



**MAKE-BELIEVE**

*match*

*USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

*Melanie Harlow*

*make believe match*

MELANIE HARLOW

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*For my first little firefly as she leaves home  
to light up the world.*

Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.

HELEN KELLER

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ONE



MY SWEET, bird-boned little Gran added a teaspoon of sugar to her tea before yanking the rug out from under my life.

“I’m sorry, Alexandra. But the answer is no.”

“But Gran, you didn’t even let me finish!” I stared down at my notes, which I’d frantically scribbled last night after she’d announced she was leaning toward selling our beloved Snowberry Lodge to Black Diamond Resorts, a corporation that planned to tear it down. She was having lunch with the big bulldozing jerks on Tuesday to discuss their offer, so I only had two days to convince her to let me inherit early.

It was not going well.

“This place is too big for one woman to run on her own, darling. We’re facing a mountain of debt. I wouldn’t put that burden on you.” Gran took a tiny sip of her tea. “And while it saddens me to let it go, I’m afraid I don’t have a choice.”

“Please, Gran,” I said as panic rose in my chest. “Let’s not make any decisions yet.” Selling Snowberry would splinter my heart. My great-grandparents had built the charming little ski resort seventy-five years ago. My grandfather had been born here. My dad grew up here. My parents were married here.

All of my happiest memories of them were here.

Was it a bit outdated and unfashionable? Sure.

Had it steadily lost business to the mega-resorts that had sprung up nearby? No argument there.

Had my beloved late grandfather—who’d run Snowberry for the past three decades—been a visionary businessman?

Definitely not. He'd loved the place just as it was and never saw fit to change anything.

We'd all known the resort was struggling, but we'd been shocked to learn how bad it really was after his death two years ago. Somehow we'd wobbled through a couple more seasons, kept the lights on and the lifts running, but the situation was dire.

We needed to renovate. We needed to rebrand. We needed money and marketing and modernization.

I understood why my frail eighty-five-year-old grandmother didn't want to take it all on. But let it go just so some greedy suits could tear it down? See my childhood memories reduced to rubble? Watch a wrecking ball smash not just my home but my family's legacy?

No fucking way.

Snowberry was everything to me. And I was determined to hang on to it, even if I had to chain myself to the chairlift.

Which I might.

"Your Uncle Roddy thinks I should sell," said Gran, whose ever-present bubble-gum pink lipstick had left a mark on the edge of her teacup. I stared at it, thinking, *Of course he does.*

My dad's brother Roddy had abandoned Snowberry Lodge two decades ago, right along with his wife and kid. Currently, he lived in Miami Beach and was engaged to a woman young enough to be his daughter (my cousin Tabitha, who couldn't stand either one of them ... not that I blamed her).

While he wouldn't make any money on the sale of Snowberry in the short term, he saw dollar signs for himself down the road if Gran banked millions. He was her only living child.

But he didn't give a shit about the place. He never had.

"Give it to *me*, Gran," I begged. "I can turn it around. I'm young, I've got the energy, and I've got all kinds of ideas for this place."

"Ideas cost money," she pointed out.

“I’ll get investors.” I said it with confidence, but the truth was I’d already had a few meetings with banks that had not gone well. They wanted business plans and projections. Profit and loss sheets. Cost-benefit analysis. Market research. I didn’t know anything about that stuff—I’d tried studying business in college, but the classroom hadn’t been for me. For the last nine years, I’d run our ski school during the winter and worked the front desk during the summer. I knew every square inch of this place like my own body—it felt like an extension of me.

Gran shook her head. “There’s no time for that, I’m afraid. And the truth is, darling, I couldn’t give Snowberry to you even if I wanted to.”

I blinked. “What? Why not?”

“I’m sorry to break it to you like this, but it’s time you knew.” Gran took another agonizingly slow sip of tea. “The will and trust your great-grandparents set up make it clear that only a married couple can inherit Snowberry Lodge.”

“Wait a minute.” I cocked my head, certain I must have misheard. “It’s in your *will* that whoever inherits Snowberry has to be *married*?”

“Yes.”

I gaped at her, goose-necked. “Why haven’t I ever heard about this?”

She lifted her bony shoulders. “One never wants to discuss morbid matters, darling.”

“Oh my God.” My temper was threatening to ignite, but I stayed calm. I wouldn’t win her over with fireworks—Gran appreciated civility. “But—but you can change the will, right?”

She shook her head. “It’s set up that way for a reason, Alexandra. This has always been a family-run resort. It’s too much for one person to handle alone, especially in the present circumstances.”

“I’ll get a business partner,” I said desperately.

“You need a *life* partner,” she insisted. “Someone whose investment isn’t just monetary. Someone whose attachment doesn’t hinge on financial gain. Someone who loves Snowberry because he loves you and wants to build a life here.”

I slumped back into the kitchen chair. “Well, I’m sorry. But that person doesn’t exist.” I thought he had, once upon a time. But I’d been wrong.

“Bosh.” Gran waved a gnarled, blue-veined hand in front of her face. “He exists. You just have to keep an open mind. Take Dr. Smalley, for example.”

“Your dentist?” I frowned at the non sequitur. “What does he have to do with anything?”

“He’s widowed, you know, and he’s looking to get back out there.”

An alarm bell dinged in my head. “Good for him.”

“I thought so too. After all, he’s only thirty-five. And in the right light, he’s very handsome.” Gran smiled with meddlesome satisfaction, a glimmer of mischief in her pale blue eyes. “So I took the liberty of arranging a little meet-up for you.”

“What?” I shrieked, bolting upright in my chair. “Gran, you didn’t! In the middle of all this? I can’t!”

“Why not? Do you have plans tonight?”

“You arranged this for *tonight*?”

“Yes. He’s dropping his kids off at their grandmother’s house, and he’ll pick you up around eight. He thought maybe he’d take you somewhere called . . .” She set her teacup down and pushed herself out of her chair with some effort. Shuffling over to the counter by the telephone, she picked up a notepad. “The Broken Spoke.”

I shook my head. “Call him and cancel.”

She looked at me, her expression not at all apologetic. “I’m afraid I can’t, darling. I don’t have his number. I arranged it all last week when I was there.”

“And you just decided to tell me about this now?”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

I closed my eyes. Counted to three. Took a deep breath.

“It will be good for you, Lexi darling,” she went on in a soothing tone. “You haven’t been out with anyone in such a long time. You work too much.”

“We only have one other full-time employee right now, Gran. And she’s not terribly reliable.”

That would be Tabitha. She was younger than me by three years, and we’d grown up together. As a kid, she’d cheated at board games, cried when she lost, and blamed me when *she* was the one who threw the shoe that broke Gran’s heirloom vase. If there were two different flavors of something, she always got first pick. And even if she changed her mind after licking the cherry Dum Dum sucker and demanded my butterscotch, I had to give it to her or listen to her scream.

She wasn’t my favorite.

“I know,” Gran said. “But she tries hard.”

She didn’t.

“Gran, she spends all her time at the desk scrolling social media.”

“Well, she’s trying to be a travel instigator.”

“Travel *influencer*. And if that’s the case, why doesn’t she ever talk up Snowberry? She’s got a platform.”

“I don’t know about those things, darling.” Gran shuffled back to the table and sat down. “But she’s working reception tonight, so you’re free to meet Dr. Smalley.” She picked up her tea. “Now let’s talk about what you should wear. How about that pretty white dress you wore to my birthday dinner last month?”

Defiant, I folded my arms. “Gran, I’m not going on a date with Dr. Smalley tonight. Or any night.”

My grandmother’s eyes grew misty, and she put a hand over her heart. “Oh. I’m—I’m short of breath, all of a sudden.

My heart, it's—it's beating so fast. Bury me in my pink suit please. The one with the pearl buttons.”

“Gran!” I jumped up and went around to her side of the table, crouching down beside her. “Are you okay? Should I call an ambulance?”

“No, no, darling.” She patted her chest. “I’ll be fine. I think it’s simply that I’m so *concerned* about you. I’m getting older, you know, and soon I’ll be gone, and I don’t like to think of you alone. My heart can’t take it. Sometimes I can’t even sleep at night, I’m so anxious.”

“Oh.” Seeing through the act, I slowly rose to my feet. “So you’re all right?”

“I will be.” She looked up at me, her expression pained. “If only you’d ease my worries by seeing Dr. Smalley tonight. Then maybe my heart would slow down, and I could breathe again. Isn’t that what you want for me? To be able to breathe properly?”

I clenched my teeth. “Fine. I’ll see Dr. Smalley tonight—on one condition.”

“What’s that, darling?” Gran was perky again.

“You bring me with you to that lunch on Tuesday. I want to make sure some smooth-talking shark in a suit doesn’t think he can just chew us up and spit us out.” Fired up all over again, I looked down at my list of ideas. “I want to negotiate. Snowberry might be small, and it might be struggling, but it’s worth fighting for.” I looked across the table at her. “Deal?”

“Deal.” She beamed. “I think you should wear your hair down tonight, don’t you?”

\* \* \*

On the fifteen-minute walk from my grandmother’s house back to my condo, both of which were on the grounds of Snowberry Lodge, I got a text from my friend Winnie.

Well?? How did it go?

My life is in the toilet. And I think my grandmother just flushed.

Did she sell before you could talk to her???

No, but she refuses to consider giving it to me. She thinks I need a husband to run this place. In fact, it's in her will. Her WILL!!! And she went behind my back and set me up on a date with her widowed dentist. TONIGHT.

What???

Hang on, I'm going to call you.

My phone vibrated in my hand a moment later. "Hello?"

"What on earth?" Winnie shrieked. "You need a husband to inherit the family manor? What is this, Bridgerton?"

"Apparently. And she's arranged a match for me with her widowed dentist."

"She could have at least tried for a duke. I'm insulted for you."

"Thank you," I huffed.

"Have you ever met the dentist?"

"Once, when I took Gran to an appointment." I kicked a rock as I walked along the shoulder of the service road that circled the resort.

"How old is he?"

"Thirty-five, with two kids."

"Is he cute?"

"He's not *bad*-looking, but he's no duke of Hastings."

"Well, maybe it won't be terrible," Winnie said, always an optimist. "I fell for a single dad with two kids. And look at us now." Winnie and her husband Dex, a firefighter, shared two daughters from his first marriage with their mom and had their own two-year-old son, Michael.

I'd met her three years ago at a hospitality expo in Chicago, and we'd hit it off immediately. We were the same age, and we both worked for family-run resort properties in

northern Michigan. Winnie was the wedding planner at Cloverleigh Farms, which was about two hours away from Snowberry. She also introduced me to her bestie, Ellie Lupo, who ran the tasting room at her family's winery. They were both busy with jobs, husbands, and kids, but we tried to get together for girls' nights when we could.

"Trust me," I told Winnie, "the situation is different. Dr. Smalley is a nice guy, but he's not the *one*."

"You don't know that for sure! He could be a good time." She giggled. "I bet he's really good at drilling."

"Stop it, I'm not going to drill him."

"Why not? That's exactly what you need to bring down your stress level. Good sex is very beneficial for mental and emotional health. Orgasms release all kinds of feel-good chemicals in your body."

"I vaguely recall them." I turned up the driveway leading to a cluster of condominiums. Mine was the first one on the right, a one-story, one-bedroom unit.

"Why only vaguely?"

"Because I haven't had sex in over a year, Winnie. Not since Andrew left last summer. And it wasn't that good at the end anyway."

"You don't need a man to reap the benefits, Lexi. I was just reading about the orgasm as an act of self-care. Not only does it improve pelvic muscle tone, but all the hormones released do wonders for our sleep quality, moods, cognition, and overall stress levels."

I sighed, climbing the wooden steps to my tiny deck overlooking the woods. "You want the sad truth? I can't even get there on my own anymore."

"You can't?" Winnie whispered, like it was too terrible to say out loud.

"Nope. I can get close—like I can hear the party going on in the next room, but the door is locked. I can't get in. And



then I'm all up in my head about it." I dropped into the Adirondack chair next to the front door.

"Since when?"

"It's been months," I admitted. "Six, maybe seven. I'm broken."

"You're not *broken*, Lexi. It's stress. This year has been really tough for you."

"And it's only going to get worse. If stress stole my O, it's definitely gone for good." I closed my eyes, remembering that delicious tension, the euphoric release, the wilted afterglow. Would I ever feel those things again?

"Listen, don't worry about it right now—just put on something cute and go drink some tequila," advised Winnie. "Even if the dentist isn't the one to solve the case of the missing O, you might have a good time tonight."

And *that*, ladies and gentlemen, is how I ended up in a white dress, with my hair down, sitting next to Dr. Smalley at the bar at The Broken Spoke, sipping a margarita and listening to him rhapsodize about his late wife with tears in his eyes.

"She was just so wonderful, you know?" His eyes took on a faraway look.

"I know."

"So unselfish and sweet. A perfect mother to our children. I loved her so much."

I licked some salt off the rim of my glass. "I can tell."

"She didn't care that I wasn't the best-looking guy in the room or didn't make the most money or drive the coolest car. She just loved me for me."

"I'm so sorry for your loss." I'd lost count of how many times I'd said it already tonight.

But honestly, I *was* sorry for him. He was no rakishly handsome duke, but he was a sweet guy, and I could tell he'd carefully ironed the creases into his pants, which were too big for him. He'd also cut himself shaving and a tiny piece of

toilet paper was still stuck to a bloody dot along his jawline. But I didn't have the heart to tell him about it.

Attempting a smile, he reached for the tall glass of American pale ale he'd ordered and hadn't touched. But instead of taking a sip, he just stared at it. "That was just the color of her hair."

"Um . . ." I searched for graceful reply and came up empty.

Suddenly, he set the beer back onto the bar. "I'm sorry, Lexi. This was a mistake. I'm not ready yet."

"That's okay." Hopefully, my relief wasn't too obvious.

"When your grandmother told me how sad and lonely and socially awkward you were, I felt bad, so I agreed to come. But it's too soon."

Pressing my lips together, I allowed myself a moment of private fury with Gran.

"I'm just not ready for a girlfriend—I need more time to heal."

"I understand."

"Thank you." He glanced toward the door. "So are you ready to go?"

I tossed back the rest of my drink and suddenly wanted another. "You know what? I'll Uber home. You go ahead."

"Are you sure?" He scratched behind one ear. "Is your grandmother going to be upset with me?"

"She'll be fine." I smiled. "Really. Go on home. Thank you for the drink."

"You're welcome. Well . . . so long." He gave me a little wave and hurried toward the door, hitching up his pants along the way.

I spun around and faced the bar again, trying to catch the bartender's attention. It wasn't easy—even though it was Sunday, it was Labor Day weekend, and the place was packed. Every table was full, and the dance floor was crowded with bodies. By next weekend, all the summer people would be

gone, and the nearby lakeside town of Cherry Tree Harbor would quiet down until the holidays. That's when our business at Snowberry should pick up too. Would we be able to last one more season?

When the bartender noticed me, I ordered another margarita and sucked it down fast. Signaling him once more, I ordered a third.

He set it down and glanced at the empty stool next to me. Dr. Smalley's full beer was still sitting on the bar. "Your friend coming back?"

"No." I leaned over and licked salt off the rim of my glass.

The bartender eyed me carefully. "You okay?"

"I'll be fine as soon as I figure out how to save my family's ski resort from being demolished."

"Your family owns a ski resort?"

I nodded. "Snowberry Lodge."

"No kidding!" He grinned as he quickly uncapped three beer bottles. "I used to go there all the time as a kid."

"Everyone *used* to go there," I said with a sigh. "That's the problem." I studied him a little closer. He was in his mid-to-late twenties, shaggy blond hair, suntanned face, athletic-looking. What would it take to get this demographic to come back to Snowberry? "What's your name?" I asked him.

"Silas." He smiled at me as he filled a tall glass from the tap.

"Nice to meet you, Silas. I'm Lexi." I held out my hand, and he reached over the bar and shook it. "So where do you ski now?"

"Mostly, I go out west." He shrugged and swapped the first glass for another. "Or I hit one of the bigger resorts around here, like The Summit." He moved down the bar to deliver the beers, and I glowered into my margarita.

Of course. The Summit.

That place was the bane of my existence—a mega-resort with a water park, golf course, and giant video game arcade.

“Okay, I have another question,” I said when he came back. “Why’d you *stop* coming to Snowberry?”

Silas grabbed a wine bottle, pulled the cork out, and began pouring. “I don’t really know. I guess I just kind of forgot about it. Plus, my girlfriend likes the spa at The Summit,” he said, sticking the cork back in the bottle. “And they’ve got a pretty cool bar at the top of the mountain with glass walls. The views are incredible.”

“There’s a bar at Snowberry,” I said defensively, although I had to admit our rugged après-ski lounge with its knotty pine walls, rustic plaid upholstery, and antler chandelier wasn’t exactly the same as a chic, glass-walled, mountaintop hot spot.

“Yeah, but it’s kind of . . .” Silas thought for a moment. “Old? Sorry.” His expression was contrite.

“It’s okay,” I told him. “You’re not wrong. Thanks for being honest.”

As he moved down the bar to attend to more customers, I picked up my drink and stared into it. I wasn’t even sure I wanted it anymore. Was more tequila really going to make me feel better? Should I just pay my tab and go home? I could probably be in my pajamas watching *The Bear* in under an hour. I related hard to the main character, who was trying to save his family’s struggling sandwich shop.

A tall, dark-haired guy claimed Dr. Smalley’s vacant bar stool, but I didn’t look closely at him.

“Hi,” he said. His voice was deep and smooth.

“Hi,” I said with no feeling whatsoever.

“Is this where the line forms to talk to you?”

“There’s no line.”

“There should be.”

I looked up at him—and my pulse immediately picked up. He had startling blue eyes, a wide, sensual mouth, and one of

those jawlines you see in ads for cologne or expensive watches. It was just slightly stubbled, as if he didn't want a beard to hide its magnificent architecture.

Now *this* was a duke.

He smiled with perfect teeth. "I'm Devlin."

"Lexi." As I shifted on my stool to face him, my elbow was suddenly jostled hard from behind, and my entire drink splashed onto his lap. I gasped. "Oh my God! I'm so sorry!"

The woman who'd bumped into me apologized profusely and moved away, while Devlin stood up and brushed the ice cubes to the floor. Hideously embarrassed, I set the empty glass on the bar and grabbed a handful of cocktail napkins. "Here, let me . . ." I paused with my hand hovering in front of his crotch, staring at the giant wet spot.

"Maybe I should do that," he said, laughing as he took the napkins from me and tried to soak up the spill. "We *did* just meet."

"Here, use this." Silas appeared and handed Devlin a dry bar towel.

"Thanks," he said. "But I think I'm just going to have to dry out. So what am I wearing?"

"A margarita," I said sheepishly.

"Would you like another one? I'll get it."

"That doesn't seem fair. You shouldn't have to pay to replace the drink I just threw in your lap."

"I'd like to." He caught Silas's eye. "She'll take another margarita. I'll take a Journeyman whiskey. Neat."

Silas nodded. "You got it."

Devlin tipped his head toward me. "Maybe bring hers with a lid on it. Do you have sippy cups?"

Silas laughed. "I'll check the back."

"Very funny," I said, suddenly glad Gran had suggested this dress. It had a smocked waist, a deep V neckline, and

straps that tied over my shoulders. The tiered skirt was short on my long legs, and I crossed them at the knee to show them off a little. I didn't always love my thick, muscular thighs and ample rear end, but I'd grown to appreciate the way years of skiing had toned my body. I wouldn't mind if he wanted to appreciate it too, but right now his eyes were still on his crotch.

"Be honest. Does it look like I had an accident?"

It totally did. "Not at all."

"Are you lying to me?" He cocked his head, a grin teasing his mouth.

"Yes," I confessed. "But only because I feel bad."

"Maybe when your margarita arrives, I'll dump it over your head. Would that make you feel better?"

I laughed and covered my head with my arms. "Don't you dare. I blew out my hair tonight. I was supposed to have a big date."

"Oh yeah? With who?"

"With my grandma's recently widowed dentist, Dr. Smalley."

Devlin grinned, glancing around. "So where is he? Don't tell me he stood you up."

"Oh, he was here. He spent twenty minutes telling me all about his amazing late wife and then informed me he's not ready to move on, so he can't be my boyfriend."

"Then why did he ask you out?"

"He didn't." I smiled wryly. "My grandmother set up the date and then ambushed me with it this afternoon. But it gets worse."

He laughed. "How can it get worse?"

"Turns out, the only reason he said yes to the date was because my grandmother had gone on and on about how lonely, sad, and socially awkward I am." I shook my head. "He felt *sorry* for me."

“You’re right. That is worse.”

Silas brought our drinks, and Devlin handed him a credit card.

“Thank you,” I said, picking up the margarita with both hands. “I promise to be more careful with this one.”

“You’re welcome.” He picked up his whiskey and took a sip. “Well, I’m sorry about the bad date and the meddling grandmother, but if it helps, your hair is beautiful. Everything about you is beautiful.”

“Thanks.” My stomach fluttered. Even if it was just a line from a guy who’d approached me at the bar, I still liked hearing it. It had been a while.

Also, this guy was *ridiculously* handsome.

A spark of anticipation ignited in my belly as my eyes wandered from his chiseled features to his shoulders and the tanned forearms extending from the rolled-up cuffs of his blue plaid shirt. His body looked athletic but lean, more like a point guard than a quarterback. He wore a chunky black and silver watch on his left wrist, and his hands were masculine and elegant at the same time, with long fingers and neatly trimmed nails.

I sensed my lady bits awakening from their long slumber, and I imagined Devlin as the prince in *Sleeping Beauty*, hacking away at the thorny, overgrown branches surrounding my O.

My eyes drifted to the wet spot on his pants as I wondered about his sword. Was it long? Was it steely? Did he know how to use it?

Realizing my eyes were laser-beamed on his crotch, I quickly looked up. “So what brings *you* here tonight?”

“I’m with my family.” He looked over his shoulder toward the dance floor. “They’re sitting at a table over there, probably watching us. I told them I was coming over here to impress you.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You were that sure you could impress me, huh?”

He shrugged. “I was gonna give it my best shot—and my best shot is usually pretty good.”

It didn’t surprise me. Between his looks and his confidence, I doubted he swung and missed too often. “Do you live around here?”

“I grew up in Cherry Tree Harbor, but I’m out east now—Boston. I’m just home for a visit.”

“So who’s over there?” I glanced in the direction of the dance floor. “Brothers? Sisters? Mom and Dad?”

“Two of my three brothers—the third lives in California—and my little sister Mabel plus her best friend Ari, who might as well be another little sister. My dad is at home, watching my oldest brother’s twins. They’re seven.”

“Where’s your mom?”

“I lost my mom when I was nine.”

My jaw dropped. “I did too.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, so quietly I almost didn’t hear him over the band.

And maybe it was ridiculous that I trusted him more after learning we shared that specific childhood experience, but I found myself sliding to the edge of my barstool, moving a little closer to him. “So you’re an uncle.”

“Uncle Devlin,” he confirmed. “It’s the best thing ever.”

“You like kids?” Good grief, those eyes. What did you even call a blue that bright? Cobalt? Sapphire? Caribbean? Whatever the shade, it was making me hot. I had a sudden urge to go swimming.

“Kids are great. I often prefer them to adults.”

I laughed. “Same. I work with kids a lot, and they’re so honest and funny. No bullshit.”

“Exactly.” He tipped up his glass. “So are you a teacher?”



“You could say that.” I sighed and shook my head. “But I don’t really want to talk about work. It will just stress me out, and I’m trying to unwind tonight.”

He nodded. “You know what you need?”

“An orgasm.”

I swear to God, I only meant to *think* it.

But when Devlin choked on his whiskey, I realized I’d said it.

Out.

Loud.

TWO

*devlin*

FOR A SECOND, I couldn't breathe.

My eyes watered as I tried to stop coughing and regain my senses.

Had this stunning brunette with the bombshell curves and fuck-hot legs just asked me to give her an orgasm? Could any man be so lucky so *fast*?

“Actually, I was just going to ask you to dance, but I like your idea better.”

“Oh my God—I cannot believe that just came out of my mouth.” Lexi set down her drink and buried her face in her hands, which was a crying shame. Wide-set eyes, adorable dimple in her chin, and a sensuous mouth that was putting all sorts of unholy thoughts in my head. She peeked at me from between her fingers. “You have to forget I said that.”

I grinned. “Sorry, that’s never going to happen.”

“I want to die right now.”

“I’m not going to kill you, but say the word, and I’ll do my best to make you see God.”

She dropped her hands into her lap and shook her head. “What is *wrong* with me? Why would I say that to a complete stranger?”

“I’m not mad about it.”

“Just when I thought this night couldn’t get worse.”

I tried to make her laugh. “Look, if that’s really what you need, I believe I can deliver.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Come on.” I gave her shoulder a playful little nudge. “It seems unfair of you to doubt my word without giving me a chance to demonstrate my skills.”

“It’s not you, it’s me. I can’t . . . do that anymore.”

“Do what?”

“Have a—you know . . .” She made little explosive motions with her hands, like mini-fireworks going off. “A proper finish.”

“Why not?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.”

“Maybe you haven’t been with the right person,” I suggested. “A lot of guys are pretty fucking clueless.”

“I haven’t been with *anyone*. Just by myself.” She slapped a palm to her forehead. “I cannot even believe I’m having this conversation with you. What is this *day*?”

She was so beautiful, and so distressed, I wanted to toss her over my shoulder and carry her out of here, make everything better—if she’d let me. “Tell me something. How long has it been since you’ve . . . had a proper finish?”

She sighed. “About six months. It’s probably just because of anxiety—I’m dealing with a lot of family stuff right now that makes it tough for me to relax.”

I finished off my whiskey. “Okay. You’re not making this easy for me, but I’ve never been one to back away from a challenge.” I set the empty glass on the bar and faced her. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” I met her eyes and leaned toward her slightly. “You give me fifteen minutes in the backseat of my car, and I will give you a hand-crafted, responsibly farmed, artisanal orgasm that will make you forget all your troubles.”

Cocky as fuck, aren’t I?

But listen, I'm not saying I'm amazing at everything. There are some things I'm not good at. Relationships. Cooking. Observing the speed limit. And I don't admit this to many people, but I'm fucking terrified of heights, so don't ask me to go skydiving or bungee jumping or even skiing.

Chairlifts, man. Fuck those hanging death traps.

But delivering an orgasm? That was about communication, patience, and strategic navigation of female anatomy—three things I happen to excel at.

She laughed nervously. “Hand-crafted, huh?”

“Well . . .” I leaned in closer. Spoke lower. “My tongue might get involved too. If that's okay with you.”

A small gasp. Her lush mouth stayed open, and the surprise in her light brown eyes turned to curiosity. And then to desire. I watched it happen, willing myself to stay quiet, to let *her* be the one to decide. If this was going to work, she had to trust me.

Then a flicker of doubt crossed her face, and I prepared myself for the rejection. Which would be fine, I wasn't going to pressure her. I was just—

“Okay.”

My dick sprang to life inside my pants. “Huh?”

“Okay.” Deep red roses bloomed in her cheeks. She slid off her stool and stood between my knees, tucking a strand of hair behind one ear. “I'll give you fifteen minutes.”

Now *my* jaw dropped.

Could this be real?

The joke in my family has always been that I can talk anyone into anything and make it seem like their idea in the first place. It's what makes me good at my job brokering multi-million-dollar real estate deals—I understand the art of persuasion, which isn't about coercion, manipulation, or intimidation.

But I hadn't expected her to seriously entertain my offer.

Honestly, I sort of felt like this could be a setup, and any minute now, a hidden cameraman was going to pop out and a cackling reality show host was going to inform me I'd been had. Would it be my punishment for coming back to town to persuade an old lady to sell her family's historic ski resort?

No, fuck that. I was doing that old lady a favor, and everyone else in her family too. Times had changed. The resort was a cadaver. And they'd walk away with millions.

I realized I'd been paralyzed with shock when Lexi backed away. "Maybe I shouldn't," she said, clearly flustered. "This is not like me at all, and I—"

I locked a forearm around her waist and pulled her in close. Buried my face in her hair and spoke low in her ear. "If you walk out of here with me right now, I will do everything in my power to give you the best fifteen minutes you've ever had—or ever will have."

"Really?" Her voice was breathless.

I locked my arm around her so tight her back bowed. "I will make you come so hard you see stars. As many times as you let me."

"Why do I believe you?" she asked, her voice bewildered.

I grinned. "It's a gift."

\* \* \*

I sent the bartender a frantic signal that I needed to cash out, signed the tab with a hasty scribble, and grabbed Lexi by the wrist. Pulling her through the crowd, I glanced at the table where my brothers were sitting with their dates but decided they did not need to be informed of my whereabouts for the next fifteen minutes.

Speaking of which, I did some quick calculations in my mind as we moved for the back exit.

Nine hundred seconds.

That's all I had to give this woman the finish that had been eluding her for half a year. Not gonna lie, a sliver of self-doubt was threatening to penetrate my confidence. My skills had never let me down before, but I had a sudden vision of Icarus flying too close to the sun. A sweat broke out on my back.

No. This was no time for uncertainty. The stakes were high, but I knew what I was doing. I was a little out of practice, since I'd been in a bit of a dry spell lately, but once I got going, *I had this*.

Throwing the bar's door open with my shoulder, we burst outside into the warm, humid late summer air. Neither of us spoke as I pulled her in the direction of my car—rented, since I'd flown in from Boston earlier in the day. Lexi had long legs, but not as lengthy as mine, and she took two quick steps for every one of my determined strides. It was a good thing she wasn't in heels.

When we reached the large black SUV, I looked around. The gravel lot wasn't well-lit, we were parked completely in the shadows, and I didn't see anyone lurking, but I knew that in order for this to work, Lexi needed to feel completely comfortable. I turned to her. "Do you want me to move the car somewhere less visible?"

She glanced around. "You think we'll be caught here?"

"No." I pressed a button on the fob and unlocked the doors. "And to be honest, in thirty seconds, I'm not going to care, because my face will be buried between your thighs."

She inhaled sharply, her chest expanding. Her nipples poked through the material of her little white dress. "Then let's stay."

"Give me one minute." In what I now saw as the universe doing me a solid, the smaller-size class of SUV that I'd reserved hadn't been available at the airport, so they'd given me a Chevy Suburban that comfortably sat seven people in three rows of seats and featured a hefty amount of cargo space once you put the second and third row seats down. As I did so, I sent a quick prayer of thanks to the guy who'd talked me into going with the bigger vehicle rather than the compact.

I opened the door for Lexi and watched her crawl across the fuzzy, flat surface. The bottom of her dress rode up a little higher, exposing more of her skin and making my heart pump faster. The crotch of my jeans was tight as fuck.

But this wasn't about me. Not right now, anyway. And if there was a ghost of a chance it *could* be about me later on, I knew what I had to do.

Close the deal.

I got in after her and pulled the door shut. Stretching out diagonally in the rectangular space, Lexi leaned back on her elbows and started to laugh. "I don't know what to do."

"You don't have to do anything." I knelt between her legs and braced my hands on either side of her. My lips hovered just above hers. "Are you okay? You still want this?"

"Yes," she said.

My favorite word.

I lowered my mouth to hers, tasting the salt and lime from her margarita on her lips, and then on her tongue. For the moment, I kept my hands off her body, eager to earn her trust, willing to be patient. I wanted her to want this. To want me. So instead of groping her like a teenager—which is what the animal in me wanted to do—I used only my mouth.

But I'm pretty good with my mouth.

I teased her lips open with mine and stroked between them with my tongue. Then I pulled back, brushing my lips across hers with a whisper. When she grabbed my head with one hand and sealed our lips tight again, I changed the angle of the kiss to make it deeper. I caught her lower lip between my teeth. I moved my mouth over her jaw, down her neck, across her collarbone. I caressed her throat with my tongue in a way that foreshadowed what I might do with it on other, more sensitive body parts.

"Oh," she whispered softly.

Only then did I slide a hand up her thigh. Beneath her dress. I picked up my head and looked at her. "Yes?"



She nodded. “Yes.”

When my hand reached the apex of her legs, I rubbed my thumb softly and slowly over the thin material of her underwear. The softness beneath made my blood rush faster. “Yes?”

Another nod. “Yes.”

I hooked my fingers over the stretchy band around her hip. “Can I take these off?”

She brought her legs together and I dragged the panties down her legs, tossing them aside. Then I knelt between her feet and put my hands to the backs of her knees, slowly lifting them. The bottom of her dress slipped down the tops of her thighs and rested on her hips.

Scooting backward, I lowered my head and pressed gentle kisses on her thighs, in between which I spoke to her in a low but commanding tone. “If you want me to stop, you say so. If something feels good, you say so. If there’s something you want—more or less, slower or faster, softer or harder or deeper—you say so.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Nothing matters but you,” I said, brushing my nose and mouth against her pussy, letting her feel my breath and lips and the tip of my tongue. Gradually, I gave her a little more—a long, slow stroke up the center, a lingering caress at the top, a swirling motion over her clit that made her whimper. But I went slow—a ticking clock was no excuse for a rushed or sloppy game. And I didn’t want her to feel any kind of pressure. All I wanted was for her to surrender.

I told her how sweet she tasted, listened carefully to her breathing, paid attention to the sounds she made, noticed when her gasps became sighs and her sighs became moans. “That feels . . . incredible,” she said as I gently sucked her clit into my mouth.

When I sensed her hips beginning to move, I eased a finger inside her, trying not to groan with agonizing desire at the tight, wet, warmth of her. I could not get distracted thinking

about fucking her. I had to stay focused—this next part was crucial. If I could find that secret spot inside her, I could work my fingers and mouth together to make magic happen.

I spent a few minutes exploring, touching her this way and that, changing the angle of my head, adding another finger, flicking her faster with my tongue.

But while she seemed to be enjoying everything I was doing, I struggled to find that one enchanted little place that would unlock her pleasure.

And then.

I tipped her hips up slightly, which somehow allowed me to go a little deeper. I felt her insides grow tighter. I sucked a little harder. I felt her hands move into my hair and sensed victory closing in.

“Oh, my God,” she panted. “The party. It’s right there. It’s right there in the next room. I’m so close.”

Party in the next room?

I had no idea what the fuck she was talking about, but *I’m so close* was a very promising development.

“The door—oh God, Devlin, the door. It’s opening. It’s fucking opening. I can go in. I can go in! *Fuck yes, I’m going in!*”

Door?

I’d never been more confused in my life, but her hands tightened in my hair, her insides clenched around my fingers, and a moment later she cried out in ecstasy as the pulse of her climax beat like a drum against my tongue.

I didn’t stop until she begged me to.

“Oh my goodness,” she breathed as I wiped my mouth on my sleeve. “It worked. You did it. You solved the case of my missing O.”

I laughed. “It was there all along. I just had to find it.”

“You went in deep. I admire your dedication. And you definitely have talent. I mean . . .” Her entire body shivered

with an aftershock. “A-plus. No notes.”

“When I commit to something, I commit hard.” Speaking of hard, my cock was like granite. I adjusted myself, and she noticed.

“So those fifteen minutes.” She leaned back on her elbows again. “Are there more where those came from?”

My thigh muscles tensed. “As many as you want.”

She reached out and curled a hand into my shirt. “Good. I want more.”

“Right here, right now?” This cramped space would not be conducive to my best moves, but if she wanted me to fuck her right here, right now, the answer was *can do*.

“Yes,” she said. Now she was reaching for the button on my jeans. Tugging down the zipper. Yanking them down my hips. My erection sprang free and she wrapped her hand around it, worked her fist up and down my shaft. “Oh, God. It’s been so long.”

*My thoughts exactly.*

In fact, it had been so long since I’d had a woman’s eager hands on me, I was slightly worried I’d embarrass myself. I shoved my hand into my back pocket and pulled out my wallet, fumbling around until I located the condom and tore it open. I rolled it on in record time and pitched forward, positioning myself between her legs.

We both moaned as I slid inside her. She was hot and snug and wet, and I wanted to take my time and go slow, I really did, but she immediately grabbed my ass and pulled me in deep. Wrapped her legs around me. Began to rock her hips beneath mine.

I lost my mind—I couldn’t help it.

In no time at all, I was driving into her like a wild animal, primitive and predatory, frustrated by the way my thighs were shackled by my jeans. The interior of the Chevy was stiflingly hot, and the windows steamed up within minutes. Her sultry-sweet perfume emanated from her warm skin. I felt like a

teenager, desperately hoping to impress this girl he was fucking like a maniac in the backseat of his car, but unable to rein in the testosterone hurricane that was crashing through my body. And I *know* I moved like one—fast and frenzied, a chest-heaving, teeth-gnashing, hip-thrusting fuck-hammer with no control or finesse whatsoever. I hated myself for it—but I couldn't stop.

And the crazy thing was, she seemed to like it. She yanked at my shirt, and a button popped. She raked her nails through my hair and across my back. She filled her hands with my ass and dug her fingers into my flesh. She panted and gasped and said my favorite word—*yes*—over and over again.

I was close—too close. Determined to make this good for her, I summoned all my willpower and forced myself to quit the jackhammering and tune in to her needs. Lifting myself off her chest, I snuck a hand between us and used my thumb on her clit, keeping my cock buried inside her.

“Oh, God,” she whimpered. Her eyes were squeezed shut. “I'm there. I'm right there again. The door is opening. I don't know how you're doing it.”

“Don't worry about how.” Also hovering at the edge, I was more worried about when.

“Devlin.” Her eyes flew open and her hands clutched at my shirt. “I don't even know you,” she panted. “Are you—are you a good person?”

“Yes.” Fuck, she was beautiful.

“Tell me something good about you,” she begged.

I racked my brain and came up with something I thought she'd like. (Something true, by the way. I'm not *that* guy.) “I work with an organization that supports kids who've lost a parent,” I said quickly. “And I'm a counselor at their summer camp.”

“Yes!” she cried out, pulling me on top of her again. “Oh, my God, yes!”

Untethered by her words and hands and the way she moved, by the heat of her body and the way it clenched around

me, by the illicit thrill of fucking a gorgeous stranger in the backseat on a hot summer night, I gave myself over to it, groaning through a long, surging climax until I was completely spent.

When my body had quieted, I lifted myself from her chest, which was rising and falling rapidly. “You okay?”

“Fine. Better than fine.”

“Good.” I paused. “What was all that about a door?”

Her expression turned sheepish. “For the last six months, it’s been like there’s a party going on behind a closed door, but it’s locked. I can’t get in.”

“And tonight you got in?”

“Twice.” She smiled. “So what now?”

“That’s up to you. I’d be glad to take you home if you want. I’d bring you back to my place, but I’m staying with my dad, which might be slightly awkward, given the amount of noise I’m imagining we’ll make.”

“Was I loud?” She sounded a little embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I got carried away.”

“Hey.” I tipped her chin up. “You were fucking perfect. My only regret is that I didn’t make you shatter the windows.”

“I have some windows back at my place,” she offered. “You could try again.”

I grinned. “Challenge accepted.”

\* \* \*

Lexi decided to wait in the car while I went back into The Broken Spoke to tell my family I was leaving. After she got into the front seat, I made sure she locked the doors before hurrying back across the parking lot.

Inside the bar, I headed straight for the table. My brother Austin and his girlfriend, Veronica, were sitting there alone.

“Hey,” I said, slightly out of breath. “I’m gonna head out. Can you drive Mabel and Ari home?”

Neither of them said anything at first. Then Veronica cleared her throat. “Sure,” she said, smiling as her eyes traveled over my hair and haphazardly tucked-in shirt. Hopefully, they wouldn’t notice the missing button.

“What the hell happened to you?” Austin asked. “Why are you so sweaty?”

“It’s hot in here.” I tried to sound casual.

“Your hair’s all messed up too,” he said, starting to laugh. “You look like you’ve been through a tornado.”

I tried to smooth it. “So you’ll drive them home?”

“I’ll drive them home. Where are you off to?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I’m leaving with the brunette I saw earlier at the bar.”

Austin’s brow lifted and he checked his watch. “That was barely an hour ago.”

“Yeah, well, some of us know how to close the deal faster than others.” I couldn’t resist—it was widely known in our family that Austin had wasted a bunch of time fighting his feelings for Veronica, whom he’d hired as a nanny at the start of the summer.

“Have fun.” Veronica gave me a wave. “We’ll catch up with you tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.”

And if either one of them said another word in the next five seconds, I couldn’t have told you, because I was already halfway to the door. My mind was racing with anticipation at the night ahead, at all the things I wanted to do to Lexi . . . wait, Lexi what? Had I gotten her last name? As I hurried back across the parking lot, I tried to remember. I didn’t want to ask her if she’d already told me—it seemed like a dick move to forget a girl’s last name because you were too busy trying to get your tongue in her mouth.

And other places.

Fuck, that was a good time, I thought, picking up my pace to nearly a run.

I licked my lips. I could still taste her.

\* \* \*

The drive to her place took about twenty minutes. Other than giving me directions, she remained silent. I did too.

My hand on her thigh. My foot on the gas. My mind on the hours ahead.

I never did ask her last name.

In fact, we did very little talking at all that night.

I mean, words were exchanged, but they were hot and dirty. Quick and to the point. *You want it? God. Yes. Harder. Fuck me. Right there. Don't stop. Come for me.*

She was a fucking riot in bed—uninhibited and adventuresome. Athletic and flexible. Quick to recover, keen to please, hungry for pleasure. At one point, she got on top, and I nearly lost my mind watching her move up and down my cock, her hands on my chest, her hair tumbling around her shoulders, her perfect breasts bouncing as she rode me to the finish. A goddamn dream.

When I finally pulled my clothes back on, around four in the morning, she was lying on her stomach sideways across the bed. Arms thrown above her head. Cheek on the mattress. “You don’t have to go,” she said, her voice drowsy.

“I have things I have to do in the morning,” I said, buttoning my shirt.

“Okay.” Her eyes drifted shut.

When I was fully dressed, I paused and looked at her, asleep on the bed, her dark hair splayed across the white sheet. The rest of her bedding and all the pillows were on the floor—we’d gotten a little rough.

Crouching down, I put a hand on her head. “I had a really good time.”

“Me too.” Her eyes didn’t even open.

Downstairs, I pulled the door shut behind me and made sure it was locked. As I drove away, exhausted but content, I wondered again about her last name. And where she taught school. And why work was so stressful for her. At least I’d been able to help her with *one* problem. I chuckled as I recalled her door analogy. I’d successfully opened that door for her at least four times in the last six hours. If I lived around here, I wouldn’t mind being her doorman on a more frequent basis.

In fact, I wasn’t flying back to Boston until Tuesday night. I hadn’t gotten her number, but I knew where she lived. I could swing by before I left.

But just as quickly, I decided I better not. A night like this was really all I could offer.

She’d already gotten the best of me.



THREE

MY ALARM WENT off at seven.

Sitting up, I switched off the noise and pulled the sheet around my naked body, somewhat confused. Where was my comforter? And all my pillows? Why was I naked?

As my eyes focused, I noticed the pillows strewn about my room like boats tossed upon the beach after a storm. I smiled as memories from last night began to filter through the clouds in my brain. Things had gotten a little rough in here—I had the sore muscles and smell of sex on my skin to prove it.

But God, I'd had fun. The most fun I'd had in a long, long time. Maybe ever. I'd never had a one-night stand before—I'd always thought sex was better when it involved emotions. But there had been something so freeing about it. I hadn't felt any pressure or judgment or worries about *what this meant*. I just let go.

Dragging myself from the bed, I showered and dressed for work, moving a little slower than usual. Not so much because I was tired—although I was exhausted after so few hours of sleep—but because I kept zoning out, thinking about Devlin and last night. I ran out of time to blow out my hair, so I threw it up into a damp, messy bun. No amount of makeup was going to cover the dark circles under my eyes, but I did the best I could. And actually, I thought, scanning my reflection in the bathroom mirror, my skin did have a bit of a glow to it this morning—which caused my mind to drift away again.

By the time I left, I was running so late I didn't have time to stop for coffee. I'd have to make it at work.

On the ten-minute drive along the service road to Snowberry's main lodge, I decided to give Winnie a quick call. Even though it wasn't quite eight, she was usually up early with Michael.

"Hello?"

"Are you awake?"

"I have a two-year-old, of course I'm awake."

"Good, because I have big news."

She gasped. "What?"

"The runaway O has returned." I grinned all over again.

"Told you it would!" She laughed. "So was the dentist good with his drill or did she come back all on her own?"

"Neither. The dentist went home early, and I met someone else at the bar."

"What?" she squealed. "Tell me everything!"

"The short version is that he found her in the back of his Chevy Suburban in the parking lot of The Broken Spoke. Classy, right?"

"So classy." Winnie laughed. "Good for you!"

"It was good for me." I experienced a full-body shiver.

"So what'd he do that made the difference?"

"I don't know exactly. I mean, he definitely had some skills, but I think more than anything, he just *really* cared. He was all about consent too. And he was crazy hot and seemed super into me. It made me feel good."

"Of course he was into you," she said fiercely. "You're a total babe. Ten out of ten."

I laughed. "Thanks. He definitely helped restore some confidence. I know it sounds sort of nuts, but I just felt this instant connection with him."

"So who is he?"

“His name is Devlin,” I told her as I turned into Snowberry’s nearly empty employee lot. “He grew up in Cherry Tree Harbor, lives on the East Coast now, has eyes so blue you could make jewelry out of them, and he’s really good with his hands.”

She snickered. “I bet. What’s his last name?”

“You know what?” I pulled into a spot and put my car in park. “I don’t even know if he mentioned it. We didn’t talk that much. He took me home and stayed until four o’clock in the morning, and I could not tell you one more thing about him.”

“Seriously?”

“Wait—yes I can.” I grabbed my shoulder bag and got out of the car. “He’s an uncle, his mom died when he was nine, and he works for some organization that supports kids who have lost a parent.”

“Oh, wow! No wonder you felt such a connection to him. He sounds like a really good guy.”

“He was,” I said, heading for the lodge. “I’m kind of bummed he didn’t ask for my number or anything.”

“Why didn’t you get his? Your grandmother might be old-fashioned, but you’re a modern woman.”

“I don’t know. It was sort of understood that it was only a one-time, no-strings-attached, just-for-fun kind of thing. Plus, he lives on the East Coast,” I said. “That’s far.”

“It’s not *that* far,” she argued.

“I don’t want someone who will always be leaving, Win. I need to meet someone who can be happy *here*, because this is where my heart is.” I stopped moving for a moment and glanced at the Alpine-style inn my great-grandparents had built, at the mountain beyond it where I’d learned to ski, at the woods where I’d played in the summertime. Somewhere beyond the mountain was the inland lake where I’d learned to swim. In the winter, when it froze over, my mom would take me ice skating on it. I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of freshly cut grass and cedar trees, and felt a surge of something

akin to homesickness, although home was all around me. “I can’t let it go.”

“So what’s next?” she asked as I let myself into the building. “Can you prevent the sale?”

“I don’t think so.” I walked past the administrative offices toward the front desk. The faint scent of my grandfather’s pipe tobacco still lingered in the hallway. “And if I can’t inherit without a husband, my only choice is to fight for a deal that doesn’t involve demolition, starting tomorrow at lunch with the rep from Black Diamond Resorts. I need to be a total badass at that table.”

“You can do it,” she said. “What are you going to wear?”

“No clue. My wardrobe leans more toward athleisure than badass businesswoman. You don’t happen to have a suit I could borrow, do you? Something that says, ‘Don’t mess with me?’” Winnie and I were built similarly, although I was taller.

“Absolutely,” she said. “Can you make the drive down tonight after work? We’ll turn you into Badass Business Barbie. That corporate clown won’t stand a chance.”

I laughed. “Perfect. I’m off at five, so I’ll be there around seven.”

“See you then.”

\* \* \*

My eight to five shift was quiet. It mostly involved checking guests out after the long weekend and despairing at the paltry reservations in the books for the winter months. I had a fair amount of downtime, the first couple hours of which I spent sifting through hot, sweaty memories of last night. I wondered when Devlin was leaving town. I wondered if he was with his family today. I wondered if I’d ever see him again and *really* hoped I would. Maybe he’d pop into The Broken Spoke next time he was home. Would that be at Thanksgiving?

Winnie was right—I should have gotten his number.

Shoving thoughts of Devlin aside, I pulled out the notebook where I'd written down all the reasons Gran should let me inherit instead of sell. With a frown, I wrote a big X across the page and flipped to a new one. Time for plan B—convince Black Diamond Resorts to invest instead of demolish.

I began writing down all the things I'd do if I could get the money to do them. As I worked my way down the page, hope sprouted somewhere deep inside me. This could work!

My first priority would be renovating the main lodge itself—the lobby, the guest rooms, the bar and restaurant. Then I thought about what we could add. A gift shop. A ski shop. Maybe even a cute coffee and pastry shop.

Next on my list was upgrading the lifts and snowmaking technologies. What we had now was adequate but not great. In order to attract more skiers, we needed to offer the best possible conditions and experience. While we couldn't compete with Colorado or Utah or any of the mountain resorts out west, we could become the top-tier small midwestern ski destination. Then once we made the changes, we needed to invest money in marketing. People had forgotten about Snowberry Lodge. We had to show them why they should come back.

Finally, we had to improve our summer operations—we needed events and attractions that would bring people here during the off-season so we didn't die during the warmer months. Concerts. Festivals. Wellness retreats. Romantic getaway specials. Family vacation packages. Maybe we could partner with a nearby golf course or winery and offer some discounts. When I was little, my mom would arrange music performances on the back lawn, and I had lovely memories of stretching out on a picnic blanket and looking at the stars while a string quartet played nearby, the katydids chirping along. I loved those summer nights.

Energized, I looked around at the family photographs on the walls in the lobby—generations of McIntyres who'd given their all to this place. I wouldn't let them down.

At three o'clock, Tabitha strolled in, an hour late for her shift, dressed in a hot pink velour track suit. "Hey," she said without lifting her eyes from her phone.

I closed my notebook and dropped it into my bag under the desk. "Where were you?"

"I was doing a photo shoot a couple hours away. The light was great, so I didn't want to cut it short." She continued to study her screen, probably looking at pictures of herself. It was one of her favorite activities. Although, truth be told, if I looked like Tabitha, I'd probably enjoy it too. While her personality could be tart, she had the sweet, ethereal beauty of a Renaissance Madonna—the long golden hair, the high smooth forehead, the flawless ivory skin.

"Photo shoot for what?"

"Just something for my blog," she said briskly, setting her phone aside and looking at me for the first time. "You look a little rough."

"I'm tired. Didn't get much sleep."

She smirked, folding her arms over her chest. "Late night with Dr. Smalley?"

"No. Just a late night."

"With who?"

"With nobody."

She rolled her eyes. "You never have late nights. You must have been with someone."

"It's no one you know," I said casually, turning my attention to the computer screen, like I was hunting for a reservation.

"Try me."

I thought about shutting down the conversation then and there, but Tabitha was always bragging about all the guys interested in her.

"His name is Devlin," I said.

“Devlin what?”

“Actually, I didn’t get his last name.”

“You went home with someone and you didn’t even know his last *name*?” she shouted just as a couple was entering the lobby through the front door.

“Will you be quiet?” I gave her a sharp glance. “I didn’t go home with him.” The couple bypassed the front desk with a wave and headed for the elevators. I turned to Tabitha. “I brought him home with me.”

My cousin laughed. “Same difference. Awfully trusting, aren’t you? What if he was a total creeper?”

“He wasn’t.” But rather than give in to the urge to gush about my night, I decided to change the subject. “Hey, has Gran ever mentioned her will to you?”

“No. Why?” Tabitha’s wide-set eyes narrowed. “Is this about the pearls? Because those are mine. She promised them to me years ago.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not about the pearls. We’ve never discussed her will at all. But yesterday, out of the blue, she told me that whoever inherits Snowberry has to be married.”

“Oh.” Tabitha looked way less interested now that the pearls were not in question. “Who cares? This place is going under anyway. I hope Gran sells fast. She said once it happens, I can have my inheritance early. I just love Gran.”

I was about to lose my shit when our grandmother came walking into the reception area from the back hallway. “Hello, darlings,” she said, bringing with her the scent of lilies of the valley and mothballs.

Tabitha gave her a kiss on the cheek. “You look beautiful, Gran. Is that a new sweater?”

Gran looked down at the floral-embroidered cardigan I’d seen her wear a hundred times. “Aren’t you sweet? No, this isn’t new. I just unzipped my fall clothing from the storage bags.” She turned to me. “How was your evening with Dr. Smalley?”



“It was short,” I said.

Tabitha coughed noisily.

“He decided he’s not quite ready to date again, Gran,” I told her. “He needs more time to heal.”

My grandmother’s narrow shoulders drooped. “What a shame.”

“Don’t worry. She still had a good time last night.” Tabitha’s eyes twinkled.

“Anyway.” I gave my cousin a murderous look behind Gran’s back. “What time is lunch tomorrow? And where?”

“It’s at noon. The representative from Black Diamond Resorts will meet us in the restaurant.”

“I’ll get there early and grab a good table,” I told her.

“Why are *you* going to this lunch?” Tabitha narrowed her eyes in my direction. “Should I come too?”

“You’ll be working the desk,” I reminded her. “You’ve got the first shift tomorrow.”

“But how do I know my interests are going to be represented fairly?” She pouted. “I stand to profit from this sale too, right Gran?”

“Let’s just see how it goes tomorrow,” our grandmother said smoothly. “I haven’t made up my mind about the sale quite yet, but you both have to trust me.”

Tabitha looked worried for a second, but then she rearranged her face into a more serene expression. “I trust you, Gran. You look a little tired. Can I get you some tea?”

“That sounds lovely, dear. I’ll be in my office. Can you bring it to me there?”

“Of course. I’ll just be a minute.” Tabitha gave me a triumphant look before hurrying down the hallway toward our small employee kitchen and break room.

Gran looked at me, her expression disappointed. “So it didn’t go well with Dr. Smalley?”

“Not really.”

“You know, my podiatrist is recently divorced.”

I held up a hand. “Gran, don’t even think about it.”

\* \* \*

“That one. Definitely.” Winnie sounded confident.

“You think?” Standing in front of the full-length mirror on the back of her closet door, I turned to the side. “The skirt might be a little short.”

Winnie laughed and dropped onto the foot of the bed. “Well, your legs are longer than mine, but that suit fits you like a glove, and the color is gorgeous on you.”

“You think red is the right move?” I faced the glass again and studied my reflection. The ripe-tomato color did look nice with my dark hair and summer tan.

“Oh, yeah. Red says power. Confidence. Fire. Don’t fuck with me or you will get burned.”

I nodded. That was exactly what I needed to project. I rose up on my bare toes. “What kind of shoe? You think heels?”

“Yes. Nude or black. Spiky high heels that suggest they might puncture an organ if necessary.”

I laughed. “And what about my hair? Up or down?”

“Hmm. Let me see it down.”

I tugged out the bun I’d hastily fashioned this morning, and my hair spilled around my shoulders, almost halfway down my back. It was still a little damp.

Tightening her ponytail, Winnie got off the bed and moved to one side of me, eyes narrowed. “Down is sexier, which could be its own kind of power move.”

I frowned at her. “I don’t want this guy to think I’m sexy, Win. I want him to think I’m tough. Smart. Capable.”

“Then up,” Winnie decided. “But not messy up. I’d go with a twist or a low bun. Like this.” She gathered my hair into a tail and then wound it into a chignon at the nape of my neck. Meeting my eyes in the mirror, she smiled. “Hot. I know that’s not the point, but you’re going to look like a million bucks when you walk into that restaurant. That guy won’t know what hit him.”

“Thanks. I really need this to work.”

Winnie met my eyes in the mirror. “Stay confident, Lex. You got this.”

\* \* \*

By quarter to twelve the next day, I was seated at a table in the back of the restaurant, repeating her words in my head. *You got this. You got this. You got this.*

I was wearing the red suit and high heels. I had a perfect low bun and a bold red lip. I’d caught up on sleep, worked out this morning, and meditated for a full fifteen minutes, even though I’d gotten antsy and checked the timer after five.

I was ready.

I would be polite but firm. We would not consider their offer without serious renegotiation that involved preserving Snowberry Lodge for future generations. We were looking for investors, not a buyer.

Sipping a cup of coffee, I glanced around at the decor in the restaurant, which was called the Alpine Bar & Grill. I wasn’t often in here during the day, and I had to admit the sunlight coming in through the windows wasn’t doing the place any favors. The patterned carpet was worn. The mostly empty tables and chairs were dark and dated. The fake edelweiss centerpieces were embarrassing. If the view of the mountain wasn’t so pretty, I’d have asked the manager to shut the drapes.

Looking out the window calmed me, so I kept my eyes focused on the beautiful vista beyond the glass. The early

afternoon sun on the green slope side. The clear blue sky. A chairlift was running, and I could see hikers on it. I recalled riding it to the top with my mom and dad during summer days. We'd take a little picnic, eat it at the top, and then hike down an easy back trail. The memory made me smile, and I remembered how my dad would quiz me on all the different trees that grew on the mountain, or teach me to identify a bird by its song, or—

“There she is.”

My daydream was abruptly ended by my grandmother's voice. I looked over as she approached the table, a tall, dark-haired man in a suit behind her. The shark.

Steeling myself, I rose to my feet as Gran stepped aside and made the introduction.

But it wasn't necessary.

The shark and I were already *very* well-acquainted.

Back-of-his-Chevy, top-of-my-sheets, rolling-around-naked-until-four-in-the-morning acquainted.

The room around me spun.

Gran was clueless, of course. “Mr. Buckley, this is my granddaughter, Alexandra McIntyre. And darling, this is Devlin Buckley, representing Black Diamond Resorts.”

My jaw was on the floor. I had to grab the back of the chair next to me to stay upright.

By contrast, Devlin didn't appear thrown in the slightest. Disarmingly gorgeous in his suit and tie, he held out his hand and smiled. “Ms. McIntyre. A pleasure.”

Polite instinct had me taking his hand. My fingers trembled as he squeezed my palm, but his handshake was perfectly steady. I searched for my voice and couldn't find it. This didn't make sense. Devlin was the representative from Black Diamond Resorts? Devlin was here to sink his teeth into Snowberry Lodge? Devlin with the blue eyes and chiseled jaw and magic tongue was the bad guy?

Numb and confused, I watched as he pulled out Gran's chair and sat her before taking the seat across from me. He seemed perfectly composed.

I, on the other hand, couldn't seem to make my legs bend at the knee to sit down again. I just stared at him while he unfolded his napkin, laid it across his lap, and laughed politely at something my grandmother said. How on earth could he be so unfazed that the girl he'd charmed and ravaged so thoroughly just the night before last was the very same girl whose property he'd come to plunder?

That's when it struck me.

*He must have known.*

FOUR

*devlin*

THE MOMENT I SAW HER, it was like someone had taken a sledgehammer to my chest. All the wind had been knocked out of me.

But I'd done my best to hide it while reading her expression and her body language, determined to follow her lead. If she didn't want her grandmother to know we'd met before, I wasn't going to say anything.

But Lexi appeared dumbstruck—she hadn't spoken or smiled or even sat down. She continued to stand at the side of the table with a dazed look on her face, her mouth hanging open slightly.

Then her eyes narrowed. Her focus sharpened. "You knew."

"I'm sorry?" I glanced at Martha McIntyre quickly, but she seemed completely baffled.

"That night." Lexi's eyes blazed with fury. "You knew who I was."

"Have you two met?" Martha looked back and forth between us.

"We have indeed." Lexi kept her searing gaze on my face while speaking to her grandmother. "Gran, could you excuse us for just a moment?" Without waiting for the old lady to respond, Lexi headed away from the table, jerking her head for me to follow.

"I'll be right back," I said, rising to my feet and placing my napkin on the table. "My apologies for leaving you alone

at the table.”

“That’s alright.” Martha’s expression was bewildered, but she waved a blue-veined hand in a gesture of conciliation.

I trailed Lexi between tables to the front of the restaurant, where she veered left into the bar, which wasn’t open at this time of day. She looked so different than she had the other night. A tailored business suit in wrath-of-God red instead of a soft white dress. Spiky black heels instead of strappy little sandals. Dark hair tucked into stern-librarian bun instead of flowing over her shoulders. Recalling the way it brushed across my chest while she moved her body over mine sent a surge of arousal straight to my cock. No matter what she wore, she was stunning. I couldn’t tear my eyes off those long legs in that short skirt.

But as she whipped around and faced me with hellfire in her eyes, I knew she hadn’t dragged me away from the table for a quickie.

“How could you?” she seethed.

“How could I what?”

“How could you be so low as to seek me out, pick me up, and do all those *things* to me when you knew I’d never have given you the time of day had I known who you were?” She shook her head. “Was it just a sick game for you? Fuck the granddaughter before you fuck over the entire family?”

Wait a minute—she thought I’d scammed her?

“Lexi, come on,” I said, my tone calm and reasonable. “I had no idea who you were.”

“Or maybe you thought it would butter me up.” She folded her arms over her chest. “Was that it? You find my missing orgasm and give me the best night of my life, and you think I’ll just hand over the keys to the Snowberry Lodge? Well, that’s not how it’s going to work.”

“The best night of your life, really?” I smiled. I couldn’t help it. “Thanks.”



She poked my chest three times with an index finger. “*You’re not welcome!* And I don’t believe for one second you didn’t know exactly what you were doing. You lied to me.”

My composure slipped a bit. I was a lot of things—ambitious, driven, and not above using my charm when it served my purpose, but I wasn’t a liar. Integrity was important to me. “I didn’t lie, Lexi. We just didn’t do a whole lot of talking. You were the one who said you didn’t want to discuss work—I followed your lead.”

“And *speaking* of work, you told me you worked for an organization that supports kids who’ve lost a parent!” Her eyes teared up unexpectedly, and she turned away from me, like she was embarrassed. “Did you really lose your mom when you were nine or was that part of your scheme to get me to trust you?”

“Hey.” Taking her gently by the shoulders, I turned her to face me and spoke firmly but quietly. “I really lost my mom when I was nine. I’d never make something like that up. And I said I worked *with* an organization that supports kids who’ve lost a parent. That’s the truth. It’s a passion project, not my day job—the day job supports my work with the organization.”

She pressed her lips together. “What about the summer camp? Are you really a counselor?”

“Yes. Every summer for the last six years, I’ve spent my vacation time at Camp Lemonade in southeastern Massachusetts. I’ve got the T-shirt to prove it.” My hands were still on her shoulders, and I rubbed them with my thumbs. “Hey, come on. We had a great time together. This is just a strange coincidence.”

She didn’t say anything, but she didn’t knock my hands away either.

“And maybe this is a good thing,” I went on. “We already know we have great chemistry and play nicely together.” I tried the easy grin that had worked so well Sunday night. “Let’s use that to negotiate the best possible deal for the both of us.”

Now she knocked my hands off her. “No way, mister. This is too much coincidence. I still say you knew who I was and got me to admit all kinds of private things, and then you—you bedeviled me with your magic tongue!”

“*Bedeviled* you? Be fair, Lexi. It was your choice to leave with me, and I asked you over and over again if what I was doing was okay. I would have stopped at any time.” I paused. Rubbed a hand over my jaw. “Magic tongue, huh?”

Her cheeks flushed. “Okay fine, maybe you didn’t take advantage of me like *that*, but I’ll never believe you didn’t know exactly what you were doing. You probably thought this would be easy—coming out here and steam-rolling my little old grandmother into accepting your offer.”

“It’s a good offer,” I said with a shrug. “If it were my grandmother, I’d tell her to take it.”

“I don’t care what you’d tell anyone.” She took a step closer to me—so close I could smell her perfume, and the scent woke up all kinds of sensory memories in me. I wanted to crush my mouth to hers, set her up on that bar, and bury my head between her thighs all over again.

Wisely, I decided now wasn’t the time.

“Snowberry Lodge isn’t just a paycheck to me,” she said, her voice catching. “It’s not about the money. It’s about honoring my family and the place we’ve always called home. It’s about continuing tradition. It’s about offering an alternative to the overpriced corporate amusement parks calling themselves ski resorts these days.”

“Those places are making money,” I pointed out, my tone matter-of-fact but not mean. “Snowberry isn’t.”

“But it could,” she insisted, the stubborn tone back in her voice. “With some investment and fresh ideas, it could.”

“Whose ideas?”

“Mine. I could turn things around.” Her chin came up, her eyes daring me to say something dismissive or maybe even laugh.

But I wasn't a jerk or a fool. Insulting her would be the absolute worst thing I could do right now. People give what they get—what I wanted to do was make her feel valued and important. She was the one who could walk away from this deal today, and I was the one who needed to seal it.

I tucked my hands into my pockets, forming my next sentence carefully. "What do you do at Snowberry?"

"I run the ski school in the winter and the front desk in the summer. But I've worked here all my life. I've done just about every job."

I nodded. "I'm sure you know a lot about what it would take to run this place."

"But you don't think I could do it." Her tone kept its edge.

"I think you could do anything you set your mind to. You're obviously smart, determined, and emotionally invested. And I get it—I'm from this area too. It's home to me. It means family and childhood. There are memories here I carry with me everywhere I go." Our eyes locked, and a look of recognition passed between us, a reminder that we shared an experience that had forever left a mark. It sent warmth rippling through my body, like the rings made by a stone tossed into a still pond.

I ignored it. Focused on the task at hand.

"What you're proposing would take money," I went on. "Do you have it?"

"I'm going to get it," she said confidently.

"From where?" I'd seen the numbers—there was little chance a bank was going to give her the kind of money needed to turn this place before it went completely bankrupt. "And by when?"

"You don't need to know that," she said, and I knew right then and there she had not secured any kind of loan.

"Do you have a business plan?"

"You don't need to know that either." Her neck and face were growing mottled with blotchy pink spots. "All you need

to know is that we won't be selling to you—not today and not ever!" She elbowed me aside and marched off. As she reached the end of the bar, she tossed a furious look over her shoulder. "Now I'm *glad* I dumped a margarita on you!"

I would have laughed if the situation hadn't been so dire.

When she was gone, I rubbed the back of my neck, cursing softly. Black Diamond Resorts was getting antsy, and my boss was breathing down my neck. I'd basically guaranteed I could get this deal done by the end of the summer, which was why I'd been assigned to this account. Now it would look like I'd written a check I couldn't cash, or I'd botched it somehow.

Maybe I had, however inadvertently. I'd have to work extra hard to turn this ship around. But how?

Lexi clearly had her grandmother's ear. I'd have to win her over somehow. I'd done it once, right? I could do it again. In fact, I'd enjoy the challenge. Straightening my tie, I left the bar and walked back to the table.

But to my surprise and disappointment, Lexi wasn't there. Only Martha sat with a cup of tea, looking out the window, her expression forlorn.

I took my seat again. "I'm sorry about that," I said, replacing my napkin on my lap.

"I'm sorry too." Martha aimed worried eyes toward Lexi's vacant chair. "My granddaughter apparently isn't feeling well. She won't be joining us for lunch."

"I hope it's nothing serious." Wondering exactly what Lexi had told her grandmother, I looked at the cup of coffee she left behind and noticed the two empty half-and-half pods. One torn-open sugar packet.

"I'm not sure what it is. She was so determined to be at this meeting, and then all of a sudden, she wanted nothing to do with it." The old woman studied me with shrewd eyes. "She seems to have something against you."

"We met recently," I conceded, deciding to be truthful in a limited capacity. "And I'm afraid we didn't realize who the

other was at the time. I think Lexi feels I withheld that information.”

“And did you?”

“No. I did not. We simply didn’t discuss our jobs.” *We were too busy fucking*, I thought, picking up the menu and looking over its traditional but uninspired fare.

“Well, I suppose that would explain why she just snatched up her purse and left.” Sighing, she set down her teacup. “She gets moods, you know.”

I smiled. “Don’t we all?”

“I suppose so, but Lexi has always been so stubbornly governed by her emotions. She lacks the logic to temper the feelings. My husband was just the same way—so was her father. They *feel* things so deeply, it clouds the judgment.”

“You just described my younger brother and sister to a T,” I said.

“You’re the oldest of three siblings?” She regarded me with interest.

“Actually, I’m the middle of five. I have two older brothers as well.”

“What a coincidence!” Her face brightened. “I was the middle child of five siblings too!”

I felt the tide turning in my favor. People generally responded better to people they thought were like them. Common ground was a good thing. So after the server came by and took our orders, I immediately returned to the topic of family. “Did you grow up around here, Mrs. McIntyre?”

“Chicago,” she said. “And it’s Martha, please. I was a city girl. But we used to vacation up this way in the summer and winter. I met my husband at Snowberry when I was just seventeen.”

“You must have a lot of memories here.”

“I do,” she said wistfully. “What about you? Where did you grow up?”

“Not too far from here. Cherry Tree Harbor.”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh, I just adore Cherry Tree Harbor. I used to take my sons there during the summer. They loved to ride the ferry boat.”

“It’s still running. Same captain for the last forty years, and he took it over from his father before him.”

“Isn’t that something?” Her eyes grew misty. “Family traditions are wonderful. Which is why I wish we didn’t have to consider selling Snowberry.”

I took a little time with my reply. “Family traditions *are* wonderful. It’s important to remember and respect those who came before, but when it comes to business, staying stuck in the past can hurt you.”

“I know.” She picked up her tea again and sipped. “I tried to tell my husband that for many years, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“Change can be difficult for many people,” I said. “But businesses need to adapt or they won’t survive. Many smaller resorts have been in the position you’re in now. I know it isn’t easy. But wouldn’t you prefer to see Snowberry sold for a generous price, one that would ensure the comfort of you and your family for generations, rather than watch it die and walk away with nothing but debt?”

“Certainly I would,” she said, her expression troubled. “But my preferences aren’t the only ones that matter.”

“Lexi mentioned she’d like to take over,” I said casually. “Is that something you’re considering?”

She sighed. “Unfortunately for Alexandra, she cannot inherit Snowberry unless she’s married. It’s always been that way, and my husband and I agreed before he died that it should stay that way. I know it seems old-fashioned, but I think it’s for the best.”

Well. That was a new wrinkle.

I took a drink of water. “She’s aware of this?”

“Yes,” Martha said. “I just told her a few days ago, and she’s quite upset about it. But contrary to what she might think, this isn’t just about me wanting her to settle down and have a family, although I do worry about her being alone. I even tried to set her up with my dentist the other night, but it didn’t go very well.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I hid my grin behind my glass.

“I just don’t think she understands the toll it would take on her,” Martha went on. “Not just financially, but physically and emotionally. She’d turn herself inside out for this place, entirely on her own, without any support. And if she failed, what then? She’d blame herself. And she’d have no one there to hold her up.”

Our food arrived, which gave me ample time to process what she’d told me and consider how to proceed. “I take it there’s no spouse on the horizon?” I picked up a quarter of my club sandwich.

“No.” Martha sprinkled a little pepper over her soup. “She had a steady relationship for several years, but it ended last summer. Her fiancé got a job opportunity out west, and she couldn’t bring herself to leave Snowberry.”

“She was engaged?”

“Briefly.” She hesitated. “She was quite hurt when he left. But she wouldn’t go with him.”

“I understand.” I experienced a pang of sympathy for Lexi. Not just because of the broken engagement, but because it didn’t seem right that just because she was single, she wouldn’t be given a chance to prove herself. She could have gone out west with her fiancé, but she’d stayed.

“Are you married, Mr. Buckley?”

“No. My career keeps me very busy. I don’t have a lot of time for a relationship.”

“You sound like Lexi.” Her tone made it clear that was not a compliment. “Pardon me for asking, but how old are you?”

“I’ll be twenty-nine on Sunday.”

She clucked her tongue. “I don’t know what’s wrong with your generation that you wait so long to settle down and start your families. Work isn’t everything.”

“No, but I enjoy what I do. I’m sure Lexi does too. And I can certainly understand her attachment to the place where she grew up.”

Martha ate a spoonful or two of soup. Sipped her tea. Sat back in her chair. “Mr. Buckley, I’ll be frank. There are currently no other bids for Snowberry on the table. I’m too old and tired to continue running the place. I can’t deed it to Alexandra if she doesn’t have a husband. And your client’s offer is generous.”

“It’s the best you’ll get,” I said confidently, but without arrogance.

She dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “Would your client conceive of purchasing Snowberry and keeping it open?”

I shook my head, unwilling to mislead her. “No. They’ve made their intentions clear. It would be demolished.”

“All of it? Would they consider leaving a few things in place? Perhaps they could hire Alexandra to run the operations here? Keep ties to the family?”

I hesitated. Black Diamond had been firm on this—I had no room to negotiate. “I want to be completely transparent with you, so I have to say no.”

“I appreciate that. You seem like a trustworthy fellow.” She studied me a little more intently. “Mr. Buckley, I’m inclined to sell. But I really want my granddaughter to be on board, and that may take a little more effort. Lexi has attachments to this place that go beyond simply wishing things could stay the same.”

I said nothing, giving her the space to elaborate, if she wanted to.

“Both her parents died in a car accident when she was nine. Their ashes are scattered along the mountaintop.”



The pang I'd felt earlier became an ache within my chest, a fault line cracking open. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"It was tragic for everyone—my son and his wife were wonderful people, and I miss them every day. And maybe their loss did contribute to my husband's reluctance to make changes. Maybe he, like Alexandra, thought that if things *looked* the same as before, they'd *feel* the same. Or maybe it was meant to honor them. I don't know for sure." Her paper-thin voice wavered. "Grief is very personal."

"It is." I cleared my throat and reached for my water, focusing on the icy-cold liquid sliding over my tongue, unwilling to let any buried memories surface just now.

"Anyway, letting go of this place is more complicated for her. She's holding on for many different reasons." Her eyes met mine. "And money isn't one of them."

"I'd be glad to speak with her, if you think that will help."

Martha McIntyre sat up taller and beamed. "What a marvelous idea. I'll give you her phone number."

\* \* \*

I walked out of the restaurant with Lexi's number in my contacts, but I knew better than to think she'd have a conversation with me over the phone. Even if she answered a call from an unknown number, the second she realized it was me, she'd hang up. For that reason, I decided to take advantage of the fact that I knew where she lived. If she wanted to slam the door in my face, fine—but I felt like I'd have a better chance to convince her of my sincerity if she could look in my eyes.

(I mentioned I'm not above using my charm when it serves my purpose, right?)

But I couldn't help thinking this served *her* purpose too. There was no way she was going to convince her grandmother to hand her the deed to this resort—not without a husband. And even if she somehow managed to circumvent the will, the

place was going to go under without serious money behind it, fast. Her best option was to take her share of the sale price and start over somewhere new.

You couldn't live in the past. You had to keep moving forward.

It took me a little time to wind my way toward Lexi's condominium complex. I knew roughly where it was, but because we'd approached it from the highway the other night, I hadn't realized its proximity to Snowberry Lodge.

Also, I'd had other things on my mind, like getting her naked. Feeling those legs wrapped around me. Putting my tongue on those perky little nipples poking through the white material of her dress.

Fuck. Shifting in the driver's seat, I adjusted the crotch of my pants.

As I followed the service road from the lodge around the perimeter of the resort toward the area where I thought her condo was located, I couldn't help noticing that Snowberry *did* still have some charm. The area was beautiful, the grounds were well-kept, if a little shabby, and there was something romantic about the place. Something nostalgic. I could see a certain kind of person being drawn to this rather than to a mega-resort. It was sweet and peaceful.

I found myself thinking about the changes I would make to modernize it while retaining its quaint personality. What a rebranding would look like, both in person and in the marketing. How I'd sell investors on the idea. What the talking points would be. The seed of a new challenge tried to take root, and I immediately brushed it off.

My challenge was to close this deal for Black Diamond Resorts. Get the promotion I deserved. Get the raise and corner office and year-end bonus that accompanied it. Upgrade my apartment, my car, maybe my watch. Book a trip to a five-star resort somewhere tropical. I liked nice things.

But no one just handed you life's prizes. You had to win them. I was good at the game, and I prided myself on playing

it fair and square.

But I wasn't completely selfish—I liked giving back too. My work with Camp Lemonade meant a lot to me. My siblings and I had been lucky. After our mom died, we'd had our dad and other family and a tightly knit small-town community there to support us. But a lot of kids didn't have that, or their families lacked the resources for counseling.

I wasn't planning to get married or have children of my own, but when I saw those kids laughing and enjoying themselves for two weeks every summer, able to forget everything and just run free and have fun, I understood the instinct to be a father. To take care of someone. It just felt good.

When Lexi's condo building came into view, I drove up the hill into the lot and pulled into one of the spots marked *GUEST*. Checking my reflection in the visor mirror, I messed with my hair a little, checked my teeth, and examined my jaw for any nicks from this morning's shave. Then I got out of the car and climbed the porch steps to her door.

She had a welcome mat that read *Cead Mile Failte*, which I knew meant *a hundred thousand welcomes* in Gaelic. I knocked on the door and prayed for the luck of the Irish.

Didn't work. She opened it, took one look at me, and slammed it again.

I knocked once more. "Lexi, come on. Can we talk?"

"No! I can't even believe you had the nerve to show up here."

"Would you rather I called first? Your grandmother gave me your number."

"Oh my God. Tell me she didn't."

Pulling my phone from my suit jacket pocket, I called her. It rang a few times. "You going to answer, or should I leave a message?"

She picked up. "Don't bother."

“So are you going to let me in?” I stared at the thick wooden door that separated us.

“Not on your life.”

“Why not? Are you busy?”

“I will be in a minute—changing my phone number.”

“Your doormat here says a hundred thousand welcomes.”

“So?”

“All I need is one.”

“You had your one!” she shouted. “And you tricked me to get it!”

“No, I didn’t. Look, Lexi. Let’s not fight. Your grandmother asked me to speak with you.”

“Then speak.”

“Can’t we talk face to face?”

“No. I don’t trust you.” She paused. “Or myself. It’s better if I can’t see you.”

That made me smile. “Okay, fine. We’ll talk on the phone. Let me sit down.” I lowered myself into the Adirondack chair next to her front door. “You have a nice view,” I told her, scanning the woods across from her building.

“Enjoy it for the next sixty seconds because that’s how long you’re allowed to sit on my porch.”

“Your grandmother wants you to be happy,” I said.

“Sure. On *her* terms.”

“She doesn’t want to go through with the sale without your approval.”

“She doesn’t need my approval.”

“Well, she’d like it.” I paused. “*I’d* like it.”

She barked out a laugh. “What do you care?”

“I’m not the villain here, Lexi. I’m trying to negotiate a deal that’s good for both sides.”

“This is just a *job* for you. It’s my *life*.”

“Fair enough.” I thought for a moment. “Can I be honest?”

“Oh, *now* he’s honest.”

“I’ve seen the numbers, Lexi. This resort is going under. I’m sorry, because I know what this place means to you, but it’s true. The question is, do you want to walk away with nothing or with the means to start over somewhere new?”

She didn’t answer right away, and hope had me holding my breath. Was she coming around?

One second later the door next to me flew open and she stepped out onto the porch. The red suit and stiletto heels were gone, and she stood barefoot in jeans and a white tank top. The makeup had been scrubbed off, and her hair tumbled around her shoulders in soft waves I wanted to run my fingers through.

“Hi,” I said, rising to my feet.

But she hadn’t come out here for niceties. Her eyes were feverish, and she spoke in the most ferocious whisper you can imagine. “You have no idea what this place means to me.”

Passion and determination emanated from her body like heatwaves—I could feel how deeply she cared, how hard she’d fight to hang on. I saw the nine-year-old girl who’d lost her parents, who didn’t want to experience that loss all over again. The urge to put my arms around her, to wrap her up and shield her from the inevitable was so sudden and unbearable, I had to take a step back.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You’re right. I don’t.”

“Nor do you know what lengths I’ll go to in order to save it.”

“You can’t save it, Lexi. Not without a miracle. Or a marriage.”

She stuck her hands on her hips. “Oh, you know about that too? What a surprise, you went snooping into my grandmother’s estate planning. You probably knew about it before I did!”

“I did not snoop! Your grandmother told me about it at lunch today after you stormed off like a toddler.” Great, now I was name-calling. This woman had me so far off my game, I couldn’t even find the court.

“I left so I wouldn’t have to look at your face while you swindled my poor grandmother.”

“There’s no swindling, Lexi. Your grandmother will walk away with millions. You could too—just take the deal.”

She folded her arms over her chest, her jaw set, her eyes focused on the trees to her right. Beyond them, the top of the mountain was visible.

“You could do anything you wanted with that money,” I cajoled. “Start a business, buy a house, travel the world, give it all away—whatever you want.” I stuck my phone back in my pocket and studied her beautiful, stubborn face. When I asked the next question, I was genuinely curious about the answer. “What is it you want?”

She said nothing for a moment. Birds sang in the woods. An airplane painted a vapor trail across the sky. The wind ruffled her hair. Finally she looked me in the eye. “I want to save my home.”

That crack in my chest widened. “You can’t, Lexi. It doesn’t bring me any pleasure to say that, because I like you, but you can’t save this place.”

“Oh no?” She rose up on her toes and poked my chest. “Watch me.”



WINNIE CALLED a few minutes after I shut the door on Devlin.

“Well? How did it go? Did you slay the dragon with your stiletto heels?”

“Not even close.” I stuck two halves of a plain bagel in the toaster. When I’d walked out of the restaurant, I hadn’t been hungry at all, but somehow fighting with Devlin had restored my appetite. “The dragon just drove away from my condo in perfect condition.”

“What was he doing at your condo?”

While I rinsed off an apple, I told her about what had transpired at the restaurant.

“No. Fucking. Way,” she said. “The shark was the *same* guy who found the missing O? What are the chances?”

“Zero!” I cut the apple into slices with more force than necessary. “That’s how I know he scammed me.”

“But why? What would that get him?”

“I don’t know.” I sprinkled cinnamon and sugar on my apples. “Maybe he thought he’d get intel about the family.”

“Did he ask you any questions about your family?”

“No,” I admitted. “So maybe he just did it to throw me off my game.”

“How would he have even known where to find you? It’s not like you’d posted on social media or something that you were going to The Broken Spoke Sunday night.”



“Stop taking his side,” I moaned, carrying my plate over to my little kitchen table for two.

“I’m not! I’m just wondering what would motivate this guy to mess with you like that.”

“He’s evil,” I said, sitting cross-legged on a chair. “You should see him in a suit. Only Lucifer himself could look that good.”

She laughed. “So you still think he’s hot?”

“He’s unbelievably, unbearably, inhumanly hot.” I bit into a slice of apple, but what I tasted on my tongue was his whiskey-flavored kiss. Further proof he used black magic against me. “I’m gonna need a priest to exorcise him from my memory.”

“So why did he come over after you left the table today?”

“Because my grandmother—my sweet, lovely, menace of a grandmother—gave him my phone number and told him to come talk to me. She’s convinced we should sell, but she doesn’t want to do it without my blessing.”

“That’s nice of her.”

“It is, but I’m not sure how long it’s going to last. She doesn’t want this fight.”

“There is another solution, you know.”

“What’s that?”

“Just run out and get a husband.”

“Right!” I laughed. “It will be so easy! Who wouldn’t want to marry me for my ski resort in distress?”

“Eligible bachelors with no red flags would line up around the block for that kind of opportunity, Lex. All you’d have to do is pick one.”

“I wish,” I muttered, sinking my teeth into the bagel.

“So what will you do?”

I chewed and swallowed, but the food stuck in my throat. “I need to find another buyer, one that won’t tear it down.” It

sounded hopeless when I said it out loud. “And the clock is ticking.”

\* \* \*

I had to work the late shift at the desk, but on my way there, I stopped at Gran’s house. Even though I wasn’t happy she’d given Devlin my phone number, I owed her an apology for taking off on her this afternoon. I wanted her to think I was mature, logical, and capable, and running off had only reinforced her belief that I was ruled by my emotional side.

As I turned into her driveway, I looked up automatically at the second-floor bedroom window that had been mine after I’d moved in here. My heart ached—would this house be torn down too? What would they put up in its place? A waterslide? Mini-golf? Go-karts?

I got out of the car and ambled slowly up the drive.

“Hello, darling,” called Gran from a rocker on the deep wraparound porch. “I’m just having some tea. Would you like a cup?”

“Sure,” I said, climbing the steps. “But don’t get up. I’ll get it.”

In the kitchen, the water was still hot in the kettle. I poured some into a cup, glanced at the various flavors of tea Gran had in the canister, and chose lemon and ginger. Dunking the teabag into the water, I went back outside and sat in the rocker beside her.

“Are you feeling better, dear?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry I walked out on you.”

“That’s all right.” She sipped her tea. “Did Mr. Buckley call you?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And I told him the same thing I’ll tell you. I’m not ready to give up.”

She sighed. “I thought maybe he could convince you. He’s very persuasive.”

“He *certainly* is.”

She looked over at me. “You’d met before, I hear.”

“We’d met. But I don’t really want to discuss it.”

“He’s quite handsome, isn’t he?”

“I suppose. If you like that slick, suit-and-tie type.”

“I bet he looks just fine out of his suit and tie as well.”

“Gran!” I couldn’t help laughing a little.

“I was just wondering if you might be able to confirm that,” she said, as if her question was completely innocent.

“No comment.” I took a slurp of tea. Above our heads, a flock of Canadian geese honked noisily as they headed south.

A moment later, Gran said, “I spoke with Quentin.”

I froze. Quentin was Snowberry’s longtime accountant. “And?”

“And he advised me to cancel any existing reservations starting November first.”

“Gran, no!” I sat up straight, my tea sloshing over the edge of the mug onto my work pants.

“Closing down then would allow us to offer our employees a fair severance package. Those who have stayed with us deserve that, Alexandra.”

“I just need more time!”

“Darling, I wish I could give it to you. But I’m afraid if you don’t have the necessary funds by the end of the month, I’m going to follow Quentin’s advice.” Her expression was grave. “And then I’m going to accept Black Diamond’s offer. It’s the best we can hope for.”



*devlin*

AS EXPECTED, my boss was not happy when I returned to the office on Wednesday morning without the keys to Snowberry in my pocket.

“What the fuck, Buckley?” Harvey B. Hotchkiss II of Hotchkiss Properties glowered at me with beady eyes from behind his desk. “You said this was going to be a slam dunk.”

“It should have been.” I ran a hand through my hair. “There was a bit of a complication.”

“What complication?” He looked at the folder open on his desk. “I’m staring at the financials right here, and it’s plain as fucking day they need to sell. If they’re not selling to our client, they’re selling to someone else.”

“They’re not selling to anyone else. The complication is just a granddaughter who’s hell-bent on saving the farm.”

He cracked his knuckles. “What if Black Diamond upped the offer?”

“It’s not about the money. It’s sentimental. She just doesn’t want to let it go.”

“Jesus Christ.” Harvey glared at me, pointed a pudgy finger in my direction. “That’s your fucking job, Buckley. You talk people into things they don’t want to do.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Working on it?” He shoved a wad of gum in his mouth, jumped up from his chair, and started pacing. He was a heavysset man in his late fifties with a receding salt-and-pepper hairline and thick jowls. His forehead wore a sheen of sweat.

“Black Diamond is losing patience. My father’s about to come out of retirement and fire me because he thinks I put someone incompetent on the job. My wife’s driving me fucking crazy with all the money she’s spending on McKenna’s wedding, and I can’t even have a cigarette because my doctor told me I’m going to die if I don’t quit.”

“I’m sorry, Harvey. I’ll get it done. I just need a little more time.”

“You’ve got two weeks to wrap this thing up and tie a fucking bow on it, or I’m giving the account to Bob Oliver.”

My hands balled into fists. Because fuck Bob Oliver.

He was two years younger than me, and once upon a time, I’d been something of a mentor to him. He was the new guy, I was the rising star. He asked me for advice, and I gave it. I gave time. I gave effort. I gave a fuck, and I tend to reserve those for people who really matter to me.

But within six months, Bob had proven himself to be all the things I hated.

A liar. A cheater. A backstabber.

He’d stolen my research. He’d stolen my ideas. He’d passed off my work as his own. He’d blamed me for his mistakes. He’d used shady, underhanded tactics to poach clients from me, and now he was engaged to McKenna Hotchkiss, the boss’s daughter.

My ex-girlfriend.

Whom he’d fucked at the company Christmas party last year.

It made me sick to think of him making empty promises to Martha McIntyre over lunch. Or Lexi—my blood nearly boiled thinking about him in the same room with Lexi. Lying to her. Giving her false hope.

“I don’t want Bob Oliver anywhere near this,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Bob gets things done.”

“I can get this done.”

“Two weeks, Buckley.” Hotchkiss’s expression was threatening. “Or you can kiss that promotion goodbye.”

As I left Harvey’s office, I nearly ran right into Bob, who was standing right outside the door eating a bag of microwave popcorn. He reminded me of one of my little sister Mabel’s Ken dolls, blond and plastic, with a permanently smug expression and insincere eyes. “How’d that go for you?” he asked, shoving a handful of popcorn into his mouth.

I had at least three inches on him, which I used to full effect as I scowled down at his face. “Stay the fuck away from my accounts.”

He smiled and tipped the bag toward me. “You look hangry. Need a snack?”

“Fuck off.” Shouldering past him, I strode down the hall and into my office. After closing the door, I sat down at my desk and called Lexi.

As I expected, it went straight to voicemail. “Hey Lexi, it’s Devlin. I’m really sorry about the way things went down yesterday, and I’d like to continue the conversation. I’m happy to come back there if you’d prefer to talk in person, or you can feel free to call me back any time. I hope you’re having a good day.”

She didn’t call me back.

I gave her a few days to cool off and tried again. Left another message. “Hi, Lexi. It’s Devlin Buckley. I know you’re upset with me, and I understand. If I were you, I’d probably think the worst too. But I swear on my Camp Lemonade T-shirt that I had no idea who you were at The Broken Spoke that night. I saw you across the room and thought you were beautiful, so I wanted to talk to you. That’s the truth. If you knew me better—maybe if we’d done a little more talking that night—you’d know I don’t believe in lying to get what I want. I don’t like cheaters. I always play fair. That’s why I didn’t make your grandmother any false promises at the table. I want to be straight with her. And with you.” I

pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to relieve the ache at the back of my skull. “All I want to do is talk things through. Please call me.”

Nothing.

Sunday was my birthday. I woke up early, jogged from my apartment on Dalton Street over to the Public Garden and Boston Common, logged five miles on the trails, and headed home. After a quick shower, I got dressed and drank a cup of coffee while standing at the counter checking emails, scanning the news, and returning texts from family and friends wishing me happy birthday.

There was one from my dad, my oldest brother Austin and both his kids—they loved texting me from their iPads—and my sister Mabel, who was in graduate school at William and Mary. My brother Dash was an actor out in L.A. and probably not up yet, and my brother Xander had likely forgotten, given how much he had going on. After a stint as a Navy SEAL, he’d worked private security for a few years, and now he was opening a bar back home. But he’d gotten sidetracked when an old friend had roped him into providing security for his country music star sister, who was staying in a cabin not too far from Cherry Tree Harbor. They’d been at The Broken Spoke over the weekend too, and it was obvious something was going on between them, even though he’d tried hard to deny it.

At quarter to ten, I packed a lunch, threw a Red Sox cap on my head, and headed over to the meeting spot for today’s Camp Lemonade excursion—a trip to the Charles River Bike Trails, where a guide would take us on a hike, after which we’d have a picnic.

When the kids heard it was my birthday, they sang a loud, off-key rendition of “Happy Birthday” on the bus and had fun guessing my age—I heard numbers from nineteen to fifty-five. After the hike, the kids wanted to race me, and I must have run twenty-seven different footraces, giving each of them a chance to “beat” me.



On the bus ride back to the city, I was typing a text to Lexi when a little girl named Sara came up and pointed at the empty seat next to me. “Can I sit here?”

“Sure,” I said, giving her a smile. She was maybe eight or nine, an adorable little thing with two blond braids and big brown eyes who loved asking me for piggyback rides. She’d lost her dad two years ago.

She climbed onto the seat and held out her closed fist. “I have a birthday present for you.”

“You do?” I shifted to face her. “What is it?”

Turning her hand over, she opened her palm, revealing a colorful beaded bracelet that spelled out FEARLESS. She had about fifteen of them going up her arm. “It’s a friendship bracelet. It’s one of mine, but I want you to have it.”

Touched, I slipped it onto my wrist. It barely fit and looked ridiculous, but I held out my arm to show it off. “How does it look?”

She grinned. “Great. It says *fearless* because that’s one of my favorite Taylor Swift songs.”

“What’s it about?”

She thought for a moment. “It’s about not being afraid to dance in a storm in a nice dress.”

I nodded. “I’ll remember that.”

She noticed my phone in my lap. “What are you doing? Playing a game?”

“No, I’m sending someone a message.”

“Your girlfriend?”

“No. I don’t have a girlfriend. Actually, this person doesn’t like me at all right now.” I paused. “But believe me, she liked me just *fine* a week ago.”

“Why doesn’t she like you anymore?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Grownups always say that. But I bet it’s not that complicated.”

I laughed in surprise. “You’re right. It’s not. She doesn’t like me because she doesn’t trust me. She doesn’t think I’m a nice person.”

“Did you do something wrong?”

“Not on purpose,” I hedged.

“Just say you’re sorry anyway.”

“I tried that. She won’t believe me.”

“Will she believe *me*?”

I looked at her. “Maybe. You want to try?”

“Sure.” Grinning, she took my phone. “What’s her name?”

“Lexi. It’s short for Alexandra. L-E-X-I.”

The tip of her tongue appeared between her teeth as she concentrated on typing. “How do you spell Devlin?”

“D-E-V-L-I-N.”

A moment later she asked, “How do you spell piggyback?”

I spelled it out for her. When she was done, she handed the phone back to me.

Dear Lexi, my name is Sara. I am 8. Devlin is my friend. He is so nice. He gives us piggyback rides. I am sitting next to him on the bus. He is sorry for what he did. Please believe me. From Sara

“Wow,” I said, warmth spreading in my chest. “This is awesome. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She kicked the seat in front of her and looked pleased. “Did I spell everything right?”

“You sure did. I’m very impressed.”

Her cheeks turned pink. “Are you going to send it?”

“Yes. And if she doesn’t like me after that, there’s no justice in the world.”

Sara grinned, and I hit send.

Two minutes later, I had a reply.

Is there really a Sara?

Yes. She says hi.

Because if there isn't, this is low even for you.

I turned to Sara. "She wants to know if you're real. Selfie?"

Sara clapped her hands. "Yes!"

I snapped a pic and sent it to Lexi.

Adorable. Look at that smile.

Thank you. But did you see the kid next to me?

YOU KNOW I MEANT HER.

I suppose.

Can we talk later? I'm on a bus coming home from a Camp Lemonade field trip, but I can call you when I'm home.

I have nothing new to say.

Maybe I just like the sound of your voice.

You are despicable.

"Well?" Sara asked. "Does she like you again?"

"No," I said. "But she's definitely warming up. Thanks for the help. I promise to take you out for an ice cream cone soon."

She held up her pinky. "Pinky promise?"

I latched my pinky to hers. "Pinky promise."

"You can't break a pinky promise, you know."

“I would never break a pinky promise.”

She grinned happily and continued sitting next to me on the ride home, kicking the seat in front of her and telling me about each and every one of her friendship bracelets. At one point she dozed off, head tipping onto my shoulder.

Somewhere along my internal wiring, that paternal instinct hummed again, and I thought it would be kind of nice to have a little girl like the one at my side. If I were different.

If everything had been different.

\* \* \*

My brother Xander called while I was getting ready to go out for dinner and drinks with a few friends.

“Hello?”

“Hey, brother. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks. How’s everything going with the bar?”

“Okay. Still on track to open next Friday night.”

“Can’t wait to see it. I might be back in the next month.”

“How did the lunch with Granny go? I never got a chance to ask, you left town so fast. You sweet talk her into accepting your millions?”

I winced. “Ah, not exactly.”

“*What?* I thought this was a done deal.”

“It should have been a done deal. But there was a complication in the shape of a granddaughter who joined us for lunch.” And Jesus, how I’d worshiped that shape. I still thought about it every single night before bed—usually with my dick in my hand.

“Granddaughter?” He paused. “How old?”

“Late twenties, maybe. She grew up there and works there, and she’s totally against selling. She’s got some ridiculous notion she can get investors who will help turn the business

around. My offer was much higher than anything else she'd get, but she refuses to listen to reason."

"You mean there are actually humans alive you can't sell to?"

"There's *one*," I said defensively. "And it's only because she has the wrong idea about me."

"Maybe she noticed you were trying to bamboozle her granny over French onion soup."

"No, she arrived at the table with preconceived notions about my character. She was prejudicial and biased against me from the start."

"Why?"

I exhaled. "Because we'd met before."

"Where?"

"Remember that gorgeous brunette I left with the night we all went to The Broken Spoke?"

Xander started to laugh. "That was the granddaughter?"

"I didn't know it at the time, okay? We didn't get into a lot of personal details, we just had a good time. But no matter what I say, she doesn't believe me. She's convinced I sought her out and slept with her for nefarious purposes."

"So now what?"

"Now I have to figure out how to make this deal happen even though she's working against me at every turn. My boss won't accept anything less."

"You'll be fired if you can't make it happen?"

"I might not be fired, but instead of the promotion I want, I'd probably be relegated to sales manager in Bumfuck, Nowhere."

"Well, hang in there. I'm sure you'll find a way."

Usually I was sure of myself too, but with every passing day, my confidence was draining.

I'd try again later tonight.

\* \* \*

When I got home from dinner, I saw the bracelet Sara had made for me on my kitchen counter. It made me smile, and I slipped it onto my wrist for good luck. Then I texted Lexi.

It's my birthday.

Good for you.

Sara made me a present. Want to see it?

Only because Sara sounds nice.

I took a photo of my wrist and sent it to her.

A friendship bracelet. Very cute.

I could ask her to teach me how to make one for you.

Don't bother. You and I are not friends.

We were friends for one night, weren't we?

I was young and foolish then.

I even found your missing O.

Don't remind me.

Why not? We had a good time. Best time I've had in a while.

It doesn't matter, Devlin. Even if you are not the scoundrel I think you are, that doesn't change the fact we are on opposite sides of the biggest fight of my life. I may have accidentally slept with the enemy, but I don't have to wish him a happy birthday.

I'm not your enemy, Lexi. I want to help you.

You can't. I'm not sure anyone can.

Frustrated, I gave up and got ready for bed, placing the friendship bracelet next to my phone on the nightstand, trading my jeans and dress shirt for soft gray sweats, and brushing my teeth. She was so damn stubborn—and irritatingly immune to my charms. But by the time I crawled between the sheets and picked up my phone to set my alarm, she'd sent one more text.

Fine. Happy birthday.

It made me smile.

I admired her tenacity, I really did, as well as her loyalty and sense of duty to her family. The problem was, it was all in direct conflict with my need to push this deal through or watch fucking sleazeball Bob Oliver walk off with my win. And he would not win gracefully. He'd gloat and brag and never let me or anyone else forget he'd scored the final goal. Just like he spread it around after fucking my girlfriend that he hadn't even had to try that hard.

McKenna had drunkenly confessed the night it happened, blurting the truth on the way home from the party, saying it was my fault she'd had to go elsewhere to get some attention. She claimed I took her for granted and didn't know the good thing I had. She was tired of waiting around for me to put a ring on her finger. It had been two years already—what was I waiting for? Did I think I was too good for her? Did I think I'd find someone better?

I refused to fight, calmly telling her it was over between us and probably had been for a while. The next day, she'd shown up at my door in tears, begging me to take her back and insisting she loved me, but her words rang hollow to me—I wasn't entirely sure what love was, but there was no way it was *this*.

By Valentine's Day, she had a rock on her finger from Bob Oliver, who was fond of telling people how he'd stolen my girlfriend.

Whatever. Those two deserved each other.

But I'd be damned if I let him steal my account. My reputation was on the line. My promotion. My pride. I had to win this one, and I needed Lexi to do it.

I'd give her a few days, and then try again.

\* \* \*

When another week went by with nothing but silence on Lexi's end, I decided to travel back to Michigan and try meeting with her in person. I only had two days left, and every time Bob Oliver passed me in the hallway or sat across from me at the conference table, I could see him grinning like he tasted victory already, all the sweeter because it would be served with two scoops of my failure and shame.

I had to make a move. Take a risk.

I walked into Harvey's office the following Monday morning to let him know I'd be flying out to meet with the McIntyre family again.

"Don't bother," he said. "You're off the account."

"What? You gave me two weeks, Harvey! That means I have until Wednesday."

"Black Diamond is tired of waiting." He opened a drawer and rummaged around in it. "They're threatening to take their business elsewhere, and I need a man on the job who can close the deal *now*. I'm turning the account over to Bob."

My blood pressure spiked. "Don't do this, Harvey. I've worked a lot on this deal. I've put in time and effort, and I deserve the chance to see it through."

"You had your chance, Buckley. You didn't get it done." He slammed that drawer and opened another one. "Goddammit, where's my gum?"

"I told you—there's a family member who's reluctant to sell. I just need a little more time to convince her."

"Face it, Buckley, you couldn't close. Now stop whining like a fucking baby and send the client files over to Bob. He's



expecting them within the hour.” He ransacked the contents of the second drawer, muttering to himself.

I folded my arms over my chest. “No.”

Harvey stopped his foraging and looked up at me. “What?”

“You heard me. I’m not sending shit to Bob. It’s *my* work.”

My boss’s face darkened. He took a cigarette from the drawer, lit it with a match, and dragged in deep. “Your *work* is part of your *job*, which *I* hired you to do. Get it? You work for *me*. You belong to *me*.”

“Not anymore,” I said, standing a little taller.

“Huh?”

“I quit. I’ve worked my ass off for this company for years, and you can’t give me two more days? Fuck the promotion, fuck this job, and fuck you. I’m out.” Before he could say anything else, I stormed out of his office, barreling right into Bob, of course, who’d been lurking at the door.

“Hey,” he said, that smug grin on his face. “You should watch where you’re going.”

“You should stay the fuck out of my way.”

“No problem.” He shrugged. “We’re not moving in the same direction anyway. You’re going down, and I’m going up.”

I wasn’t the type for a fistfight and hadn’t thrown a punch in years—not even after Bob had slept with my girlfriend—but that self-satisfied smirk set my temper ablaze, and I took extreme pleasure in cocking my fist back and then smashing it into his face.

The blow surprised him, knocking him backward onto his ass. He touched his bloody lip and glared up at me. “You’re gonna be fired for that, asshole.”

“You had that coming,” I seethed. “And I already quit.”

\* \* \*

Forty-five minutes later, I was escorted from the building.

In three hours, I'd packed a bag and was on my way to the airport.

In five hours, I was on a flight to Michigan.

By nine o'clock that night, I was pulling up at Lexi's condo in my rental car. All the while, a plan had been taking shape in my head.

It was a good plan. A little extreme, maybe, but it would work. It would give Lexi what she needed (the chance to hold onto her home) and me what I wanted (the chance to fuck over Bob Oliver).

I just had to get her to marry me.

SEVEN

I WAS ALREADY in my pajamas, curled up on my couch watching *The Bear* with a pint of Hudsonville Extra Indulgent Cookie Dough ice cream on my lap when I heard the knock on the door.

What the hell? Who was here at nine o'clock on a Monday night?

Annoyed, I paused the episode and set the ice cream carton on the coffee table, spoon inside it. Couldn't a girl enjoy stressed-out chefs and sugar-laden dairy products in peace? Surely I deserved it after all the disappointment I'd suffered the past week. Dozens of emails and phone calls in the desperate attempt to find a benevolent buyer for Snowberry, all with no luck. Not a single resort company or property developer was interested in restoration. They all said the same thing—if I could even get someone to return my call—the land was worth more without Snowberry on it.

My heart was heavy, but I still wasn't ready to give up. Gran had given me until the end of the month, and that meant I still had nearly two full weeks. Miracles could happen in two weeks, right?

The knocking sounded again, loud and frantic.

"I'm coming," I said loudly, hurrying to the door in my bare feet. It was probably Tabitha wanting to borrow something from my closet. She often showed up out of nowhere to paw through my things before she went out for the night, complaining all the while that all my clothes were too big for her.

But when I pulled open the front door, it wasn't my cousin standing there.

"Devlin?" I stared at him in disbelief. He hardly looked like the same guy. No suit and tie, no dress shoes, no fresh shave and neat coiffure. Instead he wore jeans, sneakers, and a Camp Lemonade T-shirt. His hair was a mess. His stubble was well beyond five o'clock shadow. And above his watch, he wore a colorful beaded bracelet that looked ridiculous on his thick masculine wrist.

But those eyes. Damn it, they could suck the soul from my body.

"Nice shirt," I said.

"I thought you might like it."

"What are you doing here?" I would not be swayed by his charm. "I already told you, there's nothing you can say to change my mind about selling to Black Diamond."

"I don't want you to sell to Black Diamond."

I stared blankly at him. "What?"

"I don't want you to sell at all."

A cool autumn night breeze blew in, and my nipples puckered. Realizing I wasn't wearing a bra, I crossed my arms over my chest. "What are you talking about? You know as well as I do that this resort will go under if it doesn't get an influx of cash."

"There's another way," he said anxiously.

"Another way to what?"

"Another way for you to save your childhood memories. A way for you to inherit Snowberry and turn it around."

Tilting my head, I squinted at him. "You're not making sense, Devlin. What way is that?"

"You marry me," he said confidently. "We do this together."

My jaw fell open, my arms falling to my sides. "*What?!*"

“If we get married, you can inherit right now.”

“You’re insane!”

“I’m not. It makes perfect sense.” Another chilly gust ruffled his hair, and he glanced behind me into my living room. “Can I come in so we can talk it over?”

“No!”

“Come on, you’re cold.” His eyes fell to my chest, and I quickly wrapped my arms around myself again. “You’ve got goosebumps, Lexi. Let me in. I just want to talk.”

“Fine.” I backed up and allowed him to enter, closing the door behind him. “But there’s no way in hell I’m agreeing to marry you.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” I whirled around and stuck my hands on my hips. “Number one, it’s a scam. It can’t be legal.”

“It’s totally legal. We’re both single adults.”

“Two, Gran is never going to believe that you and I suddenly fell in love after what happened at lunch.”

“Gran will believe what she wants to believe.”

I glared at him. “Three, I don’t even like you, let alone love you. Why would I marry you?”

“Because you love Snowberry. And you can’t let it go.”

Another chill swept over my skin, even though the door was shut. “That doesn’t mean I’d marry you to keep it.” Brushing past him, I grabbed the pint of ice cream from the table and went into the kitchen. “Marriage might just be another kind of business deal to you, but it means something to me. I want to marry the love of my life. I want to *be* the love of someone’s life.”

Devlin followed me. “We wouldn’t have to stay married forever. Just long enough for Gran to deed the property to you and get the renovations underway.”

Dropping my spoon in the sink, I opened the freezer and stuck the carton of ice cream inside. “That’s another thing. Even if we convince Gran to let me inherit early, that doesn’t solve the money problem. I need millions of dollars to renovate.”

“Leave that to me. I can get the money.”

“How?”

“I know people.”

I shut the freezer and looked at him leaning casually back against the stove. His confidence was reassuring and yet irksome. “It’s that easy for you? You can just snap your fingers and get millions of dollars?”

“Maybe not *that* easy,” he allowed. “But I think it can be done. I’m up for the challenge.”

“Of course you are,” I said, recalling the words *give me fifteen minutes*. “Nothing you love more than a challenge.”

He shrugged. “I can’t help it, I’m competitive. I grew up with three brothers always trying to outdo one another. And I wasn’t the oldest or the strongest, so I got my ass kicked regularly—until I realized I was the fastest and learned to outrun them.”

“Speaking of family, what’s yours going to say about this, huh? Are they going to believe you’re suddenly head over heels for a local ski instructor you met one night at The Broken Spoke?”

“If I tell them I’m happy, they’ll be happy for me. That’s how my family is.”

I shook my head. “Won’t it make you feel bad? Lying to them?”

For the first time, he hesitated, appearing slightly less sure of himself. “Yes. It will make me feel bad to lie to them. Honesty is important to me. But in this case, the lie isn’t hurting anyone, and I believe the ends will justify the means.”

“Speaking of the ends, what do you get out of this?” I rested my tailbone on the edge of the counter across from him.

“There’s no way you’re doing this for me.”

“I’m doing this so that the sale to Black Diamond doesn’t go through.”

“I thought Black Diamond was your client.”

“Not anymore. I quit my job.”

I blinked. “You did what?”

“I quit my job.”

“Why?”

“My asshole boss gave the Black Diamond account to his dickhead soon-to-be son-in-law, whom I cannot stand for various reasons, and who does not deserve to get the win.”

I studied him. He was a slick talker, but I could tell he was leaving something out. “What are the reasons?”

“Never mind the reasons.” He crossed his arms over his chest, the sleeves of his T-shirt tightening around his biceps.

“Oh, you want me to *marry you*, and you won’t tell me why you’d go to such lengths to piss off some business rival?”

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Are they business reasons? Or personal reasons?”

“Both.”

“So this is about *revenge* for you?”

“Maybe.”

I exhaled. “This doesn’t seem right, Devlin. Yes, I want to save Snowberry, but having to marry a man I don’t love—or even like—in order to do it feels like some real patriarchal bullshit.”

“It does. I agree.” He held up his palms. “None of this *will* business is fair to you. I thought that the moment your grandmother told me about it.”

That surprised me, and it did make me feel a little warmer toward him, but . . . *marriage*? Living together as husband and wife? Exchanging rings in front of people we cared about?



Promising to love and honor one another forever, knowing it was all a sham? Trusting that this guy meant what he said, and he really was going to help me turn Snowberry around? What if he was just a shark after all?

I mean, who was Devlin Buckley?

“I don’t think I can do it, Devlin,” I said, twisting my fingers together. “I don’t even know you. What if this is all just a scam? What if you’re not who you’re pretending to be, with your camp counselor T-shirt and friendship bracelet? What if this is just another deal you want to close, and I’m going to lose everything in the end?”

“You’ll have to trust me, Lexi,” he said. “I know it’s hard. But you *will* have to trust me.”

“I’ve been burned before. I thought I knew someone, I believed his promises, and—”

“I won’t lie to you.”

I tossed my arms in the air. “This whole thing is a lie!”

“When it’s just you and me, I won’t lie to you. I swear it.” He came forward and took my hands. His blue eyes brimmed with sincerity. “It’s everyone else we need to fool.”

I swallowed. “Starting when?”

“Tomorrow. We’ll fly to Vegas.”

“Tomorrow!” I snatched my hands back. “So soon?”

“We don’t have a lot of time,” he said. “Black Diamond is getting impatient. The guy taking over the account is a smooth-talking bully, and he’s not above misleading people to get what he wants. He could swindle your grandmother in minutes.”

“Gran only gave me to the end of the month to find another buyer,” I confessed. My stomach was roiling, and I placed both hands over it. “I’ve gotten nowhere.”

“Let me help you,” he said urgently. “Do you have to work tomorrow?”

“No. I’m off Tuesday and Wednesday this week. I worked double shifts all weekend so my cousin Tabitha could go out of town, so she owes me.”

“Perfect. I’ll pick you up at six a.m.”

I looked down at my bare feet, toe to toe with his sneakers, and considered my options. I could turn him away and keep praying for a miracle. Or I could take a chance on him. Become his wife and put my fate in his hands.

He wasn’t the love of my life, but right now he was my only hope.

“Okay. I’ll be ready.” I looked him in the eye again. “Where are you staying tonight?”

“My dad’s house, I guess. It’s about an hour from here.”

“It seems silly for you to drive all the way there and come back here again so early. Just stay over.”

His dark eyebrows rose. “Here? Really?”

“On the couch,” I clarified. “*Not* in my bed.”

“Couch is fine. I can do couch.” He tilted his head. “You sure you want me to stay?”

“No, I’m not sure I want you to stay! I’m not sure about anything right now!” I fisted my hands in my hair. “Trusting you could be the biggest mistake of my life.”

“Or it could make all your dreams come true.”

“I know, but . . . I’m scared,” I admitted. “I hate saying that to you, and there aren’t many things in life I’m afraid of, but if this goes wrong, I stand to lose everything.”

“Here.” He removed the bracelet from his wrist and slipped it onto mine. “Look, it says *fearless*. Look at it when you need a little reminder of your strength.”

“Thanks.” I looked down at it. “Will Sara mind that you gave it to me?”

“I think she’d be fine with it. But if it makes you feel better, I’ll check with her.”

“Okay.” I met his eyes, and it struck me that in less than twenty-four hours, this man would be my *husband*. “I cannot believe I just agreed to marry you. How did you talk me into it so fast?”

That grin appeared, along with a lift of his shoulders. “It’s a gift.”

\* \* \*

While Devlin went out to the car to get his bag, I grabbed an extra pillow and a blanket and placed them on the couch. He came in a minute later, locking the door behind him.

“I’ll just be a minute in the bathroom, and then you can use it,” I told him. “There are extra towels in the hall closet.”

“Thank you.” He set his bag down next to the couch and whipped off his T-shirt, revealing his bare chest and ripped abs.

My eyes bugged out. “Hey!”

“Hey, what?” He tossed the shirt aside.

“No undressing out in the open!”

“You want me to sleep in my clothes?” He unbuckled his belt.

“Okay, we’re gonna need to lay some ground rules,” I said, unable to stop staring at his naked skin. “All removal of clothing must be done behind a closed door.”

His fingers hovered around his zipper. “So I shouldn’t take off my pants right now?”

I stuck my hands on my hips. “This is the problem with you.”

“What, that I’m funny?”

“No. That you cannot be trusted.” I spun around and marched down the hall to the bathroom.

“Goodnight, wife!” he called.

“I am not your wife!” I shouted back, slamming the door behind me. Then I braced myself against the sink and stared at my red face in the mirror. Fanned it. Splashed cold water on it.

Fuck, he was hot.

But if we were going to go into business together—and that’s what this marriage would be, a business deal—we had to keep things professional.

There could be no sex.

I brushed my teeth, darted across the hall, and slipped beneath the covers.

Sex would only cloud the judgment, I told myself. Sex would muddy the waters. Sex would just make it difficult to stay focused on the goal at hand.

Hand. Fingers. Wrist, arm, biceps in a tight T-shirt. Shoulders in the dark above me, right here in this room.

My nipples tingled beneath my cotton tank, and I brushed my thumbs over them. Closing my eyes, I remembered his lips on my skin.

I yanked my hands from beneath the covers and pressed my arms to my sides above the comforter, stiff as a soldier. I would not touch myself and fantasize about him. I would not.

But I couldn’t stop thinking about him out in my living room. We hadn’t even talked about where we’d live. Would he move in here? This place was so small. There was only one bedroom.

There was only one bed.

I gulped. This could get tricky.

\* \* \*

All night long, I heard Devlin’s voice in my head. *Marry me. We do this together.*

I tossed and turned and tried to sleep, but the madness of this plan, the audacity of running off to Vegas to elope, would

start my adrenaline rushing, and I was awake for long stretches of time.

When I'd sworn to do whatever it took to save Snowberry, I hadn't imagined it would involve a white dress and 'til death do us part.

Could we pull this off? Would Gran actually cede ownership to me if I became Mrs. Alexandra Buckley tomorrow? Could we convince people we were in love? What would happen if people discovered the marriage was a temporary sham?

Flopping onto my side, I flipped my pillow and laid my cheek on the cool cotton. But my eyes refused to close. Moonlight slipped in around the edges of my bedroom window shade, and I caught sight of the friendship bracelet on my nightstand. Reaching for it, I tugged it onto my wrist again. I wondered about Sara, the girl who'd made it. What her story was. Why she'd given Devlin this gift. Since she was on a Camp Lemonade field trip, I assumed she'd lost a parent. Was Devlin sort of a surrogate dad to her?

As I played with the beads that spelled out *fearless*, I remembered my own dad. He'd taught me to ski, to be careful but confident. The day I conquered my first double black diamond slope, he'd stood next to me at the top, encouraging me to trust in my talent and training. Urging me to take the risk. "But what if I fall?" I'd asked, my voice timid in the whipping-cold wind. The run, called Demon Dive, was steep and blanketed with moguls. Even experienced skiers approached it with respect.

"If you fall, you get up again. I'll be right there to help you," he promised. "You ready?"

"I don't know."

"Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all, Firefly. What's yours gonna be?"

Heart racing, blood pumping, I pushed off the top of the slope. It felt like I'd jumped off a cliff, the angle was so extreme. Immediately, I was out of control, going way too fast,

arms flailing, bouncing over the moguls like a speedboat over choppy waters. Then I heard my dad shouting behind me, his words unclear, but his voice reassuring. I could do this. I could do this. Determined to keep my balance, I flexed my leg muscles and brought my skis closer together, navigating the turns like I'd been taught, finding my rhythm, planting the poles to help me keep my balance. I made it all the way to the bottom before wiping out completely, losing both skis and poles, and face-planting into the snow.

But I'd done it.

Years later, I'd had the words tattooed across my upper back, a drawing of a firefly beneath them.

*Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.*

What was mine going to be?

\* \* \*

My alarm woke me at five-thirty, and I was groggy as hell. But instead of hitting snooze, I turned it off and got out of bed. Opening my door a crack, I peered across the hall. Bathroom door open.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I tiptoed down the hall and snuck a peek into the living room.

No Devlin. The pillow he'd used was at one end of the couch, the blanket folded on top of it. Huh. I went to the window and noticed his car was gone. Had he changed his mind? Left without so much as a goodbye?

Then I saw the note on the coffee table.

*Went for coffee, wife. Back soon.*

Laughing a little, I shook my head. "I'm not your wife," I muttered. "Not yet, anyway."

But today was my wedding day.

In less than twenty-four hours, I would be.

\* \* \*

Half an hour later, I came out of my room wearing jeans and a pink cami tank, dragging a small roller bag behind me. He'd been sitting on the couch looking at his phone, but he rose quickly to his feet when he saw me. The sight of him set off butterflies in my belly. He wore jeans and a short-sleeved black shirt, his hair was combed, his jaw was freshly shaved. I put a hand over my stomach, as if to still the fluttering wings.

They had *no business* in there.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yes," I lied. "Just a little on edge."

"Don't be. Everything is going to be fine." He reached out and took the handle of my roller bag. "I'll get this. Mine's already in the car."

I grabbed my purse and followed him out, making sure the door was locked behind me. The early morning air was chilly, and I shivered as Devlin placed my luggage next to his in the back of a white SUV.

"Are you cold?" he asked, looking at my bare arms.

"A little. But I've got a cardigan packed."

"I've got a sweatshirt right here." He unzipped his bag, reached in, and pulled out a navy blue crewneck. "Yours if you want it."

"Thanks." Tossing my bag on the floor of the front seat, I pulled the sweatshirt over my head. It was huge on me, of course, the sleeves immense and the hem hitting me mid-thigh. It said Two Buckleys Home Improvement on it. "What's this?" I asked, pointing at the logo.

"It's my family's business," he said. "My grandfather and his dad started it, and my father and uncle took it over. When my uncle died, my brother Austin came on board, although he's leaving to start his own company soon. He makes furniture out of reclaimed wood."

“So your family is handy,” I said. “Are you?”

“I’m good with my hands. Does that count?”

Our eyes met. His mouth hooked up on one side, sending a hot little current zipping along my nerve endings. “I suppose it does,” I said slowly.

He gave me the full wattage of his smile and opened the passenger door. “Hop in.”

Right away I smelled coffee and spied the cardboard cups in the center console’s holders. Devlin got behind the wheel, slipped on his sunglasses, and turned on the engine. “The one in front is for you. Two packets of half and half, one sugar.”

I picked up the cup in front and inhaled the heavenly scent drifting from the opening in the lid. “Thank you. But how did you know how I take my coffee?”

“Easy, it was in the dossier I had compiled on you before I followed you to The Broken Spoke in order to tie you to the train tracks and force you to sell me your ski resort.”

I gave him the side-eye. “Very funny.”

“You left a cup of coffee on the table at lunch last week. I notice things.” He left the parking lot and turned onto the road leading away from Snowberry. “I take my coffee black, if you’d like to know.”

I took a sip. It was the perfect balance of bitter and creamy sweet, and the warmth of the cup in my hands and his sweatshirt on my body relaxed me a little. “So what’s the plan, mastermind?”

“I booked us two tickets to Vegas and a room at The Bellagio.”

“Just one?”

“Well, I thought it might look a little strange if newlyweds booked separate rooms.”

I took another sip. “There better be two beds.”

“There’s a couch. I made sure.” He reached for his coffee. “But—and I’m just putting this out there—if at any time you



want to mix business with pleasure, I'm in."

"Not a chance," I said. "This marriage is strictly for show. Rule number one is *no sex*."

"I thought rule number one was no undressing out in the open."

"Then rule number two is no sex."

"Is there a rule number three?"

I thought for a moment. "Yes. There needs to be an agreed-on end point. A finish line."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we're both going into this with clearly established goals. I want Snowberry, and you want revenge, which you'll get when you prevent the sale to Black Diamond from going through. So let's agree right now that the marriage is over once the investment is secured, the work is underway, and Snowberry is mine." I looked over at him. "How long do you think that will take?"

He exhaled. Took another sip of his coffee. "I'll make some phone calls. But assuming your grandmother at least gives you power of attorney once we show proof we're married, I think I could get the money within a month. Two at the most. Work could begin in November. But since the remodel is so extensive, we're going to have to shutter for this season. Start fresh next ski season."

"Shuttering for one season is better than closing forever." I liked the way he said *we*. "There aren't that many reservations anyway. I'm more worried about longtime staff that's been loyal."

"We'll make sure they're taken care of. I'll work with the accountant and come up with a plan."

"Thank you. So it sounds like we're talking one year of marriage?"

"I think much of it depends on how easily we can convince Gran to let you inherit now, but my gut tells me it won't be all

that hard. She pretty much told me at lunch that day she wanted you to have it—all you needed was a spouse.”

“So maybe even less than a year.”

“I think six months will do it.”

“Okay then. I’ll marry you.” I reached over and tapped my coffee cup to his. “Congratulations, you closed the deal.”

“I always do.” He looked straight ahead again, one corner of his mouth crooking up. “Wife.”

EIGHT

*devlin*

GOD, she looked cute in my sweatshirt.

And she smelled good too. The sweet vanilla scent of her perfume mingled with the bitter aroma of my black coffee, and when I took a sip from my cup, I swore I could taste her.

No. I couldn't go there.

Today wasn't about getting her naked, it was about getting her to trust me. To believe in me. It was about showing her I wasn't the con artist she thought I was and convincing her to make a bid for Snowberry Lodge using my playbook. The more I thought about it, the more determined I was to keep it out of Black Diamond's hands. I'd been up well into the night going over the financials, looking at similar renovations that had been done at other resorts, studying the winter tourism stats for this area.

That is, when I wasn't wondering if Lexi was down the hall sleeping naked.

Dirty thoughts aside, I'd come to the conclusion that Snowberry *could* survive. It needed serious work, but there was an opportunity to offer an alternative to the giant corporate resorts catering to families with kids. We could appeal to adults looking for romantic getaways, girls' trips, guys' weekends. I had a feeling Lexi was going to fight me on that, but I'd deal with that later.

First, we had to tie the knot.

Then we had to convince everyone it was real.

“So let’s talk,” I said. “In case anyone asks, what made you fall in love with me so fast?”

“Desperation.”

“Come on,” I prodded. “You have to find something about me attractive.”

She sighed heavily. “Fine. You have a nice face.”

“That’s it? Try to be more specific.” I was just fucking with her, but she actually answered the question.

“When we first met, your eyes made me want to go swimming.”

“Swimming?”

“They looked like the ocean,” she said with a shrug.

“Thank you.” I glanced at her. “That’s actually very sweet.”

She took another sip of her coffee. “That’s all you’re getting. You’ve reached the bottom of my sweet barrel.”

Laughing, I signaled and merged onto the highway. “Well, I took one look at you from across the room and said, *that* is the girl for me.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Absolutely. My brothers will back me up on that.”

“Okay, but the question isn’t going to be about the night we met. It’s going to be about how we managed to fall in love long-distance in less than three weeks. We live like five states apart.”

“It’s more like two states and a chunk of Canada,” I countered.

She slapped my leg. “You know what I mean!”

“I do.” Chuckling at getting a rise out of her—it was so easy—I thought for a moment. “I think what happened was that we got to know each other as we negotiated back and forth. We started talking all the time. Texting. FaceTiming.

Then I secretly flew out to visit you, and we realized we were soul mates, blah blah.”

“Soul mates, *blah blah*? That’s not going to cut it. I need more info.” She put her coffee cup back in the holder, reached into her bag and pulled out her phone.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m looking for something,” she said, typing, then scrolling. “Aha! Here we go. Juicy questions to ask your crush.”

“Your *crush*? Is this for teenagers?”

“Number one. Who’s the last person you held hands with?”

I laughed. “*Held hands*?”

“Just answer the question, please.”

“Probably Sara. Or one of the other kids in Camp Lemonade.”

“Romantically,” she pressed.

“I guess my ex-girlfriend, McKenna. Although I’m not much for public displays of affection.”

“I love them, for the record.”

“Of course you do.”

“When did you and McKenna break up?”

“Last December.”

“How long were you together?”

“A couple years, off and on.”

“Why’d you decide to be permanently off?”

I tipped up my coffee cup, unwilling to let Bob Oliver into the conversation and ruin my good mood. “We were just wrong for each other. Wanted different things.”

“*Such as*?”

“She wanted to get married. I was more focused on my career.” I gave her a sappy look. “Until I met you, kitten.”

She scrunched up her face like she’d stepped in dog shit. “Nope.”

“Doll face?”

“Try again.”

“Boo thang?”

“Try harder.”

“The old ball and chain?”

She laughed. “Try it and see what happens. So what should I call you?”

“Daddy, of course.”

She snorted. “In your dreams.”

“What about you?” I asked. “Did *you* always want to get married?”

“Yes. In fact, I was engaged once.”

I decided not to mention her grandmother had already spilled that tea. “What happened?”

“He was an operations manager at Snowberry. But he got an offer from a big resort out west last year, and he took it.”

“That must have been tough.”

“It was. But I’m over it now. Or at least over him.” She was quiet a minute as she stared out the passenger window. “It was my own fault. I fall fast, and I pick the wrong people.”

“How so?”

“I just always seem to choose leavers.” Her voice grew quieter. “I need a stayer next time I fall in love.” She looked at me. “Did you love McKenna?”

“I’m not entirely sure.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means I cared about her to the extent that I’m willing and able to care about someone. Maybe it was love, maybe not.”

She grunted. “If you told her that, I can see why she left.”

“I *didn't* tell her that, and *she* didn't leave. Next question.”

Sighing, she looked at her phone again. “Mountains or beach for a romantic getaway?”

“I like the beach.”

“I like the mountains. Favorite season?”

“Summer. Definitely. You?”

“Winter.”

“Of course winter.” I grinned ruefully. “So far, we’re perfect for each other.”

“Come on. Snow is so beautiful,” she enthused, “and there’s nothing better than spending a day on the mountain and then curling up under a blanket in front of the fire with a mug of hot chocolate.” She took a deep breath, like she could smell the burning logs or cocoa in her cup.

“That last part does sound nice.”

She looked at her phone again. “Do you have trust issues?”

“Not really. I tend not to trust people, so it’s never an issue.”

“And I tend to trust everyone, which gets me in trouble.”

“You don’t trust *me*,” I pointed out.

“I did when we met. If you recall, I left The Broken Spoke and went out to the parking lot with you after knowing you for like ten minutes.”

“That’s true,” I conceded. “You’re lucky I’m a good guy.”

Setting her phone in her lap, she shifted in her seat to face me. “Tell me the truth. Did you know who I was that night or not?”



“I didn’t, Lexi.” I glanced at her. “Swear on my life, I didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you look shocked to see me at the lunch table two days later?”

“Because I have a good poker face. It’s useful when you negotiate high-stakes deals for a living.”

“Well, it made me feel like the whole thing was a setup.”

“I’m sorry about that. I’m used to suppressing gut reactions in favor of taking a moment and thinking things through. And I try not to let anything show.”

“God, I could *never* have your job,” she said. “I let *everything* show. I can’t help it.”

“The truth is, I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me when I saw you at the table,” I confessed. “But I wasn’t sure how you wanted to handle the situation, so I didn’t let on.”

“You certainly didn’t. So I thought you were just a con artist.”

“I’m not. I promise. Next question.”

She checked her screen again and laughed. “Do you like it when people play with your hair?”

“I guess I don’t dislike it. But if you’re looking for something to play with, I have other suggestions.”

“I’m sure you do,” she said drily. “But I think this question is supposed to be about what relaxes you, not what turns you on.”

“Oh. That’s different.”

“So what relaxes you?”

I hesitated. “Can you keep a secret?”

“You’d better hope so.”

“I’m serious. This can’t get out. It will ruin my reputation as an alpha male.”

She snickered. “Tell me.”

I rubbed a finger beneath my lower lip, like I was doubtful she could be trusted with a confidence.

“Devlin. *Tell* me.” She slapped my shoulder.

“Fine. I like the occasional bubble bath.”

She burst out laughing. “You like bubble baths?”

“Yes. But a *manly* bubble bath. With manly-smelling bubbles. None of that fruity, flowery girly shit.”

“I’m not sure I want to know what man-bubbles smell like.”

“Bourbon and cedar,” I told her. “With just a hint of coriander.”

“That is very specific.”

“It’s the scent of my shower gel, and lucky for you, I packed some. You can try it out. Our room has a big tub.”

“Maybe I will. *Alone*, of course.”

“Of course alone. I will be a perfect gentleman tonight, Lexi. You have my word. You can have the tub, you can have the bed, you can have the remote control all to yourself.”

“You might be stuck watching *The Bear*,” she warned.

I grinned. “I fucking love that show. Let it rip.”

Her laughter was my new favorite sound.

\* \* \*

I’d booked first class tickets, and Lexi was duly impressed. “So this is how the one percent travels,” she said, relaxing into her roomy seat by the window as we soared above the clouds. “Nice.”

“Nothing but the best for my fiancée.”

Ignoring me, she smiled at the flight attendant who appeared at my side asking what we’d like to drink. “Just water, please.”

“What?” I shot Lexi a disgusted look and met the flight attendant’s eye. Her name tag said Donna. “Don’t listen to her, Donna. We’re eloping today, so we’ll have champagne.”

Donna gasped. “That’s so exciting! Congratulations!”

“Thank you.” I put my arm around Lexi. “We couldn’t be happier.”

“How long have you been together?” she asked.

“Forever,” said Lexi at the same time I said, “We just met.”

“What he means is that it *feels* like we just met, even though we’ve been together for years,” Lexi said, pinning me with an evil stare. “Right, darling?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “Time flies when you’re this madly in love.”

“Where’d you meet each other?” asked Donna.

“Work,” replied Lexi, just as I said, “School.”

I laughed. “Well, it was work for her, school for me. You see, she was my teacher, and even though her crush on me was totally inappropriate, some feelings just cannot be denied.”

The poor woman looked totally confused. “She was your teacher?”

“His ski instructor,” Lexi clarified. “And he was awful, just awful. I had to spend a lot of extra time with him. Many private lessons.”

“Oh.” The clouds on her face lifted, and Donna smiled. “Well, congratulations. Would you like a picture? A photo of you guys on the plane as you elope?”

“No, thanks,” said Lexi, while I answered, “Good idea.”

I opened the camera on my phone and handed it to her. “Here you go.”

“Smile,” she said, snapping the shot. “Perfect. How about a kiss?”

Lexi shook her head. “That’s not necessary.”

“Now, sweetheart, don’t be shy.” I met her eyes and spoke quietly. “It’s only a kiss. It’s not even against the rules.”

“Fine,” she whispered. “One kiss. And then we’re amending the rules.”

I pressed my lips to hers, which she kept firm and closed. Even so, my body prickled with heat.

“Got it,” said Donna, handing my phone back to me. “And I’ll be back in a minute with your champagne.”

The second she was gone, Lexi turned on me. “What was that?”

“That was practice,” I said, removing my arm. “And clearly we needed it.”

“What we need is to get our story straight. And I’m putting ‘no kissing’ under the ‘no sex’ umbrella.”

I sighed. “You’re taking all the fun out of this.”

“This isn’t supposed to be fun—this is business.” She fanned her face. “God, I’m a nervous wreck already. We’re terrible at pretending.”

“Maybe just try not letting every single thing you feel register on your face.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” I said, already regretting my words.

“You think you’re so much better than me because you can mask what you’re feeling so easily?”

“Well, it makes me a better *actor*.”

Her cheeks flushed. “Sorry if my face is too honest for you.”

“Here you are.” The flight attendant appeared with two glasses of bubbly. “Congratulations again. You’re a beautiful couple.”

“Thank you,” I said. I handed a glass to Lexi, who looked like she might dump the champagne in my lap. “Bottoms up.”

\* \* \*

After a layover in Chicago, we arrived in Las Vegas around three o'clock. As soon as we checked into our suite—which did indeed have one king-sized bed and one blue velvet couch—we headed for the Clark County Clerk's office to get our marriage license. We'd filled out the application online somewhere above the Rocky Mountains.

With the paperwork in hand, we exited the building and stood on the sidewalk. "So now what?" she asked.

"Now we can get married."

"Seriously? That's it?" She seemed dismayed that it was so easy.

"That's it." I looked up and down the block where the County Clerk's office was located, where several smart entrepreneurs had installed wedding chapels. "The guy said we can pretty much just walk into one of these places and get it done."

"Okay. Then we might as well just do it now."

"Really?" I faced her. "You're ready right now?"

"Why not?"

"I don't know." I gestured to her jeans and tank top. It was warm, so she'd tied my Two Buckleys sweatshirt around her waist. "Is that what you want to get married in?"

"This isn't my real wedding, Devlin. I don't really care what I wear. Someday, I hope I do the thing with the white dress and Gran's veil and a bouquet of roses in my hands as I come down the staircase at Snowberry Lodge, but that's not today."

"You want to get married at Snowberry?"

"Yes." She shaded her eyes from the sun with one hand and looked up at me. "In front of the fireplace in the lobby. That's where my parents got married. It's what I've always dreamed about."

I nodded slowly. “I hope you get that someday.”

“Thanks.”

“Rings,” I said, noting her naked fingers above her brow. “We need rings.”

She looked around and pointed across the street. “There’s a pawn shop.”

I followed her gaze. “Looks decent. Let’s go.”

Twenty minutes later, we left the shop with two plain gold bands in a shabby velvet box. Each one was inscribed with *beloved*.

“It’s kinda sad,” she said as we headed up the street toward the chapel the pawn shop guy had recommended for a walk-in wedding. “I mean, why are these rings in a pawn shop? What happened?”

I shrugged. “People split up all the time.”

“But do you think the rings are cursed or anything?” She sounded so worried, I laughed. “I’m serious, Devlin.” Pivoting in front of me, she walked backward a few steps. “I know we’re not planning on a long marriage, but we do need *luck*.”

“I am feeling very lucky today,” I assured her, opening the door of The Viva Las Lovers Wedding Chapel. “Come on. Let’s get hitched and then go get a burger or something. I’m hungry.”

\* \* \*

In less than half an hour, we stood in a waiting room outside the chapel door, waiting for our names to be called. The air conditioning was kicked up so high, Lexi had been chilly enough to put my sweatshirt back on. I’d declined the red carnation boutonniere that was part of our package, but Lexi had decided to carry the one red rose offered. She’d also let them clip a short veil to her head. It looked pretty ridiculous, but I didn’t tell her that.

She stared down at the rose like she felt sorry for it. “They’ll probably ask for this back,” she whispered. “Stick it in the fridge and give it to the next girl.”

“Doesn’t matter, right?”

“I guess not.” Suddenly she turned to me, her hazel eyes full of worry, her expression panicked. “Are we doing the right thing, Devlin?”

“We’re doing the *necessary* thing,” I told her.

“But I’m tricking my grandmother to get something I want,” she fretted. “I’m a bad person.”

“You are not a bad person. You are loyal and selfless. And from what I know of your grandmother, I bet she’d do the same thing in your shoes.”

The chapel door opened, and a happy couple rushed out, hand in hand, flushed with excitement. He wore a suit. She wore a white dress and carried an actual bouquet, and flowers were pinned in her hair. They stopped to kiss, their eyes closed, their bodies radiating with joy. When they pulled apart, they were both smiling, and the bride had tears running down her face. “We did it,” she said.

Hand in hand, they walked past us, and the guy held the door open for his new wife.

“Devlin Buckley and Alexandra McIntyre?”

Startled, I whipped my head around and saw the guy with a clipboard standing by the chapel door. His name tag said Pete. “Yes.”

“You’re up,” he said. “Groom, you come with me. Bride, you’ll be cued in a minute. Then you enter and walk up the aisle.”

“Actually, can we just come in together?” Lexi asked anxiously.

Pete shrugged. “Whatever you want. It’s your wedding.”

We followed him into the chapel, which didn’t seem quite the right word for the space, although it was painted white and

had a few wooden benches on either side of a runner that split the center of the room. An officiant dressed as Elvis waited for us at the front, dressed in a bejeweled, bell-bottomed white jumpsuit, complete with open chest and cape. If that wasn't a wig on his head, he had some amazing sideburns.

"Wait here," Pete said. "I'll go back and press play. When your song comes on, you go."

I nodded. "Thanks."

Lexi and I stood side by side at the foot of the aisle, facing off with Elvis like it was a duel. From the corner of my eye, I saw the rose she held with both hands begin to tremble. Immediately, I slipped my arm in hers. "Hey," I whispered. "You okay?"

She looked up at me. "I don't know."

"You don't have to do this," I told her. "If you want to change your mind, it's fine. We can head right out the door and never speak of this again."

She took a breath and faced the aisle again. Squared her shoulders. "No. Let's do it."

Elvis Presley's "It's Now or Never" began to play over speakers in each corner of the room. Keeping my arm in Lexi's, we walked down the aisle together at a pretty good clip. Fake Elvis probably thought we were *very* eager to get married.

"Welcome," he said in a deep, twangy voice. "We are gathered here today to join your hearts in everlasting love. You ready?"

"Ready," Lexi said.

"Ready," I echoed.

Elvis's lip hooked up on one side. "Dearly beloved . . ."





*lexi*

I ACTUALLY DON'T RECALL MUCH about the ceremony.

We faced each other. Someone took my rose. Someone took a picture. We held hands. We repeated some words. The room was overly air-conditioned, and I felt chilly, even with Devlin's sweatshirt on. I kept shivering.

At the appropriate time, Devlin took the ring box from his back pocket. I put one on his finger. He put one on mine.

More words were spoken. There was some nodding. Some agreeing. Some polite laughter at Elvis's jokes. The click of the camera.

"So," he said after maybe ten minutes. "With the authority invested in me by this great state of Nevada, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

I closed my eyes, waiting to feel Devlin's lips on mine. Instead I heard him say, "It's fine, we're good."

My eyes flew open. Devlin winked at me. A laugh bubbled up in my chest.

Elvis, however, appeared taken aback. "You don't want to kiss your new wife?"

"Well, I would, but it's against the rules. Thanks, though." Grinning, he took me by the hand. "Come on, wife."

We practically raced up the aisle, performing an end-zone run around the befuddled photographer who stood near the door.

“Wait!” she called. “Don’t you want a ‘just married’ photo?”

“No, thanks!” I unclipped the veil from my head and tossed it in the air.

Bursting into the lobby, we raced for the exit and spilled out onto the front steps, where we stood for a minute and stared at each other. We didn’t kiss, we didn’t cry, and we certainly didn’t declare our love.

But we were *married*.

Husband.

Wife.

\* \* \*

I got a little bit tipsy at dinner.

Maybe it was because I hadn’t eaten all day. Maybe it was because I was trying to distract myself from thinking about what we’d done. Maybe it was to fight the fear I had that it would all be for nothing, because everyone would see through this scheme and Gran wouldn’t let me inherit.

Or maybe it was to numb my attraction to Devlin.

My *husband*.

The thought of it sent a secret little thrill up my spine. Maybe it wasn’t real, but it was true.

And tonight was our wedding night.

Seated across from him in a dark corner of the steakhouse inside our hotel, I finished off my second glass of pinot noir and watched him take a sip of his second glass of whiskey. Why did he have to be so hot? Memories of the night we’d spent together were assaulting my mind left and right. He took another drink and set the glass down, keeping his hand wrapped around it. The shiny gold band on his finger reflected the candlelight on our table.

“Are you a lefty?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know that about you.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.” His eyes locked on mine. In the dark, their sapphire hue was dulled, but not their effect on me.

I grew warm under his gaze and kind of wanted to take his sweatshirt off. I wished I was wearing something cuter underneath, but we’d been so hungry, neither one of us wanted to take the time to go up to our room and change.

Our one room. With its one bed.

I picked up my empty wineglass and attempted to take another sip.

“I think it’s gone,” Devlin said with a grin. “Would you like another?”

“I’m not sure I should.”

“Why not?”

“I might become vulnerable to your advances,” I said coquettishly, batting my lashes.

The grin disappeared. “There will be no advances, Lexi. I already told you—I will be a perfect gentleman tonight. You’ve got nothing to worry about. So if you’d like another glass of wine, go ahead and order it. You’re safe with me.”

Safe with him. I liked the words. I even believed them. So why was I feeling a little let down?

“I guess I don’t need more wine,” I said, dropping the coy virgin routine. “We’ve already paid the bill, and I don’t want to fly home with a headache in the morning.”

“Okay.” He finished off his whiskey. “Then let’s go.”

“Speaking of home, where is it?” I asked as we left our table. “I mean, where are we going to live?”

“I was thinking your place probably makes the most sense. For the time being, anyway.” He followed me out of the restaurant, briefly placing a hand on my lower back. “It’s a

little small for both of us, but unless you want to move to a bigger place, it's what we've got."

"There are some two-bedroom units in the complex," I told him. "I could see if any of those are available. Although it might not make sense if we're only going to need it for six months."

"It would make even less sense if we didn't live together."

As we headed through the casino, several women stared openly at Devlin, their heads turning as he passed them by. I didn't blame them. I sort of wished he hadn't taken his hand off my back.

"Hey, should I change my name?" I asked as we reached the elevators.

"Maybe." He punched the button with the up arrow. "Just to avoid suspicion."

"Pretty sure Elvis suspected something was up when you didn't want to kiss me," I teased, poking his shoulder.

"Oh, you wanted me to kiss you? Because your face told a different story." The elevator arrived, and Devlin let me go in first. No one else entered, and he hit the button for our floor.

The doors closed. "I'm not saying I *wanted* you to kiss me, I'm just—" Suddenly I found myself pressed against the back wall of the elevator, caged in by both of his arms. He wasn't touching me, but his mouth hovered so close to mine I could feel his breath on my lips.

"Because if you want me to kiss you, Lexi, say the word."

Was that the elevator rising so fast? Or my pulse?

I licked my lips.

"You have to say it, Lexi. Otherwise, I'm going to stick to the rules."

More than anything, I wanted to say *fuck the rules*. I wanted to grab his head and pull his mouth onto mine. I wanted to taste the whiskey on his tongue.

I knew he could read all of that on my face. He was only asking me to say it out loud to mess with me. To show me he was boss. To flaunt how in control he was, like he could take me or leave me.

The doors opened behind him.

“Let me out,” I said.

He backed off immediately, and I rushed off the elevator into the hallway, taking a deep gulp of air. My head was spinning, but not just from the wine. I walked ahead of him all the way to our room, standing aside while he unlocked the door.

He held it open. “Would you like me to carry you across the threshold?”

“Very funny,” I said, hurrying inside. Grabbing the overnight bag I’d packed, I went into the bathroom and shut the door.

I needed a cold shower.

\* \* \*

This morning, when I’d packed for this trip, I’d been convinced the no-sex rule was best, and it’s possible I didn’t trust nighttime Lexi to toe the line, because I had nothing even remotely alluring to sleep in. After my shower, I came out of the bathroom dressed in an old Sleeping Bear Dunes T-shirt and cotton pajama shorts with a frayed hem. My underwear was . . . not cute.

But it didn’t matter because Devlin barely looked at me. The room was dark except for the lamp near the couch, where he sat with his laptop open on the coffee table. “Done in the bathroom?” he asked without taking his eyes off the screen.

“Yes. It’s all yours.” I turned the covers back on the king-sized bed, watching him grab a few things from his bag out of the corner of my eye. He disappeared into the bathroom, and I slipped between the cool, crisp sheets.

The shower ran. I imagined him naked, the water splashing down those long, lean limbs. His hands gliding over his hot, wet skin. Was he still wearing his ring? I twisted mine around my finger. Beneath the covers, my body started to hum.

Dammit, why couldn't he have just kissed me in that elevator? Why did he have to make me admit out loud that I wanted him?

I wasn't tired at all, but when the bathroom door opened, I curled up on my side and slammed my eyes shut, feigning sleep. I could smell his body wash—bourbon and cedar. Hint of coriander.

I never knew coriander could be sexy.

He settled on the couch again, and I heard tapping, like he was typing on his laptop. I wondered what he was wearing and decided to peek.

Shirtless. Some kind of sweatpants. Wet hair. And glasses. He was wearing fucking eyeglasses, and I had no idea why that turned me on so much, but it did.

He caught me looking. "Is the lamp bothering you? I can turn it off." Reaching behind the couch, he switched it off, and the room went dark except for his screen, which bathed his skin in bluish light.

"Thanks." Reluctantly, I closed my eyes again. More tapping. "What are you doing?"

"Market research," he said. "We can talk about it tomorrow on the way home." He removed his glasses and closed the screen. "It's late. We should get some sleep."

In the dark, I pictured him trying to stretch out on the couch, unable to extend his long legs all the way. The couch wasn't that deep either. It was more for looks than comfort.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. This was stupid. The bed was enormous. We were married. It was obvious he wasn't going to touch me without permission.

Which I was thinking about granting anyway.

"Devlin," I whispered.

“Yeah?”

“You can sleep in the bed.”

“No, thanks.”

“What?” Outraged, I bolted upright. “You’re turning me down?”

“I’m respecting the rules.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Fine. Sleep on the couch. I don’t care.” Flopping back again, I frowned into the darkness.

“I mean, if you *want* me to sleep in the bed with you . . .”

“Never mind!”

“Listen, I’m not the one who made the rules. I’m not the one who accused you of being a scam artist. I’m just a guy trying to prove he can be trusted, and getting into bed with you without being explicitly asked seems like looking for trouble.”

I sighed loudly, pitting my pride against the orgasms he’d given me the night we met.

It was not a fair fight.

“I’m asking you to sleep in the bed with me,” I said quietly.

“What’s that? I couldn’t quite hear you.”

I clenched my teeth and spoke louder. “I’m *asking* you to sleep in the bed with me.”

“That’s better.” He got off the couch and walked around to the far side. “So how do you feel about my pants?”

“Your pants?”

“Yes. I seem to recall a rule about not undressing in front of each other. But I’d rather not sleep in my pants. Could you maybe close your eyes?”

“Just take them off,” I said irritably. “I don’t care.”

He slipped them off while I pretended I wasn’t watching, pretended my heart wasn’t pounding, pretended my lady bits



weren't tingling with anticipation. Then he climbed into the bed, pulling the covers to his waist.

I turned onto my side, facing him. I scooted a little closer to the center of the bed.

He stayed right where he was, lying on his back.

At this point, I was seething. "You're going to stay all the way over there?"

"Seems prudent. Unless you'd like to break another rule."

My pulse quickened. "Which one did you have in mind?"

"Well, if I move any closer to you, I'll definitely be tempted to kiss you, and since that falls under the no-sex rule umbrella, I suppose that's the one I was thinking about."

I stretched out one leg. My toes found his calf. "What if I said we could break that rule?"

"Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes. I mean, it does seem a bit silly," I said, my arm snaking across the few inches of remaining space between us. When I felt his torso, I moved my hand over his abdomen. The muscles tensed beneath my palm. "We've already done it."

"That's true," he said. "And we weren't even married then."

"Exactly." I tucked myself along his side, slid my hand lower on his hip—and stopped. "Wait, you're naked already?"

"You watched me take off my pants."

"I know, but it was dark. I thought you had underwear on."

"I like to sleep naked." Suddenly he flipped me onto my back, pinning my wrists above my shoulders. His cock pressed into my hip, thick and hard. "Just so I'm clear—all rules are out the window?"

"All except one."

"And which one is that?"

"The one about the end date for the marriage. That rule stays in place." I didn't want there to be any confusion about

that.

“So you mean, we can essentially enjoy no-strings-attached sex for a few months while we save your family’s resort and fuck over my former company?”

“Yes.”

“Well. You drive a hard bargain, Alexandra McIntyre, but I think I can agree to those terms.” He grinned. “Congratulations on closing the deal.”

“Buckley.”

“Huh?”

“Alexandra Buckley. We’re married, remember?”

“That’s right.” He lowered his lips to my ear. “And I hope you’re not tired, because I plan on fucking my wife all night long.”

My entire body trembled. “You do?”

“Yes. But first, I’m going to get her naked, put my hands on every inch of her skin, and make her come with my tongue.” He sucked my earlobe into his mouth. “How does that sound?”

“That sounds amazing,” I panted.

“Good. Because you know what they say.” His lips hovered above mine. “Happy wife, happy life.”

\* \* \*

I learned something about my husband that night—how patient he could be in bed.

He nearly drove me *mad* with it.

After lifting my shirt over my head and pulling my shorts and panties down my legs, Devlin spent an agonizingly long time just touching me. Hands only. Running his palms along my limbs, over my belly, across my back. His fingers caressed my collarbone, the curve of my hip, every one of my toes.

Beneath his hands, I trembled and writhed, arched and stretched. My body burned for his touch, my body was molten. Sometimes I could feel his breath on my skin, and I'd go perfectly still, hoping his lips would make contact.

I realized he was avoiding all the most sensitive spots and whimpered softly. My breasts ached for his hands, my nipples hard and tingling. Deep within my core, the need for him was gathering like a storm. My clit fluttered and hummed, desperate for his attention.

“Devlin.” His name was a plea on my lips.

“Yes?”

“I want you.”

“You have me.” Kneeling between my thighs, he pressed his fingertips to the hollow at the base of my throat and drew a line down my chest. “I’m wearing the ring to prove it.”

“You know what I mean.” I arched my back, praying he’d be unable to resist. Patience was not my strong suit. “I want you to fuck me.”

“We’ll get there. It’s not just about the destination, Lexi.” When he reached the bottom of my ribcage, he circled one breast, giving its sensitive tip a wide berth, but then slowly spiraling inward, loop after loop bringing him closer to the pebbled peak. When he finally brushed his thumb across it, I cried out, clawing at the sheets. “God, you’re beautiful,” he said, teasing me with featherlight strokes, gentle pinches, soft tugs, until I was nearly out of my mind with desire. Then he repeated it all on the other side.

“You’re killing me,” I whispered. “I’m not good at waiting.”

With a low chuckle, he finally moved a hand between my legs, stroking me softly. “Would you like me to outline the benefits of delayed gratification, wife?”

“No. I would like you to stop talking and—oh!” His fingers caressed my clit at the same time he leaned down and took one aching nipple in his mouth. I grabbed his head, threading my fingers into his damp hair, and lifted my hips. He

slipped two fingers inside me, both of us moaning at the sensation. Withdrawing his hand, he rubbed me with warm, wet fingertips, using firm pressure and a steady rhythm. Every muscle in my lower body went tight.

“Oh God,” I whimpered. “I’m so close already.” In fact, I only lasted about ten more seconds before the tension he’d so carefully wrought snapped, and I cried out as my body throbbed with relief. As soon as my muscles loosened again, I sat up and tried reaching for his cock.

Sitting back on his heels, he grabbed my wrist. “No. Not yet.”

“Why?”

“Because I have plans for you that require diligence and restraint. You touch me like that, I might get impatient.”

“I just want to feel you,” I whispered. “Let me.”

He kept my wrist shackled with his fingers but brought my hand to his cock. I wrapped my hand around his hot, hard flesh and he slowly worked my fist up and down, controlling the motion with his grip on my wrist. His breathing was heavy and labored. “You want that?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Here.” I took his other hand and brought it between my legs, using his fingers on me like he was using my fist on him. I dipped them inside me and then brought them to my mouth, rubbing my lips with his fingertips. “And here.” I sucked one finger into my mouth, and he groaned. His cock grew thicker in my palm.

“Fuck,” he growled. “Goddamn, that’s hot.”

“Come on, let me,” I coaxed, sensing I’d gained an advantage in this game. I dipped my head to see what he’d do. My tongue darted out and licked his crown. He went still, although he kept that hand wrapped around my wrist, and I kept my fingers curled around his shaft. “I want to taste you.”

A low sound rumbled from the back of his throat, but he didn't stop me when I stroked him again with my tongue. Or when I took the tip between my lips and sucked gently. Or when I began to move my fist up and down his swollen length again. In fact, he moved his hands into my hair when I took him in deeper, letting my mouth follow my hand all the way down to the hilt and back up again. His fists tightened as I worked my mouth up and down his erection, sweeping my tongue over his hot, veined skin, gripping him hard at the root. His breaths came faster. His hips began to flex. On my tongue, I tasted the salty-sweet flavor of his desire. With my free hand, I reached between his legs and cradled his balls, rubbing my middle finger along the sensitive skin just beyond them.

Suddenly he tugged my head back, forcing me to look up at him.

“Wife.” A warning.

I let him spring from my lips with a soft pop. “What’s the matter?”

“The matter will be down your throat in a minute. So if you don’t want a mouthful of me, you best take a break.”

“Maybe a mouthful of you is exactly what I want,” I murmured, teasing his crown with my tongue again. “Maybe I’d *like* to feel it down my throat. Maybe it’s *my* turn to make *you* come for *me*.”

“I don’t generally like it when things don’t go according to my plans,” he said, his voice tight. “But I suppose I could make an exception this one time.”

“You’re so good to me.” Laughing, I kept my eyes on his while brushing the tip of his cock over my lips. “Husband.”

He groaned, and I resumed what I’d been doing. And in less than a minute, he was thrusting hard between my lips, filling my mouth with hot, salty bursts. He was so rough that my eyes watered and my scalp stung from how tightly he grasped my hair, but I felt a gigantic sense of accomplishment at his long, drawn-out moan, at the power of his climax. When

it was finished, he withdrew from my mouth, and I swallowed before gasping for air.

“Fuck. Are you okay?” he asked, his hands releasing their hold in my hair.

“Fine.” I wiped my mouth with the back of my wrist.

“Jesus Christ. That was incredible.” He touched my lips with his thumb. “I love your mouth. The night we met, I couldn’t stop staring at it. And this dimple in your chin.” He pressed it gently.

“I couldn’t get over your eyes,” I whispered. “Or your jawline. Your cheekbones. Actually, your whole face.”

“You should sit on it.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” He flipped onto his back and grabbed my arm, tugging me toward him. “I need a little recovery time. You like my face. I want to fuck you with my tongue. This is a win for both of us, Lexi.”

Gingerly, I crawled up his body. “Are you sure? What if you can’t breathe?”

“Then I’ll die happy and you’ll inherit all my riches. Still winning.” He hooked his hands beneath my thighs and pulled me up so I straddled his face. Then he licked up my center with a long, leisurely stroke. “Now grab on to that headboard and go for a ride. Don’t rush it, either. Take it nice and easy.” He dipped his tongue inside me. “I want to get my fill of you.”

Shoving my nerves aside, I placed my hands on the velvet headboard, closed my eyes, and began to move my hips in a lazy rocking motion. He matched my rhythm with his tongue—drawn-out, decadent strokes that rekindled the flame inside me. But every time I began to move faster, he’d give me a little slap on the ass. “Slow down, wife.”

I tried to slow down, but he was so fucking good with his tongue, I couldn’t help myself. In no time at all, I would speed right up again, earning myself another spanking and

admonishment. “Devlin, please,” I begged. “Let me come. Is it okay now?”

“Such a good girl to ask permission,” he said. “I think you deserve a reward for that.” His palms moved over my ass, pulling me tighter to his face while he sucked my clit. Lightning bolts of desire shot through me, taking me straight to the edge. He slid his palms up to my breasts, pinching the puckered tips, and I burst wide open, the climax rocketing through me as I hung on to the headboard for dear life, crying out with every delectable pulse.

I didn’t even have time to catch my breath before Devlin tipped me onto my back and stretched out above me. “Don’t. Move.”

He didn’t need to worry—all I wanted was him inside me. In ten seconds he was back, tearing open a condom wrapper and rolling it onto his cock. My body was practically shaking with need. I’d never experienced desire like this before. Every nerve ending was on fire. Every muscle was screaming. If he asked me to get on my knees and beg, I’d do it.

But I didn’t have to.

He placed himself between my open legs. We both moaned as he slid inside me, and I swear to God, it was like my previous orgasm picked right up where it left off, because with just a few strokes of his long, hard cock, my core was tightening up again.

“Fuck, you feel way too good.” Devlin’s voice was all panic, no control. There was no delaying this gratification. He moved like a hungry lion uncaged. “And you’re so fucking hot and wet. You take my cock so deep. So hard.”

“I want it,” I rasped, clawing at his ass with my nails, yanking him into me, holding him there while he ground against me. “Don’t stop. Don’t stop . . .” At that point, I couldn’t talk anymore because my stomach muscles contracted so hard, it stole my breath. Over and over again, he drove in deep, and my body gripped him harder with every single thrust.

Then I was lost to it, the climax tearing through me with the force of a hurricane, my face buried in his neck, my mouth open in silent throes. He powered through a few more deep, hard thrusts before going plank stiff, buried deep inside me. Just as my orgasm was fading, his broke loose, and I was able to feel every single throb of him inside me.

I clung to him like a woman overboard.

And maybe I was.



TEN

*devlin*

WE WERE bleary-eyed and dizzy with exhaustion the next morning, but we made it to the airport on time—barely.

“Caffeine,” moaned Lexi, the way a zombie moans for brains. “I need caffeine.”

“I’ll get us some.” I nudged her forward in line at security, smiling at her off-kilter bun, her mismatched socks, the dark circles under her eyes. I’d made good on that promise to fuck her all night long. And even going on less than a couple hours’ sleep, she was still beautiful.

She’d asked to wear the Two Buckleys sweatshirt again. Between that and the ring on her finger, I was experiencing some feelings that weren’t exactly normal for me when it came to women. Protective. A little possessive. Kind of caveman-like. I’d started calling her *wife* because I thought it was funny—and to be honest, just to poke at her because she was giving me such a hard time about the night we met—but I had to admit, the word kind of turned me on.

How fucking crazy was that?

I decided it had to be the game, the whole faking-it-for-a-limited-time thing. I’d never actually wanted a wife before, not in the sense that I wanted to be emotionally and physically beholden to one person for the rest of my life. That was too much. But this? Six months of shacking up as friends with benefits while we worked together on a project I was actually kind of excited about? A couple seasons full of nights like the one we’d just spent? Keeping each other warm while the weather turned cold?

Sign me up.

We got through security and picked up two large coffees on the way to our gate. Sinking into two seats near the window, we sipped coffee in silence for a few minutes. “I know we need to talk about what happens next, but I’m so fucking tired, I can’t think,” she said.

“Let’s just get home, okay? We can talk after we get a little rest.”

“Okay.” She finished her coffee and got up to throw the cup away. When she came back, she tipped her head onto my left shoulder and fell asleep. Switching my coffee to my right hand, I managed to wrap my left arm around her without waking her up, and she snuggled in as much as the seats would allow.

Her arms were wrapped around herself, and her wedding band caught my eye. I thought about my dad, about how he’d continued to wear his ring long after we lost my mom. How he’d never fallen in love again. How he continued to maintain her rose gardens in the yard, and every summer, he’d proudly bring some to her gravesite to show them off. He’d been so thoroughly devoted to her.

Looking at the ring I’d placed on Lexi’s finger, I felt a little guilty that we’d so flippantly entered into this short-lived marriage while people like my parents went into theirs believing in forever.

But that belief had been shattered, hadn’t it? So maybe there was no such thing. Maybe that belief only set you up for heartache anyway.

I finished my coffee and held on to the empty cup while Lexi slept. From time to time, she jumped, like maybe she was dreaming. When our zone was called for boarding, I squeezed her shoulder. “Lex. Time to go.”

“Huh?” She picked up her head.

“We’re boarding.”

“Oh.” She sat up straighter, giving me an apologetic look. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to fall asleep on you.”

“I didn’t mind.” We gathered our things, and I tossed my cup in the trash on our way to get in line.

“I was having the weirdest dream,” she said.

“About what?”

“I was skiing down a hill, but I was totally out of control, like no matter what I did, I couldn’t catch my balance. And then I got to the bottom, and all these people were laughing at me. That’s when I looked down and discovered I was naked.”

I laughed. “Naked skiing?”

“Based on my dream, I do not recommend it.”

“I don’t ski, so it’s unlikely I’d try it.”

She stopped moving forward in line and stared at me. “What?”

I put a hand on her lower back and eased her forward. “I don’t ski.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t like it that much.” Which was true, but I was leaving out the part about being afraid of heights.

“Do you snowboard?”

“Nope.”

She went silent, and we boarded the plane. I was hoping she’d drop it, but after tucking her bag beneath the seat in front of her, she looked at me. “I can’t believe I didn’t know this about you.”

“It’s not that big a deal.”

“Devlin, I’m a ski instructor. We’re about to take over a ski resort. You don’t think it was worth mentioning to me that you don’t even enjoy the sport?”

I shrugged, buckling my seatbelt. “What does it matter? You don’t need me on the mountain. You need me in the office.”

“I guess.” She sat back and buckled in. After staring out the window for a few minutes, she turned to me again. “What

don't you like about it?"

"I don't know." I brushed some nonexistent dust off my pants. "The cold?"

"You wear warm clothing."

"It's expensive."

"You don't have to fly to the Alps for a five-star luxury vacation. There are plenty of affordable places to ski."

"It's repetitive," I said. "Ride up, ski down. Ride up, ski down. I get bored."

She grew animated. "How can you get bored? I mean, skiing turns a mountain into a wonderland! The scenery is so beautiful, the air is so fresh. There's nothing like the sound of the wind in the trees, or leaving trails in fresh snow, or that sense of accomplishment when you conquer a run you thought was beyond you. And if you get too chilly, you go in and sit by the fire to warm up. You drink something hot and get back out there."

I shrugged. "I guess we just feel differently. There's no need to take it personally, Lexi."

"I guess." But she looked so sad about it, I almost admitted the truth.

Instead, I decided to change the subject. "So whose family should we tell first?"

She exhaled. "Gosh. I don't know. Everything hinges on Gran, so we really need her to believe us. Should we tell yours first? Use it as a sort of dress rehearsal?"

"We could." I thought for a moment. "Today is Wednesday. My brother Xander is opening a bar in Cherry Tree Harbor this Friday night, and I don't want to take anything away from that. Think we could attend the event but wait until Saturday to make the announcement?"

"Sure," she said. "And then Gran on Sunday?"

I nodded. "That works."

“And Tabitha.” She wrinkled up her face. “My mean cousin.”

“Tabitha is mean?”

“She’s *difficult*,” said Lexi, forming the word slowly. “But she hasn’t had it easy. Her dad abandoned her and her mom when she was young, and her mom remarried right away. Had more kids. I think she was ignored a lot. Always wanted attention, so she’d act like a brat.”

“She had it easier than *you*,” I pointed out. “And I bet *you* weren’t a brat.”

“No, I wasn’t a brat.” Her grin turned a little wicked. “But since I was a better, faster skier, I’d get back at her by beating her down the mountain all the time. She couldn’t keep up. I’d wait for her at the bottom of the slope, pretending to be asleep.”

I elbowed her. “*Now* who’s mean?”

“Listen, Tabitha doesn’t need your sympathy. She grew up gorgeous and never lacks for attention.”

“She’s gorgeous, huh?” I pretended to be intrigued. “Does she look like you?”

“Not one bit.” She pulled out her phone and opened up an Instagram account. “See? Angelic blonde. Big blue eyes. She’s a travel influencer now.”

I took the phone from her and studied the posts.

“Well?” Lexi prompted. “Gorgeous, right?”

“She’s cute, I guess. But I’m a married man.”

Lexi punched my shoulder. “Haha.”

I opened up one post and scrolled through its multiple photos, which showed Tabitha posing on a mountaintop in a hot pink outfit. “Is that at Snowberry?”

“Let me see.” She took the phone back and gasped. “No! It’s at The Summit! That little shit collaborated with The Summit!”

“Seriously?” I leaned over Lexi’s shoulder and read the caption. Sure enough, Tabitha had posted all about autumn packages at The Summit, *northern Michigan’s premiere recreational resort in all seasons*. “Wow.”

The flight attendant asked for phones to be placed in airplane mode, and Lexi switched it on before shoving her phone inside her bag. She fumed for a minute or so, and then said, “You know what? I can’t think about her.”

“Don’t. Let’s focus on putting together a business plan and a pitch deck. I’ll reach out to potential investors right away.”

“Okay.” She looked hopeful again. “I have lots of ideas.”

“Can’t wait to hear them.”

Smiling, she laid her head on my shoulder. Reached over and picked up my hand. “Thanks for this.”

“You’re welcome.” I noticed she was still wearing the friendship bracelet.

By the time the flight took off, she was sound asleep again. Once we were cruising above the clouds and my nerves settled—believe it or not, flying doesn’t bother me the way balconies and high dives do—I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

When the flight touched down hours later, we were still holding hands.

\* \* \*

Thanks to the time difference, it was already late by the time we got back to Lexi’s condo. We had planned to start working as soon as we got in, but we were so exhausted, we decided ordering pizza and watching *The Bear* was all our brains could handle.

After only a couple episodes, we were both dozing off. “Let’s just call it a night,” she said, getting up to put the leftover pizza away.

“Sounds good.” I yawned. “Do you want me to sleep out here?”

After sticking the box in the fridge, she came back into the living room. “Do you *want* to sleep out here?”

“No. But I want to respect your space.”

“I appreciate that, but you might as well sleep in the bed. Although I have to warn you,” she said, “I’m too tired for sex tonight.”

“Me too.”

Of course, that wasn’t true.

She showered first, and she was already in bed when I climbed in beside her, lying on her side, and I couldn’t resist curling my body behind hers. That’s when I discovered she was naked.

So was I.

And as soon as I pressed up against her, my dick sprang to life, tapping on her ass like it was asking permission to enter. My hand slid over her hip and up her belly, covering one breast. I played with its pert little tip, and it changed shape for me.

“I thought you were too tired for sex,” she said.

“I thought I was too.”

“But you’re not?”

Fully hard, I pressed my cock against her perfect round ass. “Congratulations, you married a man who can admit when he was wrong.”

She laughed. “Lucky, lucky me.”

\* \* \*

The following morning, when Lexi got in the shower, I dragged myself out of bed, put a pot of coffee on, and opened up my laptop at the kitchen table. While I waited for the coffee to brew, I skimmed through my inbox and noticed I had an email from a guy in Los Angeles who worked for a west coast property development and management company. He’d



offered me a job after I finished my M.B.A. at Harvard, but in the end, I'd gone for the job at Hotchkiss in Boston, because I thought there was more possibility for quicker advancement.

The subject line said L.A. Opportunity. I opened it up.

*Hey Devlin,*

*Heard a rumor that you left Hotchkiss and wondered if you might consider heading west. I've watched your career over the last few years, and I'm very impressed with your performance. I'm now the head of HR in our Santa Monica office, and I'm interviewing candidates for Senior Account Representative. We could go internal, but I think you'd be a great fit. I remember how you said you hated those east coast winters, so I'm attaching a pic of what would be your corner office view. Interested?*

*Let's talk.*

*Rian Richman*

For a second, I was surprised the news that I'd parted ways with Hotchkiss had traveled so fast—I'd only quit three days ago—but then again, it sounded like Richman had been keeping tabs on me. Plus, this profession could sometimes feel like a small world, where gossip spread quickly, rumors flourished, and everyone knew everyone else's business. Which meant, of course, that if he hadn't heard about the circumstances of my leaving (including the fact that I'd thrown a punch at a co-worker), he soon would.

I opened the attached photos and groaned. It was fucking beautiful. Palm trees. Mountains. Blue skies. The Pacific Ocean with its white sandy beaches. The iconic Santa Monica Pier.

There were definite benefits, I thought, as I poured coffee into a cup. I could hike the canyons. Learn to surf. Drive a convertible year-round. I'd be closer to Dash. We could hang out all the time. Maybe even live together.

I'd never intended to stay in Boston forever anyway. I always figured I'd move up the ladder as far as I could at Hotchkiss and then move on to something bigger and better. I

felt no real attachment to the city—only to my work with Camp Lemonade. My chest caved a little bit at the thought of leaving those kids behind, but I couldn't stay in one place just for them. I had to keep moving. Keep reaching for the next thing.

If you stayed still, you got rusty.

As I sat there sipping my first cup of coffee and looking out Lexi's kitchen window at the evergreens, I became convinced that a sweeping change of scenery was exactly what I needed once I finished up here.

Setting the mug aside, I typed out a reply.

*Hey Rian,*

*Good to hear from you. The rumor is true—I'm no longer working for Hotchkiss. Not sure if you've heard yet that I left on bad terms, but that's definitely the case. I won't be getting any kind of positive review from old Harvey.*

*That said, I'm definitely interested in the position out west, but I'm currently involved with an interim project in northern Michigan. I'm investing some money and time in the renovation of a resort property, and I'll need to be on site for at least six months. But I could definitely get away for an interview. Let's talk dates.*

*Devlin Buckley*

A few minutes after I hit send, Lexi hustled into the kitchen. Dressed for work, her hair in two braids like Sara wore, she grabbed a travel mug from the cupboard and poured herself some coffee. "I'm late," she said. "I hate being late."

I stood up. "What can I do for you? Would it help if I drove you to work?"

"Thanks, but no. I'll just hurry." She spun around and headed in my direction, bag over one shoulder, travel mug in one hand, car keys in the other. Then she stopped. "Sorry. I don't know if we do this."

"Do what?"

"You know. Kiss hello and goodbye. Like a real couple."

I laughed and snagged her around the waist, pulling her close to me. She looked bright and fresh and beautiful, and she smelled delicious. “Let’s say we do.”

Smiling, she rose up on tiptoe and kissed my lips. “See you this afternoon.”

\* \* \*

A few hours later, Rian Richman got back to me and said he’d heard that there might be bad blood between me and my former boss, but he thought Harvey Hotchkiss was a first-class dipshit and wouldn’t have asked for his opinion in the first place. He said the start date might be an issue, but he was going to send me some potential interview dates anyway. I responded and said thanks.

In the back of my mind, I wondered what Lexi was going to say when I told her about the job interview across the country. If she’d worry. If she’d think I was abandoning her. In my head, I heard her say, *I always seem to choose leavers.*

But it wasn’t the same, was it? She hadn’t really chosen me. And she certainly didn’t love me.

Still, I decided not to mention it right away.

ELEVEN

*lexi*

I'D TAKEN my ring off this morning before work, but all day long I caught myself looking at the finger where it should have been. Was it strange that I kind of missed it? I knew the whole entanglement with Devlin was just for show, but I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so happy.

In fact, when Tabitha strolled in at three o'clock, she took one look at me and asked, "Did you go to the spa or something on your days off?"

"No. Why?"

"You just look different. You're glowing."

I shrugged. "Must be the crisp fall air. It's beautiful today, isn't it?"

She made a face. "Whatever. I'm just waiting for my money so I can get out of here. Do you know what's happening with the sale?"

"There might not be a sale."

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? Gran says there has to be. And I got a phone call from some guy wanting to talk to me about it."

A chill snaked up my spine. "What guy?"

"I don't know. He left a message for me yesterday."

"What was his name?"

"I don't know," she said dismissively. "Rob? Bob? He said he represents some company that wants to purchase

Snowberry and he'd like to talk. Evidently, Gran isn't returning his calls."

"How did he get your number?"

"I think my dad gave it to him." She studied her manicure. "He must have taken a break from being a complete shithead and remembered he had a daughter. Funny, since he completely forgot my birthday last month."

"What was the name of the guy's company?"

"Something about diamonds?" She shrugged. "I haven't called him back yet."

"Don't," I said firmly. "I mean it, Tabitha. Don't call him back. We're not selling to that company."

"I don't take orders from you," she said indignantly. "And why wouldn't we sell to that company, if they give us the best offer?"

"Because we're trying to figure out a way to prevent this place from being demolished."

"As long as I get my money, I don't care what they do with this place," she said, looking around with distaste. "We're lucky the land is worth something."

Grabbing my bag from beneath the desk, I slung it over my shoulder. "I have to go."

\* \* \*

Ten minutes later, I burst into my condo and slammed the door behind me. Devlin was sitting on the couch, his laptop open on the coffee table, a notepad and pen beside it.

"What's the name of the guy who screwed you over at your company?" I asked him. "The one who's on the Black Diamond account now."

"Bob Oliver," he said, removing his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. "Why?"

“Because I’m ninety-nine percent sure he’s trying to cozy up to my Uncle Roddy and my cousin Tabitha and get them to push Gran on the sale to Black Diamond.”

He nodded grimly. “Sounds like him.”

“What should we do?”

“What we’re doing.” He slid his glasses back on. “I made some calls today, and I’m continuing to crunch the numbers, but it’s going to take a little time to put a proposal together. We need estimates from contractors and aerial lift manufacturers. We need to consult a new chef. But in the meantime, we’ll need to make sure your grandmother doesn’t sell out from under us.”

“She gave me to the end of the month,” I said, crossing the room to sit beside him on the couch. “I don’t think she’d go back on her word.”

“You don’t know Bob Oliver. The guy’s a sleazeball, but he’s a good talker. He can con an old lady in the blink of an eye. And believe me, he will do anything to take me down a notch. This isn’t just business for him.”

I chewed my bottom lip. “So should we tell Gran now?”

“I think we have to. Tomorrow.”

My stomach lurched, and I put a hand over it. “Okay. Tomorrow.”

“Don’t look so scared. She wants what we want.”

“Right.” I took a deep, slow breath. “But Tabitha and her father are going to fight us.”

“We can win.” He reached over and put a hand on my knee. “Trust me.”

“Okay.” I inhaled and exhaled again, his touch reassuring. “I trust you.”

\* \* \*

Devlin and I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening sitting at my kitchen table going over renovation ideas. In addition to collecting data, he'd actually drawn a map showing his vision for the new and improved resort.

"The biggest projects, in addition to investing in better snowmaking technology and one high-speed lift, will be the main lodge." He pointed to it on the map. "The ground floor will be completely remodeled to include retail space, and the lower level will house a spa and heated saltwater grotto."

"Heated saltwater grotto!" I gaped at him. "What the hell is that?"

"Saltwater has healing properties and it's great for sore muscles," he said. "Best of all, no other resort with a spa around here has one. It will be a draw. We'll also be reducing the number of guest rooms from ninety-four to fifty-six," he went on.

"Why?"

"Because for the price we're going to charge, we want to make the rooms bigger. Snowberry is going to be a boutique, luxury experience. We want to attract couples looking for a romantic getaway, women planning ski and spa weekends, and guys *looking* for girls planning ski and spa weekends."

"But what about families?" I asked. "I was thinking we could fit in a little zip-line adventure thing over here."

Devlin shook his head. "A little zip-line adventure is not going to compete with The Summit's activities for kids. We have to target a different market."

I propped my elbows on the table, my head in my hands, staring at his drawing. "What's that at the top of the mountain?"

"That's a bar."

"Let me guess. It has walls of glass."

"It should have some big windows," Devlin allowed. "That's the point of being at the top of the mountain—the view."



“I know, but . . .” I stared at the spot on the mountaintop where I always went to feel connected to my parents. My heart ached.

“You have to be willing to make changes, Lexi.” Devlin’s tone was firm. “You can’t stay stuck in the past.”

“I understand. I just . . .” My throat was so tight. I tried to swallow and struggled.

“You just what? Don’t want to see this place survive? Don’t want to make money? What don’t you want to do?”

“I don’t want to see my memories trampled, okay?” I tried to control my emotions but couldn’t. “Look, my parents’ ashes are scattered there. When I think about people sitting there sipping gin and tonics, my soul dies a little bit.”

“I’m sorry about that, but if you don’t let go, this entire *place* is going to be a graveyard. And if you’re not willing to do what it takes to prevent that, I’m out. So you need to tell me now.”

Pushing back from the table, I jumped out of my chair and headed out the front door, slamming it behind me. Out on the porch, I placed my hands on the wooden railing and filled my lungs with the late summer air. A hint of fall was on the breeze, something cool and earthy. The change of season. The sun was setting beyond the trees, and I closed my eyes, feeling the warmth on my face.

The door opened and closed behind me. Softly, not like I had done it. A moment later, I sensed Devlin behind me. He put his hands on my shoulders and tipped his head onto mine.

“I’m sorry, Lexi,” he said. “I’m really sorry.”

I didn’t trust myself not to burst into tears, so I stayed silent.

“That was insensitive of me to say those things. I’m just worried. I don’t want all this to be for nothing.”

A tear slipped down my cheek. Then another.

“Hey. Come here.” He turned me into his arms and wrapped them around me.

Burying my face in his chest, I gave in and wept, comforted by his embrace. He didn't say anything, just stroked my hair and my back, and let me cry.

"I know I need to let go," I said between sobs. "It's just hard."

"Of course it is."

"This place meant everything to them. I feel like I'm letting them down by letting go."

"You're not, Lexi. In fact, I bet they'd be so proud of the way you're fighting to save this place. Fighting to keep their dream alive. Willing to do whatever you have to do to save it."

"Even marry my enemy," I said with a snuffle.

A chuckle rumbled his chest. "Aren't we friends yet? I gave you a bracelet and everything."

"I guess I just had this delusion that money would function like a time machine," I confessed. "We could bring people back by polishing up what was already here. Making improvements here and there without really altering the vibe."

"I think," he said, tipping my chin up with his fingers, "you have the potential to build something amazing here. Something unique. Something that will create all kinds of buzz."

"And you'll help me?"

"I'll help you." He hesitated. "I have some money set aside. It's not a ton, but it's a decent amount. If it's okay with you, I'd like to invest it here."

"Really?"

"Yes. We can work something out where the resort can pay me back after a certain amount of time. Once it's profitable."

"Of course! I'll pay you back—I promise." Smiling, I looped my arms around his waist and hugged him hard. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

I leaned back again. “Do you think there’s room for a ski apparel boutique in the new lodge? Or maybe a store where local artisans could sell their products? That could be anything from food items to jewelry to handmade soaps or skincare.”

“Absolutely. Those are great ideas. See?” He cradled my face in his hands and wiped away the leftover tears on my cheeks with his thumbs. “Forward motion is the key. Focusing your energy on the future, not the past.”

I took a deep breath. “I’ll try. And you really think we can come up with saltwater grotto money?”

“I talked to someone today who thinks they might be able to come through with some venture capital. I’ll know more next week.”

“Who is it?” I asked as we headed inside.

“A banker in Boston with good connections.”

“Does he owe you a favor or something?”

“She.” He smiled as he held the door for me. “Her name is Jennifer Bates. It’s Sara’s mom.”

“Oh my gosh!” Buoyed by the news, I headed into the kitchen and asked him what he’d like for dinner.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” he said. “Would you like me to go pick something up?”

“I don’t mind cooking,” I told him, opening the fridge to see what was in there.

“You cook?” Devlin sounded impressed.

“I do.” I shut the fridge and pulled the freezer open. “How would you feel about butternut squash gnocchi with Italian sausage?”

He stopped at the threshold to the kitchen and leaned against the frame. “Wife.”

Every time he said *wife* that way, like he was holding himself back from ravaging me and could snap at any moment, it made me laugh. It just felt so good.

Why did this feel so good?

\* \* \*

Devlin said he could use some exercise before dinner, so while he went on a run around the property, I zipped over to the grocery store. On the way there, I called Winnie.

“Hello?”

“Hey. Are you busy?”

“Just getting dinner together. But I’ve got a minute. What’s up?”

“Okay, I have to tell you something, but you can’t judge me.”

“I would never,” she said.

“And you have to keep this a secret.”

She groaned. “I’m really bad at secrets, but okay. Talk to me.”

I took a breath. “I got married.”

“You what?” she squealed. And then, “Just a second. Dex! Can you take over here? I have to take this call!” Dex yelled back he could, and after some shuffling noises, she was back. “Okay, tell me everything. I’m dying. Did you really get married?”

“Yes.”

“To who?”

I grinned. “The dragon.”

Thump!

“Win? You okay?”

“Yes. I ran into the door. Wait a minute. You married the guy who scammed you?”

“Turns out, it wasn’t a scam.” I told her about Devlin showing up on my doorstep three nights ago, what he’d told

me, and what his plan entailed.

“Oh my God. So you did it? You guys ran off to Vegas and got hitched?”

“We sure did.” I pulled into a parking spot at the store. “You would not believe how easy it is to tie the knot in that place. We came home yesterday.”

“So you spent the night there?”

“Yes.”

“Together?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Yes.”

She shrieked. “This is bananas, Lexi!”

“I know.” I turned off the engine. “But it’s how it has to happen because of Gran’s stupid will.”

“Have you told her yet?”

“No. That’s tomorrow.” I got out of the car and started walking toward the store. “And then we have to tell his family.”

“But you’re telling them like it’s real, right?”

“It *is* real. The marriage, anyway.”

“You know what I mean! You’re pretending like you’re actually in love?”

“Yes. We have to.” Wincing a little, I grabbed a cart at the store entrance. “We don’t love that we have to lie to everyone we care about, but Devlin thinks the ends justify the means.”

“Do you?”

“I keep saying I’ll do anything to save my home,” I said, putting some fresh sage and thyme in my basket.

“But what if your grandmother doesn’t believe you? What if she sells anyway? Or what happens if you *do* get control of

Snowberry? Are you stuck being married to this guy *forever*? Two weeks ago, you couldn't stand him!"

"We get along better now," I assured her. "But no. The marriage has an expiration date."

"What is it?"

"Well, it depends on when the funding comes through, but probably sometime next spring. Summer."

"So one year of make-believe?"

"At most." I paused in front of the squashes and lowered my voice. "It's not *all* make-believe, actually."

"It isn't? What's real?"

"The orgasms," I whispered, laughing a little. "The orgasms are definitely real."

Winnie laughed. "I thought my sister Felicity was crazy when she faked an engagement, but this is next level."

"Felicity faked an engagement? I never knew that! To who?"

"To Hutton."

"Wait, isn't that her husband's name?"

"Yes." Another giggle. "Turns out it wasn't all make-believe for them, either."

\* \* \*

The following night, Devlin and I met Gran for dinner at Snowberry's restaurant. I'd asked her to meet me and a potential investor, although I hadn't given her a name. After dinner, Devlin and I were heading to Cherry Tree Harbor to surprise his family at his brother's bar opening. The plan was to introduce me to them tonight but wait until Saturday to announce the marriage so we didn't steal attention.

We got to the restaurant a little early, and while we waited for Gran to arrive, we ordered drinks and toasted to our first

victory—Sara’s mom had called Devlin today and told him she had investors interested in meeting with us in late October.

“In the meantime,” Devlin said, “we can get the contractors lined up and have everything ready to go when the money comes through.”

“I’m so nervous,” I said. “What if Gran says no? What if all this is for nothing?”

“We’ll convince her,” Devlin said easily. “I don’t think it’s going to be as hard as you imagine.”

“Right.” I took a breath. “She said I had to have a husband, and I have a husband.”

“Not just any husband, but one with a Harvard M.B.A, experience in property development, and good connections.” He sipped his whiskey, his eyes dancing above the rim of his glass. “You hit the jackpot, Mrs. Buckley.”

Laughing, I looked down at my hand, at the gold band around my finger. “Let’s hope so.”

“You look beautiful, by the way. I love that color on you.”

I glanced down at the emerald green top I wore. “Thank you. It’s my favorite color.”

“Speaking of colors, tell me what you see for this dining room. It definitely needs an update.”

“I was thinking of maybe going lighter, a little more modern. Maybe Scandinavian design instead of Swiss? I want sleek but cozy.”

We were still discussing changes to the restaurant layout and decor when Gran approached the table. She stopped short when she saw us, steeling her fingers over her heart. “What’s this?”

Devlin stood and pulled out a chair for her. “Mrs. McIntyre.”

“Mr. Buckley.” She glanced at me, then back at him. “I’m surprised to see you here.”

“I can imagine,” he said.

“But not displeased,” she went on quickly, taking her seat. “I’d been hoping the two of you might work things out.” She smiled at me. “You look lovely, Alexandra. Just lovely.”

“Thanks, Gran.”

Devlin sat down again, and we exchanged a look. He moved his chair a little closer to mine and draped his left arm over my shoulders—all part of the choreography we’d discussed.

“So we have some news,” I began, which was my first line in the script we’d written, but as I watched Gran’s eyes move from the champagne in my glass to the ring on Devlin’s finger, to the close proximity of our bodies, I forgot what I was supposed to say next.

“News?” Gran was growing more excited. “What news?”

“We’re married!” I blurted, going off book. I brought my hand out from under the table, sticking my arm out so she could see my ring. “Devlin and I got married.”

“Oh my goodness!” Gran touched her rouged cheeks with both hands. “Is that true?”

Next to me, Devlin cleared his throat. “It’s true.”

Flabbergasted, Gran shook her head. “But how? When?”

“After you gave me her number that day at lunch,” Devlin said, sticking to the script, “I reached out, and we talked before I went back to Boston. Then we continued talking. Every night.”

“You did?” Gran looked at me. “You never said anything, you sneaky girl!”

I laughed flirtatiously, patting Devlin’s hand on my shoulder. “We agreed to keep it between us. We didn’t want to jinx anything.”

“So then what happened?” Gran was on the edge of her seat.

“The more time we spent getting to know each other, the more we realized something was there,” I said, getting back on



track. “Devlin flew back here, and the moment we saw each other, we knew.”

“We were meant to be,” Devlin said, looking at me with surprisingly good phony adoration. “*This* was meant to be. We eloped three days ago.”

Gran didn’t say anything for a moment. She just stared at the two of us with a look of utter shock on her face. In fact, I was starting to worry that we hadn’t fooled her when all of a sudden, her hands fell away from her cheeks and she beamed. Her expression turned into one of self-satisfaction.

“I knew it,” she said.

“Huh?” I blinked.

“I knew it!” she cried, clasping her hands together. “I could see the chemistry between you instantly.”

“You could?” I was dumbfounded.

“Of course you could.” Devlin nudged my leg with his knee under the table.

“Good chemistry can play tricks on you,” Gran said. “It can make you think you don’t like a person at all because they just get right under your skin. But that’s just a defense mechanism, of course. What you’re really feeling is that intense sexual connection.”

“Gran!”

“Oh, come on, Lexi. I’m eighty-five years old. I’ve been around the block. That’s why I gave you her number,” Gran said to Devlin with a smug little smile. “I was hoping something might come of it. But I never dreamed . . .” Her eyes grew misty, and she pulled a white, lace-trimmed handkerchief from her purse. “Oh. This is so wonderful. I’m so happy.”

“Thank you, Gran.”

“Of course, I wish I could have been there to see it. I always hoped you’d wear my veil,” she said, dabbing at her eyes. “Remember how you used to try it on when you were a girl?”

“Yes,” I said, guilt stabbing me in the gut. “I wish you could have been there too. And I wish I could have worn your veil.” I caught myself right before I said, *Next time*.

“Oh well. It’s not that important.” Gran sighed and tucked her handkerchief away again. “What matters is that you two found each other.”

“And we want to work together,” I said, “to save Snowberry. To restore it.”

Gran touched her chest. “Do you think you can?”

“Yes.” Devlin took his arm from my shoulders and leaned forward. “I’m in the process of securing investors now. We’ll have to close for a season, but when we reopen, it will be *the* place to visit.”

“Really?” Amazement on her face, Gran looked back and forth between us.

“Really.” I smiled, and without even realizing what I was doing, I put my hand on Devlin’s thigh beneath the table. “All we need is your blessing.”

“Well, of course you have my blessing.”

“In order to get the funding, we’ll also need you to give Lexi power of attorney,” said Devlin. “The sooner the better. The next step will be a deed that transfers ownership of the property to her.”

“You mean to both of you.” Gran smiled.

“Sure. To both of us.”

“I’ll speak to my lawyer right away,” said Gran. Her eyes grew shiny again. “Your grandfather would be so happy, Lexi. Your parents too.”

Devlin took my hand in his.

I felt the squeeze around my heart.

\* \* \*

“I still can’t believe how easy that was,” I said as we drove east toward the highway that would take us to Cherry Tree Harbor. “Gran didn’t even question it!”

“Did you really think she would?”

“I wasn’t sure. I know she doesn’t want me to be lonely, but swallowing our story takes some serious suspension of disbelief.” I looked over at him behind the wheel of my car. “What about your family? Will they buy it?”

“I think so. My parents got married really quickly too.”

“*This* quickly?”

“Well, no,” he admitted. “The story was that on their first date, he told her he was going to marry her. Six months later, he did.”

I gasped. “Oh, that’s so romantic. I love it.”

“And my brother Austin fell for his kids’ nanny this summer. I wasn’t around, of course, but Xander told me it happened pretty fast.”

“But they’re not engaged or anything.”

“No. But I’ve seen them together, and it wouldn’t surprise me at all if it happened soon. They’ll be there tonight, I’m sure.”

I sifted through what I knew about his family. “None of your siblings are married, right?”

“Right. Austin is dating Veronica, the nanny. Xander had a girl with him the night I met you at the bar, and it was obvious he was into her, but he was hired to be her bodyguard, so he felt a little weird about it.”

“What?” I turned to face him in the passenger seat. “I didn’t know he was a bodyguard! I thought he was opening a bar.”

“He is. He was a Navy SEAL, and then he did private security for a few years, and this summer he moved back home to open a bar. But an old Navy buddy called in a favor—

he asked Xander to provide twenty-four seven security for his sister while she took a vacation up here.”

“Why did she need that kind of security?”

“Ever hear of Pixie Hart?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s her. Except I was introduced to her as Kelly.”

“Seriously? Wow!” I laughed. “So Pixie Hart was at The Broken Spoke that night? Incognito?”

“Yes. But he took her back to Nashville last week, so I’m not sure what’s going on with them.”

“Wait a minute.” I snapped my fingers a few times. “I just saw something online today about Pixie Hart. Apparently, she was assaulted last night at some big country music awards ceremony.”

Devlin frowned. “Is she okay?”

“Yes. She was fine, just shaken up.”

“Xander must not have been there,” said Devlin. “He’d *never* have let that happen. I bet he was back up here already, getting ready for tonight.”

“So that’s Austin and Xander,” I said, counting off on my fingers. “You’re in the middle, right? What about your two younger siblings?”

“After me is Dash. He’s the one out in Hollywood. He’s an actor.”

“Like in the movies?”

“Television. He *wants* to do movies, but he got cast on this teen beach show called *Malibu Splash* and signed a big, long contract. So he’s been stuck playing a teenager for five years, and he claims now he’s been typecast and can’t get other roles.” Devlin snickered. “His fans are all adolescent girls and their moms. It’s hilarious.”

“I’ve seen that show,” I said. “It’s cute. And now that you told me that, I do remember a guy who looks kind of like you.

He's got those blue eyes. He plays a lifeguard, right?"

"Yeah. Named Bulge," said Devlin, cracking up.

"Aww, be nice. He's chasing his dream."

"Listen, Dash has a house in L.A., plenty of money—we call it 'Bulge Bucks' in our family—his face on billboards all over Hollywood, and girls all over him." Devlin shook his head. "He can take some shit from his brothers. And it's our duty to provide it."

I sighed. "You're so lucky. When I was growing up, I'd have given my right arm for some brothers or sisters. All I had was mean Tabitha."

"You ever ask her about that post she made for The Summit?"

"No. I planned to confront her, but she mentioned the phone call from Bob Oliver, and I panicked. Forgot all about it." But I didn't want to think about that now. "Tell me about your sister. Her name is Mabel, right?"

He nodded. "Mabel is a good kid. Crazy smart and funny. She's at graduate school studying to be an archaeologist. She works her ass off, always has."

"Will she be there tonight?" I asked hopefully.

"I don't think so. She was just home over Labor Day weekend—she was at The Broken Spoke that night too."

"So Mabel grew up with *four* older brothers," I remarked. "Were you guys crazy protective of her?"

"Totally."

"What did you do when she brought boys home?"

He thought for a second. "You know, I can't remember her bringing a single guy to our house."

"Wonder why," I murmured.

"Mostly she and Ari—that's her best friend—just hung around together and begged us to take them places. I basically had two little sisters."

“And your dad—he never remarried?”

“No.” Devlin thought more a moment. “Mabel once asked him why he didn’t go on dates, and he said, ‘It only happens once.’”

I put a hand over my heart. “That’s sad, but also romantic, I guess. The notion that there’s only one great love of your life.”

Devlin made a dismissive noise.

“What, you don’t believe in soul mates?”

“No. It’s setting yourself up for disappointment. First of all, if it’s true and there’s one perfect person made just for you, what are the odds you even find them? There are billions of people in the world.”

“You trust fate, I guess.”

“Fate isn’t always kind. I mean, bad things happen to good people.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t *love* each other. Humans need connection.”

“I’m not saying being alone is ideal. But there are a lot of ways to connect with someone. Love doesn’t always work out.” He paused. “People cheat or grow apart, or one could lose the other. What happens then?”

“I don’t know. You move on?”

“But you can’t,” he said. “Not if you believe it only happens once.”

“Okay, but not all people fall out of love or experience loss. Sometimes love is forever.”

He was silent for a minute. “I just think it’s a lot of pressure to put on a relationship. To expect it to last forever.”

I wanted to argue in defense of forever, but I decided against it. So what if Devlin didn’t believe in soul mates? It wasn’t my problem, and it wouldn’t hurt me. What we had wasn’t real, what we felt wasn’t love, and what we expected

was six months of partnership and an amicable farewell. That was a far cry from forever.

But as we made our way closer to his hometown, I wondered more about his romantic past. Was there a girl here who'd broken his heart? What had happened with McKenna? Had there been other broken or toxic relationships? I remembered what he said when I'd asked him if he'd loved McKenna.

*I cared about her to the extent that I'm willing and able to care about someone. Maybe it was love, maybe not.*

You didn't say those things without some trauma to the heart, did you?

There was a lot I didn't know about my husband.

But I found myself wanting to know more, to understand him better.

To be closer to him.

TWELVE



*devlin*

THE PARKING LOT for Buckley's Pub was packed, as were both sides of the street. We ended up parking about two blocks down and walking back to the bar.

At the door, we stood for a moment and gathered our wits, like we were preparing for battle.

"You ready?" I asked her.

"I think so. You're going to do most of the talking, right?"

"Right."

"And I'll just agree with you and add things when I have to?"

"Yes."

"And we're not going to say we're already married until tomorrow?"

"Exactly." We'd already removed our rings. Mine was in my wallet. Hers was in her purse. "Let's go."

I opened the door for her, and we headed inside. The place looked great—even better than I imagined. It was primarily intended to be a sports bar, and there were games on big screens hung on walls and behind the bar, but it also looked like a cool place to just hang out and grab a beer or cocktail with friends. The decor was masculine—cement floors, exposed brick walls, black leather couches—but it was warm and inviting.

I spotted Xander's height and wide shoulders right away. He was standing near the bar talking to a group of people I

didn't recognize. My eyes scanned the room and found Austin and Veronica seated at a table over to the side, and I was surprised to see Kelly sitting with them as well. She had a ball cap covering her famous red hair, but I recognized her. My dad was chatting with my Aunt Faye at a table nearby, and Mabel's best friend Ari was working behind the bar. All around the room, people were smiling and laughing and having a good time. I was happy for Xander—he deserved this success.

Taking Lexi by the elbow, I brought her over to where Xander was standing. “Hey, brother.”

He turned, his face surprised. “Devlin! You're here!” His huge bear arms grabbed me in a hug, his fist thumping me on the back a couple times. “Thanks for coming.”

“I wouldn't have missed it.” When he let me go, I gestured toward Lexi. “I want to introduce you to someone.”

Xander's brow cocked up, and he gave me a quick glance before holding out his hand. “Hey. I'm Xander.”

“Lexi,” she said, placing her palm against his.

“You look familiar,” he said. “Are you from around here?”

“About an hour away. My family owns Snowberry Lodge.”

Understanding dawned quickly on Xander's face, and even though I caught the what-the-fuck look he gave me, he played it cool. “Nice,” he said, nodding. “I remember skiing there when I was younger.”

“Lexi and I met a few weeks ago at The Broken Spoke,” I said. “You might have seen her there.”

“Sure.” Xander nodded. “That must be it. So . . . you two kept in touch?”

“Yes.” I put my arm around Lexi's shoulders. Kissed her temple. “We sure did.”

Xander's jaw was hanging open at this point. He rubbed his dark brown beard with one hand. “Interesting. I mean, great. Cool. Let's get you guys some drinks. What can Ari pour for you?”

\* \* \*

After introducing Lexi to Ari and my father, we sat with Austin, Veronica, and Kelly for a while. The story Lexi had seen online turned out to have been true, and Kelly gave us a quick rundown of what had transpired. She was obviously trying to fly under the radar tonight, but a few people approached and asked for her autograph anyway. She was kind to everyone, even posing for photos.

I sat next to Lexi with my arm across the back of her chair, and every now and again, I touched her shoulder or rubbed her arm. When her beer was gone, I got her another one. When she got up to use the bathroom, I walked her to the back of the bar. When she came out, we ambled over to a couch to sit alone. I tugged her onto my lap, and she sat with one arm looped around my neck.

“Your brothers are definitely suspicious,” she said in my ear. “They keep staring at us.”

“They’ve just never seen me behave this way with a girl before,” I explained, curling an arm around her hip. “It works in our favor.”

“Hmm.” She played with the collar of my shirt. “So I’m curious about something. What happened with McKenna?”

“I told you. We wanted different things. So we split up.”

“I know what you *told* me. But I have a hunch there’s more to the story.” She paused. “Is there?”

I took a sip of my beer and decided to admit the truth. “We broke up because she slept with someone else at the company Christmas party last year.”

Lexi gasped. “She did not.”

“She did.”

“*Why?* I mean, you definitely have some faults, but your sexual skills are . . .” She kissed her fingertips. “Chef’s kiss.”

I couldn't help smiling. "Thanks. But I don't think she did it to have better sex. I think she did it to punish me."

"For what?"

"Not giving her what she wanted."

"What did she want?"

"Attention, mostly. But she also wanted a ring."

Lexi nodded in understanding. "Had you ever told her you didn't want to get married?"

"Many times. I never hid the fact that it wasn't something I wanted. She heard what she wanted to hear. Everyone does."

She thought about that for a second. "I guess."

"Anyway, she and I were never going to be right for each other, even if she hadn't cheated." I took another swallow from my beer. "Plus, the guy she fucked was Bob Oliver."

"Oh, shit."

"Yeah. And what *really* pissed me off was that I'd been a mentor to him, shown him the ropes, shared my strategies. And he turned around and backstabbed me multiple times over—not just the incident with McKenna, but with clients too."

"What a dick."

"They're engaged now."

"Wait." She put it all together, her brow furrowed. "McKenna is the boss's daughter?"

"Yep."

"Jeez." She shook her head. "The thought of that guy getting his hands on Snowberry makes me sick."

"Me too. It won't happen." I finished off my beer. "So tell me about the dickhead *you* were engaged to."

She laughed. "He wasn't a dickhead until he decided that he'd rather make more money than be with me."

"The job he took paid better?"

“Yeah. The resorts out west are huge. The area is ritzy. But we’d talked many, many times about the life we wanted here. He just changed his mind.”

“You didn’t consider going with him?”

“Nope. He knew I wouldn’t. And I suppose it’s better I found out *then* that the life we’d imagined wasn’t what he wanted anymore. Before we actually got married and started a family.” She shook her head. “But boy, he’d made me alllll kinds of promises.”

“See? Dickhead.”

“And the day he left, he had the nerve to tell me he’d always love me. What kind of bullshit is that?”

“Dickhead bullshit.”

She poked my chest. “Don’t ever tell a girl you love her as you’re leaving.”

“I won’t,” I told her, holding out my pinky. “Pinky promise. Like Sara taught me.”

Laughing, she hooked her finger with mine. “I hope I get to meet Sara.”

“I owe her an ice cream cone. Maybe when we’re in Boston for the pitch meeting next month, we can get together.”

“I’d love that. So what’s the plan for tomorrow? Do we just tell your dad in the morning and make the rounds?”

“I guess.” Looking around the room, I saw my dad, my brothers, and their girlfriends standing together over by the bar, laughing and talking with Ari. I made a snap decision. “You know what? Let’s tell everyone tonight.”

“What?”

“Let’s just get it done.” I stood up, helping her to her feet. “The gang’s all here. Everyone is in a good mood. Let’s give them one more thing to celebrate.”

“I thought you didn’t want to steal Xander’s thunder.”

“Trust me, Xander’s thunder will always be bigger and louder than anyone else’s.” I pulled my wallet from my back pocket and fished out the gold band. “Got your ring?”

“Yes.” She reached into her purse, dug it out, and slipped it on. “But I’m nervous.”

“Don’t worry about anything.” I took her by the hand. “Just follow my lead.”

\* \* \*

We wandered up to the bar and ordered two more beers. When Ari brought them, I handed one to Lexi and put an arm around her hip. “So Lexi and I have an announcement to make,” I said.

Perched on a stool next to Kelly, Veronica smiled. “What is it?”

“It’s . . .” Right at that moment, I caught my dad’s eye, and I experienced a moment of panic that had me groping for words—which *never* happened to me. He’d been such a good father, so honest and open and devoted to us. Family was everything to him. And even after all this time, he honored the promise he’d made to our mom. His word meant a lot to him.

What was mine worth?

My vision grayed slightly at the edges.

“Well?” My dad laughed. “We’re waiting, son. What’s the big news? Did you get that promotion?”

My throat was desert dry. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. The room was tilting, and the music seemed to be coming at me through a tunnel.

Lexi slipped an arm around my lower back and looked up at me. “Dev? You okay?”

I locked eyes with her and felt the floor even out beneath my feet. Her face, which never hid anything, was etched with worry. I tightened my arm around her. “I’m fine. Just overwhelmed.” Then I looked at my dad. “I didn’t get the

promotion. In fact, I quit my job on Monday. But I got something better.”

“What?” asked Xander.

“A wife.” I gave Lexi a squeeze. “Lexi and I got married.”

For a long moment, no one said anything. My dad looked stunned. Austin cocked his head, like maybe he’d heard wrong. Xander looked like he’d just sniffed some bad meat.

“Married?” Veronica’s head tilted. “Like, legally?”

Lexi giggled. “As legal as it gets in Las Vegas.”

“You eloped?” Austin asked.

I nodded. “We sure did. On Tuesday.”

“Our officiant was an Elvis impersonator,” added Lexi.

Another moment of stunned silence.

“Well, my goodness!” Kelly jumped down from her barstool. “Congratulations, you two!” She hugged Lexi, and then me, and then gave Xander an elbow in the gut. “Isn’t this great news? They got married!”

“Sure, it is!” My dad finally recovered and came forward to embrace Lexi. “Welcome to the family, sweetheart.”

“Thank you.” Lexi laughed. “I know it’s a bit sudden, but —”

“That’s okay.” My father released her but held her by the shoulders. “Sometimes the best things in life happen out of nowhere.” He turned to me and gave me a hug, thumping me on the back a few times. “I just wish I could have been there to see my son tie the knot. The first one of my kids to take the plunge.”

“Sorry about that, Dad,” I said, swallowing back the guilt. “It—it just all happened so fast. We didn’t really slow down to think.”

“This is incredible!” Veronica slid off her stool and hugged us both, followed by Austin and Xander. Even Ari came around from behind the bar, giddy with excitement.

“I can’t believe it,” she gushed, her brown eyes huge. “Does Mabel know?”

“Not yet,” I said. “You heard it first.”

“Eeep!” she squealed. “She’s gonna be so mad she missed this!”

“Let’s have a toast!” Veronica grabbed her wineglass and held it up. “To the newlyweds!”

“To the newlyweds!” everyone chorused, raising their drinks.

“So how did this happen?” Kelly asked before I’d even swallowed the sip I’d taken.

“Well, we met a few weeks ago at The Broken Spoke and really hit it off,” I said.

“Oh yeah.” Veronica nodded enthusiastically. “I remember that night. You left early.”

“And sweaty,” added Austin under his breath, a grin on his face.

I ignored him. “Anyway, we ran into each other a few days later and kept in touch when I went back to Boston.”

“Talked every night for hours,” Lexi confirmed.

“And the more we got to know each other, the more we realized we had in common,” I said. “We grew up near each other, family is really important to us, we both love the outdoors and waking up early.”

“Just not to ski,” Lexi added with a laugh. “That’s the one thing we don’t have in common. I couldn’t believe it when I realized I fell for someone who hates skiing.”

“It’s not the skiing so much as the chairlift,” joked Xander, and Austin laughed.

“The chairlift?” Lexi sounded confused. She glanced up at me. “You don’t like chairlifts?”

All eyes were on me, and I was forced to admit the truth. “I don’t like heights,” I said. “It’s not a big deal.”



“Wait. You’re afraid of—” Lexi stopped. Recovered. “Oh right, you did tell me about the heights thing. Now I remember. We’ve just had so many conversations over the last few weeks, my mind is a blur.” Then she smiled up at me and patted my chest. “It’s okay, babe. I won’t make you ride the chairlift if you don’t make me speak in public.”

“Devlin is great at public speaking,” my dad said proudly. “He was on the debate team in high school and college. So you two will be perfect together.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“This is *so* romantic,” Kelly gushed. “I’m so happy for you guys.”

“Me too,” said Veronica. “Devlin, are you moving back home or will Lexi move to Boston?”

“For now, I’m going to move back to Michigan and help Lexi’s family restore Snowberry.”

“We were going to be forced to sell if he hadn’t offered to help,” Lexi said, gazing up at me with a smile. “He’s like an angel.”

“Gah! This is so sweet!” Veronica clasped her hands beneath her chin. “So Devlin, did you propose down on one knee? Was there a ring?”

“No knee, no ring,” I said. “Very spur of the moment.”

“But there was a friendship bracelet.” Laughing, Lexi held up her arm to show it off.

“One of the kids from Camp Lemonade gave it to me for my birthday,” I explained.

“Yes, and he showed up at my door with it and said, ‘Let’s get married!’” Lexi shouted. “And I was like, ‘This is crazy, but okay!’ Then we hopped on a plane. There really wasn’t time for a ring. Just the wedding bands.” She looked down at hers. “But it’s good enough for me. I’ve never been into diamonds anyway.”

“What matters is the size of the promise you’re making,” Veronica said. “Not the size of ring. Take it from me.”

Lexi was probably perplexed, but I knew that Veronica had ditched a wealthy, philandering groom at the altar right before she'd taken the job as Austin's nanny.

"What did you wear?" Kelly asked.

Lexi grinned sheepishly. "Jeans and a Two Buckleys Home Improvement sweatshirt."

Everyone laughed, and Austin shook his head. "As one of the two Buckleys on the shirt, I'm proud I was able to take part in some way."

"We should have a party," my dad said excitedly. "How about tomorrow night at the house?"

"I have to work tomorrow night," Xander pointed out. "But don't worry about me."

"Why not have the party here?" suggested Kelly.

"We really don't need a party," Lexi protested.

"Of course you do!" My dad's tone said he wasn't going to take no for an answer. "And even if you don't, I do! I've got my first daughter-in-law, and I want to celebrate! Xander, would it be okay to have a party here tomorrow night for your brother and his wife?"

"Absolutely." Xander nodded. "I'd be honored to have it here." But when he looked at me, I had the feeling he knew something wasn't quite on the level.

"Then it's settled." My father nodded and smiled widely, lines creasing his face but light in his eyes. "And of course, you'll stay at the house tonight."

"We don't want to crowd you, Dad. We can get a hotel room."

"Nonsense!" He waved a hand. "We've got all those bedrooms, and it makes me happy to fill them up with family again. I've offered Mabel's old room to Kelly while she's here, but your old room is all yours."

He was so excited, I didn't have the heart to decline. "Okay."

“Thank you, Mr. Buckley,” said Lexi. “That’s very kind.”

“Call me Dad.” He smiled at her with a happiness that nearly broke my heart. “Please.”

\* \* \*

Later that night, Lexi and I drove back to the house where I’d grown up. My dad had come home earlier and gone to bed, but he’d left the porch light on for us, the door unlocked. As soon as we stepped into the house, my dad’s dog, a German Australian Shepherd mix, came trotting into the front hall from the kitchen.

“Hey, boy.” I spoke softly, closing the door behind us. “Are you okay with dogs?” I asked Lexi.

“Definitely,” she whispered, scratching behind his ears. “What’s his name?”

“Fritz.” I switched off the porch light. “I’ll show you around tomorrow, so we don’t wake my dad.”

“Okay.”

I led the way upstairs and down the hall, pointing at closed bedroom doors. “This was Mabel’s room, where Kelly is staying, and across the hall is Xander’s, but my guess is he’ll sleep in there with her.”

Lexi giggled softly. “My guess is you’re right.”

Moving down the hall, I pushed open the door to my childhood bedroom and switched the light on. “And this was mine.”

“Very nice,” she said, looking around at the slate blue paint on the walls, the queen-sized bed with its navy plaid spread, the oak dresser and desk. “Does it look the same?”

“Sort of. But we had bunk beds back then, because Dash and I shared this room. That door by the desk leads to the bathroom.”

She dropped her overnight bag on the floor at the foot of the bed and wandered to the window. Pushing the curtains aside, she peeked out. "It's too dark to see. Big backyard?"

"Yes." Gently, I closed the bedroom door behind me. "Mom's roses over to the right, playscape for Austin's kids in the middle of the lawn, tree I broke my arm trying to climb on the left."

She laughed sympathetically. "Oh no! How old were you?"

"Fifteen, I think? I only did it because my brothers were up there calling me a chicken shit and making clucking noises. It was either climb it or cop to being scared, so I climbed it. But halfway up, I made the mistake of looking down. Got dizzy. Lost my grip."

She was silent a moment, staring through the glass into the dark. "You never mentioned your fear of heights."

"It's not usually something I bring up when I'm trying to impress a girl."

Her giggle was soft. "I broke my wrist once."

"Yeah? How'd you do that?" I moved toward the window. The top she was wearing was one of those off-the-shoulder deals, and the bare skin it showed had been killing me all night. Coming up behind her, I wrapped my arms around her waist and pressed my mouth to the right side of her neck. Breathed in her scent.

Her arms covered mine, and she leaned back against me. "I was showing off because there was a group of older guys from my high school skiing at Snowberry that day. I was going way too fast and caught an edge. Wiped out massively. Sprained an ankle, broke a wrist. Decimated my ego."

"Ouch." I kissed a trail from beneath her ear down the slope of her neck to her shoulder.

"That's what happens when you're trying to do something stupid for the wrong reasons. You pay a price."

I slipped my hands under the top, felt the warm skin of her stomach beneath my palms. "Mmm."

“Devlin.”

“Hm?” I unhooked the strapless bra she wore. It fell to the floor, and I filled my hands with her full, round breasts. God, I loved her body. Strong in some ways, soft in others. A fucking playground of slopes and curves and hiding places.

“Stop. We can’t mess around here.”

“Why not?” I teased her nipples the way I knew she liked. My cock was bulging against the crotch of my pants, and I pressed it against her tailbone.

“Because your dad is home,” she whispered. But she reached up and cradled my head in her hands.

“So what? He’s in his sixties. I bet he’s hard of hearing.”

She laughed, and it turned into a groan. “We are *loud*. He would hear us.”

“I don’t care.”

“I do! I don’t want him thinking his daughter-in-law is a sex fiend who can’t control herself around his son.”

“I think he would find that charming. I know I do.” My hands moved to the button of her jeans, slipped it through the hole.

“Devlin.”

“We can be quiet,” I whispered in her ear, sliding my hand down the front of her jeans, inside her panties. I dipped one finger insider her—she was warm and wet and tantalizing. “I just want to put my tongue right here for a minute.” I caressed her clit with a slick fingertip. “What’s one little minute?”

“One little minute?” she repeated breathlessly. “I don’t believe you.”

“Give me sixty seconds,” I said, taking her by the hips and moving backward toward the bed. Without bothering to turn off the light, I placed her at the foot and knelt down in front of her. Removed her shoes. “And if you want me to stop after that, I will stop.”

“You will?”

“Of course I will.” I tugged her jeans off, took her by the hips, and sat her on the edge of the bed. “You just sit right there and let me taste you.” I pushed her knees apart. “Please.”

“Oh God,” she moaned softly as I lowered my head between her thighs and stroked her pussy with my tongue. “You’re so good at getting your way with me. It’s sorcery or something.”

I eased two fingers inside her, pushing deep.

She fell back on her elbows. “This isn’t fair. You know I won’t stop you at a minute.”

Laughing, I circled her swollen clit slowly with the tip of my tongue, then fluttered it quickly. Her insides grew tighter around my fingers. Her breathing grew heavy.

“Oh God, oh God, I can’t stay quiet, I really can’t—this is so hard for me, you have no idea. I’m—I’m not a person who’s good at holding her feelings in, and—Devlin!” Frantically, she flopped her arms over her head until her hands found a pillow, which she held over her face while I finished her off, her sighs and whimpers muffled by memory foam.

When her grip on my hand loosened, I sat back on my heels. She tossed the pillow from her face and sat up, watching me suck the honey off the fingers I’d used to fuck her. Her mouth hung open. “Damn you,” she breathed. “You knew what I’d want after that.”

“What do you want?”

She whipped her top over her head and slid off the bed onto her knees. Then she pushed against my chest, tipping me over so I lay on my back on the rug, propped up on my elbows. She reached for the button on my jeans. “More.” She unzipped them and yanked them down to my thighs, my bulging erection springing free. “You.” She took my cock in her hands and gave it a few tight strokes. “This.”

“You want my cock?” I spoke low, my voice gravelly with want.

“Yes.” She leaned down and sucked just the tip, making my leg muscles tight with need. My hands flexed into fists.

For several minutes, she tortured me with her mouth, and since the light was on, I watched her with wide, grateful eyes. Her lips moving up and down my cock. Her hand gripping the shaft. Her soft, wavy hair brushing against my abs. Her full, luscious breasts. Although I was much better than she was at staying quiet, fire was roaring inside my veins, every muscle screaming out to move, to touch her, to fuck her. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore.

“Wife,” I said through clenched teeth.

She took her mouth off me and laughed throatily. “I love when you say it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you might lose control if I don't behave.”

“So we understand each other.”

“We do.” Crawling up my body, she straddled my hips. “You're still all buttoned up.” She worked her way down the buttons of my shirt, then pushed it from my shoulders. I sat up just enough to slip it off, then grabbed my T-shirt from the back of the neck and yanked it over my head. She pushed me back again and ran her hands over my bare chest. “I love your body,” she whispered, falling forward to caress my skin with her lips. I put my hands in her hair as she kissed my jaw, my neck, ran her tongue along my collarbone, teased my nipples with her tongue.

Sitting up again, she reached between us, stroking my cock once more. “Devlin.”

“Yes.” I held my breath.

“I'm on birth control. I never went off the shot after—after.”

“I haven't been with anyone in over six months.”

“Okay.” She positioned my cock between her thighs and slid onto it, sinking deep. “I just want to feel closer to you.”

I couldn't talk. I couldn't think. All I could do was feel the incredible sensation of her body, warm and wet and snug around the most sensitive part of my body. She began to move,

and I inhaled sharply, grabbing her by the hips. “Slow,” I managed. “Need slow.”

Another deep, throaty laugh. “Anything for you,” she said softly. “Husband.”

Fuck. *Fuck*, why was that hot? Being called *husband* should not turn me on. But hearing Lexi whisper it as she took her pleasure from me, languidly circling her hips, eyes closed, lips open. I thought I might lose my mind when she brought her hands to her breasts, filling her palms with delectable curves, playing with their pert wine-colored tips.

I was close—too close. And she was starting to move faster, sliding up and down my cock, the friction almost unbearable. I moved one hand to where our bodies joined and used my thumb on her clit, and she cried out—one sharp little sound—before biting her lip. Falling forward again, she braced her hands on my chest and jerked her hips hard over mine, grinding against me. I gave up trying to hang onto control and clutched her thighs as I bucked up into her with sharp, savage thrusts. Within seconds, I shot off like a rocket, all the tension in my body releasing through my cock in quick, hot bursts. At the tail end, as my body relaxed, I felt the tremors of her orgasm surround me.

A moment later, she collapsed on my chest, breathing hard. I stroked her back—her skin was warm and damp. Inhaling, I caught the scent of her shampoo, and I held it inside my lungs for a few heartbeats, wanting anything she could give me.

“We were loud,” she whispered.

“I don’t care.”

“But I want your dad to like me.”

“He likes everybody.”

“That’s not helpful.”

“Okay, well, he likes you.” I played with her hair. “Did you see the way he smiled at you tonight? Remember how he asked you all those questions about Snowberry? Told you all about the work he’d done there?”



“Yes. He said very sweet things about my grandfather. That was nice.”

“See? He likes you.”

She was silent a moment. “He asked me to call him Dad.”

“I know.” My hand stilled. “You don’t have to, if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“It just makes me sad.”

I closed my eyes. “Don’t think about it.”

“But—”

“Look, I don’t like that part of it either. But let’s stay focused. All that matters is that your grandmother is talking to her lawyer this week.”

“Right. Okay.”

It was a good reminder of what we were about. And what we weren’t.

Because I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something was making me feel like the lines were blurring a little.

\* \* \*

Lexi used the bathroom first, and when I came out, she was already curled up in bed in the dark. I climbed between the sheets and fit my body behind hers, wrapping an arm around her middle and pulling her closer.

She snickered.

“What’s funny?” I asked.

“Nothing. I just never would have thought you were a snuggle bunny.”

“I am *not* a snuggle bunny,” I said grumpily.

“Okay.” She covered my arm with hers and patted my hand.

“I just like the feel of you, that’s all. And adolescent me spent a lot of nights in this room dreaming of getting someone half as hot as you in my bed. Maybe I’m just holding on to make sure you’re real.”

“I’m real.” Her hand found mine, and I curled my fingers around hers, playing with her wedding band before drifting off to sleep.

THIRTEEN

*Lexi*

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Devlin took me to breakfast at a place called Moe's Diner.

The moment I walked through the door, I felt like I'd stepped back in time or onto a movie set. Everything about it screamed 1950s kitsch, from the black-and-white floor tiles to the red vinyl and chrome counter stools to the jukebox in the corner.

As the hostess led us to a booth along the back wall, Devlin was stopped by at least three people who'd already heard about our marriage—a teenaged waitress (Ari's cousin), an older couple sitting at a table near the door (Devlin's high school cross country coach and his wife, who'd been at the pub last night), and two old guys who'd been seated at the counter but came over to shake Devlin's hand as soon as they saw him.

Devlin introduced them as Larry and Gus, old fishing buddies of his father's. Then he rested a hand on the nape of my neck. "And this is my wife, Lexi."

A thrill shot through me like a pinball.

"A pleasure," said Gus, who wore a navy ball cap and suspenders. He pumped my hand with enthusiasm.

Larry, whose ball cap and suspenders were red, was a bit more gruff but muttered his congratulations. "We heard the news down at the docks this morning," he told us. "Your dad was bursting with it."

“We know all about the party tonight too,” said Gus. “We wouldn’t miss it.”

“Wow,” I said once we were seated. “News travels fast in Cherry Tree Harbor.”

“Small towns,” Devlin said with a shrug, handing me a menu before studying his own.

I started to scan the options but found my eyes drifting up to secretly peer at Devlin instead. He looked so handsome this morning, freshly showered, hair combed, glasses on. My heart fluttered when I saw the ring on his finger and remembered how he’d put his hand on my neck and introduced me as his wife.

Ari’s cousin, whose name tag said Gemma, came by to pour coffee, chattering a mile a minute. “Is it true you got married by Elvis?”

“It’s true,” Devlin said.

“Wearing a Two Buckleys Home Improvement sweatshirt?”

“Also true,” I confirmed. “We just couldn’t wait.”

Gemma sighed. “It’s so romantic. I wish I could meet someone who’d fall in love with me so fast he had to whisk me off to Vegas and put a ring on it. It’s hard enough to get a guy to ask you to Homecoming, you know?”

I laughed. “You’ve got time. Don’t rush things.”

“Maybe finish high school first,” suggested Devlin.

“Good idea.” She laughed. “So what can I bring you to eat?”

\* \* \*

As Devlin was paying the bill, I noticed all the signed celebrity headshots on the wall—actors, singers, comedians, politicians. “Wow. All those people have been here?”

“Yep.” Devlin scribbled his name on the check and stuck his credit card back into his wallet. “My brother Dash is up there somewhere.”

“That’s right! I keep forgetting I have a famous brother-in-law.” I scanned the rows until I found him, then squinted. “Wait a minute. Is that him?”

Devlin looked up and started to laugh. Someone had drawn pointy horns, a villainous mustache, and a devil’s goatee on his handsome face. “Yeah. That’s him.”

“Who did that to his picture?”

“Probably Ari,” he said, sliding out of the booth.

“Ari?” I followed him to the door, shaking my head. “That sweet, brown-eyed girl I met last night? Why?”

“Something happened with them years ago. I’m not sure what, but she can’t stand him.” He opened the door for me, and I stepped out into the sunshine. “So what would you like to do?”

“Everything!” I fished my sunglasses out of my purse and slipped them on. “Show me the town. I want to see where you grew up.”

“Okay.” He looked around. “Let’s go down by the water. We can tour the lighthouse. Then maybe we’ll take the ferry ride, if the water’s not too choppy. You get a nice view of the coastline from the boat.”

“Sounds great. Lead the way.”

I wasn’t expecting him to take my hand as we walked down the block.

Nor was I expecting to like it so much.

\* \* \*

After the lighthouse and the ferry ride, Devlin took me to a restaurant called the Pier Inn, where his Aunt Faye greeted us

from the hostess stand. “The happy couple!” she crowed. “Two for lunch?”

“Yes. Can we sit outside on the deck?” asked Devlin.

“Absolutely.” Faye smiled at me. “Right this way.” Menus in hand, she led us through a glass door out onto a deck where just a few tables were occupied, their bright red umbrellas open. “It’s beautiful today, isn’t it? Hard to believe it’s fall already. Soon we’ll be closing the patio for the season.”

I sat down and inhaled, the fresh air filling my lungs—lake and seaweed and a whiff of gasoline from the nearby docks. The temperature was in the low seventies, and the sky was a gorgeous bright blue with only a few puffy white clouds. The sunlight glimmered on the water.

A server came by, greeted Devlin by name, and took our orders. I wasn’t very hungry, so I just ordered a cup of ginger carrot soup. Devlin ordered a grilled chicken sandwich with French fries. While we ate, we discussed hiring a designer for the interior spaces—guest rooms, restaurant, bar.

“Do you know anyone?” he asked.

“Not offhand, but I have some friends whose families also own resorts that I bet can help me. They have beautiful taste.”

“Oh yeah? What resorts?”

“My friend Winnie Matthews is the event planner at Cloverleigh Farms, and my friend Ellie Lupo runs the tasting room at Abelard Vineyards.”

“I’ve been to both,” Devlin said. “Nice places.”

I set my spoon down. “In fact, I have to confess something.”

“What’s up?”

“I told Winnie the truth about us.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You did?”

“I couldn’t help it,” I said desperately. “I was going to burst if I didn’t say something, and Winnie knew all about you from the very beginning. Sorry if I betrayed your confidence.”

He finished a quarter of his sandwich. “Does she think you’re crazy?”

“Yeah. But she understands.” I looked out over the lake, at the sailboats gliding on the surface. It was peaceful and relaxing, but my insides were knotted up. I twisted my napkin in my lap, and Devlin noticed my discomfort.

“What’s wrong?”

“I feel kind of bad about this party tonight,” I confessed. “Your dad was so happy this morning when he was telling us about all the people he was inviting. He’s so excited.”

“Yeah.” Devlin picked up his water for a sip.

“And Veronica was so sweet. She offered to take me shopping if I needed something to wear.” I laughed ruefully. “I think she’s concerned I might show up in the Two Buckleys sweatshirt.”

“Hey. That sweatshirt looks great on you.”

“I do like it,” I said, “but I should probably wear something nicer to the party, and I didn’t really pack anything.”

“I promise you, everyone will be casual, but you can go shopping if you want. What time did they want to meet up?” He checked his phone.

“Well, I told them I wasn’t sure what our plans were today, but Veronica gave me her number. I could text her.”

“Do that,” he said, frowning at his screen. “Xander has texted twice in the last half hour asking if I’d come help him move some heavy shit at the bar, so maybe while you’re with the girls, I’ll go do that.”

“Perfect.” I typed a quick message to Veronica, and she replied right away. “Okay, she says she can meet me in an hour at the corner of Main and Spring. She’s going to text Kelly too.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He leaned back in his chair. “In the interest of complete transparency, I have to tell you something.”



“What?” I reached over and stole a fry from his plate.

“I have a potential job interview.”

“Oh?”

“In Santa Monica.”

“Oh.” I chewed slowly. Swallowed without tasting. “Okay.” Trying not to panic, I picked up my water and took a sip. “When’s the interview?”

“End of October, possibly early November.”

“And when does the job start?”

“I haven’t gotten it yet.”

“You will.”

He smiled. “Thanks. But I don’t know for sure. I told the guy that I was tied up here for the next six months, and he still wants me to interview.”

“Okay.”

He studied my face. “You look worried.”

“Sorry.” I took a breath. “You have every right to go to that interview. I know what we’re doing is temporary. I think I underestimated how much work it is—the renovation. I’m worried about being able to handle it all. But that’s not your problem.”

He reached for my hand. “I promise, Lex, I won’t go anywhere until you’re completely confident you can run things on your own. I gave you my word, and I’ll honor it. And by the time I go, we’ll make sure you have a team in place that you can depend on. But don’t sell yourself short—you’ve got a good head on your shoulders. You’re intuitive, you communicate well, and your devotion to Snowberry translates into an incredible work ethic. Could you be a little more level-headed sometimes? Sure.”

I laughed self-consciously. “Noted.”

“But you can run it on your own. If that’s what you want.”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s what I want.”

But honestly, Gran's will was starting to make more sense.

\* \* \*

I spent the afternoon shopping with Veronica and Kelly. Although I was nervous I'd say the wrong thing and give away the game, neither one of them seemed to have any trouble believing Devlin and I were in love. In fact, they were one hundred percent into the story. I confessed that we'd spent the night together right after we met, and that it felt like magic right from the start—which was true.

Both of them said they completely understood. "It's that Buckley voodoo," Veronica said. "They have this ability to get you under their spell like *that*." She snapped her fingers.

Kelly agreed. "I'm telling you, I had no intention of letting Xander stay with me in that cabin. I was flat-out rude about it, and he was stubborn and bossy as hell, and yet somehow we can't live without each other now."

They insisted I buy a white dress, which I found on the sale rack at a boutique on Main Street. They helped me find a pair of heels to go with it, and then the three of us got our nails done.

Afterward, Veronica dropped Kelly and me off at Devlin's house. When we went inside, his dad greeted us at the front door. "Devlin and Xander aren't back yet," he said, "but I'm just having a cup of coffee in the kitchen if you'd like to join me."

"Sure," I said. "Coffee sounds good."

"Actually, I'm a little tired." Kelly smiled apologetically. "Such a late night last night. I think I might lie down a minute before the party if that's okay."

"Of course," Mr. Buckley said. "My new daughter-in-law and I will just get a little better acquainted."

Kelly disappeared up the stairs and I set my shopping bags by the front door before following Devlin's dad, whose first name was George, back to the kitchen.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to a chair at the large round kitchen table. “Do you like cream and sugar?”

“Yes, please.”

He brought me a steaming mug along with a carton of half and half and a sugar bowl. While I doctored my coffee, he sat across from me and closed the newspaper he’d been looking at. Then he picked up a mug that said World’s Best Grandpa on it. “Have a good time today?” he asked.

“A wonderful time.” I sipped my coffee. “Cherry Tree Harbor is lovely.”

“It is. Perfect place to raise a family.” He laughed. “Not that I’m pressuring you about it. Honestly, I’m just glad Devlin found someone he was willing to settle down with. He’s always been so focused on his career. So driven. Even in high school, he never slowed down. As soon as he reached one goal, it was on to the next.”

“He’s very good at what he does,” I said. “And I’m so grateful to have his help with Snowberry. I don’t know what I’d have done without him.”

“He’s a good egg,” said the proud dad. “All my kids are good eggs. Got big hearts, like their mom had. Some of them just like to keep those hearts hidden. Tucked away where nobody can see how big they are.”

I smiled, wrapping my hands around the warm mug.

“Did Devlin tell you about the time and money he donates to that organization for kids who lost parents?”

“Camp Lemonade.” I nodded. “Yes.”

“Did he tell you that he’s been saving up money to build a second camp location?”

I set the mug down with a thump. “No.”

“I told him I’d help with the construction if he needed it.”

Right away, I heard Devlin’s words in my head. *I have some money set aside.* I swallowed hard. “I didn’t know about that. I guess we’re still learning things about each other.”

“That’s all right. That’s part of the fun, isn’t it? Unraveling someone’s mysteries, peeling away those protective layers.” He sipped his coffee. “I wasn’t sure Devlin would ever slow down enough to let someone get that close. You must have really stolen his heart.”

Guilt squeezed my insides. “I guess.”

“Well, I couldn’t be happier.” He got up from the table. “Come on. I have something for you.”

With dread pounding in my chest, I rose to my feet and followed him into a first-floor bedroom. It was tidy and masculine, a little old-fashioned. Oak dresser and headboard, faded wallpaper, a patchwork quilt across the foot of the neatly made bed. He went over to the dresser and opened a wooden box on its top while I lingered close to the doorway. My eyes were drawn to a photo of a beautiful sapphire-eyed woman on his nightstand—I knew right away it was Devlin’s mother. Not only had Devlin inherited her eyes, but also her full-lipped smile.

“Here we are.” George closed the box and turned to me. “I want you to have these.” He uncurled his fist, and on his palm was a beautiful pair of pearl drop earrings. “They belonged to my wife, Devlin’s mom. I gave them to her on our tenth anniversary. I hope you and Devlin will be as happy on your tenth anniversary as we were on ours.”

“Oh.” My throat closed up, and I put both hands on my chest. “I couldn’t possibly accept such a precious gift. You should keep those.”

“And do what with them? Let them collect dust in a box?”

“Mabel will want them,” I said quickly.

“Mabel has other pieces.”

“Maybe one of the other boys—”

“They have plenty to choose from. I spoiled my wife as often as I could, not that I could afford the real fancy expensive stuff. But the gifts were always given from the heart.” He smiled. “It will make me happy to see you wear them. I know it would make her happy too.”

*Oh, God.* My throat ached. The truth was a goose egg I couldn't swallow. "Mr. Buckley—"

"Dad," he corrected.

"Dad." My voice cracked. "I'm—I'm not sure I deserve this."

"Nonsense. Try them on." He stood there with those earrings on his palm like a platter. "Please?"

What could I do? I picked up one and slipped it through the hole in my earlobe, then the other.

"Beautiful," he said. "Just perfect. Have a look."

Reluctantly, I faced my reflection in the mirror over the dresser. "They are beautiful," I said, turning my head this way and that. The pearls dangled from small diamond studs that sparkled as they caught the light. My eyes filled with tears. "I'm—I'm overwhelmed. Thank you."

He patted my shoulder. "Love is overwhelming. But it's also a gift. Just enjoy it."

FOURTEEN

*devlin*

WHEN I REACHED Buckley's Pub, I knocked on the locked glass door. Xander appeared on the other side, turned the bolt, and let me in. "Hey," he said.

"Hey." I strolled inside. "The place looks fucking great, Xander. Congrats."

"Thanks." His voice was oddly stern, and I turned around to see him standing there with his thick, tattooed arms folded across his chest. Eyes narrowed. Wide stance.

"What?" I asked. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because I'm trying to figure out if you're crazy or just an asshole."

"What do you mean?"

"Barely two weeks ago, you told me there was a girl standing in the way of closing a deal. You told me she couldn't stand you. You told me nothing you said could get through to her. Last night you show up and announce you're married to her?" He shook his head. "Something here does not add up."

I shrugged. "The more we talked, the—"

"Nope. That might work on Dad and the ladies, but it's not working on me. Tell me you didn't marry her just to close a deal."

"What?" My eyes nearly popped, and I clenched my jaw. "Fuck you, Xander. I'd never do that."

"I didn't think so," he allowed, relaxing his stiff posture slightly, "but for the life me, I cannot figure what your game

is.”

I exhaled. Ran a hand through my hair.

“You always said you didn’t want to get married or have kids,” he reminded me.

“I know.”

“And that’s changed?”

“Not exactly, but it’s a long story.”

Xander pulled out a chair from a nearby table and plunked himself down. “I got time.”

“I thought you needed me to help move—”

“That was bullshit.” He kicked the chair across from him out from the table. “Now sit down and tell me what the fuck is up.”

Giving in, I dropped onto the chair. “What I say here stays between us.”

“Fine.”

“I’m serious, Xander. Dad can’t know. Austin can’t know. Lexi and I have an understanding. But . . .” I took off my glasses and cleaned them on my shirt. “She told me she confided in a friend, so I guess I can tell someone the truth too.”

“What’s the truth?”

I spilled it—all of it. About the will, quitting my job, forming the plan, convincing Lexi to go along with it, flying to Vegas, tying the knot.

“This is fucking *nuts*,” he said, shaking his head. “I can’t believe Lexi went for it.”

“What was the alternative? Watch her childhood home be demolished? She’s got too many memories there to let it go without a fight.” I told him about her parents. The ashes scattered at the top of the mountain.

“Jesus.” He scrubbed a hand over his beard. “That’s tough. But still—getting married just to inherit?”



“She’d probably have done something even more extreme,” I said. “You don’t know her like I do. The girl is *highly* emotional. Fiercely sentimental. And she’s got a wild streak. She runs hot.”

A smile crept onto Xander’s face. “I bet she does.”

“Not like that,” I said. Then I paused. “Actually, yeah, like that.”

Xander laughed. “I figured there was more in it for you than just getting back at some business rival.”

“There’s more in it for me than just sex,” I said defensively. “I’ve got some money saved that I’m going to invest in Snowberry. I really think it will do well. I’ll see the return eventually.”

“I thought you were saving that money for some kind of kids’ summer camp.”

“I was, but . . .” I shrugged. “That will have to wait. I want to help her out. And listen, don’t tell her about that. I don’t want her to know I was saving that money for a specific purpose. She’ll feel bad.”

Xander leaned back in his chair, tipping it onto two legs. Studying me with curious eyes. “You like this girl.”

I shrugged, trying to downplay my feelings. “I like her.”

“A lot. I saw you with her last night. It wasn’t all for show.”

“Fine, I like her a lot.” I frowned. “Did you have to tell her I was afraid of the chairlift, asshole?”

“Yes. I felt it was my solemn duty as your big brother to roast you a little bit on the occasion of your marriage.”

“Gee, thanks.”

He was silent a moment. “Dad seems happy.”

“Yeah.” I cringed a little bit. “I do feel bad about that.”

“How long you plan on staying married?”

“We think six months should do it.”

He cocked his head. “Six months playing house, huh? And then you just say goodbye? Move back to Boston?”

I shrugged. “Or somewhere else. I haven’t decided yet.”

“And she’s going to be fine with that?”

“Absolutely. We have it all worked out.”

He cocked his head and gave me a smile that said he knew better. “Of course you do.”

\* \* \*

When I got home, I went up to my bedroom to find Lexi pacing back and forth at the foot of the bed.

“Thank God you’re here!” she whispered frantically, rushing to shut the door behind me. “I’m losing my mind!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s *wrong*, exactly, it’s just that there’s a party tonight for our wedding and in that bag over there is a dress I’m supposed to wear and Veronica and Kelly were so kind to me today and so excited for us and I’m wearing this gold band on my finger and your dad gave me these earrings that were your mom’s and I finally saw our wedding photo today and I just can’t—it’s all fake, Devlin! We’re liars! It’s all fake!” She burst into tears, and I instinctively pulled her into my arms.

“Hey. Shhh, it’s okay.” I stroked her hair, the way I knew she liked. The way that relaxed her. “Everything is okay. So you found a dress for tonight?”

“Yes.” Her voice was muffled in my shirt. “It’s white.”

I smiled. “I like you in white. You were wearing a white dress the night we met, remember?”

“I remember.” She sniffed.

“You had fun with Kelly and Veronica?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s this about earrings?”

Sighing, she backed away from me and held up her hair so I could see the pearl earrings she wore. “They were your mom’s.”

“They’re beautiful. I don’t recognize them, but I was pretty young when she died. I didn’t pay much attention to jewelry.”

“They were a tenth anniversary present.” She let her hair fall. “And your dad said he hoped we would be as happy on our tenth anniversary as they were on theirs.”

I nodded slowly. “Ten years. That was probably right before she got sick.”

“It just feels so wrong to lie to him, Devlin.” She wrapped her arms around her stomach. “He’s so sweet, and he wants me to call him Dad, and I just haven’t called anyone Dad in so long and I—” She burst into tears again, and I folded her into my embrace once more. I knew by now that when the tears came, it was best to just let them fall.

“Hey,” I said gently. “If you want to call this off, we can. We should probably get through tonight, but tomorrow we can stop pretending and just say we realized we moved too fast, and we’ve changed our minds.”

Her arms looped around my waist and she tucked her head under my chin, pressing her cheek to my chest. “Can I think about it?”

“Sure. In the meantime, how about a bubble bath?”

That made her laugh. “Bourbon and cedar?”

“With just a hint of coriander.”

“Is the tub big enough for two?”

“Well, it was big enough for me and Dashiell when we were toddlers. But I haven’t tried to get in there with anyone else since.”

She leaned back and looked up at me. “Want to try now?”

I dropped a kiss on her puffy red nose. “Definitely.”

\* \* \*

It was a tight fit, but we both managed to get in the bathtub. She sat between my legs and I washed her hair, then we traded places and she scrubbed my back. After we let the water drain from the tub, we turned the shower on and rinsed off.

I'd have gladly stayed naked with her all night in the bedroom, but since friends and family and possibly the entire town of Cherry Tree Harbor were expecting us to show up to our wedding celebration, I exercised *great restraint* and kept my hands to myself the whole time.

While Lexi dried her hair in the bathroom, I ironed my shirt. While she dressed in the bedroom, I shaved at the bathroom sink. While I buttoned up my shirt and buckled my belt, she put on her makeup and strapped on a pair of high-heeled shoes. It was the routine of any married couple going out on a Saturday night, perfectly boring in its normalcy, but I liked the natural rhythm of it. The way we traded places and shared space with ease, the way she asked me to zip up her dress without saying a word, the way I could see her behind me in the mirror while I shaved, putting on the earrings my father had given her.

I wished I could remember my mother wearing them, but in my memories, she's never dressed in fancy clothes with her hair and makeup done. She was just *Mom*, moving around in the kitchen in jeans and sneakers, Mabel on her hip, helping me with my spelling words, hollering at her older boys to wipe their feet when they come in, stirring something on the stove. It seemed to me she never sat down, never stopped moving, never had a moment to herself.

As a kid, you never thought about the intimacies of your parents' marriage—gross—but the love between my parents was always there in the room, and she would stop fussing about long enough to kiss him when he came home from work, dirty and sweaty and sometimes grouchy, but always smiling after that kiss. They made each other happy.

Switching off the bathroom light, I entered the bedroom to find Lexi frowning at herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door. “You look gorgeous,” I told her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

I came up behind her. Kissed one bare shoulder. “You still upset about the earrings?”

She met my eyes in the mirror. “Maybe. What was she like, your mom? Maybe it would help if I knew something about her.”

“Hmm. She was outgoing. She was funny. She had rules and she’d definitely stay on you about them, but she was also understanding and kind. She was always giving us hugs. She loved her roses, she loved cooking, she loved my dad.”

“What was her name?”

“Susan.”

“Susan.” Lexi touched the earrings dangling from each earlobe. “I saw her photo earlier. She was very pretty.”

“She was.”

“You have her eyes. And her smile.”

“That’s what everyone says.”

“I’m giving these earrings back to you as soon as possible.”

“We don’t have to think about that now.”

“I know you think I’m being ridiculous about this, but—”

“I don’t think that, Lexi.” I turned her to face me. “Not at all. If you didn’t think it was a big deal to wear my mom’s earrings, I’d think you had no feelings.” I grinned. “And we both know that isn’t true. You have an absurd amount of feelings. Massive overstock. You need a feelings clearance sale.”

That brought a smile. “Right.”

She was wearing lipstick, so I kissed her cheek. “Ready to go, Mrs. Buckley?”

“It’s so weird when you say that.”

“Why? That’s what you are,” I said, following her out of the bedroom. Then I gave her a little spank on the ass. “Wife.”

\* \* \*

I’d never loved wedding receptions, but I had to admit, ours was a lot of fun. My family had all pitched in for food, and there were platters of delicious bar snacks—sliders and buffalo wings, fried pickles and loaded potato skins. Ari had baked us a three-tiered wedding cake, topped with little Elvis and Priscilla wedding figurines.

“Oh my God, that’s adorable! Where did you find that on such short notice?” Lexi asked.

“I lucked out—when I went to get some baking supplies for the cake, the shop also had some toppers, and I couldn’t resist! It even looks like you guys!” Ari said with a laugh.

I had to admit, it kind of did.

Xander had moved some furniture to create a little dance floor, Veronica and Kelly had come early and decorated with centerpieces and balloons, and my Aunt Faye had brought Lexi a little bouquet from her sister’s flower shop. “For tossing!” she said, giving Lexi a hug. “You shouldn’t miss out on all the fun bride things just because you eloped!”

So after we cut the cake and danced to Elvis’s “It’s Now or Never,” Lexi stood at one end of the room and flung the bouquet behind her—which Veronica caught.

We ate, drank, danced, and celebrated long into the night, surrounded by people who were genuinely happy for us and totally unconcerned that we’d rushed into marriage after knowing each other only a few weeks.

“Don’t let anyone tell you there’s no such thing as love at first sight,” said Gus. “I knew the second I laid eyes on my

Betsy, she was the one for me.”

“And don’t let people who say it won’t last get you down either,” Betsy added. “We met in ninth grade, and we’re still together.”

I thought all the generosity and goodwill was going to get Lexi down, but she seemed to have a fantastic time. She practically skipped out to the car, and she chirped like a robin the entire ride home.

“I love this town! The people are so nice! And your family is amazing. I wish your other brother and sister could have come. I wish Gran could have come. I wish Winnie and Ellie could have come. I even wish mean old Tabitha could have come—maybe some of the niceness around here would rub off on her.”

“Yeah, she could use a little small-town kindness. Why do you put up with her again?”

“I don’t know. She definitely drove me crazy when we were kids, but I gave some back to her. And as I got older, I could see how being abandoned by both her parents had affected her. I know it’s not the same as what I went through, but it still sucked. Plus ... family is important to me, and I don’t have a lot of it like you do. No siblings, no other cousins. She’s what I got.” Lexi shrugged. “I feel the need to try to make the best of it. I think my parents would have wanted that.”

Taking her hand, I kissed the back of it. “Then I’ll try too.”

She looked over at me. “Did you have a good time tonight?”

“Yeah. I did.” Pulling up at the house, I put the car in park and turned off the engine. “Good thing, since that’s the one and only wedding reception I’ll ever have.”

She laughed. “That’s right. This is it for you.”

“And how is your future reception going to measure up to that, huh? Darts, Elvis and Priscilla cake topper, fried pickles . . . where do you go from there?”

“I have no idea.” She giggled. “Oh my God, speaking of Elvis, I forgot to show you our wedding photo.”

“What wedding photo?”

“From the ceremony in Las Vegas. It was emailed to me, but it went to spam and I only found it today.” She dug into her purse and came up with her phone. After scrolling a couple seconds, she showed the screen.

I had to laugh. There was Elvis in his white jumpsuit and sideburns. There was me in jeans and sneakers. And there was Lexi in her rented veil and Two Buckleys sweatshirt. In the photo, we were holding hands and looking at each other. “You know what’s funny? I have no recollection of that moment.”

“Me neither!” She laughed too. “I thought the same thing when I saw it. We must have said ‘I do’ at some point.”

I shook my head and unbuckled my seatbelt. “Well, it’s proof at least. If anyone asks.” I got out and came around to open her door.

“We can frame it,” she said, taking my hand and letting me help her from the car. “Send it out as our Christmas card.”

Inside, we moved quietly up the stairs so we wouldn’t wake my dad, who’d come home earlier. In my old room, we got ready for bed and crawled between the sheets. I pulled her close and kissed her. “Finally, I have you to myself.”

She kissed me back, winding her arms around my neck and throwing one leg over my hip. My hands roamed all over her body, my fingers slipping easily inside her, my cock growing hard and thick. But when I rolled on top of her, she pressed her hands to my chest and pushed slightly.

“We can be quiet,” I said, impatient to get inside her.

“I doubt it, but it’s not that.” She brushed her thumbs over my collarbone. “Your dad told me something today that’s on my mind.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me you’d been saving money to build a second Camp Lemonade.”



“Oh.”

“Is that true?”

I’d promised her I’d always be honest, so there was only one answer. “Yes.”

“And is that the money you told me you want to invest at Snowberry?”

“Yes.”

She exhaled. “Oh, Devlin.”

“It’s my choice, Lexi. And that’s what I want.”

“But what about the—”

“Look, who knows when the loan is going to come through? We’re going to need some cash up front to get started. I can make more money. And I’ll always be involved with Camp Lemonade.”

“But I *feel* bad.”

“Want me to make you feel good?” Reaching low between our bodies, I teased her clit with the tip of my cock.

She groaned. “Stop distracting me with your dick when I’m trying to be a good person.”

“You *are* a good person, Lexi. You just really like my dick. It’s fine.”

That earned me a pinch on the bicep. “Jerk.”

“So we’re going to stay married?”

“I suppose we can stay married.” She wrapped those legs around me. “If that works for you.”

“It definitely works for me.” I entered her fully with a swift, deep stroke. “Wife.”

FIFTEEN

THERE WAS JUST one person who wasn't pleased about my newlywed status.

"You're *married*?" Tabitha gaped at me when I saw her at work the following week. "Gran said so, but I don't believe it."

"Believe it." I flipped my wrist down in front of her face. "See?"

She grabbed my hand and examined my fingers, her expression curdling from disbelief to distaste. "What is that?"

"It's my ring."

"There's no diamond."

I snatched my hand back. "I didn't want a diamond."

Tabitha barked a laugh. "Who doesn't want a diamond? Is the guy poor or something?"

"No, he isn't. I'm just not superficial like that." I turned to the computer and started scrolling through the upcoming reservations I'd have to cancel. Devlin and I had discussed trying to remain open during the start of construction, but ultimately, we'd decided the work could be done quicker if the place was empty of guests. It would also save us from a lot of complaints about noise, dust, and inconvenience. We planned to offer two free nights when the resort opened up again to compensate them.

"Who is this *husband*, anyway?" Tabitha said from behind me. "Gran went on about him like he's some kind of knight who rode in on a white horse to rescue us."

“His name is Devlin Buckley.”

“Devlin?” She paused. “Wasn’t that the name of the guy you spent the night with a few weeks ago?”

“If you must know, yes.”

“You didn’t even know his last *name* the next morning. Now you’re his wife? I’m no mathematician, but something doesn’t add up.”

I turned around and faced my cousin, who stood with her arms folded over her chest. “It adds up just fine. We stayed in touch. We fell in love. We eloped.”

Her eyes narrowed. She folded her arms over her chest. “And now you inherit Snowberry, right? That’s convenient.”

“It is,” I agreed. “Since this place means everything to me. I’m lucky my husband understands and wants to work with me to fix it up.”

“Instead of sell?”

“We don’t want to sell. We want to renovate.”

“But I want my money,” she said, her tone growing more desperate. “I have plans.”

“There’s no money to give you.”

“There would be if we sold. What was the name of that company who wanted to buy it? Something about diamonds?” She snapped her fingers. “Black Diamond, was it?”

“That deal is off the table,” I said quickly, panic rising fast in my chest.

“I never did return that guy’s call. The one who wanted to talk to me about the sale.”

“You don’t need to return his call.” I spoke with a lot more confidence than I felt. “That deal is *off the table*.”

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” She grabbed her phone off the counter and flounced off down the hall.

\* \* \*

Devlin didn't seem that concerned when I told him about the conversation with Tabitha. "She can't do anything," he said, unpacking the groceries I'd picked up after work. "Unless Gran goes back on her word, you'll have power of attorney by the end of the week. That's all we need to get the loan. And what did Gran say about the deed?"

"She said she needed a real estate lawyer to prepare it, and she was told it could take months. Apparently, the one official who processes these things at the county level was out for weeks because he had back surgery, and now there's a backlog."

Devlin shook his head. "Small towns, man." He pulled a package of ground beef out of a plastic bag. "Fridge or freezer?"

"You can leave that out. I'm going to use it for dinner."

"What are we having?"

"Spaghetti Bolognese. My friend Ellie's husband Gianni gave me his family's secret recipe for meat sauce. Although I basically had to beg for it." I started filling a pot with water.

Devlin came up behind me, bracing his hands on the edge of the sink next to my hips. "You begged, huh?"

I giggled as his mouth tickled the crook of my neck. "So hard."

"I'm jealous. You begged another man for his sauce."

"I didn't beg him like I beg you, silly." Laughing, I turned off the faucet. "You're the only man who's heard me beg like *that*."

He sank his teeth lightly into my shoulder. "Good. By the way, I have news."

"Yeah?"

“Jennifer Bates called. We have a date for our pitch meeting—October twenty-seventh.”

I spun around to face him. “A whole month away.”

“That could be a good thing. We still have prep work to do. I want to get a contractor hired before we go, so that work can begin immediately once the money comes through. And maybe the official with the bad back will get the deed processed by then.”

“You sound awfully confident.”

“I am.” He pressed his lips to mine. “You should be too.”

\* \* \*

October arrived. The leaves changed colors, and I changed my name, which Gran wanted to celebrate. She invited us over for dinner and made my favorite meal from when I was younger—chili and cornbread.

“Alexandra was always such a good eater,” Gran said after we’d finished eating but were still sitting at the table. “I never had to get after her to finish her plate. Were you like that?” she asked Devlin.

“I was a pretty good eater.” He leaned back and draped his arm across the back of my chair.

Gran looked pleased. “I bet your children will have good appetites too.”

“Okay, Gran.” I stood up and took my dishes to the sink. “We don’t need to get into that now.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s too soon.” Returning to the table for her dishes, I pinned her with a laser-beam stare. “We just got married.”

“Well, one always wants to plan ahead.”

“We’re enjoying the moment.” I went to the sink once more, and Devlin followed me, placing his bowl and utensils

on the counter.

“Can I do the dishes?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about—”

“What a marvelous husband!” Gran interrupted. “Lexi, darling, take him up on it, and you come upstairs with me. I have something for you.”

Devlin took me by the shoulders and steered me away from the sink. “Go. I’ve got this. Dash and I were always on dish duty after dinner in my house.”

“Okay. Thanks.” I followed Gran out of the kitchen and up the stairs, which she climbed slowly, with one hand gripping the banister. She talked the whole time.

“I was just thinking—and of course, I don’t mean to meddle too much—wouldn’t it be nice to have some sort of party for you here? To celebrate your marriage?”

“It’s not necessary.”

“But I didn’t get to see you walk down the aisle, or say your vows, or see the groom kiss the bride! And I know a Las Vegas wedding is legal, of course, but it’s not sentimental. It’s not traditional. Don’t you want a wedding ceremony with something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue?”

“I wore a blue sweatshirt,” I said as we finally reached the top of the stairs. “You saw the picture.”

She sighed as she shuffled down the hall past my old bedroom toward hers. “That’s not what I meant.” Ambling over to her closet, she opened the door and looked up. “I’m not sure I can reach. Can you help, darling? It’s that white hat box.”

“Of course.” I went over and lifted down a white box. The thick layer of dust on its surface made me sneeze.

“Bless you. Sorry about the dust—I haven’t taken it down in years. Not since you and Tabitha used to ask to play dress-up with it.” She lifted the top off and took out her veil. Gently shaking it out, she placed it on my head, tucking its comb into

the hair at my crown, and smiled. “There. See? Go look in the mirror.”

I didn’t want to, but I saw no way out. Reluctantly, I turned toward the corner of the room, where an old cheval mirror stood in a wooden frame.

And there I was in Gran’s wedding veil. I bit my lip.

Gran appeared behind me, her eyes misty as they met mine in the glass. “You look like a dream,” she said, placing her hand on her heart. “And I just want to see it come true.”

“I don’t know, Gran. Snowberry is going to be all torn apart in the next few weeks, and—”

“It doesn’t have to be immediate,” she said. “We could wait for the refurbishment to be complete. How would that be?”

“I’ll talk to Devlin,” I said, vowing that I would not walk through the motions of my dream Snowberry wedding wearing Gran’s veil as part of this charade.

My grandmother beamed. “That’s all I ask.” Then she paused. “Well, that plus some great-grandchildren, but one thing at a time.”

\* \* \*

Devlin and I threw ourselves into the remodel headfirst.

We scheduled appointments with contractors and designers and restaurateurs. I contacted everyone with reservations and explained we were closing for the season for renovations, and while there were some complaints, most of the guests had been loyal to Snowberry for years and were excited to return once the work was complete. We decided to keep one lift running on weekends for daytime hikers, although that would have to stop when the snow fell.

Tabitha was giving me the silent treatment, which made me nervous, but Devlin remained relatively unconcerned, especially once the power of attorney forms had been signed.



Still, I worried my cousin was up to something. It wasn't like her to be so quiet.

One morning, Gran informed me that Tabitha wanted time off to go visit her father in Florida.

"Would that be okay?" Her expression was apologetic. "I'm sorry to ask you to work longer hours, darling. I know you're a newlywed and want to be spending time with your husband."

"It's fine, Gran." Actually, I'd be less stressed without Tabitha hovering. "I don't mind at all. Truthfully, we're not that busy. The last few reservations are this weekend, and then we're closed to guests."

She sighed and looked around the lobby. "It makes me sad to think of this place empty for the holidays. It's always so magical at Christmas."

"It will be magical again, Gran." I smiled. "Not just in the winter either." On my lunch break, Devlin and I were going to grab a golf cart and drive up to Otter Lake, which was at the north end of the property. I'd pitched some ideas for expanding our summertime offerings, like renting paddle boards or kayaks or putting in a fishing dock, and he wanted to see the area for himself to gauge its potential. "Trust me."

"I do." She angled her head a different way and gave me a sly smile. "You're looking particularly happy this morning."

"I'm feeling happy, Gran."

"Married life agrees with you."

I laughed. "I guess it must."

"You're even wearing a dress." Gran's eyes traveled approvingly up and down my body. "You hardly ever wear dresses to work."

"Devlin and I have a meeting with a contractor this afternoon," I told her, neglecting to mention that Devlin let it slip at our wedding reception that he loved when I wore dresses because my legs drove him crazy. "And later we're

going out for dinner to celebrate our one-month wedding anniversary.”

“How sweet!” Gran was elated. “Things are going well with the two of you?”

“Yes,” I said, glad it wasn’t a lie. “Things are going very well.”

\* \* \*

“What do you think?” I looked over at Devlin, who stood at the edge of Otter Lake, surveying it beneath the shade of one hand. His brow was slightly furrowed. “I know it’s not huge, but do you think it has potential?”

“Definitely,” he said. “I’m even wondering if we could put in a little beach on the western shore there. Bring in some sand and build it up.”

My heart thumped happily, and I clapped my hands. “I vote yes!”

After walking the perimeter of the lake, we saw an old path leading into the surrounding woods and followed it, disappearing into the cool shade of the trees. The crisp fall air carried the scent of dried leaves and damp earth. After a minute, Devlin stopped and inhaled. “I love that smell. Reminds me of my childhood.”

“Me too.” Suddenly I was overcome with excitement for the future, joy at the prospect of bringing this place back to life, and gratitude for the man standing beside me. I looped my arms around his neck and pressed close to his body. “I can’t thank you enough for everything you’re doing for me. Even if it’s not technically *for me*. It’s making me very happy.”

His arms came around me. “I’m glad. I like seeing you happy.”

“Want to see me even more happy? Let’s ride the chairlift to the top of the mountain and look at the fall foliage!”

He laughed. “Not. A. fucking. Chance.”

I pouted, and he caught my lower lip in his teeth before sealing his mouth to mine. His hands roamed over my back and his tongue swept into my mouth. When he grabbed my ass, pulling me against the bulge of his erection, I moaned with regret.

“I have to go back to work,” I told him.

“But it’s our anniversary. And I want a present.” He pivoted and put my back against a thick oak tree, grinding his hard length against me. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

My lips curved into a grin. “Where have I heard that before?”

“Maybe I’ll only need five minutes. Fuck, I’m so hard.” Reaching beneath my dress, he inched his fingers inside the edge of my underwear, slipped them easily inside me. “Jesus. Make that two minutes.”

“Devlin, we can’t do this out here.”

“The hell we can’t.” He dropped to his knees and yanked my panties to my ankles, then tossed one of my legs over his shoulder and buried his tongue in my pussy.

My cry of surprise pierced the empty woods, and a frightened squirrel scampered up a nearby tree. Devlin gripped my hips, refusing to let up, feasting hungrily. Moans of pleasure escaped my throat—I couldn’t help it—and I worked my fingers into his hair, clutching tight. In no time at all, I was coming hard all over his mouth.

With a grunt of impatience, he leaped to his feet and unbuckled his jeans. Freed his cock. Gave it a few quick, hard pulls. Then he lifted the bottom of my dress and hitched up one of my legs, and before I even had time to catch my breath from the first climax, he was driving me toward the second.

He fucked me hard and fast, and I cried out at the height of each powerful thrust, so loud that Devlin put a hand over my lips to muffle the sound. I sucked his thumb into my mouth and caught it between my teeth. I clawed the back of his shirt so hard I thought my nails might rake right through it. He shoved in further, burying himself inside me, pinning my

lower back to the tree and moving his hips in small, quick thrusts that made my body seize up around his cock and then release all its tension once more—from a different place this time, somewhere deeper and more secret. With a long groan, he stiffened, and with three final strokes, he was lost. I closed my eyes and relished every throb of him inside me.

Not only that, but the fact that he'd wanted me so badly, he had to have me right here, right now—even though he knew I'd be in his bed later. There was something so thrilling about being desired that way, especially by someone like Devlin. So handsome and smart and successful and charming. He could have anyone . . . yet here I was.

Maybe I wasn't in love with him, but damn if I wasn't in love with being his wife.

After the final shudder, he rested his forehead against mine. "What are the chances," he said, breathing hard, "I could talk you into blowing off work for the rest of the day?"

I laughed. "Not even you could close that deal. I have to get back. Tabitha is gone for the rest of the week, so I'm the only front desk employee."

"Where did she go?"

"Florida, I guess, to visit her father."

"Can't say I'll miss her." He pulled out gently and put himself back together while I wished I had something to clean up with. The evidence of our afternoon delight was trickling down my thigh as I tugged my panties into place.

He noticed I was uncomfortable and immediately guessed why. "Here," he said, yanking off his collared shirt and then the white T-shirt he wore underneath. "Use this. Actually, let me." Dropping to his knees, he carefully and considerately wiped the insides of my legs and between them with his soft white cotton shirt, then put my panties back in place. "Is that better?"

"Yes," I said softly, touched by the gesture. "Thank you."

"Of course. I like taking care of you."

I smiled, my heart trilling like a sparrow.

Eventually, we walked back to the golf cart, and Devlin drove me back to the main lodge. “You good?”

“I think so. How do I look?”

“Like you’ve been thoroughly ravaged by a wolf in the woods.”

I laughed. “Well, you look like the wolf who did the ravaging, so before the next contractor appointment, you might want to fix your hair.”

“I believe *you* ravaged my hair.” He ran a hand over it. “You maniac.”

“Can’t help it. Not sorry.” Grinning, I started to get out of the cart when he grabbed my arm.

“Hey.” Tugging me closer, he kissed me. “See you later. Wife.”

Fireworks went off in my chest.

\* \* \*

Later that night, Devlin ran a fingertip over the words that stretched from one shoulder blade to the other. “I like your tattoo. *Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.*”

“Thanks.” We were in bed, covers thrown off, still hot and sweaty, the smell of sex on our skin. I was lying on my belly, and he was on his side next to me. “It’s something my dad used to say, although later I discovered he pilfered the line from Helen Keller.”

He laughed. “What’s this beneath the words?” His finger rubbed the spot. “A dragonfly?”

“A firefly. That’s what he used to call me. Firefly.”

“I like that. It suits you.”

“Do you have any ink I haven’t noticed yet?”

“No tattoos on me.”

“You don’t like them?”

“I like them fine on other people. My two older brothers have a bunch. I just can’t think of anything I’d mark on my body permanently.”

“You do have to make sure it’s something you’ll always love,” I agreed.

My eyes were drifting shut when he spoke again.

“Firefly,” he said.

“Hm?”

“That’s what we should call the bar at the top of the mountain. Firefly.”

I smiled, picturing it. “I’d like that.”

He played with my hair, sweeping it off the back of my neck, then he pressed his lips there. “Good.”

\* \* \*

A week later, Tabitha returned with sun-kissed skin and a strangely agreeable attitude.

When she showed up for work her first day back, I’d expected either more silence or a sullen attitude accompanied by demands for “her money,” but instead she wore an angelic smile and greeted me with actual good cheer.

“Good morning!” She set her coffee cup down and rubbed her hands together. “I hear things are going well around here. Gran says work is going to start soon.”

“Yes,” I said, wary of her complete one-eighty. “We hired a contractor and work should begin by Thanksgiving.”

“A-*maze*-ing.” She beamed. “You must be so happy.”

I was happy—everything was falling into place. The renderings of the new space had brought me to tears, they were so beautiful. We’d hired a designer who understood our vision and a spa manager who’d run a successful hotel spa

down in Detroit and had recently moved to the area. Devlin had met with a representative from an aerial lift manufacturer based in Utah, who'd flown in to tour Snowberry and offer advice on what new technology would best fit our space and budget, and the snow gun maker had offered us a great deal on two new fans.

But I didn't feel like sharing any of that with Tabitha.

"So you're good to work tomorrow and Saturday, right?" I asked instead, gathering up my things behind the desk. Our flight to Boston left late tonight. Our pitch meeting was tomorrow morning.

"Sure," she said, giving me a thumbs up. "*Absolutely.*"

"Thanks." I paused, convinced something was not right. "How was your visit with your dad?"

"Great!"

"Did you have nice weather in Florida?"

"Beautiful."

"What did you do down there?"

"Oh, you know, went to the beach, went boating. Took some business meetings."

I blinked. "Business meetings? What business?"

"I can't say as of yet. But it's very interesting."

I squinted at her. "Is this a game, Tabitha? I don't have time to play."

"I know. You've got your *big important meeting* with investors tomorrow." A slow, I-know-something-you-don't-know smile took over her rosebud lips. "Good luck."

Gooseflesh blanketed my arms. I hadn't told her about the meeting. "How do you know about that?"

"Maybe Gran mentioned it."

I stood there a moment longer, unease creeping under my skin. She obviously had something up her sleeve. "Look, Tabitha, I know we've got our differences, but we're family.

And everything I'm doing, I'm doing to hold onto what our family has built."

"Everything? Like marrying the guy who tried to get you to sell in the first place?" Her eyes had a little fire in them now. "Yeah, I know all about that. Did you know he got fired when he couldn't close the deal?"

"He didn't get fired. He quit," I said hotly.

Her laugh rang out like a bell. "Of course, that's what he told you. But I have it on good authority that when he was taken off the account, he punched someone in the face right there at the office, and then got fired."

My entire body blazed with fury. "That's not true."

"Ask him," she said with a cool confidence that had me a little nervous. "Ask him what happened that day. Then ask yourself if you think it's a little strange that he suddenly decided he's in love with you. Ask yourself what kind of game he might be playing."

"The only one playing games is you, Tabitha. I saw those photos from The Summit." I shook my head. "How could you?"

"They paid me. They recognized my talent. And I need the money."

"It would break Gran's heart if she knew."

She reached out and patted my arm. "That's how I know you're not going to tell her."

I yanked my arm out of her reach. "Well, while you're out there betraying her, I'm just trying to do what's right."

"What's *right*? Like a quickie marriage just so you can inherit the place?" She snorted. "That's rich. So how long are you planning to stay married? Just long enough to get your name on the deed, I bet."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

She wagged her fingers at me. "Have a nice trip."



Heading out to my car, I tried to reassure myself that she was just saying shit to get under my skin, the way she always had. She'd obviously talked to Bob Oliver, and he'd fed her false information.

But the conversation had left a massive pit in my stomach that was quickly filling with dread.

SIXTEEN

AT HOME, I said nothing to Devlin as I packed a bag for the two-day trip. He must have noticed I was agitated about something, because he asked me several times if I was okay. I said I was fine, just nervous about the meeting tomorrow, which was also true.

On the drive to the airport, I kept looking over at his hand on the steering wheel, recalling what Tabitha had said. Was all of it bullshit? I hated that she was making me doubt his word after I'd come to trust him. After he'd promised me honesty at all times.

"Devlin," I said, playing with the friendship bracelet on my wrist. "Were you fired from your job in Boston? Or did you quit?"

"I quit." He glanced at me. "I told you that."

"I know, but . . ." I sighed. "Tabitha has obviously talked to Bob Oliver, and he told her a different story."

"What story?"

"That you were taken off the Black Diamond account when you couldn't close the deal, and you were so mad you punched someone at the office and got fired for it." I looked at his left hand. At the wedding band I'd placed on his finger. "So what's the truth?"

"The truth is that I was taken off the account, I quit, and then I gave Bob Oliver the punch in the face he'd deserved for two years—probably longer."

"You never told me that. About hitting him."

“I’m not that proud of it. Actually, fuck that. I’m proud of it.” He shrugged. “It just didn’t seem like a necessary part of the story the night I came to your house to ask you to marry me. I didn’t want you to think I was a jerk.”

“Pretty sure I already thought that.”

He laughed. “See? It was already an uphill climb to get you to trust me. I didn’t want to add more incline with anger management problems.”

“Okay.” I kept fiddling with the beads around my wrist.

“Hey.” He reached over and took my hand. “Stop worrying. It doesn’t matter who Bob Oliver talks to. We have what we need. We’re moving forward.”

“Right,” I said, inhaling and exhaling. “We have what we need. We’re moving forward.” It reminded me of what his father had told me about him—how he was always chasing a goal, and as soon as he achieved it he was onto the next. *I wasn’t sure Devlin would ever slow down enough to let someone get that close. You must have really stolen his heart.*

I hadn’t, of course. And it was no use wishing I had.

\* \* \*

I hardly slept that night, I was so nervous.

In the morning, even before Devlin was awake, I gave up trying and got out of bed. I threw on the button-up shirt he’d taken off and tossed on the floor in our hurry to get undressed last night, and wandered out of the dark bedroom, pulling the door shut behind me.

I marveled at the luxury I hadn’t been able to fully appreciate since we’d gotten in so late. Bad weather had delayed our flight, and it was after midnight by the time we’d arrived. We’d gone straight to bed.

He’d said his Boston apartment was “nice,” which was a massive understatement. Huge windows and high ceilings drenched the place in soft gray light, showing off the gorgeous

wood plank floors, the sleek modern lines of his furniture, the shiny quartz countertops and stainless steel appliances in the kitchen. I popped a pod in his coffee maker, yawning while it filled my cup. The aroma of a dark roast filled my nostrils, and I breathed it in gratefully. When it was done, I moused around in his pantry and found a bag of sugar. He didn't have any cream, but I could live without it. After adding a little sweetness, I wrapped my hands around the cup and shuffled barefoot over to the living room window.

It was overcast and rainy today, and I watched colorful umbrellas move quickly along downtown sidewalks as people made their way to work. Taking a sip of my coffee, I wondered if I could see the building where our meeting would be today at eleven a.m.

Behind me, the bedroom door opened. I heard footsteps in the kitchen, a cupboard door closing, second cup of coffee being brewed. A moment later, Devlin appeared at the window beside me. He was shirtless, wearing just a pair of soft gray sweatpants.

“Morning,” he said, his voice gravelly.

“Morning.”

“How'd you sleep?”

“I'm not sure I did.” I sipped my coffee. “You?”

“Like a baby.”

I sighed. “Jerk.”

Chuckling, he moved behind me and wrapped one arm around my middle. Kissed my shoulder. “Everything is going to be okay, Lexi. We're going to walk in there and dazzle them with our pitch deck and our professionalism, not to mention our stunning good looks.”

I laughed. “Okay.”

“By the time we're through telling them about everything we're going to do, they'll be begging us to take their money.” He squeezed me tighter. “You'll see.”

“You're very persuasive.”

He kissed my shoulder again, then whispered in my ear. “It’s a gift.”

\* \* \*

Believe it or not, the meeting went down almost exactly like Devlin said it would. Okay, maybe they weren’t begging us to take their money, but once we’d shown them all the charts and spreadsheets Devlin had created, all the market data he’d collected, all the plans from the builders and renderings from the designers, they appeared convinced.

Devlin was incredible. He blew my mind the way he presented the information, listened to questions and concerns, and addressed each one with thoughtful responses. My appreciation for his gift grew as I watched him win over every last person in the room, not with smarmy bullshit or false bravado, but with genuine respect for the people at the table and their time. Occasionally, while Devlin worked his magic, I’d exchange a smile with Jennifer Bates, Sara’s mom, a slender, dark-haired woman in her early forties. It was like we were in on a secret—Devlin couldn’t lose.

When my part came, I spoke about growing up at Snowberry, about my family’s legacy, about wanting to build something that would both honor tradition and embrace modern luxury. Devlin’s presence at my side was reassuring. Every time I grew nervous and panicky, I’d look at him, and he’d smile—a refuge in the storm. I’d take a breath, refocus, and keep going.

When it was over and the other investors had shaken our hands and left the room, Sara’s mom hugged us both. “Congratulations to you both—on your marriage and your new business venture. I’ll get investment terms to you within a week.”

“Thank you,” I said. I held out a hand, which continued to tremble. “I can’t believe it’s done. I might never stop shaking!”

Jennifer covered my hand with both of her own. “These meetings are always stressful.”

“Unless you’re Devlin.” I looked at him with awe. “You never even broke a sweat!”

He smiled. Gave an easy shrug. “I’m used to this.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to break it to Sara that you’re moving away for good,” Jennifer said to Devlin. “She’s been so sad since you left town.”

“I shouldn’t have left without saying goodbye,” he said. “I’ll make it up to her. I owe her an ice cream cone. Is she around this afternoon?”

“She is.” Jennifer checked her watch. “On Fridays, I pick her up from school at three-twenty.”

“Do you have dinner plans?” he asked. “We could all go out for pizza or something.”

“I do, but Sara doesn’t.” She smiled. “And I’m one hundred percent positive she’d prefer pizza out with you to dinner at home with her sitter tonight.”

“Awesome. I’ll come by and pick her up around six if that’s okay?”

“Of course.” Jennifer looked at me. “But are you sure you want Sara tagging along on your dinner date?”

“Yes! I can’t wait to meet her,” I said. “Devlin has told me all kinds of great things about her.”

“He’s so good with her. With all those kids.” Sighing, she focused on Devlin again. “Camp Lemonade is really going to miss you.”

“I’ll miss them too.” Devlin cleared his throat. “Ready to go, Lex?”

“Yes.” I smiled at Jennifer. “So nice to meet you. And I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for my family.”

“Family is the most important thing in the world,” she said, placing a hand over her heart. “And Devlin has certainly helped mine. I was thrilled to help his.”

For a moment, I was confused, since it wasn't the Buckley family she'd helped. But as Devlin guided me toward the elevator with a hand on the small of my back, I realized what she'd meant.

*I was Devlin's family now.*

The elevator doors parted, and I stepped inside the car. The moment the doors closed and we were alone, he grabbed me in a giant bear hug and lifted me right off my feet. "Fuck yeah! We did it!"

Laughing, I hugged him back. "*You* did it."

"Hey, you played a huge role. Your story put heart into the pitch. And you told it perfectly." He set me down again. Took my face in his hands and kissed me. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you." As I looked into his blue eyes, the thought struck my heart again, piercing it like an arrow.

We were a family, Devlin and me.

*We were a family.*



SEVENTEEN

*devlin*

“LOOK at me with two pretty girls at my table. How did I get this lucky?”

I put my arm around Lexi, who sat next to me in a booth at the cozy Italian pizzeria we’d found not far from the townhouse where Sara and her mom lived. Across from us, Sara giggled and kicked my shins beneath the table.

“Can we go for ice cream now?” she asked, her wide brown eyes hopeful. “My favorite place is right up the street.”

“Are you done eating?” I looked at the half-slice of pizza remaining on her plate. She hadn’t eaten much, but then again, she’d chattered almost nonstop since we’d picked her up.

“Yes, I’m done.”

“Then yes, we can go for ice cream now.” I signaled the server for our bill, then paid it while Lexi and Sara named their favorite ice cream flavor. It did not surprise me when they both said it was cookie dough. Turned out, they had a ton in common—they both loved skiing, they both loved Taylor Swift, and they both loved to poke fun at me.

“Sometimes he has this piece of hair that sticks up in the back,” Sara told Lexi gleefully.

“You should see his hair in the morning,” Lexi told her. “It’s hilarious. Sticks up all over the place.”

They kept it up after we left the restaurant, walking side by side down the block in a light drizzle. “Sometimes he doesn’t shave and he has whiskers,” Sara cackled. “And once we went

swimming and I saw that he had hair in his armpits. And on his chest.”

Lexi burst out laughing and winked at me over her shoulder. “That’s true. He does.”

I grinned and shook my head. “I’m not paying for the ice cream if this abuse keeps up.”

But my mood was good. I was glad for myself—it always felt nice to score a winning shot—but mostly, I was happy for Lexi.

As soon as we’d gotten home from the meeting, she’d tipped over on my couch and napped for hours. I knew she hadn’t slept well last night, so I slipped her shoes off her feet, laid a blanket over her, and let her sleep. When she woke up, she seemed a little out of it—sort of quiet and tense—but I figured the relief probably hadn’t sunk all the way in yet. After we’d picked up Sara, she’d loosened up.

Inside the ice cream shop, I waited by the register, while the two new best friends ordered their cones, I paid for them, and I grabbed a table by the window. They joined me a few minutes later, licking big fat scoops of vanilla ice cream filled with chunks of cookie dough. I tried not to notice the way Lexi’s tongue worked around the perimeter of her cone, or the little dribble of vanilla she licked from her lips while making eye contact with me.

She was such a vixen sometimes. I loved that about her. I loved a lot of things about her, actually.

Living with her was surprisingly easy. Maybe it was because we had so much sex. Maybe it was because we knew it was only temporary. Or maybe it was because we actually suited each other pretty well. Our differences were well matched.

She’d been shocked the first time she came home to a sparkling bathroom and kitchen, the fixtures gleaming, the tiles shiny, the floors spotless. Her jaw dropped when she saw the perfectly made bed. She asked if a hotel maid had paid a visit.

I feigned offense, telling her that after our mom died, we'd all had to pitch in and help out around the house—I'd been too young to cook or run errands, but I was good at household chores. It stuck with me. I even do laundry, I told her, offering to take her clothes off right then and there and put them in the washing machine just to prove I was telling the truth.

She took me up on that offer, by the way.

And her cooking? I'd never eaten so well in my life (nor had I ever endured so many jokes about how much I enjoyed another man's sauce).

My family adored her, and she fit right in. We'd met Austin, Veronica, and the kids for breakfast at Moe's. We'd hung out at Buckley's Pub with Xander and Kelly. We'd participated in family game night at my dad's. Mabel had FaceTimed us so she could "meet" her new sister officially, and Dash sent a wedding gift, including a handwritten note saying that even though I was a dick for eloping when I'd promised him years ago he could be my best man, he was happy for us and couldn't wait to celebrate next time he was home.

Everything with her just felt easy.

It's not that we never argued. Sometimes we didn't see eye to eye on some facet of the renovation, and when Lexi was determined to get her way, she dug her heels in *deep*. She was ridiculously emotional, somewhat temperamental, and not above slamming a door when she got mad.

But she was quick to apologize when she'd overreacted, and when I was at fault for saying something insensitive, I'd say I was sorry and try to make it up to her. We balanced each other out. I was good at viewing things big-picture, remaining logical and rational, problem-solving within our budget. She was creative and resourceful, and her stories about the place helped us come up with ideas that were modern with just the right amount of romance and nostalgia. I'd even come to appreciate the way she was incapable of hiding her feelings. I loved that I could read her so easily.

She was endlessly grateful for what I was doing for her and for Snowberry, and I liked the way it made me feel. Appreciated. Needed. Vital to something bigger than myself. In my profession, I was used to negotiating a deal and moving on. But this was about more than money. We were restoring something. Building something that would last.

Also, she gave excellent blowjobs.

That night I'd shown up on her doorstep and asked her to marry me, I'd approached it like a job, and there were parts of it that felt like work. But I had to admit . . . there were a lot of benefits.

Things I'd miss when all was said and done.

"Mom says you're going to live in Michigan now." Sara's voice tugged me back to the present. "Is that true?"

"For a while," I said. "But I'll come back and visit sometimes."

"You better." She had ice cream all over her face, hand, and sleeve.

"Pinky promise." I held out my little finger and she grinned, hooking her sticky finger in mine.

"Pinky promise." She took one more bite of her cone. "I'm done."

Rising to my feet, I reached for what was left and tossed it in the trash, bringing a few napkins back to the table. "Here. Want to wipe off your mouth?"

She took the paper napkins and scrubbed them over her lips. "Thanks."

"Ready to go?" I asked Lexi.

She nodded, brushing her hands on her jeans. "Wish we'd brought an umbrella. It's really coming down out there now."

"I don't care!" shouted Sara, running for the door. "I love rain!"

Groaning through laughter, we followed her out to the sidewalk where she joyfully stomped in every puddle, spun

circles in the downpour, and tried to catch drops on her tongue. Couples under umbrellas laughed at us as we chased behind her, the rain soaking my shirt and Lexi's blouse.

At the crosswalk, we had to wait for the signal, and Sara grabbed my hand. "Let's dance!"

I laughed. "Dance?"

"Yes! Just like my favorite Taylor Swift song I told you about!"

I lifted my hand, twirling her under one arm. Then I picked her up by the waist and swung her around while she shrieked happily. By then the signal had changed, so I set her down again. "Come on."

"Piggyback ride?" she pleaded.

Nodding, I presented my back and hunched down. "Hop on."

We crossed the street, walked the remaining two blocks to her house, and delivered a soaked Sara to her babysitter.

"Sorry. She's kind of a mess," Lexi said as the little girl slid off my back.

"That's okay." The teenaged sitter smiled. "I'll get her dried off. Ready to come in, Sara?"

"No!" Sara turned to me and threw her arms around my waist. Then she tipped her head back and looked up at me with sad eyes. "I don't want you to go."

"I pinky-promised to visit, remember?" I tapped her nose. "And I'd never break a pinky promise."

"Can I come visit you too?"

"Yes!" Lexi rubbed Sara's back. "You can come skiing with me!"

"Okay." She gave me a big squeeze, then gave Lexi a hug too. "Bye."

"Bye, honey." Lexi and I waved and hurried toward my car, which was parked farther down the street.

Lexi shivered the entire drive back to my building. When I reached for her hand as we walked through the parking garage, it felt icy cold in mine. “You’re freezing,” I said, pulling her close to me in the elevator. I wrapped my arms around her. “How can a little Boston drizzle chill a girl who loves Michigan winters to the bone?”

“I don’t know,” she said, folding her arms against her chest, her hands beneath her chin. Her body shuddered in my embrace. “Maybe it’s stress release or something.”

The door opened onto my floor. I kept my arm around her shoulders as we moved down the hall. “I’ve got an idea. Why don’t you go take a hot shower? Loosen up all this tension. Let go of all the worry you felt going into today, because you don’t need it anymore.”

“Okay.”

“And when you get out, I will do my best to keep you warm and stress-free with other activities.”

She laughed. “Sounds good.”

While she was in the bathroom, I poured myself a couple fingers of bourbon and checked my voicemail. I’d missed a call from Rian Richman.

“Hey Devlin. Rian Richman here. Sorry for the delay in getting you those interview dates. Things have been hectic this fall. We’ve had some shakeups in account management. Wondering if you might be able to make it out here week after next. Give me a call.”

I called him back, and his voicemail picked up.

“Hey Rian. Good to hear from you. No concerns on the delay, I’ve been busy with that property in Michigan. I can probably come out to Santa Monica next week, but I need to talk to my wife first. I’ll let you know as soon as I can. Thanks.”

I ended the call and took a sip of bourbon. It surprised me a little how easily that phrase rolled off my tongue—my wife. It hadn’t even felt like a joke just now.

Which didn't bother me that much. What the fuck?

Heading into my bedroom, I set my glass on the nightstand and lit some candles. In the bathroom, I heard the shower running and imagined her in there, naked and wet.

My dick immediately tried to grab the wheel and get me to join her, but I shoved that urge aside. She deserved some space, some time to herself, before I claimed her again.

*My wife.*

That possessive instinct was kicking in hard. Heating my blood. Tightening my muscles. Accelerating my pulse. Quickening my breath.

My tie rack caught my eye.

And gave me an idea.



EIGHTEEN

DEVLIN'S BATHROOM was masculine and luxurious—high ceilings, marble counters, charcoal-colored herringbone tiles in the shower, shiny chrome fixtures. I stood beneath the rain shower head and let the gentle flow of the water trickle over my head and down my body. I breathed deeply, inhaling the lingering scent of Devlin's shower gel and trying to let go of the nagging suspicion that I was overlooking something.

But what?

Devlin was right—everything was going my way. I had Snowberry. I had the money to renovate. I had a team of people to help me. I had Devlin's business expertise and support. I even had him in my bed tonight.

I focused on that thought for a moment, letting the smell of bourbon, cedar, and coriander fill my head. Arousal fluttered within me, and my hands wandered over my wet skin. He would touch me *here* and *here* and *here*. He would bend my body to his whim. He would move inside me. He would say the words that sent me soaring, that made me feel cherished and chosen.

*My wife.*

And it wouldn't matter that it wasn't real. It was true. It would *feel* real. Couldn't I just lose myself in that dream for a night?

Quickly, I finished up in the shower and dried myself off with a thick, fluffy white towel. Wrapping it around myself, I combed through my hair and opened the bathroom door, steam billowing into the bedroom.

It was dim, the only light coming from a trio of flickering candles on his dresser and a pair on each nightstand. Devlin was in bed already. Leaning back against the brown leather cushion that served as a headboard, he was shirtless, legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankle. A glass of amber liquid over ice in his left hand. His wedding band gleaming in the semi-dark. “Better?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Good.” He took a sip. “Can I get you anything? Bourbon? Glass of wine?”

“No, thanks.” I spied what looked like several neckties in a pile on the white comforter, coiled like snakes. “What are those for?”

“Those are for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes.” He set the glass on his nightstand and swung his bare feet to the floor. “If you give me permission.”

“Permission to what?” I asked tentatively as he walked to where I stood near the foot of the bed.

“To tie you up and let me have my way with you.”

My pulse kicked up. I’d never done anything like that before. To date, the kinkiest experience I’d ever had was fucking Devlin in the backseat of his rental car in the public parking lot of The Broken Spoke. The risk then had been discovery. The risk here felt higher.

But I looked at Devlin again and realized I trusted him enough to say yes. That I was willing to submit to pain. That I wanted to be vulnerable to him. That if I had hidden desires, I wanted him to be the one to uncover them.

And I wanted to fulfill his fantasies.

“Okay,” I said.

“If you don’t like something, just tell me to stop. Use the word stop. Understand?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Good.” He kissed my lips and unwrapped the towel from my body, tossing it onto the foot of the bed. “Now come here and lie down.”

My heart boomed like a canon as I climbed onto the sheet and stretched out on my back. Hands stacked on top of my belly. Thighs pressed together.

Devlin paused to take a sip of bourbon before reaching for one of the neckties. When he spoke, his voice was low but commanding. “I’m going to bind your wrists and tie them to this bar on the wall.”

Bar? I braced myself on my elbows and glanced behind me, discovering what I hadn’t noticed before—the leather cushions that fashioned his headboard were suspended from a black bar attached to the wall. “Okay.”

“But first, I’m going to blindfold you.” He knelt next to me, a smile teasing his lips. “Are you nervous?”

“Kind of. I’ve never done this before.”

“Good.” He placed the black tie over my eyes and tied it securely at the back of my head.

The total darkness was more disconcerting than I thought it would be. My body prickled with fear at the sudden loss of vision. “Have you done this before?”

“Yes.”

I couldn’t help being disappointed, which was so dumb. “A lot?”

“I wouldn’t say that.” The mattress shifted as he placed a knee on either side of my ribcage. He eased my head down onto a pillow and crossed my wrists above my head. “But it’s better for you that this isn’t my first time.”

“Okay.”

He tied my wrists, and I tugged at the restraints. They weren’t so tight as to cut off circulation, but there was no escaping. My heart was skipping beats like a stone across the water. My breath was coming faster.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes.” My voice was faint, as if my vocal cords had been incapacitated along with my hands.

He continued working, and my arms were pulled toward the wall. Secured tight. I imagined a necktie stretching between my crossed wrists and the bar above my head. My hunch was confirmed when I realized I had a small range of motion from my shoulder joint, but that was it. I was tethered to the wall.

My pulse galloped even faster. Even though I knew I was safe with him, it was like some million-year-old instinct in me was worried that I would not be able to escape the predator who prowled nearby.

The next thing I felt was Devlin’s lips at my ear. “This might not be my first time, but it’s already my favorite.” He moved down my body, his breath a mere whisper on my skin—neck, breast, ribcage, hip—but igniting every receptor like a blow torch.

My nipples tingled. My toes curled. The hum began to build, sweet and low. I held my breath, my nerves on edge. I wished I could *see* him. Was he enjoying this? Was it turning him on to see me this way? Was he hard?

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Frustrated. I miss my eyes and my hands.”

A low chuckle. “What would you do with your hands?”

“Touch you. I want to know if you’re hard.”

“You’re thinking about my cock?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“I like that. I like that a lot.” His voice grew quieter. “And yes, I’m hard.”

I thought for sure his next move would be proving it, but I was wrong. Keeping my legs locked together between his knees, he put something small and metallic against my lips,

then slowly dragged it down my chin, my neck, my sternum. “You know, I had no idea how much I’d enjoy this.”

“Tying me up? Seeing me helpless?”

“No. I knew I’d enjoy that.” He circled my breasts with the tiny object, used it to tease my nipples, ran it along the curve of my hip. “I meant being married to you.”

And I realized what he was using on my skin.

*His ring.*

“Living with you. Making you laugh. Seeing you smile.” He slid the ring low across my belly. “Feeling you come.”

My mouth opened, but I couldn’t speak.

“I thought the best part of this would be getting revenge. I was wrong.” He swept the gold band back up the center of my chest and throat, then traced the outline of my mouth. “It’s calling you my wife.”

I thought my body might burst into flames. Burn down this whole building. Incinerate the city.

He took the ring off my lips. A moment later, I heard the ice cubes clink in his glass.

Suddenly a splash of something cold hit my chest, and I gasped as it trickled in cool rivers down my sternum and over my breasts. Then came his tongue, warm and smooth as he licked it off my skin. His eager mouth moved along my curves, lingering on my nipples, circling, sucking, biting gently. He poured a little more, and it flowed toward my belly. He licked his way down the center of my body, his tongue making my stomach quiver. He dripped some in the hollow at the base of my throat, and I thought I’d die when his lips and tongue played there—somehow, I felt the fluttering touch on my clit. Was it the blindfold confusing my sensory cortex? Heightening my arousal?

He continued to worship my body with his tongue, his mouth traveling down the outsides of my legs. He sucked every one of my toes. He lifted one heel and kissed a path up my calf. He caressed the backs of my knees with his lips. I was

aching for him to put his mouth or even his hand between my thighs—one stroke of his tongue could have set me off—but he carefully avoided touching me anywhere near the nuclear button.

Easing back up my body, he kept my thighs together with his knees and kissed me hard and deep, tricking my senses again into feeling his tongue in other places. I writhed beneath him, trying to lift my hips, desperate to feel his weight on me, to feel the hard length of him between my legs.

He took his bourbon-flavored lips off mine. “So impatient.”

“I can’t help it,” I said. “I’m so turned on right now.”

“What is it you want?”

“I want everything.”

He bit my earlobe. “Be specific. Tell me exactly what you want, and I might give it to you.”

“I want you to lick me,” I said shamelessly. “I want you to make me come with your tongue.”

“Good girl.” His legs released their viselike hold on me, and he moved down the bed. A second later, my legs were pushed apart, spreading me wide open. I held my breath, waiting at the edge of sanity for the sweep of his tongue, the brush of his lips, the glide of his finger. I was pretty sure I could come if he *breathed* on me at this point.

“So fucking pretty,” he growled. “And all mine.”

“Yes,” I panted. “I’m all yours.”

The buildup had already been so intense, it took no time at all for the tension to zip along my nerve endings and center at the point of contact with his tongue. It was hot and sharp and explosive, my lower body thrashing beneath him, my arms yanking at the knots above my head, my cries bouncing off the walls. Behind the blindfold, silvery stars pierced the blackness.

My body was still spasming when Devlin tore his mouth off me with a strangled curse. “I have to get inside you.” After some fumbling on the mattress—taking his pants off?—he was

back between my thighs, groaning as he slid his cock inside me.

“Still wondering if I’m hard?” he growled as he began to move with deep, slow thrusts.

“I guess I—have my answer,” I panted. “God, you feel so good.”

“I’ll tell you a secret,” he said in my ear. “I’m hard for you all day, every day.”

The storm was gathering again, in a different place this time. Deeper within me. I locked my legs around the backs of his thighs. I lifted my hips and yanked at the ties, begging him to release me.

“I want to see you,” I pleaded. “Just let me see you.”

He stopped fucking me just long enough to pull the blindfold off. Then our eyes locked, and it was like the world around us ceased to exist. For a second, we hung there, suspended in time, and all I knew was the sensation of wanting to surrender. Body. Heart. Soul. I wanted to pour myself into him and feel him pouring into me. I wanted promises. I wanted forever. I wanted love.

Don’t say it, I willed myself. Don’t ruin this.

And because I was afraid my expression hid nothing and he was going to read my feelings in my face, I turned my head to the side and squeezed my eyes shut. If I kept looking in those eyes, I was going to break.

He began to move once more. Harder. Faster. His body hot and heavy on mine. His cock tapping that magical place that had my insides gripping him tight. Buried deep inside me, he rocked into me with quick, steady pulses that sent me reeling over the edge, only this time he was right there with me. And with every throb of him inside me, I felt my feelings for him rise until they were over my head.

I was drowning in them.



\* \* \*

After Devlin untied me, he asked permission to do one more thing.

I gave him a wary look, rubbing my red wrists. “What’s the thing?”

“I want to give you a massage.” He reached for one of the candles on his nightstand and blew it out. “Look, it melts into massage oil. A friend gave it to me as a birthday gift. She works for this company, and she says the candles are amazing.”

“You’ve never used it?”

“Nope.” He sniffed it. “But it smells delicious.”

“It won’t burn me?”

He tipped the glass jar over, pouring some oil into his palm. “Warm, but not hot.”

I smiled. “Okay.”

He took my right arm and laid it across his lap, then rubbed the fragrant oil into my skin. I closed my eyes as his hands applied gentle pressure with long, sweeping motions along my forearm, carefully massaging away the marks his tie had left behind. He rubbed my hand, my biceps and triceps, my shoulder. When he was done with that arm, he brought it to his mouth and pressed his lips to the inside of my wrist. Then he poured more oil into his palm and walked around to the other side of the bed, where he repeated the entire routine on my left arm. This time, he kissed each finger when he was done, and finally rested his lips on my palm. “Thank you,” he said.

“I should be thanking you. You’re the one who gave the massage.”

He placed my hand in his lap. “I wasn’t talking about the massage. I was talking about the trust that took.”

“Oh.” I attempted to laugh. “You know me. I trust everybody.”

“Don’t.” His thumb rubbed soft circles on my wrist. “Don’t trust everybody, Lexi. This is going to sound selfish as fuck, but I don’t want you to trust anybody like that.”

My lips fell open, and suddenly I was terrified that whatever I said next would embarrass us both. So I blurted something completely irrelevant. “I’m thirsty.”

Devlin laughed. “I’ll get you some water.”

When he left the bedroom, I hurried into the bathroom. Behind the closed door, I cleaned myself up and took a few deep breaths. Splashed cold water on my face. Brushed my teeth. Gave my pulse a minute to slow down. But when I looked in the mirror, my cheeks were still flushed and my eyes remained feverishly bright.

*It was the game, I told myself. It was the whole fantasy thing making the sex feel so intense.*

It was the blindfold and the bondage and the bourbon and maybe even the massage. It wasn’t the words he said or the response they provoked in me. It was the roles we played. Not the feelings we shared.

When I felt certain I could mask my emotions well enough for the dark of his bedroom, I opened the door.

The candles had all been blown out, and one bedside lamp was on. Devlin, wearing his black pants again, was tucking a fresh sheet beneath one corner of the mattress. “Bottle of water is there on the nightstand for you. Thought I’d change the sheets so we didn’t have to sleep in a puddle of bourbon.”

“Thanks.” An involuntary shiver rattled through me, and I rubbed my arms.

“Are you still cold?” he asked. “Want something to sleep in?”

I had packed pajamas, but I wanted to sleep in something of his. “Sure.”

He went to his dresser and opened a drawer. Grinning, he pulled out a Camp Lemonade T-shirt and held it up. “How’s this?”

“Perfect.”

He slipped it over my head and watched me poke my arms through the sleeves. “Looks better on you. And I don’t say that lightly, because I look *good* in that shirt.”

I laughed. “Thank you.”

We climbed into bed, and Devlin switched off the lamp. I took a few sips of cool water before recapping the bottle and placing my head on the pillow. Both of us lay on our backs for a moment.

Then he rolled to his side. “Hey.”

“What?”

“I have to ask you something.”

“Okay.”

“The guy who wants to interview me for that position in Santa Monica called. He wants to know if I can come out there week after next.”

“Oh.”

“Is that okay?”

“You don’t need to ask my permission, Devlin.”

“I’m asking anyway.”

“It’s fine.” My voice was papery thin.

He reached over and ran his fingertips up and down my arm. “You don’t have to worry. I’m not leaving for good. It’s just an interview.”

“It’s fine, Devlin.”

“You could come with me if you want.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, imagining us strolling on the pier, eating dinners in cute little beachside restaurants, setting a

hotel bed on fire at night. “I don’t really have time for a trip. Lots to do at home.”

“Okay.” He kept rubbing my arm. “I feel like something is wrong. Was that too much for you—being tied up like that?”

“No. It’s not that.”

“But there’s something?”

Yes, there was something. But I couldn’t admit it. I couldn’t deny it either, because even though the lights were off, Devlin no longer needed to see my face to take my temperature. He knew me too well. Maybe I could talk *around* it. Be truthful if not entirely honest.

“It was just something Jennifer said earlier,” I told him.

“What did she say?”

I took a breath. “Something about how you helped her family, so she was glad to help yours.”

“*That’s* what got to you?”

“Well, yes.” I bunched up the covers at my waist. “It hadn’t occurred to me before that people would look at you and me as a family. I know that sounds dumb, but the word just hit me hard.”

“Oh. I get it.” He thought for a moment. “I don’t think that’s dumb at all. You take the idea of family seriously.”

“Don’t you?”

“Yes. But I guess I’ve never really thought I’d have my own family, so maybe it’s different for me.”

I shifted to my side, facing him. In the dark, it was easier to be truthful. “Can I ask why you don’t want your own family? You like kids so much, and you’re so great with Sara. Seeing you with her today . . . it was really easy imagining you as a dad.”

He was silent for a moment. “Sometimes I imagine it too. But that’s as far as it goes.”

“How come?”

“I guess I just don’t like the idea of settling down. I like to keep moving, you know?”

“Stillness can be nice too.”

“I’ve never liked stillness, to be honest.”

“Why not?”

He rolled to his back again, placing his hands behind his head. When he spoke, his voice was deep and quiet. “When I’m still for too long, I feel things too deeply.”

My throat caught, because I understood. “I get that. But . . . maybe it doesn’t always have to be a bad thing. I mean, I feel things deeply too.”

“Has it made you happy? Feeling things so deeply?”

“Not yet, I guess. But I hope someday it does.”

He was silent for a moment. “I hope so too. You deserve to be happy.”

“Thanks.” I was afraid if I said anything else, I’d cry, so I rolled away from him and curled into a ball facing the other direction.

A minute later, Devlin rolled onto his side again, hooking an arm around my waist and pulling me into the shelter of his body. When he spoke, his voice was soft. “I do like being still with you.”

Warmth spread throughout my body. “You do?”

“Yes. If I wasn’t already married to you, I’d definitely date you.”

I laughed, covering his arm with my own. “Thank you. I feel the same.”

“There are times, Lexi, when I wish I could offer you more.”

“Devlin, stop. I’m not asking for more.”

“I know you’re not. I’m just saying.” He buried his face in my hair. “Right now, I wish I could offer it.”

\* \* \*

We drove Devlin's car back to Michigan the following day, and for two people who liked to talk as much as Devlin and I did, the fifteen-hour ride was oddly silent.

As I chewed on the end of one braid, I wondered if he was thinking about the things we'd done last night, or the things we'd said.

He's a dude, Lexi, I reminded myself. Do you think he's reminiscing about sweet nothings or about tying you to the wall and licking bourbon off your skin?

Which had been fun, of course, but the thing that stuck in my mind was what he'd done afterward. The way he'd taken care of me. Changed the sheets. Given me his T-shirt. Held me close. Opened up about his reluctance to settle down and have a family.

*When I'm still for too long, I feel things too deeply.*

Then I remembered how good he was with Sara, how much he adored her, how she'd light up when he smiled her way. He liked taking care of people. It was obvious.

But he was afraid of loving them. That was obvious too.

Still, I couldn't help the shiver that moved through my body when I recalled he'd spoken softly in my ear. *I do like being still with you.*

It was as close to those three little words as I was going to get.

As for me, I'd fallen madly in love with my husband.

And I had no idea what to do about it.

NINETEEN

TWO WEEKS LATER, I watched him zip up his roller bag in the pre-dawn darkness.

He was booked on an early morning flight out to California. His interview was at three o'clock this afternoon, he'd see his brother Dash for dinner, and tomorrow, the guy who wanted to hire him was going to take him golfing. He'd fly home Sunday.

As he checked his pockets for his keys, wallet, and phone, my heart grew heavier in my chest.

Which was stupid. I had every reason to be happy.

The venture capital had been transferred. Construction was underway. A new website was being designed. A new chef had been hired. A new cocktail menu had been designed. Devlin's brother Austin was even making a custom bar for us out of wood salvaged from the original interior of the main lodge. And the deed transferring ownership of the property to us had been secured.

Everything I wanted, I'd gotten.

But this hollow ache in my chest refused to go away. I was doing my best to hide it, but Devlin could tell something was up with me.

He sat on the edge of the bed and touched my shoulder. "Hey. You'll be okay while I'm gone, right?"

I sat up taller and hugged a pillow to my chest. "Yes. It just feels weird that you're leaving. We haven't spent a single night apart since . . . since Vegas."



“You won’t even miss me. You’re sleeping at Winnie’s tonight, right?”

“Yes.” Winnie, Ellie, and I were getting together at Winnie’s house for a home spa night and sleepover. Her stepdaughters would be with their mom this weekend, so she’d invited me to crash in their bedroom.

I was looking forward to the girl time, but as he kissed me goodbye and told me he’d call me later, my chest felt hollow. My throat was tight. It was only after I heard the front door slam that I whispered the words I wished I could have said while he was listening.

“I love you.”

\* \* \*

The door at Winnie’s house was opened by two young girls, both wearing aprons and name tags. “Welcome to Halluna Day Spa,” said the shorter one, whose name tag said Luna. Her blond curls escaped from a bun on the top of her head.

“Your premiere destination for luxury and relaxation, offering services for hair, skin, and nails,” added the taller one, who had her dad’s dark hair and eyes. Her name tag said Hallie. “May we take your coat?”

“Sure.” I laughed as I shrugged out of my jacket, suddenly glad I’d come. I’d been feeling so down since Devlin left, I’d almost canceled.

“Hey,” Winnie said, coming from the kitchen into the front hall to give me a hug. “Sorry about the change in plans. The girls’ mom had some kind of work function, so they’re with us tonight. And Ellie’s morning sickness was really bad all day, so she’s out. But Michael is with my parents, thank goodness, and Dex is at the firehouse tonight. So it’s still girl time.”

“No problem,” I said, smiling at Dex’s daughters. “I can always head home after a spa treatment or two.”

“Actually, the girls are all excited about camping out in the family room,” Winnie said. “So you’ve still got a room here

for the night.”

“Yes,” said Luna. “The spa area is going to transform into a fairy tale woods after dark.”

“That sounds so fun.” I smiled at them. “So tell me about Halluna Day Spa.”

“We’ve got a menu for you to look at,” said Hallie, handing me a folded piece of paper with a logo drawn on the front. “Come right this way. Can we offer you some lemon water?”

“Don’t worry, I have wine for after the lemon water,” mumbled Winnie as we followed the girls into the family room. There were two spa stations set up, with buckets of water for our feet, thick terrycloth headbands, and plates of cucumber slices for our eyes. Fragrant candles were burning on the coffee table, filling the room with the scent of lemongrass.

“Please sit here, Miss, um . . .” Luna paused. “Wait, what’s your last name?”

“McInt—actually, it’s Buckley,” I said, lowering myself onto the couch where Luna indicated. “I’m Mrs. Buckley.”

“Did you really change your name?” Winnie asked, dropping down next to me.

I nodded. “I did.”

Winnie eyeballed the girls, who were testing the water in the buckets to make sure it was warm enough. “After the spa portion of the evening concludes, I need to hear *everything*.”

\* \* \*

The girls pampered Winnie and me with a fizzy foot soak, a face mask, a lip scrub, manicures, and aromatherapy. When they were done, we helped them clean up, tipped them generously, and moved into the kitchen for wine and a charcuterie board Winnie had prepared.

“So how’s it going?” she asked, pouring me a glass of pinot noir.

“Which part?”

“Let’s start with Snowberry.” Winnie sat down across from me and reached for a cracker.

“Everything is going really well at Snowberry. Want to see photos?”

“Yes!” Winnie topped her cracker with cheese and took a bite.

Bringing out my phone, I showed her the renderings for the new lobby, the restaurant and bar, the guest rooms, and the spa. Then I showed her the current state of the construction area. “That’s all phase one. Phase two is the mountaintop bar, which won’t be done until next spring after the snow melts and the ground thaws.” I set my phone aside and reached for my wine.

“It’s so exciting! Is Gran happy?”

“Yes. Everyone is, except for Tabitha.”

Winnie rolled her eyes. “What’s with her?”

“A lot of things, but mostly she wanted to sell because Gran evidently promised her a chunk of money once the sale went through. Now she’s just being weird.” I picked up a piece of prosciutto and popped it into my mouth.

“Weird how?”

“Secretive and smug. Like she knows something I don’t. It’s hard to explain.”

“What could she know?”

I lifted my shoulders. “I have no idea. Devlin’s former company, the one trying to push the sale, reached out to her, like maybe they thought she’d have influence over Gran, but nothing ever came of it.”

“And now you’re the owner, right?”

“Yes. Devlin and I own it together.”

She grinned. “I can’t wait to see it.”

“I’d love it if you and Ellie could drive up and help me brainstorm some events to bring guests in. Maybe a wine tasting? Or an opening party?”

“Of course! We’d love that!” She munched on another cracker. “Now tell me about married life.”

“Married life is . . . good.” I sipped my wine. “Better than I expected. Maybe too good.”

“Yeah?” Her eyebrows went up.

“Yeah.” I stared into my pinot noir. “I’m actually kind of concerned.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not really pretending anymore, Win.” I met her eyes. “I have feelings for him. Big fat feelings that aren’t just going to go away when this marriage is no longer necessary.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.” I took a deep breath and forced myself to admit the truth. “I think I might actually be in love with him.”

She gasped. “Whoa.”

“I know. It’s bad.” I tried to blink away tears. “And it’s dumb. Like, I knew what this was.”

“But you can’t control your feelings,” she argued.

“I can’t. That’s for sure. So why didn’t I see this coming? I should have predicted it—I always fall for the ones who leave, Win. Always.”

Her blue eyes were wide with sympathy. “Have you talked to him about this? Maybe he feels the same way.”

“No.” I shook my head vehemently. “He doesn’t. I mean, I think he cares about me, but he is not interested in any kind of long-term thing. He’s made that very clear. And his last relationship imploded because his girlfriend expected him to

propose when he'd been completely up front about the fact that he never intended to get married."

"He married *you*," she pointed out.

"That was about business. Not feelings." I took a shaky breath, pushing back at the sob that wanted to erupt. "He doesn't want to settle down or plant roots. He doesn't want a family."

"Not ever?"

"No. I think—I think a lot of his aversion to the idea stems from losing his mom so young," I said tentatively. "I think his coping mechanism was constant motion. Always looking ahead. Striving for things. He doesn't allow himself to look back or even be still for too long."

Winnie sighed, sitting back in her chair. "So what will you do?"

"What can I do? Stick to the plan. Suck it up when he leaves. Try to get over him and move on." The tears fell freely now. "There must be someone out there who wants the kind of life I want. Who will love me enough to stay."

Winnie got up from her chair and came around the back of mine, wrapping her arms around me. "There is. I know there is."

"Watching him walk out the door this morning was so hard," I wept, "and he's only going to be gone for two stupid days. I'll see him Sunday. What is *wrong* with me?"

"You're scared, that's all." She squeezed harder. "You love him and don't want to lose him."

"But I will, and I know it. I guess that's what I should be glad about." I closed my eyes. "At least I know it's coming."

\* \* \*

On the drive home from Winnie's the next morning, I made a decision. In order to protect myself, I needed to stop the

physical stuff with Devlin. Maybe if we took sex out of the equation, my emotions would ease up.

It would be hard, of course, and I wasn't sure how I was going to explain it to Devlin without giving myself away, but it was necessary for my well-being. By the time I turned into my parking lot, my mind was made up.

And then I saw his car.

But it couldn't be. He was in California until tomorrow. He was supposed to be on a golf course today.

I squinted at the Massachusetts plates as my heart started to pound. Was it possible he'd come home early? Had something gone wrong during the interview?

Pulling into the garage, I grabbed my bag, entered my condo through the lower-level door, and raced up the stairs into the kitchen. His jacket was tossed over a chair. Adrenaline surged through me as I hurried down the hall toward the bedroom.

His sleeping form beneath the blankets nearly made me burst with joy. Forgetting all about my vow not to have sex with him, I toed off my sneakers, yanked off my jeans, whipped off my shirt, ditched my bra, and slipped beneath the sheets.

"Hey," he said, waking up and rolling over to embrace me. "You're back."

"*You're* back." I snuggled close to his sleep-warm body. His bare chest. "I thought you weren't coming home until tomorrow."

"I changed my mind and jumped on the red-eye last night after dinner."

"Why?"

"When I thought about sleeping one more night alone in my hotel room or here with you, there was no contest. So I came back early." He flipped me beneath him. "That okay?"

The seams on my heart began to rip. "Yes. How was the interview?"

“Good. How was girls’ night?”

“Good.”

He kissed me, then sniffed my cheek. “You smell like fruit.”

I laughed. “I was given a watermelon face mask. And I had cucumbers on my eyes. Doesn’t my skin feel nice?”

“Yes.” He rubbed his stubbled chin along my jaw, then whispered in my ear. “I missed you. I really fucking missed you.”

\* \* \*

It was as if we’d been separated for months, the way we clung and kissed and clutched. And just when it seemed like we’d smothered the fire, it would flare up again. We stayed in bed for hours.

Later, we threw on jeans and sweaters and took cups of coffee out onto the small deck overlooking the woods. There was only one chair, so Devlin pulled me onto his lap. The fall air was cool and sharp, but the sun was out, warming our faces.

“So the interview went well, huh?”

He nodded. “I think so.”

“You’ll get the job?”

“I think so.”

I lifted my mug to my lips with both hands. “And when would you start?”

“I’m not sure yet. But I won’t accept their offer without talking to you.”

“Okay.” I didn’t want to think about it.

“So what’s the plan for Thanksgiving? What does your family do?”

“In the past, we’ve always had dinner at the restaurant. This year, I’m not sure what we’ll do. I can’t believe it’s less than two weeks away—it kind of snuck up on me.”

“My dad called me yesterday and invited us and Gran and whatever members of your family who’d like to join us to his house. Austin and Xander are going to cook.”

“That’s so kind. I’ll talk to Gran.” Then I wrinkled my nose. “And Tabitha.”

“She won’t go visit her dad for Thanksgiving?”

“I doubt it. And even though she’s not my favorite person right now, I’d feel bad leaving her alone on Thanksgiving. Maybe including her will get her to stop acting so weird.”

“You still think she’s up to something?”

“Yes. She’s been too nice to me now for a month.”

Devlin laughed. “Maybe she realized you’re the boss. You can fire her.”

I giggled. “I wish. She’s supposed to be consulting with the spa manager on the aesthetics for the space, but I’m pretty sure we’re mostly paying her to scroll Instagram.”

“Maybe she’d rather have a job doing social media. Or PR. We need someone to handle those things eventually. Maybe that’s a better match for her skill set.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll talk to her.” I sighed. “There are days I wish I *could* fire her, but I can’t. She’s annoying, but she’s family. That will always mean something to me.”

He chuckled and kissed my temple. “I know.”



TWENTY

*devlin*

EXACTLY ONE WEEK after my interview with Rian Richman, he called me and said the position was mine if I wanted it. Corner office with a view. Fat salary. Company car. Excellent benefits. Everything I could dream of. Everything I'd been working toward.

The only hitch was that I had to start on the first of the year.

“That’s gonna be tough, Rian. I’ll just be honest.” I got up from the desk in the administrative office I’d been using in the main lodge and shut the door, muffling the sound of the drills and saws in the lobby.

“I’ll tack on two more weeks’ paid vacation,” he said. “With the use of company vacation homes. We’ve got properties everywhere—Aspen, Maui, Venice, the French Riviera.”

“Sounds nice,” I said, immediately picturing Lexi and I lounging poolside on a terrace overlooking the Mediterranean. Strolling hand in hand along cobblestone streets. Relaxing in a gondola as it cruised down a narrow canal.

“Your wife will love it out here after all those Michigan winters,” said Rian.

“You’d be surprised,” I said. “She actually loves winter.”

But of course, it didn’t matter, because Lexi wouldn’t be moving to California with me. Nor would she be accompanying me on any luxury vacations.

“I need to speak with my wife, Rian. Can I have some time to talk this over with her?”

“Sure. A couple days?”

“Could I have a couple weeks? Let you know right after Thanksgiving?”

He paused. “Okay. I can do that.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it. I’ll be in touch.”

We hung up, and I set my phone aside. Folded my hands over my stomach. This office was nice—lots of dark wood and leather, big windows with plenty of natural light, a view of the mountain. It had belonged to Lexi’s grandfather, and when I inhaled, I could still smell the pipe tobacco he’d smoked. I didn’t mind. It was a nice, grandfatherly smell, and something about it was comforting.

On the large, sturdy oak desk was a framed photo of Lexi and Tabitha as kids. I reached for it and smiled.

They were sitting on their grandfather’s lap—Lexi a few years younger than Sara, Tabitha still a toddler—and he had an arm around each of them. Lexi’s front teeth were missing, but that hadn’t stopped her from grinning widely, proudly showing off the gap in her smile. Her dark hair was in two braids, the way she sometimes wore it now, and that dimple in her chin looked exactly the same. She might have been laughing at something, and I could practically hear the giggle echo in the room.

Tabitha had the blue-eyed, towheaded look of a doll, and their grandfather’s expression was one of complete contentment. Based on Lexi’s age, it had to have been taken before her parents’ deaths, and I wished I could go back in time and stop it right there so that little dark-haired girl never had to hurt.

But I was about to hurt her, wasn’t I?

Frowning, I replaced the frame on the desk. For the last couple weeks—ever since Boston—I’d been grappling with a sense of dread I hadn’t anticipated. When I’d asked her to marry me, I’d thought only about the legal aspect of it. The

actual piece of paper that made us husband and wife. I hadn't thought at all about the relationship aspect. How it would feel to live with her. Get close to her. Share a goal and a vision day after day and a bed night after night. I hadn't worried at all that either of us would lose sight of the big-picture reasons we'd gotten married. I hadn't anticipated how good the moment-to-moment would be.

The truth was, I had feelings for her that weren't just going to go away when our marriage was no longer necessary. But something was holding me back from admitting that to her.

Rising from the chair, I wandered to the window and looked out. The chairlift taunted me, silent and still. Lexi had taken it up with the contractors several times, always making an excuse for me that hid the real reason I couldn't go up.

I looked down at my hand and twisted the ring around my finger. Funny how used to it I'd gotten. I took it off and studied the plain gold band. The inscription on the inside.

*Beloved.*

I pictured us walking down that Vegas avenue looking for a quickie wedding chapel. Lexi in my Two Buckleys sweatshirt. Me in my jeans and ball cap. I remembered how she'd told me this wasn't her real wedding. Someday she was going to descend the staircase at Snowberry wearing a white dress and her grandmother's veil, and speak her vows in front of all the people that mattered to her.

I wouldn't be there.

Because I was a leaver.

Wasn't I?

\* \* \*

When I left the office a couple hours later, I ran into Tabitha in the hallway outside the employee break room.

"Look at you working late on a Friday," she cooed.

“Hey, Tabitha,” I said. In my opinion, Lexi’s cousin continued to act like a spoiled brat, but for Lexi’s sake, I was always friendly. I tried to imagine that little girl on her grandfather’s lap. “How’s it going with plans for the spa?”

“Great.” Her smile was more of a smirk. “Coming along just fine.”

“Good. I hear you’re going to join us for Thanksgiving at my dad’s house.”

“Yes.” She shook the ice in her plastic cup. “Any chance your brother Dash will be there?”

“I doubt it. He doesn’t get home too often, but I’ll ask.”

“Are you guys close?”

“We were close growing up. It’s harder now, living across the country.”

“Mm.” She took a sip from her straw. “If you get that job in Santa Monica, you’ll see him more. That will be nice.”

I froze. How did she know about the interview in Santa Monica? Lexi and I had agreed not to say anything about it. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Oh, come on, Devlin.” She gave me a poke on the shoulder. “You can be real with me. Gran might be fooled by this whole marriage scam, but I’m not. You married Lexi so she could inherit. You’re not actually in love with her. And you’re not going to stick around.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Believe me, I know all about guys who get married and don’t stick around. You’re telling me you *didn’t* have a job interview last week in California? Because my source says you did.”

“And who is your source?” I asked, although I already knew.

“Does it matter?”

“What did Bob Oliver promise you?” I hitched my laptop bag higher on my shoulder. Shifted my weight to one foot as I

appraised her.

“I only want what I’m owed, Devlin.”

“And how is Bob Oliver going to get you anything? The sale to Black Diamond didn’t happen.”

“Yet,” she said, a gleam in her icy blue eyes.

“It won’t ever happen. Lexi’s marriage enabled her to inherit. Us to inherit,” I corrected.

“I know. *Well done you.*” She patted my chest three times. “I just hope you guys can keep this up.”

“Keep what up? What’s that mean?”

She sucked on her straw again, then smiled. “Guess we’ll find out. See you around.”

Turning around, she ambled off down the hallway and out the back door.

What the fuck?

\* \* \*

“I think we just have to ignore her,” Lexi said that night during dinner. “She’s trying to get a rise out of us, maybe scare us into paying her off.”

“I could fucking pummel Bob Oliver,” I seethed, cutting my steak with more force than necessary.

“You already did that.”

“I enjoyed it. I’d do it again.”

“It’s not necessary.” Lexi’s voice was soothing. “He’s just pissed that you won. So he knows about the interview—big deal.”

“But if your grandmother finds out about it—”

“I’ll talk to Tabitha, okay?” She reached over and patted my arm. “Let me try just leveling with her. Sometimes that works.”

“Okay,” I grumbled.

“She can be awful—believe me, I know—but she can also be nice. Not all my childhood memories of her are bad.” Lexi picked up her wine glass and took a sip. “There’s a heart in her somewhere.”

“Fine. I’ll let you talk to Tabitha instead of beating Bob Oliver’s ass again.” I put down my fork and picked up my beer, taking a long swallow.

“Thank you.” Then she laughed. “Hey, this is kind of funny. I’m talking *you* down from *your* feelings. You must be rubbing off on me.”

“I do love rubbing off on you.”

That earned me an eye roll. “You’re such a *boy* sometimes. Can’t you just let me have a nice moment? I’m trying to tell you that you’ve been good for me.”

“I’m sorry.” I reached over and touched her wrist. “Thank you for saying that. You’ve been good for me too.”

“Really?” Her cheeks turned a little pink.

“Yes. The way you’re fighting for this place, the way you’re willing to risk everything, it’s . . . it’s inspiring. I’m always focused on looking ahead, but honoring the past matters too. I’ve been thinking about my dad a lot, the sacrifices he made, the example he set, the home I grew up in, what he tried to teach us.” I found myself choking up a little and took a quick pull from my beer. “Anyway, thanks.”

“You’re welcome. It’s actually kind of nice to see your emotions get to you,” she said softly. “I wasn’t sure they were in there.”

I grinned. “I guess you’re rubbing off on me too.”

She shook her head and sighed. “You couldn’t resist.”

\* \* \*

Later that night, right after she crawled in bed beside me, I told her the news. “I got the job.”

Her hand, which had been brushing back and forth on my chest, went completely still. “Oh.”

“I got the call this afternoon, right before I ran into Tabitha.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“Sorry. I was so mad about Oliver, I forgot.”

“Tell me about the position.”

“It’s everything I’ve been working toward. Senior account representative. Fat salary. Corner office. Company car. Paid vacations.”

“Wow. You can’t turn that down, can you?” She was silent a moment. “When do they want you to start?”

I exhaled, closing my eyes. “January first.”

“*Oh.*” More silence.

“I asked for two weeks to think about it. I told him I had to talk to my wife.” I paused, making up my mind then and there. “But I’m going to turn it down.”

Lexi popped up, bringing her knees beneath her so she sat on her heels. “What?”

“I’m going to say no.”

“Why?”

“Because I made a promise to you.” I picked up her hand. “And we’re not done here yet.”

There was no denying the pure joy that spread across her face. “Are you sure?”

I kissed her fingertips. “I’m sure. I want to see this through.”

With a whoop of excitement, she straddled my hips and whipped my Camp Lemonade T-shirt over her head. She loved sleeping in it.



“Thank you,” she said. When she leaned down to kiss me, her hair brushed across my chest, reminding me of the first night I spent in this bed.

She put her mouth and her hands all over my skin, she stroked my cock with her fist and her tongue, she lowered herself down on me and worked her hips in agonizingly slow circles. She lifted her hair off her neck, moving up and down my shaft with a complete lack of haste, like she wanted to be sure to feel every single inch slipping in and out. Finally, I lost control, flipping her onto her back and driving inside her like a locomotive, angling her hips just the way she liked.

When it was over and we lay sapped of strength and breath, our bodies entwined in damp, twisted sheets, she started to laugh.

“What’s funny?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Us. This. How good it turned out to be.”

“It is good.” I picked up my head and looked down at her. My chest didn’t feel big enough to contain what I felt.

If I was the kind of guy who could make promises, I’d have made one right then and there.

TWENTY-ONE

ON SATURDAY, I sent Tabitha a text asking if she'd meet me for coffee. She didn't respond. I tried again on Sunday, but she ignored that message too. On Monday, I figured I'd catch her at work, but she didn't show up.

Later that afternoon, I stopped by Gran's house and asked if she'd heard from Tabitha in the last few days.

"No, but she's been out of town," said Gran, pouring hot water from the kettle into her teacup. "Would you like some tea, darling?"

"No, thank you. Do you know where she went?" I asked.

"She said she was visiting a friend. I think somewhere out east." Gran brought her cup and saucer over to the table. "Boston, maybe? Or New York?" She sighed as she lowered herself into her chair. "Sorry, darling. My memory isn't what it used to be."

"It's okay, Gran. I'll catch up with her when she gets back. Do you know when that will be?"

Gran thought for a moment. "I believe she said Tuesday, because Wednesday she promised to help me bake a couple pies to bring to Devlin's dad's house for Thanksgiving." She smiled as she lifted her teacup. "I've been a bit worried about her, to be honest. She seemed so upset when we decided not to sell. But over the last few weeks, she's really come around, hasn't she?"

"I hope so, Gran."

But I had a feeling it was all an act.

\* \* \*

I finally caught up with her Tuesday night, but only because I drove over to her apartment and knocked on the door.

When she opened it, she gave me her fake smile. “Oh, hi. What a pleasant surprise.”

“Can I come in, please? I want to talk to you.”

“Be my guest.” She stood back so I could enter, closing the door behind me. “I’m just unpacking.”

I followed her into her bedroom. “I heard you were on a trip.”

“Mmhm.” She tossed some clothing from her suitcase into a laundry basket.

“Where’d you go?”

“Boston.”

Leaning against the doorframe, I folded my arms. “What was going on there?”

“I had some business.” She hung up a little black dress. “I stayed at the most amazing hotel. Five stars. Every possible amenity. My suite had an incredible view. Thank God I didn’t have to pay for it—it would have been way outside my budget.”

“Sounds nice. Was it a collaboration for your blog?”

“Nope.” She giggled. “I had a generous benefactor who took care of the bill.”

“Tabitha. Tell me it wasn’t Bob Oliver.”

“What business is it of yours?” She placed a pair of black heels in the closet. “Are you the only one in this family who’s allowed to have a little fun?”

“He’s engaged. Did you know that?”

She shrugged. “He says that’s all for show.”

“He’s getting *married* for show?”

She pinned me with a stare over her shoulder. “Look who’s talking.”

I took a breath and tried again. “Okay, fine. Your personal life is your business. But I don’t think this guy can be trusted.”

“And why’s that? Frankly, everything *he’s* told me has turned out to be true.” She folded a sweater and tucked it into a drawer.

“What has he told you?”

“That I’m worth a lot of money and I shouldn’t be cheated out of it just because you up and married some random guy who only proposed in order to spite the guy who replaced him.”

“That’s not true, Tabitha.”

“Oh no?” She zipped up her suitcase and tried to shove it on the high shelf of her closet but couldn’t quite reach.

“No.” I went over and reached for the suitcase, easily pushing it onto the shelf.

She spun around and faced me with a furious expression I recognized from childhood. “I could have reached it! You’re not better than me just because you’re taller!”

“Sorry, I just thought you needed help.”

“Well, I don’t want your help. I just want my money so I can get out of here and go somewhere I’m appreciated.”

“You’re appreciated here, Tabitha.” I sat down on the foot of her bed. “Tell me what you want to do at Snowberry and we’ll make it work. If you don’t want to be involved at the spa, that’s fine. I just thought you’d be good at it. But you could do PR or social media or whatever else you’d like.”

“I want my own business,” she snapped. “It’s not fair that you get everything and I get nothing! And it’s been that way my entire life.”

“Tabitha, that’s not—”

“Don’t tell me it’s not true, because it is!” Her eyes filled with tears. “I’ve never been anyone’s favorite. It was always

Lexi, Lexi, Lexi. You were the better skier, the better student, the better person. Everyone loved you more, even Gran and Grandpa. I could tell. Everyone felt sorry for you when your parents died—and I did too—but it was like I didn't exist after that! No matter what I did, I could never compete with you. And I still can't. Because you're perfect, and I'm just in the way. Even my mom and dad didn't want me around. Do you know what that feels like?"

My jaw was hanging open. "Tabitha, I had no idea you felt that way. I'm—I'm sorry."

"And now I'm an asshole again for making you apologize that you had to grow up without parents," she said, wiping her eyes.

"You're not an asshole, I just don't know what else to say. But believe me, I'm not perfect. I've . . . I've done things that I'm not proud of."

"Like get married just so you can inherit early?"

"I'm not sorry about that," I said, lifting my chin. "I was willing to do anything so Snowberry wouldn't be sold and torn down. I only regret that it involved lying to Gran."

"Lying to *everyone!*"

"Fine. Lying to everyone!" I jumped up, throwing my hands in the air. "You're right, Tabitha. The truth is that Devlin and I eloped so that I could inherit and he could stick it to Bob Oliver. We agreed to stay married just long enough to secure ownership, borrow the funds for the renovation, and get construction going."

"I knew it!" Her eyes blazed with triumph.

"Now what do you want from me, Tabitha? Money? You want me to pay you off so you don't tell Gran?"

"I don't need *your* money," she huffed. "I'll have my own just as soon as your little sham marriage goes bust."

"What do you mean?"

She cocked her head. "Obviously you don't know about the five-year clause."

“The what?”

“The five-year clause. In Gran’s will, it states that if your marriage ends before five years is up, the deed transferring ownership to you is null and void.”

In a stupor, I dropped onto the edge of the bed again. “Is that true?”

“It’s totally true.”

“She never said anything about it.”

“Why would she? You and Prince Charming have her convinced your love is real.” She shook her head. “It’s so ridiculous. He didn’t even get you a diamond!”

“So wait—what happens if the marriage doesn’t last five years?” My mind was spinning. I placed a palm on my forehead.

“Ownership reverts to Gran. And without anyone to inherit, she sells. I’ll get my money.” Tabitha lowered her voice, like she was telling a secret. “And by the way, I have it on good authority that the offer from Black Diamond will be good until the end of the year, so if you could just hurry up and get a quickie divorce, I’d really appreciate it.”

“How do you know all this—about the will?” I managed.

“My good-for-nothing dad turned out to be somewhat useful for once.” Her tone dripped with resentment. “He hired someone Bob recommended to do a little digging. Turns out, Gran’s will stipulates that if there is no one qualified to inherit upon her death, my father gets to decide what happens to Snowberry. And since he’s not interested in owning it, he’d sell. But don’t worry,” she told me. “You’d get thirty-three percent of the profits. You’d still be rich.”

My eyes closed. “I don’t care about the money.”

“You know, I can’t figure out if you’re serious when you say shit like that.”

Taking a deep breath, I rose to my feet. “Tabitha. Is what you’re telling me true?”

“Yes.” She lifted her shoulders. “But you don’t have to trust me. You can go ask Gran if you want to.”

I was choking back tears. “Why are you doing this?”

“Me?” She touched her chest. “I’m not doing *anything*! I’m simply aware of the terms of Gran’s will. Seems to me, you could have done a little better job at knowing what you were getting into. Instead you ran off and got married without doing your homework.”

My God. She was right.

“Not that I blame you,” she went on. “Devlin is hot as fuck. I can see how you got carried away.”

Unable to stomach another word out of her mouth, I raced out of her apartment, slamming the door behind me. After stumbling down the stairs in the glassed-in stairwell of the two-story building, I burst out outside and gulped in the smoky autumn air.

Tears burned my eyes on the way to my car, and once I got behind the wheel, I sat there and sobbed.

It had all been for nothing. I was going to lose everything. And all because I hadn’t bothered to check the actual terms of the will—as usual, I’d let my emotions run away with my decisions.

And Devlin . . . what was he going to say? Would he be mad that he’d wasted his time? Thank God he hadn’t invested his own money yet. But what would happen to the money I’d borrowed from the bank? The work already being done?

How quickly was he going to leave?

Tipping my face into my hands, I cried harder, heaving sobs racking my body.

I deserved this. I’d lied to my grandmother. I’d married a man for the wrong reasons. I’d spoken vows that should have meant something to me. I’d trivialized a lifelong commitment.

And I’d fallen for someone who’d told me right from the start he wasn’t going to stay.



When the tears slowed and I had regained some control of my breathing, I reached into my glovebox and found some old napkins I used to wipe my nose. Then I gathered my strength and drove to Gran's house.

\* \* \*

Gran's house smelled like chicken noodle soup, and the aroma brought me back to childhood. She'd often made it on chilly fall or snowy winter days, and it could warm up your belly with one spoonful.

But I couldn't eat.

"Would you like some?" Gran asked, ladling herself a bowl. "I was just about to have supper."

"No, thanks. I'm not hungry." I sat across from her at the kitchen table in the seat where I'd eaten thousands of meals. Everything in the room was so familiar, from the hue of the honey oak cabinets to the hum of the old refrigerator to the row of duck canisters on the Formica countertop.

"Something the matter?" Gran asked, taking the seat across from me.

"Yes," I said. "I'm afraid."

"You? Bosh." Gran ate a spoonful of soup. "You've never been afraid of anything. I used to *wish* you were afraid of more things—I was always positive you were going to break an arm or a leg the way you skied that mountain."

"I'm afraid I made a mistake."

She ate another spoonful and waited for me to continue.

"Devlin and I got married very fast."

"And you're not getting along?"

"No, we're getting along," I said. "I just—what would happen if we weren't? What would happen, let's say, if he changed his mind about me?"

“He would never,” Gran assured me. “I see the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is watching.”

“But what if it happened?” I pressed. “I know in the beginning of a thing, it can seem like everyone is on the same page, but sometimes . . .”

*I just changed my mind, Lexi. I'm sorry.*

“Sometimes people change their minds. Look at Andrew.”

“Andrew wasn’t the one for you.”

“I know he wasn’t, but my point is that people can change. People can leave. What happens if Devlin leaves me in a year or two?”

“That won’t happen.”

“Gran.” I leaned forward and put both hands on the table. “Tabitha told me about some kind of five-year clause in the will that says my inheritance can be revoked if my marriage doesn’t last at least that long. Is that true?”

“Yes, but I’m not worried, darling. That’s why I didn’t mention it.” She smiled sweetly. “It’s so obvious you two were meant for each other.”

“But—but five years is a long time,” I said.

“Nonsense. You grandfather and I were married over sixty years. Believe me, time flies, darling. Before you know it, you’ve got kids and grandkids, wrinkles and gray hair, cataracts and tired old bones.” She laughed gently. “But you still have each other.”

\* \* \*

Devlin was in the kitchen when I got home. “Guess what I did?” he shouted as I removed my jacket and tossed it onto the couch.

“What?”

He appeared in the doorway to the kitchen in my dark red apron, a proud grin on his face. “I made dinner!”

I managed a wan smile. “What did you make?”

“Chili. I remembered Gran saying it was your favorite as a kid, so I called Xander and got his recipe. He used to cook for us when we were kids.”

“It smells good,” I said, heading into the kitchen to peek into the pot on the stove. “And it looks great.”

“Thanks. I *think* it tastes right, but if you don’t like it, I’ll take you out for dinner. I just wanted to give you a break from cooking.” He pressed up behind me and kissed the side of my neck.

“Thanks. I’m sure it’s going to be good.” Although I wasn’t hungry at all. In fact, I was nauseated.

“Cooking is so much work,” he said, taking bowls down from the cupboard. “All that chopping and slicing and stirring and making sure shit doesn’t burn over here while you’re cutting something up over there.”

“It gets easier.” Moving slowly, I opened a drawer and took out two spoons. “Want a beer?”

“Sure, thanks.” He took off the apron and hung it on a hook inside the back stairwell.

I pulled two beers from my fridge and pried the caps off before going to the sink to wash my hands. The words I needed to say to him stuck in my throat.

“Dinner is served, wife.” Devlin pulled out my chair for me, and I sat down, trying hard to smile. He’d done something sweet for me, and I didn’t want to ruin it.

After tasting the chili, I praised his efforts sincerely. “This is delicious, Devlin.”

“Thanks. I thought I might have over-browned the beef, but I guess all the other stuff hides that mistake.”

“It’s perfect.” I ate another spoonful. “Thank you for making dinner tonight.”

“You’re welcome.” We ate in silence for a few minutes. Or rather, Devlin ate, and I moved my spoon around in my bowl.

“Everything okay? You’re so quiet.”

“It’s been a long day, I guess.”

Devlin lifted his beer. “Did you get ahold of Tabitha?”

I nodded. My throat was tight.

“And?”

“It’s not good.”

He paused with the bottle halfway to the table, and then set it down slowly. “What do you mean?”

I set my spoon aside and lowered my face into my hands.

“Lexi, what’s wrong?”

“There’s a clause in the will,” I said, my voice muffled inside my palms.

“What’s it say?”

Taking a deep breath, I dropped my hands and looked him in those blue eyes. “It says if we don’t stay married for five years, the deed transferring ownership to us is null and void. Ownership reverts to Gran, and she’ll sell. If she’s gone at that point and there are no other qualified heirs, the property will be sold, debts paid, and profits split between Roddy, Tabitha, and me.”

Devlin’s eyes closed. He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “She never mentioned that.”

“No, she didn’t. Why would she?” I echoed Tabitha’s words. “We were so convincing. Gran fully believes our story—or at least she wanted to believe it so badly, she allowed herself to *say* she did.”

“Fuck.” Devlin rubbed his temples with the thumb and fingers of his left hand. His wedding band gleamed in the kitchen light. “How did Tabitha even figure this out?”

“Apparently her father helped her. He hired someone—at Bob Oliver’s suggestion—to look more closely at the will and trust.”

“Fucking Oliver,” Devlin muttered. “He never quits being sleazy.”

“Tabitha also let me know that the offer from Black Diamond will be good until the end of the year.”

Devlin’s head came up sharply. “Fuck that.”

“I can’t,” I said, tears filling my eyes. “I can’t just say ‘fuck that.’”

Fury contorted Devlin’s handsome features, and he jumped from his chair and went over to the kitchen sink, leaning on the edge, his head hanging low. “I’m sorry, Lex. He’s doing this to get back at me.”

“It’s not your fault, Devlin. Bob Oliver or no Bob Oliver, the clause was there. It was going to be an issue no matter what. Maybe it’s better we know about it now.”

He didn’t move for what felt like hours but was probably only a minute or so. When he spoke, his voice was strained. “What do you want to do?”

“What can we do?”

“Maybe it’s bullshit. Maybe they’re making it up.”

“They’re not. I went to see Gran after Tabitha told me about the clause. It’s real.”

“Can we fight it?”

“I don’t think so. And what would our reason be? We know this marriage is temporary? We only got married so I could inherit?” I shook my head. “I don’t want to do that. I don’t want Gran to look at me with disappointment.”

Devlin turned around and faced me. Folded his arms over his chest. “We could stay married until then.”

I took a breath. “Five years is a long time.”

“Yes.”

“You have plans for those years, and I’m not about to trap you here.” I took a breath and forced myself to say the words I

had to say for his sake. “You should take that job in California. It’s everything you want. Everything you deserve.”

He looked out the window into the darkness without saying anything for a moment. “What if we stayed married long-distance?”

His tone was practical. Businesslike. Without emotion.

Which was why that wouldn’t work.

“No.” My throat constricted, and I shook my head emphatically. “I don’t want that. You don’t really want that.”

“But it could work. We could tell Gran we needed the income, and—”

“The whole point of the will in the first place was because Gran doesn’t want me running the resort on my own. She and my grandfather thought it was too much for one person. And to be honest, Devlin, it might be. The past couple months have been eye-opening for me—I don’t necessarily agree with the whole ‘you must be married to inherit’ bullshit, but I can see why they didn’t want me tackling it alone.”

He didn’t say anything. His jaw was clenched tight.

I took a shuddery breath and forced myself to say the next thing. “And it’s not just the resort who needs someone to stay, Devlin. I do too.”

His eyes closed. He nodded.

It was a window. Would he open it? Say the words?

In the silence that followed, I had my answer.

“We tried, Devlin.” My voice trembled. “But we can’t win.”

His chest expanded as he inhaled. His eyes came back to mine. “So this is what you want?”

Of course, it wasn’t. I wanted him to smash that window, jump through it, and carry me from this burning house to safety. But *he* had to want that too.

Tears slipped down my cheeks, and I swiped at them with both hands. “I don’t think we have a choice. Take the job in California.”

He appeared to struggle for words. “I don’t want to leave you.”

*But I have to.* The subtext was there beneath his regret.

“I appreciate that.” I forced myself to say the words I knew he needed to hear to live his life the way he wanted. “Look, we gave this our best shot. And I’ll always be grateful that you were willing to do this crazy thing for me.”

“What will you do?”

“I’m not sure yet. But I’ll figure it out. Don’t worry about me.”

“Lexi.”

I stood up. “You know what? I’m not really that hungry right now. I think I’m just going to take a shower and get ready for bed.”

He opened his mouth like maybe he’d argue with me—and God, God, I wanted him to—but instead he just nodded. “Go ahead. I’ll take care of the dishes.”

“Thanks.” I hurried out of the kitchen before I melted down into an ugly cry or, worse, threw myself at his feet and begged him to love me. Inside the bathroom, I turned on the shower, but rather than get in, I lowered the lid on the toilet, sat down, and sobbed wretchedly, hoping the noise of the water covered the sounds.

It was over. I’d lost it all.

TWENTY-TWO



*devlin*

I STOOD THERE WOODENLY, listening to bathroom door close and the shower come on. A moment later, I heard her sobs.

Immediately I went to the bathroom door and raised my fist to knock. But I couldn't do it. It was like something grabbed me by the wrist and held me back.

What was I going to say? What could I offer her?

She deserved more than I could promise. She had a different dream for the future. Her roots were planted here, and she wanted to stay and see them grow. My heart ached for her—I didn't see how she could hang on to this place—and I was fucking furious that Bob Oliver might get his win after all. And those anguished sobs . . . I wanted nothing more than to bust through this door and put my arms around her. Comfort her. Take care of her.

But what could I do? Make a promise I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep? Risk hurting her down the road? I believed in playing fair—I prided myself on it. She'd told me from the very beginning what she wanted, and it wasn't what I wanted.

Stillness wasn't my thing.

And I'd once promised her I'd never tell anyone I loved her and then leave.

Lowering my hand, I backed away from the bathroom door.

\* \* \*

When she came out of the bathroom, I went in. We slipped past each other without saying a word. By the time I entered the bedroom, the lights were out, and I could barely make out the shape of her beneath the covers.

Chest tight, I undressed down to my boxer briefs in the darkness and crawled between the sheets. Lying on my back without touching her, I stared at the ceiling. She was on her side facing away from me.

“Lexi?” I whispered.

“Yes.”

“Is this okay?”

“Is what okay?”

“Me sleeping in here. Would you prefer I went out to the couch?”

“It’s fine. You can stay in here.”

It wasn’t long before I heard a snuffle. I closed my eyes and swallowed hard as I heard her trying to weep silently. Did she want me to touch her? Should I keep my hands to myself? What were the rules in this strange in-between space?

Finally, I couldn’t stand it. I rolled toward her and put my arm over her waist.

She rolled toward me and came into my arms as if by magnetic force. Pressed close, she cried quietly into my chest while I stroked her hair and her back. “I’m sorry,” she said between pitiful little sobs that put my heart in a vise. “I promised myself I wouldn’t do this to you. It’s not fair.”

“I don’t mind. And I understand. I just . . . wish I could make it better.”

“I wish you could too.”

A couple minutes went by, and her tears stopped. Her breathing evened out. I thought maybe she’d fallen asleep

when she spoke again. “What should I do about the renovation? Halt the progress and sell? Pay back the loan?”

I swallowed hard. “Probably. That’s the most practical solution.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to Gran.”

“When you’re ready, I’ll deal with Jennifer Bates and the investors.”

“Thank you.” Her fingers brushed back and forth on my chest. “We made a good team for a while, didn’t we?”

“We sure did.”

She pressed her lips to my collarbone. “I’m not sorry.”

“Me neither.” My cock was thickening, heat surging through me. Would I be a total dick for touching her the way I wanted to?

“Guess we need to get divorced now.”

“Probably.”

Unbelievably, her hand started to wander down my body, over my hip, until her fingers edged inside my briefs. She wrapped around my erection. “I know this is wrong,” she whispered, slipping my flesh through her fist. “But I want to feel like your wife one last time.”

“Who says it’s wrong?” My breath quickened.

I tried not to think about the phrase one last time as I pulled off her T-shirt. As she tugged my briefs down my legs. As I feasted on her breasts. As she moved her mouth up and down my cock. As I groaned with agonized desire.

As I buried my tongue in her pussy. As I heard her sigh with rapture. As I settled my weight between her thighs. As I slowly eased inside her, inch by torturous inch, taking my time, savoring every second. As I watched her lips fall open and murmur my name. As I began to move in tandem with the lift of her hips, our bodies undulating like waves on the sea. As I thrust as deeply as I possibly could, until she cried out with pain or pleasure or both. As I fought the urge to plunge

harder and faster, because then it would be over, and I wanted this to last.

But it couldn't. The heat and the friction and the scent of her skin and the desperate need to pour myself inside her and feel her body grasping mine like it would never let go overwhelmed me.

She cried out repeatedly—*yes, yes, yes*—her hands gripping my ass, pulling me in tight as she thrust up beneath me. I let go, losing myself inside her.

One last time.

\* \* \*

I slept hard. When I woke up the next morning, Lexi was gone. I reached for my phone and saw that she'd texted me a series of messages.

Hey. I need a little space. I am not asking you to leave today, I will just spend a few nights at Gran's house. I'm heading there now, and I will tell her Thanksgiving is off. I'm also going to tell her you and I have decided to part ways. I don't see any point in prolonging this.

I hope you have a nice time with your family. I truly loved meeting them and think they're wonderful. I envy you all those siblings and the close relationship you have with your dad, and I'm sorry if our split upsets them.

Your mom's earrings are in a box on the dresser. Please return them to your dad and let him know it was an honor just to wear them for a little while.

Thank you for all you did for me. I consider you a friend.

I read it through several times. Then I put my phone face down on the nightstand and buried my head beneath the pillow.

I could still smell her.

TWENTY-THREE

*lexi*

I COULDN'T FACE Gran right away, so I drove to Winnie's.

Even though she and her family were in the middle of prepping Thanksgiving dinner, she led me upstairs and let me sob on her bedroom floor while Dex played with Michael in the family room and Hallie and Luna took over in the kitchen, peeling potatoes and cubing bread for stuffing.

"The worst is, it's all my fault," I blubbered. "I should have looked over that will. I could have prevented this. I could have said no to his crazy scheme and saved myself from falling for him."

Winnie had done her best to console me, and even invited me to stay there and have Thanksgiving with them, but as much as I appreciated the invitation, I knew being around her happy family wasn't going to help. After I cried myself out, I drove back home, stopping at the market on the way and picking up the bare essentials for a turkey dinner.

Then I headed to Gran's house to put the groceries in her fridge, make her a cup of tea, and deliver the bad news.

\* \* \*

"I don't understand." Sitting across from me at the kitchen table, Gran shook her head. "You're so happy together."

"We just moved too fast, Gran. We realized we're better off as friends."

“Friends?” She repeated the word like she didn’t comprehend it. “That doesn’t make any sense. He’s in love with you.”

My throat tightened, and I fought hard against the sob threatening to choke me. “I don’t think so. It was just infatuation.”

“But the things he said, and the way he looks at you, and everything he’s doing for Snowberry ...” Gran looked completely bewildered. “Of course he loves you.”

“I know this is hard for you to accept, but it’s the truth. We’ve decided to split up.”

Immediately, she brought her hand to her heart. “Oh,” she said, swaying a bit in her chair. “Oh, my. I’m feeling so strange. I’m short of breath. And my heart, it’s—it’s beating so fast.” She swooned and flung the back of her wrist across her forehead, her eyes closing. “Bury me in my pink suit, darling. The one with the pearl buttons.”

I shook my head. “It’s not going to work this time, Gran. I can’t give you what you want.”

She opened one eye and peered at me from beneath her forearm. “Why not?”

“Because Devlin and I are too different. He doesn’t want a family.”

Dropping her arm, she sat up straight again. “Hmm. He said that?”

“Yes.”

She considered the fact, and then dismissed it with a toss of her hand. “Sometimes men don’t really know what they want when it comes to that sort of thing. But they can be convinced.”

“No, Gran. I’m not *convincing* Devlin to stay with me. I deserve someone who doesn’t need convincing, don’t you agree?”

Gran opened her mouth, then closed it again. Sighed. “Of course I do.” Reaching across the table, she patted my arm.

“Of course I do.”

“Thank you.”

Picking up her teacup, she took a sip and looked weary and put-upon. “It’s so hard being old. Your eyesight is worse, but sometimes you feel like the only person who sees clearly.”

“I’m sorry. I know I’m letting you down.”

“Don’t be silly, darling.” Gran tapped my arm again. “You’ve never let me down in your life. And I’m not convinced this separation business is real.”

If I’d had it in me to laugh, I would have. Devlin was right—people believed what they wanted to believe.

“Now how about we get some pies in the oven?” Gran asked. “Tabitha canceled on me.” She lowered her voice. “But truth be told, I’d rather bake with you. Tabitha isn’t much help in the kitchen.” Gran sighed. “But I try to be patient with her. I try to show her love so she can show it to other people, you know?”

“I know exactly.” I smiled, realizing where I’d gotten that gift. “I’d love to bake with you today, Gran.”

\* \* \*

“This Thanksgiving is lame,” Tabitha said over the meal I’d prepared in Gran’s kitchen and laid out on her dining room table.

“Zip it, Tabitha,” I told her, pouring myself more wine.

“Now, girls. We’ve been through enough.” Gran took a bite of turkey. “And dinner is wonderful, Lexi. You’re such a good cook.”

“Thanks.” It wasn’t much—a small turkey, a simple stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, plain old green beans. I hadn’t had time to make anything fancy.

“So where’s Devlin eating?” Tabitha picked up her wineglass. “Did he move out already?”



“I’m not sure,” I said listlessly. He hadn’t replied to my text. “Maybe.”

“Oh, I hope not,” Gran fretted. “The more I think about it, the more I’m sure this is just belated cold feet. Nothing to worry about. He’ll come back.”

“He won’t, Gran.” I spoke firmly. “I told you. We decided the marriage was a mistake. We’re getting a divorce.”

“But darling, why so soon? You haven’t tried to work things out.”

“There’s nothing to work on. We just aren’t meant to be together, Gran. We’re too different.”

“Differences can be overcome,” she urged. “He might say he doesn’t want a family now, but he’ll come around.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” said Tabitha. “Not everyone is cut out to have kids. Maybe he knows he wouldn’t be a good father.”

“He’d be a great father,” I said.

Gran sighed. “I’m sorry, darling. I wish there was something I could do.”

“Maybe next time, you’ll think twice before marrying some guy before you know anything about him,” said my cousin with a smirk.

“Zip it, Tabitha,” said Gran.

I almost smiled.

\* \* \*

After the meal, Gran said she and Tabitha would do the dishes and suggested I take a walk to get some air. I put on my boots and coat, tugged a hat on my head, and stuck some gloves on my hands. Tabitha was still complaining about being forced into clean-up duty when I left the house.

It was just after five, and the sun was setting. Instinctively, I headed for the mountain in the fading light. When I reached

the bottom of the deserted slope, I looked up toward the top. The trees rustled in the wind, but the chairlift was still. Maybe this weekend I'd go up and say goodbye. I never could talk Devlin into going up there with me.

Sadly, I walked toward the lodge, which was dark and silent, and would remain so forever, until they tore it down. I stretched out on a wooden bench near the front entrance and looked up, watching the stars appear in the sky like pinpricks through a screen.

I lay there as my toes grew cold and my teeth began to chatter. I lay there as farewell tears seeped from the corners of my eyes. I lay there as my heart yearned for the man I loved.

I lay there until I heard an eerie howling in the nearby woods, at which point I hopped up and hustled my ass out of there. A hungry, wolfish Devlin in the trees was one thing.

An actual wolf who wanted to eat me?

*Fuck that.*

I ran all the way home.

\* \* \*

Right before bed, I checked my phone again, hoping for a message from Devlin. Or a voicemail—I missed the sound of his voice already. I wondered how his Thanksgiving dinner was, how his family had taken the news, if he'd accepted that job in Santa Monica yet.

If he'd changed his mind.

But there was nothing.

Heartsick, I turned off the lamp and crawled beneath the blankets, missing his body beside me, his arms around me, his voice in my ear.

*My wife.*

TWENTY-FOUR

*devlin*

NO DOUBT ABOUT IT, I ruined Thanksgiving.

Thanks to the news about my divorce, the mood over the holiday was strained and somber. If I could have waited until after the meal on Thursday to tell them, I would have, but the first question I got when I arrived at my dad's house Wednesday afternoon was, "Where's Lexi?"

I thought about making an excuse, putting off the task of announcing the split until later, but in the end, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I didn't have the energy to hide the truth.

My dad was crushed, but he tried not to show it. He gave me a hug with a few thumps on my back and said I was welcome to stay as long as I wanted and he was sorry to hear it hadn't worked out. "I really liked that girl," he said. "I hope it's okay to say that."

"Of course it is, Dad. I really like her too, I just—we just decided we're better as friends."

When I handed him the box with the earrings, he regarded it sadly for a moment. "Guess I'll put these back."

He disappeared into his bedroom, and I went upstairs to mine, where I shut the door, dropped my bag at the foot of the bed, and flopped onto my back across the mattress, one arm flung over my eyes.

How was it possible this room reminded me of her, when I'd spent thousands of nights in it without her and only two with her next to me?

I don't know how long I lay there before someone knocked on the door. "Come in," I said.

The door swung open, and Xander appeared. "Hey."

"Hey."

He tucked his hands in his pockets. "Dad told me about you and Lexi."

"Yeah."

"Sooner than planned, huh?"

"Things took an unexpected turn." I explained what we'd learned about the will.

"No chance that you'd last five years?"

"I offered. She turned me down."

Xander nodded. "You okay?"

"Yes and no."

"I'm heading to the bar. Wanna come hang out?"

"I guess." I swung my feet to the floor. "Kelly in town?"

"Not yet. She's flying in early tomorrow. I'll pick her up at the airport around ten."

I nodded. "So things are going well with you guys?"

"Things are actually fucking great." Xander had a look on his face I'd never seen before, something between disbelief and gratitude.

"That's cool." I rubbed the back of my head. "Give me ten minutes, and I'll meet you downstairs."

"Sounds good." He slipped out of the room.

"Hey Xander?"

"Yeah?" His head popped around the door.

"I don't feel like explaining shit to anyone tonight. Can you keep the news about Lexi and me to yourself at the bar?"

"Sure, brother." He studied me. "You don't have to come out if you don't want to."

“Actually, I want to.” I stood up and reached for my bag. “Sitting around here will just make me feel worse.”

\* \* \*

I parked myself at one end of the bar and nursed a few glasses of whiskey, growing more miserable with each one. Anyone who came up and tried to chat with me got nothing more than a few grunts in response.

All I did was think about Lexi. What was she doing tonight? Had she gone out? Was she home alone? Had she gone back to our place or was she still at Gran’s? Every now and then, I took out my phone and contemplated answering her text, but I didn’t know what to say.

I read her messages over and over again, my feelings vying for control like my brothers and I used to fight over the last donut in the box. Sadness. Guilt. Anger. Frustration.

Polishing off my drink, I scowled into the empty glass.

“You’re going to scare away my customers with that face,” Xander said from behind the bar. He leaned forward on two hands. “Why don’t you let me call you a car? You’re obviously not up for this tonight.”

“I’m fine.”

He laughed. “You’re not, and if I could, I’d sit down next to you and try to figure out what the fuck is going on in your head, but I’ve got a business to run, and we’re packed and short-handed.”

“So put me to work,” I told him.

“Seriously?”

“Yes.” I slid off the barstool and cuffed up my sleeves. “Put me to work, Xander. I need the distraction.”

He shrugged. “Okay. Since you asked.”

I spent the next several hours doing everything from washing dishes to serving food to pouring beers to bussing

tables. I sweated through my shirt. I broke a glass. I fucked up drink orders. I apologized and brought new ones. But I stayed busy, which was better than sitting on that fucking barstool and realizing how lonely I was going to be without Lexi in my life.

I kept seeing things that reminded me of her. Some woman came in wearing a top in Lexi's favorite shade of green. Another had her hair in braids. At one point, I heard someone laugh, and it sounded so much like Lexi, I nearly dropped the tray I was carrying.

Around midnight, I heard Xander shout, "What the hell are you doing here?" and I looked up to see him swooping Kelly into his arms.

"I grabbed an earlier flight!" she said. "I couldn't wait to see you!"

He held her tight, lifting her up so her feet didn't touch the ground. I was seized by an envy so fierce, it felt like an icy claw around the back of my neck. I turned around and walked away.

\* \* \*

I stayed until close, locking the door behind the last customer and helping Xander and his staff shut everything down, cash out, clean up, and restock. When he'd walked the last server to her car, he came back inside where I was just replacing the trash can liner behind the bar.

"One more?" he asked, pulling down a bottle of whiskey.

"Sure." I took a seat on a barstool and watched him pour us each a couple fingers.

He handed me a glass and tapped his against it. "Thanks for the help tonight. If that whole millionaire real estate developer thing doesn't work out for you, you'll always have a job at Buckley's Pub."

I laughed glumly. "Thanks."

We each took a drink, and he leaned back against the counter. “So what’s really got you fucked up?”

I swirled the whiskey in my glass. “I failed Lexi. She’s going to lose her home.”

He nodded slowly. “Okay. But you tried to help, right? You did everything you could?”

“Yeah. Except stay married for five years.”

“You said she shot that idea down.”

“She did.”

“Any idea why?”

“She said it would be unfair to trap me for so long. She wants me to take that job in Santa Monica. She thinks I deserve to have what I want.”

“And that’s what you want? The job in California?”

“It’s what I should want.” I frowned. “It’s a fantastic offer. And it’s doing something I know I’m good at. It’s the dream job.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that I don’t actually know if that’s the dream anymore. I feel like—like there’s something I want more.”

Xander sipped his whiskey. “Okay.”

“But it’s stupid. It’s crazy. The whole thing with Lexi was just for show. It was only to get back at Bob Oliver for trying to fuck me, and to help her inherit. Now that it all imploded, I should just move on.”

“So move on.”

“I don’t know if I *can*.” I set my glass on the bar and dropped my head into my hands, threading my fingers into my hair. “She gets me, Xander. She just fucking gets me. And now I have this weird, totally foreign compulsion to *stay* where I am—where I *was*—with her. To keep working together. To see this vision we had come to life and watch it succeed. To grow



something together. It's totally unlike me. I usually just make the deal, take the money, and move on to the next negotiation. But all of a sudden, that's not enough."

Xander sipped. Said nothing.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and showed him the end of her text messages. "Look at this bullshit. '*Thank you for all you did for me. I consider you a friend.*' I don't want to be her fucking friend!"

"What do you want to be?"

"Her husband!"

Xander rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, I'm not saying I think what you did was smart. In fact, I think it was totally fucked-up and I can't even believe someone as level-headed and practical as you thought it was a good idea."

"I wasn't thinking clearly," I said. "All I cared about was fucking over Bob Oliver."

Xander narrowed his eyes. Shook his head. "See, I don't buy that."

"Huh?"

"I'm not saying it didn't factor in, but I think Lexi got under your skin. I think she was the first woman—possibly the first human—to resist you in your adult life, and you were going to do anything it took to win her over. Even marry her. I think by refusing to give into you, she proved she was worthy of you, and you fucking *wanted* her. Bad. Even if it was subconscious."

My jaw hung open. "Shit."

Xander tossed back more whiskey. "For what it's worth, I don't think you were wrong. I do think she's worthy of you. And I think you're in love with her. Should you have *dated* her before marrying her? Yeah. But what's done is done. So now the question is, do you undo it all and run away? Or do you face down whatever it is that has you so convinced you can't stay and try to make it work?"

"I don't know what it is."

“Yes, you do.”

“She wants forever, Xander,” I blurted. “She wants a soul mate. She wants kids. I’ve never wanted any of that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I just never did. It’s so much.”

“So much what?”

“Responsibility. Work. Pressure. Time. Trust.”

“And you’re scared you can’t handle those things?”

“No,” I scoffed. “I can handle those things.”

“Then what can’t you handle?”

Rather than answer, I got off the stool and walked over to the front window. Stuck my hands in my pockets and stared out at the dark, silent street. For a full minute, I said nothing.

Then I answered truthfully. “The fear.”

“The fear of what?”

“I guess it’s the fear that you could lose someone you love. I don’t want to feel it. So maybe it’s better not to love someone that deeply.”

Xander was silent at first. “I get that. Being scared sucks. I used to think I wasn’t afraid of anything . . . then I met Kelly. Now I worry about her every damn minute of the day. But you know what?”

“What?”

“I wouldn’t trade it for being without her. When we’re apart, I fucking hate it.”

My eyes closed. “Right.”

A moment later, I heard Xander’s footsteps behind me. Felt his heavy hand on my shoulder. “Listen. Why don’t you take some time and think this over? Go out to California. See if it feels like home. See if being there inspires you.”

I didn’t want to go anywhere without Lexi. But maybe Xander was right. Maybe I needed some time for myself to re-

evaluate what I wanted in life. What mattered the most. And I wanted to give Lexi the space she needed as well.

But I already missed her so much it hurt.

\* \* \*

We gathered around the dining room table the next day, all nine of us—my dad, Austin, Veronica, the twins, Xander and Kelly, Dash, Mabel and me. I tried to be grateful for who was there and not think about who wasn't, but it was hard. I'm pretty sure I ate and drank, but mostly I just felt numb. It seemed like everyone was giving me a wide berth, since no one asked me any direct questions about the divorce or mentioned Lexi's name.

After dinner, Veronica and I did the dishes, since we hadn't helped with any of the cooking. Standing side by side near the sink, I loaded the dishwasher while she hand-washed serving bowls and platters. She talked for a while about the dance studio she'd just opened—she'd been a professional dancer in New York City—and how happy she was to be teaching again, and I listened with half my brain while the other half wondered what Lexi was doing, if she'd cooked, how her Thanksgiving was going, if she was thinking about me.

“Hey. You okay?”

Yanked out of my thoughts by Veronica's elbow in my side, I looked down at her. “Sorry. Yeah. I'm fine.”

“You don't seem fine.”

I placed a handful of forks in the dishwasher's silverware rack. “I was thinking about Lexi.”

“Ah,” she said softly. “Where is she today?”

“At her grandmother's, I think.”

“You don't sound too happy about that.”

“I'm not.”

“Do you wish she was here?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

Veronica began drying a wineglass. “Does she know that?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Why not tell her?”

“She asked for space,” I said. “I’m trying to give it to her.”

Placing the glass on a towel, she picked up a second one. “So then it’s not final? The decision to split up?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I’m . . . I’m kind of fucked up over it.”

“Can I offer some completely unsolicited advice?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“Don’t let her go because you’re too stubborn to tell her how you feel. Withholding your feelings is different than respecting her space.”

“I’m not sure she would believe me if I confessed my true feelings,” I said.

Veronica looked at me like I was nuts. “What? Why wouldn’t she?”

I remembered that Veronica didn’t know the marriage was only one of convenience. “I spend a lot of time guarding my feelings around her,” I said carefully.

“Okay, but you *proposed* after knowing her for less than three weeks.” Veronica laughed. “Not all that guarded if you ask me. And she’s head over heels in love with you.”

Hearing the words, even if Lexi hadn’t been the one to say them, hit me like a bowling ball in the gut. “You think so?”

“Yes! She flat out told me it was magic from the night you met. What’s more magical than love?”

“She said that?”

“Yes.”

I wondered if it was something Lexi had made up, or something she honestly felt. I wished I could ask her.

When everyone went into the living room for the traditional game of Pictionary, I claimed I had a bad headache and went up to my room. My siblings never would have let me get away with that if they hadn't felt so bad for me. Or maybe they knew I wouldn't be much fun, so they didn't care if I was around anyway.

Upstairs in my room, I lay on the bed and stared at my phone, dying to call my wife. To hear her voice. To make her laugh. To tell her I felt it too, whatever the magic was between us. To tell her I loved her. Wanted her. Needed her in my life.

But I couldn't make myself do it. Spilling out my feelings like that just wasn't me. Maybe if I let them alone for a little bit, they'd evaporate instead of erupt.

I booked a plane ticket to L.A. for the following morning.

\* \* \*

My dad was the in the kitchen when I came down just after dawn.

"You're up early," he said, pouring coffee from the pot into a mug. "Want a cup?"

"I don't have a lot of time, actually."

He glanced at my bag and lifted his coffee to his lips. "Going home already?"

"Flying to California, actually. I got a job offer out there."

"That's a ways away."

"Yeah." I hitched my bag up higher on my shoulder and looked out the kitchen window into the yard. "That tree," I said, shaking my head at the site of the massive oak from which I'd tumbled. "Every time I see it, my arm hurts."

My dad chuckled. "That was quite a fall."

"I never should have climbed that thing."

"Oh, I don't know. I think you had to." He sipped his coffee.

“Dad, I broke my arm in two places.”

“I know, but you faced a fear. And then your brothers took care of you.”

“They did?” My memories after I’d hit the ground were hazy.

“Sure. I wasn’t home at the time, but the way they told it, Xander hauled you to your feet and got you to the car, and Austin drove you to the hospital. And they stayed with you, even after I got there.” He took another sip. “It’s what family does—they stay with you.”

I swallowed. “I have to go.”

“Goodbye, son.” He opened his arms and gave me a hug. “Hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for.”

\* \* \*

My father’s words stuck with me as I drove to the airport. As I parked the car and went through security. As I sat at the gate waiting for my zone to be called.

My leg jittered nervously, bouncing up and down, even though I hadn’t even had coffee this morning. My fingers rubbed my scruffy jaw—I hadn’t shaved since Wednesday.

*Hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for.*

What the fuck was I looking for? What did I want to do with my life? When I thought about what mattered most to me, was it my job? My bank account? My address?

I realized that over the last several years, what had brought the most meaning to my life was the kids at Camp Lemonade. Being a substitute dad or big brother for them. Doing all the things my dad and older brothers had done for me. I loved doing those things. I enjoyed them. They made me feel good and alive. The first thing I would do if I moved to California was find the equivalent of Camp Lemonade out there.

Because I liked being needed. Taking care of people. Making them happy. It was like being part of a family.

*It's what family does—they stay with you.*

So why was I running away from the person I *most* wanted to take care of? Was I going to let fear get in my way? Let my rational brain convince me that what I felt was just infatuation and it wouldn't last?

Or was I going to trust my gut—that voice in my head, that yearning in my heart—telling me that what I felt was love, what I wanted was a chance at forever, what I needed was to go home to my wife.

And stay.

I picked up my bag and ran.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, I burst through the back door of my dad's house and announced, "I need help."

Xander and Kelly were sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast. "With what?" my brother asked.

"Getting my wife back. Where's Dad?"

"He went to have breakfast with Larry and Gus," said Xander.

Kelly's face lit up, and she clapped her hands. "Let us help you! What can we do?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You think she won't take you back if you just ask?" Xander tipped his chair back on two legs.

"I want to do more than just ask," I said. "I want to show her that she's the love of my life. I want her to know that I understand her and want to be with her, and our family is the most important thing in the world to me."

Kelly fanned her face with both hands. "I'm going to cry. This is so sweet."

"So how do I do it?"

Xander scratched his head. “Well, I’d say you could propose, but you jumped the gun a little bit there.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t good. It wasn’t what she deserved.” I thought for a moment. “I could do it again.”

“Maybe get her a ring this time?” Kelly suggested. “A diamond?”

I shook my head. “She wouldn’t want a diamond, but you know what? I bet she’d love an emerald. Green is her favorite color.”

“Perfect,” said Kelly. “Once you have the ring, where could you propose that’s meaningful?”

The three of us were quiet for a moment. Then Xander started to laugh. “What?” I asked.

“If you really wanted to prove your love, you’d ride the chairlift and do it at the top of the mountain,” he said.

I groaned, because he was right.

“Come on, it’s like a ten-minute ride at most.” The front legs of his chair dropped to the floor with a thump. “You can handle it.”

“Fine,” I said, my stomach churning. “New ring. Ride the chairlift. Do you think that’s enough?”

“Well, you’re gonna have to say some words, but that’s always been your specialty,” my brother pointed out.

The room spun. “Not *those* kinds of words.”

“Just say what you *feel*,” urged Kelly. “Don’t plan anything. It should come from the heart.”

I nodded. “Okay. I’ll try. Anyone want to come to the jewelry store with me?”

Kelly was out of her chair and racing for the stairs in a heartbeat. “Yes! Give me five minutes to get dressed!”

“When is this happening?” Xander asked.

“Today, if I can arrange it. But I have to get in touch with the lift operator—it’s not running right now. I’m also going to



need his help inventing a reason for her to go up there.”

Xander laughed. “This is a lot of work to propose to a woman who’s already your wife.”

I grinned. “She’s worth it. She’s fucking worth it.”

\* \* \*

While I waited for Kelly to get ready to go, I made a phone call.

“Hello?”

“Hey Luke, it’s Devlin.”

“Hey, Devlin. What’s up?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt your holiday weekend, but I need a favor. The kind that only the lift operations manager at Snowberry can provide.”

He laughed. “Name it. It’s done.”

“It involves getting Lexi to the top of the mountain at sunset this evening. Do you think you can do it?”

“Hmmm. I could tell her there’s an issue with the arrival station up there. We’re open for business tomorrow, so she’d want to look at it right away.”

“Perfect. Just one more thing.”

“What’s up?”

Closing my eyes, I took a breath. “I need you to run me up there first.”

TWENTY-FIVE

ON FRIDAY, I didn't even feel like getting out of bed.

I lay around in my pajamas in my old room, staring out the window, trying not to cry, and wondering where I was going to go from here. Around ten, my phone buzzed, and my heart started to pound. But when I grabbed it and checked the screen, it wasn't Devlin.

"Hey, Winnie," I said miserably.

"Hey." Her voice was soft. "Just checking on you. Are you okay?"

"Yes and no."

"How was Thanksgiving?"

"Fine, I guess. Lonely."

"Oh, Lex. I'm sorry. I wish I knew what to say."

"Say it's my fault for falling for the wrong guy. For confusing what was pretend with something real. That's how desperate I am to be loved."

"It's not your fault," she said firmly. "And you *are* loved." Then she sighed. "But I know what you mean. You want to be loved like *that*."

"I want to be loved like that," I echoed. "I want someone who can't live without me. No, you know what? I want someone who *could* live without me but doesn't want to. I want him to *choose* a life with me, because I make him happy."

"You'll find him, honey."

“Maybe someday,” I said, although the thought of being with anyone but Devlin made my stomach hurt. “But first I have to get divorced.”

“I bet it will be quick. You weren’t married that long. Doesn’t that make it easier?”

“I have no idea. But nothing about this is easy.” I lifted my left hand and stared at the band I couldn’t bring myself to take off. “Nothing.”

\* \* \*

At lunchtime, Gran poked her head in and tried to coax me downstairs for a turkey sandwich.

“I’m not hungry, Gran.”

“I don’t care. I’m your grandmother, and I need to feed you. You’ll make me feel bad if you don’t come down and eat.” She paused. “Besides, I want to talk to you.”

Sighing, I hauled myself out of bed and followed her downstairs. At the table were two sandwiches and two cups of tea. Ignoring the food, I picked up the tea and took a sip.

Gran sat across from me. “Alexandra, I’ve been thinking.”

“About what?”

“About the will.”

“What about it?”

“Maybe it’s outdated.”

“It’s *one hundred percent* outdated, Gran.” I set my cup down. “But you and Grandpa were right. I can’t run this place on my own. It’s too much.”

“You once mentioned a partner,” she said. “Now that you’ve got your business loan and your blueprints and your renovation going, maybe you could find someone.”

“Maybe.” But I just wanted Devlin. It was *our* business loan and *our* blueprints and *our* renovation. I wanted to share

it with him.

“Would you prefer to sell?”

My head came up sharply. “What? No! No.” I frowned. “Sorry, Gran. I’m out of it today. I would love the opportunity to find a business partner and continue with the remodel and reopening if you’re up for letting me try it without a husband.”

“I think you’ve earned a shot to make your parents proud,” Gran said with a smile. “I’ll do anything I can to help you.”

“Thank you, Gran.” My eyes teared up, and I blinked them away. “I appreciate that. But what about Tabitha? She wants money. She’s going to fuss.”

Gran waved a hand in the air. “You leave Tabitha to me. I’ll give her the pearls early. Between you and me, they’re imitation anyway. Fool girl can’t even tell the difference.”

Despite my broken heart, I laughed.

\* \* \*

Mustering some energy, I took a shower, got dressed, braided my hair, and went over to the lodge. Letting myself into my grandfather’s old office, I sat at his desk, opened my laptop, and started researching the process for hiring a business partner.

A couple hours had gone by when my phone rang, and I saw that it was Luke DeVries, the chief lift operations manager.

“Hey Luke.”

“Hey Lexi, sorry to bother you, but we’re having an issue with the arrival station of the Northland lift. Got a minute to go up there?”

“Sure. Is the lift running now?”

“Yeah. No issues at the point of departure. I’ll meet you there.”

“Sounds good. I’ll be there in five.”

I bundled up in my coat and hat, tugging on my mittens as I walked over to the lift station at the base of the mountain. It was one of the older ones, so it didn't surprise me that there might be an issue with it, but hopefully we could get it sorted out by the time we opened tomorrow morning. Thanksgiving weekend was popular for hikers.

Daylight was fading behind the mountain, and the air was chilly. A few dry snowflakes drifted down from the pewter sky. Luke saw me and waved. "Ready?"

"Ready!"

He and I caught one of the cars going up. As we ascended the slope, I thought about Devlin's fear of riding the chairlift, how I'd never been able to convince him to ride it up to the top so I could show him the place that was so special to me.

Then again, maybe he wouldn't have cared.

"How was your Thanksgiving?" Luke asked.

"Low key. Yours?"

"Great. We hosted this year." He started telling me all about who'd come to his house, what they'd served, how they'd cooked the turkey, the seating arrangements, and the football they'd watched. He talked so much I didn't even get a chance to ask him what was wrong with the lift.

At the top, we unloaded easily, and I looked around to see what could be wrong. "Seems okay to me," I said. "Where's the issue?"

"Right here," said a familiar voice from behind me.

I spun around and gasped. Devlin had come out from the station house and was walking toward me. Quickly I looked back at Luke, who was already jumping on a car to ride back down.

"Lift will keep running," he called with a wave. "I'll wait at the bottom. Take your time."

Turning my attention back to Devlin, I watched him come closer as the butterflies awakened in my stomach and flew madly about. "Devlin? What is this?"

“This is a lot of things.” He was close enough for me to see the blue of his eyes, which appeared indigo in the twilight. “This is I’m sorry. This is I love you. This is I want you to be my wife.”

My knees buckled, and Devlin grabbed me by the arms to keep me upright. “Sorry,” I said, leaning into him. “But can you say all that again? Starting from the beginning? And maybe go slower this time? Elaborate a bit?”

“Sure.” A grin overtook his face. “I’m sorry for not realizing sooner that staying here is what I want—not just for one year or five years, but as long as you’re here and you want me by your side. If that’s forever, then I’ll stay forever.”

“Oh my God,” I croaked. “Do you mean it?”

“Yes. I want to stay—if that will make you happy. Because I love you.”

“I love you too,” I said breathlessly. “I don’t know how it happened.”

He shrugged. “We’ve got good chemistry. All the sex didn’t hurt, either.”

I laughed. “No, it didn’t.”

“So you’re okay with this? You forgive me for thinking I could walk away?”

“Of course I do.” I tapped his chest with my mittened hand. “But say the thing about wanting me to be your wife again.”

“I will,” he said, gently pushing me away so I balanced on my feet again. Then he knelt down. “But it requires a little choreography.”

I gasped and covered my mouth with my mittens as he pulled a small box from his coat pocket. When he opened it up, a gorgeous rectangular green stone caught the last rays of daylight, shimmering with hues of emerald and sage and forest. On either side, two tiny diamonds rested within a slender gold band. I’d never seen anything like it.

Nor had I ever experienced anything like the dizzying, heart-throbbing experience of seeing Devlin down on one knee, looking up at me like I was the only woman in the world. Snowflakes continued to fall softly around us.

“Lexi, you are the love of my life,” he said. “You’ve shown me that stillness isn’t something to be afraid of, it’s something to be savored. I have so many dreams for us, and I know they will take a lot of work and energy and money and time and sacrifice. But as long as I get to be still with you at the end of the day, it will always be worth it.” He took the ring from the box, and I yanked off my mitten. Slipping the ring on my finger so it snuggled up against my wedding band, his voice cracked as he said, “You are my wife. You are my family. You are my forever.” He looked up at me with shiny sapphire eyes. “Marry me for real this time?”

“Of course I will.” I dropped to my knees and threw my arms around his neck, crushing my lips to his. “Of course I will.”

He held me close and kissed me deeply, gathering all my dreams in his hands. I knew he would make them come true.

Eventually, Devlin helped me to my feet. “When should we get married?”

“You want to actually get married again?”

“Yes. You deserve a real wedding, where you come down the steps at Snowberry wearing Gran’s veil and carrying a real bouquet of roses, and all our family and friends are there to witness it.”

“Eeep!” I squealed. “I would love that! We’ll have to wait until the renovation is done. Spring?”

“Whatever makes you happy.”

I threw my arms around him again, squeezing my eyes shut. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too. I even rode the chairlift for you.”

Keeping my hands clasped around his neck, I leaned back. “How was it?”



“Fucking *terrible*,” he said. “I hated every second.” He kissed my lips. “But worth it. I wanted to say all this in the place I knew meant the most to you.”

I grinned, my body humming with joy. “The future home of The Firefly.”

“Yes.” He rested his forehead against mine. “I love thinking about the future with you.”

“What do you see?”

“A house with a big backyard. Kids begging me for piggyback rides. *Maybe* a nice car in the garage.”

I laughed. “That sounds perfect. Can I ask what made you change your mind?”

“Well, for one thing, when I woke up without you the morning you left, I hated everything about it. I wanted you back right then.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” I shook my head. “I thought you didn’t care!”

“I wanted to—I almost did—a hundred times. I was so fucking miserable. I drove to Cherry Tree Harbor and talked to Xander, and he said some things that made me realize I was standing in my own way.”

“What did he say?”

“I think it was essentially the equivalent of him up in the tree telling me to stop being a chicken-shit and climb it.”

I laughed. “The tree all over again, huh? At least you didn’t fall this time.”

“Oh, I fell,” he said, that grin that stole my heart the night we met appearing. “I fell hard.”

“But I caught you,” I whispered, tucking my head beneath his chin, my cheek pressed to his chest. “And I’ll never let go.”

\* \* \*

Getting Devlin back on the chairlift took some coaxing.

“I’ll walk down.”

“Devlin, stop. It’s too dark.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“It’s too cold, and you don’t even have a hat.”

“I have body heat.”

“Listen, I know all about your body heat, and I’m not letting you walk down this mountain alone in the dark because I want to take advantage of it later.”

He groaned as I tugged him over to the station. “Are you trying to distract me with sex?”

“Yes, is it working?”

“Sort of.” We stood in place and waited for the lift to come up behind us. “If I die, go on without me.”

“Oh, Lord. You’re not gonna die. Come on, here we go.” The car scooped us up, and we sat down on the bench. “There, see?”

Devlin quickly pulled the safety bar down. “Is he going to slow it down for us to get off?”

“I will text him right now and tell him we’re coming.” Pulling my phone from my coat pocket, I sent Luke a note. “So he was in on this scheme, huh?”

“He was. I needed him.”

“Was Gran in on it, by chance?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Because this afternoon she told me that she’d been thinking, and she decided to give me a chance to run this place on my own if I still wanted to.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. I told her that I’d been thinking too, and I realized she and Grandpa had probably been right that it’s too much for one person, so I was going to find a business partner.”

“A business partner, huh?” He put an arm around me.

“Yes. I’ll be accepting applications soon, and I hope you’ll submit one.”

He laughed. “I might. Does the job come with a corner office?”

“No, but it comes with me in your bed every night for the rest of your life.”

“Sold.”

I leaned against him, tugged my mitten off, and held out my hand. “This ring. I can’t stop looking at it. I can’t wait to show it off to Tabitha!”

He laughed. “She’ll probably turn up her nose because it isn’t a diamond.”

“I don’t give a shit about diamonds. This is so beautiful! Is it an emerald?”

“It’s a teal sapphire.”

“I love it.” I tipped my head onto his shoulder. “And I love you.”

“I love you too. But I *hate* this chairlift. Is it supposed to swing like this?”

“Yes.” I laughed and pulled my mitten back on. “But you never have to ride it again. I’ll teach our kids how to ski.”

“Perfect. I’ll teach them how to talk their mom into getting what they want.”

“You are good at that,” I said.

He squeezed me a little tighter and put his lips at my ear. “It’s a gift.”

TWENTY-SIX

*epilogue*

“LEXI, stop peeking around that corner! Someone’s going to see you down there!”

“So what?”

“So the groom isn’t supposed to see the bride before the ceremony,” Winnie chided, fussing with my veil again. “It’s bad luck.”

Laughing, I turned and faced her. “We’re already married, Win. This is just for fun. And that tradition isn’t about bad luck, it’s about the parents who’d arranged the marriage not wanting the groom to get a look at his bride before the knot was tied in case he saw her and changed his mind. I don’t think Devlin is going to back out when he sees me.”

She grinned. “He sure isn’t. You look gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” I was wearing a fitted white lace dress that came down to my knees and showed off my curves. Over the sweetheart under-bodice, the lace extended up to a crew neck and down into three-quarter sleeves. The back dipped into a V above a tiny vertical row of buttons running from the middle of my shoulder blades to my tailbone. On my feet I wore satin heels, and on my head, Gran’s lace-edged veil was pinned, the tulle floating gracefully around my shoulders. In my hands was a bouquet of white roses. And at my ears were the pearl earrings my father-in-law had returned to me.

“I’m going to go sit with Dex. Are you all good?”

I nodded. “Couldn’t be better.”

She smiled with bright eyes and gave me a loose hug. “I want to squeeze you, but I don’t want to mess you up.”

“Squeeze me later,” I told her with a laugh.

“Okay. I’ll get everyone in their places and cue the string quartet,” she said, going into wedding planner mode. “You know when to start down?”

“Yes.”

She blew me a kiss. “I’m so happy for you.” Then she disappeared, leaving me with a moment to myself.

At the top of the stairs where I waited was a huge window that looked out on the mountain. It was a gorgeous May evening, warm and fragrant with the spring flowers my mom had taught me to identify—white trillium and wild columbine and Virginia bluebells. The sky was fading from a brilliant cerulean to a hazy orange on the horizon, with clouds scattered above the trees.

I couldn’t believe how fast winter had gone. Just yesterday it seemed like Devlin and I were sitting on my couch looking at his sketch, and now phase one was complete. We had started taking reservations beginning the first of March, offering fantastic spa packages for girls’ weekends, romantic breakfast-in-bed weekends, and wine tasting dinners for foodies. Both Winnie and Ellie had been incredible resources, and Ellie’s husband Gianni had helped us put together an exciting menu that highlighted locally grown foods as much as possible. Tabitha had even proved herself useful as social media manager and head of PR, enticing bloggers and content creators in the travel space to come give the new Snowberry Lodge a try.

Bob Oliver had dropped her like a stone once it had been clear that she was not going to deliver what he wanted, and she’d been so furious, she sent proof of his cheating to McKenna, who’d promptly dumped him. He’d been fired from Hotchkiss a day later.

“He shouldn’t have messed with me,” Tabitha said with a shrug. “Hell hath no fury and all that.”

She was still grumpy about “her money,” but we’d convinced her that the better Snowberry did, the more she stood to inherit down the road. We’d offered her a good salary with lots of perks, and she seemed happy.

So far, the response to the changes at Snowberry had been fantastic, and we’d booked up fast. Our designer had leaned into the Scandinavian feel I’d suggested, with lots of warm wood, big windows, and pale stone. People loved the roomy, refurbished guest rooms, and the restaurant, named Skadi after the Norse goddess of winter, was packed every night. The bar Austin had made out of reclaimed wood for Snö, our new cocktail lounge, was a showpiece. Architecture and design magazines had even featured it on their pages.

We’d updated the lifts, groomed new hiking trails, and put in the saltwater grotto, which I had to admit, was everything Devlin said it would be. This summer, phase two would begin—Firefly would be a reality by the time we opened for ski season.

The only change we’d made to our original plans involved Lake Otter. The idea had come to me in a dream, in which I’d seen groups of kids splashing around in the water, singing songs around a campfire, and eating meals at long picnic tables in the sunshine. I sat up in bed the next morning and pitched it to Devlin.

Great Lakes Camp Lemonade.

“I love the idea. But are you sure, Lexi?” Devlin asked me.

“Of course I’m sure. I can’t think of anything that would make my parents happier. They’d be so proud.”

“It’s a good chunk of land.”

“It’s going to be put to good use.”

“What about Gran?”

“What about her? I think she’ll be thrilled to see a pocket of Snowberry transformed for such a good cause. Maybe we can name the girls’ cabin after her.”

“That’s a great idea.”



I tossed my hair. “I’m full of them. *Husband.*”

“I just want to be certain you’re not doing this because you think you owe me something.” He put his hands on my hips and pulled me close. “You don’t.”

I tapped my fingers against his chest. “Hey, do you want to close this deal or what?”

He laughed. “I want to close the deal.”

We’d applied for grants and worked with the existing organization to raise funds, and work would begin this summer. By next summer, we’d be open to campers. Sara had made us promise to save a spot for her, and she said when she was old enough, she wanted to be a counselor.

Sara was downstairs now, seated next to her mom. It wasn’t a large wedding, but everyone who mattered to us was down there—all of Devlin’s siblings, his niece and nephew, Veronica and Kelly, Ari, Winnie and Dex, Ellie and Gianni, Gran and Tabitha.

When I heard the quartet start playing our song—Elvis’s “It’s Now or Never”—I nearly turned away from the window. But then two tiny moving lights caught my eye on the other side of the glass. I gasped, moving closer. Flitting wildly about just outside the window was a pair of fireflies. My eyes filled with tears, but a sweet calm washed over me, and I smiled. I knew what they meant.

“I see you,” I whispered, touching my heart. “And I know you’re with me.” After a deep, steadying breath, I walked to the top of the stairs and started down.

When I came into view, everyone stood and looked up at me. It’s a little disconcerting to descend a staircase in a spotlight like that, but I took my time and tried to savor the moment—I’d dreamed about this ever since I was a kid. At the foot of the stairs, my father-in-law waited with an expression of pure joy on his face. He offered me an arm, and I slipped my hand inside his elbow, giving him a grateful smile.

We turned to walk up the aisle toward the fireplace, where Devlin waited for me, Dash standing proudly behind him.

Only I knew that beneath the dark suit Devlin wore, under the left sleeve of his white dress shirt, was a tattoo on his inner forearm—a firefly. He’d surprised me with it last week. “I thought of something I want to mark on my body permanently,” he’d said. “Something I know I’ll always love.”

I’d burst into tears, of course, which made him laugh and pull me close.

To my right and left, I heard sniffles and murmurs as we moved slowly toward the love of my life. When we reached him, George kissed my cheek and gave his son a hug before taking the seat next to Mabel in the front row.

Winnie stepped forward to take my roses, and I turned to face my husband. He took both my hands in his. Mouthed the words *my wife*. Made me feel more loved and wanted and cherished than any ring on my finger or traditional vows ever could.

“Welcome,” said Elvis, whom we’d hunted down and flown in for the occasion. “We are gathered here today to join two hearts in everlasting love—again.”

Our guests laughed.

“I’ll marry this woman as many times as she’ll let me,” said Devlin.

My heart was too full to speak, but I knew he could read on my face what I felt.

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THE END

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## *about the author*

Melanie Harlow likes her heels high, her martini dry, and her history with the naughty bits left in. She's the author of over 30 contemporary romances.

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