working for, right?”

Eloise’s smile lost a little of its luster. “That’s what they say.”

“Are we ready to sing?” Naomi’s voice cut in between their conversation. Eloise seized the opportunity, immediately spinning away and moving to the other side of the room without looking back, seeming completely unaffected and unbothered.

It was a frustrating moment, especially considering he’d been the one moving away from her up to that point. He should still be moving away from her now, but the possibility of that happening got slimmer with each passing second. When she moved in beside Bryson, making sure he got a piece of cake and a scoop of ice cream, the will to keep her at arm’s length was all but severed.

“Fancy meeting you here.” Tyson moved in at his shoulder, observing his son’s birthday party with an amused gaze. “I knew you’d show up.”

“At least one of us did. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to make it.” Nate dragged his attention from where Eloise sat, plopped down beside Harlow on one of the large sofas, the fake fucking smile back on her face as she people-pleased her way through conversation.

Until today, he thought her disposition was real. That Eloise was every bit the guileless, genuine, sweetheart of a woman she presented. And maybe she still was. But now he knew how much more there was hiding under her pristine personality.

And it was making it so much fucking harder to stay away.

“You know how fucking hot Florida is this time of year?” He forced his eyes from Eloise, swiping one hand along the freshly cropped line of his fade, being careful not to get into the styled, longer hair along his crown. “I was

fucking sweating my balls off down there.”

“Hopefully you’d rather freeze your balls off than sweat them off.” Tyson glanced toward the line of windows overlooking the gated property. “Because it sounds like we’re about to get dumped on.”

“I’ll take the snow over the bullshit humidity any day.” Nate scanned the room, hoping to disguise that he was checking in on two specific partygoers. “They say there’s no bad weather, only bad clothes, but there’s not enough naked in this world to make that fucking heat comfortable.”

Rico had been happier than a fly on shit baking in the Florida sun, but he couldn’t wait to get back to the cold and snow of Alaska. It was home. It was where he was happiest. Where all the people he cared about were.

“I’m not saying I like the cold, but after being here for a few years I’m not sure I could handle the heat either.” Tyson shook his head. “But I’m not looking forward to having to shovel my own sidewalks this winter.”

“Liar.” Nate smirked at his friend. “You fucking love that townhouse and all the bullshit that goes with it.”

Tyson’s eyes slowly slid from where they were fixed on Naomi and Emmett and a wide smile spread across his face. “I might like it a little bit.” He looked Nate up and down. “When’s your place supposed to be done?”

He shrugged, trying to look unbothered that he was one of the final members of Rogue to move into the newly built compound Pierce constructed to offer the constantly growing families of Alaskan Security a safe place to live and expand.

And they were sure as shit expanding.

“Last I heard they were hoping I’d be in by the end of the month.” Nate’s eyes accidentally found their way back to where Eloise sat, lingering as she continued chatting and smiling with the women around her. “Hopefully they get it finished before anyone else couples up.” The bitterness he usually kept under wraps crept into his tone, revealing more than he intended.

And Tyson didn’t miss it.

“Still bitter about being bumped by Jamison, huh?” He worked one elbow into Nate’s side.

Luckily his friend misread the reason behind the sourness he’d carried for nearly fifteen years and assumed it was due to a minor inconvenience instead of the fallout from having everything he’d ever wanted ripped away in an instant.

And it could happen again if he wasn’t careful.



Nate turned from where Eloise sat, ignoring the urge to find her face yet again. "I should go unpack."

# CHAPTER THREE



## ELOISE

“YOU WANT TO go out tonight?” Eloise glanced around her apartment, taking in the piles of clothes and her half-organized closet. She started to sigh but caught herself and forced on a smile instead. “Sure. Of course I can come. What time?”

“Seven?” Jen tossed out the same time she always did. An hour that wasn’t necessarily late, but also wasn’t early.

“Sure. Seven is perfect.” Eloise checked her watch, mentally calculating how much she could get finished in the two hours she had between now and then. “Should I meet you guys there?”

As expected, Jen had a whole plan already laid out. “It’s Naomi’s turn to drive. She’s going to swing past and pick me up first then we’ll come grab you.”

Great. Now she wouldn’t have the option of leaving early. Not that she would have actually done it. She always stuck it out, no matter how late it got or how exhausted she was. “Perfect. I’ll see you soon.”

Eloise disconnected the call, her phone hitting the mattress a second before her back as she dropped flat against the clothing-covered surface and stared at the ceiling. She’d planned to spend the evening reorganizing. She desperately needed to weed out her wardrobe, but she needed a distraction even more. Something to keep her from thinking about how Nate was so sweet with Bryson.

And the not so sweet way he seemed to always be a little closer than she expected.

And the way he looked in all that black, geared up and ready for anything that dared cross his path.

And the stupid way she kept catching whiffs of the clean, slightly woody scent that made Nate smell like a man who could tackle anything.

But mostly, she needed to stop thinking about the heat that flared in his eyes when he mentioned the kiss she was almost positive he was teasing her with. Because if Nate really wanted to kiss her he would have. Initially, she'd understood his hesitation to take full advantage of the mistletoe at last year's Alaskan Security Christmas party, but at this point, he'd had more than a few opportunities and could have made plenty more.

But he hadn't. Shocker.

She heaved her body up from the mattress, groaning long and loud as she scanned the mess she'd made. Now, not only was there no time to finish what she started, she had to decide what in the heck to wear tonight and where in the hell she put it.

While digging through the mounds of organized chaos, she ran across a dress she purchased nearly a year ago, thinking it might be what she would wear on her first date with Nate. The thing remained unworn, still sporting the tags it came with, because part of her—the hopelessly romantic part—continued reserving it for its intended purpose.

Not anymore. She gripped the paper and yanked, snapping the plastic fastener in two.

She was an idiot. No woman in her right mind would have held onto hope this long. They would've moved on. Found someone new. Someone who was actually interested in them.

Unfortunately, it was easier said than done. At least in the long term. There were plenty of men who wanted to take her on first and sometimes second dates, but rarely did it go beyond that. It didn't matter how agreeable she was. How friendly. How much she smiled or how interested she was in everything they said, the third dates never came.

And, on the rare occurrence they did, she ended up wishing they hadn't, like she had with Matt.

He seemed nice enough at first. Had plenty to talk about and enjoyed going out to dinner. He was a welcome distraction and a nice boost for her ego after the embarrassment of being so bluntly rejected by Nate.

But then, like every other relationship she'd managed to get into, Matt ultimately decided he wasn't that interested in her and broke things off five minutes before he was supposed to pick her up for a double date with Naomi and Tyson. The whole thing embarrassed the absolute heck out of her.

Enough that, for a minute, she forgot to be who they believed she was, accidentally letting her old self bleed through. It could have been catastrophic. She could have ended up single *and* friendless.

And honestly, that wasn't even the worst part of it.

Adding insult to injury, Matt showed up, flowers in hand, expecting her to take him back and acting like nothing had happened.

But something happened all right. Nate tossed him out on his butt, springing the lingering hope still festering in her chest back to life. Making her think she'd finally found a man who felt more than mild interest when he looked at her.

But, like the date they were supposed to have, and the flipping kiss Nate loved to talk about, it was yet another fake out. And she was tired of the bullshit. Tired of being nice and agreeable and complimentary and easy-going and still alone.

It seemed like the best, and most immediate, plan of action was to stuff herself into the hottest dress she owned and get hammered.

Two hours later, she was halfway into her new plan, yanking at the strap of her SPANX as she turned in front of the mirror. Her dark hair was curled within an inch of its life, the thick pile of her bangs pushed a little to one side since they were well past needing a trim. Normally she'd try to snip them herself in the bathroom since the bangs added to the syrupy sweet image she worked hard to convey, but tonight she was over it. Over herself.

Both versions.

So she skipped the trim and added an extra layer of smokiness to her eye makeup, smiling when the long length of her false lashes didn't have anything to tangle in as she batted them at her reflection. She sure didn't look like a sweet elementary school principal tonight. Maybe she wouldn't act like one either.

Eloise checked her phone as she wiggled both feet into the most ridiculous pair of shoes she owned. The heels were impractical and possibly a little dangerous, but tonight style trumped stability. On all fronts.

She eyed the snow boots sitting beside her door and considered taking them along. Just in case. You never knew what might happen, it was Alaska after all, and there wouldn't be much worse than having to stomp through the snow in pumps if they got stranded.

In the end, she fought the ingrained urge to be prepared for anything, grabbing only her coat and purse before hurrying out the door and down the

shoveled steps right as the expensive black SUV Tyson chauffeured them around in pulled up. It was still relatively early in the season, but in typical Alaska fashion, the temperature had dropped earlier than normal, and she pulled her coat tighter to her body as she hustled across the lot, keeping all her attention on picking the best possible places to step.

Jen jumped out of the back seat, peering at her around the passenger-side door. “Wowza. You look hot.”

Eloise smiled but kept her focus on the ground. Now would be a terrible time to bust her butt. “I wish I was hot. I’m freezing.” She rounded the SUV, grabbed the other rear door’s handle and yanked it open, piling into the seat next to Jen just as her teeth started to chatter. She was suffering now, but it would absolutely be worth it if she managed to catch the attention of one of the burly outdoorsmen who frequented their favorite bar.

It was one of the main reasons she moved back to Alaska. Not only did she make way more money, but the ratio of men to women was heavily skewed in her favor.

And yet here she was, two years later. Still single and—

A pair of baby blue eyes met hers in the rearview mirror. “Buckle up, Eloise. The roads are slick.”

*No.* Naomi wouldn’t do this to her again. Not like this.

Eloise targeted her glare on her friend sitting in the front passenger’s seat and Naomi shot her an apologetic look, wincing a little as Nate backed out of the spot. “Tyson had to go out on an assignment at the last minute, but luckily Nate offered to drive us.”

Luckily. Right. Eloise snorted, forgetting who she was for a second as a bitter laugh slipped free. When both her friends’ eyes widened the tiniest bit, she plastered on a smile and smoothed her voice back to the sweet, happy pitch everyone expected from her. “That is lucky.”

Making friends had always been a struggle. She’d never been good at putting herself out there, and even when she did, all of her interests were so far from what most girls her age were into, it was nearly impossible to form any sort of connection or find common ground. So she learned to be agreeable. To be happy. To be positive and uplifting. The cheerleader every friend group needed.

When they wanted to go out, she wanted to go out. Whatever they wanted to do, she wanted to do. If they wanted to complain, she listened. When they celebrated, she made a toast.

Did it feel slightly superficial? Sure. But it was better than being alone and, based on her success rate when it came to relationships, the last thing she should do was rock the boat.

“They’re having trivia tonight.” Jen leaned closer, oblivious that Eloise was seriously considering how scuffed up she would get if she bolted out the door at a stoplight. “Winners get a free round.”

The smile frozen on her face ached, but Eloise kept it in place. “Awesome.”

Jen’s eyes were bright with excitement. “Right? I knew you would be on board. You’re a freaking teacher after all. You probably know all kinds of shit.”

Her eye started to twitch as she counted the people in the SUV. Trivia night required teams of four. “Are we picking Miranda up?” She hoped she sounded more conversationally hopeful than teetering on the edge of a panic attack.

Jen’s lower lip pushed out in a pout. “She couldn’t come. Some excuse about having to work tomorrow.” Her expression brightened. “Luckily Nate said he’ll hang around.”

Now her jaw was throbbing from the exertion required to keep her smile in place. “Sounds like we’re just all kinds of lucky tonight.”

Maybe she should be a little reckless in the parking lot. Find a patch of ice and slide across it. If tonight was as lucky as Jen thought, she might break her neck.

Jen’s focus shifted to Naomi as the two women fell into their normal conversation about nursing and the hospital where they met. It left Eloise plenty of time to sink into the reality that her night would not be going the way she planned. Instead of slinking around the bar feeling sexy and desirable, she would be facing down the proof she was neither of those things.

And she was going to have to do it with a smile.

Too soon they were pulling into the lot at Barney’s. Their favorite bar had burned down about a year ago, but they’d rebuilt quickly and the place was better than ever. Normally she looked forward to spending an evening there, even if it meant staying up past her bedtime and paying for it the next day.

But tonight she was going to be stuck sitting too close to Nate. Too close to the reminder that no matter how hard she tried, she was never a woman men wanted to keep around. A woman who held their interest.

A woman they wanted.

The second the car stopped, Eloise shoved out the door and into the frigid air, ready to get as far away from Nate and as close to the bar as possible. This night was going to require a large amount of alcohol.

She frowned at the cleared parking lot. The blacktop was snow and ice free, stealing one of her possible outs. If she fell now she would just look stupid. Clumsy.

But maybe it was the lesser of two evils. At this point it was a toss-up.

The warmth and volume of the bar hit her like a slap, assaulting her senses with chaos as she stepped inside. She didn't mind an occasional trip to a bar, but the friend group she was a part of preferred it over anything else—definitely over the kinds of activities she enjoyed—so here she was, sucking it up yet again.

And yet again, it was another thing that was better than the alternative. The alternative being sitting at home alone. Friendless. Boyfriendless. Finally admitting she was the weird, bitchy girl no one wanted around.

Eloise went straight for the bar, offering up the megawatt smile that made people think she was friendly and accommodating. “Can I get a rum and Coke?”

“You can get anything you want, Miss Eloise.” Kirk, the man behind the bar, returned her smile, and for the first time she realized maybe his was just as fake as hers. He was probably sick of being in a bar too. Although it was unlikely he was as unhappy about Nate's arrival as she was.

Kirk mixed up her drink and slid it across the bar, his smile dimming the tiniest bit as his eyes drifted over her shoulder.

A second later a giant hand slapped down on the bar, pinning a credit card against the surface. “Put her on my tab.”

Eloise tossed back a steeling gulp of her drink before turning her costume of a smile Nate's way. “That's awful nice of you to pay for everyone's drinks.”

His eyes focused solely on her as Kirk snagged his credit card and disappeared toward the register. “Not everyone's. Just yours.”

She worked so hard to be the kind of friend who didn't rock the boat, but this man made it incredibly difficult to accomplish. Her next words slid right out, sharp and full of venom. “*Stop it.*”

She expected him to play stupid. Act all innocent and wide-eyed like he didn't know what she meant.



Instead, Nate shook his head. “No.”

The unexpectedness of his refusal made her scoff. “Yes.”

This was normally when the other person would realize she wasn’t all she pretended to be and they’d go on their merry little way, glad to be rid of her. But Nate stood firm, lips barely quirked as his eyes continued to hold hers. “No.”

Part of her wanted to stay and argue with him. To point out that he hadn’t had any trouble stopping on more than one occasion. But she was already frustrated and flustered and didn’t want it to bleed over into the way she acted around her friends. Friends she desperately wanted to keep.

“Fine.” Eloise snagged her drink, lifting it up and offering Nate a smirk. “But you’re gonna regret it.”

She spun away and marched to the table they always sat at, dropping her drink to the surface a little harder than she intended. The solid clink of the heavy glass against the wood dragged all eyes her way. The smile she gave them was purely on reflex as she unbuttoned the front of her heavy coat. “We’re going to kick ass tonight.”

She turned away just long enough to sling the coat over the back of her chair, then grabbed her drink and downed two more gulps, nearly choking on the combination of sugar and fizz. “What are we naming our team tonight?” For a second the evening almost felt normal as she slid into her role as team cheerleader, full of plastered on smiles and mustered up enthusiasm. But then a deep voice cut into the moment. A deep, unfamiliar voice.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

Eloise blinked as the question registered. She slowly craned her neck to the side and found the proverbial tall, dark, and handsome standing next to her, an easy smile softening the sharp angles of his features as his gaze drank her in. Her throat constricted, swallowing hard all on its own.

Maybe tonight wouldn’t be a complete pile of dookie after all.

“Fuck off, Luca.” Nate sliced between them, his large body blocking her view of the other man. “Her tab’s already been taken care of.”

Luca cocked a black brow, looking undaunted and unbothered by Nate’s appearance. “That’s a shame.” His dark gaze slid to where Naomi stood. “I thought we were friends, Nay.”

Naomi rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “My friend group isn’t interested in being your personal dating pool, Luca.”

Luca leaned around Nate, his outrageously tall body crowding Eloise’s

space as his smirking lips came close to her ear. “Let me know if you get tired of pretty boy.”

“Touch her and I will rip your fucking hand off.” Nate’s tone was dark and deadly as his eyes locked on where Luca’s palm hovered close to the small of her back. “And I don’t think Zeke will be happy if his best driver is down a hand.”

Luca smirked, lifting both palms up in fake surrender. One that became even less genuine when he shot her a wink over Nate’s shoulder.

Eloise glared at Nate as the gorgeous man who was exactly what she was hoping to meet tonight angled his body through the crowd. It was one thing for him not to want her, but standing in the way of her finding someone who might actually be interested?

It was fucked-up and had her more than ready to make good on the threat she dished out at the bar.

Eloise turned to Jen and Naomi, the wicked smile on her face so much more real than the one she normally wore. “Who wants shots?” She shifted her eyes to Nate. “They’re on me.”

# CHAPTER FOUR



## NATE

THIS WAS NOT how he expected the evening to go. Not just because Eloise came sauntering out of her apartment in a dress that should be illegal and a pair of shoes that brought him dangerously close to imagining what they might feel like digging into his back, but also because she was now pounding shots of tequila like it was her job. And each one was punctuated by a glare in his direction, making it clear he was the reason her liver was suffering.

“I’ll be right back.” He walked away from the table, temporarily abandoning the women as they continued to cackle and snort, completely unaware of his absence.

He reached the bar and closed out his tab before requesting three glasses of water. While he waited, Luca slid in beside him. “Didn’t realize you had your sights set on one of Naomi’s friends.” He shifted, turning to prop his back against the bar, eyes finding Eloise. “Kind of upset I didn’t run across her first. She looks like hell on wheels.”

“She doesn’t normally look that way.” He couldn’t stop himself from grumbling about the sudden change in the squeaky-clean principal. He’d liked her before. Fell hard for the way she used made-up swear words and was full of sunshine and butterflies. But now? Now that he realized how much more was lurking beneath the innocent and bubbly exterior?

Now his interest in her was headed due south, requiring him to avert his eyes and adjust his pants more times tonight than he could count.

“Where in the hell did she get that dress?” Luca shook his head. “I didn’t even know they sold shit like that in Alaska.”

Nate ground his back teeth together, wishing like hell he wasn’t the designated driver and could toss back a whiskey in the hopes it would ease

the irritation Luca's attention on Eloise was digging beneath his skin. "I'm gonna give you to the count of ten to find somewhere else to put your fucking eyeballs before I rip them out of your face."

He wasn't normally the kind to dish out threats, but the way Luca was continuing to take in Eloise and the appreciation in his stare made him want to punch something.

Specifically Luca's smug face.

For the second time tonight Luca held his hands up. "I heard what you said earlier. I know she's off-limits, but there aren't many people who wouldn't appreciate the way her ass looks in that dress." Before Nate could take a swing, Luca made one of his own, grinning as he slapped one hand against Nate's backside. "It looks almost as good as yours does." He shot him a wink as he walked away, barely managing to save himself a right hook as he crossed the bar, offering a salute before disappearing out the door.

The bartender pushed the waters across the counter, sloshing a little onto the surface before leaving Nate to go fill another order. He collected the drinks and carried them back to the table, sliding one in front of each of the girls.

Eloise ignored the water and took an unsteady step back, teetering a little in her sky-high heels. "I'm gonna go get us another round."

"No, you're not." Nate pointed to the glass. "Not until you drink that."

Eloise's bleary eyes narrowed as her lips pressed into a thin line. "You don't get to tell me what to do." Her lush curves swayed as she stepped his way, one finger stabbing into the center of his chest. "You're not my dad and you're sure as snickerdoodles not my boyfriend, so you can just zip those lips." She punctuated the last words by walking her fingers up his chest before placing them on his lips, pinching them together. Her touch lingered for a second as her eyes dropped to rest against his mouth. "Men shouldn't have lips like this anyway."

His dick stirred in his pants at the closeness of her body. The way she'd completely dropped the mask and offered him an unobscured peek at the real woman beneath it.

And that woman was even more irresistible than the one he thought he knew. She was powerful. Defiant. Fearless. The urge to part his lips and nip the tip of her finger, just to see what she would do, was strong. But Eloise was already skittish as hell around him. And for good reason.

Everything she'd said about him was true. He'd made promises. Given

mixed signals. Run hot and cold more times than he could count.

At least that's the way it appeared. In reality, every inch of him was nothing but hot when she was around. Hot and frequently hard. Especially now with her fingers on his mouth and her body so close to his.

All it would take was half a step and he could have what he desperately wanted. He could know how soft her full lips would be. How sweet her mouth would taste. How perfect her curves would feel as they pressed into him.

But that couldn't happen. Definitely not here with Naomi around to witness everything and have certain expectations he might not live up to. Then he would be back where he started. Or worse.

He could lose everything. Again.

The fingers Eloise had pressed against his mouth slid down, dragging across his skin before dropping away. Her glossy lips curled in a snarl. "You are so annoying."

She spun away, headed straight to the bar, steps wobbly as she pushed into the fold. Nate followed behind her, shouldering his way through the crowd to stay hot on her heels. Not just because he was worried for her safety, but because the way she looked had attracted more than a few interested gazes. He didn't have time to go around ripping the faces off every man in the place—not if he wanted to keep an eye on her too—so staying close and giving the appearance they were together was his next best deterrent.

And Eloise definitely needed someone keeping an eye on her.

She reached the bar without slowing down, the impact bouncing her belly against the surface as she slowly blinked. It took her a second to find the bartender and a second more to focus.

Nate stepped up beside her, blocking her sideline. "I said no more drinks until you've had some water."

Eloise's eyes lifted to his. "And I said you can't tell me what to do." She pulled her focus from him and lifted one hand to grab the bartender's attention. It was yet another behavior to add to the stack of actions that were the complete opposite of what he expected from her. And, like the rest, it pulled him closer. Drew him in even more than before.

"Eloise." He kept his tone calm and steady, hoping it might reduce the risk of an overreaction.

She continued to stare down the bar. "I'm not talking to you."

“Fine. Then I’ll talk to you.” He leaned in, stealing a guilty lungful of the soft scent clinging to her skin before letting his lips brush against her ear. “I will drag your sweet little ass out of this place before I let you get another drink.”

He was used to dishing out threats, equally used to following up on them, and the possibility he would have the opportunity to make good on the one he just laid out shot straight to his already half hard cock.

But, unlike most of the men he faced off with on a regular basis, Eloise was completely unfazed by him. She snorted, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling. “Right. I’ll believe it when I see it.” She leaned farther across the bar in a move that tugged down the already dangerously low neckline of her dress, revealing an obscene amount of her full tits.

“Eloise. I won’t say it again.” This time he didn’t have to try to make the threat sound ominous. His voice was tight with aggravation. He scanned to see who else noticed the perfect swell of her cleavage as it fought the constraints of her dress. “No. More. Drinks.”

Her eyes swung to meet his. “I thought you said you weren’t going to say that again?” She scowled, looking him up and down with a level of distaste that threatened to shrivel his aching hard-on. “Everyone thinks you’re so fucking charming but you’re just a bullpooper.” She waved one hand, the move coming dangerously close to smacking him in the face. “You all are. I’m so flipping sick of men and their crap.”

Jealousy sparked through him, bringing the irritation already burning under his skin to a flashpoint. He knew when he canceled their date that a woman like Eloise wouldn’t continue spending her nights alone, but the reminder there were other men—men who did have the balls to take her out—chapped his ass to no end.

If only she didn’t know Naomi. If only she wasn’t tied to the people he cared about most. If only he could be close to her without worrying what the fallout might be if things went south.

But she *did* know Naomi. She *was* connected to the people he loved more than anything. And he knew *exactly* what the fallout would be if things went south. A year ago he decided it wasn’t worth the risk, but fate just kept stacking the deck against him. Tempting him to break the rule he laid down.

He forced in a slow breath, counting his way through the inhale and exhale, hoping it would give him enough time to calm down. To think of a new way to handle the woman who was testing him in ways he never

expected.

Unfortunately, she was still wearing that fucking red dress. Still leaning against the bar, giving him and everyone else a view of her tits that made it clear they were infinitely more impressive than he initially expected.

And she was still shooting daggers his direction. Still proving to be immune to the charm that had served him so well.

And it meant her mask wasn't the only one that slipped.

Nate leaned into her ear again, abandoning any semblance of the smoothness that ruled his life. "I'm going to give you to the count of three to get your ass away from this bar. One. Two." He paused, expecting her to peel herself free, shoot him another glare, and go back to the table.

But Eloise didn't budge. Didn't act like she'd heard his threat at all.

"Fine. Have it your way." He grabbed the arm she was still holding out in an effort to attract the bartender's attention, oblivious he'd already closed their tab, lacing it over his head before bending down to plant his shoulder in her middle. She let out an ear-piercing squeal as he hefted her up and over, planting one palm against her ass so the hem of her dress stayed put as he strode through the bar. He snagged her coat from the back of the chair and tossed it over her ass and legs, covering as much of her as possible.

Naomi's eyes widened. "What's going on?"

"I'm taking Eloise home." His cool was long gone and it showed. Irritation and aggravation carried through his tone which only pissed him off more. "Luca will be back to pick you two up."

Before Naomi could say anything else, or he could consider the fallout of what he was doing, he turned away, the crowd parting as he strode to the door and out into the night.

Eloise struggled against him, fighting his hold as she wailed against his back with both fists. "Put me down."

"You had your chance. I warned you." He pressed the button on the fob, unlocking the Jeep as he made a beeline for the passenger's side. "Twice."

"Nate, I'm serious. Put me down or I'm going to—"

He whipped open the passenger's door and bent forward, sliding Eloise onto her stilettos in one smooth move. "Or you're going to what?"

The words were barely out of his mouth before fifty dollars' worth of tequila came flying out of hers, splattering onto his pants and boots.

He'd been expecting threats of violence and instead became the victim of something much worse.



Eloise's hand came to her mouth, fingers pressing into her skin as she stared wide-eyed at the mess soaking into the fabric of his jeans.

It wasn't the worst thing he'd had spilled on him. It probably wasn't even the worst thing he'd faced this week, but it was still sobering as fuck.

It wasn't the smell or the rapidly freezing ick that bothered him. It was knowing he was the reason behind it. Not just the immediate cause, but also the driving force behind Eloise's need to shoot tequila in the first place.

"Christ." He raked one hand through his hair, messing up the perfect style he'd scraped it into after getting out of the shower.

Eloise sniffled, her eyes continuing to stare down at the sour smelling vomit splattering the snow.

He was an ass. After years of avoiding relationships, he was more out of practice than he'd realized. When the men around him started pairing off into happy couples, he thought maybe it was time to suck it up and put the past behind him. To move forward instead of continuously looking back and expecting history to repeat itself.

But this shit wasn't like riding a bike. And as much as he was trying to fight it, history did seem to be rolling back for an encore.

"I'm sorry." He raked his hand through his hair again, because why the hell not? Everything else was going to shit. His hair might as well go too. "I shouldn't have carried you out of there like that."

Eloise's gaze wouldn't meet his as she shifted the coat he'd thrown over her higher, wrapping her arms into the thick fabric. "You probably shouldn't have done a lot of things, but that hasn't stopped you."

He deserved that. He'd fucked-up every way possible with this woman. Got close then blew her off over and over again.

And here he was again. Right back in front of her, trying to find a way to get close without losing everything.

"Eloise—"

She lifted one hand, cutting him off. "I don't care." She snuggled deeper into the bulk of her coat. "I don't know what your deal is, but can you just leave me alone?"

Could he? He'd tried. Multiple times.

And failed each and every one of them.

But those times were for him. Self-serving. This one would be for her, and maybe that was what he needed too. A reason to walk away from her that wasn't his own.

He managed a jerky nod. "Fine."

Eloise straightened her spine, chin barely lifting as she sucked in a breath and turned toward the bar. "Good." She took a step before tilting her head his direction, eyes still refusing to come his way. "I'm gonna go wait for Luca inside." Her chin tucked and her gaze shifted, finding his lower half. "I'm sorry about your pants." She turned away and he could swear she said one final word as she walked away.

"Sorta."

# CHAPTER FIVE



## ELOISE

“MISS RIVERS?”

The soft voice at her open office door yanked Eloise’s head up from where it was resting on her desk. She blinked away the clouds blurring her vision and snapped her spine straight. “Yes?”

She’d somehow managed to make it through the whole school day without barfing or falling asleep. But she still had work left that needed to be finished before she went home, so, the second the last kid was out the door, she’d flipped off her office light and given her pounding head and rolling stomach the break they needed.

And then promptly fell asleep.

Bryson stood in the glowing rectangle cut from the lights of the main office on the other side of her door. He shifted uncertainly on his feet. “A-are you okay?”

“Of course.” She worked hard to make sure her voice was softer this time. Gentler. “Just a little tired.” She smoothed down the mess of her hair and scooted closer to the desk as Bryson continued to watch her warily. “Is everything okay with you?”

He glanced over one shoulder before stepping a little deeper into the shadows of her office. “My dad didn’t come to get me.”

Of course he didn’t.

It wasn’t a surprise. Bryson’s father forgot him more often than not, and usually one of the other parents who lived in the same area would take him home. But, that wouldn’t be the case today. It was late enough that the only people left would be custodians and a handful of teachers lingering over their lesson plans.

“I can take you home.” She’d had every intention of staying until she was finished with all the day’s tasks, but maybe this was a sign.

Just like when she puked on Nate’s shoes.

“I’m sorry. I should have told you right away, but I thought he might come.” Bryson offered an apology that wasn’t his to give. It was something he was no doubt programmed to do in an effort to avoid being on the receiving end of an adult’s anger and all that occasionally came with it.

“You don’t have to apologize, Bryson. This isn’t your fault.” Eloise stood, wincing as her head throbbed. She cracked open a bottle of water from her desk, chugging it down along with a couple more aspirin, before grabbing her bag, loading it up with her computer and cell phone, and slinging it over one shoulder. “Do you have everything?”

Bryson nodded.

Eloise looked him over, taking in his too small shoes, too big clothes, and the filthy jacket no one would consider warm enough for an Alaskan winter. “Okay.”

Last winter she’d managed to sneak him thick socks and a heavy coat, but both seemed to quickly disappear, leaving her unsure how to proceed. Maybe she could have him store the items here and use them while he was at school, but that wouldn’t do him any good on evenings and weekends.

It was one more frustration for her overloaded and aching brain to ponder. At least the source of this one wasn’t a six-foot-four fart knocker who deserved a kick to the family jewels.

“Here.” Eloise draped her coat over Bryson’s shoulders, tucking it around him. “You want a cup of coffee to keep you warm on the way home?”

Bryson gave her a sheepish nod and followed her to the coffee station they visited twice a day. Once in the morning before school started, and once after lunch. It was a trick she’d learned when she was a teacher in Idaho. Occasionally she’d come across a parent who didn’t want to give their hyperactive children pharmaceutical assistance, and she’d learned caffeine will actually calm a kid with ADHD down and help them focus. In Bryson’s case, it wasn’t that his dad refused meds. In order to refuse them, there would have been a trip to the doctor and a subsequent prescription, which would have involved effort and at least temporary sobriety. Both were clearly way too much to ask from a man who couldn’t even manage to get his child a winter coat from one of the many resources she’d attempted to connect him with.

So, she scheduled time out of Bryson's day in the hopes it would take the edge off the energy and lack of impulse control that disturbed not only his own school day, but also his classmates'.

And so far it did seem to be helping. Now she just had to figure out what to do about the coat situation.

Eloise poured the remaining coffee into a couple of insulated paper cups, topping Bryson's off with a healthy dose of the sweetened French vanilla creamer he loved before adding a tiny splash to hers. She capped them both, slid on insulating cardboard sleeves, and handed Bryson his. "Now you'll be warm from the inside out."

Bryson curved his hands around the cup, taking a careful sip the way he did every morning and afternoon before offering her a smile, as if a cup of coffee brightened his whole world.

Hopefully hers would do the same, because her head was pounding, her stomach was still threatening to repeat last night's performance, and she was so pissed at Bryson's dad for being such a pile of camel dookie that her shoulders were climbing up toward her ears.

Eloise led Bryson out of the building and into the cold outside air, stifling a shiver so he wouldn't feel guilty for being bundled into her coat. Her car seats were heated, and she had a spare blanket and coat in the back, so she wouldn't be chilly for long. Heck, she could even brew them up another round of coffee if she wanted to. Her trunk was basically a survivalist's dream. One that helped her feel close to the only man who never let her down.

Hopefully he would be proud to know she listened to everything he taught her and continued to be diligent and prepared.

She opened the passenger's door to her crossover, helping Bryson get loaded into the seat before tossing her bag into the back, grabbing the blanket, and climbing into the front seat. She tucked herself under the plush fleece, wishing it was as warm as the heavier blanket she kept in the trunk, as she flipped on both the seat warmers and the first lukewarm air poured through the vents. "You want a snack for the road?"

Bryson's eyes met hers and she couldn't miss the hunger there. It was yet another aspect of his life she could only control during school hours. He always had breakfast and lunch Monday to Friday, but her power didn't extend into the evenings or weekends.

Technically.

Eloise flipped open the console and started digging through the emergency snacks stacked inside. None of it was particularly nutritious or anything a person would want to live on exclusively, but they would absolutely keep energy levels up and fill an empty belly short-term. “Take these. They’re my favorite.” She pulled out a few of the peanut butter protein bars she was partial to and stacked them on Bryson’s lap, making a mental note to replenish her stash when she got home.

You never knew when your life might depend on your ability to be prepared. Especially in Alaska.

Bryson snatched them up, stuffing the wrapped bars into the pockets of his blue jeans. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I always have them in there. If you ever want more, just let me know.” She tried to sound casual, like she wasn’t pondering if the weight of her tiny SUV would be enough to crush a rage filled alcoholic.

“Hopefully your dad’s okay.” She didn’t actually hope that at all. Nothing would make her happier than dropping Bryson off and discovering his piece of poop sperm donor frozen in the front yard. Of course, that would add yet another layer of trauma to a little boy who’d already witnessed way too much.

Hopefully he’d be frozen in the backyard instead.

“He just probably forgot.” Bryson’s eyes went to his lap. “He does that sometimes.”

Eloise fished around for something to say. Something to make the sad little boy beside her feel less worthless. Less abandoned. But the only things that came to mind would only make her feel better and him feel worse.

Like pointing out his father was a sorry excuse for a parent.

Mentioning he should never have been allowed to breed in the first place.

Wondering exactly how long it could possibly take for alcoholism to finally finish him off.

Eloise fell silent instead, choosing to keep her mouth shut because it was what was best for the little boy beside her. And that was part of being an adult. Doing what was best even when it wasn’t what you wanted.

Clearly Nate didn’t get the memo.

The ride to Bryson’s house was relatively long. He lived at the very edge of the district, down more than a few narrow roads, making her grateful she’d upgraded to all-wheel drive when she decided to move back to Alaska two years ago. Unfortunately, when she pulled up in front of the run-down

structure Bryson called home, there was no dead body in the front yard. The backyard looked disappointingly dead body free too.

She put the SUV in park, planning to walk Bryson to the door in the hopes she might be able to have a little talk with the turd burglar who didn't seem to realize he was supposed to put his child first. But before she could even unbuckle her seatbelt, Bryson was out of the car, offering a rushed thank you before slamming the door and racing up the unshoveled driveway. She blinked and he was gone, disappearing through the beat-up front door, leaving her staring after him.

"Forking heck." She sighed and shifted into reverse, backing out of the drive since the opportunity to run a negligent parent over didn't readily present itself. It took almost a half hour to make it back home and her mood only soured more on the way. By the time she pulled into her apartment complex, finger punching the button on her garage opener like it was responsible for all the wrongs in the world, anger was amplifying the steady throb still pounding in her cranium.

How could a parent be like that? Especially the parent of a kid as sweet and gentle as Bryson. It wasn't forking right and it wasn't flipping fair.

She stomped out of her car, grabbing the bag from the backseat before collecting the coat Bryson abandoned, slinging it over one arm instead of putting it on. Hopefully the cold air would cool a little of the rage heating her blood. Flinging open the door of the detached space and traipsing up the sidewalk leading to her door, she stopped halfway up the stairs, staring at the sight in front of her.

"You've got to be kidding me." She shuffled the items in her arms around, managing to free up a hand so she could grab the package on her doorstep. The balloon tied to it bounced off the center of her face and she smacked at it, knocking it out of the way as she wedged her key into the deadbolt and stumbled inside, juggling the armload she carried on her way to the kitchen. Dumping everything onto the counter, she yanked at the card taped to the box of chocolates. She shouldn't even bother opening it. No doubt they were from Nate, apologizing for carrying her over his shoulder through a public place after making her look like a fool for the past year.

As the card slid from the envelope, purple glitter dropped across the granite surface, making yet another mess she would have to deal with. Eloise flipped it over and scanned the surprisingly sentimental text scrawled on the front. "Gross."



If he thought she could be won over with a little sugar he was dumber than—

Her heart stopped and her stomach lurched when she opened the card, her gaze resting on the name printed in perfect letters across the bottom right side.

It wasn't Nate who'd been on her porch, and it wasn't Nate attempting to apologize.

Eloise dropped the card like it was on fire and stepped back, wiping the clinging glitter from her fingers. How had this day managed to get worse?

She stabbed the balloon with a fork, grabbed the box of chocolate from the counter and chucked them into the trash can, topping the pile with the glitter bomb of a card before tying the sack off and carrying it out, throwing the whole thing in the dumpster before stomping back inside and vacuuming up the mess Matt dumped all over her kitchen counter and floor. A glance down proved it wasn't simply the hard surfaces that were now coated in glitter, but also the sides of her dress where she wiped her hands, so her stomp continued up the stairs as she peeled off the knee length sweater and flung it in the laundry basket. She was halfway through worming her way out of the thick tights keeping her legs warm when her cell started to ring.

Apprehension made her middle tight. Certainly he wouldn't try to call her.

Thankfully, the name displayed across her cell was not the same one scrawled across the card, sending a sigh of relief free as she answered Naomi's call, fighting on a smile. "Hey. How are you?"

"You sound way perkier than I expected after last night." Naomi barely paused for a breath. "I thought you might still be a little hung over so I made some chicken noodle soup if you want to come have dinner."

Naomi had really come into her own since meeting Tyson. They practically had to drag her out when she first moved to Alaska, but now she made plans almost as much as everyone else did.

Which was great, except going to Naomi's house included a certain amount of risk. Risk she normally would have avoided like the plague tonight. But knowing Matt had been on her porch at some point during the day had her ready to get out of these walls regardless of how the evening might end up.

"That sounds freaking fantastic." Eloise snagged a pair of sweatpants from the pile stacked on her chair still waiting to be organized. It looked like

her closet plans would have to wait another day.

“What can I bring?” She bounced across the floor, yanking the oversized pants up her body. “I think I’ve got a full carton of the ice cream you love in my freezer.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“I also have the one Tyson likes. Should I bring it too?” Asking if Tyson was there felt a little too direct—too easy to dissect—but she wanted to be prepared for whatever was coming her way. *Whoever* was coming her way.

“Tyson’s not here. He and a few of the other guys are out doing something top-secret that I’m not allowed to know about.”

Eloise let out the breath she’d been holding. Maybe her day was finally taking a turn for the better. “That’s a bummer.”

“Nah. You know I’m always down for a girls’ night.”

Eloise smiled. She’d always loved Naomi. Out of their whole group, Naomi was the calmest. She was an anchoring presence that made Eloise feel as if maybe at least one person in their group would like her even if she didn’t put on the show they all expected.

Which was good, because she wasn’t really feeling up to performing. “I could really use a girls’ night.”

Naomi was quiet for a heartbeat. “I know. I’m really sorry about Nate showing up last night. I had him talked into just dropping us off until Jen got in the car and invited him to stay. Next time I’ll tell her to keep her big mouth shut.”

Eloise yanked a tank top on after ditching her bra, adding a long-sleeved T-shirt and a hoodie to the layers she always wore so she would be ready for whatever temperature came her way. “It’s okay. I think he and I have a truce.”

She’d told him to leave her alone, and he’d agreed. It seemed like he genuinely meant it too.

It was exactly what she wanted. And in direct conflict with the pit in her stomach at the thought of finally giving up any hope of that date.

And that kiss.

Because as much as the man frustrated the hell out of her—all the ways he ran hot and cold and on and off—there was still something about him. Something no amount of rational thinking could combat.

It probably had a lot to do with how gentle he was with Bryson.

It definitely wasn’t because of the way his voice rasped in her ear last

night when he made threats he wouldn't follow up on.

And it most certainly wasn't due to the hard line of his muscles as she pounded on his back hoping he would release her before the tequila she downed made a repeat performance.

Naomi snorted. "Good. I'd hate to have to kill him."

Eloise smiled as she wiggled her toes into a thick pair of socks. "No one said you still shouldn't."

# CHAPTER SIX



## NATE

“YOU’RE AWFULLY QUIET today.” Tyson fell in at his side as they walked from the back of the van toward the double doors leading into headquarters.

“Wasn’t really much to say.” He offered Tyson a grin. “Pierce and Vincent said enough for everybody.”

They’d spent the day cooped up in a conference room, listening to Vincent and Pierce argue over exactly how much assistance Alaskan Security would continue offering the head of GHOST. Apparently, Vincent had figured out how useful they could be and how clean their involvement kept his hands. It must have made him realize the benefits of having another degree of separation between the tasks he had to accomplish and the government that requested them. And now he wanted more.

So what was meant to be a simple training exercise designed to help their two teams work better together quickly deteriorated into a shouting match between the heads of the groups. The only thing they accomplished was wasting everyone’s time.

Tyson snorted. “I thought Pierce was gonna punch him in the face for a minute there.” He pulled open one door, holding it wide. “Vincent definitely thought he would get what he wanted, no questions asked.”

Nate shook his head. “He clearly doesn’t know Pierce very well then.”

The owner of Alaskan Security didn’t get where he was by being a pushover, and he certainly wouldn’t roll over now. Not when there was so much on the line.

A few years ago Alaskan Security was completely different than it was now. Not only in demographics and numbers, but also in goals and

objectives. When they first started, everyone was there for money and thrills, and the job offered plenty of both. They took on anything that paid well enough, regardless of who it involved. It led to a pretty substantial financial windfall for all of them since Pierce was good about passing on the wealth, but it also tangled them with some seriously questionable individuals. A few of whom were proving to be difficult to detangle themselves from.

Vincent being the primary one.

Nate turned down the hall leading to the locker room. “You think Pierce will cut him off completely?”

Tyson shook his head. “No fucking way. The relationship is a two-way street. One that benefits both of us.”

“Yeah, but sometimes the risks outweigh the benefits.” It was something he knew firsthand. Was the main reason he agreed to leave Eloise alone. The risk outweighed the benefit. At least that’s what he was telling himself.

“There’s no way we could function like we do without Vincent. He can clean up our messes and make people disappear, no questions asked.” Tyson shrugged. “In exchange, we do a little of his dirty work. It seems like a pretty fair deal to me.”

“Yeah, but he knows he’s got us in a corner. We need him more than he needs us and he plans to exploit that.” It was probably the reason Vincent was in the position he was in to begin with. He definitely didn’t become the head of a covert government-adjacent operation by being nice, but it was still a huge pain in the ass. Especially if it was going to lead to spending entire days sitting on his ass in a conference room listening to two grown men talk over each other.

“I don’t know. It seems like he needs us quite a bit or he wouldn’t be trying to get as much as he can.” Tyson followed him into the locker room, opening the door on his locker before yanking out his coat and keys. “Either way, it’ll be interesting to see what happens.”

Nate grunted. “I’m not sure if ‘interesting’ is the word I would use.”

He used to love everything about his job. At first, being a part of Rogue felt like he’d finally found where he belonged. Finally had the family he’d been hoping for. But lately, their dynamic was changing. Like Alaskan Security, his family was growing. Shifting around in ways that pushed him toward the outer edges.

He couldn’t help but feel like all it would take was one wrong move and he’d be out on his ass. Abandoned and alone yet again.

“You got plans for the night?” Tyson tugged on his coat. “I’m thinking about seeing if Jamison wants to come over and have a couple beers and some pizza.”

“Sounds good.” It definitely sounded a hell of a lot better than his initial plans to hit the gym and take out some frustration on the treadmill before staring at the four walls of his room in the mostly empty rooming house. He opened his own locker and snapped on the badge he used to move throughout the building. “Let me go get changed and I’ll head your way.”

Tyson lifted his brows, looking him over. “Why would you waste time changing? It’s not like we did anything but sit in a fucking room all day.” Tyson jerked his chin toward the door. “Plus, I’m fucking starving.”



THE UNLINED ROAD flanking the row of two-story townhomes that made up the first portion of Alaskan Security’s housing compound was surprisingly empty. The bulk of Rogue now lived there, so it would stand to reason the place should be as busy as the rooming house used to be. But the two-car garages that took up most of the base level in each unit kept the area from feeling as cluttered and congested as the halls and kitchen at headquarters used to be.

The same halls and kitchen that were now all but abandoned. The place had once been packed to capacity, especially when the men he worked with started to fall like dominoes and their wives and children added to the already overflowing headcount.

And he’d loved every minute of it. Loved the noise. The chaos. Loved always having someone around.

Part of him was hoping moving to the compound would bring that back, but it appeared it might be lost to him forever.

Nate pulled up to the sloping curb in front of Tyson and Naomi’s townhouse, shutting off the engine of the Jeep before stepping out into the icy air. He took a deep breath, letting it fill his lungs. The heat of Florida still wasn’t completely out of his veins and all he wanted was to feel like things were back to normal.

But maybe the feeling had less to do with Florida and more to do with the reality that things were changing. Again. And, like last time, there was little

he could do to keep it from happening. To hold onto what he so desperately wanted.

A thin layer of snow dusted the cleared sidewalk as he made his way toward the steps leading to the front door. His boots weren't the first to grace them though. A set of footprints already marred the glittering flakes, bringing back hope that tonight might bring him a little taste of the boisterous family life that always seemed just out of his reach.

He could get close enough to experience it. To pretend he might be a part of it. But no matter how hard he tried, it was impossible to grip. To hang onto. To keep.

He rapped his knuckles against the door, waiting for Tyson to let him in.

A few seconds later the front door flew open and Naomi stared out at him. Her eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here?"

"Uhhh." He'd expected Tyson to call Naomi on their way over. To let her know she was about to be invaded by a handful of grumpy mercenaries who planned to take over her couch and television while they bitched about their pointless day. "Tyson invited me."

Naomi rolled her eyes to the ceiling and whispered a swear under her breath. "Of course he did."

Nate expected her to step back so he could come inside, but instead, Naomi came toward him, bumping him back as she closed the door and lifted a finger to his face. "You better be on your best fucking behavior, got it?"

He should have expected this. Should have known Naomi wouldn't let what happened last night slide.

He'd hoped it would just blow over. That he hadn't fucked everything up yet again. That maybe this time would be different than the last, and one wrong move wouldn't be enough to end up back out on his ass in the cold.

"I overreacted." He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully, desperate to fix this. "I was just—"

Naomi held up a hand between them, her expression stern. "I'm pretty sure I know exactly what was going on there, and you need to either pop your head out of your ass or leave her the hell alone." Naomi crossed both arms over her chest. "I know Eloise seems unbreakable, but you don't know her like I do. She's way more fragile than she seems."

Naomi's assessment almost brought a smirk to his lips because she clearly didn't know Eloise as well as she thought. Eloise absolutely put on a front. She was a people pleaser through and through. She liked telling people



what they wanted to hear and being thought of as the bubbly, happy-go-lucky one of the gang.

But she was not fragile.

He saw it when she warned him about making promises to Bryson. When he bore the brunt of the wrath she kept well-hidden last night after losing his cool. But there was no way he would argue with Naomi now—or ever—so he nodded his head. “Understood.”

Naomi eyed him a second longer before finally nodding back. “Good.” She turned and flung open the door. “Because tonight she’s armed.”

Nate stepped in behind her, opening his mouth to ask what in the hell she meant by that, but the question was cut off by something small bouncing off the center of his forehead. The impact wasn’t exactly painful, but it was shocking and left a lingering sting that brought his palm to his skin as he searched for the source of the assault.

It took him all of two seconds to find the assailant. Eloise sat on the large sectional, looking sexy as shit in oversized sweats and a messy ponytail as she lined up the sight on her Nerf gun for a second time. He didn’t have the chance to sidestep or lift his hands in defense before another foam ball bounced off his throat, hitting his windpipe hard enough to make him cough.

“Good shot, Miss Rivers.” Emmett bounced beside her, laughing with unrestrained glee as Eloise pumped the plastic pistol yet again and took aim, this time lower.

Was she really going to—

Eloise’s finger twitched on the trigger, hesitating just long enough to give him a chance to block the next hit.

The Nerf ball bounced off his knuckles instead of his nuts, ricocheting across the room as Emmett hit the floor laughing.

Nate lifted a brow at her.

Eloise’s full lips pulled into a smirk and then the woman started pumping air into the gun again.

He’d like to claim it was training that moved him in her direction, but it was something much more complicated that had him standing in front of her, expertly disarming the school principal with wicked aim, before she could get off her next shot.

Eloise’s eyes widened as he relieved her of her weapon, saving both his balls and his sanity.

But the reprieve was short-lived.

A second weapon was shoved into her hands, passed off by the woman most likely responsible for her ridiculously accurate aim.

Nate glanced to where Sadie, Jamison's girlfriend, grinned at him. "Are you kidding me?" He immediately took the backup, managing to have it in his possession before Eloise could fire off another shot.

Eloise scowled, glare holding as she stood up, proving she was absolutely not the delicate flower Naomi seemed to believe. "I thought you were going to leave me alone."

Nate held her stare but refused to match her mood. "I'm not the one who just considered firing a kill shot at point-blank range."

Her eyes flashed, like she was surprised he knew what she was planning. "It's a Nerf gun. I would hardly call it a kill shot."

"Normally I would agree, but you were planning to take out future generations with that thing." He continued to hold the bigger of the two weapons in front of his crotch, just in case she managed to get her hands on yet another weapon. "And you can't really ask me to leave you alone and then shoot me between the eyes."

Eloise's chin lifted the tiniest bit. "That was payback. For last night."

"That's funny. I assumed the payback was you puking on my shoes."

Her face flushed, turning a pretty pink that crept over her cheeks and down her neck to disappear under the high neckline of her hoodie. "That was your fault."

"You're right. It was." He could feel eyes burning into his back, the weight of them reminding him this needed to get wrapped up before someone got the wrong impression. "Truce?"

Eloise studied him as the seconds ticked past. Finally she lifted one shoulder and let it drop. "Sure. Why not."

"That doesn't sound convincing." He couldn't resist goading her a little more, especially since her response was so vague.

"I can't promise I won't take another shot at you if I have the opportunity."

His laugh was loud and immediate, tipping his head back. "I'll keep that in mind." He turned away, taking the guns with him as he strode back across the room, slamming the yellow and blue plastic against Tyson's chest as he passed. "I think I might take a rain check. I'd like to be a father someday." He didn't stop on his way out the door and down the steps.

There was nothing he wanted more than to spend the evening with his

family. But as much as he wanted to believe he could keep his hands and his mind off Eloise, she seemed hell-bent on making that more and more difficult every time their paths crossed.

First it was the awful karaoke at the Christmas party. She'd belted out '*I want a Hippopotamus for Christmas*', completely off key and shamelessly, shaking her ass through the whole number.

Then she bumped into him under the mistletoe and made what he now believed was a tequila-fueled suggestion they should follow the rules of the holiday. As much as he wanted to take advantage, the last thing he wanted was to make the people he loved see him differently, and kissing Naomi's drunk friend at a Christmas party would absolutely have done just that. So instead he asked her out.

Then got cold feet and canceled.

Without Eloise there to tempt him, it was easier to realize that if things didn't go well, Naomi and Tyson could easily turn their backs on him.

Which should've been the end of it.

But it wasn't. Because Eloise kept showing up at parties and gatherings. Kept smiling and laughing. Kept spreading sunshine and happiness all around. Kept reminding him what a fucking coward he was. How badly he fucked up by pushing her away.

And then she started dating a fucking prick. One who didn't appreciate her light. Her warmth. Her kindness.

Who didn't appreciate *her*.

When they split up, he was happier than he should have been. And it led to yet another bad decision. One that made Eloise mark him as a repeat offender and led her to write him off completely, ending any interest she might have had in him.

But his fascination with her continued.

Every time she was around it was impossible to stay away. To ignore her the way he knew he should.

So once again, he had to remove himself from the situation. Do exactly what she accused him of doing so many times before.

There was no denying he'd sent her every mixed-signal possible at this point and, honestly, he probably should've let her get that last shot in.

It might've made them both feel better.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



## ELOISE

ELOISE TOPPED OFF her coffee cup, lingering at the machine in the middle of the main office as the minutes ticked by. She checked her watch, frowning as she scanned the vestibule leading to the main entrance.

The first bell was set to ring any second and there was still no sign of Bryson. If it was any other kid she might not be as concerned but, while Bryson's father frequently forgot to pick him up, he rarely missed an opportunity to rid himself of his son. It was probably the only reason Bryson was at Emmett's birthday party. The man would sure as soup never go out of his way to do something for Bryson's benefit.

She sipped at the steaming hot liquid in her cup, tapping one Mary Jane against the floor while she waited, getting more and more impatient as the seconds passed.

"You look grumpy." Becky, the school secretary looked her up and down, confusion pinching her dark brows together.

Out of reflex, Eloise plastered on a bright smile. "I'm fine. I think I just have the stares." She resisted the urge to check the clock again and forced her feet toward the door of the office, smiling at the students as they passed by. "Good morning."

Seeing their little faces helped calm her down a little. Reminded her she had more than one child to worry about. More than one child she was here to look out for. To take care of.

Her primary reason for moving back to Alaska wasn't centered around her career, but boy had it ended up being an amazing opportunity. Not only was she making significantly more money here than she was making in Idaho, but the classroom sizes were smaller and the students were less

troubled.

With the exception of one. The same one who still hadn't walked through the doors.

Her smile tightened as the bell rang, signifying the beginning of the school day and encouraging the last few stragglers to pick up their pace, wet boots squeaking across the tile as they rushed to their homerooms.

Eloise waited until the last door was closed and the hall was silent before letting her smile disappear and sink into the frown that felt more fitting for the moment.

What if Bryson's dad hadn't been home last night when she dropped him off? What if he'd been as dead in the backyard as she'd hoped and the little boy was stranded, alone and scared all the way out in the middle of nowhere?

Eloise turned, marching into her office and picking up the phone, punching out the number she'd called more times than she could count and waiting for it to ring.

But instead of the expected ring she heard a dull click, followed by an ascending computerized tone and a digital voice letting her know the line she was trying to reach was no longer in service.

Fantastic. Just what she needed.

She slammed the receiver into its cradle and pressed both pointers into the dip of her temples. This week was shaping up to be one of the worst she'd had in a long time. Between all of Nate's bullshit, the struggles with Bryson, and Matt's unexpected candy delivery on her porch yesterday, it was getting harder and harder to pretend to be the happy-go-lucky, eternal optimist she presented herself to be.

"Miss Rivers?" Becky strode into her office, dropping three files onto the desk. "I printed out all the forms you need for today's teacher evaluations and separated them into files." She glanced up at the clock. "Mrs. Schneider will be doing a class project while you're in her room this morning. Mr. DuPaul is expecting you right before lunch and will be doing a presentation, and Miss Kirkland will be your last observance of the day." Her nose scrunched, lifting one side of her upper lip. "And I think they're dissecting frogs."

Eloise swallowed hard, not necessarily because her after lunch experience would include amphibian guts, but because this was the part of the job she hated the most. She wasn't the kind of person who enjoyed making others nervous, and knowing the principal of the school was sitting in the back of your classroom was one of the more nerve-racking moments of being a

teacher. It didn't matter how much she smiled or how nice she was, no one wanted their boss watching them work.

"Great." She managed a smile in spite of the direction her day was heading. "Thank you so much for getting this together for me."

She'd all but forgotten this week would include evaluations—probably because she did everything possible to push them out of her mind so she didn't stress out about it. Of course, had she known how much else she would have to stress about, she might have taken advantage of adding them to the pile. What was a little more at this point?

Eloise grabbed the first file from the stack along with a pen, rocking her neck from side to side before heading out of the office and down the hall to her first sit-in. She quietly crept into the room and took her place at the backmost desk, hoping everyone would continue to act normally in her presence.

They did not.

The students continuously peeked her direction, sitting a little straighter when her gaze met theirs. The room was silent and awkward as Mrs. Schneider walked her second graders through the process of creating a map of Alaska. By all accounts, they should have been having a blast. They had homemade salt clay to add elevation, markers for outlining, and paints to fill in the coastline. But, as so often happened, she was sitting at the edge keeping everyone else from enjoying themselves.

It was why she learned to be the cheerleader. The enthusiastic one. The one encouraging everyone around her to do exactly what made them the happiest.

This went directly against all that and left her completely out of her designated element.

She managed to suffer through her hour with the second graders, face sore from holding her smile for so long as she snuck from the room as quietly as she came in and went back to her office to fill out forms and enter relevant information into the system. While she was there she checked the attendance records and confirmed Bryson had not made it to school, making her mood even more sour as she headed out for her second observation.

This one was less uncomfortable because it was a presentation where everyone was supposed to be quiet anyway, so she listened and took in the same information as the fifth graders. Mr. DuPaul was a skilled presenter and the hour flew past. He was entertaining. Engaging. Interesting and funny.

Once the hour was over she went back to her office, ate a quick lunch, returned a handful of emails, and checked with Becky to see if anyone had called Bryson in sick, even though she knew no one had. Not just because their phone was cut off, but because his father wouldn't have done it anyway.

Fart knocker.

By the time she was finished wolfing down her food, taking a quick break, and checking in with Becky, it was time to head back out for her afternoon autopsy observation.

The process itself didn't make her squeamish, but the smell of the preservatives and the constant groaning of the kids had her head throbbing by the time it was over and she couldn't wait to escape to the quiet of her office.

Except her office was occupied by a parent who wanted to discuss their child's claims of being bullied on the playground. In a fun twist, their kid wasn't being bullied, but was the actual bully, so things got pretty tense and only exacerbated the steady pulse throbbing behind her eyes.

When the final bell rang and the students filed out, Eloise flopped into her seat and groaned, checking off another day in the week that seemed to be descended from hell.

And it was only Tuesday.

Becky peeked in, giving her a grin. "Hanging in there?"

Eloise stretched her lips into what was hopefully a teasing smile. "Ask me in an hour." She stood, stretching her neck from side to side in the hope it would alleviate a little of the tightness adding to the pain between her temples.

Becky frowned. "You should be gone in an hour. It's supposed to start snowing."

"It always snows here." Eloise glanced out the window. "It's Alaska. That's what it does. It snows."

"I don't understand why you decided to come back to all this." Becky shook her head, glowering out at the thin layer of snow already covering the ground. "I know I won't."

Becky moved to Alaska around the same time Eloise came back, only Becky didn't choose to come here on her own. She was forced to follow her husband when he got a job in some sort of energy development. She was not a fan and missed no opportunity to tell him, and anyone else who would listen, how ready she was to leave.

Eloise managed a more genuine smile. "Well, hopefully you won't have



to get used to it since you're moving south as soon as John retires."

Becky groaned, her head tipping back. "It can't happen soon enough. This snow makes me a nervous wreck." She pointed to where Eloise's coat hung on the rack. "So you should go home. I don't want to worry about you all night."

Becky was one of the many unexpected reasons she loved her job. She'd landed the position not realizing it included a surrogate mother who would fuss over her and offer a little taste of what she never had.

And she ate it up.

"Fine." Eloise faked a dramatic groan and snagged her coat, pulling it on as she kicked off her heeled Mary Janes. "If it will make you happy."

"What would make me happy would be living in Florida, staring out at the ocean instead of all that flipping white shit." Becky gave Eloise a warm smile. "But knowing you'll get home safely will be the second-best option."

They continued to chat while they pulled on the winter boots that made the parking lot significantly less treacherous. Once she was dressed, Eloise collected her computer, stuffed her inside shoes into her bag, zipped up her coat, and headed out with Becky. The parking lot was surprisingly empty. "Where is everyone?"

Becky lifted her brows. "I told you. There's a storm coming. They all wanted to get home before it hit."

It took everything Eloise had not to roll her eyes. Storms happened all winter long in Alaska. It was just a fact of life. One they all learned to deal with. "I think everyone just wanted to use it as an excuse to get the heck out of here." Not that she could blame them if they'd had a week half as craptastic as hers.

"I know *I'm* using it to get the heck home and bundled up before all the snow starts to hit." Becky shooed Eloise toward her SUV. "Call me when you get home, so I know you made it safe."

Eloise dropped her head to one side. "I live five minutes away. I think I'll be just fine."

She recognized Becky was being dramatic, but part of her loved having someone worry over her. That hadn't happened in almost three years. Not since she lost the person who meant more to her than anything. The same person who would agree with her that everyone was being worried over nothing.

Becky shot her a glare over the top of her car.

Eloise rolled her eyes but couldn't keep from smiling. "Fine. I'll call you when I'm home."

She said another goodbye and climbed into her SUV, sinking down into the heated seat as she pulled out of the lot and headed home.

But it wasn't long before she was rethinking her direction. Bryson's absence from school still bothered her. She should have made sure someone was home when she dropped him off the day before. She should have checked that he wasn't alone.

Guilt and worry had her turning in the opposite direction, moving her away from town and along the isolated roads leading to Bryson's home at the edge of the district. It wasn't a quick trip, but surely it wouldn't take too long. She had plenty of time to make sure the little boy was safe before getting back to her apartment, changing into some comfy clothes, and finishing the closet reorganization she started over the weekend.

Of course, Becky probably wouldn't consider the detour as vital as she did, so Eloise waited a couple of minutes before calling her well-meaning coworker and telling a tiny fib. One she didn't feel too bad telling. Especially since she was making sure a student was okay.

It was her job, right?

With Becky notified, Eloise dropped her cell into the cup-holder of the console and cranked the heat, turning up the music as she made her way out of town and toward the unlined road leading to Bryson's home.

Unfortunately, Becky might have known what she was talking about, and soon snow started to fall. But it wasn't falling in a scattered, white Christmas sort of way. It was literally dumping from the sky. Large, wet, heavy flakes nearly covered her windshield between each swipe of the wipers, slowing her pace to a crawl.

She watched the outside temperature gauge steadily drop as the sun started to set. The shortened days during the winter months were definitely not easy to adjust to. Luckily, the reflective properties of snow kept things from feeling oppressively dark. Today was no exception. If anything, the world outside her windows felt ridiculously bright because all she could see was the falling snow.

Right up until there was no missing the giant moose standing in the middle of the road.

Even though she was going slow, driving carefully in the treacherous weather, there was no controlling her SUV as she swerved to miss the huge

animal. The fresh layer of snow was sloppy and cold enough that her tires struggled to find traction and she scooted right off the edge of the roadway and onto the sloping shoulder, tipping sideways into a slant no amount of all-wheel drive could traverse.

“Mother flipping son of a biscuit eater.” Eloise huffed out a breath, letting her head drop back against the rest.

Becky was going to kill her. Possibly with her own bare hands.

Eloise grabbed her phone and woke it up. The laugh that bubbled free as she took in the lack of bars was unexpected and a little unhinged. Because, of course she didn’t have service. What would be more fitting after the week she’d had?

Not much.

The urge to chuck the useless piece of technology across the car was strong, but she took a deep breath and carefully set her cell back into place.

It’s not that she wasn’t prepared for a scenario like this. Thanks to a childhood filled with backwoods camping trips and a father who loved being prepared for anything, she had everything she needed to survive until someone found her. Maybe longer. The main issue was the timing.

This was not how she wanted to spend her evening, or really any evening for that matter.

But it could be worse.

After a weekend of ‘birthday party Nate’ and ‘girls’ night Nate’ and even ‘hanging out at Naomi’s Nate’, she needed an evening without his face showing up to ruin it.

So technically, she was getting what she wanted.

Eloise glanced out the window, glaring at the moose’s backside as it sauntered away, barely visible through the heavy snow pelting her stranded SUV.

She stewed over the situation a few seconds longer before shifting around in her seat. Time to stop whining and start being proactive.

It would be easiest to go to the back and open the hatch, but she wanted to conserve all the warmth she could, and trudging through the falling snow would get her wet and only make it more difficult to stay warm. Luckily, her SUV was remarkably roomy for as small as it was, so she was able to crawl into the back, folding down the bench to make a flat, relatively spacious surface. Hopefully she wouldn’t be stuck long, but she grabbed the bag from the back and went to work settling in. It would be better to be prepared, just

in case.

At least there was no way she'd have to deal with running into Nate again.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



## NATE

“DID YOU ORDER any for me?” Naomi padded into the kitchen of the townhome she shared with Tyson, scanning the open pizza boxes stacked across the counters.

“Depends. Did you come to play or just to steal food?” Nate grabbed a beer from the fridge and held it out.

Naomi took the bottle, prying off the cap before swallowing down a gulp. “Does that mean I’m allowed to play again?”

Jamison groaned from his spot at the table. “If she’s playing I’m out. She got enough of my money last time.”

Naomi’s smile was wicked and filled with delight. “Come on. I’ve got my eye on a new handbag.”

Tyson motioned at Reed as he was dealing out the hand. “Deal her in. I’ve seen how much those things cost.”

Naomi piled a piece of pizza onto a plate, head dropping back in a cackle as she carried it toward the hall leading to the master bedroom. “Naw. I’ll let you boys keep your money tonight.”

Nate loaded up a couple plates and went to where his partner was setting up. Emmett sat next to him, looking very serious as he stacked his poker chips by color. The little boy was determined to learn how to play and he’d volunteered to teach him how. Winning wasn’t a big deal to him, he was just here to have a good time. If he lost a little cash in the process, then so be it. It would be worth it to help Emmett feel included.

He slid Emmett’s plate in front of the little boy and sat down, taking a bite of his pizza as Emmett picked up their cards. He expected the kid to start listing off what they had or offer up an expression that would give them

away, but Tyson's son had a surprisingly impressive poker face.

Nate looked over their cards and leaned into Emmett's ear, offering up the simplest explanation of the hand they were dealt as the men around the table shifted through their own cards. It was the kind of moment he never thought would be his, not after losing the first real family he'd ever had. To be given a second chance at this kind of love and acceptance was an opportunity he didn't plan to waste.

Or risk.

It brought his mind back to Eloise. As appealing as everything about her was, the chances they would work out were fifty-fifty at best. He didn't like those odds, especially since she was one of Naomi's best friends. When things went wrong, choices would have to be made. And he'd been on the wrong side of decisions like that before.

At the end of the day it didn't matter how perfect Eloise might be for him, risking his family simply wasn't anything he could do. He wouldn't survive being shut out again.

"Bet?" Emmett's whisper was soft as he looked between the flop and the cards in his hands. It was probably a guess since the rules of poker were a little advanced for him, but it was a good one.

"Yup." Nate helped stack up the right amount of chips and leaned back in his seat.

"Emmett's got a better poker face than you do." Reed flipped his cards face down. "Fold."

The evening was everything he hoped. Emmett turned out to be an accidentally decent poker player and managed to hang on to all of his chips and then some. Did it seem like a few of those were given to him? Maybe. But no one seemed upset or bothered to lose a little bit of cash to a kid who was clearly having the time of his life.

Nate was still nursing his second beer when Naomi came out of the bedroom where she was spending her evening binge watching *Bridgerton*. Her brows were pinched together and her cell phone was in one hand.

Tyson stood, abandoning their game to go to her side. "What's wrong?"

Naomi's expression was tight. "That was Jen. She's been trying to call Eloise and it keeps going to voicemail."

As much as he wanted to believe it would be easy to pretend his interest in Eloise was nonexistent, the mention of her name pulled every bit of his focus to where Naomi stood, looking concerned.

“Maybe she’s busy.” Tyson lifted one shoulder and let it drop. “Maybe she’s asleep.”

Naomi shook her head, lips pinching tight. “Eloise always answers her phone when one of us calls.” Her eyes met Tyson’s, serious and solemn. “*Always.*”

It was something he’d also noticed about Eloise. She was literally there the second anyone needed her. No questions asked. She’d helped Naomi out with babysitting on more than one occasion, rushing over at the last minute no matter what her initial plans were. At any party they had, she was the first one to jump in and help set up or do dishes, happily taking on any task with a wide smile on her face. It made sense that Eloise not answering her phone might be as concerning as Naomi was making it out to be.

And why he couldn’t make himself stay quiet. “Have you called her?”

Naomi’s gaze jumped to him as her head tipped to one side, irritation narrowing her eyes. “Of course I called her.” She slid one thumb across the screen of her cell, punching the call button and putting it to her ear, blowing out a breath. “It goes straight to voicemail.”

That was different from her not answering. Whether it was different good or different bad was still up in the air. “Is it possible she dropped her phone? Maybe it’s dead and she’s out getting a new one.”

His suggestion barely eased the tightness lifting Naomi’s shoulders higher with every passing second. “Maybe.” She chewed her lower lip, turning back to Tyson. “Could you go over to her apartment and make sure she’s okay? I won’t be able to relax until I know she’s fine.”

Tyson shifted on his feet, glancing back at the line of beers he downed during their game. “I’m not sure I should be on the road right now.”

Everyone around the table looked at each other. At this point practically all of Rogue lived in the neighborhood, so it was easy to walk home. That meant it was also easy to get shit-faced without worry.

Only Nate and Reed still lived on campus, which meant they were the only two who ever had to drive home. Not that they normally did. Any other time he would have been just as lit as Tyson, and ended the evening crashing on his couch, but it hadn’t seemed right to sit next to Emmett and tie one on. And that left him as the only one in the group capable of going out.

But it wouldn’t have mattered if someone else was also sober. The thought of anyone else going to check on Eloise, even one of the men he considered brothers, made his gut burn.



Nate stood. "I'll go check on her."

Naomi's eyes rolled toward the ceiling. "Lord help me." She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and then faced him down. "You better act right, or I swear—"

This was exactly why he had to stay away from Eloise. Already she was making things tense between him and the family he desperately wanted to keep. "I'll just check on her and leave. That's all. I promise."

Naomi studied him through narrowed eyes. "You call me the second you see her."

He nodded. "Got it."

He collected his shit and headed out the door into the shitty weather. A storm hit heavy and hard earlier in the afternoon, dumping a heavy layer of thick white snow on everything. It normally wouldn't have been a big deal, but it came down so fast it wasn't easy to keep up with and the city was still attempting to dig out.

Luckily, Pierce paid well to make sure the roads of the little neighborhood where most of his family lived were the first cleared, so the trek out of the gated community was easy. Even the main roads of Fairbanks were already mostly passable, so it didn't take much longer than normal to reach Eloise's apartment.

Unfortunately, it was obvious she wasn't there. There were no lights on inside and the snow leading up the steps was undisturbed.

Mostly.

An odd-shaped pile sat on the doorstep, the tip of a bottle of wine the only thing identifiable in the mess. He pulled to a stop, leaving his Jeep running as he trudged up the steps, kicking away as much of the snow as he could to clear the path in case Eloise made it back here after he left. The least he could do after everything was make sure her steps were clear.

He leaned across the small porch and rang the doorbell, continuing to knock the snow off the steps and the stoop as he waited, giving it another ring before shaking the snow from the collection of items stacked on her welcome mat.

It was definitely a gift of some sort. The fancy box was from a local gourmet shop that sold imported items and pricey red wine was crusted in ice and snow. He collected the items, along with the card accompanying them, and shoved everything into the floorboard of the front seat.

After kicking the bulk of the snow from his boots he climbed in and

backed out, making a call using the touchscreen on his dash. Naomi answered on the first ring and he delivered the bad news. “She’s not here.”

She let out a loud breath. “Shit.”

Nate slowly made his way through the lot, looking for any sign of Eloise’s small SUV. “Maybe she’s still at work? Didn’t get out before the storm hit and decided to stay late until the roads were better?”

“Maybe.” Naomi didn’t sound convinced.

“I’ll check there next.” He promised to call with any news before disconnecting to focus on driving.

Except all he could think about was the look on Naomi’s face when she said she couldn’t get ahold of Eloise. How unusual this situation clearly was and what it might mean.

He gripped the wheel tighter, boot resting harder on the gas as he pushed the limits of the Jeep’s snow tires. Eloise was from Alaska but moved away for a while. Maybe she wasn’t as capable in weather like this as she could be. She did wear those fucking shoes to the bar Sunday night, testing both her own stability and his commitment to keeping her at a distance.

One of them managed just fine, which made him want to believe she was just as okay tonight as she had been Sunday. That she was hunkered down in her office with a hot cup of coffee waiting for the crews to clear away the muck and mess.

But that didn’t explain her cell phone sending calls straight to voicemail. It was what made him go against his better judgment, sending him tapping the touch screen again as he waited to turn out of the complex. Heidi answered on the third ring. “Nathan. How’s it going? You winning big?”

“I’m actually not at poker night anymore.” He took the turn out of the apartment complex, heading for the small school where Eloise worked. “I’m out trying to find Naomi’s friend, Eloise. No one’s been able to get in touch with her.”

“Eloise?” The panicked pitch of Heidi’s voice was unexpected. “Eloise always answers her phone.”

He shouldn’t be surprised Eloise’s charms extended far beyond Naomi and Tyson, but Heidi’s reaction made it clearer than ever his decision to avoid the sweet, sunshiny principal was the right one.

Unfortunately, avoiding her was the last thing he wanted to do. It was becoming clear just how out of character it was for Eloise to be unreachable, and his concern was amping up more with each passing second. “That’s what

Naomi said. She wasn't at her apartment so I'm on my way to the school to see if she's still there."

"I'm guessing you're calling me because you don't expect to find her at the school." Heidi shuffled around on the other end of the line. "You want me to see if I can track down her location?"

That was exactly why he was calling, but hearing Heidi say it out loud made him realize how invasive it was. "I think there's more than a few privacy laws—"

"Fuck privacy laws. It's better to ask for forgiveness than permission." Heidi grunted. "Let me get my ass up off the couch."

Nate stopped at a red light, eyes drifting to the pile of gifts on the floorboard as a second alternative flitted into his brain. "Whatever happened to that guy she used to date? Is he still hanging around?"

"Matt?" Heidi snorted. "No. I'm pretty sure you made it perfectly clear he needed to stay away from Eloise."

Unlike Naomi, Heidi wasn't giving him shit over Eloise, and he appreciated the hell out of it. It made it easier for him to do his job when he wasn't worried about crossing a line that might cut him off at the knees. "There were some gifts on her doorstep when I went to check her apartment."

Heidi snorted. "Were they from Matt?"

"Don't know." Nate drummed his fingers against the steering wheel, holding his breath while waiting for Heidi to bite. Give him the permission he was seeking.

She didn't let him down. "Is there a card?"

"Yup."

Heidi scoffed. "Then why in hell haven't you opened it yet?"

"I'm trying to find her, not completely invade all her privacy." He glanced at the card again, torn between concern and aggravation with himself. He had no right to care whose name was inside the card. No right to be upset that Eloise was moving on.

"Fair enough." The sound of Heidi's fingers moving on her keyboard carried through the line. "How about if she's not at the school you open the card? It might be a clue. We can't completely ignore it."

Heidi's words settled, cold in the pit of his stomach. "Do you really think something might have happened to her?"

"I am not saying I'm ready to assume something has happened to her, but historically speaking, the closer someone is to Alaskan Security, the more

likely they are to end up in a less than ideal situation.”

He hadn't thought of that. Hadn't considered the very thing keeping him away from Eloise might also put her in danger.

“You at the school yet?” Heidi sounded as impatient as he was.

Nate took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Trying to focus like he would any other time. This was a normal situation for him. One he'd handled countless times.

But for some reason it felt different.

His chest clenched as the school came into view. “I'm pulling in now.”

A plow worked its way through the lot, clearing the space in neat lines, unhindered by any vehicles. “The parking lot's empty. No one's here.”

“Guess it's card time.”

Nate pulled to the curb, switching the SUV into park before reaching over and snatching the soggy envelope. He tore into it and yanked out the sodden card stock inside, frowning down at the damp paper as he peeled it open. The single name signed inside was blurred from moisture, but still legible. “It's from Matt.”

Heidi clicked her tongue. “He's a lot dumber than I thought.”

“Find her.” Nate crumpled the card in his fist, chucking it across the front seat as he tried to calm the anger skittering across his skin. Matt was a fucking waste of a skin bag. He didn't deserve Eloise for the time he was lucky enough to have her, and he sure as shit didn't have the right to be sending her gifts and cards. If he was responsible for her current situation, then—

“Found her.”

Nate's eyes snapped to the screen in the dash as Heidi logged a set of GPS coordinates into the map displayed there. He leaned forward, squinting at the spot outside the city limits. “Are you sure?”

“I'm going to pretend you didn't say that because if you had it would offend me.” Heidi continued controlling the items on his screen, setting up directions he didn't need. “Luckily, while being friends with us can come with its own set of hazards, it also comes with some perks. Intel vets anyone allowed into our inner circle, which means if something like this happens I can usually figure shit out pretty quickly.”

“I'm sure you got clearance and permission for all this, right?” He couldn't resist teasing Heidi in the hope she might jab him back. Give him a little bit of a distraction as he pulled away from the curb and out onto the still

slightly treacherous roadway.

But Heidi wasn't bothered. "I can definitely come up with a permission slip if it ever comes down to it. The only issue I think we might run into is the last time her phone pinged on a tower was a few hours ago, so that leaves a lot of time for something else to happen. She's in a spot with terrible coverage, so once you get there you probably won't have perfect service. You might be on your own for a minute."

"Got it." He reached for the screen, finger hovering over the disconnect button. "Thank you for your help."

"You don't have to thank me. I care about Eloise just as much as everyone else." She paused and somehow he knew what was coming next. "I mean, maybe not as much as you." Heidi cackled into the phone, clearly delighted she'd finally called him out on his obvious fascination.

If that was what you could call it.

The longer it went on, the less it felt like fascination and the more it felt like...

Something bigger. Something he was having a hell of a time keeping under control.

"Heidi?" Nate focused on the road as his finger hovered over the screen, itching to end the call. "I love you, but you can fuck all the way off."

# CHAPTER NINE



## ELOISE

THIS WAS RIDICULOUS.

Even this far out someone should have come past by now. It had been hours since she'd slid off the road, and a sinking feeling was now parked heavy in her gut. Not simply because she was stranded and in desperate need of help, but because there was the chance Bryson was in a similar situation. If something happened to his father, the little boy would be out here completely alone with no way to call for help. It was almost enough to make her consider braving the weather and finishing the rest of the trip on foot.

But only almost. It was one of many things her father drilled into her head as a kid. *Stay put. The more you move, the less likely it is someone will find you.*

So, like it or not, she was staying put and hoping someone would keep their end of the bargain and find her.

Unfortunately, the only thing capable of finding her so far was the same forking moose who caused her to be in this position in the first place. He'd come past at least four times in the past few hours, and she could almost swear the oversized twerp smirked as he passed.

Eloise hunkered down a little deeper into the cocoon she'd created in the back of her SUV as the cold started to make her nose run. She tucked it under the edge of the fleece blanket layered under the open flap of her sleeping bag, breathing her own breath for a minute until most of the chill was gone before poking it back out again to breathe fresh air. She checked her phone, quickly shutting it off after seeing there still was no cell service and another hour had passed. She'd tried firing off text messages to everyone she knew, hoping one of them would meet its destination. So far, every one displayed the red circle

of death, indicating they'd failed to send, so she was stuck waiting in the dark, bored to tears.

But it could be worse. At least she was warm and had food.

Eloise lifted her eyes toward the sky and thanked her father for passing on his love of preparedness. It was one of many things she inherited from him and yet another trait most people didn't understand, so she made sure to keep it hidden. But in this moment, she was grateful as hell for it. Especially when her stomach started to growl.

Eloise carefully worked one hand free of her blanket burrito to dig through the bag of supplies she always kept on hand. Never once had she really believed she would need them, but knowing they were in the back of her SUV gave her a sense of security. It also made it seem like her dad was still with her. And maybe he was. Maybe he was the whole reason she had a stack of MREs at the ready.

Eloise picked the least gross sounding one and tore into it, pulling out the self-heating pouch and the main dish. Once it was assembled and warming she set it aside to heat while mixing up a packet of electrolytes into a bottle of water. Staying hydrated was probably more important than anything right now, so she gulped half down while her food cooked. Once it was ready she snuggled back into the blanket/sleeping bag burrito, tore open the pouch and dug in. It wasn't quite as terrible as she expected, and it filled her belly and warmed her up from the inside out.

She was almost to the bottom when a flash of light sent her sitting up straight. It almost seemed like it might be headlights. Like maybe she was finally saved.

Eloise wormed her way fully upright, fighting free from the layers of blanket and sleeping bag so she could swipe one hand across the condensation fogging the back window.

Sure enough, a blurry set of lights illuminated the night.

Eloise kicked the blankets and bag away, ready to get the heck out of there. At the last second, it dawned on her there was a slim possibility the person in the oncoming vehicle could be a serial killer, so she grabbed the folding knife from her bag, keeping it tucked in her palm as she reached for the back door. Right as she pulled the handle, a large, shadowy figure stepped into the road, blocking out some of the light.

"You've got to be kidding me." She jumped out of the car, losing a little of her common sense as she lobbed what was left of her dinner at the mother



flipping moose determined to ruin what was left of her evening. “Get out of the road you big—”

But it was too late. For the second time tonight, the giant moose managed to scare the shit out of an oncoming driver, sending them skidding to the side. Eloise yelped as the larger SUV slid across the snowy road, clearly out of control.

She tumbled back into the only protective space she had, pulling the door closed behind her just as the Jeep slid past her. She gripped the back of the front seats, heart in her throat as she watched it continue skidding down the road. Maybe it would stay on the road. Maybe it would get traction. Maybe—

The Jeep reached the sloping shoulder and continued moving over the incline, practically rocking onto its side before finally coming to a stop. The wheels were still spinning but it was clear there was no way it would be able to get her, or whoever was inside it, out of here.

Hopefully her fears about the other driver being a serial killer were unfounded because it looked like they were now stuck together.

Eloise shoved the door back open, pushing her way out into snow that now nearly reached her kneecaps, spilling over the top ledge of her boots and sinking into the thick weave of her tights. The new arrival had certainly had a rougher landing than she did, so there was a chance whoever was inside could be injured and in need of help.

She was about to close the door when the driver’s side of the Jeep popped up, flinging a few inches open before slamming back down. Since the vehicle was on its side, whoever was coming out had to physically lift the weight of the door, making escape less than ideal. A second later it shoved up again, this time staying propped up a few inches.

“Hang on. I’ll come help you.” Eloise called out to the person inside. It would be way easier for them to get out if she was able to help hold the weight of the door, but she only made it a step before an answer came back.

*“Eloise, get your ass back in the car.”*

Her racing heart skidded to a stop.

No. It couldn’t be.

She watched in horror as the door lurched higher, wedged ajar by a broad palm connected to a long, well-muscled arm.

She held out hope a second longer, unable to peel her eyes from the man hauling himself free. Maybe it was someone else who knew her. Maybe the voice was just distorted because her ears were so cold.

But then Nate's head popped out, expression twisted into a scowl as he glared her way. "I said, get back inside."

"I was coming to help you, jerk face. There's no way you're going to—"

"*Eloise.*" Nate's tone had a hard edge. "I'm not being an ass. I need you to get back in your car and close the door. Now." His eyes flicked over her shoulder as he suddenly lunged, practically leaping free of the sideways vehicle.

A loud crunch behind her sent a chill racing down her spine.

She forgot about the moose.

Most people didn't realize how dangerous the animals were. They were unpredictable and easily provoked. Capable of killing just about anything they crossed paths with.

And right now one was crossing paths with her.

Her whole body started to shake as adrenaline dumped into her veins, making the next few seconds feel like forever. Time seemed to slow down even more as the steady crunch of steps sped up, getting louder and closer with each beat of her heart. She fell onto the collapsed seat, yanking the door closed just as the animal made contact, ramming the side of her crossover with enough force to rock it in place.

Eloise scrambled across the SUV, putting herself as far from where the moose was gearing up to hit again as possible. The second ram was even harder than the first and for a minute she was worried her vehicle would suffer the same fate as Nate's. That it would roll even farther down the steep incline and she would end up dead in spite of everything.

You couldn't prepare your way out of being turned into a human pinball machine.

She braced, grabbing her bag full of food and water, holding it tight as she waited for the next impact. But before the moose could cause any more damage, a series of sharp whistling sounds cut through the air outside the window. Eloise watched through the foggy glass as the large animal stumbled, wavering on its feet for a second before dropping to the snow.

She slowly crept across the folded down seats to get a closer look. Had it given itself some sort of concussion? Maybe damaged its spinal cord using its head like a battering ram?

Eloise used the sleeve of her coat to rub away some of the fog clouding her view. The animal lay completely still in the middle of the road, body completely unmoving as the snow beside its neck took on a dark shadowy

tone.

What in the world—

She sucked in a breath as the back hatch swung open. Nate's eyes swept her from head to toe. "Are you okay?"

She swallowed hard at the sight of him, large and intimidating in his white tactical gear. Her eyes dragged to the rifle hooked over one shoulder. "Did you shoot the moose?"

Nate was quiet for a minute, studying her face. "I don't think you want me to answer that."

Of course he didn't think she would want him to answer that. Nate looked at her the way everyone else did, and it was her own fault. It was by design, technically. He assumed she was nothing more than a pile of empathetic positivity. A sweetheart of a girl who wore dresses and high heels and liked things pretty and feminine.

And technically those things were all true. She was an eternal optimist. She did love cheering people on and all things girly.

But she was more than that. Lots more. But most people found the *lots more* part strange. Weird.

And bitchy.

So she kept that part to herself. It was easier that way.

And also meant she had friends.

Nate's eyes fell to the giant bag she still clutched tight before sweeping across her scattered blankets. "What's all this?"

"My supplies so I can stay warm and alive." She scowled at the large opening allowing every bit of heat she'd managed to retain to escape out into the cold Alaskan night. "But now it's freezing in here, thank you very much." A tiny bit of the less than sugarcoated attitude she'd inherited from her father leaked free and she was too over everything to stop it.

One of Nate's eyebrows slowly lifted as he took in the back of her SUV, eyes lingering on the sleeping bag and blankets piled up. "My apologies."

He took a step back and the hatch lowered. For a second she thought he was going to close her back in. Leave her alone.

The thought wasn't completely unappealing. Maybe then she would be able to take a full breath again. Maybe then she wouldn't feel so suddenly aggravated. She wasn't half this bothered before he showed up. Sure, she was irritated at being stranded, but because of her upbringing, this wasn't a scenario she'd never considered before or was unprepared to handle.

Nate, on the other hand, she was completely unprepared to handle.

Her hopes of a full breath were dashed when she realized he'd only taken a step back so he could swing the rifle over his shoulder free. Once it was loose, he stepped closer, lining it up against the edge of the cargo area before bringing his giant body into the tiny space.

It got even smaller when he pulled the hatch down, closing them in together.

Eloise held her bag tighter, clinging to the only barrier between them. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to save you." He glared out at the large carcass freezing on the other side of her vehicle. "Guess our friend had other ideas."

Eloise snorted. "He's not my friend. The jerkwad's the reason I'm stuck on the side of the road."

Nate's brows lifted. "Seriously?" He shook his head, chuckling. "I can't believe the bastard took both of us out."

Eloise leaned to peek out the window at the animal. "It seems like you took him out."

Nate's eyes dropped hers as he carefully angled his legs, situating his snowy, booted feet in the farthest corner. "Moose are violent. There's no telling how long he would have kept attacking your car and I wasn't willing to risk your safety."

Normally she would be just so grateful. Appreciative and sweet. She would stick to the act that had served her so well. The one that maintained friendships and secured her position in the world. But after sitting in the back of her car and facing down a homicidal moose, she was tired. Too tired to keep up the facade.

And honestly, what Nate thought of her didn't matter anyway. Not anymore.

"It's fine." She frowned at the giant animal. "I do feel a little bad we can't butcher it. It's a shame to have all that meat go to waste."

Nate slowly turned her way, and for a second she thought he was going to question her. Ask why she was worried about meat salvaging. But he didn't. He simply went back to staring at his boots. "It's cold enough it should be okay overnight. Hopefully someone comes by soon and we can make sure it gets handled and sent to someone who could use it."

Nate seemed to know more than she expected about the process, and she couldn't stop herself from asking, "Have you shot a moose before?"

Nate winced, one eye squinting with the movement. “We’ve been called by the local authorities to help out in situations where they had to be taken out. They’re kind of a hassle up here and, unfortunately, if they end up in neighborhoods, there’s no safe way to get them back where they’re supposed to be.”

Interesting. She was definitely curious about what exactly Alaskan Security did, but getting any answers from Naomi was all but impossible. Based on her friend’s non-answers and partial explanations, she was suspicious that at least a little of it was highly illegal. It always made her wonder how such a large company was able to get away with questionable activities.

But from the sound of it, they were involved with the authorities, at least at the local level. Maybe that played a part. Gave them a little more... flexibility.

Nate’s eyes came her way, appraising in a way that made her shift in her seat. “What about you?”

Eloise held the bag tighter, using it like a shield. “What do you mean, what about me?”

Nate’s wickedly appealing lips twitched, hinting at a smile. “How many moose have you killed?”

Eloise chewed her lower lip, uncertain how much of an answer she wanted to offer. Eventually, she settled on the simplest option, which was the truth.

“Moose? None.” She glanced outside again, feeling irrationally angry at a dead animal who was just doing his thing because his thing directly led to her being trapped in the snow with the one man she planned never to see again. “But I would’ve killed that one if I could have.”

# CHAPTER TEN



## NATE

NONE OF THIS was going the way he expected.

Not only was he now just as stranded as Eloise was, but he had to take an animal down in front of her. Luckily her reaction hadn't been what he expected.

At all.

It was almost as surprising as the confident way she said she would have done the same thing. As if hunting wasn't completely foreign to her. It went directly against the sweet, soft, gentle temperament she'd shown so far.

Mostly.

She hadn't been so sweet and soft when he was holding open the back hatch of her SUV. It made him think maybe there was more to her.

It was intriguing. And problematic.

Nate shifted around, trying to give Eloise as much space as he could in the back of her small SUV. The silence stretched out between them, lasting long enough he couldn't stop himself from asking, "Is that something you're capable of? Killing a moose?"

The more he thought about it, the more he realized there were hints Eloise wasn't all sugar and spice. She'd nearly taken his head off over Bryson. Managed to beat a few bruises into his back when he hauled her out of the bar. The Nerf gun she wielded like a sniper.

And that sneaky scowl he'd caught sight of a handful of times. It drove him fucking wild. Made him continue doing exactly what he said he wouldn't.

Which was unlike him.

He'd dated occasionally over the years, usually hanging around for a

month or two, but backing off before things got serious. Eloise definitely wasn't the first woman he'd given mixed signals, and, as much as he hated to admit it, she probably wouldn't be the last. Not because he didn't desperately want something serious. Something real. He did.

His reasons for running away the second real feelings started to settle in were more deep-seated and difficult to reconcile. Almost as difficult as it was turning out to be to stay away from Eloise.

"I guess my best answer is, maybe?" She pondered his question for a second, chewing on her lower lip. "They're probably a lot like a deer. If you hit them in the right spot they go down easily, but if you don't..."

"Moose are not like deer." He understood her reasoning, and it opened up a can of worms he fully planned to dig into, but he couldn't have Eloise believing an animal as large and dangerous as a moose would be easy to take down. "Once I had to help take down a moose trapped in someone's backyard." He shook his head. "It was the first time I ever had to deal with anything like that, and I was shocked at how much of a pain in the ass they can be." He met her gaze, wanting to be sure she understood he didn't take killing an animal lightly. "I've seen them put a grown man in the hospital, and he got off lucky. If that thing had gotten to you—"

A wave of fear closed his throat, making it impossible to continue the thought. Eloise was more of a temptation than he'd faced in forever, and the thought of her getting hurt at a time when he couldn't get to her was almost unbearable.

"I get it." Her eyes dropped his, fixing on where her gloved hands sat in her lap. "But that's just the way things go when you live somewhere like this."

He sat with her comment for a minute, trying to wrap his brain around all the new information he was getting. "How long have you lived here?" He thought Naomi mentioned Eloise moving sometime in the past few years, but she wasn't acting like someone new to Alaska.

"This time?" Eloise tucked her hands between her thighs, wedging them into the fabric of her skirt. "Almost three years."

"This time?" Nate resisted the urge to shift closer. "What about the time before that?"

"I moved here with my dad when I was really young then left to go to college. When I graduated, I got a job in Idaho and lived there for a few years." She curled inward, arms tucking close to her body. "Then I came



back.”

She was clearly cold, and in his haste to get to her, he ran out of Tyson’s house with nothing to warm her back up. He might have managed to figure out where she was, but thanks to an unexpected roadblock, her situation hadn’t changed. Except, now she had company. Whether that was good or bad was yet to be seen.

Nate leaned forward, working off his coat and draping it over her lap. “Here.”

Eloise lifted her eyes to his. “You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s fine.” He couldn’t stop himself from reaching out to pull his coat higher. Tucking it in around the curve of her hip, spending a little too much time working it into place.

Eloise shook her head, brows coming together. “No, I really mean it.” She unwound his coat from her lap and held it up. “You should keep this on. We might be out here all night.”

“It’s fine. I’m used to the cold.” He tried to push it back at her but she resisted.

“I understand, but I have blankets.” She grabbed something wedged behind her, gently tugging it free. “This one’s really warm.” She piled it between them, smoothing down the fabric before grabbing another wad of something and wrestling it loose. “I also have a sleeping bag, but only one.” Her lips flattened out as her eyes slowly dragged down his frame. “And I’m not sure it’s big enough for both of us.”

It was a visual he didn’t need. Keeping his thoughts in respectable places was never easy when Eloise was involved, and it was only getting more difficult as he got to know her better. Realized she was more than just the bouncy, ultra enthusiastic girl she made herself out to be.

Nate studied the sleeping bag, taking in the design and the high-end materials. It wasn’t something you could just pick up at Walmart. This was a more expensive, specialized product. His focus moved to the large tote bag Eloise still held tight. “What else do you have?”

She hesitated a second, rubbing her lips together as she stared down into the heavy canvas bag. “It’s just some things I keep in my trunk just in case.”

Interesting. “Just in case of what?”

She gave him a little shrug, but for some reason it seemed constructed. Meant to throw him off. She wanted to act like this wasn’t a big deal, but something about it felt like it was. Maybe it was how tightly she held the bag.

Maybe it was how carefully she handled the blanket and the sleeping bag. Whatever it was, these things were important to her. Important for reasons that went beyond simple survival.

“I guess in case of something like this.” Her eyes came his way before dropping again. “You never really know what’s going to happen.”

“Obviously.” He tipped his chin at the bag. “You want to show me what you have in there?”

She glanced his way again before finally reaching into the bag and pulling out a plastic sealed pack. One that brought back all sorts of memories.

Nate took it, scanning the words printed along the outside. “Where in the world did you get MREs?” He’d had more than a few during his time in the military, and when he decided to walk away from that career and into this one, he never expected to see one again. That it was a dark-haired school principal with wide brown eyes connecting his present to his past made him want to give the moment more weight than he should.

“I know a guy.” Eloise reached into the bag and pulled out a few more military rations, stacking them in the tiny scrap of space between them. “I keep some in my apartment and some in my car just in case I ever need them.”

“And have you?” He was fully invested in her answer. In what it would offer him. The tiny scrap of insight he was hungry to claim.

Eloise smiled softly, the expression slightly reminiscent. “Not since I’ve moved back.” She tilted her head to one side. “At least until tonight.” Her expression turned to one of concern as she focused on his face. “Are you hungry? Do you want one?”

“I’m okay. I think I ate half a pizza at Tyson and Naomi’s. If that doesn’t hold me over, I probably need to head straight to the medical unit when we get out of here.”

Eloise’s dark eyes stayed on his face, holding. “I didn’t thank you for taking care of Bryson on Saturday. I really appreciated it.”

“Did you? Because it didn’t seem like you were real happy about it.” And he secretly loved it. Loved how ferocious she was over the little boy.

Eloise’s spine straightened the tiniest bit. “I’m just protective of him.” Her lips flattened and her nostrils flared. “Someone has to be.”

And there it was. The crux of the reason why he couldn’t stay away from her no matter how bad of an idea he knew it was. She was everything he wished he had when he was Bryson’s age. Seeing her with the little boy

sealed his fate in a way he tried not to accept, but there was no denying it.

He could have handled the off-key karaoke. The sweet smiles and the infectious positivity. Hell, he could even have handled the sneaky glares and the ass chewing she dished out when he hauled her from the bar.

But protecting, defending, and caring for a kid who had no one else?

He was a fucking goner without a chance.

“I’m glad he has you.” Nate shifted around, trying to get a little more comfortable in the confined space. “A kid like him needs somebody on their side.”

Eloise slumped down, head tipping back against the front seat headrest. “I’m not doing a very good job of being on his side tonight. I was heading to his place to make sure he was okay when I got stuck. For all I know he could be sitting at home alone, scared and cold and hungry.” Her chin barely quivered on the last part. Like the thought of Bryson suffering was more than she could handle.

And that was more than he could handle.

Nate reached for her, not realizing he was doing it until his fingers laced with hers. “Someone will come looking for us soon. The second they get here, we’ll go and make sure Bryson is okay.”

Eloise sniffled, sucking in a long breath. “Okay.” Her head turned his direction. “How did you know to come look for me?”

“Naomi tried to call you and you didn’t answer.” He relaxed his own head back, rocking it toward hers. “Apparently you always answer your phone and everyone started to panic.”

Eloise’s lips pulled into a bright smile. “Really?”

The hint of surprise in her voice made his chest tight. Like she didn’t expect her friends to worry about her. Didn’t expect them to know her well enough to realize something was wrong.

“Everybody was wound up about it. Heidi’s the one who helped me figure out where you were. She tracked down where your cell phone pinged last.” Might as well get the full truth out in the open and give Eloise time to sit on it. Come to terms with the invasion of her privacy now instead of when she was in front of everyone.

But Eloise didn’t seem upset or bothered. “That was really nice of her.”

He should agree, but it didn’t feel right letting Eloise believe what they did was simply a nice gesture without acknowledging the element of the invasion of her privacy. “It was definitely useful, but means she has access to

a lot of your cell phone data.”

Eloise’s eyes widened. “Like text messages and stuff?”

Nate blew out a breath and shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know exactly what Heidi’s capable of. But I wouldn’t put it past her.”

He braced for the upset, but it never came.

Instead, Eloise laughed. “If she went through my text messages, hopefully she was trying to fall asleep. They are about as boring as it gets.”

It was yet another unexpected piece of the puzzle that was turning out to be Eloise. Most people would be offended, or more likely outraged, to find out their privacy had been invaded like this, but Eloise almost seemed flattered.

But he still felt like he needed to explain. “She doesn’t really do it to be nosy, she just likes to make sure anyone who’s around Alaskan Security is —” He didn’t really know how to explain it.

“Not a liability?” Eloise explained it perfectly.

He was going to have to add perceptive to the list of qualities she possessed. “Something like that.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.” She lifted one hand, gesturing at the tactical gear he hadn’t changed out of yet. “It’s pretty obvious you guys aren’t doing low-level animal control jobs for a living.”

Nate smirked. Her assessment intrigued him. Made him want to know more of what she’d figured out on her own. “You don’t think?”

Eloise shook her head. “Definitely not.”

“What was your first clue?”

Her brows jumped, climbing high on her forehead. “My first clue?” She wiggled around like she was settling in. Getting comfortable. “Probably when you guys came out of the woodwork the night the bar caught on fire.”

*That* was what made her realize they weren’t a run-of-the-mill security company? “Believe it or not, none of us were on the clock that night.”

Eloise appeared skeptical. “So you just all come running whenever somebody in your company has a problem?”

“Yes.” It was part of the reason the people around him were so important. They were exactly the kind of family he’d always wanted. They depended on each other. Needed each other. Appreciated each other. They would never walk away from him without looking back. They would never abandon him for no reason.

It’s why he worked hard not to give them a reason. Why he was willing to

sacrifice his feelings for Eloise. As much as he thought they could be something good, nothing in life was guaranteed. If things fell apart, his friends would have to make a choice between them. And he wasn't convinced they would choose him.

"That's actually really nice." Eloise focused on her bag, reaching into it. "And not very surprising, which is why I'm not upset Heidi dug into me." She pulled out a bottle of water and passed it to him. "Especially since it's what's going to get me off the side of this road." Her eyes slid his way. "As soon as someone who can keep their car on its wheels shows up."

There was no stopping the laugh that jumped free. "Are you giving me shit right now?"

"Maybe." She cracked open a second bottle of water and took a sip, hiding her smile behind the lip. "Fair warning, I'll probably give you some later too."

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



## ELOISE

THERE WERE PROBABLY worse people she could be trapped in the back of a car with, but at the moment, it was impossible to think of anyone. Her brain didn't seem to be capable of functioning properly with Nate so close. Add in that he'd killed a moose to save her and tried to cover her up with his coat, and she was riding the struggle bus hard. Fighting to keep from falling into the same flipping trap she did every time he was around.

"How long have you been out here?" Nate shifted around again, angling his body awkwardly as he once again attempted to find a comfortable position.

"A few hours." She hugged the large bag containing food, water, flashlights, and other random survival tools a little closer, trying to make it as small as possible. She needed to find as much room as she could because the man beside her was huge. He took up all the space and all the air, making it hard to breathe and impossible to think.

"What are you doing all the way out here?"

Nate was just full of questions tonight. Like he didn't realize how difficult it was for her to think. To focus. No matter how hard she tried, her brain just kept circling back to remind her he was right next to her. Big and warm and dangerous. To add another layer of distraction, the inside of her SUV now smelled like him. Clean and masculine and a little like the woods she used to camp in.

It was irritating. All of it. His questions. His presence. His scent. Every bit of it had her unfocused and on edge.

"Is this an interrogation?" Eloise lifted her chin. "Because last time I checked, you didn't seem too interested in being in my business."

Nate's head dropped, chin tucking close to his chest. "I deserve that."

The annoyance biting at her heels flared hot and ready, standing front and center, begging to be unleashed. She'd been so nice for so long. Agreeable and sweet and happy and excited. Everything that would make her easy to be around. The kind of friend everyone would want to have.

But Nate wasn't her friend and he clearly didn't want her around. So what would it hurt if he discovered she was less than the perfect image she portrayed?

Nothing. That's what.

"You're right. You deserve that and lots more. You've been kind of an asshole to me." It was a word she hadn't said in years, and it felt amazing rolling off her tongue.

She used to love to cuss. It was one of her favorite pastimes. A hobby she shared with her father. And they both excelled at it.

Unfortunately, having a mouth like a sailor didn't combine well with her desired career path, so she'd had to come up with an alternative. Cut it out completely. Go cold turkey. And she had. Convincing herself she didn't miss it.

But now that the seal had been broken, there was a sea of words ready to rush free.

"You pretended to like me and then completely blew me off. It was bullshit and a fucking dick move." The cussing dam wasn't the only one that failed, and suddenly all sorts of confessions came spewing out. "I really liked you. I thought you were nice. I thought you were interesting. I thought you were funny and handsome and sweet. But it was all bullshit. You're just a fuck boy who likes to play with women's emotions to prove you can."

The second the words were out of her mouth she regretted them. Not because they weren't true, they were.

They were also going to make however long she was stranded with Nate highly uncomfortable, and she worked hard to avoid being uncomfortable.

It was part of the reason she was so agreeable. No one ever had anything bad to say about her. No one put her in awkward positions or made her feel bad about herself. And everyone wanted to keep her around. She was easy to be with. Comfortable.

For someone who had no one, feeling like you wouldn't lose the people you gained was important. And after spending too many years being lonely and isolated, she was willing to do whatever it took to avoid feeling like that



again.

Except, apparently, keeping her mouth shut when Nate provoked her.

“I know.” His immediate admission was shocking. “I’ve sent you a lot of mixed signals and I’m really sorry.”

Eloise opened her mouth, ready to continue telling him how awful he was, but something completely different came out. “Oh.” She wanted to be angry. Wanted to continue lashing out, but Nate’s ownership of his bad behavior took a little of the wind out of her sails. “Okay.”

He shook his head. “It’s far from okay.” Nate’s eyes lifted to hers, oddly serious. “But I wasn’t pretending.”

Her stomach did a little flip, like it hadn’t listened to any of the past five minutes of conversation. “What?”

“I wasn’t pretending that I liked you.” Nate’s voice was a little bit lower. A little bit softer. Deep in a way that snaked down her spine and swirled through her belly, threatening to drop lower.

But what he was saying didn’t make sense. “Then why would you keep disappearing like you did? You canceled the date you asked me on at the Christmas party before dropping off the face of the Earth. Then you showed up at the ballet, threw Matt out on his ass, told me you still wanted to kiss me, and then I didn’t hear from you *again*.”

Nate raked one hand through his hair, messing up the careful lines of the style it was always perfectly gelled into. “It’s complicated.”

Eloise laughed, but the sound was bitter and harsh. She wasn’t letting him off that easily. “Everything’s complicated.”

Nate sucked in a breath, blowing it back out as his head tipped back to rest against the back of the front seat. “I just knew if things didn’t work out between us it would be awkward.”

That was it? That was why he kept flaking out? “Weird.”

Nate’s eyes snapped her way. “What’s weird?”

She shrugged, her aggravation with him climbing to an all-time high. “I thought you were a grown-ass man who understood adults can have relationships that don’t work out. Shit doesn’t always have to be a mess when it ends.”

Nate watched her for a minute, his eyes narrowing. Eloise held her breath, thinking maybe she’d pushed this too far. Shoved Nate to the point she’d pushed so many other people and given him an actual reason to not want to be around her again.

But then he slowly moved closer, leaning in until his lips were less than an inch away from her ear. Near enough she could feel the warmth of his breath skate across her skin as he spoke. "I can assure you I am a grown-ass man, Eloise."

Her stomach bottomed out, dropping straight down as far as it could go, and it must have taken the majority of her sense with it. Because she used her next, hard-won breath to utter the words, "Could have fooled me."

She shouldn't let him do this. Shouldn't let Nate drag her back to the past. She wasn't this girl anymore.

Her whole life she'd only known one person, one man, who appreciated her the way she was. Enjoyed her snarky attitude and quick comebacks. Everyone else? They just thought she was a bitch.

And maybe she was. Maybe her personal sense of humor leaned a little too far to the sarcastic side. It certainly hadn't endeared her to anyone as a kid.

Or in college.

Or as a young adult.

That's why she trashed it when the one person who appreciated it died, leaving her alone in almost every sense of the word.

But for some reason, Nate's presence made it all but impossible to be fake. To dish out the quirky happiness everyone else seemed to love so much.

And, like always, Nate seemed completely unbothered by her jab. His laugh filled the confined space they were forced to share and he wiped at the corner of one eye as a tear of amusement leaked free. "Fair enough." His gaze slid to where she sat, assessing in a way that made her want to shift in her seat. "But it seems like I'm not the only one who's been pretending to be something I'm not."

Eloise yanked her eyes from his. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Right." Nate drew the word out slowly as he moved around beside her, his large frame creeping a little closer. "You can keep pretending. That's fine." His voice lowered. "But I see you, Eloise."

Why did that make her thighs clench together? Was it the thought of him watching her? Seeing her in a way very few other people had?

Or was it the suggestion in his tone? The slightly seductive edge it carried.

Hell. It was probably both.

But she would never admit it. Not to this man who'd led her on so many times before. "I guess that makes two of us then." She crossed her arms in an attempt to hold everything together. To bind the pieces she'd so carefully assembled thinking they would form a more pleasing whole.

Nate moved again and this time his leg touched hers, the long length of it warm and solid where it rested against her outer thigh. "Tell me something."

She waited, thinking he was going to ask a question, but none came. "About what?"

"About you." His voice lowered to that sexy, seductive tone again. "The real you."

It was a little annoying how smug he sounded about this discovery he believed he'd made. She should slap on a smile and the mask she wore to dish out a little of the fakeness she was so skilled at serving. Prove him wrong. Refuse to provide what he obviously expected.

But sitting in her car for three hours left her feeling less than motivated. Unable to be perky and optimistic. "I'd rather not."

Nate leaned closer, as if the possibility of learning more about her genuinely intrigued him. "And why is that?"

There were plenty of answers to that question.

Because she didn't trust him. Because she didn't like admitting she had to be fake in order to actually have friends. Because it was depressing to realize the only person who ever genuinely liked, let alone loved, her was no longer around so it didn't matter how she acted.

But none of those were the answer she offered. The answer she gave him was even more personal. "Because you wouldn't like the real me."

It was a hard pill to swallow. One she'd tried to choke down on more than a few occasions.

*Be yourself* was a universal wisdom everyone claimed to want to live by, but that's only because they didn't understand what it was like to be alone. To be isolated. To be unliked and unappreciated. If they did, they would see the perks of putting on a fake face everyone wanted to see.

"Try me." It wasn't a suggestion. The surprisingly sharp tone of Nate's voice made it more of a demand. A challenge.

And if she was going to spend however long she was trapped here with him being her authentic self, she wasn't going to be very good at backing down from that challenge.

"Fine." Her eyes lifted to his annoyingly perfect clipper cut, moving over

the precise placement of every hair on his head. “I don’t like your hair.”

She was hoping to offend him a little. To knock him down a peg the same way he’d done her.

But Nate just shook his head, a wickedly sinful smile curving his lips. “That’s not about you, Eloise. That was about me.” He relaxed back, stretching one arm across the seat behind them. “Try again.”

She was a little stunned. Shocked at how unbothered he was. Even more surprised he simply wasn’t going to let this go.

She racked her brain for the least interesting truth she could offer him. One that would prove he would be just as uninterested in the real her as he clearly was with the fraudulent version she presented. “I hate karaoke.”

Nate snorted. “No shit. The only people who love karaoke are the ones blessed with good voices. Everyone else just fucking tolerates it.” His gaze slowly skimmed her face. “Except that’s not why you do it. You tolerate it because your friends love it and you love them.”

“Now you’re some sort of armchair therapist?” His assessment wasn’t wrong, but it didn’t mean he had the right to make it. “If you think you’re going to sit here and pick me apart then you can get your ass out in the cold and freeze to death.”

Her words were harsh. Angry. Real. They felt too good flowing free. Good enough she should probably spend a little time reining herself back in before they were rescued. Before she got too comfortable. Because the last thing she needed was to slip up and let her bitch flag fly in front of her friends or coworkers.

“I’m not trying to pick you apart.” Like always Nate’s tone was cool and calm. As if her bad attitude didn’t affect him in the slightest. “I’m just trying to get to know you.”

“Why? So you can pretend to be interested in me again and then disappear the second I let my guard down?” She shook her head. “No thanks. I’d rather die single.”

“I doubt you would die single, Eloise.” He paused and an odd flash of emotion hardened his stupid, handsome face. “I’m sure there’s no shortage of men who would line up to take you out.” His jaw worked from side to side as if he was trying to loosen it. “The fake you and the real one.”

Now *that* was funny. Amusing enough she snorted a laugh. “Right. Men just love a bitch.”

“They like a bitch way more than a doormat who only tells them what she

thinks they want to hear.”

Eloise’s eyes widened as she snapped her head in his direction. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what it means. I said I see you, Eloise Rivers, and I meant it. I know your game.” There was no accusation in his tone, but the certainty it carried grated. “You’re always there for everyone else. You’re always happy and easy-going and available when they need you. You go along with all their plans whether you want to or not. And you do it all with a smile on your face.”

Once again, the accuracy of his assessment was irritating as fuck. Irritating, and unearned. “You’ve been watching me awfully close for a guy who doesn’t even want to take me out on a date.”

“It has nothing to do with lack of wanting.” Nate didn’t miss a beat. “If I didn’t want you, I would’ve been able to walk away the first time without looking back.”

# CHAPTER TWELVE



## NATE

HE WAS PLAYING with fire. Letting himself get caught up in a woman he was supposed to be swearing off. A woman who was becoming more and more appealing with every layer he managed to peel back.

And she was making him work for every single one of them. It was probably part of the appeal. He wasn't the kind of guy who usually had to work for female attention. Between the way he looked and the charm he'd learned, which was really his most powerful weapon, female interest was never something in short supply.

Except every bit of it was superficial. Based on nothing more than genetics and the web of bullshit he'd been spinning for as long as he could remember. It was what got him where he was.

But it couldn't get him everything.

He'd spent his entire adult life wanting more. Looking to reclaim something he'd never actually had. Then he tucked tail and ran like a coward when it finally found him. He was caught between fear and desire. Unable to find a way between them. Unable to figure out how to move forward. How to find happiness. How to find real love.

"Nate," Elise rolled her eyes, "just stop with the bullshit already."

"It's not bullshit." He wasn't normally one to admit the way he felt, but her clear disbelief and annoyance made it a little easier. Lessened his concern that he was about to land himself in a trap of his own setting. "It's not bullshit. I genuinely like you." He started to rake his hand through his hair but stopped, barely managing to avoid ruining what was left of the style he meticulously sculpted every morning. "That's a big part of the fucking problem." He huffed out a bitter laugh. "And then you had to go and be a

pain in the ass on top of everything and make it all worse.”

If only she'd been exactly what she pretended to be. Then he had a shot at eventually forcing his interests away.

“I'm not the one who showed up tonight and decided to make everything even weirder.” She started grabbing the items around them, stuffing them into her bag before shifting around the blanket and the sleeping bag. “I was doing just fine out here all by myself. I have food and water. I would have been okay for a few days.” She scooted away from him, putting as much space between their bodies as possible as she fought with the mess of supplies, wadding the majority of it up in her arms as she wiggled away. “But now I've gotta sit here with you and listen to you explain all the reasons you're not interested in me while you pretend like I'm not the problem.”

“You're not the problem.” He grabbed the bag, a little upset she was trying to put so much between them—physically and emotionally—right when they were starting to genuinely know each other. “I'm the fucking problem. That's what I've been trying to tell you.” He snatched away the blanket, shoving it into the bag so she would have less to use as a barrier. “I like you, Eloise. I think you're funny and smart and kind and sexy as fuck, but if shit goes wrong between us, I'm the one who's going to be left out in the cold.” He leaned closer, lining his eyes with hers so she would be forced to see the truth he was offering. “Tyson and Naomi and everyone else at Alaskan Security love you. They will keep you around and I will be the one shoved to the side. I'll be left with nothing and no one. Again.”

Eloise stopped, her dark eyes barely widening as the hard line of her jaw softened. “Again?”

He opened his mouth, fully intending to lay himself bare in a way he'd never done before so she would see the reality of his situation. The decision he had to make. But an odd pinging sound cut them off. It was completely unexpected and eerily familiar. It came again, and this time there was no mistaking the metallic edge.

“Shit.” Nate grabbed Eloise, hauling her toward him. One hand splayed across the back of her head, shoving her down right as the first bullet cut through the side window, spreading cracks racing across the glass like spiderwebs.

Someone was fucking shooting at them.

He leaned against the side door, pulling the handle and tumbling out into the night, dragging Eloise and his weapon with him as they rolled through the



snow, tumbling down the slope and toward the heavy tree line.

This was bad. Real, fucking bad.

The bullets continued to pierce both SUVs as he collected the large, canvas-backed blanket that tumbled out with them. He flipped it flannel side out and flung it around Eloise, hoping the light blue fabric would camouflage her dark clothing. Scooping up the bag and sleeping bag she'd managed to hang onto, he clamped them under one arm before wrapping the other around Eloise's waist and all but carrying her into the thick clog of fir trees. It was the only cover available and offered little more than patchy concealment, but it was still better than being stranded out in the open.

He paused behind one of the thickest trees, lining their bodies behind the trunk as he held his breath and listened.

Eloise's hands fisted in his shirt but she didn't make a sound. Even the fog of her exhales stopped, proving she was far more experienced in the outdoors than she let on.

When the sound of voices carried down the hill, Eloise's eyes lifted to meet his. He'd been in situations like this before, but never with someone he genuinely cared about in tow. Everyone he protected paid for his services so he was concerned for their well-being in the general sense, but not much beyond that.

The thought of something happening to Eloise, especially if he was the cause of it, added a layer of tension that made it difficult to find clarity. To rely on the years of training Pierce paid him so well for.

Because his first instinct was to run. To get Eloise as far from here as possible. Away from whoever was on the roadway. But doing that would create a commotion. Generate movement that would give away their location and make them easier to see, especially Eloise. The blanket wrapped around her body helped, but one wrong move and her dark hair and dress would put a bullseye on her back.

As much as he hated it with every fiber of his being, the best option was to hold his ground. To remain still.

Nate leaned closer, pinning Eloise tighter to the tree, using his body to cover as much of hers as possible as he wrapped the light-colored blanket tighter against her thick dark hair and deep grey coat.

Eloise gasped softly as his body pressed into hers. The sound was a dangerous one and it threatened more than just their ability to stay hidden.

Nate leaned closer, bringing his lips against the shell of her ear before

speaking as softly as possible. “Be as quiet as you can.”

Eloise nodded her head, but she didn’t make another sound. Unfortunately her silence came too late to save his sanity. His mind was already replaying that single soft gasp over and over and every inch of him was desperate to hear it again. To figure out how to drag the same sound from her out of something other than fear.

It was yet another distraction he didn’t need. Never in his life had he struggled to find focus in a moment like this, but with his body lined against Eloise’s lush curves, breathing in her scent with every slow inhale, he was struggling to think of anything but her.

It was a huge fucking problem.

The voices on the other side of the tree line got a little louder, finally pulling his focus from the woman against him. Eloise’s hands twisted tighter in his shirt, her body going stiff as she buried her face against his chest.

He hated finding any sort of pleasure in her terror, but it was impossible to ignore how fucking amazing it felt having her clinging to him like this. Looking to him for comfort. For safety. He’d wanted to be needed this way for so long and it was like getting the first hit of a drug you’d never be able to quit.

He instantly needed more. Would do whatever it took to get it.

“It’s okay.” He skimmed his fingers over the chilly skin of her cheek, wanting to soothe her, pretending it wasn’t also a self-serving act. “We just need to wait them out.”

It seemed plausible. It was possible whoever shot their cars didn’t realize they were occupied. Maybe it was just a couple of punk kids out to fuck up anything they could and they would move on when their rage was satiated.

As long as no one looked too hard at the snow on the shoulder, they might not even realize they were there. The chances were slim, but not none.

Eloise stood perfectly still, clinging to him as the seconds ticked past, dragging out into minutes. The sounds coming from the road continued but were difficult to identify. A collection of hushed voices and engines made it impossible to know what was happening.

Or what might be headed their way.

After what felt like an eternity, everything went silent. Quiet enough he could hear the falling snow as it started to come down again.

Eloise relaxed a tiny bit but still didn’t make a sound as she waited along with him. Her eyes fixed on his face as she mouthed a question. *Are they*

*gone?*

Nate tucked his chin in a small nod. "Seems like."

He forced his body away from hers, nearly groaning at the loss of her warmth and her scent. Eloise shivered almost immediately and he was terrible enough to take pleasure in knowing she felt the loss too, even if it was only the loss of his warmth.

Nate shifted the blanket covering her body, pulling it in and tucking it across her front, before tilting his head toward the road. "I'll be right back."

One of Eloise's hands shot out from under the blanket, grabbing his arm and stopping his movement. She shook her head violently, eyes wide.

Nate carefully unwound her gloved fingers, stroking his thumb across the center of her palm as he tucked it back under the blanket. He pointed to the snow at her feet before lifting a finger to his lips, indicating she needed to stay quiet and stay put.

He had to make sure their unwanted visitors were really gone before they made any big movements. As much as he wanted to keep her close, there was no way he would put Eloise in the direct line of fire. If they took him out she could stay where she was, let them think they got who they were looking for. She had food and water and blankets and a sleeping bag, so she could make it a little while longer, even without the cover of her car.

And, based on what he was seeing now, they would absolutely be without the cover of her car. Or his, for that matter.

Both his Jeep and Eloise's crossover were gone. The only sign of their existence were the lines of tire tracks cut into the heavy snow. He shifted to one side, finding a gap in the branches that offered a different angle and an explanation for why they hadn't been discovered. While the moose had been responsible for their predicament, he was also responsible for their escape. He'd paced around Eloise's car enough that the snow was churned up beyond belief, disturbed by prints and gouges making it practically impossible to notice the skidding marks left from their escape.

He gave the landscape one final scan before turning and going back to Eloise. She was standing right where he left her. For the most part.

She'd migrated her way around the tree trunk, blanket wrapped tight around her shoulders as she peeked his direction, exposing herself to anyone who might want to take her out. And she didn't look the least bit sorry about it as he stalked back her way.

Nate shot her a glare intended to make the seriousness of his point clear.

“I told you to stay put.”

Eloise scoffed. “I needed to know if you got murdered so I would be ready to run.” She bent down and grabbed her bag, struggling with the weight of it as she tried to sling it over one shoulder. “God knows I need a head start.”

Nate closed the gap between them, snagging away the tote before grabbing the sleeping bag and shoving it down inside. “They took our cars.”

Eloise looked him up and down, eyeing him with suspicion. “Who is *they*?”

He hated the answer he had to give her. “I don’t know.”

Eloise’s brows lifted. “You don’t know who came to try to murder you?”

Nate stopped wrestling with the bag. “Why did they have to be coming to murder me?”

Eloise rolled her eyes as she turned away. “Come on. Who in the hell wants to murder a goody-two-shoes elementary school principal?”

“Maybe Matt?”

Eloise’s spine stiffened. She stood completely still for a second before slowly turning his way. “Why would you bring him up?”

Because he was a jealous asshole who was still a little agitated that a prick like Matt had every opportunity to make Eloise his. “I went to see if you were at your apartment and there was something on your porch from him.”

Eloise’s chin lifted a little. “Maybe we’re dating again.”

Nate shook his head, the possibility adding to the irritation already simmering under his skin. “No way.”

Eloise huffed out a bitter laugh. “What? Don’t think I’m good enough to date him either?” She was baiting him.

And it was going to work. Just not the way she expected.

Nate moved in close, crowding her space. “You’re not dating him again because I know you wouldn’t do something that stupid.”

Eloise eyed him but didn’t back up. “That might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

He had plenty of nice things he wanted to say to her. None of them fit for polite company.

“Why is he leaving shit at your house?” He’d thrown Matt out on his ass once and was itching for a repeat performance. The prick didn’t deserve the time he was lucky enough to spend with Eloise. Knowing Matt only had the

opportunity because Nate canceled the date he and Eloise should have had chapped his ass to no end.

Eloise lifted one shoulder and let it drop. “Who knows. He’s as unpredictable as you are.”

Nate moved in closer, bringing the tip of his nose to the tip of hers. “I don’t like that you just put me and him in the same group.”

Eloise’s eyes flashed as she stared him down, undaunted and unafraid. “Don’t act like it’s my fault you’re there, because it’s not.”

She was fucking incredible. Irresistible in the worst possible way.

And maybe it was time to stop fighting it. Maybe it was time to give up.

Give in.

See if there really could be something between them without having to worry about the prying eyes of his family watching his every move.

Right now they were alone—and might stay that way for a while. He might not get another opportunity like this and he resolved to take it.

Nate moved closer, itching to get his hands on her. “I guess I’ll just have to prove you’ve got me all wrong then.”

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



## ELOISE

“RIGHT.” SHE SNORTED, the sound about as unsweet and unladylike as it could get. “I’ll hold my breath on that.” Eloise pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders, more in her element than she had been in years. It felt so good to finally let it all out. To finally say what she was thinking without caring how it landed.

Not that the person she pretended to be was a complete lie. She *was* optimistic. She *did* want the people she cared about to succeed. She *did* enjoy going out and being social.

She’d simply taken the best parts of herself and pushed them front and center, building them high and wide enough that no one really looked over or around to where the less shiny bits were hiding.

But fuck Nate. Fuck his wishy-washy ways and fuck his back-and-forth behavior. Who cared if he saw those darker, less pretty parts? Who cared if he figured out she was secretly a sarcastic bitch who preferred hiking through the mountains and campfires to singing off-key karaoke in crowded bars at night?

Definitely not her.

Eloise pushed past him through the snow, doing her best to keep any clumpy white chunks from flying up onto her dress and tights. One of the primary keys to keeping warm in weather like this was staying dry, so the less snow she kicked around, the better off she would be.

“Eloise, wait.” Nate chased after her, easily catching up and blocking her path. “We need to come up with a plan.”

“I have a plan.” Eloise pointed over his shoulder. “I’m going there.”

Nate turned. “Holy shit.”

“Did you think I was just standing there waiting for you to save us?” Eloise started walking again, bumping his shoulder with hers. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not a damsel in distress.” She focused on putting one boot in front of the other instead of the fact that Nate immediately fell in line, following her without question or argument.

Sadly, the small structure she’d seen while hiding behind the tree, thinking each second might be her last, was farther away than it seemed. It was also less impressive than she expected.

And she wasn’t expecting much.

The closer they got, the more dilapidated it appeared. The shingled roof had a slight dip to it and the wood siding was rotting away, curling and splintering from the wear and tear of the Alaskan weather. But shelter was shelter, and since it didn’t seem like the best idea to stand on the side of the road with her thumb out, the only other option they had was hunkering down and waiting all this out. Maybe figuring out a way to get somewhere their cell phones would work.

Eloise skidded to a stop, reaching under the blanket to pat down the pockets of her coat. When she didn’t feel the solid, rectangular case of her cell she let her head drop back on a groan. “I left my phone in the freaking car.”

Nate continued past her, plowing a path through the knee-high snow. “Good. It means no one else can track you the same way I did.”

Eloise eyed the semi clear pathway his long strides created. For a second, she considered plowing into an untouched area just to be stubborn. Just to prove she didn’t need him for anything. Except, while she might be a pain in the ass, she wasn’t stupid. Stupidity got you killed, and that wasn’t something she was in the mood for.

Eloise fell in line behind him, catching up quickly since Nate’s tracks made the job of fighting through the snow easier. Not that she would ever admit it. “What about you? Can’t they trace your phone?”

“My phone’s untrackable.” He glanced over one shoulder, looking her up and down before facing forward again. “It’s one of the perks of working for Alaskan Security.”

“Are you sure?” Clearly Alaskan Security was into some shady shit if Nate was casually carrying around the kind of rifle that could take out a moose. And while Heidi was obviously great at what she did, no barrier was impenetrable.



Nate paused before slowly turning her way. “Shit.” He fished out his phone and shut it down. “A few hours ago I would have said yes, but that was before someone came out of nowhere to shoot up my Jeep before hauling it away.”

Eloise smirked. “I thought it was me they were after.”

“It should have been.” Nate pointed one gloved finger at her. “You’re a menace.” His lips barely twitched as he turned back to continue trekking across the sloping valley leading them toward shelter.

She managed half a smile at his tease, but the whole situation was beginning to get to her. The hike had sweat sinking into her base layer, making everything wet from both the inside and the outside. Her steps started to slow as the exhaustion from being stranded in her car and chased by homicidal maniacs hit. Eloise peeked around Nate’s broad body, expecting the little cabin to be close, but the damn thing seemed just as far away as it had ten minutes ago. For the first time since all this started, she felt a little bit like crying. But only felt like it. Wasn’t going to actually do it.

Crying was for quitters. And she wasn’t a quitter.

A distraction would help. Something that would occupy her mind without requiring too much thinking since her brain was starting to shut down.

“You said having an untrackable cell was one of the perks of working for Alaskan Security. What are the rest?” She didn’t really expect an interesting answer, but maybe listening to Nate ramble about his job would help the time pass a little faster.

“I get to kill people who deserve to be killed. That’s pretty fun.” Nate continued walking, like he didn’t just admit to being an assassin.

Elise stopped in her tracks, blinking a few times like that might help her brain process what must be incorrect information. “I don’t think I heard you right.”

Nate swung around to face her, looking calm and confident and in control. “You heard me right. I figured you should have a heads-up just in case shit gets ugly.”

“You’re saying you might have to kill people?” Eloise looked from side to side. She would know if she was unconscious, right? Would have realized she passed out and was caught in some weird dream where Nate was talking about murder the same way most people talked about what they ate for breakfast.

He came toward her, steps slow and careful. His hands came to rest on

her shoulders, heavy but gentle. “Breathe.”

She sucked in air. “I am breathing.” Her eyes snapped to his. “You can’t just drop information like that and expect me not to have a reaction.”

“I did expect you to have a reaction. That’s why I’m telling you now instead of after you’ve had to watch me kill someone who was trying to hurt you.” He stepped closer, the invasion of her space not as unwanted as it should have been, all homicidal things considered. “Because if anyone tries to lay a hand on you I won’t think twice.” He leaned closer, eyes serious. “And for the record, Matt is lucky he’s still breathing. I could have made him disappear and I wouldn’t have felt even a little bad about it.”

Well damn. Now she was a little disappointed he wasn’t slightly more murderous. Eloise shook off his hands. “Coulda, woulda, shoulda.” She lifted her brows at him. “But that seems to be the story of your life, doesn’t it?”

She started to stride away, but only made it two steps before Nate’s hand snagged her arm, whipping her back to face him. This time he didn’t simply look serious. This time he looked just as deadly as he claimed to be.

“I don’t mind letting you play with me, Eloise, but there are limits.” He inched in closer, using his hold to keep her from backing away. “And if you keep pushing me you’re going to find out what they are.”

“Are you threatening me?” It sounded a little bit like a threat, but not quite, and that not quite part had an unfortunate ache starting between her thighs.

“Take it however you want.” Nate’s lips were dangerously close to hers as he continued. “All I’m saying is you keep fucking around you’re going to get everything I’ve ever promised you, so you better start deciding if you want it or not.”

Before she could react, he turned and continued down their intended path, leaving her stunned and pissed and honestly a little turned on.

No, a lot turned on.

“Better hurry.” Nate glanced up as the snow started falling faster. “Unless you’d rather freeze to death than spend another minute with me.”

The decision should be an easy one but she hesitated. Suddenly being alone with Nate seemed very dangerous.

Maybe it wasn’t *that* cold. Maybe she’d be fine in the snow.

Nate stopped and turned, throwing his arms out at his sides. “Are you fucking kidding me?” He stalked toward her, the hardness in his expression making her take a step back. He didn’t slow down as she started to retreat,

closing the distance between them in long strides that ended when he bent at the waist and hauled her over his shoulder, just like he did at the bar.

Eloise yelped as the world turned upside down and her hair found its way into her eyes and up her nose. “What the fuck? I was still deciding.”

“I changed my mind. You don’t get options.” Nate’s steps were faster now as he hauled both her and all her gear up the hillside. “You’re enough of a pain in the ass that you’d try to freeze to death.”

Eloise swiped at her hair, attempting to get it free of her mouth and eyelashes. “It might be better than dealing with you.”

Once again, Nate proved to be immune to her snarky ways. If anything, he seemed to freaking enjoy it. His laugh was loud as hell, carrying through the cold air as they continued toward the small building she’d seen in the distance. The deep, rich sound of it was almost as annoying as realizing she was significantly warmer with her entire front pressed against Nate’s body. The steady chattering of her teeth had somewhat subsided as the heat from his chest sank into her legs and his back blocked the bulk of the wind from reaching her upper half. Add in not having to fight her way through the snow, and she was almost reconsidering kicking him in the nuts when he put her down.

But only almost.

“I think we might’ve lucked out.” Nate’s words were the only warning she got before the world again tilted on its axis and she was suddenly planted on her feet, all the blood rushing back where it belonged so fast she saw stars.

“Whoops.” Nate scooped her up as she started to drop, holding her bridal style as he finished the walk to what appeared to be a small hunting cabin. “Looks like I get to carry you across the threshold.” He paused, shifting his weight. They rocked back as he swung one foot up and planted it right in the center of the door, hitting it with enough force to send it bouncing off the interior wall.

“Are you always this destructive?” Eloise fought his hold, worming her way around until Nate finally tipped her feet toward the floor. This time she managed to stay upright as she took in their temporary home. “Someone could have been living here, you know.”

“Not unless they’re like you and wanted to freeze to death.” Nate dropped her bag and the blankets onto an aging floral armchair as he motioned to the cast-iron stove tucked into one corner of the single room shack. “There was no smoke coming out of the chimney.” He turned and went to work closing

the door, pulling a multi-use tool from his belt before rigging everything back into place.

“There’s probably a key under the mat.” Eloise wrapped both arms around her middle, hoping to conserve heat. The little building did block the wind, but after getting snowed on and sweaty, her clothes and hair were damp, allowing the chill to sink straight into her bones.

“Wasn’t in the mood to dig through a pile of snow to find it.” Nate crossed the space, his boots heavy as they moved over the worn and dusty plank floors. “Give me just a second and I’ll get a fire started.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” Eloise glanced out the window. “Then someone will be able to tell we’re here.”

“We’re far enough away from the road that no one can see this place, and there’s smoke coming out of chimneys all over. No one’s going to notice this one, and even if they do, they won’t assume it’s us.” Nate flipped the lock on the back door and swung it open, stepping out onto the small porch. He came back a second later with an armload of dry firewood. “Plus, we have to get dry.”

It seemed wrong to make themselves right at home in someone else’s home. “What about the people who live here? I’m pretty sure they won’t love coming home to find us hanging out.”

“Didn’t you notice all the dust? No one’s been here for a long fucking time.” Nate dropped the wood onto the floor in front of the stove and crouched down, swinging open the door before loading in a few pieces. “And I can promise you no one will be here anytime soon, so sit your pretty ass down and relax.”

“Don’t do that.” She scowled at the back of his head. “Don’t treat me like all I can do is be pretty.” It shouldn’t bother her. She’d literally built a whole personality on practically that. But after allowing Nate a glimpse of who she really was, it grated that he still reduced her to nothing more than something pleasant to look at.

“You’re putting words in my mouth.” Nate snagged an extra-long match from the supply of fire-starting items sitting next to the stove in a ceramic tray painted with swirling roses. He struck it and settled it inside, working the lit edge under the wood before closing the door and turning to face her. “Because I don’t remember saying being pretty was all you could do.” He stepped toward her and it took everything in her power not to move back. To retreat. To get away from this man who was absolutely a threat. Nate’s eyes

held hers as one corner of his mouth lifted. “You’re also real good at being a pain in the ass.”

Eloise flattened her lips, shooting him a frown. “Funny.”

“Funny because it’s true.” Nate continued coming closer, large and looming. “And I’m a little bit upset that you weren’t a pain in my ass earlier.”

She stood her ground, doing her best not to get distracted by his nearness. Or his face. Or his scent. Or that low seductive tone his voice was taking on. “And would that have changed anything? Would it have made you want to kiss me at the Christmas party or take me out on that date we were supposed to have?”

Nate stopped, a flicker of uncertainty passing across his strong features.

“Yeah.” She smirked, feeling victorious but also oddly disappointed. “That’s what I thought.”

Eloise turned away, not really sure where she was going since there wasn’t much space to be had, but planning to get as far away from Nate as she could. She barely made it a step before he snagged her, one arm banding around her middle and the other covering her mouth as he dragged her body back against his, pinning her back to his front. He stood perfectly still so she did the same, refusing to even breathe as she waited to find out what in the hell could be wrong now.

A shadow moved across the curtains covering the back window. Her stomach dropped as her heart started to race.

She tried to warn him. Told him whoever was after him would see the smoke coming out of the chimney and realize someone was in here.

Nate slowly released her, lifting one finger to his mouth the same way he had in the woods, as if he thought she was dumb enough to do something ridiculous like scream. Could he not see that she was more than capable of handling just about anything this world threw at her?

Nate slowly crept toward the window, movements surprisingly silent considering his size. He stood by the window a second before ever so carefully edging the flower-printed fabric away from one side, moving it just enough so he could peek out. The cabin was so silent she could hear the rush of air as it left his lungs. “You’re not going to believe this.”

“What?” She couldn’t handle any more surprises. Any more craziness. Any more—

Nate flung the curtains open to reveal who was lurking on the other side.

Eloise groaned. “Motherfucker.”

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



## NATE

ELOISE STARED AT the moose on the other side of the window, her jaw slack. For a few seconds she didn't blink. Didn't even breathe.

Then she started to laugh, the sound becoming slightly unhinged as she pointed his way. "He knows you killed his brother." The next breath she took included a snort. "Now he's after us too."

He was glad to see her laughing, but the wild edge of the sound made him worry she might quickly shift to tears.

And if Eloise cried, the chances of him murdering someone when they found out who was responsible for this went up astronomically.

Nate closed the oddly feminine curtains, blocking off the least of their problems as Eloise sobered. Her full mouth flattened into a grim line as she stood in the center of the cabin, shivering in her wet clothes, looking more uncertain than she'd been. "What do we do now?"

"Now we wait." Nate grabbed the hem of his shirt, peeling it over his head before shaking the damp fabric out.

Eloise made a squeaking noise, her eyes widening as they fixed on his chest. "What are you doing?"

He grabbed one of the chairs from the small dining table tucked into the corner of the kitchen area and dragged it in front of the stove. "We need to get as dry as we can just in case we have to go back out."

Eloise gripped the front of her coat tighter. "What do you mean, go back out? Why would we need to go back out?"

Nate draped his shirt over the ladder back of the chair. "I want to believe Alaskan Security will find us, but I honestly don't know who that was on the road. There's a small chance—"

“You said they wouldn’t know where we were.” Eloise stomped toward him. “You said we would be fine.”

The reality of their situation was clearly starting to sink in and he wanted to calm her fears. “We are fine. Everything will be okay. I’m just trying to be prepared.”

Her brows pinched together as she glared up at him. “Do I strike you as the kind of person who doesn’t *also* like to be prepared?” Her glare turned into a scowl. “Start telling me the truth. I’d rather know what’s going on and be ready for it than be shocked when something crazy happens.”

Nate’s eyes drifted to the bag from her car. The sleeping bag and blankets stuffed into the top of it. Feeling prepared and informed was clearly important to Eloise. Leaving her in the dark would only make her more afraid. “What we do at Alaskan Security isn’t always—” he paused, fishing around for the least problematic explanation he could come up with, “completely legal.”

Eloise huffed out a little laugh. “I’d figured that out on my own when you told me you’d killed people before. I’m not a freaking idiot.”

Any sign of the sweet, smiling Eloise he’d known before was all but gone, leaving him staring down a woman who wasn’t afraid to say what she was thinking or hold him accountable when he fucked up. And it was becoming one hell of a problem.

He loved the way she didn’t hide how she felt. It meant he knew exactly where he stood with her, even if it wasn’t where he wanted to be. And it made him want to change where he was. Made him want to figure out how to make her forget all the ways he’d fucked-up.

Because Eloise was the kind of person who would never just disappear. She would never say one thing and then do another.

She would never leave him out in the cold wondering what in the hell happened.

“I didn’t say you were an idiot.” Nate studied her, watching a little closer. He motioned toward the bag of items sitting by the door. “Actually, it seems like you’re about as far from being an idiot as it gets. You would’ve been fine without me. You were prepared. Equipped to handle whatever happened to you.”

Surprise flickered across Eloise’s dark eyes and the hard jut of her shoulders softened. “I *would* have been fine.” She sighed, the sound resigned. “Right up until someone started shooting at my car.”



Nate shook his head, unwilling to claim even a small amount of the credit she deserved. “I think you would’ve even been fine then. You don’t seem like the kind of person who just rolls over and takes whatever bullshit comes your way.”

A little bit of the tension came back to Eloise’s stance, straightening her spine and lifting her chin. “You kept giving it to me anyway.”

Nate sighed. They were caught in a never-ending game of back and forth. He kept trying to work his way up to an explanation, but the minute he geared up to take a swing at it, she swung first. He wasn’t going to get anywhere like this, which meant he needed to offer up a little of the truth he’d been withholding.

“It wasn’t bullshit, Eloise.” Nate started pulling items off his belt, lining them down the small table as he continued. “Everything I said was real.” He slid his belt free of the loops and added it to the table before unbuttoning his pants. “I meant every word of it.” He raked down the zipper. “But I thought I should stay away from you, so that’s what I kept trying to do.” He dropped his pants to the floor, snagging them and draping them across the back of another chair before placing them in front of the stove to dry, then he turned to Eloise. “But it turns out I’m shit at it.”

He waited for her to say something. To swing back at him in the way she was so good at, but Eloise was silent. Frozen in place. Eyes locked on where his dick strained against the front of his black briefs.

He’d been so distracted he hadn’t realized his cock was half hard. Or maybe he was just used to being half hard when she was around. Either way, it didn’t stay that way long. Instead of reading the severity of the situation and cooperating by standing down, his dick continued to stretch under her pointed attention. Pushing against the constraints of the cotton more and more with each breath that passed through her parted lips.

When she sucked in a sharp breath it jerked, flexing as the sound shot through him like lightning.

“Eloise.” Nate waited as her eyes slowly raked up his body before finally fixing on his face. He pointed two fingers in the same direction. “My eyes are up here.”

She blinked, the line of her delicate throat working as she swallowed. “You’re hard.” The soft surprise in her words nearly made him groan.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe nothing about her was fake. Maybe Eloise was absolutely as sweet as he first thought and just knew how to

compartmentalize better than most people.

“Why are you looking?” He rubbed one hand across his chest in the hopes it would drag her attention back down his body.

She didn’t disappoint him.

Eloise’s wide eyes dropped, going back to fix directly on his aching length. “How in the hell was I supposed to miss that? It’s right front and center.” She motioned in his direction. “And you’re naked.”

Nate chuckled, enjoying teasing her a little too much as he hooked a thumb into the elastic of his underwear. “I’m not naked, but I can be if you want.”

He was hoping for another of those sexy, sweet gasps to feed the heat of lust coursing through his veins. Instead he got a scoff that was immediately followed by a scowl.

Eloise’s nostrils flared as her gaze snapped to his face. “Do you think this is funny?” She stood a little taller, shoulders squaring.

Then she was coming his way. Fast. “You just can’t stop yourself from fucking with me, can you?” She snagged his pistol from the table, snapping it free of its holster before switching off the safety without missing a beat as she continued to advance on him.

It was a situation he’d never been in before and reflex had him backing up, trying to keep distance between them.

But Eloise only walked faster and the cabin was too fucking small. Before he knew it, his back was against the wall and she was right in front of him, close enough the fabric of her skirt teased against his thigh. “Maybe I should send you out into the snow like this.” Her gaze drifted down his body. “See if —” Her eyes widened and she finally offered up another of those gasps he was chasing. “Did you get even harder?”

He was struggling to keep his breathing even. To stay focused on the very real danger he might be in.

Instead, all he could think about was how fucking cute she was. How easy it would be to lean just a little bit closer and finally feel her body against his. “I’ve never had a woman pull a gun on me before.”

Her jaw went slack, eyes bouncing to meet his. “And it’s turning you on?”

It absolutely was. Not that a random woman pulling a gun on him would have the same effect. This was purely because of the woman doing it. “It seems like you might’ve unlocked a new kink for me.”

A very specific kink. An *Eloise in control* sort of kink. It took everything out of his hands. Meant he didn't have to worry about what he was doing or the possible ramifications that might come with it.

Eloise continued to stare at him, mouth hanging open, pistol still in her hand. The way her fingers gripped it, keeping the barrel pointed safely away and angled toward the floor, told him this was not the first gun she'd ever seen. Add on how easily she switched off the safety, and he was pretty confident Eloise still had secrets she was keeping.

And he wanted to hear every one of them. "What about you?"

Her lips clamped together like she finally realized her jaw had dropped. "What do you mean, what about me?"

"Am I your first?"

She scoffed, outrage pinching her stunning features. "I've had plenty of sex."

"Good to know. I like experienced women, but I wasn't talking about sex." He finally gave in to the need humming through him, daring to ease closer. "Am I the first man you've pulled a gun on?"

She pursed her lips, hesitating just long enough to tell him what he needed to know.

"Eloise Rivers." He inched in a little more, barely brushing his body against hers. "I never expected you to be so violent."

She inhaled sharply but didn't step away. "I didn't shoot him."

Nate went still, his brain working through the possible scenarios that might have led to Eloise needing to arm herself. "Who is he?" For a second there he'd been able to feel like himself around her for the first time ever. Relaxed and calm and in control. But the thought of someone trying to hurt Eloise sapped every bit of calm from his body. "And where can I find him?"

Eloise's eyes stayed fixed on his face, body still. "It was some random guy who tried to steal some stuff."

It was the vaguest explanation he'd ever heard, and he had heard some pretty vague fucking explanations over the years. People rarely enjoyed spilling the truth, especially when it could cast them in a negative light. But he wasn't sure what about this story Eloise might be worried would make her look bad. "Someone tried to mug you?"

Her gaze finally left his, lifting to the ceiling like his continued questioning bothered her. "It wasn't like that."

"Then what was it like?" He reached up to grab her chin, bringing it down

until her eyes came back to his. “Tell me.”

He was walking on thin ice. Eloise was significantly more complicated than he’d initially realized. One wrong move would send him crashing through the ice into Arctic waters. She would freeze him out.

Possibly permanently.

But, like always, his control with her was practically nonexistent.

Her lips tilted in a little frown and for a second he thought the ice was beginning to crack, but then she huffed out a sigh. “It was at a campsite. I was at one of the national parks and he was creeping around during the night trying to get his hands on anything he could.”

None of that surprised him. Not the part about someone prowling around off-grid camping sites and not the part about Eloise being in that location.

It explained a lot.

His eyes moved to the bag sitting by the door. “So this isn’t your first rodeo.”

Her lower lip tucked between her teeth before pulling free. “I used to camp a lot, so no. I’ve been out alone in the middle of nowhere before.” Her eyes dropped, lingering just a second before snapping to his. “Not usually with a naked mercenary though.”

“That’s too bad.” He moved in a little more, fully letting his front rest against hers. “We’re really good at sharing body heat.”

Eloise shivered, like he’d reminded her she was cold. Her coat and dress were damp and cool where they pressed into his skin, so she had to be freezing. “Your clothes need to dry.”

The sound she made was somewhere between a squeak and a yelp as both hands came to grip the front of her coat, like she expected him to start peeling it away any second.

It wasn’t an unappealing thought, but he would much rather watch her do it.

Even though it was the last thing he wanted to do, Nate stepped away, going to one of the old, flower-printed armchairs and sinking into the seat. He stretched his legs out, angling both feet toward the warm air blowing from the stove. “If we have to go back out you’re going to be twice as cold if you’re wet. You need to get dry.”

He expected her to continue dragging her feet. For it to take a little more convincing.

Instead, Eloise rolled her eyes again, huffing out a loud exhale as she

yanked her coat off. "I know." She kicked at the two chairs he set up, shoving them to one side as she peeled away her clothing.

The movements weren't graceful or remotely sexual, but it was still impossible to control his body's reaction. Every inch of creamy pale skin that came into view made his dick harder and harder until it was jutting out as far as it could manage given the constraints of his briefs. By the time she wiggled free of the thick tights covering her lower half, a wet spot was soaking into the cotton where he was starting to leak.

Eloise collected her clothes, giving him a sideways glance that focused solely on his aching cock. "Do you need to go take care of that thing?"

He would love nothing more than to fuck his fist right now, but the thought of doing it while she was in the next room, knowing what was happening, didn't seem right. Especially considering it would be images of her in his mind.

Nate shook his head. "Nope."

She straightened. "So you're just going to sit there like that?"

He lifted his hands toward the ceiling in a halfhearted shrug. "Seems like."

Eloise's lips pursed, working to one side for a second before she finally lifted one shoulder and let it drop. "Suit yourself." Then she turned away.

For a second his feelings were a little hurt. She'd been questioning if his interest in her was genuine and she'd just stared at the proof it was for more than a few seconds without batting an eye. He was hoping it might make her see he genuinely did want her. That she might realize how difficult it was for him to ignore the attraction he felt.

At the very least he was hoping she might be a little impressed by what he brought to the table.

But Eloise didn't appear to be doing any of those things. All she offered was disinterest and the opportunity to handle his issue himself.

And the worst part was he deserved it. He deserved to sit here and suffer, wanting her so bad it hurt, knowing she hated his guts and would never feel the same.

Eloise grabbed a chair from the table and dragged it across the room. When her hips swayed a little more as she came his way he thought it was his mind playing tricks on him.

But then she stood right in front of him and bent over, the motion pressing her ass his direction, giving him a full view of where the cleft of her

ass and pussy met, the outlines of both impossible to miss through the thin fabric of her hot pink panties.

Then she fucking wiggled it.

He didn't realize he groaned until her head turned his way, peeking back at him. "Something wrong?"

It took him a second to realize what he was seeing wasn't indifference.

It was torture. Pure, unadulterated vengeance.

She was punishing him.

And he was gonna let it happen. Let her even things back out again. Give him back everything he gave her.

And once she was done, maybe he'd be able to show her what happens when a woman tempts a man like him a little too much.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN



## ELOISE

NATE'S EYES HELD hers, lids low as he watched her every move. "Nope. Everything is fucking amazing."

She initially decided to tease him a little just to see what might happen. There was no missing that something had him excited, but she wasn't entirely convinced yet it was her. Maybe he was an adrenaline junkie and the thrill of the chase got him all hot and bothered.

Then she bent over, feeling a little cocky and full of herself.

And Nate groaned. The sound deep and dark and full of promise. Like he was imagining all sorts of scandalous things.

Scandalous things that involved her.

The sound surprised the hell out of her, but it also had every part of her clenching tight and sent her eyes his way, desperate to see exactly what was happening. To witness it firsthand.

And she was not disappointed. A little confused, but not disappointed.

Eloise studied Nate a second longer, taking in the clench of his jaw and the flare of his nostrils. He didn't look like he was faking it. Like he was trying to trick her into thinking he was interested again.

He looked like...

Like he might devour her whole if she held still long enough.

It was yet another thought that sent her thighs pressing together and her pussy clenching, reminding her just how long it had been since someone looked at her like that.

Technically, it had been never. No one ever looked at her the way Nate was now. Like he couldn't wait to get his hands on her. Like if he had to wait a second longer to touch her he might die.



And it made her suspicious.

Eloise straightened, the thought of teasing Nate suddenly less fun than it was a minute ago. She spun to face him, abandoning her damp clothes in a pile on the chair. “You don’t like me.”

Nate’s heavy gaze slid up her mostly naked body in a slow drag. “Wrong.”

She sucked in a breath at the heat in his stare, straightening her shoulders and arching her back ever so slightly, pushing her breasts higher because maybe teasing Nate was still a little fun. “If you liked me then we would have gone out on a date. You would have kissed me at the Christmas party. You would have called me after that day at the ballet.” She stood her ground, refusing to back down even as the most gorgeous man she’d ever seen continued to drink her in with his eyes. “You don’t like me.”

Nate’s gaze slowly lifted to hers in a leisurely and languid move. “Come here and I’ll show you how much I don’t like you.”

Something squeaked.

It was her.

How long had she wanted to hear Nate say something just like that? Months? A year?

Too long. Long enough she should not be so affected by it now.

Or as tempted to consider it.

“What would happen if I did?” The words came out breathy and hoarse, giving away all she hoped to hide.

And Nate didn’t miss it. His sinfully full lips lifted at the corners. “Come here and find out.”

She should. She should make him service her. Let him get her off and then leave him hanging. She deserved to get something out of this after all.

There was a major flaw in that possibility though. “I’m not convinced it would be worth my while.”

Nate’s brows slowly lifted, like she’d actually surprised him. “Oh, really.”

Eloise managed a nod, stretching to her full height and forcing her shoulders back in a way she hoped made her look more confident and in control than she felt. “Really.”

“Did you know I’m a Marine?” His eyes drifted back down her body, snagging on the lace of her bra. “I can hold my breath for over three and a half minutes.” His gaze drifted lower, sliding over the slope of her belly

before fixing on the apex of her thighs. “I’m trained to find my target and not to leave until the job is done.”

It wasn’t surprising to find out Nate had been in the military. Every inch of him was solid muscle. He’d managed to haul her through the woods without even breaking a sweat and walked straight toward gunfire without hesitation.

But none of that meant he knew where to find the clit. “Now is when I should thank you for your service, right?”

Nate’s eyes fixed on her face. “You can thank me by coming over here.”

A slow throb was building between her legs, tempting her to take him up on his offer. What could it hurt? It certainly wouldn’t make things worse between them. He’d led her on and she pulled a gun on him and puked on his shoes. That seemed like peak dysfunction.

Eloise wiggled her bare toes against the cold wood floor. “We’re not having sex.” It was her hard line. One she would absolutely not cross.

Nate continued watching her, his body completely still. Like an animal just waiting to pounce. “That’s correct. We will not be having sex.”

It didn’t sound so much like he was agreeing with her. More like he was confirming a hard line of his own.

And it chapped her ass a little.

“Are you really going to sit there and pretend like you don’t want to have sex with me?” She pointed at the long length of his fully hard dick. “Because it sure as heck seems like you do.”

“Oh, I absolutely want to fuck you, Eloise.” He tipped his head toward the bag at the door. “But while you are clearly prepared for a hell of a lot, I’m not sure you came prepared for that.”

Eloise swallowed hard, nearly choking on her spit at the discrepancy between their word choices.

She said *have sex*. He said *fuck*. Those were two completely different things. What made them different, she couldn’t quite put her finger on in this moment, but it was pretty clear her version of coitus and Nate’s might not be too similar.

Especially considering he got hard when she pointed a gun at him.

“I’m talking about condoms.” Her prolonged silence must have made Nate think she didn’t understand what he was saying. “Protection.”

“Yeah. I got it.” Her eyes went back to the front of his underwear. “I’m also not getting you off.”

Nate's lips barely twitched. "I don't remember asking you to."

His offer was getting harder and harder to turn down—pun totally intended.

She already hated him, so that couldn't get worse. She knew nothing would come of this, so her expectations were exactly where they should be when Nate was involved. And maybe this would finally bring an end to her interest in him. Then she could go back to her normal, Nate-free life.

As long as someone eventually came and rescued them.

"Fine." She started moving before she lost her nerve, swinging one knee onto the chair before straddling his lap and leaning close. "Do your worst."

Nate didn't move. Only his eyes shifted, dragging down to rest on her breasts where they sat a few inches from his face. "You're awfully close for me to be able to do my worst."

"You're a Marine." She gripped the back of the chair, looking for a little stability as uncertainty started to sink in. "You'll figure it out."

Seconds ticked by and neither of them moved a muscle. She'd been strategic when crawling into the chair, its wide seat making it possible for her to situate herself so none of her skin touched any of his. The only point of contact was where the warmth of his breath fanned across the skin of her cleavage.

Nate's eyes slowly lifted to hers. "What's your favorite way to get off?"

Was he already in need of assistance? That wasn't a good sign. "Successfully."

One brow cocked. "That's it?"

"If you're already having second thoughts—" Eloise tried to move away, but a heavy palm clamped down on her thigh, keeping her in place.

"No second thoughts. Just a simple question." Nate's hand stayed on her skin, sliding back to tease along the edge of her panties. "Am I not allowed to ask questions?"

"I guess it depends on the questions." Her heart rate picked up as his fingers traced lower, following the curve of her ass. She'd expected him to maybe grab her boob or shove a hand down the front of her panties, but Nate's approach was the complete opposite. It was slow. It was careful.

It was calculated.

His touch almost tickled as he teased the crease where her butt met her thigh, arm curving around her body. "I'm just trying to get to know you better. What you like. What you don't like." Nate's fingers skimmed deeper,

light as a feather as they traced along the seam of her pussy through the fabric of her panties.

Eloise sucked in a breath, teeth sinking into her lower lip. “I don’t like you.”

Nate, like usual, was unbothered by her less than sweet words. “What else don’t you like?”

The light brushing of his fingers continued across her slit, driving her to distraction. “Karaoke.”

Nate chuckled, the sound low as it reverberated through his chest. “That’s good, because you’re terrible at it.”

Her eyes snapped to his face. “Fuck you.”

“I said no fucking.” Nate’s smile held. “And you already confessed your dislike of karaoke. I want to know something else. Something new.” His free hand laced into her hair, fisting tight. “What about kissing? How do you feel about that?” His eyes were fixed on her mouth, dark and intense. Like kissing her was the only thing he wanted. The only thing that mattered.

It was a little intoxicating. That was the only excuse for what she said next.

“I don’t mind kissing.”

Nate’s nostrils barely flared and the hand in her hair tightened. “Good.”

There was no time to prepare. Not even a split second to brace herself. Because less than a heartbeat later he was dragging her in, pulling her close, pinning her body to his as his lips claimed hers.

And that’s what this was. It wasn’t a kiss. It was a claiming. Hard and hot and consuming. There was no lead up. No pretense. None of the careful nipping and soft presses that usually happened in a first kiss. Nate kissed her like he’d done it a thousand times. Like he planned to do it a thousand more. Like he already knew exactly what she wanted. What she needed.

The glide of his tongue against hers and the scrape of his teeth against her lower lip sent the world spinning. Forcing her to latch onto something. Anything. She laced her fingers in his hair, holding tight to the slightly stiff strands as any semblance of his perfectly styled coif were obliterated by her grabbing fingers.

Hopefully it would annoy the shit out of him because he was annoying the shit out of her. Nate should not be this good of the kisser. He should not be so—

The hand between her thighs moved, dragging every bit of her focus

down to the spot where it was teasing its way into the side of her panties. For a second she'd forgotten he was touching her there. Forgotten the offer he'd made. But now it was all she could think about because if he could kiss like this, what in the hell else was he capable of?

All the air rushed from her body as he brushed over the swell of her clit.

Nate's sinfully skilled mouth nipped at her chin, following the line of her jaw before sucking on the lobe of her ear. "Still think I can't give you what you want?" He teased across her clit again, sending a jolt of sensation and need racing through her body. She bucked against him, unable to control her reaction as a needy whine escaped her lips.

The prick had the audacity to chuckle. "That's what I thought."

"I hate you." She tried to sound like she meant it, but that was easier said than done.

Nate chuckled again. "That's fine. You can hate me and still love what I do to you."

His words shot straight to her clit, hitting her with a double dose of pleasure that amplified every stroke of his unerring fingers.

She'd been with men who liked to talk while they made out or had sex, but usually it was cringey and borderline amusing.

There was nothing amusing about the words still coming out of Nate's mouth.

"And I don't think you hate me as much as you think you do. If you did, you wouldn't be so wet for me." His fingers slid back, dipping into her body with a slow press. The easy glide of it proved his words were more than filthy, they were true.

And she would be mad about it later. Pissed he was finding so much smug satisfaction in this moment. But it was impossible to think of anything but the steady way he thrust into her, each motion dragging over a spot that had her clenching around him.

"What's wrong?" Nate made another dragging pass across that knee buckling spot. "Didn't think I knew how to find this either?"

Holy fuckballs, she was screwed. Ruined forever by a man she'd probably never see again after this.

Still might be worth it.

Nate's lips continued down the column of her neck, tugging on her hair, tilting her head back to expose more of her sensitive skin. "So fucking sweet." His fingers continued to steadily thrust as his thumb settled against

her clit, dragging an unholy sound free of her as every nerve ending in her body lit up and zeroed in.

Nate leaned back, lids heavy as his eyes locked onto her face, watching with an intensity that made it clear he had every intention of witnessing her undoing.

And there was nothing she could do to stop it. Even if his hand wasn't in her hair, holding her in place, the actions of his other hand made it impossible to do anything but breathe, and even that was getting sketchy.

Her whole body was at his command. Every sound. Every move. Every thought. All of it was under his control.

It might be terrifying if it didn't feel so fucking good.

"That's it." Nate's lips were parted as he continued working her body like he'd played it countless times. "Good girl. Let me take care of you."

It was like flipping a switch. One that sent her tumbling over the edge and down a cliff she'd been avoiding for years.

Her body convulsed, muscles twitching, limbs jerking, lungs seizing. It was as if he'd broken her open and sent pieces scattering everywhere. Every bit of her was raw and exposed. Forcing her to see all she'd been trying to hide.

Not just from the people around her, but from herself too.

And all because of a handful of words.

*Let me take care of you.*

She was right. Nate was absolutely going to ruin her, and it had nothing to do with his skilled hands.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN



## NATE

“HERE.” HE CAREFULLY draped one of Eloise’s blankets over her mostly naked body, tucking her in where she sat in the armchair closest to the stove. She’d been oddly quiet in the hour since their...

Interaction.

He’d expected her to immediately go back to her snarky ways and claim nothing had changed. That she still despised him and planned to continue holding his mistakes against him indefinitely. It wasn’t ideal, but it sure as hell would’ve been better than her silence. The despondent expression on her face as she stared across the room at nothing in particular.

Nate went to the tiny kitchen in the corner, grabbed the teakettle off the counter and carried it into the main area of the tiny cabin, setting it on top of the cast-iron wood burning stove. He snagged a bottle of water from Eloise’s bag and poured a little inside, rinsing it out before filling it up and leaving the kettle to heat up. Then he grabbed a bowl and went to collect fresh snow from around the back porch.

Now that he wasn’t quite as distracted, he was starting to realize his confidence might have been misplaced. They weren’t *that* far from the roadway by Alaska standards. And if someone were actively looking for them, it might not take as much for them to be found as he wanted to believe.

Sitting and hoping Alaskan Security would find them first didn’t seem like a great idea. That meant he needed to be prepared. Especially since it wasn’t himself he had to keep safe.

Once he had a substantial amount of snow melting on the counter, he went back to check their clothes. The moisture wicking fabric of his meant both his pants and shirt were completely dry, so he pulled them on, replacing



his belt and all the gear clipped to it.

Eloise's eyes pulled from where they'd been fused to the front window, skimming over him as her brows pinched together. "What are you doing?" She sat up straighter, spine going stiff as her eyes went wide. "Is something wrong?"

Nate shoved one foot into a boot. "Nothing's wrong, but I think staying in one place too long might be a bad idea. We probably need to keep moving."

The line between her brows deepened. "Oh." She slid her feet to the floor and reached for her dress. "Okay."

"Hang on." Nate went to the small closet tucked into the corner, pulling it open. "I'm hoping we can find something better for you to wear here." He dug through the surprising number of items hanging inside, pulling out a long-sleeved thermal shirt, a heavy flannel to layer over it, and a pair of fleece-lined jeans. He held them up, a little surprised at the size of them. They were dusty and stiff from disuse, but they were cut for a person about Eloise's stature. "I think these might actually fit you."

Eloise frowned, her expression a little more familiar now. "That's because those are women's clothes." She stood, tossing the blanket to the chair as she crossed the room to steal away the items. "Women hunt too." Her eyes dragged over the blankets on the bed. "I probably should have guessed this place belonged to a woman."

"Why's that?" Nate looked over the bed, but all it brought to mind were images of Eloise's limbs tangled with his. Hell, that was also true of the floor, the counters, and just about every other flat surface in the place.

And maybe she was having the same issue. Maybe that's why she was suddenly so quiet and withdrawn. Maybe he'd been a little more successful than he hoped in convincing her he wasn't quite as bad as she believed.

A man could hope.

"Everything matches." She pulled on the cream colored thermal, concealing her upper half. "The sheets, the chairs, the curtains." She motioned toward the kitchen. "Even the dish towels."

It was a decent observation. And a connection he wouldn't have made, even without Eloise there to distract him. "You don't miss much, do you?"

Eloise stepped into the pants, working them up into place before tucking in the shirt. "Paying attention is important. You never know what's going to matter." Her lips flattened. "Missing something important could be the difference between life and death."

She grabbed the flannel and layered it on, buttoning the front before sitting on the mattress and rolling up the extra length on the pants. “Where are we going to go?”

Nate shrugged. “I don’t know. Where do you think we should go?” Eloise might not be as skilled in evasion as he was, but he wasn’t foolish enough to discount her survival skills. Whether she liked it or not, they were a team and using both their abilities to the fullest would increase their chances of coming out of this unscathed.

Eloise’s eyes jumped to his. “Well,” she rubbed her lips together like she was thinking it over, “where would you expect us to be if you were the one trying to find us?”

“If I was trying to find someone like me who was paired with a school principal, I would expect them to stay as close to safety as possible.” And if it was some random civilian with him that’s exactly what he would be doing. Trying to move within a small radius that would allow Alaskan Security the opportunity to get to them—hopefully before anyone else did.

But Eloise wasn’t *just* an elementary school principal. She was capable and prepared. Skilled in ways the men looking for them probably wouldn’t expect. And he needed to use that to their advantage. “I would assume he wouldn’t feel comfortable taking her farther away, but we don’t have that problem.”

One of Eloise’s brows lifted. “We don’t?”

“I know your opinion of me isn’t particularly high,” Nate went back to the kitchen corner, snagging a mug and a container of instant coffee off the counter, “but I’d have to be a fucking idiot not to notice how capable you are.” He dumped a serving of granules into the cup and went to the stove, filling the mug with heated water before passing it off to Eloise. “I hope you take it black and stale, because that’s all we’ve got.”

Eloise took the cup, one side of her nose scrunching up as she stared down into it. “I’m normally a sweetened creamer kinda girl, but I can make this work.” She took a sip, wincing a little as she started to laugh. “This is just terrible.”

Nate made himself a cup and took a healthy swallow, fighting his way through the old, slightly burnt taste. “Definitely not a fucking latte, that’s for sure.”

Eloise took another swallow, this time without the wince. “I wouldn’t have guessed you were a latte drinker.”

“I didn’t used to be.” He downed the rest of his cup, setting the mug on the counter before opening the cabinets one by one. “Our office manager got a fancy coffee machine and it took her a few rounds to figure out how to use it, so we all ended up drinking lattes while she fine-tuned her process. I guess I got used to it.”

“I didn’t realize you were in the office that much.” Eloise stared into her cup a second longer before bringing her eyes to him. “I thought you were out doing things like this most of the time.”

“I used to be, but Alaskan Security has gone through a lot of changes in the past few years.” He snagged a few empty bottles from under the counter, uncapping them and giving each one a sniff before carefully filling them with melted snow. “A couple of our teams haven’t really been affected and are still out doing what they’ve always done, but the rest of us are kind of in this weird limbo where we’re no longer doing what we used to do, but what we are doing doesn’t seem a whole lot different.”

Eloise watched as he worked, inching a little closer. “Did you expect it to be different?”

“That was the whole point of not doing what we used to do. The majority decided they didn’t think it was right to continue down the same path.”

Eloise came a little closer, bracing her hip against the counter beside him. “I take it you weren’t part of the majority?”

“I was actually one of the few who didn’t give a shit. I’ve seen enough to realize the line between right and wrong isn’t as thick as everybody wants to believe it is.”

He hadn’t opened up to anyone in forever. Not like this. It offered a level of vulnerability he didn’t usually allow. It put him in a position of weakness. Set him up for disappointment at the least.

Devastation at the worst.

But he wanted Eloise to see he wasn’t what she thought. That he had reasons for acting the way he did. The only way to make that happen was to show her the parts of him no one else ever got to see.

“My dad was a veteran.” Eloise’s eyes fixed on a worn spot on the aged, but immaculate, counter. “He struggled a lot with what he saw.”

Nate turned to face her, putting all his focus on the sadness in her features. He didn’t have to ask to know her dad wasn’t around anymore and bringing it up felt like it would be adding salt to a wound that was still clearly raw and aching. “Is he the reason for all the blankets and water and food?”

A little of the sorrow pinching her features eased as a small smile curved her lips. “Yes. He wanted me to be able to handle anything the world threw at me. Thought it was the most important thing he could teach me.”

“It seems like he did a pretty good job.” Nate tipped his head toward the dress still draped across a chair in front of the fire. “I mean, your wardrobe could probably use a little work—”

To his surprise, Eloise laughed, her head tipping back. “I used to keep snow pants in the trunk too, but I took them out because it just seemed like overkill.” She huffed out a sigh. “I can almost hear him now, reminding me that you can never be too prepared.”

“If he would be disappointed in you, then he sure as hell would be disappointed in me, because I didn’t come with shit.” He reached up and snagged a bit of her loose dark hair, curling it behind the shell of one ear. Eloise went still, not even breathing as his fingers slid down the length of her silky strands. “When I heard no one could find you I might have panicked a little.”

Eloise’s dark eyes moved over his face, like she was looking for something. Hopefully she found it.

Her gaze dropped to the counter. “You did bring guns. Those turned out to be useful.” She pressed her lips together in thought as her eyes came back to his. “Did they take the moose too?”

Once again, she was picking up something he’d missed completely. “There was nothing on the road.”

Eloise’s head tipped to one side. “That’s weird, right?”

“Not if they want to make sure no one else knows where to find us.” He turned back to the counter, topping off the water bottle he’d started filling. “It wouldn’t be hard to figure out the moose wasn’t taken down by someone hunting, or by a car. Anyone from Alaskan Security would have been able to recognize the bullets and they would have known it was me who killed it.”

“You have special bullets?” Eloise sounded a little intrigued by the possibility.

“We special order our ammo.” He moved onto the next bottle, driven by a sense of urgency that was climbing higher the more they discussed what happened on the roadway.

He needed to protect her. To get Eloise out of here and as far away as possible. Somewhere no one could find her. If that meant no one from Alaskan Security could find them either, so be it. At least she’d be safe.

“That means they’re going to try to find us, right?” Her voice went up a little in pitch and her skin paled. “Otherwise they wouldn’t care if Alaskan Security could find us.” Eloise let out a shaky breath. “But maybe they didn’t even know we were there. Maybe they don’t even know we’re out here.”

He had the same thought initially, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized there was a flaw in that possibility. “They probably kept their eyes on where our cars were. When no one came to tow them, they would have realized we hadn’t simply been picked up.” Nate finished filling the last bottle and capped it before spinning toward the front window and peeking outside. “How long have we been here?”

Eloise checked her watch. “A few hours.”

“Shit.” Nate went back to the closet, yanking out a backpack hung inside before tossing it onto the bed. “We need to get moving.” Eloise nodded, abandoning her cup of cooling coffee on the counter. She went to the back door and yanked it open then stepped out. She came back a second later with a bowl full of snow and went to the stove, opening it up and tossing it into the fire. She quickly closed the door, stealing off the billowing smoke trying to rush free. “If this thing is hot they’ll know we were here.”

“If they come this way they’ll know we were here regardless.” He glanced out at the falling snow. It was coming down decently, but not fast enough to hide their footprints completely. Definitely not the ones they would leave on their way out. “The faster we can get out of here, the better off we’ll be.”

He grabbed anything that might be useful from the cabin. Extra socks. More gloves. Two more blankets and all the bottles of water, splitting them between the backpack and Eloise’s large duffel bag. Once everything was packed up he grabbed her coat, moving in to pull it around her body. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a better option than her heavy grey outer layer, so they were just going to have to work with it. “We’re going to have to move fast.” He zipped her up and lapped over the panel of snaps. “If it gets to be too much, I need you to let me know, okay?”

Eloise nodded as he pulled up her hood and cinched it down. “Okay.”

Nate pulled on his own coat, grabbing the larger, heavier duffel bag and slinging it over one shoulder before helping Eloise into the backpack. Then they were out the back door, moving through the falling snow.

He took the lead, both to make sure his was the body on the line if they crossed paths with anyone, and to provide a semi-clear path for her to walk

in. Eloise was silent as they hiked, keeping up with his punishing pace without a single complaint. He sent up a silent thanks to the man who raised her because that could be what saved both of their asses.

They reached a thick line of trees and Nate pushed in, carefully holding back branches as Eloise followed behind him. The canopy was thick and the fir trees were abundant, making the snow thinner here and in some places completely nonexistent. He kept to the areas of lesser snow, hoping to give her a break and obscure their trail.

And it was turning out to be one hell of a long trail. He was relatively familiar with a decent portion of the outskirts of Fairbanks, but at this point they were pushing into territory he didn't know as well. Territory where the trees just kept going and the incline started to pitch upward.

Nate paused, turning to both check on Eloise and ask a question. She was breathing a little heavy and a slight sheen of sweat glistened on her brow, but other than that it didn't seem like she was struggling. "Do you know where we are?"

She hesitated, chewing her lip as she looked back the way they came. "Does your phone have a compass?"

Nate grinned as he pulled his cell free, powering it on and passing it off without worry since there was no chance of having service this far out. And therefore, hopefully, no way for anyone to trace it.

Eloise took it, eyeing him warily. "What?"

"Nothing." He watched as she opened the app. "Just glad you're the one out here with me."

Eloise shot him a look that wasn't quite the glare he'd gotten used to before refocusing on the compass. She turned in place, orienting herself before pointing toward the east. "Based on where we were last night and how far we've walked, I think we're straight north of Two Rivers." Her lips pursed. "But there's no way we can get there from here. We're not really prepared to cross the mountains."

"Agreed." Nate moved closer, zipping her coat higher and re-cinching her hood. "What's our best shot at getting back to civilization without crossing anyone's path?"

Eloise considered it a second before meeting his gaze. "I still think we should head south. North and east are too treacherous and west will put us too close to the road."

Nate took his phone back, switching it off before sliding it into his

pocket. "South it is."

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN





## ELOISE

SHE WAS A little surprised at Nate's immediate change of trajectory. More than a little surprised, actually.

But she didn't have much time to think about it, because before long, all her mind could handle was focusing on putting one foot in front of the other and keeping up. Besides a quick pause to eat a couple of protein bars and make sure they were still on track, they didn't stop moving all day.

Ten years ago it might not have been too rough of a trek. That was back when camping and hiking were part of her regular activities. But the past ten years hadn't afforded her many opportunities to get back to the things she used to love. By the time the sun started to set and Nate's steps began to slow, her feet were aching, her legs were burning, and her whole body was worn out and weak.

Nate scanned the densely wooded area around them. "I think this is a good place to stop."

Eloise blinked, trying to get a better look at their surroundings in the dim light. They'd been in the never-ending wooded area most of the day, and while the trees provided an amount of cover from the wind and the snow while they hiked, it was still freezing cold and exposed to the elements. Not terrible for traveling, but not great for sleeping. "Here?"

"Not here." Nate lifted one arm, pointing a few yards ahead. "There."

She squinted, peering through the fir trees until she saw what he was pointing to. "Is that a lean-to?"

"That's what it looks like to me." Nate reached out, taking her hand in his. "It's not ideal, but it's better than nothing."

She let him drag her along, appreciative his steps were coming a little

slower than before. Once they reached the small, surprisingly well-made structure, Nate slid the backpack off her shoulders and dropped it in one corner. “You sit down. I’ll get everything set up.”

Eloise swallowed hard as she settled onto the bag, unable to miss what was happening. Again.

He was taking care of her.

Had been all day.

From making her coffee, to getting her dressed, to bundling her up and cutting a path through the snow, Nate had been making sure she was cared for every step of the way. She was the first one to eat. The first one to drink. He helped her cross ravines and cleared her path through thickets.

It was something she’d decided not to want and definitely not to expect. It felt like a way to honor the memory of her father. He would forever be the only man who’d ever taken care of her.

It was always his number one priority. The most important thing in his life. It was also what led to his downfall.

That’s why she wanted to reserve a place for only him. He’d been so much more than her father. He’d been her best friend. The only person who knew her as she really was.

And as she watched Nate sweep away the debris before carefully spreading out both her blankets and the ones he’d stolen from the hunting cabin, it was impossible not to admit her father probably would have liked him.

In spite of all his back-and-forth tendencies.

Nate finished laying everything out and turned to her. “Hungry?”

She nodded, throat too tight to offer anything more.

Nate’s eyes searched her face, full of concern as he shifted closer. One big hand came up to ease back a tangle of her messy hair. “Did I push you too hard today? I just wanted to get us as far away as I could.”

She swallowed at the lump trapped beneath her vocal cords, managing to ease it the tiniest bit. “I’m okay. Just tired.” Her eyes started to burn, forcing her to blink.

She needed a minute.

Eloise pushed up from where she sat on the backpack, hating that she felt the loss of his touch as she stood. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“I’ll come with you.” Nate tried to stand, making it about halfway up before she stopped him.

Eloise held out a hand. "I'm okay." She forced on a smile, hoping it would ease the concern pinching his brow. "I've done this before."

Nate's jaw tightened, but he didn't argue. "Okay." He caught her hand as she turned away, waiting for her eyes to meet his. "I'll be right here if you need me."

"Thanks." She pulled her hand from his, rushing through the trees, desperate for a lungful of air that didn't smell like him.

*Let me take care of you.*

*I'll be here if you need me.*

She'd expected being trapped with Nate to be miserable. That he would only continue making her hate him more and more.

But none of this was what she thought it would be.

*He was not what she thought he would be. And it was royally fucking her up. Making her see things she'd been ignoring for years. Making her face things she'd done her best to avoid facing. And the fallout from all of it was starting to suck.*

Eloise went as far as she dared before stopping to press her back against a wide tree, sucking in air as she lifted her face to the stars.

Why did Nate have to be like this? Why did he have to make her think about all the things she tried to leave in the past? Why couldn't he just be like the other men she'd allowed in her life?

Shallow. Self-centered. Egotistical.

Safe.

"Shit." Eloise swiped at her running nose with the sleeve of her coat, wiggling down the borrowed pants as she squatted lower, using the tree against her back for balance as she did her business. Gritting her teeth and bracing for the impact, she used a handful of snow to clean up her lady bits before yanking the pants back up and heading for the lean-to.

When she got back to their little camp, Nate had two of her MRE dinners activated and warming in their pouches. His long body was stretched across the blankets, boots off, guns close by, looking all sorts of problematic as he watched her kick the snow off her boots.

"Feel better?"

Eloise sat down, sliding off her boots before scooting across the blankets. "I don't know if I'd call it better, but I no longer have to pee." She blew out a breath. "Any idea where we are?"

It felt like they were so close yet so far away. It wouldn't be difficult to

find their way back to the main road cutting through this part of the mountains, but doing that was a risk. It would leave them hoping they wouldn't cross paths with whoever tried to kill them the evening before. Using Nate's cell phone carried the same sort of risk. Yes, it would mean they would know the second they were within a service area, but so would everyone else.

It would also mean using up the only battery they had without knowing whether or not it would pay off. So, outside of a few quick checks for time and direction, the cell stayed off.

"My best guess is we're still due north of Two Rivers." He shut the phone down and tucked it into the pocket of his pants. "We covered a good amount of distance today, so tomorrow we should end up somewhere we can call for help."

It was technically good news. She was exhausted after only one day of walking through the snow and mountains. Having to do multiple days would probably kill her.

But there was something so nostalgic about being out here. Putting the skills her father taught her to good use. Proving she was still who he raised her to be, even though she'd spent the better part of the last decade wishing she was someone else.

Trying to prove she could be.

Eloise leaned against the back wall of the structure, getting as comfortable against the lumpy logs as possible. It was a losing battle. Apparently everything was determined to make her as uncomfortable as she could get. Physically, mentally, and emotionally.

After years of avoiding so much, the thought of taking it on was overwhelming and completely unappealing. So it was time to focus on something else.

She focused on Nate. "Are you from Alaska?"

"No." He sifted through her bag, lining all their supplies down the blanket. "I grew up in Colorado."

She pursed her lips. Apparently she was going to have to work a little harder for the distraction she was seeking. "I've heard it's pretty there."

Nate lifted one shoulder as he continued sifting through protein bars and emergency rations. "It can be pretty everywhere."

"I guess that's true." Eloise shifted a little closer to him as the wind sliced around the corner. "Did you move to Alaska because of your job, or do you

have family here?”

Nate’s hands stilled. “Both.” His eyes came to hers. “Alaskan Security is my family.”

She opened her mouth, ready to ask another question, but once again there was no avoiding the truth of what was going on. As much as it was a terrible idea, she was curious about him. Wanted to know more about the man beside her.

Because she still couldn’t help but like him. Hell, she might like him more now than before. “You don’t have any other family?”

Nate shook his head, the muscles of his jaw tensing. “No.” He held her gaze for a second longer. “Bryson and I have a lot in common.”

Her stomach dropped, sinking all the way down as a few of Nate’s actions started to make sense. “That’s why you were so nice to him.”

Nate’s expression hardened as he shook his head. “No. I was nice to him because adults should be nice to kids. They should be there for them. Take care of them.”

The lump was back in her throat, hard and unmovable.

It was so difficult to imagine Nate as a lost and lonely little boy, but the reality that it had happened was written all over his face. The pain still lingered.

It was yet another thing she understood completely.

Eloise cleared her throat, trying to ease the ache. “I lost my mom when I was just a baby. I don’t remember her at all.” She’d seen pictures and heard stories, but none of it really made her feel a connection to the woman who birthed her, and it made her sad. “Luckily, my dad was amazing. He was everything I could’ve ever wanted.”

Nate’s jaw set. “Was it lucky?”

The unexpectedness of Nate’s question made her sit up straighter. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

She’d known what it was like to be loved unconditionally. Been safe and protected by someone who always put her first. Someone who saw her for exactly what she was and never made her feel like she needed to be anything else.

Nate’s expression hardened even more, making him look almost angry. “Because now you know what it’s like to lose someone like that.”

That was one way to look at it, it just wasn’t the way *she* looked at it. And it said a lot about how Nate viewed connection and loss. “I think I would

rather have had him for the time I did than to not have him at all.” She sniffed, blinking a few times to keep her emotions in check. “And I know what it’s like to really be loved because of him.”

Nate’s lips flattened as his eyes dropped. “I guess that’s the difference then.”

Eloise fought in a shaky breath, unable to take her eyes off the man in front of her. He looked nothing like the charming, confident guy who’d gotten her hopes up so many times before.

Right now he looked exactly like that broken little boy she didn’t expect to see.

“What’s the difference?” She knew it was a question she wouldn’t want to hear the answer to. Knew without a doubt it would break her a little, adding more cracks to her already aching heart.

But she had to know.

Nate worked his jaw from side to side, eyes going back to the items in front of him. “My dad was a piece of shit. My mom left us when I was a kid and he couldn’t cope with knowing she walked away from him, so he made drinking himself to death his full-time job.” He started to rake one hand through his hair but caught himself, sliding it against the shorter hair at his temple before dropping it to his side. “I never had what I needed. Clothes. Food. Heat. You name it, I did without. I was always dirty and didn’t have a real haircut until I was old enough to pay for it myself.”

Eloise’s eyes lifted to the top of his head, lingering on the dark blonde strands that were usually styled within an inch of their lives. “Oh.” She fought in a breath, trying to steady her emotions, but Nate wasn’t done swinging his wrecking ball against the walls she’d worked so hard to construct.

“I got a job the second I was old enough to work, so I finally had decent clothes to wear and food to eat.” He shrugged. “But I still didn’t have anybody who gave a shit about me. Not until I started dating this girl. She was really close with her family and at first I didn’t know how to act.” His nostrils flared. “But they took me in. Treated me like I was one of them. I went on vacations. Came to family dinners. They bought me Christmas presents for fuck’s sake.”

His anger was palpable. And confusing. “Wasn’t that a good thing?”

Nate’s eyes met hers, colder and harder than she’d ever seen them. “It was fucking fantastic. Right up until we graduated and they moved away.”

His eyes dropped as he went back to moving around the items laid across the blanket. “I never saw them again.”

“*What?*” She said it so loudly her voice echoed around them. It was outrageous. Unimaginable. “They just fucking left you?”

Nate’s eyes came back to hers and a little of the anger and coldness had filtered away. “She decided she was going away to school and wanted her freedom.”

“Yeah, but—” Elise scoffed, trying to wrap her brain around how someone could do that to a kid with a life like Nate had. “Didn’t they know how you grew up?”

Nate gave her a jerky nod.

Of all the low down, no good, piece of shit—

Eloise sucked in a breath as a realization smacked her hard and unyielding.

*Alaskan Security is my family.*

That’s what he told her.

They were all Nate had. Everything he’d once lost.

And she was friends with most of them. Connected in a way that would force them to make a hard decision if things didn’t go well. The kind of decision that hadn’t gone in Nate’s favor once before.

It made sense he would figure that if one family cut him off, another could too. Obviously they would choose him, but maybe he didn’t know that.

Or was too terrified to even risk the possibility.

Her focus jumped to his, eyes meeting Nate’s as those last lingering pieces of the puzzle fit together. “Is that why you kept disappearing on me? Because you were afraid Naomi and Tyson would walk away from you if things didn’t work out?”

Nate stared at her silently. It wasn’t technically an answer, but it told her everything she needed to know.

It also sent her lunging across the blanket, tackling him and holding on tight as they went down, sending their supplies scattering.

Nate hadn’t been fucking with her. He wasn’t leading her on or playing games.

He was just a terrified and broken little boy who didn’t realize how loved he really was.

But before she could do anything to soothe away the haunted look on his face, the world shifted and she found her back against the blankets with a

very intense mercenary staring down at her.  
Then his mouth was on hers.



# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



## NATE

HE EXPECTED IT to take a little longer for Eloise to warm up to him. That he would have to put in just as much time and effort into winning her back as he did pushing her away.

He should've known better. Should've realized Eloise was the kind of person who would understand what he'd been through. Why he was the way he was.

It still felt too easy. Undeserved.

Which is why, as impossible of a feat as it seemed, he needed to hit the brakes.

Nate pulled his mouth from hers, sucking in a steeling breath when she immediately grabbed his hair and tried to pull him back. It took everything in him to resist her, but it had to be done. "We need to slow down."

He thought she might be grateful. That Eloise would recognize the same thing he did and understand why they should slow down.

At the very least he expected her to agree.

Instead the wickedly sexy snarl she wore when tackling him came back to her face. "Are you fucking kidding me?" Eloise shoved at his chest, fighting to get out from under him. "Get off me."

Nate grabbed her shoving hands, fighting to catch them just in case she started to swing. Once he had her by the wrists he pinned both to the blanket above her head. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm not backing off again." He met her narrowed gaze. "But a few hours ago you said you hated me. I think we need to pace ourselves."

"That was before I knew why you were being such a pain in the ass." Eloise wiggled around, managing to get one leg free, but instead of helping

her escape, the move brought his hips between her thighs, lining his fully hard cock up against the seam of her pussy. Eloise gasped at the sudden pressure where their bodies met. “Oh.” Her lips parted and her pupils dilated and she stopped fighting.

And, just like every other time he tried to stick to his guns, she slid right past his defenses. Making him go back on his good intentions.

Nate thrust, dragging his length against her. He was rewarded with a whimper of a moan that shot straight to his groin, pulling his balls tight. He’d been caught in a constant state of arousal since making her come, feeling how wet she got for him, and his body was desperate for release.

Eloise bent the knee on her freed leg, pressing her foot into the blanket for leverage as she rolled her hips, rubbing against him and sending spots dancing across his vision.

He gritted his teeth against the need to come. “Why do you have to be such a pain in my ass?”

“Because you keep coming back for more.” Eloise arched her back, bringing the soft press of her tits flush against his chest as she rolled into him again.

“I can’t help it.” There was no stopping himself as he continued thrusting against her, meeting her movements. “You make me fucking crazy.”

This situation was spiraling out of control and it was happening fast. His chances of regaining control slipped away more with each drag of his body against hers and it was clear Eloise would not be the one hitting the brakes. That responsibility fell to him.

Nate risked releasing one of her wrists and grabbed her thigh, tipping it back until her butt lifted off the blanket, stealing her ability to continue torturing him.

“Well that was just mean.” Eloise fisted her hand in the front of his coat, holding tight as she fought her other leg free. “For a guy who was awfully eager to dish out orgasms earlier, you’re sure as hell holding back now.”

“Is that what you think is happening?” Before she could cause any more problems, like making him deal with frozen cum in his pants, he pushed up to his knees. “Because I don’t remember refusing to give you anything.”

He reached under the hem of her coat and flipped the button of her borrowed jeans free, yanking the sides apart to force the zipper open before dragging them down to the middle of her thighs. Once he had enough room to work he pushed her knees up to her chest, baring her flushed pussy to the

cold air. He fisted one hand in the bunched denim fabric, using it to keep her pinned in place as he tugged his glove off with his teeth and slid his fingers over her glistening flash. “Is this what’s wrong?” He found her swollen clit and teased alongside it. “Is this why you’re being such a pain in the ass? Because I didn’t take care of you well enough earlier?”

Eloise whimpered, but didn’t offer an answer.

He pulled his hand away and lifted his eyes to hers, cocking one brow. “I want an answer, Eloise.”

Her dark eyes narrowed. “I think I hate you again.”

“You don’t really mean that.” Nate grabbed the sleeping bag he’d left folded in the corner, dragging it up. “Even if you do, I don’t think you’ll mean it long.” He tugged the thick layer higher as he leaned down for his first taste of her.

He’d imagined Eloise like this more times than he should be willing to admit, but not a single one of those fantasies came close to the real thing.

Because up until recently, he didn’t know the real her.

And now that he did, there was no going back. No cooling down. No backing off. Especially not when she rasped his name into the frigid air.

The sound of it on her lips—the recognition he was the one touching her, the one pleasing her—reached into a part of him he’d guarded for so long.

He knew what it was like to need someone. To wake up every morning wanting to see their face. Wanting to hear their voice. He’d put a woman at the center of his world before and then had to watch as it all burned down around him.

But he was younger then. Hadn’t seen even part of the good and bad the world had to offer. And yet he let it hold him back. Allowed the loss to dictate every aspect of his life. The risks he took and the ones he didn’t.

And Eloise was definitely a risk.

He dragged his tongue along the seam of her pussy, sliding between the heat of her slick folds to find the nub of her clit. Taking his time wasn’t an option. It was too fucking cold. No way would he leave her exposed like this, even covered with the sleeping bag, for long.

But Eloise needed to know she could rely on him. That he was done letting her down. Done being less than what she deserved. She needed to know he would always take care of her in every way.

When he curled his fingers inside her body, raking across the slightly textured spot at the front of her slick channel, she nearly came off the blanket.

Her hand shoved under the sleeping bag, fingers finding purchase in the hair he always spent so much time perfecting, tangling it into a mess as she fisted it tight.

He didn't care. She could rip out every hair on his head and it wouldn't matter. All that mattered was proving her wrong. Proving he wasn't what she thought.

When her thighs clamped tight against his ears, he pursed his lips, sealing them around her clit and sucking gently with a steady pulse as he continued working his fingers into her.

She rocked against him as she came, the sound of her cries echoing through the quiet night air, testing his self-control in a way nothing ever had. By the time she collapsed against the makeshift bed he'd created, boneless and panting, the threat of his own climax was barely beginning to ebb. His dick was never going to go down at this rate and his balls were going to be permanently blue.

It would still be worth it. He'd made her suffer for nearly a year. It was his turn to return the favor.

Nate carefully slid from under the blanket, using one hand to wipe the wetness off his mouth as he pushed up to his knees.

Eloise was already glaring. "Don't look at me like that."

He groaned. Now that he knew she was more bark than bite, her snarky attitude was starting to be cute as shit. Like a feral little kitten trying to bite the hand feeding her even though she's starving. "Like what?"

Eloise bit back without hesitating. "Like I should be impressed."

He reached under the cover and tugged her pants back into place, buttoning the fly before raking up the zipper. "I don't know. I've gotten you off twice today. I think that's pretty impressive."

Eloise rolled her eyes, but a small smile lifted her lips. "Is this how you always are? You need to hear what a good boy you've been?"

Nate eased down to the blanket beside her, pulling the opened-up sleeping bag over both of them. "Sweetheart, the whole forest just heard what a good boy I am. It's not a secret."

Eloise's eyes went wide and her skin flushed a pretty shade of pink. "That didn't happen."

Nate pulled her closer, tucking the blanket tightly around them. "I wouldn't be worried. I don't think the bears will hold it against you."

Eloise paled, the color he was enjoying so much draining from her

complexion. “Are there really bears out here?”

“Of course there are bears out here.” Nate snagged the thin blanket he took from the cabin and draped it over their faces to block the worst of the cold from hitting their lungs while they slept. “I thought you were from Alaska.”

Eloise shot him a dirty look but it lacked any real venom. “I don’t mean in general.” She glanced around. “I mean specifically. Have you seen evidence of bears being close by?”

Interesting. She was unfazed by the moose and undaunted by the trek across unknown territory while possibly being tracked by unknown assailants with guns, but it would appear Eloise was not prepared to meet a bear.

Nate shook his head, cradling her cheek in his hand as he tucked her head under his chin. “No bears. I’ve been here for a while now and haven’t seen a single bear.”

“You live in a gated compound. Of course you haven’t seen any bears.” Eloise cuddled closer, one hand snaking out to wrap around his waist and holding on tight. “And you should be glad because they’re scary as heck.”

Nate closed his eyes, relaxing into a surprisingly comfortable moment. “How many bears have you seen?”

“One.” Eloise wedged a leg between his, tangling herself around him. “And it was one too many.”

Nate smoothed his hand over the strands of her hair, following the curve of her skull with each pass. “I think bears are the least of our worries.”

Eloise tipped her head back, expression incredulous as she looked up at him. “Was that supposed to make me feel better?”

“It didn’t?” Nate tipped her head back into place, holding her close. “I thought you liked being prepared.”

Eloise groaned, the sound long and surprisingly dramatic. “Whatever.” She gave his side a little pinch. “You can go back to ignoring me if this is how you’re going to be.”

“I wasn’t ignoring you. I was pretending I could ignore you.” He pressed his nose into her hair, breathing deep. “And it was fucking impossible.”



HE WAS DEAD asleep when the sound of a twig snapping opened his eyes.

He stopped breathing, listening for any sign of what might be moving through the woods, but the quiet rustle of the wind moving through the trees was all that carried into the little lean-to keeping the worst of the weather at bay.

It would be easy to think he dreamt it. That the sound never existed and everything was as peaceful and empty as it seemed. But there was always a calm before the storm.

He carefully unwound Eloise's limbs from around him, working as quickly as he dared to keep as much warmth within their little cocoon as possible. By the time he had his boots on and laced, Eloise's eyes were open. She gripped the blankets around her tightly, keeping her nose and mouth covered. Nate reached out, curving one gloved hand around her face, hoping to soothe the fear in her eyes.

But the confirmation he'd been waiting for came a second later when the unmistakable sound of footsteps shattered any hope this day would remain uneventful.

He started to move away, but Eloise's hand grabbed his wrist, holding tight. She shook her head, eyes pleading.

He didn't want to leave her, but sitting here and waiting to see what was coming their way would be stupid and dangerous.

He leaned forward, brushing his lips across hers before whispering into her ear, "I'll be right back."

Her grip stayed tight, holding a few seconds longer before she finally let go, agreeing with a small nod.

He'd waited years for a moment like this. To have someone who wanted him around. Someone trying to tug him back into bed for just a little more time together. In his mind it had been a sleepy morning in the safety of their home. And while this setting was about as far from that as it could get, the moment was no less perfect.

And it made him even more determined to do whatever it took to ensure mornings like this continued happening. Just hopefully not in the middle of the Alaskan backcountry.

Nate silently stepped out from their shelter, nose tucked into his coat to disguise his breath as he scanned the space around him. His white clothing provided great cover in the snow, but here in the trees it offered less concealment. Luckily, the shelter they found was probably built by hunters, so was in a well wooded area, surrounded by the limbs of fir trees that

provided adequate physical camouflage. He carefully worked his way between them, sticking to the denser areas as he followed the soft sound of footsteps.

He was just starting to feel like he was closing in when they seemed to stop.

Nate crouched down, straining for any hint of where they might be coming from. When they picked back up, his stomach dropped.

They were headed in the direction of their lean-to.

Nate turned back, moving faster this time, less concerned about concealing his own steps as he rushed to Eloise. He was supposed to be showing her he could keep her safe. That he could protect her. That he really was all she'd initially hoped he could be.

And so far he'd failed every step of the way. Not just by leading her on, but by failing to protect her from this whole situation. By bringing whatever was hunting him right to her. As much as he didn't want to consider it, Eloise was right. This was all his fault.

No one went after an elementary school principal. Whoever this was, they were absolutely coming after him. She would be nothing more than collateral damage.

Nate moved faster, desperate to get his eyes on her. To see that she was safe.

When the shelter they'd slept in the night before finally came into view, his heart stopped. A huge wolf was sniffing through the space, pawing at the ground he'd been sleeping on less than fifteen minutes before.

The very empty ground.

The blankets, the bags, the food—everything was gone.

Including Eloise.



# CHAPTER NINETEEN



## ELOISE

THIS WHOLE THING was getting ridiculous. How much more shit could the universe throw at them? Hopefully not much because she was too out of shape for all this shit.

Eloise held perfectly still even though her thighs were burning and all she wanted was to run. To tear through the snow until she found somewhere safe to hide.

Preferably somewhere warm with running water and electricity.

And no fucking wolves.

The second Nate took off she'd started packing up, being as quiet as she could while loading both bags and collecting their blankets and water. She'd barely had her boots on when she heard the footsteps that must have woken him up and they sent her doing exactly what he did.

Rushing out into the snow.

Now she was tucked into a copse of trees, hunkered down in a shaking squat, watching as a giant animal sniffed and scratched around their campsite. So far the wolf seemed more interested in finding any food she might have left than hunting her down, but that could change at any minute.

Or he might have a friend roaming around, ready to take her down the second she moved.

So she stayed perfectly still and perfectly quiet, fighting instinct and better judgment.

A slow prickle of awareness crept up her spine, making it tingle where it was pressed against the rough bark of a tree. She hugged her bags tighter, trying to compress them, trying to make herself less noticeable. Less conspicuous.

The wolf stopped, ears pricking as it sniffed the air, cold eyes looking around. It was noticing the same thing she was. Realizing something else was out there.

After a few seconds, the animal went back to its task, continuing to dig at the ground and making enough noise Eloise almost didn't notice the sound behind her. She didn't have a chance to peek around the side of the tree before a big hand clamped over her mouth sealing off the yelp attempting to spring free.

"You okay?" Nate's voice was low in her ear and the calm, comforting sound of it had her pulse slowing right away.

Eloise nodded, turning to face him the second he released her. "Are you?"

"I'm fine." He snagged the bigger bag from her and slung it over his arm. "We need to get out here."

He didn't have to tell her twice. Bears scared the shit out of her, and wolves came in a close second along with coyotes and mountain lions. Anything capable of eating her face off really.

Nate helped her put the backpack on before sliding his gloved hand into hers and leading her in the opposite direction from the one she'd come. They moved slowly, stepping as silently as possible as they put distance between themselves and the wild animal who was now a little too familiar with their scent.

Seconds turned into minutes. Minutes turned into an hour. The more time that passed, the more she was able to relax again. When they reached the edge of the treeline, she was finally feeling a little less panicked.

Right up until Nate stopped dead in his tracks. One long arm swung out, winding around her waist to pin her body behind his. She almost groaned. What in the hell could it be now?

Eloise waited, standing silently as Nate methodically scanned their surroundings. There was nothing to hint at what he was looking for. No strange sounds. No strange smells. Nothing.

But something was definitely making him concerned. And if he was concerned, so was she.

Finally Nate seemed to relax a little, the line of his shoulders easing just a bit as he stepped forward, bringing her along with him. She risked a peek around his big body, hoping to finally figure out what was going on.

Nate's expression was grim as his eyes came to hers. He lifted one finger, pointing at the open area in front of them. "There's tracks in the snow."

Eloise swallowed hard. “Like bear tracks?” For the first time in her life she was hopeful it was a bear they were about to cross paths with.

At least bears didn’t carry automatic weapons.

Nate’s expression was tight as he shook his head. “No.”

Eloise pressed one gloved hand to her forehead, trying to will away the panic threatening to send her into a tailspin. “Okay.” She took a steadying breath, her eyes dipping down to the pocket where Nate’s cell phone was. “Do you think this means there might be service here?”

He scrubbed one hand down his face, rubbing his eyes. “Maybe. But if I turn my phone on I risk someone being able to ping it. And if they’re already this close...” Nate’s words drifted off.

“But they would have to be actively looking for it when you turn it on, right? What are the chances they’re continuously trying to ping your phone?” Eloise moved closer, her words coming faster as she tried to convince them both they weren’t completely fucked. “They might not even be doing it at all.” She desperately tried to hold on to a shred of hope the situation wasn’t as dire as it seemed.

But the look on Nate’s face made it impossible.

He closed his eyes, letting out a sharp exhale before opening them again. “When we’re looking for someone, we don’t just check shit when it’s convenient. We are constantly looking for anything that might tell us where they are.” His eyes flicked to the upturned snow before coming back. “I know Heidi is looking for us every second, but they might be too. If we turn on my phone, we’re gambling Heidi finds us first and that my team can get to us before anyone else does.”

She was probably going to die out here. End up as a popsicle in the Alaskan wilderness no one would ever find.

No one but the bears.

And maybe the wolves.

She sniffed as hopelessness weighed in on her. Hopelessness and a surprising amount of grief.

“Hey.” Nate wrapped her in his arms, pulling her close, one big hand coming to cradle her head where it rested against his chest. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Eloise circled both arms at his waist, pressing her face against his coat. “My dad will be so disappointed in me if I die out here like this.”

“You’re not going to die out here.” Nate’s voice was soothing and soft

and filled with a conviction she didn't currently feel.

But desperately wanted to.

Eloise sucked in a breath, the air cold enough it froze her runny nose as she met his eyes. "You promise?"

"Promise." Nate's forehead dropped down to rest against hers. "We're going to get out of this, okay?"

She hadn't had anyone in her corner in what felt like forever and hearing Nate refer to them as a we helped her feel less afraid. "Okay."

"And when we do, I'm going to take you on a trip." Nate stroked her hair, his touch soft and soothing. "So you better start deciding where you want to go."

She didn't even have to think about it. "I want to go to Disney World."

"Deal." Nate agreed without hesitation.

She laughed. "I was kidding."

Nate lifted his head from hers. "Too late now." He took her hand in his, turning back to the footprints slicing across the open space. "Better order yourself a pair of Minnie Mouse ears because there's no taking it back."

Thinking about the possibility that there might be something after this perked her up a little. Made her feel a little better. A little more like this might not be the end.

Eloise swiped at her still running nose and took in the tracks, trying to decipher which way they were headed. "Do you think those are from the people who tried to shoot at us?"

"It's hard to tell. It is a little suspicious that they're so blatant though." Nate's brows pinched together as he continued to study the scene. "Unless they want me to know they're coming after me."

Eloise huffed out a little laugh. "At least you're admitting it's you they're after." She straightened her shoulders, feeling just a tiny bit lighter. "Unless they figured out I'm way more of a threat than they realized." It felt good to be teasing him again. To lose a little of the weight wearing her down.

But Nate didn't look in a teasing mood when he turned to face her. "There's only one person trying to figure out how to get their hands on you, and that's something I'll deal with when we're done with this." The sharpness in the way he said it sent a little thrill through her.

It almost sounded like jealousy. "Who are you talking about?"

Nate scowled. "Fucking Matt. I'm going to take the shit he left on your porch and shove it up his ass."

She couldn't stop the grimace that took over her face. "Ugh. Matt." In all the craziness she'd forgotten about him. About his glitter coated bullshit.

Nate studied her closely. "Has he tried calling you or is he just leaving you creepy presents?"

Eloise shoved at her hair as the wind blew it across her face. "If he's tried calling me he probably got to have a nice, long chat with whoever took my freaking car since they got my phone too." She snorted out a laugh. "Maybe they're more interested in hearing him talk about himself than I was." She'd been so stupid. So focused on finding someone who didn't threaten her ideas about who she should be and what she thought she wanted. She never should have given Matt the time of day, let alone allowed him to make her feel unworthy.

"You're not making me want to hunt him down any less." Nate's jaw worked from side to side, but a far-off sound dragged his attention back into the clearing. "Shit." He snagged her hand in his. "We're going to put a pin in that and come back to it later. We need to start moving." He turned, leading her back into the trees.

She slowed her steps, intending to stick to the rules she'd been taught. "We're just going to go back the way we came?" If they weren't careful they were going to end up going in circles and never get anywhere. It was one of the hazards of being lost. You had to be very careful not to get turned around. And it was very easy to get turned around. Especially if you panicked.

"Not all the way, but I think we need to stay in the trees. It'll reduce the risk of leaving a visible trail." Nate was moving faster now as the mechanical sound got a little closer. "And they won't be able to get the snowmobiles in here to chase after us."

"They've got snowmobiles?" Her stomach twisted, threatening to revolt. "How are we going to outrun snowmobiles?"

"We're not going to outrun them." Nate suddenly changed direction, heading north, farther from civilization and deeper into the wilderness. "We're going to evade them by being smarter than they are."

She wanted to think it was possible. That they could somehow manage to stay one step ahead of whoever it was scouring the outskirts of Fairbanks for them. "Why are they so interested in finding you?"

"That's the million-dollar question." Nate pushed his way through the thick line of scrappy brush, holding it out of the way so she could pass behind him. "But I don't necessarily want the opportunity to ask them."

Eloise kept moving, keeping pace. “Me neither.”

Nate gave her a smile, one that looked wickedly charming and confident as hell. “Let’s get the fuck out of here then.”



A FEW HOURS later she was rethinking every life decision she’d ever made. Moving back to Alaska. Skipping out on her cardio. All the ice cream she ate with Naomi. “I think I need a break.”

“No breaks. Not yet.” Nate crouched down, slapping one hand against his back. “Climb on. We’ve got to keep moving.”

Eloise shook her head. “You cannot carry me. You’ve got to be exhausted too.”

“I’m a Marine. I’m more than capable of hauling your little ass however far I need to.” He slapped his back again. “Get on.”

She hesitated a second longer, but Nate didn’t look like he was going to give up, so she rolled her eyes and sighed before wrapping both arms around his neck. “How do I get—” She yelped a little as Nate grabbed her thighs, bouncing her into place. “Never mind, I guess.” She shifted her grip, trying to position herself so her body didn’t push against the bag of blankets he had slung over his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Nate started walking without waiting for an answer.

“I’m fine.” She loosened her hold on his neck, making sure she wasn’t cutting off his air supply. “A little embarrassed I can’t hold my own.”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.” Nate’s steps evened out as he found his new center of gravity. “This is just what I was trained for.”

Eloise leaned into his back, resting her chin on his shoulder. “Did you like being in the Marines?”

“I loved it.” His steps were longer now. Faster.

Obviously she’d been holding him back and it made her feel even more embarrassed she hadn’t been able to keep up. “If you loved it, why did you leave?”

“Pierce offered me a job.” There was something off in his answer. His words were too tight. Too clipped.

And she wanted to know why. “But you loved being in the Marines. Working for Pierce might’ve sucked. Why were you willing to risk it?”

Nate was silent for a minute. When he finally answered his words were quieter. "I never felt like I belonged in the Marines."

Eloise looked over what she could see of the man currently carrying her through terrain that was quickly becoming more treacherous. "I'm not sure how that's possible." He was barely breathing hard and didn't seem ready to slow down at all. "You're pretty damn capable."

"Physically, yeah." Nate's jaw clenched, the muscle working where it rested on her cheek. "But I barely passed the exam to get in. Had to study for weeks to even do that well and everyone knew it."

Eloise stared at the side of his face. She could only see half of him but there was no mistaking the expression he wore. Shame. She'd seen it on Bryson's face more times than she could count, and every one of them made her feel like throwing hands with whoever put it there.

This was no different.

"Not everyone is good at taking tests." She couldn't help but be angry at all the people who'd let this man down in his life. "It doesn't mean you're not smart."

"Pretty sure that's exactly what it means." Nate didn't miss a beat. His response was sharp and immediate.

"Evading men with guns might be your specialty, but education is mine, and I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty that a test doesn't indicate how smart you are. It only shows how good you are at regurgitating information." Anger brewed in her belly, hot and sour. "And you can only regurgitate information that's been fed to you in a way you can digest." She'd fought with more than a few educators, and even a handful of parents, over this very thing. "Not everyone learns in the same way."

Nate's steps slowed, but she just kept ranting.

"And people with ADHD can't usually learn by just reading information. They need practice tests and memory matching exercises and—"

"Eloise." Nate cut her off, stopping her tirade. He jerked his chin in the direction they were heading. "Look."

She lifted her eyes and nearly gasped at the sight of the cabin in front of them. It was tucked into the mountainside and a curl of smoke filtered up from the chimney. "Holy shit."

Nate's hands relaxed, letting her legs slide down from where they were hooked around his waist. "You stay here."

He started to walk away, but she grabbed him, tugging him back. "What?"



No. I want to come with you.”

He turned to her, gloved hands coming to cradle her face. “I’m glad to know you aren’t sick of me yet, but until I know that place is safe, you’re not going anywhere near it.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY



## NATE

NATE GLANCED OVER his shoulder one final time, making sure Eloise was completely out of sight before pulling in a calming breath and raising his knuckles to rap on the door.

The place was definitely occupied. There were lights on in the windows and both a four-wheel-drive SUV and a snowmobile were parked under the attached carport. Each one looked just as well cared for as the relatively spacious cabin. The place might not be accessible by vehicle year-round, but the electric wires linking it to the grid made him realize he'd done the right thing by not turning on his phone.

They were definitely getting closer to civilization.

He waited a few minutes before knocking again. Whoever was inside was probably not used to having visitors, so he was prepared for it to take some time and a little begging to get them to open the door. But the longer he waited, the better he felt about who was on the other side of the door.

Because they obviously weren't interested in him.

"Hello? My name's Nate Giles." He raised his voice loud enough that whoever was in the house would be able to hear him. "I was stranded on Steese Highway and got turned around. My cell phone died and I need to call someone to come get me." He glanced at the trees again, barely catching sight of Eloise as she peeked around the trunk before ducking behind it. He sighed, not at all surprised she wasn't staying hidden like he told her to.

He knocked again. Waiting as more minutes ticked by.

"Maybe nobody's home."

He dropped his head back, staring up at the roof of the little porch. "You really aren't good at staying put."

“It’s been forever.” Eloise crept up behind him, peeking over his shoulder. “Maybe we should just,” she widened her eyes tilting her head toward the door, “you know. Like we did at the hunting cabin.”

She wanted him to break into an obviously occupied home? “We’re not —”

The door yanked open, sending him jumping in front of Eloise, making sure her body was completely blocked by his as he faced down the occupant of the cabin.

A tiny wisp of an old woman stared out at him, her wrinkled face scrunched into a scowl as she pointed the double barrel of a shotgun at the center of the chest. “You don’t take a hint very well.”

Nate lifted both hands in the universal sign of surrender. “We aren’t meaning to intrude. We just really need—”

“Oh my gosh.” Eloise darted out from behind him, moving fast enough there was no stopping her. “Is your sweater hand knit?” She beamed at the old woman, her voice bright and warm. “I just love the colors.”

The woman stared at her a second, snarl still curling her lips, shotgun still aimed at his chest. After a few heartbeats her eyes dropped down to her chest. “Not much to do out here but knit.”

“Well, you’re really good at it.” Eloise continued smiling brightly, easily slipping back into the woman he once believed she was. “I’m Eloise and this is Nate.” She reached out to pat his chest before stepping in front of him, putting her body squarely between him and the shotgun.

And that wasn’t going to happen.

Nate grabbed the back of her coat, using his hold to pull Eloise back and out of the way.

The old woman’s barely-there brows slowly lifted and she gave him an appraising once over. “Where’d you say you got stuck?”

“Out past Fox.” He tipped his head toward Eloise. “She’s the principal down at Fairbanks North Elementary School and we were headed out to check on one of her students. The storm came in faster than we expected and we got stranded. Thought we knew our way back home, but I guess we thought wrong.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “You’re an awful long way from Fox. Not too many people could make it that far on foot.”

Eloise leaned toward the old woman, lifting one hand up like she was about to tell her a secret. “He’s a Marine.” She offered it up like it explained

everything.

And apparently it explained enough because the old woman finally lowered her shotgun. “If you’re looking for a phone, you’re out of luck. Ain’t got one and there’s no service anyway.”

Eloise’s smile held. “I don’t blame you. I loved having a cell when I was younger, but nowadays I could just do without the whole thing.” She glanced around. “Maybe if you could point us in the direction of your closest neighbor, then we can get out of your hair—”

“Do I look like I know where my neighbors are?” The woman snorted. “Even if I did, the closest one would take you more than a day to reach on foot.” She propped the gun across a bent arm. “And that’s without a storm coming in.”

Eloise’s shoulders dropped. “There’s another storm?”

The woman jerked her head in a nod. “Should be here in the next hour or two. Said it’s going to be worse than the one that came the day before yesterday.”

Eloise deflated a little more. “Oh.”

The woman’s sour expression held as she sighed. “Come on. Can’t have you two freezing to death out there on my head.” She turned from the open door and disappeared into the cabin.

Eloise hesitated, her eyes coming his way. “Are we supposed to follow her?”

“I sure as hell hope so, because I’m not trying to heat the outside.” The old woman’s voice carried out from wherever she’d gone.

“I’ll go first.” Nate moved into the doorway, grabbing Eloise’s hand so he could be sure she stayed safely behind him.

He stepped into the small entryway, pausing to close the door behind them. His foot was barely past the welcome mat when their host hollered again. “Boots off.” She appeared beside them, mug in hand, frowning as she looked them up and down. “You two look a mess.”

“We weren’t really prepared to have to hike through the snow.” Nate quickly unlaced his boots and turned to line them into place on the mat.

The old woman jumped back, coffee cup crashing to the floor as she grabbed for her shotgun. “Holy mother of god, why in the hell do you have a rifle?”

“He works in security now.” Eloise was back to being all smiles, discussing his semi-automatic with the same casual enthusiasm she had over

a hand knit sweater. “Thank goodness, because there was this whole thing with a moose and—”

“Those moose are a menace.” The old woman eyed him a second longer before pursing her lips. “Had one try to take me out a few years ago.” Her thin lips twisted into a smile and her blue eyes hinted at a sparkle. “Ever had moose jerky?”

Eloise returned her smile, looking just as amused. “Do you cut it into strips or do you use a jerky gun?”

Their host’s mouth dropped open, jaw going slack. “Well look at that. The school principal knows how to cure meat.”

Eloise’s smile turned more genuine. “I’m full of surprises.”

The woman cackled, head tipping back. She straightened, wiping at the corner of one eye. “The best women are.” She frowned down at the broken mug shattered her feet.

“I’m sorry about your coffee.” Eloise crouched and started collecting the shattered remnants into a pile. “Once we get back to Fairbanks I’ll make sure I get you a replacement.” She lifted up one of the larger sections, scanning the words printed across the ceramic. “Coffee makes me—” She went back to the shards, sifting through them before finding the one she was looking for. A whoop of laughter sent her toppling back onto her butt.

“You’re laughing now, but you won’t be when you get to be my age.” The woman snagged away the shard printed with the word *poop*. “You’ll do whatever it takes to have a nice bowel movement.”

Eloise continued laughing. “That might be the best cup I have ever seen.” She went back to collecting the pieces, standing once her hands were full. “I’m going to order two because I need one for myself.”

The woman’s stern expression softened just the tiniest bit, like she was finally realizing she’d found a kindred spirit. One who simply wore her mask in the opposite direction. “I’m Regina, but everybody calls me Reggie.”

Eloise straightened, cradling the collected bits of broken ceramic in one hand before reaching out with the other. “It’s nice to meet you, Reggie. Thank you for letting us come in. It was getting really freaking cold out there.”

“Well,” Reggie ignored Eloise’s hand, her frown slipping back into place, “it’s only going to get worse, so I guess you two will just have to stay here until I figure out what in the hell to do with you.”

“As long as it doesn’t involve turning us into jerky.” Nate worked the

rifle off his shoulder and propped it next to Reggie's shotgun.

Reggie tucked her chin, lips pressed flat as she looked him up and down. She turned to Eloise. "He always try to be funny?"

Eloise grinned. "Usually he tries to be charming, but sometimes he mixes it up."

Reggie kept her eyes on him as she moved closer to Eloise, stage whispering into her ear. "Men who look like him are usually up to no good."

Eloise's smile held. If anything it seemed to get brighter. "Oh, I know." She returned Reggie's unwhispered whisper. "That's why I like him."

Nate held both hands out. "I'm standing right here."

Reggie reached out to pat him in the center of his chest. "Hush, honey. Women are talking."

Eloise made a strangled sound before starting to cough, unsuccessfully hiding her laughter.

Reggie didn't bother pretending. She cackled loud and long as she grabbed a towel and wiped the coffee from the floor. The older woman clearly believed she was going to throw him off, but Reggie had no clue how much experience he had with a handful of younger, mouthier versions of her.

Which reminded him. "You really don't have a phone at all?" Reggie already had her back to them, making her way down the hall. "Ain't got one. Don't plan on getting one. Don't wish I had one."

Eloise followed behind the woman who would probably be her new best friend soon. "But what if you have an emergency? What happens if you get hurt?"

"Then I die." Reggie kept going, leading them deeper into her home.

And it was a pretty nice home. The end of the hall opened up into a large living room area. It was cozy and comfortable looking, with well-worn furniture and blankets that were likely hand made piled in every corner.

"I'm guessing you two are hungry since you've been out hiking around." Reggie turned their way, looking them over with a judgmental gaze. "You definitely need a shower." She motioned toward a doorway leading off of the living space. "Spare bedroom's over there. Got some towels in the bathroom you can use." She stopped, swinging her pointing finger their way. "But you better be quick. Don't be using up all my hot water."

Nate nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Eloise gave her a wide smile. One that showed no hint of the fakeness she frequently displayed. "Thank you so much."

“No reason to thank me. You’re only in here because I don’t want to have to drag your dead bodies off my property when the snow melts.” She made a shooing motion with her hands. “Go get cleaned up while I make us something to eat.”

Nate snagged Eloise by the hand, pulling her into the short hallway leading to a small bedroom with an attached bathroom. He closed the door behind them, giving the room a quick look over just in case. Once he was confident everything was safe, he motioned to the bathroom. “You can have the shower first.”

Eloise unzipped her coat, shaking out of it. “I’m glad we’re on the same page because I was absolutely going first.” She was already wriggling out of her borrowed jeans. “I can’t wait to get warm.”

Nate didn’t pretend not to look as she peeled away her shirt. “Remember what Reggie said. I have a feeling she might pull her shotgun back out if we use up all her hot water.”

Eloise shot him a grin as she pushed open the door leading to the small, attached bathroom. “I really like her.”

Nate chuckled. “You would.”

Eloise’s jaw went slack in mock outrage. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean she’s just like you. Only she pretends to be a pain in the ass so nobody notices how sweet she is while you pretend to be sweet so nobody realizes you’re a pain in the ass.” Nate stepped toward her, reaching out to swat her on the ass. “Hurry up.”

He didn’t actually care how long she took to get ready but staring at Eloise stripped down to her panties and bra had him half hard already, and after almost three days of sporting a continuous erection, he was about to turn into one giant blue ball.

“Yes, sir.” Eloise stuck her tongue out at him before ducking into the room and closing the door.

Once she was out of sight, he rolled his head from side to side, easing out a little of the tension he’d been carrying since discovering Eloise was missing. For the first time since then, things finally felt like they might be headed in the right direction.

Like everything might work out.

His hopes for a calm and restful evening were cut short by a sharp screech from the bathroom.



Nate was through the door in a heartbeat. He grabbed the shower curtain and whipped it back, ready to do damage to whatever or whoever dared try to hurt her.

But his eyes met with a perfectly safe, perfectly healthy, perfectly naked Eloise.

His racing heart stuttered as his eyes moved down her pebbled, glistening skin. “What’s wrong?”

Her teeth were chattering, clanging together as she scrubbed soap over her skin. “There’s no hot water.”

“But Reggie said—”

“I th-think she was fu-fucking with us.” Eloise dumped a pile of shampoo into her soaking wet hair, movements jerky as she tried to scrub it in. “And unless yo-you’re going to figure out a way to f-fix it, you can stop staring at my tits.”

He *was* staring at her tits, but only because her nipples were beaded so tight they had to be aching. All of her was probably aching from the onslaught of frigid water.

And he couldn’t just leave her to suffer.

Nate grabbed the hem of his shirt and yanked it over his head, tossing it into the pile of Eloise’s clothes before dragging down his pants.

“Wh-what are you d-doing?” Eloise’s whole body was convulsing at this point, and while she might not be benefiting from a cold shower, he certainly would.

Though it might not have the same effect considering the source of his suffering would be inches away.

“You said if I wasn’t going to do something to fix it then I had to stop staring at your tits.” He dropped his underwear, kicking it away before stepping directly under the icy cold spray, blocking her body with his.

Eloise stared at him. “And this is what you picked?” She shivered, but the convulsion was less pronounced than it had been seconds ago. “That water is like ice.”

“What can I say?” Nate shrugged, dropping his eyes down her front. “You’ve got really nice tits.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



## ELOISE

ALL IT TOOK was two seconds with a very large, very hard Nate to make her forget all about the cold water.

“You’re naked.” Eloise tried to keep her eyes on his chest but failed miserably. They dropped all on their own, fixating on the elephant in the room. “And hard.”

“That seems to happen around you.” His big hand lifted, fingers sinking into her hair as he continued the washing process she’d abandoned. “We need to hurry up. Especially if this actually is the warm water.”

Eloise’s eyes threatened to roll back in her head as his fingertips massaged her scalp, working Reggie’s Dollar Store shampoo through her strands. “That feels really good.”

Nate made a rumbling sound that might have been a grunt of satisfaction. “Good. I like making you feel good.”

There was no stopping the smile that curved her lips. “I noticed.”

Even in perfect conditions, she usually struggled to get off when someone else was attempting the job. The men she’d spent time with before always struggled with pacing. And roughness. And location.

They pretty much sucked at everything.

Not Nate. Somehow he’d managed to get her off not just once, but twice. And he’d done it under relatively dire circumstances. Times where her brain should have been focused on everything but an orgasm.

Hell, he’d probably be able to do it right now, standing under a spray of water about two degrees away from turning into icicles in a strange woman’s shower while the men who sent a hail of bullets their way less than three days ago seemed to be closing in.

And it made her wonder if she might be able to accomplish a similar feat. Eloise lifted her head, meeting the intensity of Nate's stare as she wrapped her hand around his reaching cock.

His fingers stilled in her hair. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" She dragged her fisted hand down his length, the shampoo lingering on her palm adding a glide to his already slick skin.

Nate's eyes dropped to where she gripped him, his nostrils flaring as she stroked him again. "It looks like you're fucking me with your fist."

Eloise inhaled sharply. How had he managed to give an already dirty act and even filthier edge? He could have said any other collection of words. He could've said she was giving him a hand job. Jacking him off. Yanking his dick. But no. He had to go and say something that made her thighs clench tight. Made her think about actual fucking. About how amazing the thick, long length of him would feel pressing into her body, inch by delicious inch.

She was definitely going to have to add condoms to her emergency kit.

Nate's fingers tightened in her hair, using the hold to tilt her head back as his mouth claimed hers, hot and hungry. It stole what little sense she had left, making it nearly impossible to maintain a steady rhythm, proving she was not nearly as skilled with her hands as Nate was.

He didn't seem to mind. If anything, he seemed more than happy to help her out.

His big body crowded hers, pushing her back until she was pinned between the hot wall of his chest and the slippery plastic of the shower wall. One big hand wrapped around hers, squeezing her fingers tighter than she would have dared as he pumped into her hand, fucking her palm hard and fast.

It was probably the hottest thing she'd ever seen, and before long Nate was not the only one breathing heavily. Every thrust of his hips increased the throbbing between her thighs, burying the ache deeper.

"Tighter." His grip pressed around hers and he groaned. "Good girl. Just like that."

She probably didn't deserve his praise considering her effort was minimal, but she was going to take it anyway. There was something about being told she was good, especially by someone who'd seen her be anything but, and it was starting to be a little addicting. Made her willing to consider what she might have to do to get him to say it again.

Hopefully it would involve her mouth.

Nate's lips covered hers again, teeth catching her lower lip as he grunted, warm breath mingling with hers. "Eloise—" his hand tightened in her hair as warmth splattered across her belly. His big body shuddered, hips continuing to thrust into their joined hands as he groaned against her lips.

The whole thing was unbelievably erotic and had her panting with need of her own.

Nate released her hand, but instead of letting her go, his palm flattened across her belly, wiping away the mess he made before sliding between her thighs. He groaned again as his fingers slid along her pussy. "So fucking wet for me." He zeroed in on her clit, working it with an unerring touch. "Were you imagining what it would've been like if it had been this pretty pussy I was fucking?"

There was no point in denying it. Not when the truth was undeniable. "Yes."

Nate fingers pressed deeper, easing into her body. "So was I." His thumb settled onto her clit, fingers rocking in and out, dragging across that magical, mythical spot, and within seconds she was coming, clenching against his probing digits, wishing he could just fuck her right here. Because while the climax was amazing, there was still an emptiness desperate to be filled.

"You really know how to make a man regret his life decisions." Nate nosed along her neck, lips dragging over her skin. "Because I am really fucking kicking myself for being such a goddamned coward." He nipped at her flesh, teeth raking against her in the most sensual way. "I could have been touching you like this for the past year."

She leaned closer, letting her nipples rub against the warmth of his chest. "Guess you'll have to make up for it."

"I guess I will." Nate's fingers smoothed over her ass, digging into the swell of her cheeks as he shifted their places, putting her back under the water before going to work rinsing the suds from her hair. Every bit of her was relaxed and heavy, making it impossible to protest as he soaped up his hands and ran them over her skin, washing everything.

And his touch was anything but clinical.

He spent extra time on her breasts, stroking her nipples with his thumbs before going back between her thighs, his touch light and careful around her overly sensitive clit. When his fingers dragged along the cleft of her ass, pressing just slightly against the pucker of her hole, she sucked in a breath.

“Interesting.” He chuckled.

Eloise gasped once more when he passed over again, this time teasing the untouched part of her a little more. “What’s interesting?”

“You.”

His exploring fingers slid away and went to work rinsing the soap from her body, but the press of his fingers had reignited the ache in her belly. There was something about the touch that had her hoping he might do it again. Maybe it was because she felt as if she shouldn’t like it. Shouldn’t allow it.

Shouldn’t want it.

Which seemed to be par for the course with this man. After everything that had happened she shouldn’t want him.

But here she was. Desperate for him to touch her anywhere and everywhere.

Literally everywhere.

Her debaucherous thoughts were cut short when the water hitting her skin dropped a few degrees, sending her lunging forward, slick skin smashing against Nate’s.

He quickly spun her way, scrubbing himself clean before switching off the absolutely ridiculously cold spray.

“F-fuck.” Eloise was back to shivering, arms curled over her chest as she fought against the shudders wracking her body.

“I guess Reggie wasn’t kidding about the warm water.” Nate whipped back the shower curtain and grabbed one of the towels from the rack, swinging it around her shoulders.” He rubbed his hand up and down her arms. “Better?”

Her teeth started to chatter. “No.”

She normally ignored the cold. Dealt with the chilly temperatures and snow because they were just a part of life in Alaska. But they were a hell of a lot easier to deal with when you had warm water. “How does she live like this?”

Eloise pinched the terrycloth towel tighter, pulling it as close as she could while Nate snagged the second one from the rack and wrapped it around her lower body, drying her off with quick swipes.

“She’s probably used to it.” He finished drying her lower half and lifted the towel to her hair, squeezing away the bulk of the dripping water before opening the door to the bedroom.

“What about you?” Eloise snuck a peek at his glistening skin. Mostly the glistening skin of his dick. The thing was huge. Big enough that pretending she could ignore it would probably just be ridiculous.

“I’m fine.” He glanced around the room. “Where did our clothes go?”

Eloise poked a finger from between the edges of the towel. “In the bathroom.” Nate shook his head. “Mine were in the bathroom, but yours were out here.” He leaned to look into the bathroom, scanning the space before turning back to her. “They’re all gone.”

There was a thump at the bedroom door and Nate barely had enough time to sling the towel in his hand across his front before Reggie barged in carrying a stack of blankets. “I tossed your clothes in the washing machine. Figured they could use a good cleaning.” She looked Eloise over. “I’ve probably got some things that will fit you.” She went to the closet and yanked open the door, reaching in to pull a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt free from the shelf inside. She dropped them to the bed. “My granddaughter comes to visit sometimes. Keeps some clothes here so she can pack light.”

Reggie sized Nate up, eyes appraising. “She’s brought boyfriends before, but none of them were half as big as you are, so even if they did leave something behind it wouldn’t fit you.” She crossed the room heading for the door, stabbing one thumb in the general direction of the bed as she went. “You’ll just have to make do with a blanket.”

The door closed behind her and Eloise stared at it, a little shocked at what just happened. “She came into the bathroom while we were showering?”

Nate raked one hand through his messy hair, looking completely unfazed that his normally perfect style was totally wrecked. “I’m going to suggest we lock the doors from now on.”

Eloise swallowed hard. “Do you think she would try to hurt us?”

Nate shook his head as he grabbed one of the blankets from the bed and wrapped it around his middle, tucking it tight. “No, but I do think she’s nosy as hell.”



“YOU TWO LOOK like you feel better.” Reggie stacked a few bowls on the small table in the kitchen. “You want to eat something?”

Eloise adjusted the towel wrapped around her head, trying to keep it from

falling off. “Depends. Is it gonna be any warmer than that water?”

Reggie snorted. “Forgot to mention my version of warm water has probably changed a little over the years.” She ladled a giant scoop of what appeared to be stew into one of the bowls and handed it to Nate. “It’s good to take a cool shower anyway.” She reached up and gently slapped one hand against her wrinkled cheek. “Keeps the skin tight.”

Eloise inched closer to the table, drawn in by the savory scent of meat and vegetables. “Have you lived out here for a long time then?”

“Moved out here with my husband nearly thirty years ago.” Reggie scooped a healthy portion into the next bowl and passed it to Eloise. “He always wanted to move back to Alaska when we retired, so that’s what we did.” She added a smaller amount to the final bowl. “Course, I didn’t expect him to croak on me two years later, but that’s the way life goes I suppose.”

Eloise slid into the chair across from Nate. “At least he was happy for those two years. Right?”

Reggie gave her the first genuine smile she’d seen. “He was definitely happy. He loved it here.”

Eloise returned her smile. “My dad loved it here too. Said there was nowhere else he would want to live.” She waited until Reggie sat down before picking up her spoon to poked at the stew, her appetite suddenly dwindling.

“What about you? You like it here?” Reggie sat down next to Nate, scooping up a healthy bite and shoving it in. “You like it here?”

Eloise shrugged one shoulder. “I didn’t used to. I didn’t mind it when I was a kid, but as I got older I felt like I’d be happier somewhere else, so when I graduated high school I moved away and went to college and got a job.”

Reggie pointed the tip of her spoon Eloise’s way. “But you came back.”

“I did.” She swallowed, expecting her throat to get tight. When it didn’t she continued. “I found out the grass wasn’t necessarily greener on the other side. When I was offered a better job here, I moved back. Glad I did, too. My dad got sick not long after.”

She didn’t talk about him much. It was too painful. Even years later, the loss of her father was difficult to navigate. But here, in this little cabin in the middle of nowhere, with two people who might understand how she felt, the loss didn’t feel quite as suffocating as it usually did.

“I think he was actually sick for longer than I realized, but he ignored his



symptoms and focused on helping me move and get settled in instead. By the time he finally went in to be checked out it was too late. There wasn't anything they could do."

Nate's hand slid across the table, wrapping around hers. "It's not your fault."

"I know that." She really did. Surprisingly, guilt wasn't one of the difficult emotions she struggled with when it came to losing her dad.

Regret? Definitely. Loss? For sure. Sadness? You bet.

"He was never the kind to put himself first. It wouldn't have mattered if I was moving or if I'd never left, he would have put that doctor's appointment off." She glanced at Nate, considering holding back the rest. But she'd been carrying this weight for so long. The burden she'd put on herself. One founded on insecurity and the desire to be accepted at any cost.

It was time to let it go.

"I always felt like he was the only person who really understood me. He was the only one I was really myself around. And when he was gone, it felt like that part of me had to be gone too." Being raised by a man like her father made her many things. Independent. Self-sufficient. Capable and prepared.

It also made her a little more blunt. A little more cynical. A little less like the sweet and bubbly little girls around her at school. And it was impossible not to notice the difference in how they were treated. Nice girls seemed to finish first in just about every way she thought mattered.

So she learned to put on an act around other people. To make them think she was sweet and bubbly too.

Everyone except her dad. He loved her occasionally bitchy, sarcastic personality just as it was.

"I hate to have to be the one to tell you this, but that's what happens when someone you love dies. They take a piece of you with them." Reggie met her eyes across the table. "Happened to me too." Her thin lips curved at the edges. "I used to be a total sweetheart."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



## NATE

NATE FROWNED ACROSS the table at where Reggie sat with a shit-eating grin on her face. “I think you might be a cheater.”

Reggie cackled as she started clearing away the fifth board game she’d kicked both their asses at. “You only think that because you’re a sore loser.”

They’d spent the day getting to know their host a little better and, after more than a few hours in Reggie’s presence, one thing had become abundantly clear.

The old woman was lonely as shit.

She talked a good game, and acted like she preferred solitude, but when it came right down to it, she was absolutely fucking delighted to have them there. Thrilled to fall into a grandmotherly role.

Minus the part where she gleefully obliterated them at everything from Monopoly to Sorry.

“I’ve got more experience than you. I used to play these games all the time.” She boxed up her most recent conquest and slid it onto one of the shelves stacked with every game imaginable. “My grandchildren used to come spend the summers here, but now they’re all older and off enjoying their own lives.”

“Didn’t you say one of them comes to visit you sometimes?” Eloise’s brows pinched together as her lips flattened. She was obviously bothered by the thought of Reggie sitting home alone for months on end. It was unsurprising since Eloise had one hell of a soft spot for the forgotten and unloved.

“She comes about once a year. Flies up from her fancy-schmancy job in California and spends a couple weeks decompressing.” Reggie gave Nate a

sly smile. “Usually brings a man to help with the decompression part.”

Nate grinned back at her. “I’m assuming you sneak in while they’re showering too.”

“Don’t act all butthurt. Your clothes are warm and dry, aren’t they?” Reggie turned back to the stack of games, frowning at the selection. “I think we’ve played just about everything.”

Nate took advantage of the lull in activity and went to the window, peering out into the snowy darkness for what might be the millionth time. He couldn’t stop himself from looking for any sign someone was closing in.

But, like every other time he stood in this spot, the scene outside was calm and peaceful. The most recent snowfall was heavy and solid, obscuring their tracks completely and hiding any hint of their location. Making it less and less likely they would be found.

For now.

They couldn’t just stay here forever. Eventually he would have to venture out. Get to a spot with service so he could make contact with Heidi and the rest of Intel.

But tonight was not that night. The storm had calmed down but, based on the information coming through Reggie’s antiquated radio, there was another wave of snow and frigid temperatures on the way.

“Do you see anything?” Eloise moved in beside him, her body tucking into his side as she gazed out the window.

“I think we’re good for now.” Nate pulled his eyes from the mountains and fixed them on Eloise. Her normally bright eyes were dull and shadowed. “Tired?”

She huffed out a soft laugh. “Exhausted.” She wiggled her elbow into his ribs. “Some dude made me sleep outside last night and walk for miles through the snow up a mountain. Both ways.”

Nate pulled her close, dragging his lips up her neck. “He should probably figure out a way to make that up to you.” The list of ways he wanted to show Eloise how much he appreciated her was long and varied and not a single bit of it could be accomplished here under Reggie’s nosey watch.

But there would be time. As long as he could get them out of here.

Because, if the past few days had shown him anything, it was how well he and Eloise worked as a team. How much their skills and personalities complimented each other. How strong of a force they were even in the face of unimaginable adversity.

But that wasn't all he'd been lucky enough to witness. He'd seen Eloise's strength. Her bravery. Her quick thinking. The vulnerable side she protected at all costs. Eloise was so much more than he could have hoped for and it only deepened his resolve to make it through this.

Because he needed as much time with her as he could get.

"Well, he did offer to take me anywhere I wanted when this is over. I'm sure a trip to Disney World will even things out a little." The teasing line of her mouth flattened out as she tried to hide her amusement.

Her happiness.

Because Eloise wasn't at all what some assholes made her believe. She wasn't bitchy or unlikable. Not in the slightest.

She was just like he was. Afraid of being alone. Willing to do whatever it took to make sure that didn't happen, even if it meant sacrificing her sense of self.

And he was done letting *that* happen.

"I'm not sure that's enough." Nate reached up to smooth down a bit of hair that had come loose from the braid she'd woven her wet strands into after their shower. "I definitely owe you a warm shower." He trailed his fingers down the column of her neck. "A night or two in a comfortable bed."

Eloise's eyes moved over his face, no doubt looking for any hint this would go the same way it had so many times before. "I guess we'll see."

They would. She might not believe him now, but eventually Eloise would realize he was done backing off. Finished getting in his own way. Tired of sacrificing one happiness for another.

Nate traced the line of her jaw, skimming one thumb over her lower lip. "Does that mean you're willing to give me the chance to make everything up to you?"

Eloise focused on Reggie as the older woman straightened up the table where they'd spent most of the day. Her gaze came back to his face and she moved a little closer, voice low as she leaned in. "I thought you were already doing that." The pink flush of her cheeks told him exactly what she was referring to. Maybe she didn't hate their cold shower as much as she claimed.

He lifted one brow. "Is it working?"

Eloise tilted her head and gave him a little shrug. "I guess we'll see about that too."

Nate chuckled as she walked away, going to the table to help Reggie clean up their empty plates and used glasses. He turned back to the window,

eyes lifting to the sky as the newest wave of snow began to fall.

No doubt Heidi was losing her mind. She probably had half the company out looking for them along with as many members of GHOST as she could blackmail Vincent into parting with.

But part of him hoped they wouldn't be found. At least not tonight.

He wanted one more chance to hold Eloise close. To wake up to her smiling face before they were faced with reality. Especially since reality was probably not going to look like Eloise believed it would.

She didn't realize it now, but her days of living alone were over for a while. Between whoever shot at them and stole their cars and Matt's unexpected appearances at her home, there was no way in hell she was going to get rid of him anytime soon.

Reggie yawned, the sound loud and long and a little too dramatic to be completely genuine. "I'm ready for bed." She snagged a book from the small end table next to her recliner. "You two wore me the hell out, making me entertain you all day." She tucked the book under one arm and headed for the small hall at the other side of the house. "I take my hearing aids out at night, so if you need something you'll have to come get me." She wiggled her brows at Eloise as she passed. "Fair warning, I sleep in the nude."

Eloise's eyes widened like she was shocked, but nothing Reggie said surprised him at this point. Somehow they'd managed to find their way to the mouthiest, wildest old woman in the mountains.

And he wasn't mad about it.

Reggie moved past her, leaning in and lowering her voice. "Help yourself to the prophylactics in the nightstand. Better not be any babies being made on my watch." She gave him an exaggerated wink before disappearing into the hall opposite the one leading to the guest room.

He stared after her, shaking his head. Maybe he could be a little shocked by what came out of her mouth after all. Never in his life had an old woman offered him condoms, and he'd be more than happy if it never happened again.

Not that it mattered. There was no way his first time with Eloise would be in the same house as the meddling old woman. Not because he believed Reggie would listen in or invade their privacy again. But because you didn't fuck in your grandma's house, and Reggie already felt a little like his grandma.

"What did she say to you?" Eloise came to his side but didn't come close

enough for their bodies to touch, which showed just how far he had to go.

She still wasn't completely confident he was going to stick around. Her uncertainty showed in every sideways glance and every hesitant touch. His feral little kitten was moving into her skittish stage. Desperate for contact, but still too scared to initiate it.

"She just let me know where the extra blankets were if we got cold." Nate rested one hand on the small of her back, directing Eloise to the opposite side of the cabin and the bedroom they would share.

Reggie hadn't come out and said it, but her husband definitely did well in his life. Well enough they could afford to build a custom home all the way out here, complete with electric and a drilled well. The place was impressive for its isolated location.

Even if the water heater was shit.

Eloise yawned, covering her mouth with one hand as they moved into the bedroom. Nate pulled back the covers, holding them up as he urged Eloise under them. Once she was in place, he tucked them around her and leaned down to press a kiss against her forehead.

Eloise gazed up at him, eyes searching his face. She was looking for reassurance. Looking for proof he really meant everything he said. All he did.

And it was there. She just had to be brave enough to believe it.

"Good night." He smoothed her hair back from her face, needing to touch her just a little more.

Eloise's brows pinched together. "You're not going to bed too?"

"I'm going to go out and do a check of the perimeter. Make sure we're safe." He hadn't seen anything concerning all day but couldn't shake the feeling someone was watching. "Then I'll be in."

Eloise nodded and he started to step away. She caught his hand, holding it tight. "Be careful."

He smiled. "You act like you're worried about me."

Eloise yanked her hand from his and shoved it under the blanket, like it would hide what she'd inadvertently revealed. "I'm worried about my trip to Disney World. If you die, who's going to take me?"

Nate moved back in, leaning over her, bending close enough he could run his nose along the side of her neck. "Is that all you're worried about? You wouldn't miss anything else I do?" He nipped at her earlobe, smiling a little more when she gasped and squirmed under the blanket.

Eloise swatted his chest. "Go hike around in the snow."

He chuckled, happy to see her feisty nature hadn't left. "Don't worry. I'll be back." He straightened, fingers sliding against her cheek. "You won't be able to get rid of me that easily." They might still be trapped with no obvious way to safely get home, but he was already making plans for when they did.

And they would. Nothing was going to stop him from being with her. Not fear of losing his family. Not Matt.

And sure as hell not whoever the fuck was trying to take him out.

Nate brought the blankets a little higher, smoothing them under Eloise's chin before leaving her behind, warm and safe.

He methodically strapped on all his gear, swinging on his coat and weapons before slipping outside into the frigid night air. The snow from the storm was finally letting up, but the wind was still brutal and cutting. The drifts were deep as he followed the edge of Reggie's property, doing a sweep of the wooded mountains surrounding it. Everything was peaceful. Quiet and calm. Nothing had come close to them all day outside of a few animals whose tracks had faded from the storm, but his lingering unease remained. Even as he made his way back to the cabin, undressed, and slipped between the blankets beside Eloise, the feeling of being watched stuck with him, leaving him considering going back out.

But then Eloise curled closer, her limbs winding around him as she made an unladylike grunt of disgust. "You're cold."

"And you're still crawling all over me." Nate wrapped one arm around her back, hauling her even closer. "Seems like you're willing to suffer to get close to me."

"Shut up." Eloise wedged one leg between his, letting out a little sigh as she settled down. "Did you see anything?"

"Not a thing." He wanted her to be able to sleep well. To relax. But he also knew Eloise well enough to realize she would want to be prepared. "But something still doesn't feel right."

Eloise tipped her head back, eyes moving over his in the shadowy darkness. "How so?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

He wanted to offer her more, but more simply didn't exist. All he had was a feeling. An intangible unease.

"Should we leave?" Eloise might have lingering fears his bad behavior would repeat, but one thing was clear. She trusted him to keep her safe. Had faith in his skills. Knew he would do whatever it took to protect her. And that



mattered almost more than anything else.

Nate shook his head. “No, but I think we need to be ready to head out at any time.”

“Okay.” Eloise snuggled a little closer, burying her face against his neck. “Are we going to have to take Reggie with us?”

He stared up at the ceiling, mulling over their situation before admitting the truth he couldn’t escape. “Probably.”



“HEY.”

Nate jerked awake, body jolting as his eyes flew open.

Reggie’s wrinkled face hovered inches from his, looking ominous in the moonlight. She squinted down at him, lips pressing into a frown. “Want to tell me why there’s twenty strange men surrounding my cabin?”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



## ELOISE

SHE KNEW SOMETHING bad was happening before she even opened her eyes. The second Nate's whole body tensed beside her it was clear they needed to start moving.

Eloise flung back the covers and jumped out of bed, going straight for the pile of stuff in the corner of the room. She had her coat on and was shoving one hand into a glove by the time Nate reached her. He rested both hands on her shoulders, leaning down so their eyes were in line. "Stay in the house."

Reggie leaned around him, looking Eloise up and down. "She sure doesn't waste any time, does she?"

The corners of Nate's mouth twitched in a hint of a smile. "No she does not." He leaned in, kissing her on the forehead the same way he had the night before. It was achingly sweet and threatened her resolve to keep his previous disappearing acts at the front of her mind. He leaned back, focus moving between her and Reggie. "I want you both to keep getting ready but do *not* come outside until I come back and tell you it's safe."

"I'm not agreeing to that," Reggie scoffed. "What if you don't come back?"

"He's coming back." Eloise said it because she needed to hear it. Needed to believe Nate would absolutely be perfectly fine.

Reggie lifted her brows. "You sure about that?"

Was she? Not just in this moment, but outside of it.

Eloise lifted her eyes to Nate's face, looking for the same thing she'd been seeking since fate landed them together. But, like every other time, what she wanted wasn't blatant or obvious. There were no guarantees in life and there were no guarantees Nate wouldn't disappear the second they got back

home, just as he had before.

Believing things would change—that *he* would change—took a leap of faith, and she'd never been great at those. Not when making friends and certainly not when it came to men. But if she expected Nate to change, she probably had to do the same.

Eloise nodded. "I'm sure."

Nate's hand came to the back of her skull, pulling her in for a kiss that almost made her forget the danger lurking outside. She sagged against him, holding on tight, hoping everything would be okay.

"Are you just gonna stand here and make out with her or are you gonna go figure out who in the hell is out there?"

Eloise opened her eyes, rolling them to the side to find Reggie staring at them, hands on her hips.

Nate claimed another, more chaste kiss before releasing her. "Pack everything up and be ready."

She nodded, watching as he raced to dress, putting on only the most dangerous of his weapons before sliding out into the snow.

Reggie turned to her the second he was out the door. "You want a gun?"

Eloise met the older woman's eyes and nodded. "Yes, I do."

Within minutes they were both fully dressed and fully armed, each with a packed bag loaded on their back and a weapon clutched in their hands.

Eloise tested the weight of the single barrel shotgun Reggie had given her. "What's this loaded with?"

"Buckshot." Reggie braced her own shotgun across her chest. "Wasn't sure how good a aim you had. Wanted to give you the best chance at actually hitting something."

Eloise snorted out a laugh in spite of the situation. "Your faith in me is humbling."

She'd spent years pretending to be sweet and feminine and the kind of girl who was more comfortable in heels and skirts than she was in jeans and hiking boots. Up until recently, she felt like all of it was fake. Like no one even came close to knowing the real her. But that wasn't true.

She did actually like dresses and heels. She was just also happy in hiking boots with a loaded gun.

Life was all about balance, and so was she.

"I'm actually a pretty good hunter." Eloise moved to the window, barely shifting the drapes to one side so she could peek out. "My dad was an

outdoorsman and taught me all kinds of shit.”

He was also the reason her vocabulary was as colorful as it was—yet another aspect of her personality that had crept to the forefront over the past few days. It was the one thing she really did need to suppress. At least while she was at work.

Right now, though, the curse words were going to fly.

“That’s probably a real good thing considering we’re about to be stuck outside.” Reggie looked her over. “You got any idea who in the hell is out there?”

“I’ve got a couple ideas.” And sharing them with Reggie didn’t seem like a great idea since both involved armed men. On the plus side it could be someone coming to rescue them—

But it could also be someone coming to kill them.

Eloise waited as the minutes ticked by, dread growing more with each one that passed.

“I think we should go look for him.” Reggie reached for the curtain. “He should have been back by now.” Before Eloise could stop her, the old woman grabbed the curtain and yanked it back. Eloise jumped back on a yelp as panic dumped adrenaline into her system.

A man was standing directly on the opposite side of the window, close enough Eloise could see the whites of his eyes.

Unfortunately that was all she could see because he was completely covered otherwise. Decked out in the same white tactical gear Nate wore, along with a knit mask that obscured his identity and would make him nearly impossible to see in the snow.

Reggie jumped back, her reaction a little delayed. “Jesus Christ.” She flipped the curtain closed, but it was much more than too late.

“We need to hide.” Eloise grabbed Reggie by the arm, planning to drag her... somewhere. Before they could even make it across the room, something hard and heavy hit the front door, rattling it on its hinges.

She turned, heading in the opposite direction. “Where can we hide? Is there a cellar? A closet? Something they won’t find right away?” The thumping on the front door continued, each hit coming faster than the one before it.

“I’ve got a—” A jostling at the back door cut off Reggie’s words.

Eloise watched in horror as the door swung open and the man from the window stepped inside, yelling something her panicked brain couldn’t make

out.

All she could focus on was escape.

“Well, shit.” Reggie stepped in front of Eloise, trying to protect her with her smaller frame. “Get your ass back outside. I just mopped those floors.” She pressed back against Eloise, urging her away from where the man stood. “Are you trying to give an old woman a heart attack? What’s wrong with you?”

The banging at the front door continued as someone hit it with a force hard enough the whole house seemed to shudder around them. Eloise looked from side to side as she grabbed Reggie. They were trapped. “Is there a side door?”

Reggie hefted up her shotgun, but before she could get it to her shoulder Eloise grabbed it. “If you shoot, everyone outside will open fire and we will die.”

The old woman snorted. “Not sure if you’ve noticed, but it looks like we might die anyway.” She yanked at the gun. “I’m not goin’ down without a fight.”

Eloise held tight, refusing to let go.

She held fast right up until the front door flew open, banging against the wall hard enough the knob punched into the drywall of the entry, lodging it in place. A giant, white clad form raced through the opening.

Nate’s eyes were wild as they locked onto hers and it was impossible to tell if she was relieved to see him or terrified. Because now he was going to die too.

Nate reached her in two long strides, grabbing her by the coat and yanking her body behind his. Reggie ended up shoved right beside her as if Nate thought he could protect them from the barrage of bullets that were surely coming their way.

“Fucking finally.” A familiar voice sent Eloise peeking around his arm just as the man at the back door whipped off his knit mask. Tyson’s shoulders sagged. “We’ve been trying to find you two for days now. Naomi’s ready to kill me for not finding you sooner.”

Eloise stepped out from behind Nate. Her whole body was shaking as panic fueled adrenaline raced through her veins. She grabbed the closest thing she could find and launched the throw pillow at Tyson’s face. “You scared the shit out of us, asshole.”

The pillow bounced off Tyson’s chest. His brows lifted as he focused on

Nate.

“Yeah.” Nate hooked one arm around her shoulders, pulling her into his side and pressing another of those confusingly perfect kisses to her forehead. “She’s come out of her shell a little bit.”

Tyson’s already high brows climbed higher as his eyes shifted between them. “Seems like it’s not the only change that’s happened.”

Nate grinned, tipping his head toward the tiny woman peeking out from his other side. “We made a friend too.”

Tyson looked them over for a minute before pointing at Reggie. “Can you have your friend stop pointing a gun at me?”

Reggie dropped the barrel of her shotgun. “Sorry. It’s a habit.”

“Pointing a shotgun at people is a habit?” Tyson focused on Nate, matching his expression with a grin of his own. “She seems like she’s gonna fit right in.”

Nate rested his free hand on Reggie’s shoulder. “That’s good, because she’s coming with us.”

Eloise expected Reggie to argue, but the old woman didn’t bat an eye. “I’ll just grab my bag.”

It would seem Reggie might be a little lonelier than she let on.

As they collected all their stuff, more members of Alaskan Security filed in, each of them greeting Nate with a hug, their expressions full of warmth and relief. It was clear they loved him. Worried over him the way any good family would. Their concern also made it easier to understand why he was so scared of losing them. Why he kept pushing her away, afraid they would choose her over him.

Especially since he’d lost a family over less before.

But all Nate’s fears seemed to be a distant memory. He spent more time checking on her—making sure she was okay and holding her close—than he did preparing to leave. When they were finally ready, Nate slung as many bags over one arm as he could before wrapping the other around her, keeping her right at his side as they headed out.

It was impossible to get a vehicle to Reggie’s cabin because of all the snowfall, so the team had arrived on foot. They did have Reggie’s snowmobile, so she and Reed climbed on and took the lead with Reggie providing directions to get them to a pickup point as quickly as possible.

Everyone else moved on foot, trudging through the ridiculously high snow drifts.

Tyson filled them in on how they were found as they walked, and it was remarkably old school. Nothing more than leg work and luck. Apparently they'd been searching around the clock, covering as much area as they could before finally coming across Reggie's cabin much the same way she and Nate had.

By accident.

And thank God they had because she was about over her impromptu outdoor adventure. Each step took a huge amount of effort and she was fading fast. After an hour of walking, Nate passed off his bags and loaded her onto his back, hauling her the rest of the way just like he had the day before.

When they finally had service, Tyson called in, letting Heidi know they found her and Nate safe before settling on a meeting point. By the time they reached the meeting point Eloise was exhausted and freezing and more than ready to be back in her own house and in her own bed.

Nate loaded her into the back seat of an idling Range Rover before sliding in next to her, keeping her close.

Reed climbed into the front passenger's seat while a couple of other men loaded Reggie's snowmobile onto a trailer and packed the older woman into a second waiting vehicle. The whole process took under two minutes and soon they were on the move. Safe and headed back to civilization.

Eloise closed her eyes, resting her head against Nate's shoulder as her body started to relax. She'd just begun to drift off when she jerked awake, jolted by a realization. "Bryson." She craned her neck to meet Nate's eyes. "I need to make sure he's okay."

It'd been days since she initially went to check on the little boy. Days that he might have been just as alone and stranded as she was. Only he didn't have anyone to help him.

He didn't have someone like Nate telling him everything would be okay. Keeping him safe. Keeping him warm.

Nate leaned forward, giving the driver directions to the spot where they got stranded before leaning back. "You'll have to get us the rest of the way there."

Eloise nodded. "Okay." Her stomach dropped as she realized something else. "I think I had his address programmed into the GPS on my phone. You don't think whoever shot at our cars would go to his house, do you?"

They'd taken her car and everything in it, which included her cell phone. It wouldn't be difficult for them to figure out where she'd been headed. And



what if they assumed that's where she would continue on to, trying to get there on foot after her car got stuck.

Nate held her gaze. "Do you know his actual address?"

Eloise deflated a little. "Not off the top of my head."

He turned to the driver. "I need you to call Heidi."

The man driving didn't hesitate. He reached out and tapped across the screen. Heidi answered on the first ring. "You better not be calling me to tell me you lost them again."

"Heidi, it's Nate. I need you to get an address for me and send everybody available there."

"Oooh. Sounds like things are getting interesting." The sound of typing carried through the line. "I love it when shit gets interesting. Who am I looking for?"

Eloise answered. "One of the little boys who was at Emmett's party. Bryson Prior. He lives out Steese Highway off Aproka Street."

"Got it." Heidi rattled off the familiar address. "I'm sending everyone that way now. How long until you're there?"

Reed was already working to put the address into their GPS. "Thirty minutes."

"It looks like we can be there in twenty. Do you want us to go in or stand down?" Heidi's words came quickly as she continued typing.

Nate shook his head even though there was no way for Heidi to see it. "Don't do anything until we get there. I want to be sure someone Bryson knows is on-site if shit goes sideways." His body stayed tense as the call was disconnected and the man driving changed directions, going a little faster as they sped toward Bryson's house.

"He's okay, right?" She wanted reassurance. Wanted to be told everything would be fine.

Nate curved his hand around the side of her face, pulling her closer. "I will do everything in my power to make sure he is safe."

It wasn't what she expected to hear, but somehow it was better. Nate wasn't lying. Wasn't claiming everything would be fine just to placate her.

But he *was* making a promise. A promise she knew he would keep.

A similar looking SUV was suddenly behind them, driving a little closer than normal. Eloise twisted in her seat, looking out the back window. "Do you know them?"

"I do." Nate tipped his head in a nod, acknowledging the man in the SUV

behind them. “That’s more of my family.” His hand gripped hers, lifting it to his lips to brush a kiss across her knuckles. “And they will do everything in their power to make sure Bryson is safe too.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



## NATE

“THIS ISN’T GOOD.” Reed scanned the filthy bungalow, lips curling at the horrible living conditions Bryson had been dealing with. “Looks like they left in a hurry.”

“How can you tell?” Nate kicked through the mess of empty liquor bottles and other miscellaneous trash. “It’s not like we could gauge whether or not this is messier than normal.”

Reed’s lips pressed into a tight frown. “I guess not.”

Reed obviously hadn’t been faced with a situation like this before and didn’t realize how normal this was for many people. Many kids.

Lucky him.

Reed picked up a discarded vodka bottle, scowling as he looked it over before dropping it back to the grime covered floor. “I guess we should go tell Eloise they’re not here.”

Nate raked one hand through his messy hair before scrubbing it over his face. “She’s going to go scorched earth when she finds out Bryson’s missing.” It was one of many things he loved about Eloise. The intensity with which she cared about a little boy everyone else had all but abandoned. But the same characteristic he loved so much meant she was going to lose her fucking mind.

Nate went for the door, calling over one shoulder to Reed as he left. “Give me a few minutes. Keep looking around for anything that could tell us where they might have gone.” He paused before adding on, “Or been taken to.”

It was an unfortunate possibility and yet another reason he knew Eloise was going to go absolutely ballistic. She was going to feel like she was

responsible for Bryson being missing and would decide she'd also be responsible for bringing him back.

And he didn't put it past her to figure out how to make it happen.

Nate slid into the backseat of the Rover where Eloise was waiting with Rico. The distraught look on her face made it clear she already knew what he was going to say.

"It's empty." Nate braced, expecting tears and yelling. Frustration and fear.

Instead, Eloise took a deep breath, sitting up straighter beside him. "Okay."

Maybe it was a delayed reaction. Maybe it would take a second to process. It gave him time to explain. "I'll find him. I promise."

"I know." She said it so matter-of-factly. As if there wasn't a doubt in her mind he was capable of doing exactly what he claimed.

Nate's brows jumped up. "You do?"

Eloise reached out, grabbing his hand and holding it tight. "It's going to be okay. We will find him and keep him safe."

It was amazing how big of a difference one word made. It took the burden he tried to place only on his shoulders and set it between them.

We will find him and keep him safe.

He'd been alone for so long. Standing by himself while the men who used to be part of his team built teams of their own. And he didn't begrudge them. He wanted them to be happy. They deserved it.

But fucking hell. So did he.

Nate nodded, reaching out to curve a hand around the back of her neck so he could pull her close. He rested his lips against her forehead, breathing deep as the tension that started building in his body the second they walked into Bryson's empty house eased just a little. "You're right. We will find him."

Eloise relaxed into him. "Can you promise me something?"

"Anything." He would give her anything. Do anything for her. Whatever she wanted. He would move heaven and hell to make it happen.

Eloise tipped her head back, meeting his eyes. "When we find them, I get the first swing at his dad."

Nate laughed. "Deal."

Reed climbed into the front seat, shaking his head to indicate he hadn't found anything of note as the rest of the team loaded up.

“It’s okay.” Eloise let out a slow breath, pursing her lips as she exhaled. “We will figure it out.”

He was so damn proud of how strong she was being. How levelheaded and calm. It made him even more glad she’d be at his side indefinitely.

“Just so you know, we’ll be figuring it out from headquarters.” Nate tipped his head at Rico, letting him know they were ready to go. “We’re going to stop at your apartment to collect your stuff and then you’ll be staying with me while we figure all this out.”

If Eloise was bothered by the development, she didn’t show it. “What about Reggie? Where will she stay?”

“They’re already getting her suite set up.” Her concern for their new friend was unsurprising. “She’ll be a few doors down from us.”

“So, far enough away we don’t have to worry about her coming in to collect our clothes.” Eloise’s lips twitched, hinting at a smile before flattening back out. “At least I’ll know she’s safe.”

Nate pulled her closer, tucking her head into his shoulder and smoothing down her messy hair as they drove to her apartment. Rico parked in the spot closest to her stoop and Nate got out, intending to round the SUV to collect Eloise, but a familiar voice stopped him before he could even get his door closed.

“Eloise?” Matt stood on the other side of the SUV, a gift bag in his hand. He looked Eloise up and down. “Holy shit. You look like hell.”

“Well you look like a stalker, so I guess we’ve both got issues.” Eloise crossed her arms. “What are you doing here?”

Matt blinked, looking shocked over her sarcastic irritated tone. “I—” He stepped closer, testing the limits of Nate’s patience. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh really.” Eloise scowled. “Because it seemed like you just wanted to leave creepy shit on my doorstep.”

Matt’s head bobbed back and his mouth dropped open. “Creepy? It’s from The Winery. I’ve spent a fortune trying to tell you I’m sorry.”

“By buying me *your* favorite things from *your* favorite store?” Eloise snorted out an unamused laugh. “You should probably work on making your apologies a little less self-centered.”

Matt’s expression flattened, eyes narrowing. “What’s wrong with you? What happened to the sweet woman I went out with?”

Eloise’s spine stiffened and Nate swiftly rounded the back end of the SUV, ready to put Matt back on his dumb ass. No one was going to make

Eloise think she needed to be less to be liked. Needed to hide part of her to be accepted. Needed to be anything besides exactly who she was.

“She’s still there.” Eloise took a step toward Matt, her lips pulling into a smile. “She just decided she doesn’t fucking like you.”



“SO, AFTER SEEING this, I feel like I should explain that I was in the middle of cleaning out and organizing my closet when everything went to hell.” Eloise stood in the doorway of his suite at headquarters, pillow clutched tight to her chest as she looked around his home.

Nate carried her bags into the bedroom, trying to look unaffected by the moment. It shouldn’t be that big of a deal. It wasn’t like she was moving in with him and it wasn’t like they’d never slept in the same bed before.

But it was still a big deal. A huge fucking deal. Because there was a really good chance now that he had Eloise with him, he would do everything in his power to make sure she stayed there. After seeing her in his space for just a few seconds, it was impossible to imagine it without her. Impossible to consider the emptiness her absence would create within his life. He needed her happy smiles and her snarky retorts the same way he needed air.

He’d been right when he believed she was sunshine and warmth and positivity personified, but that was only half of the story.

Eloise was also wickedly smart. Quick witted and filled with snappy comebacks. She understood the complications of his life and fit into it in a way he didn’t realize anyone ever could.

Now he just had to make sure she saw it too.

Nate settled her bag of clothing in the closet before carrying her toiletries into the bathroom and placing it on the counter. When he came back to where she was still standing in the doorway, Eloise looked uncertain. “You keep things really neat, don’t you?”

Nate moved to stand in front of her, bringing both hands to curve against the sides of her face. “Sweetheart, it only looks neat because I don’t have anything to mess it up with.”

Her brows pinched together as she tried to make sense of what he was saying. “You’re over thirty years old. How do you not have anything?”

It was an easy, but depressing explanation. “I’ve never had a home,

Eloise. There was no reason to have things.”

Eloise’s big eyes stared up at him. “But Tyson and Naomi have a house. Lots of people at Alaskan Security do.” Her hands came to rest on his chest. “There’s a whole bunch of places where they live. Why don’t you move into one of those?”

“I’ve been on the list to get one of the townhomes, but it didn’t make sense for me to take one when someone with a wife and kids needed it.” He’d actually been one of the first to jump at the opportunity. One of the first in line ready to shell out however much it would take to finally have a place he could call his own.

Would it have been a home? Maybe. Maybe not.

Maybe a home didn’t have as much to do with owning property as most people thought it did.

He’d still been frustrated when he kept getting bumped down the list. Not angry, because he was happy to give up his place for others in his family, but upset he didn’t need it in the same way his brothers did.

“That’s bullshit.” Eloise’s lower lip pushed out in a sexy pout. “You deserve a place just as much as they do.”

This was another of the reasons he couldn’t imagine not having Eloise in his life. No one had ever fought for him. Not when he was a little boy and not now that he was a grown man. Yes, the men on his team had his back, but at the end of the day, he wasn’t their priority.

And he shouldn’t be.

“I gave up my spot voluntarily. No one made me do it.” Nate snagged Eloise by the hand, pulling her into the suite he took over when everyone else moved to the townhomes. “Could I interest you in a hot shower?”

Eloise let out a little moan, her eyes rolling closed. “That sounds amazing.” Her lids jumped up. “It’s actually hot though, right? Not Reggie hot?”

He laughed, continuing to pull her toward the bathroom. “It is so hot it will burn your skin off if you’re not careful.”

Eloise gave him a dreamy smile. “That sounds freaking fantastic.” Her smile slipped a little. “Where is Reggie? Is she in her suite?”

“She’s happy and fed and not here to come collect your dirty clothes.” He urged Eloise into the bathroom, stealing away her pillow. “You can see her tomorrow.” He grabbed the door and swung it closed. “Take your time.”

The second the latch clicked into place he went to work. He tossed the



pillow onto his bed before grabbing a set of fresh clothes and rushing out the door. He took a quick shower of his own in the community bathroom located next to the gym before stopping at the kitchen in the rooming house to collect a few items. Eloise was probably starving after walking through the snow all day, and his refrigerator was pretty bare.

He grabbed the items as quickly as he could, piling them into a reusable shopping tote from the stash Elise kept on hand, before hurrying back to the second floor, taking the steps two at a time. He wanted everything in order before Eloise came out of the shower. He needed to prove he could take care of her. That she could depend on him. That, contrary to what he might have shown in the past, she could trust him. Count on him.

Nate quickly swiped his badge and shoved open the door, making it three steps in before nearly fumbling his armload of items. Eloise stood in the kitchen wearing nothing but one of his long-sleeved black T-shirts as she scanned the handful of items in the refrigerator.

Her eyes jumped to where he stood and she must have realized what he was staring at because she fingered the soft cotton hem where it dangled at the middle of her thigh. “I hope this is okay. I must have forgotten to grab pajamas.”

Nate cleared his throat, trying his damndest to peel his eyes away from the sight of her in his clothes. In his kitchen. *In his life.*

But maybe he shouldn't.

He moved closer, letting his gaze drink her in. “It's better than fine, actually.” He shoved the food in the general direction of the counter, refusing to take his eyes off her for a second. “I think you should sleep in it every night.” He fisted the front of the fabric, using the hold to pull her body against his. “I like it a hell of a lot better than what you slept in last night or the night before.”

Eloise laced her arms around his neck, the move lifting the bottom of his shirt higher. “Last night I slept in someone else's sweatpants and the night before that I slept in someone else's jeans.”

His lips curved. “Sounds like you have a habit of sleeping in other people's clothes.” He traced the bottom of his shirt, following the line until it reached the curve of her ass. “I have to admit I like it best when you sleep in mine.”

Eloise pinched her lower lip between her teeth. “Yours are the most comfortable so far.”

He lifted his brows. “So far?” He palmed one of her ass cheeks, using the hold to pull her closer. “I don’t recommend trying out another man’s clothes tomorrow night. I can’t promise he won’t lose something important.”

Eloise tried to flatten out her smile and failed. “Like his car keys?”

“Like his fucking teeth.” Nate gripped her ass, lifting her up onto the counter before stepping between her parted knees. “Maybe an arm.”

Eloise hooked her ankles behind his back, locking him in place. “Sounds messy.”

He leaned close, running the tip of his nose alongside hers. “I don’t mind messy.”

He slid his hands up her thighs, skimming his touch underneath the worn fabric of his shirt. Her skin was soft and smooth.

And completely bare.

“You’re not wearing any panties.”

“Do you want me to go put them on?” She came right back at him without missing a beat. “I can put on pants too if you want me to.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not.” He teased along the crease where her belly met her thigh. “Normally I’d say you didn’t have to wear anything, but I really like the way you look in my shirt.” He wrapped an arm around her waist, using the hold to heft her off the counter.

Eloise let out a little squeal as her arms and legs locked tight around him, bringing the warmth of her bare pussy right against his straining cock.

He reached around her body to tease along her slit, groaning when he found her already hot and wet. “Christ. You really know how to make a man regret being a fucking coward, you know that?” He carried her into his room and dropped her onto the mattress before crawling over her, intending to take full advantage of the fact that they were finally safe and warm and alone.

But the frown on Eloise’s face stopped him in his tracks.

“You weren’t being a coward.” Eloise’s hands skimmed down the front of his chest, smoothing over the T-shirt he’d pulled on after his hurried shower. “You were just afraid of losing the people you love.” She traced the waistband of his joggers. “I would have ignored me too.”

“I never ignored you, Eloise.” He didn’t want her to get it twisted. Not once did he ever manage to forget she existed. “That was part of the problem.” He settled his body against hers, leaning in to brush his lips against the smooth skin of her neck. “No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stay away from you.”

She was a beacon. A light that pulled him to shallower waters even though he knew it could lead to complete destruction.

“I worked like hell to keep my distance because I wanted to keep my friends. Wanted to keep my family at any cost.” He inhaled against her skin, pulling in the soft scent of honeysuckle that soothed the deepest parts of him. “Almost any cost.” He nipped at her ear, unable to stop himself from laying it all on the line. “Because it turns out I wanted you even more.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



## ELOISE

IT WOULD BE easy to fall back into her own way. To get caught up in the cycle of *does he like me or does he not*. To slide on the mask that had served her so well for so long and pretend she didn't care.

But there came a certain point where things just got ridiculous. Where ignoring the truth Nate kept offering over and over would be silly.

"Is that why you brought me all the snacks?" Eloise dipped her fingers into the waistband of his pants, more than a little tempted to finally get her hands on him. "Because you like me?"

"I brought you food because I want you to know I'll take care of you." Nate gave her a smirk. "And because I think you might want to make sure you have your strength up."

That sounded promising. "What about *your* strength?"

Nate pushed up to his knees, grabbing his shirt and peeling it over his head. "I'll be fine. I'm a Marine, remember?"

If she didn't know him better, she would wonder why Nate brought it up so much. Would think maybe he was still living in the past.

But she suspected the reason he mentioned being a Marine so often had more to do with his own deep-seated insecurities. Even after all he'd become, Nate still believed he was lacking, and reminding himself of that accomplishment kept a little of the doubt at bay. Kept him from sliding back the same way she had.

"I remember. Hopefully that means you have a decent amount of stamina." She ran her fingers along his newly bare chest. "Because someone made me hike miles through the snow today and I'm too tired to do much more than lay here."

Nate's expression turned more serious as his big body lowered over hers again. "You kept up with a team of men who do shit like that for a living, Eloise. You should be proud as shit of yourself."

"I am a little proud actually. Not that I want to do it again soon."

Her love of the outdoors was part of what she'd tried to suppress for so long. Hid from friends, thinking it would expose the façade she worked so hard to keep in place. But with Nate she didn't have to hide anything. He'd seen all she was. The good. The bad. The cranky. And, based on the hard line of his cock fighting against the fabric of his pants, he seemed to like all of it.

"I'm a little tired of being in the snow." She skimmed her fingers back down to those damn pants he was still wearing. "And I like being back in my own clothes."

"Yet here you are wearing mine." Nate grabbed the fabric of his T-shirt, dragging it up her body, baring her from the collarbone down. "Fair warning, I might not let you wear your own clothes ever again."

Eloise struggled to breathe as his eyes moved over her body. "It might be unprofessional of me to go into work like this."

Nate's gaze was dark as it lifted to hers. "You go into work like this and there will be more than a mess to clean up."

Before she could react, his head dipped and his lips closed around her nipple, mouth drawing at her sensitive flesh.

She struggled to take a breath, caught between temptation and realization as they fought it out for her attention. She was a strong, independent woman. Capable of taking care of herself in most situations and circumstances. But Nate's threat to level anyone who looked at her the way he was now did something to her insides. Made her squirm with need even as a certain amount of understanding began to dawn. She thought offering up a scrubbed down version of herself would make her more appealing, not only to friends, but also to the opposite sex.

But Nate had seen it all. Every bit of who she was. Even the parts she learned to be ashamed of so long ago. And he still looked at her like he wanted to devour her. Was actually doing his best to accomplish it.

His wicked mouth shifted to catch her other nipple, flicking it with his tongue before teasing with his teeth. His strong fingers plucked at the one he'd just abandoned, rolling the still wet tip with an amount of pressure that shot straight between her thighs.

He moved lower, making her gasp when he gripped her thighs and spread

them wide, pushing them higher to bare her completely to his roaming gaze. “I’m such a fucking idiot.” His mouth descended on her, hot and unyielding as it locked onto her clit, teasing against the sensitive bit of flesh with a single mindedness that made it impossible for her to think of anything outside of the tiny spot.

Nate’s aim was unerring. His movements relentless. It was as if the only thing that mattered to him in this world was getting her off and doing it in as expeditious of a manner as possible.

Her hands locked on his hair as her thighs started to jerk, completely possessed by him as he led her straight into an unavoidable and all-consuming orgasm. He continued lapping at her until the last tremor of pleasure was wrung free then he pushed back to his knees, not even bothering to wipe her slickness from his mouth as he smirked down at her. “That’s one.”

Eloise blinked up at him, boneless and more satisfied than she’d ever been. “Are we counting?”

Nate’s gaze traveled down her body. “I am.”

Surely he wasn’t saying he expected to accomplish that more than once tonight, right? “I’m not sure how many—”

Nate gripped one hip, rolling her onto her belly before blanketing her back with his front. “I guess we’re going to find out then.” His hand slid between her belly and the bed, cupping her still throbbing mound. “I think we talked about how once I have my target I don’t leave until the job is done.” His fingers curved against her, adding pressure without adding the direct contact that would be too much for her over sensitized clit to handle. “I’ll give you one guess what my target is.”

Eloise gripped the sheets as his hand continued moving, almost kneading her flesh with slow, languid flexes of his palm and fingers. “My clit?”

“Good guess, but no.” Nate continued working her, sealing the still swollen lips of her pussy together in a way that shielded her too sensitive clit from direct contact and already had her creeping toward another climax.

Eloise buried her face in the pillow, unable to hold still as her body worked to prove it was capable of more than she thought. “Nate. Please.” She was already desperate. Afraid whatever he was doing would ultimately fail and leave her dangling from the edge.

“Relax.” Nate’s voice was deep and soothing in her ear. “We’ve got all night.”

It was both daunting and a relief. Eased a little of the pressure she was putting on herself while also looming with a promise she might not be able to keep.

But Nate's hand showed no sign of giving up. Each move he made was identical to the one before it. Perfectly positioned and perfectly timed. It made it easy to fall into the rhythm, and without realizing it, she began to rock into his touch, hips rolling with every flex of his fingers. Nate groaned in her ear as her ass rubbed against the hard line of his cock. "You are hell-bent on testing me in every way, aren't you."

With the next roll of her hips he pressed against her, dragging the clothed line of his cock along the cleft of her ass. When his free hand wedged under her body and caught a nipple, she was gone, bucking against and into him as she came a second time. It was overwhelming. Encompassing.

And it opened up a whole new world of possibilities. Possibilities that made her greedier than she'd ever been.

Eloise curved her spine, sliding her bare ass cheeks along Nate's still straining length. "That's two. I wonder how you'll accomplish number three."

Nate thrust against her again, the move harder than the ones before it, pinning her to the mattress. "Do you wonder?"

She had a pretty good guess and hoped to God it was the right one.

The weight of Nate's body lifted from her back, and the loss was shockingly profound. The sensation of being pressed into the mattress by his frame was deliciously erotic and she rolled over, intent on hauling him back down.

But Nate was one step ahead of her. He had his pants shoved down to his thighs, bringing her face to face with the part of him she'd like to become better acquainted with.

But that might take some time since there was a lot of area to cover.

Nate was a big man. It would only make sense he would have a big dick, but still. Knowing what makes sense and staring it in the eye are two completely different things. "Wow."

Nate chuckled as he kicked away the last of his clothes. One hand came to grip the base of his cock, fisting it tight as he gave it a quick stroke. "Don't act surprised. You've seen it before."

Eloise swallowed hard. With his hand there it made it even easier to see how very thick and very long he was. "I must have still been in shock from



someone trying to kill me because I don't remember all that." She couldn't tear her eyes away from where he continued to stroke himself. "I'm a little intimidated."

Nate dropped down over her, releasing his dick to reach for the nightstand. "You're good for my ego, you know that?" He snagged a condom and ripped it open, rolling it down his substantial girth. "And I'm sure you'll be just fine." He notched himself against her. "Hopefully better than just fine."

Eloise held her breath, expecting him to shove forward. To spear into her with abandon the way every other man she'd been with had done.

But Nate didn't budge. He stayed exactly where he was, the thick head of his cock barely breaching her body as his eyes and hands moved over her skin, stroking, teasing.

As the seconds ticked past, it was impossible to ignore how suddenly empty she felt. How much she wanted him to push his way into her. To stretch her to her limits.

Unfortunately, Nate didn't seem as eager for that moment as she was. After waiting somewhat patiently she started to squirm, wiggling around in an attempt to gain what she was lacking.

"Is something wrong?" Nate's hooded gaze lifted to hers, one slashing brow lifting.

"I just don't know what you're waiting for." She wiggled a little more, managing to gain an inch.

"I was trying to savor the moment." He hooked his hands behind her knees, lifting them high and wide. "But I guess I can savor the moment next time too." His eyes locked on where their bodies joined, watching with complete focus as he slowly sank into her. His jaw clenched tight as he stared, body tense with restrained power.

Nate was capable of unimaginable things yet he was so fucking careful with her. Every touch was strong but gentle. Confident and capable but filled with a tenderness that made her ache deep inside.

It also made her ache for him. Imagining all the things he sacrificed for the family he loved, worried they might not choose him if push came to shove. Scared they could walk away from him at any second.

And he might feel the same way about her. Might worry that one wrong move would send her turning away from him. Leaving him behind.

The realization had Eloise reaching for him. Gripping Nate's arms and

pulling his body against hers. She hooked her legs at his waist and her arms at his neck, keeping him close. Her eyes stared up into his as Nate's body finally fully seated into hers, the full, hard length of him creating a completing sort of stretch.

His forehead dropped to hers as he pulled back and slowly pushed into her again. Every move of his body filled in the empty parts of her. Every brush of his hand across her skin soothed the rough edges of the walls she'd built—not to keep people out, but to make them want to allow her into their world.

Eloise slid her hands down his back, tracing the valleys and curves of the well-honed muscles there as he fucked her.

No. That's not what they were doing.

This was more than fucking. This was something else. Something she couldn't identify. Something she was afraid to imagine.

Something she didn't want to let go of or lose. Something that made it even easier to understand why Nate had done what he'd done.

Because the possibility of losing this—someone who saw her, understood her, appreciated her—was terrifying. Almost as terrifying as losing someone as caring and protective and patient as Nate.

Eloise closed her eyes, pinching them tight as she focused on stopping the climb her body had already started. She wanted this to go on. To never stop.

“Open your eyes, Eloise.” Nate didn't ask. He demanded.

She lifted her lids, meeting his gaze. “I don't want this to be over.”

Nate gripped her hips, angling them up just a little bit. Just enough for his body to sink deeper. His next thrust dragged over the secret spot only he seemed able to find, and her body responded immediately, clenching around him in every way.

“It doesn't have to be over.” He sped up, filling her faster, deeper. “I will fuck you like this every day for the rest of your life if that's what you want.”

It was an exaggeration. Obviously that would be impossible due to traveling schedules and stomach aches and old age, but the sentiment held true.

As did the offer it sounded like he was making.

“You can't know that. You don't even really know me.” It tasted like a lie as she said it. In truth, Nate knew her better than almost anyone ever had.

Maybe even herself.

Nate nipped at her lips, lingering for a second before answering. “You

don't really think that." He shifted a little and his next thrust curled her toes and arched her back. "If I didn't know you I wouldn't know exactly how you like being fucked."

There was more to knowing her than that, but it didn't seem like pertinent information at the moment.

"If I didn't know you, I wouldn't have brought up the Cheetos and the fruit tray." His voice was rough. Choppy. A little breathless. "And I wouldn't have grabbed all the Diet Dr. Pepper we had in the fridge." His hand circled the back of her neck, holding her in place as he fucked her harder. "It's not a McDonald's fountain pop, but I figured it would do in a pinch."

She was trying to hold out. Trying to keep herself from tripping right beyond the point of no return. But in this moment it became obvious that point was long past.

And not just for her.

Nate's mouth caught hers just as it all imploded. The feel of his body sliding into hers. The security of knowing there was finally another person in the world who understood her. Appreciated all she was.

The realization that she would do whatever it took to show Nate how much she appreciated all *he* was.

All they could be.

And, as her third orgasm of the night stole every bit of her breath and all of her sense, something unexpected and terrifyingly stupid came out of her mouth. "I think I love you."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



## NATE

HE MUST HAVE been hearing things. Possibly having auditory hallucinations after one of the most intense moments of his life.

Or maybe the fact that he thought he just heard Eloise claim she loved him was simply wishful thinking.

Whatever it was, he needed to find out what she really said before he made a complete ass of himself by saying something stupid like *I love you too* back.

It took everything he had to lift his head. When his eyes found hers, Eloise was staring up at him, looking a little like a deer in headlights.

“What did you say?” He tried to sound casual. Like he wasn’t holding his breath and wishing there was the chance she might say exactly what he wanted to believe he heard again.

“I don’t know.” Eloise’s words were rushed as she plastered a fake smile across her face. “I think I blacked out.” She laughed, the sound bright and airy. “Which I’m going to completely blame on you.” Everything about her reaction was wrong. Nothing like the Eloise he’d come to know.

Yes, there were certain times where she was genuinely warm and open and full of optimism and easy laughs. But this was not one of those moments.

This moment she was using that part of her as a shield. One designed to deflect and conceal.

Nate smoothed back her hair, catching his breath for a second while he worked up the courage to do what had to be done. Eloise still struggled to be vulnerable. Expecting her to trust him completely so soon was probably a pipedream. Earning her trust was something he would have to work for.

And that work started now.

Nate met her gaze, trailing his fingers along her cheek before dragging one thumb over her lower lip. “I think we should be together, Eloise.”

She swallowed, the muscles of her throat working. The tip of her tongue flicked across the lip he was still touching, teasing the pad of his thumb. “What do you mean?”

“I mean together. As a team.” He hesitated just a second before laying it out completely. “As a couple.”

Eloise’s fake smiles and practiced laughs were gone completely now, replaced by a seriousness only he seemed to know she was capable of. “What would something like that look like to you?” She spoke slowly, carefully.

She wanted specifics. Needed to know exactly what he was asking for. What he expected.

And he needed the same thing. But asking Eloise to offer her own expectations might give her the wrong idea. Might make her worry he hadn’t thought this through enough to have expectations.

But nothing could be farther from the truth. He’d thought about this a hell of a lot. Definitely more than he should have considering he kept trying to walk away from her. “My townhouse is supposed to be ready by the end of the month. I think you should move into it with me.”

He was probably moving fast. He didn’t care. Now that she was here, with him, there was no way he could give it up.

Hopefully he wouldn’t have to.

Eloise traced her fingers across his chest, eyes still on his. “I have a lease. It’s not up for four more months.”

That wasn’t a no.

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t care if we pay for two places for a few months.” Hell, he didn’t mind if he had to pay for two places forever. As long as she was with him. Next to him every morning when he woke up. It didn’t even matter whether Eloise offered a bright smile or one of the frowning scowls that felt like his own little secret. He loved them both.

He loved her.

Eloise hesitated, uncertainty pinching her beautiful face. “I have a lot of stuff.”

“Good, because I don’t.” Part of him had still been hesitant about moving to the townhomes. Maybe that was why he was the first one to give up his place when someone else needed it. Maybe deep down he knew it wouldn’t offer him what he was looking for. It wouldn’t give him the home he’d

wanted for so long.

But Eloise would.

“You can fill it with as much stuff as you want. I don’t care.” He leaned down, teasing the tip of his nose against hers. “As long as you’re there, I don’t give a shit. You can pack the place full.”

Eloise scoffed, offering up a hint of the side of her he loved so much. “I’m not a hoarder.” Her eyes drifted around his bare-bones bedroom. “I just actually have stuff.”

“Seems perfect to me.” He teased his lips along her jaw, working his way toward her ear. “What do you think? Are you interested in bringing all your stuff to a new place?”

He was so close to having everything he’d always wanted and the next few seconds seemed to take an eternity as Eloise weighed her options.

Decided whether or not she really could trust him.

She only had three days’ worth of good information to go on after almost a year of him acting an ass. The odds probably weren’t in his favor, but he still couldn’t help but hope he’d done enough. Offered up enough of his secrets to make her see why he’d been so stupid.

Eloise’s gaze dipped to where she was tracing the line of his abs. “How many bathrooms does it have?”

Her question was unexpected, but promising. “Two and a half. One attached to the master bedroom. One for the other two bedrooms to share, and a half-bath on the main level.”

Eloise pursed her lips, working them to one side. “Are there two sinks in the master bedroom bathroom?”

These weren’t the questions of someone indifferent, or opposed, to the suggestion, and it had his heart beating faster. “Absolutely.”

“Well that’s good. I don’t want to have to share a mirror with you while you’re doing your hair every morning.” She lifted her eyes to his messy blonde locks and tipped her head. “I can’t imagine how long it takes you to brush all of it into submission.”

It took too long. Especially now that he would have other, more interesting things to do with his mornings. “I’m thinking about just letting it go. It can do what it wants.”

Eloise’s expression softened, her eyes moving over his face and hair. “I kinda like it a little wilder anyway.” Her fingers slid into his freshly shampooed strands. “And I won’t feel so bad about messing up all your hard

work.”

Nate closed his eyes, enjoying her soft touch as she continued petting him. “Sounds like everything may work out then. You can have both mirrors all to yourself *and* play with my hair whenever you want.”

Eloise smiled, the tips of her fingers moving along his scalp in a touch that felt better than he could’ve ever imagined. “I guess I might not mind having a bigger place.” Her lips flattened out. “And since it’s gated, Matt won’t be able to leave any more random shit on my doorstep.”

He’d almost managed to forget about that prick and might have been more upset about the reminder if he wasn’t the one currently still inside Eloise’s body. “I can promise you the gate at the compound will be the last thing keeping him from leaving shit on our doorstep.” Nate caught her lips in a kiss, distracting both of them before he stormed out into the snow to make things a little clearer to the man who never deserved to breathe Eloise’s air, much less occupy her time.

Eloise sighed, the sound sweet and soft as her fingers locked into his hair. He wanted to stay in this moment forever. Savor it. Enjoy it. Burn it into his memory.

But Eloise needed to eat and she needed to rest.

Nate carefully eased himself away, the loss of her warmth was almost startling as he worked his body from hers. He carefully pulled down the hem of the black shirt she still wore, covering her up as he stood. “I’ll be right back with something for you to eat.”

Eloise yawned, blinking heavily. “Okay. I’ll be right here. I don’t think I could move even if I wanted to.”

The woman was definitely good at stroking his ego. Good at making him feel like he could be all she deserved. All she wanted.

And he had every intention of living up to those expectations.

After a quick pit stop in the bathroom, he went to the kitchen, loading all the things he knew she liked onto a tray Heidi left behind when she moved out of this unit. He wasn’t gone long, but Eloise’s eyes were closed when he went back to the bedroom. After three nights of being on the run, one of which they didn’t get any sleep at all, she was probably beyond exhausted. But she needed to eat.

Nate slid the tray onto his side of the bed before stroking one hand across her face.

Eloise’s lids fluttered open and she gave him a soft smile. “You’re back.”



“I’m back and you need to eat. Then you can go to sleep.” He scooted the tray closer as she shifted into a sitting position, then snagged one of the cans of pop and cracked it open, setting it on her nightstand before peeling back the sleeve on a package of string cheese and offering it up. Eloise took it with a soft *thank you* and started eating while he opened the fruit tray, popping off the lid and peeling back the protective wrap before going to work on the yogurt-based dip at the center.

“What do you like to eat?” Eloise’s smile slipped. “It seems like you know some of my favorites, but I don’t know any of yours.”

“I can eat anything.” Nate pried off the lid of the yogurt dip and set it aside.

“That’s not what I asked.” Eloise waited for his eyes to come to hers. “I know you can eat anything. You probably had to as a kid.” She grabbed another package of cheese and opened it before holding it out to him. “I want to know what you *like*.”

It was something he’d never really thought about. He simply always ate what was there and was grateful to be eating at all. Being picky was never an option. Not liking something never mattered. His willingness to eat whatever was offered continued as he got older. Even now, there were few things he would call a favorite. Few, but they did exist. “I like lattes.”

Eloise peeled off another strand of cheese, feeding it between her lips as she smiled. “Right. Because Elise had to learn how to make them and I’m sure you drank every one and told her it was amazing, right?”

He smiled at the memory of choking down more than a few terrible cups of coffee while the office manager for Alaskan Security perfected her technique. “Something like that.”

“Can we make a deal?” Eloise snagged a piece of cantaloupe and dipped it into the yogurt before holding it out, waiting until he opened his mouth before continuing. “I want you to be honest with me. If you don’t like something it’s okay to tell me. I don’t just want you telling me what you think I want to hear.”

Nate chewed through the cantaloupe, swallowing down the barely sweet, watery mess. “Isn’t that what you do? You go along with whatever your friends want, smiling the whole time while you pretend it’s what you want to do too?”

Eloise’s mouth dropped open and she scoffed.

But she didn’t tell them he was wrong.

She snagged another piece of cantaloupe, dipping it into the yogurt before feeding it to him. “I had a hard time making friends when I was younger. My dad raised me to be pretty blunt and straightforward and it turns out most people don’t enjoy that, so I decided to just be what they did like.”

“How did that work out for you?” Nate obligingly swallowed down his second mouthful of cantaloupe.

Eloise lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “Okay, I guess. I have friends and they seem to enjoy hanging out with me.” She popped a grape into her mouth, chewing through it before continuing. “I’m not so sure they would like me as much if they knew the real me.”

“I like the real you.” Nate leaned in, catching her chin with the tip of one finger to keep her in place as he brushed his lips over hers. “I like the real you a hell of a lot.”

He actually did more than like Eloise, but her reaction to what he was now fairly confident accidentally slipped out of her mouth made it seem like she wasn’t quite ready to hear that yet. Which was fine. He had all the time in the world to wait until she was ready. And he’d be waiting with her beside him.

“Yeah, but you’re weird.” She gave him one of the sneaky little smiles she didn’t offer anyone else. “And I’m still not sure I can trust your judgment.”

“Well, I fucking hated Matt, so hopefully that counts for something.” He hadn’t wanted to bring that ass back into the room, but the comment slid right out.

Eloise gave a gleeful little laugh that tipped her head back. “I can promise you he is not a big fan of yours either.” Her laugh developed an evil little edge. “I would have loved watching you throw him out on his ass if I hadn’t been so pissed off when you showed up that day.”

“Hopefully I don’t have the opportunity to do it again.” Nate snagged a piece of cantaloupe and fed it between her lips. “Maybe this weekend we can go start packing your place up.”

Eloise sighed, slouching down against the headboard as she chewed. “That’s fine, but I have to go to work Monday. I promised Becky I would be there when I called her earlier. I think she’s really worried about me, and I want her to see I’m okay.” She rubbed her lips together, eyes slowly coming to his. “Do you think they’ll be able to find Bryson before then?”

It was a question he knew would be coming, and honestly he was a little

shocked it hadn't come before now. "Heidi and the rest of Intel will absolutely find him." He had even more faith in them than he had in himself. "I'm willing to bet they won't stop working until he's safe."

Eloise nodded, sniffing a little as she toyed with the cheese wrapper in her hands. "I just don't like not knowing where he is. Becky said he hadn't been to school at all while I was gone, so that makes four days he's missed."

Nate shared her concern because he knew how vital school was to neglected kids. Sometimes it was the only place they could eat. The only place they felt safe. At least that's how it was for him. "He doesn't miss much school then, huh?"

Eloise shook her head. "His dad doesn't do much, but he drops Bryson off every day so he can get rid of him and not have to deal with having a kid for seven hours." Eloise reached up and slid a lock of hair behind her ear. "I guess I should be grateful since at least I know he's safe and warm when he's at school."

Her interest in food was clearly waning, and she seemed dangerously close to working herself up to a point she wouldn't be able to sleep because of how worried she was over Bryson. Nate collected what was left of their snacks and piled it onto the tray, moving everything out of the way before pulling the covers up around her. "Heidi and Harlow will find him. They might even know where he is when you wake up." Nate leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead. "Let me take this stuff into the kitchen. I'll be right back."

He quickly put what was left of the fruit back in the fridge and chucked the garbage in the can before snagging a couple bottles of water and heading back into the bedroom. He set one on Eloise's nightstand before depositing the other on his and sliding under the covers beside her.

She curled up against him, assuming the same position she had the past two nights. Her head rested against his shoulder as one arm slung across his middle and a leg wedged between his knees. Eloise wiggled around a few seconds longer before finally relaxing and sighing against his skin. "You might be a little more comfortable than the giant pillow I usually sleep with."

"That's good news, otherwise I'd have to kick it out of the bed." He smoothed down her hair, sliding his fingers through the silky strands as he soaked in the moment. It was absolutely fucking perfect.

Almost perfect.

The promise he made earlier was wiggling around in the corner of his

mind, refusing to let him fully relax until he did what he gave Eloise his word he would do. “Can I tell you something?”

“Hmm?” Eloise’s voice was sleepy. “Sure.”

He rested his mouth against her hairline, breathing in the soft scent lingering in her freshly washed locks. “I fucking hate cantaloupe.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



## ELOISE

“YOU’RE KIDDING, RIGHT?” Eloise stared down the line of fully armed men, all staring at her like she was crazy for questioning their plans. “You cannot come into a school like that.”

“We’re just trying to keep you safe.” Nate stood at the front of the pack, looking ridiculously handsome in white tactical gear, messy hair, and the most patient expression she’d ever seen.

That still didn’t mean she was going to let him walk into a building full of children armed to the teeth. “You will scare the shit—” She pressed her lips together, taking a deep breath before continuing. “You will scare the shirts off the kids. They’ll all freak out and it will be horribly disruptive, not to mention complete chaos.”

Nate’s desire to take precautions was understandable. She liked to be prepared just as much as anyone else. Probably a little bit more. But there were limits.

And her limit was scaring the children she was tasked with educating.

“And we definitely don’t need five of you in there. No one is going to sneak in. The only doors that are unlocked during the day are the front set leading into the vestibule connected to the main office. And once they go through those, there’s no way they can go any farther without using the intercom to check in. The next door has to be manually unlocked for them because we screen everyone who comes in the building both by face and by name.” She made a sweeping gesture at the arsenal strapped to Nate’s waist and shoulder. “So we don’t need any of that.”

Nate held her gaze, his expression was stern. “There’s no way I’m letting you go in there without what I need to keep you safe.” He tipped his head

toward the men behind him. “Reed and the rest of the guys can stay out here, but I’m coming in and I’m coming in armed.”

Eloise stared him down, fully intending not to give an inch. Nate claimed to like her just as she was and he was going to have to prove it.

But...

What if somehow the men who shot at her car did manage to gain access to the building? Then what?

Would she be able to fight them off with hot coffee and a bad attitude? Honestly, maybe a few, but not many.

Eloise huffed out a frustrated sigh, lifting her eyes to the cloudy sky as the fog from her breath drifted upward. “Fine.” She dropped her gaze to Nate, reaching out to poke at his chest. “You get one gun.” She thought it over for a second. “A small one. One that isn’t easily noticeable.”

Nate nodded. “Deal.” He snaked his arm around her waist, pulling her body flush against his as he pressed a lingering kiss to her mouth. “I like negotiating with you.”

Eloise shoved at his chest, trying to put a little space between them. “There might be parents out here.” She lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. “I can’t imagine they would appreciate seeing their kids’ principal making out in the parking lot.”

Nate shot her a sexy grin, his voice taking on a playful edge. “I guess we’ll have to make out in your office then.”

She should have realized Nate’s charm wasn’t completely an act. Just the same as her bubbly, optimistic personality wasn’t entirely fake.

“No making out during school hours.” She poked him in the chest again, letting a little more of her other, snarkier, side out. “You have to behave.”

It felt good not to worry about trying to temper her personality. To no longer screen every word and every reaction out of concern it would be taken wrong or misinterpreted or simply be too abrasive. Would she still be too much for some people? Probably, but that was fine. If she was too much they could go find less.

Nate gave her a single finger salute, completely undeterred and unfazed. “Yes, ma’am.”

Eloise pressed her lips and her thighs together, sneaking a peek at the men loitering just out of earshot, waiting for instruction. She leaned in closer, keeping her voice low as she gripped the front of Nate’s coat and pulled him down so she could whisper in his ear. “For the record, I really like that yes,

*ma'am* shit.”

If he wanted her to be honest about what she didn't like then he probably also wanted her to be honest about what she did, and she definitely liked his flirtatious ways. Especially now that she knew they were and always had been genuine.

And maybe it was also her way of rewarding him for being the first one to admit a little truth. Admitting he didn't like cantaloupe wasn't technically a big deal, but it was a start. And if he'd started, so could she.

Eloise gave him a little smile before spinning away and marching toward the entrance. The doors were currently unlocked since kids were already filing in, so she passed directly into the office with Nate following right behind her.

Becky's brows jumped up her forehead at the sight of Nate invading their space. “Good morning.”

Eloise relaxed her posture as much as she could manage. “Good morning. How is everything?”

“Everything's fine.” Becky answered her, but her eyes stayed on Nate. “How's everything with you?”

Eloise plastered on the same smile she'd been wearing for years, keeping her tone light and confident. “I'm great. Excited to be back.”

There was no reason to tell Becky how she really was. That she was equal parts worried and excited. That her life was a conflicting jumble of goodness and problems, somehow all tangled together into one intertwined and interconnected cluster of emotions. All of which she would have to deal with later.

Now she just needed to be a source of calm confidence. If she seemed unworried then everyone else would be too.

Hopefully.

“Is there anything pressing I need to deal with this morning?” Eloise fell right into her normal routine, fully intending to treat this day like any other.

“We have the school spirit rally at nine thirty, but other than that it's a pretty calm day.” Becky was still eyeing Nate. “Is there anything I should know?”

Eloise opened her mouth, ready to claim everything was absolutely fine. But before she could ease Becky's concern, Nate stepped in front of her, cutting off her view of the school secretary.

“For now, I'll be screening everyone who comes in the building.” Nate



dished out the first of his directions with a level of authority that made it seem like he didn't expect to be questioned.

Too bad for him.

Eloise grabbed him by the arm, dragging Nate into her office and closing the door, leaving Becky staring, open-mouthed, after them.

She crossed her arms and shot him a glare. "What are you doing?"

"I'm keeping you and everyone else in this building safe." Nate didn't back down. "You of all people know how important it is to be prepared. Your staff needs to know they should be more cautious than normal right now."

Eloise continued to scowl, unhappy with what he was proposing. "I don't want them to worry."

Nate moved closer, his voice dropping to a softer tone. "And I don't want you to worry. Does that mean I should start keeping information from you?"

Eloise held her scowl a few seconds longer before grabbing the door handle with a groan. "You suck."

Nate caught her around the middle, leaning into her ear before she could get the door open. "Is that a request?" His lips trailed over her neck, pausing at the pulse point to give her skin a soft pull with his mouth. The sensation shot straight between her thighs and her nipples pulled tight under the fabric of her blouse. There was no ignoring the suggestion in his words and no missing his meaning when his tongue flicked against her sensitive flesh.

This was going to be one hell of a long day.

Eloise wiggled in his hold, halfheartedly trying to move away. "You said you were going to behave."

"I did not. You told me to behave. I didn't agree." Nate pressed a final kiss to the side of her neck. "But I promise to behave when the door is open."

"Good." She yanked open the only thing that would keep her sane today and breathed out a sigh that was half relief and half frustration when Nate took a step back, putting a respectable amount of distance between them.

"We should have a conversation." Eloise smiled at Becky, hoping it would keep her friend from panicking prematurely. "Can you come into my office?"

Becky's suspicious gaze moved from her to Nate, but she joined them anyway, staying quiet while Eloise spent the next fifteen minutes explaining some of what they'd dealt with over the past few days. Of course, she left out the gunfire, choosing instead to water down the exact happenings.

Even with only the less worrying version to go on, Becky still appeared

panicked.

“So what if those men who ran you off the road and stole your car come here?” She wrung both hands in front of her. “What will we do then?”

“That’s why I’m here.” Nate offered up an answer. “There’s also a whole team of men surrounding the main entrance and getting set up to monitor the perimeter. If anyone tries to come inside, we will see them.”

Becky looked unimpressed. “And who exactly are you?”

Nate’s posture suddenly relaxed and an easy smile worked across his face. Even though she knew exactly what was happening, the change was sudden and a little unnerving..

Charming McCharmerson had entered the building.

He held one hand out Becky’s way. “I’m Nate. I work for Alaskan Security.”

Becky sized him up before finally taking his hand in a hesitant shake. “Why is Alaskan Security involved in this?”

“Alaskan Security is a part of this community and we take the safety of our kids very seriously.” His tone was smooth and silky. “Just like you clearly do.”

Becky’s defensive stance softened a little. “I just worry about them. It feels like every single one of them is mine and I don’t want anything to happen to them.”

“Neither do we.” He glanced at Eloise. “When we heard what happened to Miss Rivers, we decided to get involved. Our hope is it was an isolated incident. Someone simply took advantage of an opportunity and there will be no further issues.” His eyes drifted over her a second longer before moving back to Becky. “But I can promise you no one will get in this building and hurt a single hair on any of those kids’ heads.”

Eloise glanced at Becky, trying to gauge if Nate was able to charm her as easily as he did everyone else.

Becky gave him another once over. “Well, you do look capable.”

Eloise swallowed down a laugh as Becky’s gaze lingered over Nate’s broad shoulders. *Sure*. His *capability* was what she was noticing about him.

Becky straightened, standing a little taller. “I think we should tell the teachers we’ve increased security as a precaution. If there are a bunch of men who look like you wandering around outside, people will start to ask questions.

Nate turned to Eloise, lifting his brows. “What do you think, Miss

Rivers?”

She absolutely appreciated the level of professionalism he was showing in front of Becky, but part of her hated the formality. The sense of distance it created between them. “I think that would be a good idea.”

Nate’s eyes stayed on her. “Is that something you would like to do, or would you prefer Becky or I be the one to handle it?”

As much as she wanted to send Becky away so she could steal a few seconds alone with Nate—remind herself the distance she now felt wasn’t really there—she should be the one to talk to the teachers. “I can do it.” Eloise offered Nate and Becky a reassuring smile. “Maybe you two can go over the parameters you’ll be using when deciding who has access to the building.”

Nate nodded. “Absolutely.”

Eloise gave Nate one final look before forcing her feet out of the office and down the hall. It was still early in the day, so there were only a handful of students on the premises. It meant most of the teachers were still getting situated in preparation for the new week. She went to the lounge first, managing to catch a handful of them at once. Luckily, they were more accepting of the new situation than Becky was, and seemed unbothered by the added security.

She still offered everyone an escort to their car before and after school, just to add another level of reassurance. Nate wouldn’t mind, and hopefully it would help ease the guilt she was struggling with since this was her fault.

Sort of. Even if it wasn’t directly her fault, it was Nate’s fault and they were a team now.

Eloise pressed one hand to her belly, trying to ease the flutter there. She should not be feeling excited over her relationship with Nate in a moment like this. Not when there was still so much to be dealt with.

She continued down the hall, stopping in on a few more teachers before turning and heading for the small office the custodians used. Everyone who worked at the building needed to be informed, and she wanted to get it all done now. Unfortunately, the room was empty, so she headed back out, turning toward the back of the building where the storage rooms were located. That was probably where the daytime custodian was, clearing away any missed trash before reloading her cart in preparation for the day.

Eloise started to make the turn into the storage area but paused when something moved on the other side of the doors leading to the dumpsters. It

was impossible to tell who or what it was through the narrow glass cut into each panel, so she moved closer, her steps quickening when she caught sight of a familiar shaggy head.

She hit the bar handle at full speed, flinging the door open and grabbing Bryson, squeezing him tight. "I've been looking all over for you." Tears burned her eyes as relief flooded through her. "I've been so worried about you."

Bryson pushed at her, shoving her hard. "We have to go inside."

Eloise leaned back, meeting his wide eyes. "Is everything okay?"

"No." He shook his head almost violently. "We need to get inside before he—"

A sharp and sudden pain flared at the back of her head as she was yanked away from the little boy. She reached up, looking for the source, but another sharp tug had her tipping backwards, feet losing purchase, sending her sprawling against the icy ground.

"I know what you did you stupid bitch." A pair of red rimmed, bleary eyes glared down at her. "You're the one who called those people. Said I wasn't taking care of my kid."

Eloise grabbed at the hand twisted into her hair, trying to fight it free. "I don't know what you're talking about." Technically, she did, but she wasn't going to admit that. Not when she was in danger of losing half the hair on her head.

"You're so fucking high and mighty. Think you know so much." Bryson's father fisted her hair tighter, using the hold to drag her away from the building. "But you don't know shit. You're just a meddling, judgy little cunt."

"Stop it." Bryson screamed at his father, racing over in an attempt to fight him away from Eloise. "Leave her alone."

With zero hesitation, the monster gripping her hair back handed the little boy hard across the face, sending him crumbling to the ground.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" She usually tried so hard to watch her language when there were kids around, but there was no controlling what came out of her mouth right now. "You deserved to have OCS called on you." She grabbed his wrist, sinking her nails into the bit of skin peeking out between his coat and glove. "You actually deserve a whole lot worse than that but the ground's too frozen for me to dig a hole to put you in."

The bitch in her flowed freely and a little part of her was pissed this prick

was witnessing it. That he was the only person besides Nate who'd seen that bit of her. But it was one more thing she was too angry to worry about.

Unfortunately, Bryson's dad was unbothered by her bitchiness and unfazed by her threat. He laughed right in her face, droplets of spit flying from his mouth to land on her skin. "You think so?" He grabbed her hard, fingers digging into the flesh of her upper arm as he hauled her up from the ground. "I guess I shouldn't feel too bad about whatever I decide to do to you then."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



## NATE

NATE STEPPED OUT of the main office and into the vestibule, moving to the line of glass doors across the front as he activated the mic connected to his earpiece. “How’s it looking out there?”

“Still pretty quiet. We have a few more parents trickling in to drop their kids off, but other than that it’s just teachers and staff coming in so far.” Reed was breathing a little heavy as he spoke. “I’m gonna do a full perimeter check. I’ll do my best to stay out of sight, but I’m not sure how easy that will be. This place is right smack dab in the middle of a neighborhood, so I’ve gotta be careful not to cause anybody to panic.”

“I think being in the middle of a neighborhood might help our cause. It won’t be easy for anyone to get in or out of this place without being seen.” Nate scanned the parking lot outside. “They either have to drive in or cross private property on foot to reach the school.”

“We’re talking about people who tried to take you out on a public roadway. I don’t think they’ll be worried about going on someone’s private property.” Reed grunted. “Of course they’ll have to hop a few fences.” He huffed out a breath. “And it’s fuckin’ hard work.”

“It’s good for you. You need some more cardio anyway,” Nate teased his friend. Reed was the only other member of Rogue who remained single and over the past few months they’d gotten closer since their single status frequently left them the odd men out. Now Reed was the only one left, and Nate didn’t want his friend to feel the isolation that could come with that.

Reed only chuckled at the jab. “Shut the fuck up. You know I could beat you in a race every fucking time.”

Nate scanned the lot outside as they continued chatting. “Depends. Is it

through the snow?”

Reed was born and raised in Alaska. His family had lived there for generations. It was all he'd ever known. As a result, he was the most capable of them when it came to dealing with the weather and terrain. It made him the best choice to check the perimeter, but it also made him hard as hell to keep up with.

“We're in fucking Alaska. Of course it's through the snow.” Reed grunted again. “I'm gonna keep checking. I'll let you know if anything seems out of place.”

Nate nodded even though his friend couldn't see it. “I appreciate it. Be careful.”

“Always.” Reed's boots hit the snow once more before he cut off his mic.

Nate turned back the way he came, waiting for Becky to unlatch the door so he could enter the main office. When the lock didn't click he tried the door, frowning as it opened. “I thought you said this door stayed locked all the time.”

“Once school starts, it does.” Becky gave him the same stern look she probably dished out to countless students every day. “Until then, it has to stay unlocked so the students can get in here if they need to.”

It made sense, but he didn't like it. Not at all. “So what happens if somebody tries to cause a problem before school starts? They can just walk right into the building?”

Becky's lips flattened. “School safety is not as easy as it seems, and unfortunately the police department is already stretched thin. We do have one safety officer who patrols the drop-off line and the bus area while the kids arrive. He should be clocking in any minute.”

One safety officer? They had *one* safety officer to keep an eye on every kid trying to come into the school? “Where does he clock in?”

Becky motioned to a computer set up on a small desk in the corner. “That's his work area.”

Nate took a deep breath, blowing it back out again. “I want to talk to him the second he gets here.” He tapped his mic again. “Tyson? I'm going to need you to handle the office for a few minutes.”

Tyson and the safety officer came into the building at almost the same time. Nate briefed Tyson on the situation before leaving him to handle the office area while he and the safety officer moved outside.

“The kids all get dropped off here between eight forty and nine o'clock.”



The safety officer led him down the front sidewalk. “The buses arrive about the same time, so I move between the two areas.”

“I saw kids coming into the building before eight forty.” Nate scanned the line of cars stretching around the lot, unloading kids in what was only slightly controlled chaos.

“We tried only letting kids in the building starting at eight forty, but there are parents who have to be at work and the kids were just sitting out in the cold.” The safety officer rounded the corner of the building and motioned to a handful of buses. “About half the kids ride the bus and half of them are dropped off, so I move back and forth at a pretty good pace, trying to keep an eye on everything.”

He’d been skeptical about the school only having a single safety officer at first, but it seemed like this guy was really doing his best to keep the place as safe as possible.

It still wasn’t fucking enough.

As they reached the end of the bus area, Nate pointed at a line of fencing at the back of the building. “What’s over there?”

“That’s where we keep the dumpsters and get deliveries. The gate stays closed and locked unless we’re scheduled to have someone pick up trash or drop off food for the cafeteria.”

Once again, he was impressed with the safety officer. The man clearly had his thumb on the happenings at the school. “And what happens today?”

“Today is trash day. They show up to empty the dumpster not long after the school day starts.”

Nate scanned the students as they jumped off buses and skipped their way toward the doors. “How does the garbage truck get in? Do they use this lot and cut across?”

The safety officer shook his head, but all his focus was on the kids. “There’s an access lane at the back of the school. They come in and out that way so we don’t run the risk of anyone accidentally getting hit.”

Nate stopped what he was doing and focused on the security officer. “An access lane?” He shook his head. “That wasn’t on the aerial scan we did.”

Normally he wouldn’t offer up just how much information Alaskan Security could obtain, but this was about the safety of hundreds of students.

And Eloise.

The safety officer gave him a shrug, continuing to do the job he was assigned. “There’s a bunch of trees up both sides of it. I guess it could have

been obscured by them.”

Nate lifted his gaze to the perimeter, looking for any sign of Reed. “I’ll be right back.”

He left the safety officer at his post, tapping his mic to life as he strode across the playground currently serving as a bus lot. “You see anything strange Reed?”

Reed’s line crackled as it came to life. “I’m seeing a lot of people who don’t maintain their fucking fences.”

“I just found out there’s an access lane at the back of the school. I’m headed there to check it out. See what we’re dealing with and how it can be secured.” Nate picked up the pace, leaving behind the excited chatter of kids as he moved toward the tall privacy-style fencing blocking his view of the back portion of the school. He was almost to the corner when the sound of Eloise’s voice sent a chill snaking down his spine.

*“If you thought you were fucked before, you’re about to realize you don’t understand what the word fucked really means.”* Her words were loud and angry and threatening in a way she wasn’t currently equipped to back up.

But he was.

Nate took off, sprinting in the direction of her voice as he opened every line connected to his earpiece. “I need everybody available to get to the back of the school. Now.” His boots skidded across the slippery lot, but he didn’t have the luxury of slowing down. The sound of a sharp yelp made him push faster, fighting to keep his balance as he reached the open gate.

The sight in front of him nearly stopped his heart. Bryson lay on the filthy snow, sprawled out and unmoving. An unkempt, grungy man had Eloise, one gloved hand fisted in her hair and the other digging into her upper arm as he attempted to haul her out through the opening and toward an idling beat-up two door.

“Let her go.” Nate pulled the pistol from his waist, taking aim.

Before he could get a shot off, the man held Eloise in front of him, using her as a shield. “This doesn’t involve you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. It very much involves me.” Nate held his stance, forcing himself to stay calm as he waited for the opportunity he needed. “So I’ll make you a deal. Let her go and I won’t splatter your brains all over this place.”

“I said this doesn’t involve you.” The man’s words were slightly slurred as he continued moving, keeping Eloise’s body between them. “This is

between me and this bitch.”

Eloise went limp, forcing the man to bear all her weight. It was a smart tactic. Proved she was as prepared for just about any scenario as she claimed.

Unfortunately, her attempt to gain Nate the opportunity he needed was ineffective. The man—Bryson’s father if he had to take a guess—was many things, and one of them appeared to be relatively strong. He grunted at the added weight, but managed to keep Eloise in place as he continued toward the car.

“You’re not getting away.” Nate jerked his chin toward the area around them. “My men are all over this place.”

“If I don’t get out of here she doesn’t get out either.” The man sneered from behind Eloise. “So you better just let it go.”

Nate continued following the man as he moved, waiting for the window he needed. All it would take was a split second and he would be able to—

The sound of a silenced shot sliced through the icy air. Before Nate could react, the man holding Eloise went stiff, stumbling just a second before toppling over, taking her down with him.

“Shit.” Nate tapped his mic. “He’s down. Hold your fire.” He rushed to Eloise’s side, reaching her just as she managed to wrestle free and crawl away from him, her eyes wild with panic.

“It’s okay. He’s dead.” He was trying to soothe her. Calm her down so she would realize she didn’t need to escape.

But Eloise wasn’t trying to escape.

She went straight to where Bryson laid, scooping the little boy up into her arms and clutching him close against her chest, rocking his limp body. “Get someone here to help him. I think he hit his head.”

If he’d had any lingering doubts about his feelings for Eloise, this moment would have obliterated every one of them.

Nate dropped to his knees, wrapping both arms around Eloise and the little boy she held close. He tapped his mic, opening all lines again. “We need an ambulance.” He glanced over at the man bleeding across the streaked snow. “And we need to figure out what in the hell we’re going to do with him.”

Reed came racing through the open gate, easily moving across the slippery surface. His eyes fell to the dead man. “Glad you got a shot in.”

Nate shook his head, brows pinched in confusion. “It wasn’t my shot. I thought it was yours.”

Reed's eyes lifted to Nate. "It wasn't me." His hand went to his ear. "Who took the shot?"

He frowned. "No one?"

Nate pulled Eloise and Bryson closer with one arm and pointed at the gate with the other. "Get that fucking thing closed now."

Reed blinked as the situation registered. A heartbeat later he was on the move, swinging the double doors of the heavy gate into place and flipping the lock. He rushed back to Nate's side. "We need to get them inside." His eyes flicked the area surrounding them. "Now."

Nate got to his feet, hauling Eloise and Bryson up with him. Eloise tried to keep Bryson in her arms, but her heeled shoes were not meant to be worn across tamped down snow and she struggled to get traction.

Reed moved in at her side. "I've got him."

Eloise shrank away, holding Bryson tighter.

"It's okay. Reed will get him inside safely." Nate tried to reassure her. Tried to get her moving.

Eloise held his gaze for a second before finally nodding and giving Bryson up. Reed scooped the little boy against his chest and took off, moving quickly toward the doors leading into the building. Eloise grabbed Nate, her eyes pleading. "We need to lock this place down. We need to get all the kids inside now."

Nate glanced over his shoulder once more before scooping Eloise up and carrying her to the building. As promised, the doors were locked, forcing them to bang until a custodian who recognized Eloise finally let the four of them in. Nate dropped Eloise to her feet before tapping his earpiece. "We need to get everybody at this location that we can. Canvas the whole fucking neighborhood. Figure out who took that shot."

"We're already on it." Tyson came back immediately. "We're getting all the kids into the building now and everyone on campus is headed this way. Heidi's scanning every camera she can find to see if we can figure out who came and left from the area."

Nate glanced out the window of the door, dreading what he had to say next. "We might want to consider calling Vincent in on this."

He hated giving the man another reason to believe GHOST was more important to Alaskan Security than Alaskan Security was to GHOST, but this situation could spin out of control very quickly.

And it had happened at a fucking school. Everyone capable of making

sure these kids stayed safe needed to be involved.

“Miss Rivers?” Bryson’s voice was bleak and soft.

Eloise reached for him, fighting to get the child who was a little too big for her arms away from Reed. “I’m right here, honey.” She managed to get the boy into her grip and slowly lowered to the floor, leaning her back against the wall for support as she went down. She cradled him close, smoothing back his dirty hair as she gently rocked him. “Everything’s going to be okay. I promise.”

The sight of Eloise sitting there—thick tights shredded from her near abduction, the skin of her knees abraded and bloodied, her own hair knotted and mangled—brought him down beside her. Scooted him close enough he could rest his lips against the warmth of her temple. “You okay?”

Eloise continued to stroke Bryson, her touch warm and nurturing and motherly. “I’m fine.”

It was a moment that was as perfect as it was heartbreaking. Seeing the little boy finally get the kind of love he should have been receiving his whole life was like a punch to the gut. One that hit hard and swift and close to home because it was the same kind of love he’d never received.

But seeing Bryson get it, and watching Eloise be the one to dish it out, soothed a little of the ache he’d carried for so long.

Nate reached out, taking Bryson’s hand in his and holding it tight. “Where do you hurt?”

Bryson’s lids slowly lifted. “In my head and in my face.”

Nate scanned the little boy’s pale skin, gut burning as the bruised outline of a hand started to peek through his fair complexion. It was an injury he’d had many times. And he’d be willing to bet Bryson had too.

But it would never fucking happen again. Not if he had anything to say about it.

And he would.

Because he might not be able to go back in time and receive the sort of love he always wanted, but he could absolutely offer it now.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



## NATE

NATE STRODE INTO Intel's office and planted himself behind Heidi's desk, looking over her shoulder. "Have you found anything yet?"

Heidi rolled her eyes up at him. "Oh, yeah. We solved everything. We just decided not to tell you." She made a face at him. "You really think we would have figured something out and not called you immediately?"

Nate scrubbed one hand over his face before raking it through his unkempt hair. "I'm sorry. I'm just pissed."

"Everyone's pissed." Pierce leaned against the open door, looking deceptively relaxed. "But being pissed won't figure out who fired that shot."

Nate straightened, forcing in a calming breath. "We need to figure *something* out. It's a whole fucking school of kids, Pierce."

"I realize this." Pierce wandered into the room, tucking one hand into his pocket as he moved toward his wife's desk. "That's why, for the foreseeable future, Alaskan Security will be donating additional security."

It wasn't a perfect solution, but knowing it wouldn't just be a single security officer keeping those kids safe did make him feel slightly better. "I want the post."

Pierce lifted a brow as he settled onto the edge of Mona's desk. "Did you genuinely think I would assign it to someone else?" His hand slid from his pocket and moved to trace along the skin of Mona's knuckles. "I think you and Tyson will be the best choice given you each have connections with the school."

"I agree." Nate crossed both arms over his chest. "I think we should keep at least one man on the property even when this is all over." He'd seen exactly how quickly things could get out of control. One safety officer was

not enough. “You’ve been looking for a way to show the community we’re no threat to them. This is a way to show them not only are we not a threat, but we’re an ally.”

Pierce tipped his head, mouth flattening into a considering line. “I could see how that might reflect on us in a positive way.” He stood from Mona’s desk, dragging his touch from her hand. “We’ll revisit that when the time comes.” His eyes drifted to the screens lining the wall at the front of the room. “Hopefully it comes soon.”

Hopefully it came sooner than soon. GHOST had collected Bryson’s father from the school and reinvented the manner of his death, but it still didn’t change the reality that someone using military grade ammunition was able to take him out right under their noses. That level of accuracy required significant training. The kind of training you didn’t get at your local gun range.

Pierce turned to him, lifting his brows. “I didn’t expect to see you here this morning. I assumed you had more important places to be.” His expression pinched. “How are they doing? Eli said Bryson was a little bruised up.”

“He had a goose egg on his head last night, but it’s gone this morning. The bruise on his face looks pretty bad though.” He gritted his teeth, wishing he was the one who got to take that fucking shot. “They’re both in the basement swimming with Tyson, Naomi, and Emmett. I don’t think they’ve even realized I’m gone.”

Pierce’s lips teased a smile. “I doubt that’s true.” He lifted one finger toward the door. “Go be with them. I’ll come get you the second we find something.”

Pierce didn’t have to tell him twice. After nearly losing Eloise and watching last night as she held Bryson while he cried over the death of his father, not being at their side was almost painful.

He hurried back to the suite the three of them currently shared, stripping down before pulling on his swim trunks and rushing to the pool he promised Bryson they would one day play in together. This might not be the way he intended for it to happen, but at least now Bryson realized he kept his promises. And after losing so much, the little boy needed to know there was something he could count on.

A wave of hot, muggy air hit him as he pulled open the door and stepped into the pool room. The space had always been nice, but since Pierce had



mistakenly believed Mona loved plants and bought one of everything in existence, the pool area had a more authentic tropical feel. Now, not only were the walls painted in a lush landscape, but palm trees and hibiscus were tucked into every available space. Someone had even built a small pergola and angled it into the corner, stringing it with lights and white drapery to make it feel like a cabana. It was a tiny paradise hidden beneath Alaskan Security.

He always loved spending time here, but today was different. Today was special.

It wasn't hard for him to know why.

Eloise sat at the edge of the pool, watching Bryson and Emmett bounce around in the water. She turned as the door closed, giving him the bright, wide smile that always hit him like a beam of sunshine. "There you are."

Nate went right to her side, dropping his towel on a chair as he passed before sitting down and sliding one hand along the side of her face. He leaned in and brushed his lips against hers before pulling back and offering up a handful of words he'd been waiting years to say. "I think I love you."

Eloise's jaw dropped open, but a split second later her sweet, bright smile returned. She smacked his shoulder. "You jerk. I can't believe you pretended like you didn't hear what I said."

Nate draped one arm over her shoulders, pulling her into his side. "Anything you say immediately after getting off doesn't count." He caught her chin and pulled her in for another kiss. "Especially if you just got off three times in a row. Anyone would love me under those circumstances."

Her lips twisted into a little smirk. "Fair enough."

"Nate!" Bryson doggy paddled over to where Eloise dangled her feet in the water. "Are you going to swim with us?"

"Heck yes, I am." Nate leaned in to press another kiss to Eloise's lips. "I'll be back." He slid into the water, sucking in a breath as it reached his nuts. "It's a little chilly today."

Tyson gave him a little splash. "It's not chilly. You're just overheated from all that kissing."

Nate laughed, the sound getting a little louder when he noticed Eloise's flushed cheeks as her eyes darted away.

Tyson snagged the ball floating on the top of the water and tossed it his way. "You want to play a little game of two on two? Loser has to buy us all ice cream."

Nate caught the ball. “Deal.” He jumped out of the water, aiming for the basket fixed against one edge of the pool. The ball went straight through the hoop and dropped back into the water.

Tyson raised his brows. “Somebody came to win.”

Nate moved to the ball, snagging it before gently sending it Bryson’s way. “We win no matter what because everyone gets ice cream.”

Bryson beamed at him, the expression coming easier than Nate expected considering the bruise still blooming on his cheek and the tears that kept him up most of the night before. “Can we really get ice cream?”

“Absolutely we can get ice cream.” Nate backed away from the hoop, gesturing for Bryson to shoot.

Bryson rubbed his lips together, focusing hard as he mimicked Nate’s maneuver, launching his little body up from the water before hauling the ball in the direction of the hoop with all his might. Nate reached up to tap the ball, bumping it a tiny bit to ensure it hit the hoop. The second it cleared the ring everyone cheered, clapping and whooping as Emmett high-fived Bryson.

“After we get ice cream we should probably go to the store to make sure we have all the food you like to eat.” Nate offered up a high-five of his own. “That includes popsicles.”

Bryson’s dark eyes moved from Nate to Eloise. “Does that mean I’m gonna stay with you guys for a while?”

It was one of the first things he had Heidi look into. She checked all the records she could get her hands on. Looking to see who might come out of the woodwork to claim Bryson, hoping to get their hands on the government benefits that could come with raising a child. She found no one. Bryson’s mom, like Eloise’s, died not long after he was born. Any family or friends they had were long out of the picture, leaving the little boy completely alone.

Actually, that wasn’t true.

Nate reached out to push Bryson’s wet hair off his forehead. “You can stay with us as long as you want to, buddy.” He pinched the tip of the little boy’s nose, leaning down. “We can be a family if that’s what you want.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY



## ELOISE

“IT DOESN’T SEEM like as much stuff in here, does it?” Eloise stood in the middle of their new living room, hands on her hips as she looked around the space. “I think we might need more furniture.”

“We can get whatever you want.” Nate set the box of MREs he was carrying down on the kitchen island. “You pick it out and I’ll carry it in.”

“Me too.” Bryson put his smaller box of flashlights and emergency candles right next to Nate’s, beaming up at him.

In the few weeks Bryson had been with them he’d gained five pounds and decided Nate was his new hero. He wanted to be just like him, and it was freaking adorable.

“That’s right.” Nate held out his hand and Bryson gave him five. “You’ve got team B and N at your service.”

Eloise blinked, working away the immediate sting of tears. Even after plenty of days and nights watching Bryson and Nate together, it still hit her right in the gut. Still made her throat tight and her belly warm. Not just because Bryson was finally being loved the way he deserved, but because their relationship reminded her a little of the one she had with her father.

Nate spent a good chunk of his free time with the little boy. Teaching him everything from the rules of basketball to how to properly fold a shirt. He was a natural parent. The role came easily to him. Almost as easily as the role of boyfriend did.

Nate caught her as he passed, pulling her close for a kiss as a few more members of Alaskan Security filed in with boxes from her abandoned apartment. Once he’d gotten over the hump of worrying over his family seeing the two of them together, he’d jumped in with both feet and didn’t

miss an opportunity to hold her or kiss her or whisper scandalous things in her ear while they were around.

But, now that she'd spent a little more time with the people Nate considered his family, it became even more clear how deep-seated his fear of rejection really had been. And how unwarranted it was. There was no way in the world these people would have ever turned their back on him. They loved him. Appreciated him.

Just like she did.

Nate suddenly gripped her around the waist, swinging her body across the front of his into a bridal style carry. "Bryson," he jerked his chin toward the stairs of their townhome, "let's go show Eloise your new bedroom."

Bryson jumped into action, racing up the stairs in front of them as Nate followed, angling her against his chest so her feet didn't catch on the spindles.

The little boy darted into the first doorway on the right. It was the room he'd claimed as his own when they did their final walk-through before closing, and he hadn't stopped talking about it since then.

He raced across the new carpet in his socked feet, jumping a few steps in and launching himself into the center of the queen-sized bed that was delivered earlier in the day. "What do you think, Eloise?"

Bryson and Nate had spent the better part of the morning putting up blinds and wrestling sheets and blankets onto the bed while they waited for the moving truck to show up with all her stuff. The room was still pretty sparse, but that was to be expected. It would take time to fill it with toys and Legos and action figures and anything else Bryson wanted. For now, he had a big comfortable bed with superhero sheets, a dresser filled with clothes that fit him, and a closet with coats and boots and shoes.

"It looks amazing." Eloise squeaked as Nate dropped her onto the mattress beside Bryson. "You boys did such a good job up here." She lay down next to the boy who'd had her heart from the first time she saw his big, soulful eyes. "Your bed's pretty comfortable, buddy."

"Yeah." Bryson wiggled around a little, body needing to release some of the never-ending supply of energy he possessed. "It's got pillows too."

She opened her mouth to say 'of course it has pillows' but caught herself. She'd put her foot in her mouth on more occasions than she could count since Bryson came to live with them, and each time his little face fell, her heart ached. "It does have pillows." Eloise shifted her head from side to side,

testing out the one beneath it. “They’re good pillows too.”

“I know.” Bryson sat up, eyes going straight to Nate as his busy little mind shifted gears in the blink of an eye. “Can I have a popsicle?”

Eloise smiled as Nate reached out to gently pinch the tip of Bryson’s nose in a gesture of affection he repeated often. “Sure thing.”

Bryson slid off the bed, bounding away. “Thanks.”

Nate reached a hand out to her. “What about you, Miss Rivers? Would you like a popsicle?”

“What I want is a nap.” She held tight as Nate hauled her up. “But I feel like that’s gonna have to wait until tomorrow.”

“It’s at least going to have to wait until I get our bed set up.” Nate pulled her close, hands palming her ass as he rested his forehead against hers. “Give me half an hour.”

Eloise wrapped both arms around his neck, pushing up on her toes. “I can wait.”

“I don’t want you to wait. I want you to take a nap.” Nate hefted her a little closer. “You need to be rested up for bedtime.”

It was definitely interesting starting their life together with a kid already in the mix. One who wasn’t used to things like bedtimes and taking a shower every night.

And it cut way into their alone time.

“That’s a good point.” Eloise slid her hands through the loose blond locks at the top of his head. “Maybe I *should* take a nap.”

“Or—” Nate teased the tip of his nose against the tip of hers, “I know of a little cabin in the middle of nowhere we could sneak off to.”

Eloise groaned, letting her head fall back. “Ugh. Last time we did that someone tried to kill us and stole both our cars.”

Nate lifted his brows. “And a dead moose.”

She started to laugh. The situation wasn’t funny. It was a little terrifying, actually.

But it was what led her to Nate. To Bryson.

To being herself again.

And maybe that made it all worth it.

She wrapped her arms a little tighter where they looped around his neck. “Heidi better figure out who stole my car. They took my favorite phone charger.”

Nate smiled, looking completely confident. “She’ll find them.” He pulled

her toward the door. “The moose I’m not so sure about.”

# EPILOGUE





## ELOISE

THE NIGHT WAS surreal. Like she was caught in some weird alternate universe.

She might even have had a sense of déjà vu over how much was the same, except so much was completely different.

“Can I go play with Emmett?” Bryson bounced at her side, ready to take off and go enjoy his first ever Christmas party.

Eloise managed a smile. “Of course.” She caught him before he raced off, leaning down to give him her most serious face. “Just remember to be very careful and be aware of the people around you.”

Bryson nodded. “I will, El. I promise.”

“Good boy.” She gave him a little pat on the back as he rushed off, clearly already knowing exactly where he fit in. She loved that for him. Especially since once again she was caught in the strange spot of not knowing where *she* fit in.

That was part of what had changed. Not only because now she was with Nate, but also because after swearing to him over and over that these people would never have turned their backs on him, she kind of had to put her money where her mouth was.

And that meant she had to quit pretending. Quit hiding behind what she thought were the best parts of her and instead let all the less desirable qualities she possessed be put on display and hope she was right.

Naomi greeted Bryson when he reached her side, sending him and Emmett off to play before making a beeline for where she and Nate stood. She grabbed Eloise in a tight hug giving her a squeeze before leaning back. “Did you see they’re setting the karaoke up?”

Eloise swallowed hard, feeling a little sick. Just as she was about to accidentally smile wide and pretend to be excited, Nate's warm hand came to rest on the back of her neck, offering reassurance and support.

"Actually, I think I might pass on karaoke tonight." She braced herself, fully expecting Naomi's disappointment.

But Naomi only smiled wider. "Fantastic. That leaves more time for me." She snagged Eloise by the hand, giving it a squeeze as she leaned in. "I'm going to make Tyson sing duets with me all night long."

Eloise smiled, the expression more genuine and a little smaller than she normally would have offered. "And I will listen all night long."

Naomi gave her another smile before turning away and going to where Tyson was, no doubt to inform him there were plenty of openings for them to take advantage of.

Nate leaned down, his voice soft in her ear. "Look at you being your real self."

She swatted the center of his chest. "Quit giving me a hard time."

Nate chuckled, his breath warm against her skin. "Maybe I'll sneak you out of here and into one of the utility closets later so I can give you all the hard time you can handle."

The offer was tempting. Having a kid around meant you had to take full advantage of every opportunity that presented itself. Not that she regretted Bryson being in their life for one single second. Actually, they'd gone to great lengths and spent a decent amount of money to ensure he stayed there forever.

Nate leaned away, his eyes focusing across the room. "I'm going to go talk to Pierce." He met her eyes, holding her gaze. "I'll come find you in a few minutes."

She nodded, hoping she looked less lost than she felt. "Yeah. Go. I'll be fine."

Obviously Nate believed her, because he disappeared through the crowd of people, no doubt off to see if Pierce had heard anything about the location of their still missing vehicles, or the identity of the shooter who took Bryson's father down almost eight weeks ago.

"Are you just gonna stand there all night or are you going to come hang out with us?"

Eloise turned to find Harlow waving her closer. "He'll come back. I promise." The hacker for Intel rolled her eyes as Shawn, Heidi's husband

headed their way, a twin balanced on each hip. “They always do.”

Eloise took a little breath, hoping for reassurance before heading for the group of women who worked for Alaskan Security. They were all ridiculously smart and successful.

And intimidating as hell.

Harlow scooted over, making room for her before patting the spot. “How are things going? Are you liking your new place?”

Eloise sat down, her first instinct to spew every bit of the good, polishing it up with a rosy shine and a healthy dose of enthusiasm.

And while the townhouse was beautiful, it was also something else.

“I didn’t realize how loud two other people could be.” She sighed, flopping back against the couch. “There’s always a television on and half the time Nate and Bryson are watching some sort of sport, yelling at the top of their lungs.”

Mona sighed, bouncing her baby in her arms. “Ugh. I understand completely.” Her expression became almost wistful. “I remember how quiet it was when I lived alone. It was freaking amazing.”

Heidi caught one of her year-old twins as Shawn deposited the child into her lap. “I don’t want to hear either of you complaining about noise.” She cuddled the little girl close. “I wouldn’t give them up for anything, but I really wish these things came with a volume button.”

Harlow shrugged, a wicked smile on her lips. “That’s what you all get for procreating. My house is peaceful as shit.” She wiggled her brows. “And Dutch and I can fuck whenever we want.”

Heidi scowled at Harlow. “You don’t have to freaking rub it in.” She slumped down. “It’s been forever since I’ve had unsneaky sex.”

Harlow stood up. “Not me.” She gave them a wink. “Auntie Harlow can have all the wild relations she wants.” She tipped back the last of her drink. “And on that note I’m going for a refill.”

Eloise watched her go before turning back to the group of women and babies. “So that’s a universal thing with kids?” She loved having Bryson with them, but it had definitely forced them to get creative. “Because I was kind of hoping it would get better once Bryson got settled in.”

“I’d probably find something else to hope for.” Eva wrangled her own toddler. “They’re cute, but man do kids turn your whole life upside down.” She smoothed down the child’s wild hair. “I didn’t realize how much of a handful a small human could be.”

The rest of the women nodded in agreement and commiseration.

Eloise glanced around at all the babies. “And yet you all keep squeezing them out.” She clamped her lips together, but the words were already out there. Deadpan and dripping with sarcasm.

It was almost a full beat before anyone reacted, and the first one to crack was Mona. She laughed long and hard, falling back against the cushions on the couch. “They are everywhere, aren’t they?”

Eva wiped at the corner of one eye before lifting her little one up. “Pretty soon they’re all gonna be your responsibility.”

Harlow dropped back into her seat, stage whispering in the direction of Eloise’s ear. “More like they’re all gonna be your problem five days a week instead of theirs.” She tipped her head to one side. “At least you’ll get paid for it.”

Everyone laughed, not even batting an eye at the snark in Harlow’s retort. Eloise relaxed a little, shoulders slowly dropping from where they’d been clenched up around her ears. Maybe Nate wasn’t the only one who hadn’t had anything to worry about all this time.

Nate suddenly appeared beside her, leaning close as he slid one hand down her hair.

Harlow smirked. “I told you they always come back.”

“I’m stealing her.” Nate snagged her hand, lifting her off the couch. “Come here. I want to show you something.” He led her across the crowded room, past the kitchen area of the common space and straight to the doorway leading to the suites where they lived for a few weeks after their outdoor adventure. He stopped, eyes lifting to the frame over their head. Eloise looked up and found the same mistletoe she hoped to make use of last Christmas dangling over their heads.

She smiled, her belly warming a little at this full circle moment as she waited for Nate to lean in and give her the kiss she wanted a year ago.

Instead he dropped to one knee and flipped open a velvet ring box. “Marry me.”

Eloise blinked, completely stunned. “I think you have the mistletoe requirements mixed up.”

Nate’s grin widened. “I disagree.” He pulled the sparkling solitaire from its slot and lifted it between them. “Because I fully intend to kiss you as soon as this is on your finger.”

She took the ring, lifting it closer as she pretended to mull it over. “I’m

guessing this means you don't plan to ignore me after this."

Nate stood up, pulling her body flush against his. "Sweetheart, I don't think you could get rid of me if you tried."

She carefully slid the diamond into place, running her thumb over the inside of the band. "I guess I might as well marry you then."

Nate tipped her chin up. "Might as well."



## NATE

"HOW MUCH SHIT do you have in there?" Reed watched as Eloise dug through the soft sided cooler, dark brows creeping up his forehead as she shifted around copious amounts of snacks and drinks.

"Aha!" Eloise lifted out an item, holding it up triumphantly with a smile. "Found it." She peeled the plastic straw from the back of the cardboard juice box, pushing it through its sleeve before stabbing it into the top and passing it off to a patiently waiting Bryson. "And the answer is *enough*. I have enough in there." She smoothed Bryson's sweaty hair back from his brow. "I just like to make sure we're prepared."

Nate slid the cooler back into the basket hooked to the back of Reggie's electric scooter. He'd been completely unsurprised this morning when Eloise went through everything twice, making sure they were as ready as they could possibly be for a day of fun in the sun at the happiest place on earth.

Bryson sucked down a little of his apple juice before leaning in and giving Eloise a sideways hug. "Thank you, El. I was real thirsty."

Eloise squeezed him tight. "I bet. It's crazy hot here."

Nate chuckled, looking over their suffering group. "This is actually pretty cool for this place. Last time I was here it was over ninety degrees with a heat index of over a hundred."

Eloise glanced around the crowded park. "I guess I'm more used to the cooler weather than I realized."

Reed swiped at his brow. "You think *you're* used to it." He shook his head. "I don't know how I let Pierce talk me into coming down here."

"He offered a bonus to anyone willing to deal with Courtney." Nate reminded his friend of the actual motivation that led to him suffering and

sweating his way through central Florida.

Reed grunted. "I'm not sure it's worth it." He took a breath deep enough to lift his shoulders. "Do you know how many times she called Intel yesterday asking when we would get here?" Reed didn't wait for an answer before holding up both hands, fingers spread wide. "Ten. She called ten times."

Nate didn't envy his friend. He'd dealt with Courtney recently himself and the woman was one hell of a spoiled brat. "Bet she calls twenty today."

Like Vincent, Courtney was another of the problems lingering from their days of taking on any and every job. Her father was a Columbian drug lord with a list of enemies ranging from the mafia to some underground crime syndicate who called themselves The Association. It was a wonder the man was still breathing considering everyone who had him in their sights.

Which is how Alaskan Security ended up with Courtney. They were initially hired to protect her during one particularly nasty skirmish between her father and another drug lord. When Alaskan Security changed directions, they tried to cut both Courtney and her father off.

But Pierce had never been particularly good at refusing a woman in distress. Especially one who was young enough to remind him of his niece. So, every time Courtney called, they stepped in. Even going so far as to bring her to Alaska for a short stint in one of their off-grid cabins.

Recently, it had become clear Courtney was crying wolf, and Reed was here to tell her they were no longer going to be at her beck and call.

Reed's nostrils flared. "I can't wait to be done with her. She's a goddamn menace."

"She's a spoiled brat." Nate adjusted the shade shielding Reggie from the worst of the Florida sun. "We should send Reggie with you. I bet she could whip her into shape."

Reggie flipped open the fan printed with Madame Leota she'd picked up after they rode The Haunted Mansion and waved it in front of her sweaty face. "I came here to go to Disney World, not to babysit a grown woman. You're on your own, handsome." She flipped her fan together and used it to gently poke at Bryson. "How you doin', honey? You want to ride in my lap again?"

Between the time change and excitement that made it hard to sleep last night, Bryson was dragging a little. He'd spent most of the morning riding on the scooter with Reggie, but after heading back to the hotel for a lunch break

and a nap he seemed to be perking up.

“Yes, please.” He lifted his face to look up at Nate. “Can we ride the thing up in the air again?”

“Buddy, we can ride anything you want to ride. We’ve got all week.” Nate tweaked the little boy’s nose. It was probably an odd thing to do, but when Bryson first came to stay with them he wasn’t sure how comfortable the kid would be with affection, and that seemed safe.

And then it stuck.

Bryson beamed up at him. “Okay.” He grabbed Reggie’s hand. “Are you staying all week too?”

Reggie’s eyes crinkled at the edges as she gave Bryson’s palm a squeeze. “Heck yes, I am.”

Nate took in the group surrounding him. The love they all clearly had for each other. It was almost unbelievable that just a few short months ago he was convinced one wrong move could make him lose everything. That the people he loved would leave him behind in a second, turning their backs on him without looking back.

A little part of him still worried it might have been true, even though Eloise was doing her best to convince him it never would have happened.

Either way, the risk was most definitely worth the reward. Instead of losing people he loved, he’d gained. Managed to find a woman who was equal parts sunshine and sass and could hold her own in any situation.

And together they were able to give a neglected little boy the life and love he deserved.

And they planned to do it permanently.

Nate snagged Eloise, tucking her into his side as they slowly made their way through the crowd of people also enjoying Disney for the holiday. He pressed a kiss to her temple, breathing in the scent of honeysuckle and sunshine he got to wake up to every morning. “Is it all you hoped it would be?”

Eloise’s eyes fixed on where Reggie and Bryson scooted together in front of them. “Better.”

“I—” His plans to update Eloise about the papers they’d filed to adopt Bryson were cut short by the piercing ring of Reed’s phone.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Reed yanked it from his pocket and connected the call. “If this is about Courtney calling you, I don’t care. We told her we would be there tomorrow and that’s when—” His eyes widened,

jumping to Nate's. "You're kidding." Reed's nostrils flared. "I'm headed there now." He ended the call, jaw set as he shoved his phone back into place. "Heidi just got a call from one of Courtney's neighbors."

Nate's brows lifted. Normally Courtney liked to make her own distress calls. "And?"

Reed's frown deepened. "Her house is on fire."



Thank you so much for sticking with the gang from Alaskan Security! I hope you enjoyed Nate and Eloise's romp through the snow.

As I'm sure you've guessed, Reed and Courtney are up next. Their story will be full of banter, temper tantrums, and maybe a spanking... or two.

It will also reveal who's behind the roadside ambush and who's responsible for that well-timed shot fired in chapter 28.

And I can't wait.



[You can preorder your copy here!](#)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Janice Whiteaker writes romance as herself, her romantic suspense pen name Jemma Westbrook, and her brand new romcom pen name Josie Watts.

Her stories are low-angst and filled with girl power.

Janice lives in southwestern Ohio with her husband, three savage children, and a few too many chickens.

[Join her readers group to keep up with the latest cover reveals, and read teasers you won't find anywhere else.](#)



## LOOKING FOR MORE OF MY BOOKS?

Here's my entire backlist for your perusal.

### **Alaskan Security Team Rogue**

(as Jemma Westbrook)

[Collateral Damage](#)

[Loss Recovery](#)

[Counterfeit Relations](#)

[Enemy Territory](#)

[Guerrilla Tactics](#)

[Strategic Maneuvers](#)

[Advance by Bounds](#)

[Friendly Fire](#)

[Dangerous Proximity](#)

[Defensive Alliance](#)

[Line of Resistance](#)



### **Cowboy Classifieds**

[Cowboy Seeking a City Girl](#)

[Cowboy Seeking Nanny](#)

[Cowboy Seeking a Second Chance](#)

[Cowboy Seeking a Wedding Date](#)

[Cowboy Seeking Someone to Love](#)



### **Cross Creek Ranch**

[Crossing the Line](#)

[Winter Takes All](#)

[No Coming Back](#)



**Cowboys With Cuffs**

Cowboy of Convenience



**Scandals in Sweet Side**

(as Josie Watts)

Fish out of Water

Out on a Limb

Hit or Miss

By the Book



**Lost Boys**

Finding What's Mine

Taming What's Mine

Catching What's Mine

Protecting What's Mine

Claiming What's Mine

Saving What's Mine

Out Bad



**Sinners and Saints**

Take Me to Church

Tell Me No Lies



**Secrets of Mountain Men**

Mountain Calling  
Mountain Yearning  
Mountain Claiming  
Mountain Reckoning  
Mountain Holiday  
Mountain Homecoming



**BIG Northwest**

Danny  
Alex  
Charlie



**Never Waste a Second Chance**

Run  
Regret  
Redeem