



Snowed in
with the
Single Dad

EMMA REESE

SNOWED IN WITH THE
SINGLE DAD

A BILLIONAIRE SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE

EMMA REESE

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EPILOGUE

SNEAK PEEK

INTRODUCTION

There's a snowstorm outside and I'm stuck in a cabin with a silver fox, billionaire, single dad...

My forgotten next door neighbor and bestie, Owen.

The blizzard outside is wild. Trapping us together in this secluded cabin.

We'd only reunited a few days earlier, en route to the Swiss Alps.

And now, our childhood connection has us glued together again, sparking a long buried passion about to explode.

The fireplace is crackling, and our desire is burning.

We're making up for lost time, exploring each other with serious intensity.

His touch is consuming me - the real world has vanished.

Owen's not the boy I used to know. He's all grown up and dangerously hot.

Bounded by the falling snow outside, we're compelled to share our deepest secrets.

The first light peeks through after the blizzard and we emerge changed.

Our bond is stronger, rekindling a lost love.

With our dream vacation coming to an end, Owen drops to one knee.

Leaving a life changing question hanging in the air.

The big moment is here.
It's going to change *everything*.

SKYE

Every year, my family goes on an extravagant vacation for the winter holidays. We spend the entire year planning and preparing for a two-week Christmas and New Year vacation, but all the planning in the world couldn't have prepared me for what happened this year.

As the self-appointed type-A planner of the family, I took it upon myself to make sure everyone had their tickets, passports, and other documents to travel across the ocean to Switzerland. My parents and brother and sister and I had all been to Europe before, but none of my nieces or nephews had, so it added a new layer of challenge to make sure they were prepared just as well as we were.

Though I didn't have kids of my own, I wanted to make sure everything ran as smoothly as possible. It was a long journey from New York for me, but it was even longer for the rest of my family, who were all scattered around the country in Texas, California, and Montana.

Normally, our Christmas vacations take place a bit closer to home, but we wanted to go all out this year. It was going to be a once-in-a-lifetime trip for all of us, and *nothing* was going to go wrong.

But of course, even the best-laid plans can falter. Unexpected things happen all the time, and there is nothing we can do to stop them.

“MOM, are you sure you have everything packed?” I asked as I raced around my apartment, running down my checklist for the millionth time.

“Yes, honey. I think so.”

“You think so? That doesn’t make me feel great.”

“Well, if it’s not packed by now, it’s probably not that important.”

“Did you look over the packing list I sent you?”

“You sent me a packing list?”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes, even though I knew she couldn’t see me.

“Yes. I sent everyone a packing list over a month ago. It should be in your email.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you know I don’t check that.”

“Well, I need you to check it because it has your flight information and your packing list. Please look at it today.”

“Okay, I will.”

“You promise?”

“Yes, just as soon as I remember my password.”

I let out a long sigh, no longer caring if she knew how exasperated I was.

“Never mind. I’ll just send it in a text. Just make sure you look at it, and make sure dad gets all packed, too.”

“We don’t leave for two more weeks. I don’t see what the big rush is.”

“Mom, you know I’ll feel better if you just have everything ready to go, okay? I don’t want a repeat of last year.”

“Oh, everything worked out fine last year.”

“Eventually, yes it did, but I would really rather not rebook your airport transportation and flights if I don’t have to.”

“Alright, sweetie, I will start packing tonight.”

“Start packing? You just told me you have everything packed.”

“Well, I know where everything is I need to pack.”

“Goodbye, mom.”

“I love you!”

“Love you, too.”

I ended the call and tossed my phone onto my bed. I loved the woman, but she didn't like to make things easy on me.

ON MY SECOND to last day of work before the trip, I had about a million meetings to attend and projects to wrap up, and the stress of my job was not helping with the stress of everything else.

I was the project manager for a major advertising agency in New York, and there was never a quiet moment in my office. I always had people coming in and out, asking questions, presenting ideas, and seeking advice about their tasks.

As much as I loved my job, I looked forward to this two-week break with eager anticipation every year. It was the only time I ever took off, and I needed it if I was going to make it through another year.

On this particular afternoon, I was presenting the marketing package for a new client to the CEO and other executives of the company. I put on my best black suit, my favorite pumps, and pulled my hair back into a neat twist.

These meetings used to send me into a panic, but after over a decade of working in the field, I felt very confident each time I stepped into the board room. I knew I was good at my job, and everyone else knew it, too.

AFTER MY PRESENTATION, which was flawless, I might add, I went back upstairs to my office to wrap up a final few things. When I looked at my calendar, however, I was met with a

surprise. My boss had scheduled a meeting with me for three PM the following day.

Normally, it wouldn't be a problem, but I needed to be at the airport with all of my luggage by five PM. I was going to need a miracle if I was going to make it in time. Unfortunately, there was no chance my boss would reschedule, as he was a very rigid man.

I packed my bag and headed home, preparing to call each one of my family members to make sure they were ready to go. I just needed to make sure none of them found out there was a chance I was going to miss my flight.

I STARTED with my little sister, Sierra, who I knew would be the least prepared out of everyone. Despite being nearly 35-years-old, she was a scatter-brain and needed a lot of prodding to make sure she was ready for vacation every year. When I called, her 15-year-old daughter, Amelia, answered the phone.

“Hey, Auntie Skye.”

“Hi, Amelia, how are you?”

“I'm fine. And I'm all packed if that's what you're calling about.”

“Well, I knew you would be all packed, but how is your mom doing? And the littles?”

Sierra had had Amelia when she was in college, and then several years later when she got married, she had three more kids, who were all currently under the age of five. Ethan, and the twins, Eva and Mae.

“Um... well...”

“Uh oh, that doesn't sound good.”

“I'm trying to help her, but you know how she is.”

“I know. Can I talk to her?”

I heard Amelia shout “Mom!” through their house, and when that didn't work, she finally got her attention by yelling “Sierra Marie Clawson!”

“Hey Skye!”

“Sierra, are you packed at all?”

“Of course I am.”

“That’s not what Amelia tells me.”

“Oh, she’s always trying to get me in trouble.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. If I didn’t know any better, I would say Amelia was my daughter and not hers. She was just as organized and thorough as I was, and she thrived on strict plans and to-do lists.

“What do you still have left to pack?”

“Oh, just some stuff for the kids.”

“So your bag is ready to go? And Greg’s?”

“You worry too much.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Just try to relax, sis, everything is going to be fine.”

“When have you ever seen me relax? You know you have to be at the airport at seven AM tomorrow, right?”

“I’m aware.”

“That means you need to arrive at seven. Not leave your house at seven.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, too.”

Sierra’s family lived in Southern California, making their journey the longest out of everyone’s. I had to admit I did not envy the fact they were going to be flying halfway around the world with three little kids and a teenager.

“Can you switch to a video call?” Sierra asked.

“Um, sure.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear to look at the screen. Sierra’s shiny blonde hair came into view, and her grey eyes sparkled in the light of her bedroom lamp. Amelia was lounging on the bed behind her, a spitting image of her mother.

I had always envied Sierra's looks. I had come to accept my dirty-blonde hair and boring brown eyes a long time ago, but I still got a tad bit jealous every time I saw Sierra's effortless beauty.

"Amelia, how do I turn this around again?" Amelia sighed and got off the bed to tap the screen of Sierra's phone and turn the camera around to show me a row of five neatly packed suitcases lying on the floor.

"Wow, I'm impressed."

"Amelia's is in her room, so don't worry about that one."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"Will you stop worrying now? I even used the packing list you sent to make sure we had everything."

"You used the packing list? Amelia, are you hearing this?"

"I forced her to," Amelia said from her perch on the bed, without looking up from her phone.

"So, you guys are all set? You have your boarding passes? Passports? Car seats?"

"We have it all, Skye. You can go bother someone else now."

"Alright, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

I let out a long sigh of relief as I ended the call. At least I could check them off my list, which I immediately did. Did I have a physical list with all the names of my family members on it? Of course, I did.

NEXT, I called my brother Luke, and his husband Taylor. Between the two of them, I was certain I didn't need to worry about anything, but I figured I would give them a call anyway. When Luke answered the phone, however, I found I was completely wrong.

“Hi, Skye. It’s not a great time right now,” Luke called over the sound of screaming kids and a barking dog in the background.

“Um, sorry. I just wanted to make sure you guys were all ready to go for tomorrow.”

“Penelope, do not hit your brother!” Luke said, sounding exasperated. “I’ll have to call you back later, okay? We’ll be ready.”

Luke ended the call before I could get in another word. I looked down at my list of names and put a big circle around Luke and Taylor.

THE FINAL PEOPLE I needed to check on were my parents, and with all the hounding I had been doing over the last two weeks, I prayed they would be ready to go, and heading to bed soon.

“Mom? Mom? Hello? Can you hear me?”

“Skye?”

“Yes, Mom, it’s Skye. Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you. Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you just fine.”

“Oh, why did you say you couldn’t hear me?”

“I didn’t.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“How are you, sweetheart? Did you have a nice day at work?”

“It was fine, thanks. I’m just calling to make sure you and Dad are ready to go.”

“Of course we are. We were ready a week ago, just like you told us to be.”

“That’s great. You have your boarding passes and passports?”

“Yes, well...they were just here.”

I sighed and shook my head.

“Brent, where are the passports?”

“The what?” I heard my dad call from the other side of the house.

“The passports!”

“I don’t know!”

“I gave them to you.”

“You did? Where are they?”

“That’s what I want to know!”

“Mom. Mom!” I shouted into my phone.

“Oh, sorry, sweetie, I just don’t remember where I put them.”

“You need to find them before you go to bed, okay? Your ride is picking you up at 10 AM.”

“I know, dear. I’ll find them before then.”

“Alright, see you tomorrow.”

“I love you! Sleep tight!”

“Love you, too.”

I hung up and realized I would not be getting any sleep that night. Besides the fact that I now had to worry about making my own flight, I also had to call Luke back, and make sure my parents found their passports. At least I didn’t have to worry about Sierra for once in my life.

I knew all of the stress and chaos would be worth it if we could just get everyone to Switzerland in one piece. It wasn’t going to be easy, but I was going to make damn sure it was the best vacation we had ever had.

OWEN

“Girls,” I called from the bottom of the stairs, “where are my ski goggles?”

I heard giggling from around the corner, and started marching up the steps to see what all the commotion was about. I rounded the corner, and my two darling daughters were in fits of laughter wearing all of my ski gear. Helmet, goggles, gloves, and more were spread up and down the hallway as they tried to escape my grasp.

“Hey! Get back here!”

More giggles, which made it difficult for them to run. Laila looked back at me over her shoulder, her curly red hair bouncing as she ran.

“Run, Cora! He’s going to catch us!”

Cora glanced back at me, but then tripped over her own feet and went flying to the floor. I paused for a moment, waiting for the inevitable tears, but they never came. Instead, she started laughing and laughing, and Laila and I couldn’t help but join in.

I scooped my little 3-year-old into my arms and hugged her close.

“That was a big fall. Are you okay?”

She nodded her head and tried to free herself from my arms, but I carried her down the length of the hallway and into the girls’ bedroom. Despite having plenty of extra space and spare bedrooms, the girls insisted on sharing a room.

“Alright, girls, we’re leaving for our trip tomorrow. Let’s make sure we have everything packed.”

“Daddy,” Cora’s little voice called from her bed where I placed her, “can I bring Mr. Flopsy?”

She clutched her stuffed bunny to her chest and stared at me with big, green eyes. She had eyes exactly like her mother’s, and I wouldn’t dare say no to such an innocent request.

“Of course you can. We can’t go on a family vacation without Mr. Flopsy.”

“If she brings Mr. Flopsy, I want to bring Dee Dee!” Laila argued as she held her stuffed lion above her head, jumping up and down.

“Alright Laila, you can bring Dee Dee.”

“Daddy?” the girls both asked in unison.

“One stuffed animal each. Pick your favorite one. But no more than that, okay?”

They grumbled their agreement and started searching through all of their choices. While they debated, I searched their suitcases to ensure they had everything they needed. Our wonderful nanny, Beth, had been slowly packing for them over the last week, and I trusted her completely to make sure they were ready to go, but it still made me feel better to take a look for myself.

I walked over to each of the girls’ beds and placed a kiss on the top of their heads. I read them a story, and then turned the lights out as I left the room.

I walked down the long hallway to my bedroom and flicked on the light. Unfortunately, I didn’t have anyone to pack for me, and my suitcase sat empty in a corner, just a few pairs of socks tossed inside it. I flopped down onto the bed and closed my eyes.

This was our fourth year in a row of going on a Christmas vacation, ever since Cora was just 9 months old, and I feared it

would never get any easier, but staying home wasn't an option, either.

BEFORE MY WIFE'S PASSING, she loved Christmas. It was her favorite holiday, and she always went all out with decorating, baking, and gift-giving. She was a phenomenal person whose essence was Christmas.

She'd start decorating the week before Thanksgiving, and it seemed overnight, our apartment turned from a normal home into something you'd see in a Christmas catalog or a Hallmark movie. I wasn't sure how she did it, and she wouldn't ever let me help her.

"This is like therapy for me," she'd say. "I love doing it, and I like to see your face when you wake up in the morning and see it all done."

I learned early on in our relationship not to argue with her. But the truth of the matter was she was usually right. Okay, she was pretty much always right. It was easier if I just went along with what she told me to do.

The last Christmas we got to spend with her was definitely the hardest, but we tried to make the most of it. Rachel was weak and tired. She spent more time in bed than she did out of it, but she still had a smile on her face.

She was pregnant with Cora, and we had just received her cancer diagnosis. There was very little that her doctors could do to treat the cancer while she was pregnant, so all we could do was wait and see what happened after the baby was born.

But by then it was too late. The cancer had spread throughout her body and completely taken over. She decided to forgo treatments that would have only prolonged the inevitable, and enjoy what little time she had left with me and our two perfect daughters.

When she passed, Cora was just 12 weeks old, and Laila was approaching her second birthday. I never knew how much grief one person could handle until I had to watch my wife suffer and die. I thought there was no way I was going to make

it through those first few months, but three years later, I was somehow still standing and surviving each day.

As Christmas approached that year, I knew there was no way I could pull out the decorations. That was Rachel's realm, and I didn't dare try to intrude on something she loved so much. I attempted to make gingerbread cookies for the girls, but they turned out as solid as a rock. When I wrapped the presents I bought, it never looked as nice as Rachel's did, and I had no idea how she made such perfect bows on the top of each box.

We needed to get out of the house and go as far away as possible for as long as possible. That first year, we spent the entire month of December in Australia. Though it was Christmastime there, too, the fact that it was summer made everything feel a bit less Christmassy and sad.

Since then, we have spent Christmas in Fiji, Maldives, and Bali. Each year, trying to find somewhere warm and tropical to spend the holiday and escape the winter depression that New York City inevitably sent me into each year.

This year, however, I decided it was time to do something different. The truth of the matter was, Laila and Cora would have very limited memories of their mother, if any at all. I shouldn't deprive them of a magical Christmastime just because of my memories associated with the holiday.

I still wasn't ready to stay home, but I was ready to have a white Christmas and do all of the special things that came with it. So, I booked a trip to a small skiing town in Switzerland and never looked back.

I PEELED myself off the bed and decided it was finally time to start packing my bag. I looked at my watch and realized I had less than 10 hours until we had to be at the airport, and half of that time would surely be spent trying to get the girls out the door.

There was a knock on the bedroom door, and when I opened it, I was surprised to see my housekeeper standing on

the other side.

“Elaine? What are you still doing here? It’s late.”

“Well, I was on my way out, but I saw your skiing gear scattered down the hallway,” she said, her arms full of my belongings.

“Oh, right. I meant to go pick those up.”

“I hope you enjoy your vacation. You’re going to have a wonderful time.”

“Thanks,” I said quietly as I started to take my things from her.

“Pardon my intrusion, but is everything okay, Mr. Anderson.”

“Yes—um—you know, this is just a hard time of year.”

She nodded her head sympathetically. She had been working for me since I bought the apartment ten years ago, just after Rachel and I got married. She saw first-hand how rapidly she declined, and how her death broke me.

“She wants you to be happy, you know.”

“I know.”

“Try to enjoy your time with your lovely daughters. They need you.”

“I know they do.”

“Can I assist you with anything tonight?”

“No, Elaine. Go home and get some rest. Thank you for everything.”

She smiled as she turned around and disappeared down the hallway. I knew she was right, but it was nearly impossible to enjoy this time of year without feeling like I was forgetting Rachel and the insurmountable joy she brought to my life.

AFTER FINALLY GETTING my bag packed and making sure we had everything we needed for a long day of travel, I crawled

into bed, knowing it was going to be a rough day tomorrow. Even with Beth's help, traveling with a five-year-old and a three-year-old was never easy.

I rolled over and gazed at the picture of our family on the wall next to the bed. It was taken on Christmas morning, the first year after Rachel and I were married. Her red hair looked even more fiery than it had in person, and every time I saw a photo, I was so glad Laila had inherited her mother's hair. I never wanted to forget the exact shade of red.

We had the smiles of two people who thought life would be that simple forever. We were young and in love, and it seemed nothing in the world could bring us down.

We were standing in front of our 12-foot-tall Christmas tree, the one Rachel insisted we travel upstate to chop down ourselves. There had been a terrible storm a few days prior, but she still insisted we go. We trekked through feet of snow to find the perfect tree, and it was not an easy task. She had high standards, and she wasn't going to rest until we found one that was full on every side, tall but not too tall, and had the right "aura" as she put it.

By the time we strapped the tree to the truck we rented to haul it home, the snow had started up again, and we knew there was no way we were going to make it back that night.

I searched for a hotel nearby with availability, but nearly everything was booked. Rachel never complained or said a negative word the entire day, even when we ended up sleeping in a dirty motel off the freeway.

It was one of the things I loved the most about her; she was sunny and positive, even when no one else around her was. That's not to say she didn't have bad days. She did. As we all do. But she seemed to handle them better than most people. It's something I have tried to implement into my own life, and something I hope my daughters will learn from me, too.

Even on our worst days, there are still plenty of positives if we just search for them.

I closed my eyes so I couldn't see the picture anymore, and I tried to clear my mind. I needed to stop thinking about the past and focus on the adventure I was about to take my girls on. They needed a dad who was fully present and ready to treat them to their best Christmas yet.

SKYE

This was a terrible start to my vacation. My three o'clock meeting had been pushed to three thirty, and it didn't end until nearly five. As my boss spoke to the small group of us who had collected in his office, I paced the floor and checked my watch incessantly.

I needed to go. I needed to get out of there. I was going to miss my flight, and my family would never let me live that down. Plus, I really didn't want to spend the money to book a new last-minute flight.

As the minutes ticked by, I began getting more and more impatient. I knew everyone in the room could sense my unease, but I didn't care. I wasn't the one who scheduled this meeting.

"Are there any questions before we wrap up?" Ron asked the room.

I tapped my toe impatiently as the rest of my colleagues looked around to one another. Just when I thought I was going to escape, Sophie raised her hand.

"Yeah, actually, I do have one quick question about the client's product."

I stared at her with all of the intensity I could muster. I was looking at the back of her head, but I hoped she could feel my disdain anyway. I tried to resist cutting her off, but I desperately needed to leave.

"I'm sorry, Ron, but I need to go. Can you email me the notes from the rest of the meeting?"

He glared at me for the interruption. I knew it was rude and unprofessional, but at that point, I didn't really care.

“Excuse me?”

“I apologize, but I have a flight to catch, and if I don't leave now, I am going to miss it.”

His eyes burned into me. It probably only took him five seconds to speak again, but it felt like an hour. I started to chew my bottom lip when he finally gestured at the door.

“Fine,” he muttered.

I slipped out without looking back, and rushed to my office to grab my suitcase and order my ride to the airport. Despite my panic, I made it there relatively quickly, at least for New York City standards.

WHEN I ARRIVED, however, I was greeted with the longest security line I had ever seen. Fortunately, I traveled enough so I had access to the priority lane, but the line on that side was still about a mile long.

I jumped into the line and glanced at my watch. My flight was supposed to begin boarding in less than half an hour. I knew all my family was probably already at the gate. I made sure all of their connections through New York gave them plenty of time should something unexpected happen.

I also knew that showing up at the last moment was going to haunt me for the rest of my life. Especially after all of my relentless nagging about being on time and making sure they were prepared. If I was lucky, I would get there before they started boarding, but by the looks of it, I wasn't even sure if I was going to make it before they closed the doors.

“Skye Harris?” came a voice from behind me.

I turned around to see an incredibly handsome man standing in line with an older woman and two little girls. He had dark hair and stubble peppered with a bit of grey. His blue eyes were immediately familiar, but I couldn't place him or even remember how I knew him.

“Um, yeah, that’s me,” I said, trying not to stumble over my words in front of this striking man.

“I’m Owen Anderson...we used to be next-door neighbors.”

“Owen Anderson? No way! I haven’t seen you in, like, years!”

“Over 20 years, I think.”

“Has it really been that long? We really got old in a hurry, didn’t we?”

He laughed and the melodic sound instantly brought memories from decades ago rushing back.

I recalled the warm summer afternoons we spent exploring the woods behind our houses, our laughter echoing through the trees as we discovered hidden trails and secret clearings.

I could almost feel the rough bark of the oak tree under my fingers as I reminisced about the countless hours we spent perched on its sturdy branches, dreaming of far-off lands and daring escapades.

The memory of Owen’s encouraging voice drifted back to me, urging me to climb higher, assuring me I was capable of reaching the top. His belief in my abilities had given me the confidence to conquer my fears, not just about climbing trees but about facing challenges in life.

A soft sigh escaped my lips as I remembered our games of tag in the backyard, the feeling of freedom as we raced under the open sky. I cherished those carefree days when time seemed to stretch endlessly before us.

“Well, how have you been? What are you up to these days?” he asked, pulling me out of my memories.

We had been so close as children, but we had started to drift apart in our teenage years. It wasn’t anyone’s fault; we just had different interests and different friends, so our paths began to cross less and less often, even though we lived next door to each other.

A month after high school graduation, his family moved from Texas to Maryland, and that was the last time I ever saw him. Social media wasn't really a thing then, and though we made vague attempts to keep in touch, our relationship quickly slipped through the cracks.

"I'm doing great. I live here in the city now. Actually, I have lived here for about ten years. What about you?"

"I'm in the city, too. Moved here shortly after my parents moved to Maryland."

"And who are these lovely ladies with you today?" I asked, glancing between the old woman and the little girls.

I was pretty sure the old woman wasn't his wife, but I couldn't be entirely certain. He must have caught my glance at her because he smiled at me for a moment before introducing her.

"This is Beth; she's our wonderful nanny."

I wasn't going to judge him for being with a woman who looked at least 30 years older than him, but I had to admit, I was a bit relieved.

"And these are my daughters, Laila and Cora."

Laila smiled up at me and Cora tried to hide her face in her father's leg. I smiled at them and bent down to introduce myself.

"I'm Skye. I knew your daddy when he was about your size," I said, pointing to Laila.

She looked up at Owen, who confirmed my story with a quick nod. When I stood back up, I realized the line in front of me had moved forward quite a ways and I was a bit embarrassed at my lack of awareness.

I just couldn't believe the scrawny, nerdy boy I used to run around my neighborhood with was now a gorgeous and strong man with two beautiful daughters.

"Where are you guys headed?" I asked, unsure about how to phrase the question I really wanted to know.

“Switzerland. We’re taking a ski trip. It’ll be the girls’ first time.”

“You’re joking. I’m going to Switzerland for a ski trip, too.”

Owen smiled again, and it was the same smile I had become so fond of all those years ago.

“Well, maybe I’ll see you on the slopes,” he teased.

“Oh, I doubt that, we’re going to this tiny town way up in the Alps. It hardly ever gets tourists.”

“It wouldn’t happen to be Alpenstille, would it?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. There is no way that this was really happening. It was like the cheesy opening to a bad romantic comedy.

“Yeah, actually, it is. Don’t tell me that’s where you’re going, too?”

“It sure is,” he said with a grin.

I turned back around and realized I had reached the desk to present my passport and boarding pass. I bid Owen and his family farewell as our paths parted from one another, but I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face.

Somehow, running into an old friend just made this stressful and insane day so much better. I looked at my watch and snapped back to reality, suddenly realizing I had only a few minutes left before my flight was supposed to board.

I rushed through the security line and dashed down the stairs and towards my gate. I heard the announcement over the intercom that my flight was boarding now, and I felt my pulse pick up as my forehead started beading with sweat. I really shouldn’t have worn so many layers.

I ARRIVED AT THE GATE, and the boarding area was nearly empty, which meant my entire family was already on the plane. The only other people in the area were Owen, Beth,

Laila, and Cora, who each looked as frazzled as I was sure I did.

“I guess I should have figured we’d be on the same flight,” I said with a smile as I approached them.

Laila looked up at me, smiling as well. She had Owen’s wide grin crossing her entire face. I still hadn’t found out where their mother was or if Owen was still involved with her, but I was certain she was a beautiful woman. Both of his kids were absolutely lovely.

“Hi Skye,” Laila said in a sweet little voice.

“Hi, Laila. You remembered my name!”

“Yeah because it’s like the sky and we’re going to fly in the sky!”

“That’s right, we are,” I said with a chuckle.

“Come on, girls, we need to get on the plane or they’re going to leave without us.”

The look of horror that washed over the two young girls’ faces, I had to admit, was a bit humorous. I tried to hide my smile as I watched them head towards the airline employee patiently waiting for them.

I followed behind and pulled out my boarding pass, and then headed down the long walkway to the plane. I knew my family would be mocking me for the rest of my life for nearly missing the flight, but I was in a bit of a state of bliss, and I wasn’t too concerned about what they thought.

As I waited in the line to find my seat, countless memories of days with Owen came flooding back. Memories I thought were gone forever, and I hadn’t thought about in years.

We used to race our bikes around the block, and he always cheated and cut the corners, but I was too scared to ride on the grass or through the rocks.

In the summer, we spent endless amounts of time searching for frogs in the creek near our house, and then traumatizing our mothers when we brought them home in our hands.

Our bedroom windows faced each other, and I couldn't count the times we tried to make tin can phones and string them between our houses. I had such fond memories of those years, and I hadn't even realized it.

When I stepped onto the plane, I realized I was the last to board, which shouldn't have been a surprise, but there was just one single seat left in first class. The rest of my family were spread throughout the plane, some of them opting for cheaper tickets, and others who wanted to fly in comfort.

As I approached my seat and set my backpack down, I looked across the aisle and spotted Owen and Cora sitting in the row in front of Beth and Laila. Given all of the insane coincidences that had already happened, I shouldn't have been so shocked to see them there.

I settled into my seat and glanced over at Owen who was quietly reading a book to Cora. It warmed my heart to see him as a father, being so gentle with his little girl, and I honestly started to hope I really would run into him on the slopes in Switzerland.

OWEN

*A*s I read the words on the page of Cora's book, I knew I was saying them, but my mind was completely elsewhere. Skye was here. On my flight. Going to the same ski resort. I hadn't seen her in so long, and she looked like she hadn't aged a day.

Meanwhile, I looked like forty years had passed since we had last seen each other, not twenty. The grey throughout my hair and my beard was becoming more and more prominent, and the lines around my eyes and mouth seemed to get deeper each day. I glanced across the aisle at Skye, and there was not a single wrinkle on her face. People always thought her sister Sierra was the more beautiful of the two, but I only ever had eyes for Skye.

She wasn't as "traditionally" beautiful as Sierra, but her brown eyes had a sparkle that I had never seen in anyone else. She was intelligent and thoughtful, and her ambition was definitely one of the most attractive things about her.

I had tried several times while waiting in the security line to see if there was a ring on her finger, but I could never quite catch it. I assumed since she seemed to be traveling alone she was not involved with anyone, but that was impossible to know.

I did take note, however, of the fact that she didn't ask about the girls' mother. I saw the look she gave Beth, and then her sense of relief when I mentioned she was the nanny, but she never asked.

I wasn't sure how to bring it up. I didn't want to just start spilling all of my trauma on her, but I wanted to catch her up on my life. I wanted to hear all about her, as well. I supposed there would be plenty of time for that while on this flight, but I wasn't sure how much I wanted to bother her. It was an overnight trip, after all, and even if I could have stayed up to talk to her, I wasn't sure if she wanted it, too.

I MUST HAVE BEEN STARING TOO LONG, because Skye looked at me and her cheeks turned a slight pink color. I quickly looked away, but the damage was done. I couldn't help myself. She was possibly more stunning than she had been years ago.

She cleared her throat and leaned slightly towards me with a smile edging at the corners of her mouth.

“So,” she said, a bit hesitantly, “is it just the four of you going to Switzerland?”

I knew what she was getting at, and I still hadn't quite figured out how to tell people about Rachel's passing without eliciting sympathetic looks and nods for the remainder of the conversation.

I missed Rachel. I would always miss Rachel, and a piece of my heart would always belong to her. But I knew I needed to move forward with my life, even if only for the girls' sake.

“Yeah, it is. The girls' mother—my wife—passed away a few years ago.”

Skye's head immediately tilted to the side in the look of sympathy and pity that I knew all too well.

“I'm sorry for your loss, Owen. That must have been so hard on you guys.”

“It was, yeah. Thank you for saying that.”

She was quiet for a moment. This was the second part of this conversation I always hated; no one knew what to say next. Myself included.

“I hope you're not spending the holidays alone,” I said, trying to change the subject from my own misery.

“Oh, no. The rest of my family is all on here somewhere,” she said, gesturing around herself.

“Oh really? Your parents, too?”

“Yep, everyone. Sierra and her family, and Luke and his family.”

“I’ll have to say hello to them when we land. I haven’t seen any of them in so long.”

“I’m sure they’ll love to see you. My parents always had a soft spot for you, you know?”

“They did? What do you mean by that?”

“Well, they always wanted me to hang out with you more. They thought you were a good influence on me.”

I couldn’t resist a laugh. Me? A good influence on her? I guess I was always encouraging her to do her homework and get home on time for dinner, but I got us into some pretty dangerous situations as kids.

There was one time when we were playing at the creek, looking for frogs like we always did, and I decided I wanted to build a bridge to cross to the other side. Skye was hesitant, but she gave in eventually. Unfortunately, my bridge building skills were (and still are) completely nonexistent, so the moment we set foot on the contraption, it crumbled below us.

We fell into the creek, onto the slippery and sharp rocks, and got completely soaking wet and muddy. There were even rumors of a rabid badger living near the creek, but no one I knew had ever seen it in person.

We tromped home, trying to come up with a cover story, and I told Skye just to lie and say we got caught in the rain. Never mind the fact that it hadn’t rained in over a month. She agreed, but both of us ended up grounded for far too long.

I found it hard to believe her parents thought of me as a good influence, but I wasn’t going to argue with her about it.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” I said with a laugh. “But they were always so great to me. They were more like parents to me than my mom ever was.”

She smiled sadly. Skye knew all about my dad leaving us when I was just two years old, and my mom's struggles with addiction. My brother and I essentially raised ourselves, which meant we got into some trouble, especially as teenagers.

But Mr. and Mrs. Harris were always next door, waiting for me with open arms. They fed me dinner more times than I can count. They bought me new shoes when mine got a hole worn through the bottom. They helped me take my cat to the vet when I thought for sure she had eaten some of my mom's pills. And they let me stay the night whenever I needed an escape.

"They will be thrilled to see you. And meet your girls."

"I can't wait to see them," I said with a smile.

Skye sat back into her seat, and I hoped the conversation wasn't over, but I wasn't sure what to say next. We used to have such an easy time talking to each other about anything and everything, but time had clearly taken its toll.

"Skye," I said across the aisle.

She turned to me, and I had to pause for a second before I could continue speaking. That sparkle in her eyes was still there. It was like she had a secret; one I could never figure out.

"Yeah?"

"What are you doing for work these days?"

She turned her entire body to face me, and I knew she was ready for a full-on catching-up conversation. To say I was excited would have been an understatement.

"I work for an advertising agency. I am a project manager and I oversee everything that leaves our doors."

"Wow, sounds like a big job."

"It has its moments. I've been with the company for, gosh, ten years now, so it's kind of become second nature."

"Sounds like you enjoy it."

"Oh, I love it. I can't imagine myself doing anything else."

“Isn’t it great when you find things like that?”

She nodded her head and smiled. “What are you up to these days? I remember you had big dreams of making movies before we left for college.”

I cleared my throat. I loved my job, and I was proud of my accomplishments, but I always felt a bit full of myself whenever I talked about them. But Skye knew I wasn’t like that, right?

“Yeah, actually, I do work in the film industry.”

“Oh really? What do you do?”

“I, um, I’m a producer.”

“You’re kidding? That’s incredible! Do you work for a production company, or do you do freelance type work?”

This is the part of the conversation where I always felt the most uncomfortable.

“I actually started my own production company right out of college, and I’m still running it.”

“Owen!” she squealed. “That’s amazing! I always knew you would accomplish your dreams.”

One thing I had always loved about Skye was her ability to get excited for anyone. She was always rooting for the people she cared about, and she celebrated their accomplishments with genuine enthusiasm.

“So, would I know anything you have produced?”

“Um...probably, but I don’t want to sound too braggy about it. Just look for Galaxy Pictures the next time you watch a movie.”

“Galaxy Pictures? Fine, if you won’t tell me, I’ll just have to look it up myself.”

She pulled out her phone and started typing. Her eyes got wide as she looked over the list of movies my company had produced. I had to admit, it was a rather long list of many well-acclaimed movies.

She turned back to face me, and her mouth was agape. I tried to resist the smile that was crossing my face, but it was nearly impossible.

“Well, it seems like you’ve done rather well for yourself in the past fifteen years.”

I shrugged my shoulders. I wasn’t going to deny it. It’s not like my success had happened overnight. It took years of struggle and countless hours of hard work to get to where I was career-wise.

“It has been a wild ride, that’s for sure,” was all I could manage to say.

“Owen, you’re like a big-time producer. I didn’t think you could do all that from New York.”

“Well, I travel to LA pretty often, but for the most part, I can do almost everything from my office in the city.”

“Would you ever move to LA?”

“Oh, absolutely not. I love New York way too much. And I can’t imagine living in a place with so many people in the industry.”

“But you’re in the industry.”

I let out a quick laugh. She was absolutely right, but that didn’t mean I considered myself to be ‘one of them.’ That’s not to say I thought I was better than anyone else in the business, I just seemed to have different priorities than they did, especially since Rachel died.

“Yeah, I am. But I’m not surrounded with people in the industry every day like I would be there. Most of my neighbors are bankers or lawyers or other boring things like that.”

“Where do you live?”

“I—um—I’d rather not say.”

“Oh, come on, Owen. It’s me.”

She was right. It *was* her. The woman I had never really gotten over. The girl who had my heart since I was five years

old. The one who got away.

“I live on the Upper East Side.”

“Oh! fancy!” she said with a mocking tone, but the smile on her face gave her away.

“It’s not that fancy, just happened to be a place available when I was looking.”

“So, what building are you in? A lot of my coworkers live up there.”

“You’re going to judge me so bad if I tell you.”

“I absolutely will not.”

“Fine,” I said with a sigh, “but if I tell you, you can never bring it up again, okay?”

She nodded her head and waited wordlessly.

“I live at—um—Central Park Tower.”

Once again, her mouth dropped open.

“Are you serious?”

“You said you weren’t going to judge me.”

“I’m not! I’m just trying to hold in my jealousy.”

“Oh, come on, it seems like you’re doing really well in your career. I’m sure you have a great place, too.”

“It’s fine. But it’s certainly not on Billionaire’s Row. And it definitely doesn’t have a view of Central Park.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “Please don’t call it that.”

“Well, that’s what it is.”

“I’m sorry,” she said with a laugh, “but I’m going to have to come over and see this place someday.”

Did she just invite herself over to my apartment? My heart started racing with excitement. I was sure it was just a casual hypothetical, but the idea thrilled me nonetheless.

“I guess you’ll have to,” I agreed.

FOR THE REMAINDER of the flight, Skye and I talked here and there, but I was so exhausted I couldn't help but fall asleep a few times. I wanted to be well-rested and ready to hit the slopes when we landed in Switzerland.

She smiled and laughed with as much ease as she ever had, and as our wheels touched the ground, I still couldn't believe my luck she was there with me.

SKYE

When the plane landed in Switzerland, I was giddy with excitement. Not only because I was about to have two incredible weeks with my family, but also because I had reconnected with an old friend. It was like no time had passed. We fell back into our old rhythm with ease. Although, we're both a bit more mature than we were twenty years ago, thankfully.

Growing up, Owen had never really been someone the girls chased after. He was cute and a nice guy, but not much more than that. Clearly, time and wisdom had been good to him. Every time he smiled, the lines around his eyes deepened, indicating a lifetime of laughter and happy memories. When he spoke about the things he was passionate about, his eyes lit up, and his smile encompassed his whole face.

“Skye?” came a voice from the distance, “Skye?”

I realized I had been staring into space. Well, not into space, exactly. I was staring directly at Owen, probably with a silly grin on my face.

“You okay?” he asked.

I brought myself back to reality and blinked away the thoughts that had just been running through my mind.

“What? Oh, yeah, I’m fine.”

I reached to the floor and grabbed my backpack, and started gathering my belongings. I had books, headphones, magazines, snacks, and who knows what else strewn all over

my seat, and I felt a bit embarrassed by the fact that I probably looked like a toddler with all of my stuff everywhere.

AS I PACKED UP, my parents appeared from business class, ready to get off the plane as quickly as possible. They were the type of people to stand up the moment the seatbelt sign was turned off, much to my dismay.

“What are you guys doing up here?”

“What does it look like we’re doing? We’re getting off the plane,” my dad grunted.

Clearly, someone had not gotten much sleep.

“Generally, you’re supposed to let the people in front of you get off first,” I mentioned.

“So, what? You want us to go back to our seats?”

“Well, no, as long as you’re up here, you might as well stay. But they haven’t even opened the door yet.”

I heard stifled laughter coming from behind where my parents were standing, and I just knew Owen was getting a kick out of the whole exchange.

“Mom, Dad, do you remember Owen Anderson?”

My mom tapped her chin, and my dad stared off into the distance.

“He lived next door to us,” I reminded them.

“Oh, yes!” my mother finally exclaimed, her voice much louder than it needed to be. “He was that darling boy you used to run around with all the time. Of course I remember him.”

“Well, turn around. He’s right behind you.”

She turned and squealed like a little girl. Before he could even stand from his seat, my mom wrapped him in a hug, squeezing him until I knew he couldn’t breathe anymore. My dad just looked at him with a vague sense of recognition, but it wasn’t like him to be very excitable, anyway.

“So nice to see you, Mr. and Mrs. Harris,” Owen said, still wrapped in my mom’s embrace.

“How many times have I told you, young man? You are to call us Annie and Brent. You were family then, and you’re still family now.”

“I appreciate that,” he said with a kind smile, and I knew he was being completely genuine.

He glanced at me from between my parents, and met my eyes with a subtle wink. I never expected Owen Anderson, of all people, to make me swoon, but there I was, melting into a puddle on the floor.

EVENTUALLY, we got off the plane, and the entire family was reunited. After hugs and kisses and plenty of complaints about the other people on the plane, we all headed to baggage claim where we gathered our excessive number of suitcases and waited for our transportation to the resort.

I kept catching myself looking over my shoulder for Owen and his family, but I didn’t see him after we got off the plane. They seemed to have disappeared into thin air, but I was certain they had luggage with them to collect, didn’t they?

Although, with Owen’s massive success, perhaps he hired someone to handle all of that for them, and they just went straight to the resort. We were taking the provided shuttle, but they probably had a hired car or limousine or something.

I always knew Owen would be a success in his life, but I never expected him to be living in a \$20 million apartment in New York City. It was quite impressive, and I was not easy to impress. He had clearly worked incredibly hard for his success, and I had to admit, that was easily the thing I admired most about him. He always committed fully to anything he put his mind to. He had been like that his entire life, and it seemed nothing had changed.

“So, Luke,” I said casually as we waited for the shuttle, “what was going on the other night? You seemed a little bit, um, stressed out.”

“I have three kids, Skye, I’m always stressed out.”

“Yeah, but it seemed a little worse than usual.”

“Well, for starters, our basement flooded, which is where our passports were,” he said, pulling a stack of water-damaged passports from his pocket. “And then the company we called to clean it up said they couldn’t come until after Christmas.”

“Oh, no. I’m so—”

“I’m not finished. Then Oliver and Henry decided they needed to go downstairs and play in the water which was, in a word, disgusting.”

“They were filthy,” Taylor chimed in.

“And *then* Penelope went downstairs with them and started splashing them with water and just being, you know, an older sister.

“The dog pooped on the carpet upstairs and I didn’t notice it until I took the kids up to get in the bath and Oliver stepped in it and tracked it all over the house.

“We ordered dinner because everything was chaos, and they completely messed it up. The kids were mad they didn’t get what they wanted. I was soaking wet and furious. And Taylor was nearly vomiting as he cleaned up dog poop that had been tracked all over.”

I stared at them in shock, hoping they were finished with their tragic tale.

“Are you guys seriously telling that story again?” Amelia chimed in from the bench where she was sitting. “It’s all they talked about on the flight.”

“Amelia, when you have three kids and they absolutely wreak havoc on your life, don’t come crying to us,” Luke said with his signature sarcasm.

“I am *never* having kids. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“You guys, I am so sorry. That sounds like an awful night. Did you get the basement taken care of?”

“Yeah, we found someone who came that night, so it’s all good now, but we will have to deal with all of the damage when we get home.”

“We’re trying not to think about it.”

AS WE UNLOADED out of the shuttle upon arriving to the resort, we were immediately embraced by the breathtaking panorama of the Swiss Alps. The peaks of the mountains were kissed by the soft glow of the sun. The air was crisp, but not too cold. And the scent of pine trees was overwhelming, in the best possible way.

As we wrapped ourselves in warm coats and scarves, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of awe at the natural beauty surrounding us. I was thrilled to finally be here. I had been dreaming about it for a year, ever since we voted on our destination at last year’s Christmas gathering. It had already far surpassed what I hoped it would be.

With our ski equipment in tow, we ventured towards the heart of the resort. The village square was a bustling scene of holiday cheer. Families and friends gathered around a majestic Christmas tree adorned with twinkling lights and ornaments. Somewhere in the distance, there were voices harmonizing in cheerful carols.

I felt like I had stepped into a Christmas card. It was, without a doubt the most beautiful place I had ever been. The years of vying for this to be our destination had paid off.

When we arrived at our chalet, the roaring fireplace cast a cozy light across the room. The kids ran around the cabin, arguing over who got which bed, and where the best place for Santa to leave their gifts would be.

It was difficult to find a chalet to fit all fourteen of us, but this was not an ordinary ski chalet. It was a magical scene that only existed in romantic Christmas movies. It was immaculately decorated for the holidays, and there were views of the snow-covered mountains outside every window.

All of the bedrooms had their own private balcony, and the bunk room for the kids was the type of place that every child dreamed of. On the large back balcony, there was a hot tub and a fire pit, which I knew would get plenty of use from my family.

There was only one other cabin near us, and it had a small pathway connecting the two. There was a courtyard in the middle with heaters and a covered sitting area, perfect for morning coffee or late-night wine.

As I wandered the chalet, I heard the sound of children's laughter coming from outside. It couldn't possibly be who I thought it was, could it?

I peeked out the window and saw fiery red hair dart past me and into the chalet next door. Following closely behind Laila was little Cora, trying her best to keep up with her big sister. Owen and Beth trailed behind, and I couldn't stop the smile that crossed my face when I saw him coming down the pathway.

"Owen!" I called, stepping out onto the balcony.

He looked around for a moment before finally finding me up above him. The gentle snowfall speckled his hair with white as he waved to me.

"What are the chances?" he called. "Next door neighbors again!"

I smiled and retreated back into the warmth of the cabin, unable to control the butterflies in my stomach.

I flopped down onto the bed and, for the first time in my life, wished I had the holidays to spend with someone special. This was the type of place where people fell in love. Though I knew that wasn't in the cards for me right now, I was still determined to enjoy every second of my time here.

OWEN

I waved to Skye as she disappeared back inside her chalet. I couldn't count how many times I had dreamed that we would have adjacent bedrooms again, and it seemed like I was finally getting my wish.

I stepped into the cabin and was greeted with an overwhelming amount of Christmas decorations. Trees adorned with glittering lights and ornaments, garlands up and down the staircase, figurines of Santa, nutcrackers, and reindeer lined the shelves of the bookcase.

Laila and Cora had already made themselves at home, jumping on the couches and arguing over who got the top bunk. Of course, Laila would win that argument. She always did. Much like her mother, she was not one to give up or give in when it came to matters that were important to her.

And as a five-year-old, I too was certain that nothing was more important than getting the top bunk.

"Daddy!" Cora called as she jumped off the couch and onto the floor.

She ran over to me and wrapped her arms around my legs as if it had been days since I had seen her last when, in fact, it had been less than 30 seconds. I hoped my girls knew I would always be here for them if they needed someone to run to.

"Hi sweetheart," I said, patting her back. "Do you like the cabin?"

"Yes!" she shouted as she ran back over to the couch.

“Girls, let’s go find your bedroom,” Beth suggested. “Your luggage has already arrived.”

They hopped onto the floor and followed her up the stairs, leaving me in silence for the first time in far too many hours. I wandered the first floor of the cabin, marveling at the view and the immaculate scenery.

I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was, but there was something magical about this place. It felt special and unique in a way I had never experienced before. I was ready to have a great vacation with my girls, and if I got to spend some time with Skye, well that would simply be an added bonus.

JUST AS I was thinking about her, there was a knock on the chalet door. I meandered over to the door and swung it open, letting in a blast of cold air.

“Hey,” Skye said a bit sheepishly.

“Hey, neighbor.”

“Listen, my mom insisted that I come over here. She wanted me to invite the four of you over for dinner tonight.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but she beat me to it.

“I’m sure you guys already have plans, and I know you’re all tired and everything, so I won’t be offended at all if you say no.”

“We’d love to.”

“You—what?”

“That sounds really nice. Besides, I wouldn’t dare turn down an offer like that from your mom. She wouldn’t let me, anyway.”

“That’s very true. She’d probably come over here and drag you outside before she let you decline.”

I laughed and leaned against the doorframe, trying to act casual when I was actually feeling electrified by excitement. Skye’s eyes briefly darted to my feet and then back up to my eyes. I couldn’t tell if she was judging me for my travel attire

or if she was checking me out, but I prayed for it to be the latter.

“Well, we’re all pretty jet-lagged, so we’re going to eat around 4. Does that work for you?”

“If I know anything about your mother, we’ll arrive at 3:30.”

She smiled and nodded her head. “You know her too well, don’t you?”

“All those dinners I had with you growing up are paying off.”

She laughed again and started to turn to walk away. I wanted to reach out and grab her and make her stay, but I knew I just had to wait a few hours until I would see her again.

“I’ll see you this afternoon!” she called.

I watched her walk away for longer than was probably appropriate before I closed the door. I couldn’t remember the last time I had been this excited to have dinner with someone’s family. They were all so lovely and welcoming that I knew it was going to be a phenomenal afternoon.

“GIRLS, you need to be on your best behavior tonight, alright?”

“What does that mean, Daddy?”

“It means you need to say please and thank you, and not get into any trouble.”

The two girls nodded their heads at me, and I hoped they would follow through on their agreement. Although, with the amount of young children in Skye’s family, I probably didn’t need to worry too much.

We walked down the pathway and across the small courtyard to the chalet next to ours and knocked on the door. When Annie swung the door open, the smell of roasted vegetables and fresh baked bread hit me like a ton of bricks.

“Hello! Come in, come in!” she said as she ushered us inside.

The girls clung to me as we stepped inside the chalet, but I could see their curiosity growing with each second as they heard the sounds of kids playing upstairs. Annie crouched down to their level with a huge smile on her face.

“Girls, the kids are upstairs playing in the bunk room. Would you like me to show you up there?”

They nodded their heads enthusiastically, and each grabbed one of the woman’s hands as she guided them towards the stairs. Just a second later, Skye emerged from one of the back bedrooms.

“Oh, you’re here!” she exclaimed.

“Did you think I wouldn’t be?”

“Well, you never know these days. People flake on plans all the time. I didn’t want to get my hopes up.”

She didn’t want to get her hopes up. She really wanted me to be here? I tried to hide the excitement that was threatening to burst out of me.

“Well, here I am. I would never flake on your family. But I have to say, I have never met someone who makes an entire home-cooked meal on vacation. Especially not on a travel day after being up all night and jet-lagged.”

“You know my mom,” she said with a shrug.

Skye crossed the room towards me and sat down on an armchair next to the fireplace. She pulled a blanket onto her lap, even though it was quite warm in the cabin. Or maybe that was just me. I sat down in the chair opposite hers and smiled over at her.

“Oh! I should have offered you a drink, I’m so sorry. What can I get for you?”

“Don’t worry about it. I can wait until dinner.”

“Well, I think I’m going to have some hot chocolate, and that means you are, too.”

I didn't bother arguing as she stood from her chair and slipped into the kitchen. When she reemerged a moment later, she was carrying two steaming mugs piled high with whipped cream.

"I hope you don't mind a little something, um, extra in your hot chocolate," she said as she handed the mug to me.

"Extra? What do you mean?"

I took a small sip and realized exactly what she was talking about. A bit of alcohol might actually help me relax and enjoy this evening like I wanted to.

"Cheers," she said as she clinked the edge of her mug with mine.

WE PICKED up our conversation exactly where we had left it on the plane. Skye had been telling me about the handful of relationships she had been in in the last twenty years, and I listened to every last tale like it wasn't ripping my heart apart to hear how poorly she had been treated by some of these men.

It was clear that every person she dated was not good enough for her. They were threatened by her success. They were only after her money. They thought they were above her. It was all too much.

"You know, Skye, it sounds like you don't have the best track record with picking guys."

"You're absolutely right. But it's so hard to know when you first meet someone."

"That's true. It takes time to get to know someone's true colors."

"Well, anyway, that's why I have decided I'm done trying to date. I just get to be the cool, fun aunt, and that's okay with me."

I tried to hide the look of disappointment on my face. It wasn't like I thought she was going to fall in love with me tonight or anything, but after so many years of vying for her, I couldn't help that her words stung, just a little bit.

“That’s enough about my dating troubles. Tell me what’s going on in the world of dating when you’re, like, a super successful, smart, handsome, rich, single dad.”

I laughed and tried to gloss over the fact that she had just called me handsome and smart.

“There is absolutely nothing to speak of.”

“Oh, come on. I’m sure you have women chasing you down the streets.”

“If they are, I’ve never noticed.”

“You’re telling me you don’t date at all?”

“Nope. The last first date I went on was with Rachel. And that was nearly...twelve years ago.”

“Do you think you’ll get back into the world of romance again someday?”

The question was innocent enough, but I truly had no idea how to answer it. It was something I had thought about for a long time, and something I had discussed with Rachel before she passed. We knew she didn’t have much time, and she was adamant that I not be alone for the rest of my life. She wanted me to be happy, and if getting remarried would make me happy, she was fully in support of it.

“I don’t know. I guess—maybe—i don’t really want to be alone forever.”

“You have Laila and Cora.”

“For now. But someday they’ll grow up and leave.”

“That’s true. I guess that’s the downfall of children. They don’t get to stick around forever. It wouldn’t be fair to ask them to do so, anyway.”

“I would love to fall in love again,” I said. “But I guess I’m not ready to start actively seeking it out yet.”

“You really loved her, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did. She was everything I wanted in a partner.”

“So, how do you go about finding someone else?”

“I have no idea. I guess whoever I end up with will just have to accept the fact that part of me will always love her. She’ll always have a piece of my heart.”

“I’m sure you’ll find someone like that, Owen. You deserve to be happy and loved.”

“Thank you for saying that. And you deserve the same, by the way, even if you have sworn off men for the time being.”

She laughed and took a sip of her hot chocolate as Annie reappeared at the bottom of the stairs.

“Owen, those are the sweetest little girls I have ever met. They are so polite. You’ve done a great job with them.”

“Oh, wow, um, thank you. I’m glad they are behaving themselves.”

“Well, folks,” she announced to the room, even though Skye and I were the only ones in earshot, “dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes. I hope you’re hungry.”

AND PROMPTLY TWENTY MINUTES LATER, all eighteen of us were gathered around the table, passing dishes of food, getting caught up on each other’s lives, and trying to wrangle the gaggle of children. It was the loudest dinner I had attended in years, but it wasn’t a bad loud. It was noisy from chatter, laughter, and silverware hitting against dishes.

I tried to keep myself from focusing all of my attention on Skye, but it was hard not to. She had chosen the seat straight across, so that Laila and Cora could sit on either side of me. She glanced my direction every so often and smiled, but it was impossible to have a conversation with her from across the table.

I longed for a few more minutes alone with her, and after dinner was finished, I finally got my wish.

Beth had taken the girls back to our chalet to get ready for bed. Skye’s siblings were doing the same with their children. And her parents had disappeared moments after dinner had

ended. I found myself alone in the kitchen with Skye, tidying up the mess that was left behind.

“You really don’t have to stay and help with this,” she said sheepishly. “You’re a guest.”

“I’m not going to leave this whole mess for you. That would be incredibly rude of me.”

She smiled and picked up another stack of plates from the table and walked them over to the kitchen sink. She reached to turn on the water, but hesitated for a moment. She turned around to face me with an inscrutable look on her face.

“What?” I asked, suddenly feeling very self conscious.

“I just never realized how, um, I don’t know, charming you are.”

“Charming?”

“You had everyone at dinner laughing and smiling. It was the most relaxed family dinner we’ve had in years.”

“Well, I’m glad I could help.”

“You didn’t used to be like this. You were always so quiet and busy with your cameras.”

“I guess my old age has given me wisdom. Or something like that,” I said with a laugh.

“Hey, if you’re old, that means I’m old, too. And I am *not* old.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, unable to stifle my grin.

She crossed the kitchen towards me and leaned against the counter where I had been standing. Our arms were mere inches from each other, and I could feel the heat coming from her. I wanted to pick her up onto the counter and make her mine right then and there.

She turned towards me, and I did the same. Now we were chest to chest, with only a small gap between us. She placed her hand on my chest, and I hoped she couldn’t feel what it did to my heart rate.

“You’re a really special guy, you know that? And I’m so glad we bumped into each other.”

“Me too,” I whispered as I leaned in closer to her.

I began to close my eyes, knowing that my lips were about to brush with hers. It was a moment that I had fantasized about for so long, I couldn’t believe it was actually happening.

“SKYE!” someone called from just outside the door.

Damnit.

She took a few steps away from me, looking almost as disappointed as I felt.

“In the kitchen,” she called out.

A second later, Luke burst into the room with his hair disheveled and a crazed look in his eyes.

“There’s a mouse in our room.”

“What do you expect me to do about it?”

“I don’t know! You booked this place! Go get it!”

“I’m not getting it! You get it!”

“I’ll go take care of it,” I offered.

The two of them watched me leave the room, and I tried to hold my head up high as I walked out.

SKYE

When Owen came back into the kitchen with his hands clasped together, I let out an audible gasp.

“You caught it?” I exclaimed.

“Well, what else was I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just thought you’d chase it out or something.”

“I’m going to take it outside, then I’ll be back to help you finish cleaning up.”

“Owen, you really don’t need to do that. You can go to bed. I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

“I don’t mind,” he said with a smile.

Something about Owen made him always seem completely genuine. I truly believed he didn’t mind helping me clean up dinner. I didn’t even want to be doing it, and it was mostly my own family’s mess.

When he came back in, I was standing at the sink scrubbing a pot. I couldn’t stop thinking about that almost kiss. What would have happened if Luke hadn’t come running in? Wait, had Owen even wanted it to be a kiss? Was I being way too forward with him?

I wasn’t even sure where it had come from. I wasn’t the type to kiss a guy I hardly knew, let alone be the one to initiate it. Although, I did know Owen. Sure, it had been a long time since we had talked, but it honestly felt like nothing had changed.

But things had changed. He had been married. He had two kids. His wife died. He wasn't the same person I once knew. He was stronger. More confident. He was an amazing father from what I had seen, and I probably made him so uncomfortable with my actions.

I turned off the sink and turned around to see him scraping the remains of food off the dinner plates and into the trash. It looked like he was chewing on a roll at the same time. I laughed at the thought of him stealing a half-eaten roll off of someone's plate.

"Owen," I said, clearly startling him. "I'm sorry for before."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know...before Luke came in here."

"Oh," he said, suddenly realizing what I was referring to. "You don't need to apologize."

"No, I do. It was inappropriate of me and I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"You didn't make me uncomfortable."

"I didn't?"

He shook his head and looked at me with a stern expression. It was perhaps the first time I had seen him without a smile on his face in the past twenty-four hours. Obviously, he meant business.

"No, you didn't."

"Well, that's good—"

He cut me off before I could say anything else. Not that I had any idea what I was going to say, anyway.

"Skye, can I tell you something?"

I nodded my head. He looked away from me and set down the plate that had been in his hand this entire time. The clock seemed to tick slower than ever before he spoke again.

"No, never mind. I shouldn't have said anything."

“Owen, come on. It’s me.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew I shouldn’t have said them. He didn’t have to tell me anything. Just because we were friends a long time ago, it didn’t mean he had any obligation to me, right?

“No, I—I don’t know—let’s finish up in here and then go outside and talk.”

“You’re making me a little bit nervous,” I said slowly.

“No need to be nervous. I just don’t really want to have this conversation in here.”

“Okay...”

“Seriously, it’s nothing to worry about. Let’s just get this mess cleaned up.”

I nodded my agreement and went back to work. I don’t think I have ever cleaned anything so fast in my life. My mind was racing with everything he could possibly be about to tell me, and I wanted to get out of here as soon as I could.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, we were finally out in the courtyard between our two cabins, bundled up beneath our warmest coats and blankets, and being warmed by the heaters that surrounded us. It was still early evening, and the sun was just beginning to dip below the horizon, but it felt like I had been awake for a week straight.

“Look, this isn’t really that big of a deal. I’m sorry for making it seem way bigger than it really is,” Owen said.

“Okay, so, what is it?”

“It’s just—you didn’t make me uncomfortable in there because, well, I had a huge crush on you growing up.”

“What? You did?”

“I swore I would never tell you if we ever reconnected, but I just don’t want you to feel bad about anything.”

“How come you never told me before?”

“Oh, come on, Skye.”

“I’m serious!”

“Well, for one thing, we were friends. I didn’t want to mess that up. I knew you didn’t like me like that, anyway. And by the time we got to high school, you were so popular and I was...not.”

“So? That never changed how I felt about you.”

“Then why weren’t we friends anymore?”

“I—I don’t know,” I said, and I really didn’t.

Somewhere along the line we had just drifted apart. We never got into a fight or had some dramatic falling out. We just weren’t on the same paths anymore.

“Well, anyway, you always had a boyfriend and I never wanted to intrude on that. And mostly, I was scared of getting shot down. I didn’t think I would be able to handle it.”

“Owen,” I muttered, reaching for his hand.

His fingers were warm as I grasped them. I held on tight and never wanted to let them go. I felt terrible for everything. If I had known all those years ago...well, honestly, it probably would have made me avoid him. He wasn’t the same person then as he was now. If this confession had come twenty years ago, it would have made me cringe with embarrassment.

Back then, he was quiet and sullen, at least around other people. When it was just the two of us, he could light up a room. But as I got more and more friends, he started to drift away, and I didn’t do anything to stop it.

Now he was so much more confident and self-assured. It was incredibly attractive, and I felt myself wanting to get closer to him. I inched towards him and rested my head on his shoulder. I felt him look down at me, and I wondered what was going through his mind.

Surely he hadn’t been thinking about me all these years. He was married to the love of his life, and then he lost her. I was just some kid he knew from the neighborhood. I never

thought I was of any importance to him, but now, I was starting to think otherwise.

“Skye, I’m really sorry if that made you feel weird. That wasn’t my intention.”

“No, no. I am glad you told me.”

“You are?”

I nodded my head, but still didn’t look up at him.

“I had no idea that’s how you felt. And it’s always nice to know when someone has feelings for you. Sharing those thoughts is never a bad thing.”

“Well, I guess I’m glad I told you, too.”

“I’m really glad we both ended up here, Owen.”

“Me too,” he whispered.

He reached towards me and brushed the back of his fingers down my cheek, sending shivers down my spine. I looked towards him, and his eyes were sparkling in the ever-dimming light.

He smiled, and I was so ready for what was about to happen next. I could feel his warm breath on my skin as our faces drew closer and closer together. He licked his lips and looked down at mine when the sound of a shrieking child came from one of our chalets, startling us out of our blissful cloud.

“Again?” I muttered under my breath.

“I’m sorry. That sounds like Cora. I had better go check on her.”

“Of course, go ahead.”

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he said with a smile as he rose from the small couch where we had been sitting.

“Good night,” I whispered, watching him disappear into his chalet.

I LINGERED in the courtyard for a while longer before I made my way back inside. When I came through the large door into the living room, my mom was sitting near the fireplace with a book in her hands.

“Mom? What are you doing up?”

“Oh, I couldn’t sleep anymore.”

“It’s only been, like, an hour,” I said, glancing down at my watch.

“I know, I know. I’ll go back to sleep eventually. I just didn’t want to wake your father.”

“Alright, well I’m going to bed. Good night.”

“What were you doing out there, sweetheart?”

Her question stopped me before I could escape the room. I should have known she would bombard me like this.

“Oh, nothing. Just catching up with Owen.”

“He’s such a nice boy. Always has been.”

“Yes, he is.”

“He told me he’s single, you know.”

“Mom!”

“What? He did!”

“His wife just died.”

“She did?”

“Well, a few years ago, but still. He’s not looking for anyone right now. And even if he were, I’m not interested in him like that.”

“Sure, sure,” she said, pretending to go back to her book.

“I’m really not. You think I’m lying about it?”

“Oh, I don’t know, dear. I’m just an old woman.”

I shook my head at her. Though she would never admit it, my mother was desperate for me to get married. It wasn’t enough that she already had seven grandchildren, she needed

more. She always thought she was being so sly about bringing it up, but I knew what she was doing.

I couldn't count the number of times she introduced me to a friend's son who just "happened" to be in town the same weekend as me. Or the number of men's phone numbers that she sent me after meeting them who knows where.

Bless her heart, but I was so glad that I lived halfway across the country from her. I don't know if I would be able to handle it if I saw her more than twice a year.

"Well, anyway, he's a good boy. Good father. And very handsome," she continued.

"Mom!" I said again.

"I'm just speaking the truth."

"Good night, mom."

"Good night, dear."

OWEN

“Girls! We need to get going!” I hollered into their room.

They were awake, I knew they were, but they were not eager to get out of bed. I couldn't blame them. I was still exhausted from our long travel day, but spending the whole day sleeping wasn't going to do anyone any good.

I strolled into the kitchen where Beth had prepared coffee, juice and toast for us, alongside a tray of fruit and sausage that the resort staff had delivered. I never liked to boast about or flaunt my wealth, but it really made life far more convenient.

“Morning, Beth.”

“Good morning, Mr. Anderson. Did you sleep well?”

“Not exactly,” I said, taking a bite of toast. “What about you?”

“I slept like a log. It was wonderful.”

I smiled at her and took a sip of coffee. I would never get over how much better coffee was in Europe than it is in the US. I was going to need it today, too. After being up all night thinking about Skye and what could have been, I was plain exhausted. The girls were about to take their first skiing lesson, and I was thrilled to see them shred the slopes.

“What did you decide about skiing with us today?” I asked between bites of sausage.

“I think I'll stay here, if that's alright. Catch up on some reading, maybe enjoy the hot tub.”

Beth had been on enough vacations with us by now that she knew I wanted her to enjoy herself just as much as we were. Sure, I brought her along to help with the girls, but she deserved a break more than anyone.

“Of course that’s alright. Sounds like a really nice way to spend an afternoon. Although, I really do want you to try skiing on this trip. At least once.”

“I promise I will,” she said with a grin that didn’t reassure me one bit.

I heard footsteps coming down the stairs. They were small and slow, but somehow incredibly heavy. I glanced around the corner to see Laila walking down, half dressed and eyes nearly closed.

“Daddy,” she groaned, “I’m tired.”

“I know, baby. Let’s get you some food and then out into the sunshine. It will help you feel so much better, I promise.”

She continued moving down the stairs, one slow step at a time, hardly watching where she was stepping.

“Is Cora out of bed yet?”

She shook her head and gave me a half-hug as she reached the bottom of the stairs. I made my way up to their room and swung the door open.

“Cora?” I whispered. “Cora Lou?”

I tiptoed over to her bed and gently pulled the covers down. On the pillow where her head should have been were her tiny little feet with toenails painted purple.

“Cora, honey, it’s time to get up. There’s breakfast for you downstairs.”

“Food?” I heard her grumble from beneath the covers.

“Yes, lots of yummy food. Let’s get dressed and then you can go eat.”

I pulled the covers down a bit further so I could see her face. Her hair was pointing in every direction, but she had a big smile on her face.

“I’m hungry,” she said, her voice croaking with sleep.

“We better get you something to eat, then.”

I grabbed her underneath her arms and stood her on the floor, but she immediately flopped back down onto her bed. I walked across the room to her wardrobe where Beth had unpacked her things, and pulled out all the gear she needed for skiing.

Once I had her dressed, which was not an easy feat, she bounded down the stairs like she had all the energy in the world. I followed her into the kitchen and helped her dish up a plate of food.

“Beth, can you fix the girls’ hair while I go get dressed?”

She nodded as I left the room, and a short while later, we were finally ready to hit the slopes.

BETH HAD TAKEN Laila and Cora to pick out their ski gear several weeks ago, and I still hadn’t seen what they had chosen. Of course, it was no surprise to me that Laila ended up in purple from head-to-toe, and Cora’s selections were all over the place. A yellow helmet, a pink and white polka dot coat, neon blue snow pants, and green boots. At least she wouldn’t be easy to lose.

I had been attempting for weeks to hype them up about learning to ski, and both of them seemed excited. Until we actually got out onto the mountain. We met up with the instructor I had hired, a young man who came highly recommended by tourists and locals alike.

“Hallo. Mein name ist Frederick,” the instructor said.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I started. “They don’t speak German.”

The look the instructor gave me would have sent a weaker man to his knees.

“Non? French?” he asked in a thick accent.

“I’m sorry, they just speak English.”

“I forgot. You’re Americans.”

His voice bit at the last word, and I already knew how this was going to end. But I put a smile on my face and tried once again to get the girls excited. I crouched down to their level and tried to find their eyes beneath their helmets and goggles.

“Girls, this is Fredrick. He’s going to teach you how to ski today. It’s going to be so much fun!”

“No,” interrupted Fredrick. “We do not have any fun until they learn good technique.”

I bit my tongue and tried to keep from saying what I wanted to say. I turned my attention back to the girls and plastered on another smile, which was much harder this time.

“I’m going to be right over there if you need anything. Listen to Fredrick and pay attention to what he tells you, okay?”

The girls nodded, but I could sense their hesitation. As they followed Fredrick to the starting point for their lesson, I wasn’t sure who was more nervous, me or them.

I FOUND a bench to sit on where I was close enough to see and hear everything that was going on, but not close enough that Fredrick would think I was hovering. I honestly didn’t want him getting upset with me. I was going to have to do enough damage control with the girls as it was.

The lesson started uneventful as Fredrick showed them how to hook their boots into their skis, how to hold their poles, and how to slow down if they started going too fast. They paid attention as well as they could, but I could sense their focus waning. If they didn’t start actually skiing soon, he was going to lose both of them.

Laila kept glancing over at me, but I couldn’t quite tell what she needed. Perhaps she just wanted reassurance that I was still there. Or maybe she wanted me to take her away from this man she could hardly understand. Regardless, she continued to listen to him and follow his directions, and eventually, they started moving slowly down the hill.

It really wasn't much of a hill. It was a gentle slope, but it was more than enough for two young girls who had never stepped into ski boots before. Laila was careful and hesitant, but Cora pushed off the ground with her poles and started down the hill with all the speed that the gradual decline would allow.

I jumped to my feet and started to follow her down the hill, but Fredrick stuck out an arm to stop me.

"This is how she learns not to go too fast," he said.

"She's going to run into someone. Or hit a tree or something. I need to stop her."

"She needs to learn to listen. She was hardly paying attention."

"She is three years old. She doesn't know how to listen."

"Then she shouldn't be out here," he said with a haughty tone.

"Maybe you're right, but she is, and I need to make sure she doesn't get hurt or injure someone else."

Fredrick dropped his arm to his side with a sigh of exasperation, and I started walking down the hill again. It was really such a gentle decline that it only took me a moment to catch up to her, but when she saw me, the tears started to flow.

"Daddy! I'm scared!"

"I'm right here, baby. You're doing a great job. Do you remember how to stop?"

She shook her head frantically.

"Turn your skis into a pizza. Point your toes towards each other."

She tried to follow my directions, but her little legs didn't quite have the strength.

"Daddy! Help!"

"Cora, I'm right here. Try again. Make a pizza with your skis. You can do it."

She used all her strength to point her skis towards each other, and she came to a very slow stop. I reached out and caught her just before her face landed in the snow.

I popped her boots out of the skis and picked her up. She wrapped her little arms around my neck and started to sob. I helped her get her helmet and goggles off, and then carried her back up the hill where Laila was watching us intently and Fredrick was scoffing at my approach to parenting.

“I don’t think we’ll be needing your services anymore, Fredrick. Thanks for your time.”

He scoffed again and took off without another word. Laila followed Cora and I back to the bench where I had been sitting. Cora still hadn’t moved from her position on my shoulder, and Laila was working her hardest to travel uphill with her skis and poles.

“You were so brave, Cora,” I said as I sat down. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Yeah, Cora, you did great,” Laila echoed.

“I don’t want to ski anymore,” Cora said between sobs.

“Alright, we can be done for today, but I want you to try again tomorrow, okay? I’ll be right by your side the whole time.”

She nodded her head, but I knew it was going to take a lot of convincing to get her back into her boots.

I HELPED Laila get out of her skis, and we made our way back to the main lodge. Of course, when we entered, Skye and a few of her nieces and nephews were sitting near the fireplace. She looked to be having a very intense discussion with them, and I hesitated for a moment before I decided to approach them.

She glanced over as we walked across the large sitting area, and she did a double take when she saw that it was the three of us, with Cora still dangling around my neck. Her face suddenly got very solemn when she saw the state that Cora

was in. Though she was no longer crying, her eyes were puffy and her face was splotchy and red.

“Cora? What happened?” Skye asked, standing to meet her eyes. “Is she okay?”

“The girls had their first ski lesson and, well, it didn’t go great.”

“Oh no, I’m so sorry,” she said, gently rubbing Cora’s back.

She looked at me for confirmation that she was going to be alright, and I gave her a small nod. She turned her attention to Laila, who was already joining the other kids on the large couch in front of the fire.

“Laila, how did you like skiing?”

“Well, I didn’t really get to ski. And I couldn’t understand a word the teacher was saying.”

Skye smiled and bent down to her level.

“If you’d like to learn, I am about to take Ethan, Penelope, and Oliver out for their first lesson. We’d love to have you join us if your dad says it’s okay.”

Laila looked at me with wide, pleading eyes.

“Do you want to go back out today?” I asked.

Laila nodded her head with vigor, and that was the end of the discussion. Skye stood up with a smile on her face and turned to look at me.

“I’d be happy to take Cora, too, if she’s feeling up for it.”

Cora clung to me even tighter and refused to look at Skye. I patted her gently on the back to reassure her.

“I think we’ll come out and watch, but Cora is probably done skiing for the day.”

“Well, watching is a lot of fun, too. But you’re welcome to join us if you change your mind.”

I wasn’t sure how she had gotten so good with children, but I assumed seven nieces and nephews had something to do

with it.

Cora finally wanted her feet back on the ground, so with her hand in mine, we trekked back out into the sunshine and snow, following behind Skye and her herd of small children. I truly commended her determination to teach these four young kids all by herself, but they seemed to respect her immensely.

While the rest of her family was out enjoying their day, she was taking the time to give these kids the skills to enjoy themselves out on the slopes. Every new thing that I learned about her just made me admire her even more than I thought possible.

SKYE

The crisp winter air and the warm glow of the sun embraced us as we stood at the base of the snow-covered hill. The kids' excitement and nervous energy was palpable. I had to admit, even though I was a seasoned skier, I had never taught anyone else how to ski. And certainly not four young kids who had never set foot on a ski before.

I glanced over at Owen, who was sitting on a nearby bench with Cora, her little hand wrapped inside his. He smiled at me, though when was he *not* smiling? And he had the most perfect smile.

"Auntie Skye," Ethan asked, bringing me back into the present moment, "can we go fast?"

"We need to talk about a few things before we can go fast, okay?"

He groaned and sat down in the snow to pout. This was not going to be as simple as I thought it was.

"Alright, let's start with the basics," I said, my voice gentle yet firm. "First things first, let's get those skis on and learn how to balance."

I knelt down, demonstrating the art of strapping on the skis. The kids followed my lead, their small fingers working diligently with buckles and straps. I moved down the row, making sure they had all done it correctly.

"Oliver," I said, kneeling down in front of the blonde-haired boy. "You have your boots on the wrong feet. How did that happen?"

He shrugged and continued trying to strap the boots into the skis.

“We need to switch these around, my friend.”

I helped him pull off his boots and get them on the correct feet, then stood back up to see how everyone else was doing. I tried to resist looking at Owen, but I could feel his eyes on me. When I dared a quick glance, I saw that Cora was sitting down in the snow, rolling a ball and placing it on top of one she had already completed. The visual made me smile as I turned back to the other kids.

“Remember, take it step by step,” I encouraged. “Now, once you have your skis on, stand up and find your balance.”

Each of the kids tried their best to stand on their own, but I quickly realized they were going to need a bit of assistance. I worked my way along, helping Penelope to her feet, then Oliver, then Laila, and finally Ethan.

“Pretend you’re standing on a tightrope. Feel the weight distributed evenly on both skis.”

The kids looked at me with obvious confusion. I guess I needed to simplify my phrasing a bit more. But to their credit, they were listening quite intently.

I demonstrated what I meant, my movements smooth and controlled. The children mimicked me, their faces a mix of concentration and determination, punctuated by bouts of wobbling and giggles. There were a few tumbles into the snow, but no tears, which was the main thing I was trying to avoid.

“Great job, everyone!” I praised, my smile urging them forward. “Now, let’s talk about the snowplow. It’s very important in skiing. To slow down or stop, gently push the tails of your skis outwards, making a V-shape with your feet.”

Once again, they looked at me with a bit of confusion.

“Pizza!” Owen shouted from his perch on the bench.

“What?” I yelled back.

“Tell them to make a slice of pizza with their skis.”

I had to take a moment to figure out what he was talking about, but once it hit me, I realized that it was the perfect analogy for children.

“Yeah, pizza!” Cora chimed in.

“Okay,” I said, turning back to the kids on their skis. “If you want to slow down or stop, you need to make a slice of pizza with your skis.”

Eyes wide, the kids watched as I demonstrated the snowplow, my skis forming a perfect wedge in the snow. They followed suit, their efforts marked by determination and a newfound sense of accomplishment.

“You’re getting it!” I cheered, my voice filled with genuine excitement. “Now, when you want to go forward, bring your skis back parallel.”

As soon as the last word escaped my lips, I knew that I needed to find a better one. I thought about Owen’s pizza analogy, and tried to come up with one that worked for parallel lines. As if he could read my mind, Owen called out to me from his bench once again.

“Railroad tracks!”

“Thank you!” I called back. “If you want to go forward, your skis need to turn into railroad tracks, like this,” I demonstrated.

The children followed suit, and once again, a few little bottoms fell into the snow, but they were each able to stand back up on their own. I couldn’t help the sense of pride that was washing over me as I watched their determination.

“Keep your knees slightly bent, and lean forward a little. And most importantly, keep your eyes on the path ahead.”

The children practiced, their confidence growing with each attempt. I offered words of encouragement, adjusting their postures and giving gentle nudges when necessary. Patience was my ally, understanding that learning to ski was a journey that required time and practice.

AS THE DAY PROGRESSED, the kids shed their initial hesitations, replaced by exhilaration and growing confidence. They glided down the slopes with increasing grace, their laughter harmonizing with the surrounding mountains. Pride swelled within me as I watched, knowing that I had not only taught them how to ski but also sparked a love for the sport.

With the sun beginning its descent and casting a warm golden hue over the snow-covered landscape, I gathered the children for one final run. We stood at the hill's pinnacle, the wind tousling our hair and the thrill of the run awaiting us.

"Remember everything I've taught you," I said, my eyes reflecting their enthusiasm. "Stay confident, keep your balance, and most importantly, have fun."

With shouts of excitement, we set off down the hill, their skis slicing through the snow with newfound confidence. I followed behind them, my heart swelling with pride and joy.

Ethan attempted a few small jumps, and nailed each one of them. Penelope was a speed demon, racing with kids who clearly had much more experience than she. Oliver fell into the snow more times than I could count, but he got back up each time.

Laila, who initially was the most hesitant, went down our final run with the confidence of a seasoned professional. She glided through the snow with ease, navigating through obstacles, going over jumps, and stopping herself gracefully without falling over.

I wanted to watch her go down the run, but I was distracted by Owen and Cora's shouting and cheering for her from the sidelines. They were the most adorable duo with Cora standing on the bench and Owen holding her hand as they shouted.

The look on Laila's face as she reached the bottom was priceless. She was clearly so proud of herself, and turned to her dad to see his reaction. He and Cora ran over and he swept her up into a hug.

"You did amazing, Laila! Are you proud of yourself?"

"That was so fun!"

“I’m impressed, baby. You looked great out there. I’m so glad you had fun.”

My heart warmed with the scene of Owen and his little family embracing and encouraging each other. Owen never had that as a child, and I couldn’t express how happy it made me feel knowing he had created such a healthy environment for his children to thrive.

WHEN WE RETURNED to the lodge, I wasn’t sure who was more wiped out, me or the kids. It had been a lot of fun spending the day with them, but it also made me realize that I definitely never wanted four kids of my own. At least not four that were all under the age of six.

Keeping an eye on all of them at once was nearly impossible, so I just felt thankful that no one got lost or hurt.

Owen helped me get the kids situated in a booth in the far corner of the lodge’s cafe, and then went with me to get hot chocolates for the five of them, as well as for ourselves. We approached the counter and placed our order, then found a spot at the bar to lean while we waited.

“You were amazing with them today,” Owen said.

“Whatever. I was just teaching them what I know.”

“Yeah, but you obviously know a lot. And you’re so patient.”

“They’re kids, and it was all of their first time on skis. What else was I going to do? Yell at them for falling down?”

“I told you about Fredrick, didn’t I?”

I laughed and leaned a bit closer. Something about him was like a magnet pulling me in, and I was completely unable to resist it.

“He sounds like a real piece of work.”

“I’m sure he’s a great instructor...but maybe not for young kids.”

“Well, I’m glad you guys found us when you did. Laila did such a good job, and she was so brave on that last run.”

“You helped her be brave. I’m telling you, Skye, she is not normally like that. Cora is the daredevil and the one who acts before thinking. Laila is much more thoughtful and careful. You helped her more than you realize today.”

I knew my cheeks were turning red, and not just from the cold. Flattery usually didn’t affect me so much, but I didn’t often get such thoughtful compliments. Owen started to move towards me, just slightly, and I glanced over at the kids to make sure none of them were watching, but they were all lost in their own little worlds.

“Thank you, Skye, I mean it.”

I only had a moment to smile before my lips met with his. I wasn’t sure if he had kissed me, or if I had kissed him, but it didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was the heat between us at that very moment.

Owen’s lips moved slowly and gently across mine, and I felt his hand reach for my lower back. I let him pull me towards him, and our chests were pressed together in an instant. He pulled my lower lip into his mouth, and I fought the urge to slip my tongue into his.

“Owen,” the barista called from the counter.

He stopped moving for a moment, but didn’t pull away until the barista called his name again. Reluctantly, we separated from each other, each of us with a sheepish grin on our faces. We gathered the hot chocolates and walked them over to the booth in silence.

OWEN

*A*s we made our way back to the chalets, the children ran ahead of me and Skye, but we didn't say a word to one another until we were almost back. I could still taste her on my lips, and I desperately wanted more of her. I knew it would be impossible for anything more to happen while on this trip. Sharing cabins with kids and siblings was not going to make things easy.

"Skye, I can't thank you enough for today. Laila is never going to stop talking about it."

"I'm glad she had fun. It seems like you've got a natural born skier on your hands."

"Now if only we could get Cora back into her boots," I said with a laugh.

Despite our best efforts, Cora was completely unwilling to attempt even standing on her skis. I couldn't blame her; I probably wouldn't have wanted to, either, but I hoped that after seeing Laila's success she would want to join in on the fun tomorrow.

"What the heck?" Skye shouted just as we got into sight of the cabins.

"What? What happened?" I asked, glancing around for any signs of trouble.

She turned to look at me, and the side of her face was covered in snow.

"Where did that come from?"

“I have no idea, but I’m assuming it has something to do with my brother.”

We looked around to find Luke hiding somewhere with a stash of snowballs, but everything was quiet. Even the kids had disappeared. As if from nowhere, another snowball came flying through the air. I barely dodged it, but then another came straight for Skye.

“You are so dead!” she called into the silence.

She crouched down and started to pack the fluffy snow into a tight ball, and I had no choice but to follow suit. We tiptoed around to the backside of the chalets, and it was immediately an ambush.

Snowballs came from every angle as Skye and I tried to doge them, but it was no use; there were far more of them than there were of us.

Laughter and excitement echoed through the valley as snowballs flung from every angle. Eventually, Skye and I were no longer the target of the attack, and it was every man for himself.

Bundled up in colorful snowsuits, the kids’ eyes sparkled with mischief, while the adults, equally enthusiastic, had a competitive glint in theirs.

“Look out!” someone shouted, and I ducked just in time to avoid a perfectly aimed snowball. With a burst of energy, I retaliated, sending one soaring towards Taylor. It hit its mark, and a chorus of cheers erupted from Sierra and Skye.

Not far away, Greg was engaged in a playful duel with Cora. Crouched behind a snow mound, they exchanged rapid fire. Cora’s snowball hit Greg square on the shoulder, and he feigned defeat, falling dramatically into the snow with a grin. Cora giggled triumphantly, her cheeks rosy from the cold.

Amelia had built a miniature snow fort, and I took cover behind it at the same moment Skye did. Huddled together, we strategized and pelted snowballs at Luke, catching him completely off guard. The laughter of the young kids mixed

with the soft thud of snowballs hitting their targets, and I couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

As the battle raged on, alliances shifted, and former opponents became allies, leading to unexpected and hilarious moments. The snowball fight reached its peak when Annie, to everyone's surprise, unleashed a barrage of snowballs.

No one could contain their laughter as they watched Annie throw snowballs with all her might. After a spirited battle, we gradually wound down, panting and grinning at each other. Snow clung to our clothing, and our breath hung in the frosty air.

I GATHERED Laila and Cora and ushered them towards our chalet as we said a brief goodbye to everyone else. As much as I didn't want to say goodnight to Skye, I needed to get these girls warm and dry.

"What is all that shouting about?" Beth called from the kitchen when she heard us come in through the front door.

She emerged into the living room and her mouth fell open, but then quickly into a grin when she saw the state we were in. The girls' faces were crimson with cold, and my beard had frost on the tips.

"Come on girls," Beth said. "Let's go get you into a warm bath."

"That's alright. I'll take them up. But we're definitely going to need some hot soup when we come back down."

"It's already on the stove."

I ushered the girls upstairs and helped them peel off their soaking wet and freezing cold layers of clothes as the bath filled with perfectly warm water.

"That was so fun," Laila said with a smile.

"Which part?" I asked.

"The whole day. This was the best day ever."

I lifted the girls into the tub and couldn't help the smile on my face. It really was a fantastic day.

ONCE THE GIRLS were dressed in warm pajamas and got their hair dried, I sent them downstairs to eat their soup so I could get myself warmed up. When I stepped into my bedroom, I noticed Skye sitting out on the balcony of hers.

She looked deep in thought, and I didn't want to disturb her, but curiosity got the best of me. I opened the sliding door that went outside and waited for her to notice me.

"You scared the hell out of me!" she said with a jump.

I realized that it was almost entirely dark, and I was still wearing plenty of layers that probably made me look like a giant, hulking, beast in the darkness.

"Sorry," I said with a laugh. "What are you doing out here? It's freezing."

"I've got my electric blanket," she said, lifting the plush, red blanket to where I could see it.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"I'm just thinking."

"About anything in particular?"

"Just about...today I guess."

"What about today?"

"It was a good day. I don't think I have smiled or laughed that much in years."

"Laila told me it was the best day ever."

"She did?" she asked with a grin. "That's adorable. And she's right. It was great for a lot of reasons."

"I agree."

She looked back up towards the sky, her face lit with the light from the moon. I could have stood there and watched her all night long, but I got the sense that she wanted her privacy.

“Have a good night, Skye,” I said, turning back towards the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Well, I was going to take a shower and then eat some dinner.”

“You haven’t showered yet? You must be freezing! You shouldn’t be out here.”

“I think this may be the coldest I have ever been in my life,” I admitted.

My teeth were chattering, my fingers were entirely numb, and I could barely open and close my mouth enough to speak.

“Get inside, Owen! Go get warm, and don’t let me see you again until you do.”

“Wow, you’re bossy,” I said, hoping she would sense my sarcasm.

She stuck her tongue out at me, just like she used to when we were kids. I retreated back inside and immediately jumped into the hottest shower I could handle. The steam filled the small bathroom, and I couldn’t keep my thoughts from wandering to Skye.

Knowing that she was sitting just a few yards away while I was standing here, naked, was almost more than I could handle. I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about the way her lips felt on mine. Warm, plump, sweet.

It was the first time I had kissed anyone since Rachel, but I didn’t feel guilty about it. In fact, I knew this was what Rachel wanted. She wanted me to be happy. Everything about kissing Skye had made me happy. Well, except for the fact that it had to end. Why, oh why, did it have to end?

I wanted to take her into my arms and hold her all night long. I wanted to feel her skin pressed against mine and hear her moan my name. I should have told her to come over. We could have stayed quiet, right?

I wasn’t even sure if that’s what she wanted, but she seemed like she was enjoying the kiss just as much as I was. I

prayed there would be more kisses to come, but I didn't want to get my hopes up either. If all I ever got with Skye was that one, perfect moment, I would have to figure out a way to be okay with that.

AS I ATTEMPTED to sleep that night, all of my thoughts were on her. The way she was so attentive and caring with the kids was so sweet to watch, and her genuine interest in each of them was something I had never seen in another adult. Especially an adult without their own children.

She was one in a million. She was brilliant and beautiful, but there was so much more to her than that. Her gentle nature mixed with her confidence and drive was a combination that I was certain no one else in the world had. I longed to see her again. I didn't think I could wait until the next day to talk to her. Was she feeling the same way, too?

I sat up and glanced out the window to look at her room. The lights were off, which meant she was probably asleep. Why wasn't she sleeping next to me?

As I laid there, I knew I was in trouble. Not only were my teenage feelings for her still present, they were only getting stronger and stronger with each moment that I spent with her.

SKYE

On the morning of Christmas Eve, I woke up to a fresh blanket of snow on the ground, a fire roaring in the fireplace, and the smell of fresh baked cinnamon rolls wafting through the air. I didn't think there was any better feeling in the world.

As I sat up in bed and stretched my arms out, I could already hear the pitter-patter of tiny feet running around the house, clearly excited about the events we had planned for the day. I rolled out of bed and pulled on my robe. When I stepped out into the living room, I was surprised to see Laila and Cora running around with the rest of the kids.

I looked around, but didn't see Owen anywhere. I had to admit that he had hardly left my mind after that kiss. Though it was just a brief moment, it was by far the best kiss I had ever experienced, and I hoped there would be more.

I walked into the kitchen and, to no one's surprise, my mom was loading up a plate full of cinnamon rolls for Owen, who was trying to argue that he'd had enough already.

"Oh, nonsense. You're a growing boy. You need your energy."

"Mrs. Harris, I'm in my forties. I don't think these are going to do me any good."

"Well, I didn't wake up at six AM for you to refuse my baking."

At that moment, Owen and my mom noticed me in the doorway. They turned to look at me, and all I could do was

smile. There was something too enchanting about the image of the two of them together. Two of my favorite people in the world, who also had a fondness for one another. I wanted to run over and wrap my arms around both of them, but I resisted.

“Good morning, sweetheart. How did you sleep?”

“Oh, fine. Tossed and turned a little bit,” I said, though it wasn’t the truth at all.

I had dreamed about Owen all night long. I wanted him taking up the extra space in my bed, and I wanted to taste his lips again. I was so desperate for him that it kept me up nearly all night.

“That’s funny,” she said with a smile. “Owen said the exact same thing.”

Owen and I locked eyes and tried not to let any readable expression cross our faces. My mother may be getting on in age, but she wasn’t stupid.

“That is funny,” I said, trying to act as nonchalant as possible.

AS THE REST of the family gathered together, we went over the plan for the day. A few runs on the slopes, then lunch in the resort’s finest restaurant. Next would be the gingerbread house making contest, which was a non-negotiable family tradition. That would be followed by Sierra, Greg, and their kids singing Christmas carols as the rest of us sipped our cider and hot cocoa. Then after dinner, the kids would watch a movie and fall asleep in the living room.

Owen and I volunteered to stay up with them to watch their show so my siblings and parents could finish wrapping gifts, or do whatever it was they wanted to do with some much-needed alone time.

I had planned on going to bed early that night, but when Owen offered to watch the movie with the kids, I couldn’t possibly fathom the idea of not joining him.

LATER THAT NIGHT, everyone was exhausted. All of the adults seemed to disappear faster than normal, but I didn't mind. I was looking forward to my evening with Owen. The kids pulled out all of the blankets and pillows they could find, and they were asleep on the floor before anyone even realized that Kevin hadn't made it to Paris with his family.

I glanced over at Owen, who appeared to be nodding off on the couch next to me. I nudged him with my foot and he startled awake.

“Shhh,” I whispered, pressing a finger to my lips.

Owen blinked and glanced around the room, realizing that all of the kids were fast asleep underneath various piles of blankets and pillows.

“How long have they been asleep?” he whispered.

“Like half an hour.”

He looked around again, as if expecting someone else to be in the room with us. He motioned for me to come closer to him, and I did so, without a moment of hesitation. I nestled myself in next to him and laid my head on his shoulder as he wrapped an arm around me. There was something so comforting about being in his arms. Warm and strong, they were the most comfortable place I had ever been.

He looked down at me and smiled, and then placed a kiss on the top of my head. I wanted to jump on top of him and straddle him right then and there. I wanted the smell of him all over my body. I don't think I had ever wanted anything more.

“Thank you for being so sweet with the kids,” he whispered. “They need extra love.”

“They are the cutest girls in the world. How could I not love them?”

One of the kids started to stir, and we looked at each other in horror, clamping our mouths shut. When they settled back down, I knew what I wanted to do, but I had no idea how

Owen would react to it. But there was no use in not trying, right?

“Should we go into my room so we can talk?” I whispered.

He pondered for a moment, looked out over the kids, and then back at me. He nodded his head, and we carefully stood from the couch. We tiptoed between mounds of children and blankets, and Owen reached out to grab my hand, helping me through the maze.

I led him to the bedroom, and when we stepped inside, I wasn't sure what to do next. Sit on the bed? One of us on the bed and the other on the tiny sofa in the corner? On the floor?

He seemed just as uneasy as I was, and I suddenly started to wonder what he thought my intentions were.

I crossed the room to the fireplace and warmed my hands in front of it, trying to stall for time. He followed my lead and came towards me, but stopped right behind me. I couldn't see him, but I could tell he was hesitant to make his next move.

Finally, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me in close. His breath on my neck was warm and sweet, and it sent shivers down my spine with each exhale.

“Skye,” he said quietly, “before anything, um, happens between us, I think we should talk.”

I turned around, but stayed within the comforting grasps of his arms. I resisted the urge to wrap my arms around his neck and begin devouring him. The man standing in front of me was strong and sexy, nothing like the kid I once knew.

“Nothing has to happen. That's not why I brought you in here.”

“I know, but...”

“But what?” I asked after he didn't continue.

“I just—I don't know—I like you. I *want* something to happen between us.”

“You do?”

“More than anything.”

“Then what is there to talk about? I like you too.”

He took a deep breath and dropped his gaze to the floor. I started to get a bit nervous, wondering what in the world could be going through his head.

“It’s been a while,” he finally said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...I don’t really date much. I don’t do hookups. I haven’t...”

I chewed on my bottom lip while I waited for him to finish his sentence. He was fidgeting, and clearly uncomfortable, so I tried to give him some space, but he only pulled me in closer to him.

“All I’m trying to say is that it has been a while since I’ve, you know, *been* with anyone.”

“Like, had sex, you mean?”

He nodded.

“That’s okay. We don’t have to—”

“I want to. I want to, Skye, that’s not the problem.”

“We can take things slow, then.”

He nodded again and pulled me closer. I leaned into him and rested my head on his chest. Just like every other part of him, it was warm and firm, and made me feel immeasurably safe.

“How long has it been?” I asked quietly.

It wasn’t like I was out hooking up every weekend. In fact, it had been a while for me, too, but I wasn’t sure if it would help or harm the situation for me to tell him that.

“Um...a few years.”

“How many is a few?”

“Honestly, the last woman was...my wife.”

“Owen,” I said with a gasp as I wiggled my way out of his arms. “You haven’t slept with anyone since your wife?”

He shook his head and took a step towards me.

“And you want me to be the one who changes that for you?”

“There is no one in the world I would rather be with.”

“Owen,” I said again, completely unsure about how to feel about the whole situation, “I don’t know. Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything. You have no idea how long I have dreamed about this, Skye.”

I looked at him with about a million thoughts running through my mind. This was insane, right? I would have to be a horrible person if I did this. Or maybe I was a great person for doing it? I couldn’t think straight. Nothing in my mind was making sense. All I knew was that I desperately wanted Owen, and the longer he stood there staring at me, the more I needed him.

“If you’re not comfortable with this, I completely understand,” he said, grabbing my hand and bringing it to his mouth.

He kissed the top of my knuckles like we were in a regency-era romantic movie, and my heart started to melt once again. The heat from the fireplace on my back was searing, and I needed to get away from it, but my only option was to step toward him.

I placed my hand on his chest and looked up. He was incredibly handsome. The years that had passed since we had last seen each other had done nothing but good things for him. He should have been starring in movies, rather than producing them.

“Skye,” he said, nearly breathless.

I knew I was completely undone. There was nothing I could do anymore to resist him, and nothing I wanted to do. All I wanted was him, right now. Nothing else mattered.

In an instant, Owen’s hands were on my face and his lips met mine. He was gentle and slow, but there was a fiery intensity behind his movements. Every part of my body felt

hot. The places where he touched my skin seemed to be on fire.

“Owen,” I said, pulling away. “If you—”

He covered my mouth with his, and that was the end of our conversation for quite a while. He picked me up in his arms and walked over to the bed, setting me down with a gentle ease.

His hands slid under my shirt, slowly moving across my skin and sending shots of electricity throughout my entire body. He stared down at me intently, like he didn't even want to blink for fear of missing a single second.

I sat up on the edge of the bed so I could peel my sweater off, but he quickly reached back and took care of that for me. I lowered myself down to my back, and he climbed onto the bed, hovering over me. I glanced to one side and saw his forearms on either side of my head, holding up all of his weight so he didn't crush me. Though, I wouldn't have minded if he had.

Slowly, excruciatingly slowly, he lowered himself onto me and kissed the skin at the base of my neck. Instinctively, I let out a gasp at the sensation. It had been far too long since anyone had done anything to give me any sort of pleasure. And I knew without a doubt that all of Owen's energy was going to be focused on me.

He let out a long breath as his lips worked their way up to the sensitive skin behind my ears. His breath was shallow and hot against my hair, and as I closed my eyes, he let himself relax further on top of me.

I was covered in a blanket of Owen, and there was certainly no better feeling in the world. I reached behind him and started to pull off his shirt. After it had been flung across the room, I marveled at the firm, chiseled chest in front of me.

He had just a bit of hair across his skin, and it was dark and soft as it moved against me. I wrapped my arms around the back of his neck, and pulled him closer to me, though we were already completely pressed against one another.

I pushed my lips against his, and gently slid my tongue inside his mouth. He let out a low grumble as I explored and teased. I squirmed as I felt myself getting more and more aroused. I didn't know how much longer I could stand it. I needed him. I desperately needed him.

“Dad!” a little voice called from the living room.

Owen pulled away from me, looking completely defeated.

“That's Cora,” he whispered.

My heart sank. Whatever was about to happen was done for the night. There was no getting around that fact. I only hoped it wasn't done for good.

“You better go see what she needs.”

He placed one last kiss on my lips and stood up, searching for his shirt. He pulled it on and glanced back at me before he left the room.

“This isn't over,” he said with a wink.

OWEN

The next morning was one of excitement and chaos, and I hadn't even had a chance to think about what almost happened with Skye. What I wish would have happened. What I hoped would happen eventually.

When Cora called for me that night, she had woken from a bad dream and was terrified when she couldn't find me. I felt awful for leaving her like that, and once we were reunited, all she wanted to do was crawl in bed with me.

So, I took her and Laila back to our chalet, where they both spent the night in my bed, and I got very little sleep between thinking about Skye, and trying to avoid getting hit in the face by tiny little hands and feet.

The girls woke long before I was ready, but fortunately, Beth was ready for them, and occupied them for a little while so I could put myself together. When I finally forced myself out of bed, I peered out the window towards Skye's bedroom. The bedroom where we had almost...

Her curtains were still closed, and I hoped she was able to get better sleep than I had. Before I had a chance to spend too much time looking through the window like an absolute creep, there was a knock on my bedroom door.

"Hi, Beth," I said as I cracked it open.

"I'm sorry, but the girls are very eager to get going."

"I know, I know. I'll be right out."

Beth nodded as she walked away. I wasn't sure if I was still pleased with my decision, or I was regretting leaving all of their presents at the Harris' chalet. I should have known that they would have very limited patience for waiting around. I couldn't blame them. I was excited to get going, too. But not for the same reasons they were.

I pulled on my Christmas sweater the girls had gifted me last year, and ran a comb through my ever-graying hair. I probably should have taken a shower or at least had a shave, but I knew Laila and Cora didn't have the patience for that.

When I came downstairs, the girls were standing next to the front door, bouncing up and down, each of them holding one of Beth's hands.

“Can we go now?” Cora squealed.

“Yes, yes, we can go now.”

The two girls bolted out the door and into the deep snow that was nearly up to their ears. I followed them outside, and took a deep breath of the fresh mountain air. There really was nothing quite like the air in the Alps.

A FEW SHORT MINUTES LATER, I was relaxing in a leather armchair with a mug of hot coffee in my hands. The crackling of the fireplace filled the room with a comforting rhythm, its flames casting dancing shadows on the walls adorned with charming wooden accents.

Around me, the adults were nestled in various corners of the room, their faces illuminated by the soft, flickering glow. The aroma of breakfast, prepared with love and care, wafted from the kitchen, promising a feast of delectable treats. The scent of cinnamon mingled with the freshness of pine, creating an intoxicating perfume that hung in the air.

Outside, the snowfall had intensified into a flurry, painting the world in a pristine white. The snowflakes, delicate and intricate, clung to the windowpanes, creating a mesmerizing mosaic. Beyond the glass, the snow-laden trees stood tall and majestic, their branches bowing under the weight of the

freshly fallen snow. Every now and then, a gust of wind would shake the trees, causing the snow to cascade down like powdered sugar, adding to the enchantment of the scene.

I glanced across the room at Skye, who was leaning against the doorframe to the kitchen. I couldn't truly put into words how much I adored her. She had so far spent the morning making sure everyone had food, coffee, and cocoa, while also ensuring that all the kids got the correct presents to open.

She watched over everyone with a smile on her face, like there was no place she would rather be. I must have spent too long watching, because she looked over at me and her cheeks turned the slightest shade of pink. I smiled at her, and wished that I could talk to her about last night.

In the moment, I felt like we were on the same page. She wanted it just as badly as I did, it seemed, and I could sense her disappointment when I had to leave the room. I just hoped she hadn't changed her mind since then. I don't know if I would be able to handle never kissing those sweet lips again.

When I looked back over at where she had been standing, she was gone. I looked around to see if she had found a seat somewhere, but it appeared she had left the room.

A moment later, she reemerged with a small package in her hands. It was wrapped in red paper, and had a big silver bow on top. She crossed the room to me and sat on the arm of the chair.

"What have you got there?" I asked.

"Oh, um, this is for you," she said, trying to hide her smile.

I was completely taken aback. She hadn't known I would be there. How in the world did she get me a present in the short amount of time we had been in Switzerland. There wasn't a town nearby, and the resort gift shop was full to the brim of tourist souvenirs.

Regardless, I was thrilled she had thought of me, but also incredibly embarrassed that I didn't have anything for her. I was certain she hadn't been expecting anything, but I made a

mental note to send her a gift just as soon as I got back to New York.

Skye handed me the small box a bit sheepishly, and I took it from her, having no idea what to anticipate.

“I’m sorry, it’s kind of a dumb gift, but I really wanted to get you something.”

“I’m sure I will love it. Thank you, Skye.”

I peeled at the paper to reveal a white box. When I opened it, there was a little snow globe with the main cabin of the resort inside. I shook it, and the snow began to fall gently over the peaks of the roof, and onto the tiny trees.

Beneath where the snow globe had been laying, there was a small handwritten note. I opened it up and read the short message with a silly grin on my face.

Thank you for making this the most magical Christmas ever. -Skye

I looked up at her, nearly speechless. It was such a simple gift, but it was thoughtful and meaningful, and that was really all that mattered.

“This is the most thoughtful gift, Skye. Thank you.”

I wanted to lean over and kiss her, but a quick glance around the room reminded me that this was neither the time nor the place. She smiled at me and reached out to squeeze my arm.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get you anything,” I said, hardly able to meet her eyes.

She bit her bottom lip and leaned towards me.

“Last night was the only gift I need,” she whispered, “and you promised me that we weren’t done.”

I felt my jaw drop open, and when I looked up at Skye, she had a satisfied grin on her face. Clearly, she was rather proud of leaving me speechless. And I guess I had my answer. There seemed to be no regret from either of us, unless you count the regret that it didn’t go any further.

THE ROOM ECHOED with the sound of clinking mugs and the gentle hum of conversation. Children's laughter intertwined with the melodic tunes of a classic Christmas playlist softly playing in the background. The rest of Skye's family, their faces lit with the warm hues of the fire, exchanged thoughtful gifts – tokens of affection and appreciation that spoke volumes without the need for words.

As the morning sun filtered through the snow clouds, it cast a brilliant, golden glow over the entire resort, as if nature itself was bestowing its blessings upon our gathering. In the midst of this picturesque setting, amidst the laughter, the love, and the shared moments, I felt an overwhelming sense of contentment.

I wasn't sure why I had been so terrified and timid about taking a trip that felt "Christmas-y." So far, this had been the best Christmas in years, and the day was only getting started. Every time I looked at Skye, or she gently brushed my arm, I felt a jolt of excitement shoot through me. And knowing that she was feeling something similar only made things that much better.

AFTER THE MERRIMENT OF GIFTS, breakfast, and Christmas music had started to die down, Annie ushered everyone outside for the annual Harris family snowman building competition. I wasn't sure why everything in this family had to be a competition, but it certainly brought out different sides of Skye's family that I hadn't realized were in there.

"You're going down," Skye whispered as she pulled on her coat and stepped outside.

"In your dreams," I retorted. "I might as well be a professional snowman-builder."

"Oh really? When's the last time you built a snowman?"

I wracked my brain. It had been years. Many years. Perhaps since childhood. The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. Had I been depriving my girls of a beloved winter

tradition all their lives? As I made my way outside behind Skye, I saw that Laila and Cora were managing just fine.

Laila was working alongside Beth to build, and Cora had teamed up with Eva and Mae. They were incredibly focused as they packed the snow and placed it in just the right spot to create the best snowman.

Before I knew it, everyone around me was nearly done, but my snowman still looked like a lump without any real shape to it. Sierra and Greg's snowman must have been ten feet tall, and I had no idea how they got the head up there until I saw Sierra sitting on top of Greg's shoulders as he inched closer and closer to their towering creation.

Luke and Taylor's looked like it had been sculpted by Michelangelo himself, and even Beth and Laila's was quite impressive. When I turned to see how Skye had fared, I saw not only a picture-perfect snowman, but also an igloo that was large enough for most of the kids to gather inside, which they were quickly doing.

I caught her eye, and she tried to keep from laughing as she approached me.

"It's okay," she said with a patronizing pat on my shoulder, "there's always next year."

"How did you do that?"

"Oh Owen, you have so much to learn."

She shook her head at me and walked back towards her creation. I never thought building a snowman and an igloo would be such a turn on, but apparently I had very strange taste.

SKYE

The morning after Christmas is usually a bit of a downer. The festivities are over, the snow is less magical and somehow more cold, and the anticipation for next year begins. Normally I dread the day after Christmas, but this year was different. There was something in the air that told me the magic hadn't finished yet.

Despite our best efforts, Owen and I didn't get a moment alone the entire day. There was far too much going on. Between the gifts, the meals, the snowmen, and the games, it seemed like the entire day was packed. I was actually looking forward to the next day when the excitement had worn off a bit.

We didn't have any big plans for the day, so I sent Owen a message, asking what they were up to. I was sure he had plans with his girls, but I secretly hoped he would invite me along, or at least that I would get a chance to see him.

"We have a day-after-Christmas tradition we're doing. Care to join us?" his message read.

"I don't want to intrude! Enjoy your day."

I sent the message and felt my heart sink. I really didn't want to intrude on their family tradition, especially if it had been one that his wife had participated in. I set my phone on my bed and went out into the living room to see what everyone else was doing.

The kids were sprawled all over the place, slung over couches and laying across the floor, recovering from a day of

excitement and enjoying their new gifts. The only one of the kids that I didn't see right away was Amelia.

Because of her age, Amelia was often left out of both the kid and adult groups, and as the fun single aunt, I tried to take her in as much as possible. Especially because she was so much like me in so many ways. I searched the room for her, but didn't see her anywhere.

I peeked into the kitchen, but it was quiet and empty. I was about to go upstairs to her room, but something in the corner by the Christmas tree caught my eye. I wandered over to the pile of blankets, underneath which Amelia was hiding with her phone.

“Skye! Stop!” she whispered, pulling the blanket back over her head.

“What are you doing in there?”

“Don't tell mom!”

“Amelia, what's going on?”

“Mom took my phone away. I'm not supposed to have it.”

“Why did she take it away?”

“I—um—I was up too late.”

“You got in trouble for that? That doesn't sound like your mom.”

“Well...”

“What were you doing?”

“I don't want to talk about it!”

“Amelia, it's me. Let's go outside. I'm not going to tell your mom a thing.”

She let out a long sigh, slipped the phone in her pocket, and stood up, letting the mound of blankets pool around her feet. We pulled our coats on and walked out into the courtyard, where I turned on two of the heaters.

Amelia slumped down into one of the chairs, and refused to look at me. I knew something must be going on with her,

because she wasn't acting like her normal self at all.

“Are you going to tell me why you really got in trouble, or do you want me to guess?”

She sighed again and rolled her eyes at me, something she had never done.

“Amelia...”

“Fine. But you're going to laugh at me or make fun of me or something.”

“I have never done that in my life. I'm not going to start now.”

“When we were skiing a few days ago...I—um—started talking to someone.”

“Oh really?”

“He's really nice. I gave him my phone number, and we stayed up all night talking. Mom found out and she wasn't happy about it.”

“Well, I can understand why she wouldn't want you up all night, but tell me more about this guy.”

“He's from France. Well, actually he's from England, but he lives in France now.”

“How old is he?”

“Seventeen.”

“Wow, going for the older man, huh?”

“See? I knew you'd make fun of me!”

“Amelia, I am not making fun of you. I think that's great. Is he cute?”

“Want to see a picture?”

“Of course I do!”

She looked around to make sure no one was watching, and then carefully got her phone out of her pocket. She scrolled for a moment before settling on his social media profile. She handed me the phone with a smile on her face.

I looked through some of his photos, making a few comments here and there, and Amelia watched me, grinning from ear to ear. She was a lot like me in that she never thought anyone was good enough for her. She was self-confident and strong, and she wasn't going to waste time on anyone who didn't build her up. If this boy was making her smile like that, he must be something special.

“So, you really like this guy?”

She nodded emphatically.

“And your mom doesn't approve?”

“She doesn't even know him. She wasn't there when we met.”

“You should invite him over!”

“Yeah right. She would never go for that.”

“Why not?”

She pondered that question for a moment.

“I don't know. But would grammy be okay with it?”

“I'm sure she would love to meet someone you like.”

“Skye! You can't tell anyone that I like him!”

“Right, sorry. My lips are sealed. But you should still invite him over. Just as a friend.”

“What, like you and Owen?”

I was taken aback by the question.

“Excuse me? Owen is just my friend. We've been friends for, like, ever.”

“We *all* see the way you look at him.”

“I don't know what you're talking about. And who is 'we all'?”

“Everyone. Mom, Dad, Luke, Taylor.”

“Well, you're all out of your minds. There's nothing going on between me and Owen.”

“Skye!” I heard a man’s voice call from across the courtyard.

I looked up to see a Greek god of a man walking towards me in the snow. Owen.

“Sorry,” he said as he reached us. “I don’t mean to interrupt.”

“Oh, you’re not interrupting *anything*,” Amelia said with a grin in my direction.

“You’re not interrupting. We were just chatting.”

“Well, you didn’t respond to my last message, so I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“That is just so sweet of you. Isn’t that sweet, Skye?”

“I think that’s enough out of you, Amelia.”

She smiled at me again, and put her eyes down to her phone.

“I did respond to your last message.”

“Nope, you definitely didn’t.”

“I sent a message and then left my phone in my room. So if you messaged me again, I haven’t seen it.”

“Well, I told you to get your,” he glanced down at Amelia before whispering the next word, “*ass* over to my chalet as soon as possible.”

“I’m in high school. You can swear in front of me,” Amelia remarked without looking up.

“I guess I missed that message. But I told you I didn’t want to intrude on your tradition.”

“You didn’t let me explain what the tradition was.”

“What is it?”

“We watch *Frozen* and eat popcorn with M&M’s in it. It’s nothing fancy or secret. Just something fun that the girls like to do.”

“I still don’t want to butt in on a sacred family tradition, Owen.”

“Oh, just go over there, Skye. Obviously he wants you there or he wouldn’t have come out here without shoes or a coat on.”

I looked down at Owen’s feet and Amelia was right. He was standing in front of me in soaking wet socks and just a sweater to keep him warm.

“She has a point,” Owen said, nodding in her direction.

“Well, I’ll come over, but only if it’s okay with you, Amelia.”

“I’ve got *plenty* to do to keep me occupied. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“That sounds like trouble,” Owen remarked.

“It is,” Amelia and I said in unison.

We burst into laughter and Owen watched us with a smile on his face.

“I gotta tell you, having teenage daughters someday scares the shit out of me,” he said with a chuckle.

“We’re terrifying creatures,” Amelia said with a nod.

I started laughing again, and when Amelia and Owen both joined in, there was no stopping it. My side started to ache and tears were steaming down my face in the cold wind. Finally, the laughter subsided and I remembered what was happening.

Owen invited me to be part of his family’s tradition. It may not be anything elaborate or intricate, but it was special to his kids, and I knew it must be incredibly special to him. I knew how much he loved those girls, and he would do anything to make them happy.

“Shall we?” he asked, with a hand extended to me.

I looked over at Amelia who nodded her approval as I reached for Owen’s hand.

“Don’t have too much fun, you crazy kids,” she said with a grin.

When I stood, he wrapped an arm around my shoulder and pulled me close to him. As we walked towards his chalet, he looked back over his shoulder to make sure Amelia was out of earshot.

“Maybe tonight, after the girls are in bed, we can make a tradition of our own,” he whispered.

I looked up at him, once again shocked by his bold and forward flirtatious manner. I never would have thought that the boy I knew would become *this* man.

“That sounds like a deal,” I said, hoping that the chill from the wind was hiding the fact that my cheeks were pink with heat.

WE STEPPED into the chalet to see the girls eagerly anticipating their dad’s return.

“Can we start now?” Laila begged.

“Go ahead. I’ll make the popcorn.”

Owen guided me to the couch and sat me on one end of it, then picked up a fluffy white blanket that he spread across my lap.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he whispered.

I smiled and nodded as he left the room, and Laila hit play on the movie. She and Cora were snuggled up together on the floor, still in their pajamas and surrounded by stuffed animals, blankets, and pillows. Clearly, this was something they both looked forward to.

“So you guys like *Frozen*?” I asked, “You two are kind of like Anna and Elsa, aren’t you?”

“Shhh!” they said in unison.

I clapped a hand over my mouth to contain my laughter. I guess this was a family that did not appreciate conversation during a movie. I had to respect it.

A moment later, Owen returned with four bowls of popcorn, each of them covered in little chocolate candies. He handed one to each of the girls, who twisted and turned to see around him as he crossed in front of the TV.

Then, he handed one to me and plopped down on the couch next to me, pulling some of the blanket onto his lap.

“Where’s Beth today?” I asked.

“Shhh!” came the girls response once again.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing and Owen glared at me in a mock-disappointed manner. He shook his head at me, and that only made me want to laugh harder. I wasn’t sure how I was going to make it through an entire movie without being able to talk or laugh.

But then, Owen’s arm was around me, and my head was on his shoulder, and everything felt right in the world.

OWEN

“*W*ait, it’s been so long since I’ve seen this movie. I don’t remember there being any trolls,” Skye said without taking her eyes off the screen.

“Shhh!” Laila and Cora said in unison, for at least the thousandth time.

“You have to stop talking. They take this movie very seriously,” I whispered into her hair.

“I’m sorry. I’m just not used to being quiet during movies. My family talks the entire time.”

“Well, if you’re going to join this family for movies, you’re going to have to adhere to the girls’ rules.”

Skye rolled her eyes playfully and turned her attention back to the TV. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was so unbelievably gorgeous, and it was starting to feel like she was part of the family. In fact, it didn’t take much work at all for her to feel like that. She fit right in with both me and the girls, like she was meant to be there all along.

I didn’t think I would ever have another woman in my life who could love my children so deeply. I always worried that if I ever started dating again, there would never be anyone who could care for them like they deserved. But with Skye...well, she was simply incredible with them.

I knew I was still staring at her, but I honestly couldn’t help it. She glanced over at me and opened her mouth to say something, but immediately thought better of it, which was

probably a good decision. I just smiled at her, and she smiled back, and I felt like the happiest man alive.

WHEN THE MOVIE FINALLY ENDED, the girls were adamant that we dive straight into the second one. Skye didn't look too thrilled about the prospect, but she went along with them anyway.

"Daddy, please? We can't just watch one of them," Laila pleaded.

"It's not right," Cora added.

"They're right, you know. How could you deprive them of this?" Skye chimed in.

I shook my head at her and let out a sigh.

"We can watch the second one—"

The three of them all cheered together.

"But first you need to go play outside for half an hour. It's a beautiful day, and you need to get some sunshine."

Laila and Cora groaned and didn't move from their nest on the floor.

"Okay, then I guess we won't watch it," I said with a shrug.

"Daddy! Please!"

"Outside."

They groaned and grumbled as they got to their feet, but eventually, they made their way over to the front door and put on their boots, coats, gloves, and hats.

"I bet some of the kids next door would love to come out and play with you," Skye said with a grin.

Somehow, she always knew the thing to say to perk the girls up. Their faces immediately lit up with excitement, and they dashed out the door. Beth followed behind them, but a moment later, Laila was back inside.

“That was not half an hour,” I told her.

“I know but...”

“What?”

“I don’t trust your timing.”

“Excuse me?”

“Can I set a timer on your phone and take it outside?”

I looked over at Skye, who was smirking at me. I loved that I had raised a bright and intelligent girl, but I couldn’t believe at only five years old she was already starting to see right through my plans.

“Okay, fine. But give the phone to Beth so you don’t drop it in the snow.”

I set a timer and handed my phone to Laila who bounced back outside and slammed the door behind her, shaking the entire chalet.

“You can’t fool her,” Skye said with a smile. “She knows what you’re up to.”

I shook my head. I was in complete agreement with her, and I was terrified for what life with a teenage Laila would look like in a few years.

“It’s the red hair. It gives her extra powers.”

“You know, I’ve heard that about redheads,” Skye said with a laugh.

I pulled her closer to me and kissed her cheek. I didn’t think I would ever get over how soft and smooth her skin was. I wanted to explore every inch of her, though I was certain her entire body would be just as smooth.

She looked up at me, her grey eyes sparkling with the reflection of the snow from outside. I brushed a strand of hair out of her face and leaned in towards her as I lifted her chin to mine.

Every time I kissed her seemed to get better and better. I wasn’t sure how that was possible, but the moment our lips

met, all of my worries disappeared. I was lost in that moment and never wanted to leave.

I placed my hand on the back of her neck and held her closer to me. Her tongue slid inside my mouth and wrestled with mine for just a moment. She suddenly pulled away and looked at me with a smile on her face.

“Do you think they’re really going to stay out there for half an hour?”

“Why? Did you have something in mind?” I asked, cocking my head towards the bedroom.

“Well, I don’t know if we have time for *that*, but we can still have a little fun.”

She leaned in to kiss me again, and then hopped onto my lap, straddling me with a knee on either side of my hips. Feeling her weight on top of me was the most arousing thing I had experienced in a long time. She gently wiggled her hips and pressed into me as much as possible. Nearly every part of our bodies was against each other as she started to kiss me again.

I dug my fingers into her back and held on like I was never going to be able to touch her again. I couldn’t believe how perfectly her body felt against mine. I cursed the bulky sweater she was wearing, but I knew the kids could come in at any moment, and I didn’t want to risk Skye being half naked on the couch in front of them.

I slowly slid my hands under her sweater and felt her warm skin. She squirmed just a bit as my fingertips tickled the space above her hip bones.

“Sorry,” I whispered with a smile.

“Don’t be,” she said, barely taking her lips away from mine.

As our mouths moved in unison together, my hips started to move back and forth. With my eyes closed and my hands on her skin, I could almost pretend we weren’t still fully clothed. Almost.

I wrapped my arms around her and flipped her onto her back and climbed on top of her. She let out a little squeal of surprise, and I didn't think a sexier noise had ever been made in the history of the world.

I lowered myself down on top of her and kissed her neck, which made her squirm even more. I loved that she was ticklish and wasn't afraid to hide that fact. I pulled down the collar of her sweater just enough that I could access her collarbone, where I began kissing from her shoulder, all the way across to the other one.

Skye let out a long breath that sent chills down my spine. How was it possible for a woman to be so delightfully perfect in every single situation? It wasn't fair the way she made me feel.

I moved one of my hands down so I could slip it beneath her shirt again, this time aiming to make my way to her breasts. Even through the thick sweater, they were just begging to be praised and adored.

When I finally reached my destination, I fingered the edge of her bra, wondering if I could get it unclasped so I could explore a bit more. She gently moaned into my ear as I let my hand wander over every bit of skin it could reach.

I knew we probably didn't have much longer before the girls were back, but I desperately needed more of her. I massaged her breast over her bra, which was incredible, but not nearly as satisfying as I would have liked it to be.

I shifted my position so I could get beneath her sweater and kiss her stomach, then her ribs, and then the sensitive skin across her chest. She wiggled and squirmed beneath me, making it clear she was enjoying this almost as much as I was.

I swiped my tongue across her skin, finally tasting what I had been imagining for so long. I wasn't sure if I would be able to stop. She was everything and more than I ever wanted.

"Owen," she whispered.

"I know."

"No, Owen."

“Hmm...” I mumbled, not wanting to take my lips off her skin.

“I can hear them coming.”

“Who?”

“Laila and Cora.”

“Shit.”

I sat up and tried to smooth my hair down as much as I could. The skin around Skye’s mouth was a bit red and irritated from my stubble, but fortunately, the girls wouldn’t notice something like that.

A moment later, the front door swung open, and a burst of cold air followed the girls and Beth inside. Beth looked at Skye laying on the couch and me with my ruffled hair and gave us a knowing smile, but never said a word about it.

“We’re ready now!” Cora proclaimed.

“Well, get over here and let’s watch this movie,” I told her.

They peeled off their snow-soaked coats and boots and bounced back over to their blankets and pillows, snuggling in like they had never left. I looked over at Skye, who was now sitting up, and gave her a quick wink. I didn’t know if we were ever going to get more than this, but I wasn’t going to take any second of it for granted.

SKYE

After working through both *Frozen* movies, way too much popcorn, and at least five pounds of candy, the girls were sufficiently satisfied, and I was ready to get out on the slopes. Beth was taking Laila and Cora for the afternoon, so Owen and I were free to hit the bigger slopes together, something we hadn't done yet.

We headed to the main lodge, got suited up, and were ready to spend the afternoon in the sun. We hopped onto the lift, and I looked over at Owen, feeling my heart warm with affection. I couldn't help but feel like I had had a stroke of luck reuniting with him like this. It was as if the universe conspired to bring us back together.

The air was crisp, and our laughter blended seamlessly with the distant echoes of other skiers on the slopes as we rode up to the top of the mountain. It felt just like childhood, when we could talk about anything and everything, and the laughter came easily.

"You know I'm, like, really good at skiing, right?" Owen asked as we reached the top.

"If you're as good at skiing as you are at building snowmen, then I can't wait to see you out there."

"Listen, I didn't realize it was an art contest. I just thought we were having fun."

"Your snowman looked more like a—how do I put this nicely—a blob? Like snow fell off the roof and just piled

there? I mean, if it had been a Jabba the Hut building contest, you definitely would have won.”

“Ouch,” he said as he put his hand over his heart in mock-hurt.

We hopped off the lift and moved out of the way before I had a chance to respond.

“I guess you’ll just have to prove yourself.”

“Are you challenging me?”

“Well, only if you think you can handle it. I’m an excellent skier.”

“Oh, I can handle it. I’m not worried about that. I’m just afraid you’re going to get your feelings hurt when I beat you.”

“Trust me, you don’t have to worry about that.”

“I know; you’re very strong.”

“No, I mean, you’re not going to beat me so it doesn’t matter either way.”

“Wow, someone is confident.”

“It’s on, Anderson.”

“Good luck, Harris.”

We shook hands and narrowed our eyes at one another. A little healthy competition never hurt anyone, right? Under the vast blue sky, Owen and I found ourselves gearing up for an impromptu skiing competition. The excitement in Owen’s eyes mirrored my own as we prepared to take on the mountains and, perhaps, each other’s skills.

“First one to the bottom wins?”

“You’re on.”

With a playful glint in his eyes, he gestured for me to take the lead, his smile cocky and condescending, yet somehow still encouraging. I took off, my skis gliding over the powdery snow with a sense of exhilaration. He followed closely behind, his movements calculated and precise. I had to admit, he was keeping up better than I thought he would.

As we raced down the slopes, the wind rushed past us, and the snowflakes swirled around, creating a whirl of white. We dodged people, trees, and posts. Then went over jumps, rails, and hills.

The wind was whipping past me and I couldn't see Owen anywhere. I feared he had gotten too far ahead, and I would never catch up to him. I returned my focus to the slopes ahead of me. I pushed faster and faster, and just when I thought I was going to launch myself into the snow, Owen came zipping past me, moving at light speed.

Our friendly competition quickly turned into a test of skill. We wove through the challenging terrain, our laughter mixing with the sounds of skis slicing through the snow. Every turn and every jump was a test of our skills, but it was also a shared adventure. Halfway down the mountain, we paused, our breath visible in the cold, crisp air.

"You're tougher competition than I thought you'd be," I said with a cocky grin.

"Likewise," Owen shouted as he pushed off with his poles once again.

With renewed energy, we continued our descent. The bright sun cast a warm, golden glow upon the snow-covered peaks, creating a breathtaking backdrop for our race. As we navigated the slopes side by side, our movements synchronized effortlessly, something that did not go unnoticed by me.

As we approached the finish line, we exchanged a daring glance at one another. I was not about to let him beat me. I pushed harder than I imagined possible, and barely inched out the victory over him.

"Well, well, well. I guess we know who the best is here, don't we?"

"Whatever. I let you win," Owen said as he pulled his helmet off.

"Oh yeah right! We both know I'm better than you in every possible way."

I tossed my hair as I removed my helmet, and Owen most definitely took note of the action. I started to move away from him, full of the confident arrogance that I deserved, but I didn't get very far before he reached out and grabbed my hand to stop me. He spun me around and pulled me toward him in one swift movement. Even with our massive coats and skis in the way, he managed to meet my lips with his before I even realized what was going on.

His nose was icy against mine, but I didn't mind at all. His lips were sweet and his tongue was warm as it slid its way inside my mouth. He nibbled my bottom lip, forcing a little giggle out of me.

"What was that?" he asked in a quiet, sultry voice.

"What was what?"

"That noise you just made? Are you giggling right now? At a time like this?"

"I just wasn't expecting to be bit today, that's all."

"I didn't bite you!" He paused for a moment before leaning in and whispering in my ear, "but I can if you'd like that."

He backed away from me, once again leaving me speechless.

"Come on, I'm freezing," he said, as if his last comment had never even happened.

I did as instructed and followed him back to the main lodge, where we found a secluded seat in the back of the cafe.

After ordering our (slightly spiked) hot cocoa, the cold started to melt away, and I felt more relaxed than I had in, well, I don't know how long. We were quiet for a while, each of us lost in our own thoughts, but it wasn't an awkward silence. It was a companionable silence that made it feel like we had known each other our entire lives.

I mean, I suppose we really *had* known each other our whole lives, but I knew very little about who he was as an adult. The man sitting across from me was not who I thought teenage Owen would turn out to be. He was far better.

I always knew there was something special about Owen, but I was so caught up in myself and my own life that I never took the time to really figure out what it was. Now, seeing who he was today, I wished I had.

“What are you thinking about?”

The question startled me out of my stupor, and I had to refocus my eyes on Owen as I tried to answer him.

“I—um—I was thinking about when we were kids. We had a lot of fun together.”

“We really did. Do you remember when we thought we could build a treehouse with like four planks of wood and a few nails and no hammer?” he laughed.

“I completely forgot about that! What were we thinking?”

“We had a lot of self-confidence for a couple of kids with no construction experience. And one who was afraid of heights.”

“How did you remember I was afraid of heights?”

“I remember a lot of things about you, Skye, probably more than you realize.” He was quiet for a moment before going on. “It seems like you’ve gotten over that fear, though. I mean, you weren’t even timid about the ski lift at all.”

“It’s something I’ve been working on for a long time... either that or I was just trying to impress you by not being scared.”

“You impress me by just being yourself.”

I felt heat rush to my cheeks, and I hoped they were still red enough from being outside that he wouldn’t notice.

“So, what do you have in the works right now?” I asked, trying to get the subject away from me. “Any future Oscar winners?”

“I don’t want to talk about work,” he said with a groan.

“Fine. Where’s your next vacation going to be? Since I know you’re just swimming in cash that’s dying to be spent.”

“First of all, I am not *swimming* in cash. I keep all my money in the bank, which is where I have to go if I am in the mood for a swim.”

The joke caught me off guard and hot cocoa nearly came out my nose as I laughed.

“Well, that is a very safe place for it.”

“I actually don’t have any vacations planned right now. Usually this is our big trip of the year. Sometimes I travel to interesting places for work, but I definitely wouldn’t consider those vacations.”

“We’re far more similar than I ever realized.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is my only vacation of the year. I rarely take a sick day. And I’m never late. My life kind of revolves around work.”

“Is that the way you want it?”

“I don’t know. It’s just the only way I have ever known things to be. If I didn’t work this much, I wouldn’t have all of my success.”

“I know the feeling.”

“I mean, you have your girls, so at least your life doesn’t *completely* revolve around work.”

“No, it doesn’t, but I definitely spend too much time working. I’ve actually been thinking about cutting back in the next couple years.”

“Oh really? But I thought you loved your job.”

“I absolutely love my job, but I love my girls more. I wouldn’t ever quit completely, but I would like to spend more time with them. Teach them things about the world, take them to interesting places. I don’t want to look back in twenty years and regret not being with them more.”

“Yeah, that’s a tough spot to be in.”

“I have more than enough money saved up right now to set them up for life. They could go to any college they want, buy a house, and still have money to fall back on. That’s the one thing I don’t regret about working so much. I want them to have everything they can.”

“You’re a good dad,” I said, trying not to tear up as I listened to the obvious love and admiration for his daughters in his voice.

“I’m just trying to do my best. I think that’s what most parents hope to do for their kids.”

“Well, that makes you a better father than your dad ever was, and that’s certainly something to be proud of.”

He grabbed his mug and winked at me over the top of the rim, sending my heart fluttering.

“Thank you, Skye.”

WHEN WE ARRIVED BACK at our chalets a while later, the sun was beginning to set, and the chill in the air was intense. I wanted to stay outside with Owen for the rest of the night, talking about everything that we had missed in each others lives over the last two decades, but my body couldn’t handle the cold. Owen walked me to the front door, and I stood shivering for a moment before I reached for the handle.

“Are we still on for tonight?” he asked before I stepped inside.

“Tonight?”

“You know...I thought we might finally get some alone time.”

“I’m always down for that.”

“I’ll let you know when the girls are asleep and you can sneak over. It’ll be just like high school.”

“We never did that in high school.”

“No, but I dreamed we did.”

I playfully pushed his shoulder, but I was secretly a bit flattered.

“I’ll see you tonight, then,” I said, my heart racing in my chest.

“See you tonight,” he said as he leaned over and gently kissed my cheek.

I walked inside, unable to think about anything but the kisses Owen and I had shared earlier that day. I wanted more, and I was thrilled at the prospect of that finally coming true.

OWEN

Like most things in life, my plans for a night with Skye did not pan out the way I hoped they would. The girls took longer than expected to get to bed. They needed every bedtime story read to them, which I was happy to do, but it meant it was quite late before they were actually asleep.

Just when I was about to text Skye to come over, Laila came stumbling into my room to tell me that she needed to throw up. Of course, I wasn't going to pawn her off on Beth for something like that, so I sent Skye an apologetic message, explaining everything. After, I got Laila cleaned up and tucked into my bed with me.

Several sleepless hours passed before Skye responded. I couldn't believe she was still awake at such an hour, and I wanted to peek over to see if her bedroom light was on, but I didn't want to risk waking Laila.

"No worries, another time," she said with a small, yellow smiley face.

"What are you doing up so late?"

"Well...it's a long story."

"I've got time."

"You know how my family is a little bit...competitive?"

"Of course."

"We were playing a game. Things got a little heated. There was a rematch, and then a championship game, which I won by the way."

“Sounds like a fun night.”

“It was definitely more fun than yours was...I’m sorry you have a sick kiddo.”

“She seems fine now. I think all the junk food over the last few days finally got to her.”

“That’s never a good feeling.”

“Good night, Skye. See you tomorrow?”

“Good night.”

I looked at her final message over and over. I shouldn’t have been thinking so hard about what it meant that she hadn’t answered my question, but I really did feel like I was fifteen again when I talked to her. I got nervous and a bit sweaty, and though I tried to play it off with cheesy lines and jokes, I was worried that she could see right through me.

Sure, I was a lot more confident and self-assured than I was as a teenager, but that didn’t mean I didn’t have any insecurities, especially when talking to the person I had been in love with my entire life.

THE NEXT FEW days passed without anything interesting happening, which also meant I spent very little time with Skye. She always made everything more exciting. Just being in her presence was exhilarating.

Laila and Cora had had enough skiing for this trip, and they were tired of playing in the snow all the time, so I had to figure out more things to keep them occupied. Of course, there were the countless gifts they had received for Christmas, but apparently those were old news.

We spent time in the lodge, we found a nearby snow-covered playground, and we looked at every Christmas tree on the resort at least a thousand times.

I guess I hadn’t thought this vacation through as well as in previous years. I assumed they would be enamored with skiing and the snow, unable to get enough, but clearly I was wrong.

There weren't a lot of other kid-friendly activities nearby, so that meant we spent a lot of time cooped up in the chalet.

I knew Beth would have been happy to stay with the kids for a few hours while I went skiing or maybe just spent some time with Skye, but it was a *family* vacation, and I wanted to be with my girls, though my heart ached for Skye.

I knew she was having a great time on the slopes, but I missed her, and I had to admit, I was a bit jealous. I loved watching movies, coloring pictures, and playing in the hot tub with my girls, but a little adult interaction was definitely needed.

LATE ONE EVENING, just before the girls went to bed, there was a knock on the front door of the chalet. I told myself not to get my hopes up, but it was no use. They were up, and they weren't coming down.

I heard Beth open the front door, and then it quickly squeaked closed as footsteps entered the cabin. I craned my neck from the bathroom where the girls were playing in the tub, trying to hear who it was.

“Owen!” I heard Skye’s voice call from downstairs, “where are you?”

Before I could answer, Beth appeared in the doorway, prepared to take over for me. I thanked her and left the room, promising to come back and give the girls a goodnight kiss. I stepped out into the hallway at the top of the stairs, and there she was. Standing by the door with her coat slung over her arms and a smile on her face.

Her eyes sparkled as I made my way towards her, and her smile only grew with each step. I couldn't remember the last time my heart skipped a beat when I looked at a woman, but it probably wasn't safe with how much it was skipping right now.

“Hey,” she said as I reached the bottom step.

“Hey,” I echoed, wrapping my arms around her without a moment’s hesitation.

I leaned in to kiss her, and she did the same. I dipped her towards the ground like we were in the middle of a romance movie, and held her there for a moment before setting her back on her feet.

“I’m so glad to see you,” I whispered into her hair as I held her.

I didn’t care if I was coming on too strong. I didn’t care if I seemed over-eager. I wanted her. I needed her desperately, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to wait much longer to claim her as my own.

“Me too. I’ve missed you.”

I kissed her again, unable to restrain myself. I wanted to hold her all night long. I never wanted to let her go.

“My mom keeps asking where you’ve been.”

“Oh really?” I asked, holding her at arm’s length.

“She loves you.’

“Well, I am quite lovable. Or so I’ve heard.”

“I guess you have a certain charm about you,” she said with an eye roll.

I grinned at her and tried to keep from taking her into my bedroom right then and there.

“Anyway, the reason I came over here is because we’re having a little party for New Year’s Eve, and we all want you guys there.”

“A party, huh?”

“I mean, it’s not really a party. But we’re going to have a ton of food and play games and let the kids stay up until midnight.”

“What if I told you we already had plans?”

“Oh, well, I guess I should have expected that. No worries. Um, we can spend some time together another day, then.”

“I’m kidding.”

“What?”

“I don’t have any plans. I probably wasn’t even going to stay up that late.”

“Great joke,” she said with yet another eye roll.

“I’m sorry, Skye. I would love to spend New Year’s Eve with you, and I know the girls will be thrilled.”

“Good,” she said, the smile back on her face.

“Do you, um, I mean—uh...”

“Yes?”

“Do you want to stay for a while?”

“Stay...here?”

“Yeah. I mean, unless you don’t want to.”

“Of course I want to. But aren’t your kids still awake?”

“Well, maybe we just sit and talk. Or we can put on a movie or something.”

“I’d like that.”

I took her by the hand and led her to the living room where I pulled up the menu of movies for us to watch. She scanned through the list for a few minutes before settling on *Sleepless in Seattle*.

“I can’t believe you’ve never seen this movie,” she said with a sigh as the opening credits began.

“I know it’s your favorite.”

“There’s no way you could possibly know that.”

“Skye, you forget that I was, like, super in love with you in high school. While you were out on dates and hanging out with your friends, I was sitting at home wondering if you would ever love me back.”

“I—um—I didn’t know your feelings were that intense.”

“Well, they were. I had no idea how to deal with it, so that’s why I avoided you like crazy.”

“You avoided me?”

“You didn’t realize that we kind of lost touch in high school?”

“No, I did. I just thought it was because we were both doing our own things.”

“We were doing our own things. You were making friends and having fun. I was...thinking about you.”

She reached over and grabbed my hand, and I knew it was out of pity, but I held it anyway.

“Owen, you should have told me.”

“You would have laughed in my face.”

“That’s not true!”

“Skye.”

“Okay, well maybe I didn’t have the same feelings for you then that you did. But now...”

She trailed off, though I was dying to hear what she would say next. I was desperate to hear more about how she felt about me.

“Now?” I asked.

“Now—I don’t know—you’re different. I mean, we both are. We’re older and wiser. We’ve been through a lot of stuff. We’re not the same kids we were in high school.”

“Thank heavens for that,” I said with a laugh.

Skye scooted across the couch towards me and threw her legs over my lap. I rested my hands on her knee, though I would have much rather let them explore her. She nestled into my shoulder and I wrapped an arm around her, feeling completely at ease.

“This really is a good movie. You should have watched it years ago,” she said, changing the subject completely.

“I guess I just always hoped I would be able to watch it for the first time with you.”

She looked up at me with a smile on her face, and I gently kissed her lips as she relaxed into me. And though we may not have gotten the *alone* time that we had been longing for, somehow this was far better.

SKYE

When New Year's Eve rolled around, excitement was buzzing in the air, and not just from me. The whole resort seemed to be looking forward to what the new year might bring, and all the opportunities that we might be met with.

Our family had planned a day full of festivities and activities for both adults and kids, and I was so looking forward to spending the entire day with Owen and his girls. Even though I didn't have kids of my own, I felt a responsibility and a kinship with all of my nieces and nephews, and now with Owen's girls as well. I wanted to make sure they had the best day possible.

I HELPED my mom prepare for the day by cooking an obscene amount of food, and setting it all out on the table in an intricate manner that only she could accomplish. The table was adorned with candles, poppers, and confetti, alongside the dishes of vegetables, chocolate sweets, and cheese fondu.

One of my favorite things about New Year's Eve was the constant availability of food. It was certainly not a day that anyone was going to walk away hungry.

"Sweetheart, why do you keep looking out the window?" my mom asked as I brought out the drinks from the refrigerator.

"What are you talking about?"

“I know you’re excited for Owen to come over, but you don’t want to seem too eager, right?”

“Mom, there’s nothing going on between me and Owen. I’m just excited to hang out with him and the girls.”

“Skye, dear, you know we all love Owen. So, if you love him, we’re on board.”

“Mom!”

“What? I’m just saying, it’s been a long time since you’ve had a boyfriend, and he would be a great one to choose.”

“First of all, he is not my boyfriend. And second of all, I’ve had plenty of boyfriends. No one can ever keep up with my lifestyle.”

“I think you should give him a chance.”

“Give who a chance?” Amelia asked as she burst into the kitchen. “Owen?”

“So, you’ve noticed it, too. Sounds like the whole family wants this to happen,” my mom said with a grin.

“Nothing is happening between us, nor will anything ever happen between us. We’re friends, and that’s it. We’ve just had a lot to catch up on.”

Amelia and my mom exchanged a glance, which I knew meant that they didn’t see things the same way. Though, I didn’t see things that way either. Things *had* happened between me and Owen, and I hoped there would be more to come. But I didn’t need my family’s input on any of that.

“Can you guys please keep your mouths shut once Owen gets here?”

They looked at each other again, each of them with a sly grin on their face. I knew there would be no way they didn’t bring up their suspicions with him; I was just going to have to give him a fair warning beforehand.

There was a knock at the front door that nearly made the champagne bottle in my hand fall to the floor. I started walking over to open it, but suddenly remembered who was

watching me, and decided it would be best if I didn't look like I was excited *at all*, even though my heart was racing.

Fortunately, Penelope beat me to the door, and swung it wide open. Laila's red hair fluttered in the breeze, but my eyes went straight to Owen's. He had a bottle of Champagne in one hand, and a bottle of sparkling cider in the other. He also had a smile on his face that sent butterflies straight to my stomach. How in the world could a real person be so handsome?

"Laila, Cora, come see what we're making!" Penelope squealed, grabbing each of the girls by their hand and dragging them inside the chalet.

Owen watched them scurry away, and remained motionless in the doorway. I looked back over my shoulder to see my mom and Amelia poking their heads out of the kitchen door with the same sneaky smiles on their faces. I rolled my eyes at them and made my way over to Owen.

"Hey," he said as soon as I was close enough to hear him whisper. "These are for you guys."

I took the bottles from his hands and gave him a smile. I wanted to lean in and kiss him, but I was certain there were peering eyes watching us intently, waiting for something to happen.

"Come in," I said, pushing the door open wider with my foot.

He stepped inside and glanced over at the long table, covered with food, drinks, and decorations.

"Wow, you weren't kidding about the food."

"We take our food very seriously around here. I thought you'd know that by now."

"You know, despite all the holidays we spent together as kids, I don't think we ever had New Year's Eve together."

"Really? That can't be true."

"I tried to think of one, but I didn't come up with anything," he said.

“How is that possible? I swear, you are in, like, all of my holiday memories growing up.”

“Well, I guess it’s time to make some new memories,” he said with a quick wink.

I felt my cheeks turn pink, but I shouldn’t have been surprised about that. He made me blush constantly. Far more than anyone else ever had. And though it was a little embarrassing, it was also pretty delightful.

“Okay, everyone!” Taylor called from the top of the stairs. “Time for Harris-ball!”

The kids started cheering and everyone began racing around to find their supplies. Laila and Cora acted as if they knew exactly what was going on, but Owen stood in the middle of the living room like a deer in headlights.

“What is Harris-ball?” he asked frantically.

“It’s basically mini golf. But also a little bit like volleyball and monopoly. Oh, it’s also a drinking game for the adults.”

“That makes absolutely no sense.”

“You’re going to be completely lost. It’s okay, you can be on my team.”

I grabbed Owen’s hand and dragged him to the corner of the room where there was a dwindling pile of mini golf clubs on the floor. I handed him the yellow one, and I took the teal one, which was *always* my club.

I made my way to the starting line which was, in this case, a row of toys that one of the kids had lined up. Owen followed and stood timidly next to me behind the line. He glanced around nervously, as if he was preparing for battle, and not for a silly made-up game.

“Just follow my lead,” I instructed.

He gave a short nod and then Taylor announced that the game had begun. On the count of three, the adults all took a shot of their preferred beverage, and the children started running in every direction.

Owen looked at me, clearly horrified and confused, but all I could do was laugh, because he had no idea what he was in for. Somehow Laila and Cora were figuring it out just fine, but Owen appeared to need a little bit more assistance.

“I have absolutely no idea what’s happening,” he said.

“It’s a made-up game with made-up rules, “I told him, “so, don’t worry if you don’t catch on right away.”

I grabbed Owen’s hand and ran across the room to where a stack of golf balls were laying on the floor.

“Okay, so this part is basically like pool,” I told him.

“Pool? You didn’t tell me pool was involved in this game.”

“Just assume that this game involves all the other games,” I said with a laugh.

The balls were arranged in a pyramid, and because Owen had the yellow club, he was designated to knock them down. I set the yellow ball in front of him and gestured for him to take a swing. After a moment of hesitation, he swung his golf club and scattered the balls all across the room. Everyone went running to find the color that matched their club before the real fun began.

“I need fifty dollars!” shouted Penelope.

“Ten dollars!” said Luke.

“One hundred dollars!” my dad called from the top of the stairs.

I wasn’t sure how his ball had gotten up there, but somehow there he was, standing next to the black ball with his black club. Owen looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh,” I said. “We’re telling everyone how much money we need to buy the next piece of land.”

“The next piece of land? Was there a first piece of land?”

“Oh yeah, you missed that part.”

“I did? What? When did that happen?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I told him with a pat on the shoulder. “Two hundred dollars!” I yelled.

“Twenty dollars!” called someone else.

I looked at Owen and gave him an encouraging nod.

“Five hundred?” he said hesitantly.

The room suddenly got silent. Someone gasped as everyone turned their heads to look at Owen.

“What? What did I do?” he asked.

“You just unleashed the dragon,” I whispered.

“Now there’s a dragon in this game too?”

“Everyone take a shot!” yelled Taylor.

Owen lifted his drink to his mouth but I stopped him before he could take a sip.

“Not that kind of shot. At least not yet.”

We all swung at our balls and they went flying across the room, bouncing off of walls, furniture, and other people. We ran in every direction to find our ball again, and then took a shot of our drinks.

“Now we drink!” I called to Owen from across the room.

“This game makes absolutely no sense,” he said with a shake of his head.

SEVERAL HOURS and a few bruises later, the game was over. Of course, I was crowned the winner, as usual, and Owen remarkably didn’t come in last place. Although, when you’re playing with a bunch of young children, it’s pretty embarrassing when nearly all of them beat you.

We tidied up the room and everyone began gathering around the table full of food, which was due for a refill of snacks.

From across the room, I saw my mom whisper to Owen, and then he followed her quickly into the kitchen. I glanced at

Amelia who just shrugged her shoulders at me, feigning complete innocence.

I tried to follow them, but Taylor and Luke each put out an arm to stop me before I could open the door.

“What are you guys doing?” I asked defiantly.

“Mom told us not to let anyone in there.”

“She’s probably interrogating Owen right now and making him super uncomfortable. Just let me in for a second.”

“Sorry,” Luke said. “We’re under very strict orders.”

“And I really don’t want to be on your mom’s bad side again,” said Taylor. “I just barely won her over again.”

I sighed and turned around, knowing it was no use arguing with either of them.

A WHILE LATER, Owen emerged with a smile on his face so at least I knew my mom hadn’t completely destroyed his pride. I slowly made my way over to him to ask what had happened, but he just put a finger up to his lips and smiled, indicating that I simply shouldn’t ask.

As the day wore on, and the sun started to go down, everyone talked and laughed and played and sang. It was honestly one of the most magical days of my life.

The later it got, the more kids started to fall asleep on the floor and across couches, and on their parents’ shoulders.

When midnight approached, there were only a few young ones left standing and my dad was fast asleep in an armchair where he had been for the last several hours. Those of us who were still awake gathered on the back patio so we could see the fireworks show the resort was putting on.

Apparently, it was the best show in all of Europe, so there was no chance we were going to miss it. The wind was icy and frigid but the heaters and the fire pit and the warmth of the love around us made it all a bit more bearable.

Once the fireworks began, Laila and Cora came walking groggily out of the chalet and climbed up into their dad's lap. I honestly couldn't tell if they were still asleep or if they had woken up from the fireworks.

The rest of the kids soon join them in a matter of a few minutes, and nearly everyone was outside, enjoying the spectacular display of lights in the sky above us. The countdown to midnight approached, and everyone started to make their way to their partners. My mom even went inside and woke up my dad to make sure he joined in the festivities.

Ten

I looked over at Owen and both girls were in his lap, snuggled up to him.

Nine

He looked at me and gave me a sweet smile.

EIGHT

He shifted the girls and set them on their feet.

Seven

He stood from his chair and started walking towards me.

SIX

He grabbed my hand and helped me stand from my chair.

Five

He wrapped one hand behind my back and the other behind my neck.

FOUR

He pressed his forehead to mine and smiled.

THREE

He pulled away and looked deep into my eyes.

TWO

I wrapped my arms around him and took a deep breath.

ONE

I closed my eyes and waited.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Owen held me close and pressed a kiss to my lips. His fingers wandered through my hair and across my ass. He gently dipped me down low and my foot popped into the air as our mouths moved together.

It was the most magical kiss. The fireworks in the background and the snow-covered mountains created the perfect backdrop for the world's most romantic moment.

It felt like we were the only two people in the world but then, suddenly, I remembered we weren't. I opened my eyes to see my entire family watching me and Owen, and I bit my lip trying to hide my smile.

OWEN

When I set Skye back on her feet, I realized I had probably just embarrassed her in front of her entire family. We hadn't yet spoken about what exactly was going on between the two of us, and I had no idea how she was feeling. All I knew was that she hadn't told any of them that there was anything happening between us.

Just because I was ready to proclaim my love for her from the mountain tops didn't mean she was ready to do the same. I had spent years waiting to kiss her, but this could all just be a fling for her. I knew we needed to talk about it, but this was obviously neither the time nor the place.

I slowly turned around to look at everyone, and all eyes were on us. It seemed that our midnight kiss lasted far longer than anyone else's, and they all had the chance to see what was happening. To be fair, it was a rather long and passionate kiss, but I couldn't help myself.

I looked at Skye, who was clearly trying not to smile, but her cheeks were also crimson red. There was no way for me to know if it was because of the cold or the embarrassment that I had just caused her.

No one said anything for far too long. The only sounds around us were the last of the fireworks, and the wind shaking through the trees. Eventually, Skye's siblings began to gather their kids and take them inside for bed. Beth collected Laila and Cora, who were practically walking zombies at that point, and Annie and Brent followed everyone else inside.

That left just me and Skye alone outside. We were still standing only inches apart from one another, and I wanted nothing more than to reach out and repeat that kiss. It was far more than a kiss for me. It was the culmination of years of pining and longing finally coming true. It may not have been our first kiss, but it was definitely the kiss that I would remember for the rest of my life.

“So...” Skye said quietly.

“So,” I echoed.

“That was kind of awkward.”

“I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have kissed you like that.”

“The kiss wasn’t awkward. Just the fact that no one knew how to deal with it was awkward. It was actually, um, a really incredible kiss.”

She took a small step closer to me and placed a hand on my chest. Even through her gloves and my coat, I could feel the warmth of her skin against mine. I leaned forward and gently kissed her cheek. Her skin was like ice against my lips, and I knew she must be freezing, but I wasn’t ready to say goodnight.

“I shouldn’t have kissed you like that in front of your family. I should have known better, and I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize for anything, Owen. I kissed you right back.”

“That’s true. You may have been more into it than I was.”

“Okay, now that is not true. You started it.”

“Started what?”

“You are the one who approached me and touched me first.”

“So, you didn’t want me to touch you?”

“Oh...I did,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Well, then I don’t see what the problem is.”

“The problem is the kiss didn’t get to last any longer.”

“We can solve that right now.”

She smiled as I pulled her to me and tasted her sweet lips once again. They were warm against mine, and I could feel my entire body heating up as I held her. The cold wind didn't bother me anymore. I could have stayed there all night long.

I pulled her closer, feeling every inch of her possible. Even with heavy winter coats on, I had never felt closer to her. Her lips moved against mine, and I gently used my tongue to pry her mouth open.

She let out a brief exhale that sent shivers down my spine. I needed her right here, right now. I didn't care that it was freezing outside. I didn't care that her entire family was just inside. I had spent long enough waiting for her; I didn't think I could wait anymore.

“Owen,” she said with a sigh as my hand moved along her back.

I moved towards her ear and gently nibbled on her earlobe, something that she obviously enjoyed. I kissed the sensitive skin behind her ear and she squirmed in my arms. I moved back over to her lips, disappointed that there was very little skin that I could access right now.

She stood up onto her toes and kissed my neck. I knew my stubble was probably scratching her, but she didn't seem to mind. Her whole focus was on moving her mouth against my skin, and making me desperate for her.

All I could think about was her touch. We had gotten so close before. I shouldn't have wasted so much time that night. I should have ripped her clothes off and made her mine while I had the chance. I didn't know if I was going to get that chance again, but deep down, I knew it wouldn't be tonight.

I let her kiss me a moment longer before I couldn't stand it anymore. I picked her up and placed her on the banister of the deck. She was perfectly positioned to wrap her legs around my hips, and she did so immediately. I was locked into her grasp, and I could feel the heat emanating from her.

I was certain she could feel my desire for her growing with each kiss, but I wanted her to know how much I longed for her. I needed her to know that I would do anything for her. She kissed me with passion and intensity, and I gave it right back to her.

I couldn't remember ever kissing anyone with such fire. It was like the world was about to end, and these last few minutes were all we were ever going to get.

"Skye," I breathed into her neck, "I need you."

Her lips found mine without responding, but I knew she needed me just as much. Our passion for one another was undeniable. All I could think about was getting her inside and getting her clothes off.

Apparently, she had the same idea, because she slid down from her perch and grabbed my ass for just a moment before looking up at me again.

"We can try to sneak inside," she whispered, cocking her head towards the door.

I nodded, completely speechless. Skye opened the door, and we were surprised by all of the lights that were still on, and the noise coming from the living room around the corner. We glanced at each other, realizing there was no way we would be able to sneak into her room unnoticed now.

"What are they all still doing up?" I whispered.

Skye shrugged and led me around the corner into view of her family. It appeared all the kids had gone to bed, but the adults were just beginning round two of their party for the evening. Champagne was being passed around, and it looked like Sierra was pouring shots for everyone, too.

"Maybe they'll get drunk enough that they won't remember if you stay here," she whispered.

"You really want to risk it?"

She thought about that for a moment, looked around at the faces in the room, and somehow had more sense than I did. She shook her head and walked me to the front door.

“Thanks for the kiss,” she said as she craned her neck to give me a peck on the cheek.

“Right back at you,” I said as I opened the door.

I stepped back out into the cold night air feeling empty and disappointed. This wasn't how I wanted the night to end, but I guess that's how it had to be for now.

MORNING CAME FAR TOO EARLY the next day, especially since all I had done for the entire night was fantasize about everything I wanted to do with Skye that still hadn't been possible yet. I woke up multiple times throughout the night, expecting her to be beside me, but every time, I was left alone.

Cora came bouncing into my room the moment the sun came up, and my head was not prepared for the onslaught of never-ending questions that she had prepared for me.

Can we play that game when we get home?

Can we stay up late again tonight?

Is Beth going to be our nanny forever?

Are we going to get a new mom?

Where are we?

When are we going home?

Do we have to go home?

Can Skye come home with us?

Where is Laila?

Where is Beth?

What are you doing, daddy?

Can we have breakfast?

Do we have any donuts?

Can we go skiing? Wait, I don't want to go skiing.

Can we build a snowman?

Can we watch *Frozen* again?

Do you want to build a snowman?

“Cora, sweetheart, Daddy needs a few minutes of quiet before I get up, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy. I’ll sing quietly.”

I loved this child dearly, but singing quietly was not going to solve the problem.

“Cora, I need you to go find Laila, and then get some breakfast. I will be down in a few minutes.”

“Laila told me to leave her alone.”

“She did? Why did she say that?”

Cora shrugged her tiny shoulders and blinked her big green eyes at me. She would be a whole lot easier to resist if she weren’t so adorable.

“Alright, baby, let’s go find something to eat.”

“Yay!” she squealed as she scurried from the room.

I heard her footsteps thump down the stairs, somehow unbelievably loud for such a small girl. I struggled to roll myself out of bed, but I finally did it and made my way down the stairs to find Cora already helping herself to the pastries Beth had laid out.

I had only gotten a few sips of coffee in before Cora had her coat on, ready to go outside for more winter fun. Despite my exhaustion, I pulled my coat and boots on, and followed her outside.

WHEN WE MADE our way to the spot Cora had deemed the perfect place for her family of snow people, it wasn’t long before we were joined by Luke, Taylor, Greg, and all of the kids. Laila eventually staggered her way outside, too, and it became a gathering of an outrageous amount of kids for a group of four dads to handle.

Fortunately, Penelope was quite the little leader, and gave each child a job to do. They quickly formed an assembly line, and their army of snowmen was underway in no time. I leaned

up against a tree and closed my eyes for a brief moment before I heard footsteps in the snow coming towards me. I peered open one eye and saw Luke and Taylor standing above me with knowing smiles on their faces.

“Someone had a good night last night,” Luke said with a grin.

“Me? You guys were the ones just starting the party when I was going to bed. I’m surprised you’re not, like, insanely hung-over.”

“We may be getting old, but we can still hold our liquor,” Taylor laughed.

Luke nodded his agreement, and then their attention was back on me.

“But, seriously, what’s going on with you and my sister?”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, Owen, we all saw that kiss.”

“It was just a New Year’s kiss. I didn’t want her to be the only one without one.”

“How thoughtful of you,” Luke said, his voice dripping in sarcasm.

“Yeah, the last time I kissed someone out of pity, it definitely didn’t look like that,” Taylor said.

“It wasn’t out of pity. We’re friends. I just didn’t want her to miss out.”

“Well, it was quite the show!”

“We all know you’re not ‘just friends,’ Owen. We can see right through you.”

“And what is it that you think you see?”

“You’re mad for her!” Taylor exclaimed, knocking snow off the tree branches as he flung his arms into the air.

“That’s not true. We haven’t seen each other in like twenty years. We’ve just been catching up, that’s all.”

“Oh that’s all,” Taylor said with a nod.

“Right, sure it is,” Luke agreed.

They stared at me for a moment, then looked at each other, and then back at me. They were obviously having some kind of silent conversation that I was not a part of. And honestly, I didn't think I wanted to be part of it.

“It's all we could talk about last night,” Taylor finally said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, you guys kissed. Then we went inside, and you guys stayed out there for a long time. Then when you came inside, Skye was basically covered in beard burn around her mouth.”

“Her face was red from the cold,” I argued, though I knew that was a complete lie.

“So, we spent a lot of the night talking about how far you guys could have gone out there in the cold. There's actually a lot of things that could have gone down.”

“Are you guys middle schoolers or something?”

“No, we're just nosy gays,” Luke said completely seriously.

Taylor nodded his agreement without hesitation.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but there's nothing going on between Skye and me. And nothing happened between us last night except for one meaningless kiss.”

I stumbled over my words as I said it was ‘meaningless’ and Luke and Taylor both took notice. I knew it wasn't meaningless. And neither were any of the kisses that followed. I hoped they weren't meaningless for Skye, but I had no choice but to keep up the charade until I knew how Skye felt about everything.

“Whatever you say, Owen,” Luke said with a sideways glance to Taylor.

I wasn't sure what else there was to say, or how much longer I wanted to spend arguing with them, even though I knew they were absolutely right about everything they had

said. So, I wandered over to where the kids were working and busied myself with building a snowman army for the rest of the afternoon.

SKYE

I woke that morning to a message from Owen that had come quite early, long before I was awake. The poor guy never seemed to get a full night of sleep.

“The girls would love it if you came over for game night tonight.”

“Game night? And what does that entail?” I responded.

“Well, good morning. About time you got up.”

“I’m tired, okay?”

“The girls have some games they brought with them. You know, things that a five and three year old are able to play without too much frustration or fighting.”

“Sounds like fun. When should I come over?”

“Anytime. We’re just hanging out here today, but Beth is making dinner at six. You’re more than welcome to join us.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you this afternoon.”

I set my phone back on my bedside table and flopped back onto the pillow. There was only a few days left of vacation, and then it would be back to real life. No more rom-com kisses in the snow. No more game nights or movie nights with Owen and his girls.

It would just be meetings, working, and trying to survive each day. As much as I loved my job and I was looking forward to getting back into a routine, I was desperately going to miss the magic that this trip has showed me.

I wandered out to the kitchen and pushed the door open. The voices that had been quietly whispering suddenly stopped. I looked around the room to see my mom, Sierra, Taylor, and Amelia casually sipping their coffees like nothing was going on.

“Okay, go ahead. Say what you need to say.”

“What makes you think we need to say something, sweetheart?”

“Because I know you all stopped talking as soon as I walked in here. Obviously you were talking about me.”

“That doesn’t sound like us,” Taylor said with a shrug.

“You’re the worst gossip of the bunch,” I accused.

Taylor winked at me as he grabbed another mug of coffee for Luke and disappeared through the door.

“Sweetheart, you know we all love Owen—”

“So you *were* talking about me?”

“Yeah, obviously!” Amelia chimed in.

“You didn’t think we’d just let a kiss like that go unnoticed, did you?” Sierra asked.

“Well, no one said anything about it yesterday, so I figured you had all forgotten about it.”

“Skye, these two were too busy sucking face,” Amelia made a gagging sound as she said it, “but I saw the whole thing.”

“What whole thing? It was just a New Year’s kiss. Nothing interesting or exciting about it.”

“That’s not what I saw.”

“Then tell me what you think you saw.”

“Picture this: it’s a snowy night. Fireworks are exploding in the sky. Everyone is counting down—“

“Babe, we were all there. But thank you for setting the scene,” Sierra chimed in.

“Well, anyway, it turned into a slow-mo from a movie or something. Owen looked at Skye, Skye looked at Owen. They both turned into the little emoji with the heart eyes. He walked towards her. She blushed.”

“I did not.”

“Who is telling the story here?”

I rolled my eyes at her, but let her continue.

“They embraced each other like they had been waiting their entire lives for this moment. And then at midnight, Owen devoured her face like I have never seen. It was honestly a little disturbing.”

“He did not ‘devour’ my face. It was a simple kiss.”

“A simple kiss doesn’t usually involve ass-grabbing.”

“Amelia, watch your language,” my mom said with a grimace.

“Sorry, but it doesn’t. Mom agrees.”

Sierra looked at me with an apologetic, yet somehow accusatory look on her face.

“A peck on the cheek is a ‘simple kiss,’ or even a quick peck on the lips. But there was nothing simple about that kiss. There was passion behind it, Skye. I’m honestly surprised you didn’t mount him right then and there.”

“Sierra!” my mom said with a gasp, nearly dropping her mug onto the floor. “Don’t be crass!”

“I’m sorry, but come on. There’s definitely something going on between the two of you.”

“You’re completely wrong,” I argued.

Of course, they weren’t wrong at all, but I wasn’t about to admit that to them, especially without knowing for sure how Owen felt. Maybe he just thought we were having fun getting to know each other again. For all I knew, this was just a two-week fling that wasn’t going to go anywhere. But, could it be considered a fling if we hadn’t even slept together? I didn’t want to think too much about it.

“Say whatever you want, Skye, but we all see the way you two look at each other.”

“We just look at each other like two friends who are finally reconnecting. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Oh, sweetheart, we all knew he had a crush on you as a kid. And maybe you didn’t notice it back then, but we did.”

“We? Who are you talking about?”

“All of us,” Sierra said with a hand on her hip. “Mom, Dad, me, Luke. We all knew he was, like, in love with you back then.”

“Okay, maybe he had a crush on me, but he was not in love with me. And he is certainly not in love with me now, if that’s what you’re implying.”

The three of them glanced at each other with incredulous looks on their faces. It was a bit unnerving when they all looked back at me. All three shared the same gray eyes, and having them all on me at once made me rather uneasy.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I’m just going to get some coffee and get out of here,” I said, trying to make my way to the coffee pot. “This discussion is over, by the way.”

Amelia rolled her eyes and looked down at her phone which, apparently, she had earned back. If I wasn’t such a *loyal* and *caring* aunt, I would have spilled the beans about her secret boyfriend right then, but I kept my mouth shut.

“There’s a market a few miles away we’re going to check out this afternoon. Do you want to come?” Sierra asked.

“Oh, that sounds fun.”

The three of them stared at me again, awaiting a response.

“I—um—I actually have plans already today.”

“Plans? With Owen?”

I brought my mug up to my lips, trying to hide my embarrassment. Though, I really wasn’t sure why I was embarrassed. It was going to be a harmless afternoon of games and dinner with Owen, Beth, and two young girls. There was

nothing about it that should have made me embarrassed to tell them.

“Yeah, um, his girls wanted me to come over and play games with them.”

“You’re basically a member of the family, Skye. Why don’t you just marry him now?”

“Remember when I said the conversation about Owen was over?” I said as I removed myself from the kitchen.

I let out a long sigh as I stepped into the living room and grabbed my coat. I set down my mug and pulled on my boots and made my way out to the back deck. To my surprise, Owen was sitting on his deck with a steaming mug between his hands.

“Hey neighbor,” I called, interrupting whatever deep thought he was lost in.

“Oh, hey. Nice morning.”

“Are you making small talk with me?”

Half of Owen’s mouth turned up into a smile as I took another sip of my coffee. I knew the peering eyes in the kitchen were all watching me out the back window, but I couldn’t be bothered to care. Whenever I was around Owen, it felt like it was just us. No one else mattered.

“I’m on my third cup this morning,” he said, raising his steaming coffee up in the air where I could see it.

“Wow, rough night? Are the girls okay?”

“They’re fine. Slept perfectly, actually.”

“Then what was the problem?”

“I just couldn’t sleep, I guess. Couldn’t make my mind stop long enough to fall asleep.”

“What were you thinking about?”

He looked off into the distance and took a long sip of his coffee before looking back over at me. He smiled and looked down at his hands, still not saying a word. I waited with bated

breath to see if he was going to tell me, or if he was going to leave me in anticipation.

“I—um—I was thinking about a lot of things.”

“That’s all you’re going to give me?”

“Well, what if we talk about it later?”

I nodded my head in agreement and turned my attention to the snowy landscape in front of me. The sky was perfectly clear and blue, and the sun reflecting off the snow actually made it feel somewhat warm. Well, maybe not warm, but not completely frigid like it had been most of the time we had been here.

“So, what games to Laila and Cora have planned for me tonight?”

“You’re just going to have to wait and see.”

“Wow, you really don’t want to give me anything this morning, do you?”

“Oh Skye,” he said with a laugh. “You have no idea how many things I want to give you.”

He smirked at me, and I felt my stomach do a flip. His comment could be taken in many different ways, but I was going to assume he meant it in a dirty way.

We sat in silence for a few more minutes before my mug was empty, and I was starting to get cold. I rose from my seat and started towards the door.

“I’ll see you in a while,” I said with a smile.

“Don’t be too long.”

I bit my lip to hide my excitement as I stepped back into the chalet. Of course, Sierra and Amelia were both waiting for me with their noses basically pressed up against the glass.

“So, have you slept with him yet or not?”

“I’m going to tell mom you’re being crass again.”

“Fine, whatever, go tattle to mommy. But just tell me.”

“What would make you think I’ve slept with him? You know he has two little kids right? And even if he didn’t, there is *nothing* going on between us.”

“Come on, Skye, just tell us,” Amelia said impatiently.

“First of all, I don’t think I feel comfortable talking about this with you.”

“I’m fifteen, not five.”

I walked away from the two of them without responding, and retreated to my room.

Later that day, upon a quick glance in the mirror, I realized that Owen had seen me with no makeup, my hair in a rat’s nest of a top knot, and in a sweatshirt with no bra underneath. A shower and a bit of time pulling myself together was definitely a necessity.

WHEN I WAS FINALLY SATISFIED with my appearance, I grabbed one of our games and made my way over to Owen’s chalet. I didn’t want to look like I was trying too hard, but I at least put a little effort into my hair and makeup.

For some reason, this gathering felt different than some of our previous ones. Sure, I had spent time with the three of them several times before that night, so I wasn’t sure why I was feeling such nervous excitement. I started to wonder if maybe my mom, Sierra, and Amelia had started getting in my head.

It’s not like I was expecting anything to happen. Or maybe I was. I needed to stop thinking about it and just enjoy the evening, but when Owen opened the door, I felt my heart skip a beat. His smile was so perfectly imperfect. His arms open wide for me as I stepped inside made me feel like I was completely at home. It was a sensation that I never really knew was possible.

“The girls are so excited that you agreed to come over,” he said as he embraced me.

“They are? Why?”

“They told me that you’re way more fun than I am.”

“Oh, whatever. I’m sure they didn’t really say that.”

“Laila? Cora?”

Two little faces emerged from around a corner.

“Do you think Dad is more fun or Skye?”

“Skye!” they said in unison.

They ran over and each hugged one of my legs, and I bent down to open my arms for each of them. It was an odd but wonderful feeling that two kids whom I was not related to and who had just met me a few days ago cared for me so much. Though I definitely felt the same way about the two of them.

“So, what are we playing first?” I asked.

“Pictionary!” called Laila.

“No! Uno!” Cora cried.

“Well, both of those sound really fun. How about we play Uno and then we play Pictionary after. Does that sound like a plan?”

The girls nodded their agreement, and I grabbed each of their hands and led them to the table where a pile of games had found a home.

“Wow, did you guys bring all of these with you?”

“They wouldn’t dream of going somewhere they couldn’t play games,” Owen said with a laugh.

I dealt the cards for the first game, and though it was slow-moving with two young kids leading the way, I don’t think I had laughed that much in a long time. They were so silly with their sweet comments, and they were professionals at bending the rules to suit them.

After the first round was over and Laila was crowned the winner, she suddenly didn’t dislike the game as much. In fact, she wanted to play more. I glanced over my shoulder out the window and saw that snow was quickly accumulating outside.

“I didn’t think it was going to snow today,” I said, without giving it a second thought.

The girls’ heads snapped to the window, and Owen’s did, too. All three of them gave a look of equal surprise. The clear, blue skies of the morning were long gone, and white and gray covered everything from the horizon and up. It was even starting to get hard to see the mountains, even though they were right beneath us.

“Looks like it’s going to be a good powder day tomorrow,” Owen said with a smile in my direction.

“We’re definitely going to need to get out there,” I agreed.

AFTER A COUPLE HOURS and a truly outrageous amount of games, the girls had finally had enough. We devoured the dinner Beth had prepared, and then she took the girls up to their room for bed. At long last, it was just Owen and I alone.

I wandered over to the window that faced my family’s chalet and realized the snow had started to get exceptionally deep. It hadn’t slowed down in hours, and it didn’t look like there was any sign of stopping.

“Maybe I should go...”

“What are you talking about?”

“The snow is really coming down. What if I get stuck here.”

“Skye, I don’t think you need to worry about that. It’s like a twenty foot walk. You’ll be fine.”

“You really think so?”

“I’ll shovel you a pathway myself if I have to.”

He playfully nudged my arm before grabbing my hand and pulling me towards him. He wrapped his arms around my back, and I placed mine on either of his shoulders.

“Plus, you could always stay here,” he said as he leaned in to kiss me.

His lips tasted like the cinnamon candies we had been eating all night, and it was unbelievably intoxicating. I placed my hands on the back of his neck and pulled him even closer to me. I couldn't get enough.

"What would your kids think if they woke up in the morning and I was in bed with you?" I whispered.

"Oh, well, we have a spare bedroom. I thought you'd sleep in there."

I felt my whole body tense with embarrassment.

"I—um—right. Of course," I stammered.

Why in the world would I just assume he meant I was going to be sleeping in his bed with him? I felt like an absolute idiot.

"Skye?"

I looked up at him, forcing myself to meet his eyes.

"I'm messing with you."

I let out a short laugh, but I still wasn't certain what he was thinking.

"I want you next to me all night long. And then every night after that," he whispered into my hair as he kissed the top of my head. "Now let's go to bed."

SKYE

Owen grabbed me from behind and wrapped his arms around my waist as he led me to his bedroom. Despite all of our close calls so far, this felt like it was going to be the real thing, and my body was buzzing with anxious anticipation.

It wasn't merely the fact that I was about to sleep with someone; it was the fact that I was about to sleep with Owen. Someone who I had known my entire life. Someone who was a close friend. But never someone I would have pictured myself with like this. But now, somehow, he was the only person I wanted near me.

"Should I light the fire?" he whispered as he quietly closed the door behind me.

I nodded my head and he kissed my cheek as he walked away. I crawled onto the bed, which was perfectly made, and silently wondered if he was the type of person who made his bed every day, or if he did it just for special occasions like this.

While Owen worked on the fire, I closed my eyes and fantasized about what it was going to feel like to hold him and touch him in all the ways I had been longing for. When I opened my eyes, he was at the side of the bed with a smile on his face, and a fire roaring behind him.

"That was awfully quick," I said, indicating the fire.

"You know I used to be a Boy Scout."

"Oh, that's right. I guess I didn't think those skills transferred over to adulthood."

“Well, this might be the only one, but it was worth it for this moment right now.”

He crawled onto the bed on top of me and gently lowered himself down. With a long exhale, he kissed my neck, and then my collarbone, giving me chills all over my body. I ran my fingers through his hair as he explored my skin with his mouth. He ran his teeth gently across the front of my neck, and the sensation caused me to shiver with delight.

He let out a quiet laugh and looked down at me with pure love in his eyes. Even though the room was only being lit by the fire, it was still enough that I could see his graying hair running through his perfect stubble as I pulled his face closer to mine.

“I’d love to get you undressed,” he whispered just before his lips met mine.

I kissed him for a moment, the thrill and anticipation nearly killing me.

“Please, be my guest,” I said, unable to hide my smile.

He slid off of me and helped me sit up, gently pulling my sweater over my head. He grabbed my hand and slowly kissed every inch of skin from my fingertips to my shoulder, clearly enjoying every second of it.

“You’re so soft,” he said with a quiet groan, “so smooth.”

I blushed and reached for his shirt, which he quickly pulled off and tossed across the room.

“This is about how far we made it last time,” he said with a smile.

“I think we better keep going.”

He stood on the floor and pulled me over to him so I was at the perfect height to reach for his belt buckle. Even through his jeans, I could see that he was longing for me. They were tight and bulging, and I decided to have a little bit of fun with him before I took them off.

I moved my hands up his chest and gently across his nipples. He moaned as I wandered his skin, feeling him get

warmer and harder with every second. I grabbed his ass and pulled him towards me so my lips could reach his stomach.

Maybe it was age, or maybe I had just been oblivious as a teenager, but his abs were firm and defined. Not like anything you'd see on a body builder, but he clearly took good care of himself, something that was insanely attractive to me. His pecs were the same, just as firm and sculpted, and I couldn't stop touching him.

"Skye," he said with a breath.

I bit my bottom lip and smiled up at him, knowing that he was desperate, and he was only about to get even more desperate. I slid my finger underneath the waist of his jeans and across his hip bone. He couldn't stand still any longer, but I was having too much fun.

I gently grazed my hand over his tightening jeans and he let out another moan, this one a bit deeper than the last.

"Skye," he said again, "you're torturing me."

I laughed and looked up at him.

"If you've waited this long, you can wait a while longer."

"Oh, but I can't wait anymore. I have waited *far* too long to waste another second with only this much space between us."

I brushed my hands up and down his chest a few more times, and he put his hands on my shoulders, trying to keep his balance. I kissed his stomach. His skin was warm and hard under my lips. I moved down to kiss the little divot beside his hip bone, before deciding I had probably spent enough time being cruel to him.

I reached for his belt buckle and undid it as slow as possible. I looked up and watched him as he watched me. His pupils began to dilate even more than they had been already. He ran his fingers through my hair as I removed his clothes, and then grabbed his hands and pulled him closer to me.

I had to take a moment to catch my breath because even though I had imagined this moment a thousand times, I never

thought he would look like *that*. Perfect in every way. Big but not terrifyingly big. I was confident that he would know how to please me, and that idea thrilled me to my core.

“Can I get back on the bed now?” he asked as he leaned over to kiss me.

I nodded, and before I knew it, my pants were on the floor next to his, and his arms were wrapped tight around me. His chest was pressed up against my back, and his breath was warm across my neck.

His fingertips gently grazed my thigh and then my hip as we cuddled into one another. I wasn't sure what was going through his mind, but I knew I had never fit anywhere more perfectly than I did in his arms.

“Skye?”

I turned my head towards him as much as I could.

“I don't know, um, what you've been thinking, but I don't want this to end.”

“What are you talking about? We're just getting started.”

“I don't mean tonight. Well, I don't want tonight to end either, but I mean whatever this thing is between us. When we go back to New York, I don't want it to be over.”

“You don't?” I asked, trying to hide the quiver in my voice.

“No, I don't. I want to see where this goes. I want to see the woman you are in the real world. Not just in this fantasy snow globe we have been living in.”

“Well, I'm not very interesting in the real world.”

“I know that's not true.”

He kissed my neck and ran his finger up over my hip and across my stomach. I pressed my ass further into him, feeling how big he really was. I didn't know if I could wait for him much longer, but I didn't want to ruin the moment.

“I don't want this to end, either,” I said quietly.

“Good,” he said as he slid his hand between my legs.

His fingers were cold against the heat of my skin, but they quickly warmed up as he stroked my inner thigh and whispered all the dirty things he wanted to do to me in my ear.

“I’ve been dreaming about this, Skye. It has kept me up at night. Seeing you like this is far beyond anything I could have imagined. Let me please you like you’ve never experienced.”

“You sound pretty confident in yourself.”

“Let me prove my worth.”

I squeezed his arm and he pulled me in closer to him. His hand was still between my thigh, inching closer and closer to the heat that I couldn’t control.

“First, I’ll start by teasing you here, just a little bit.”

He ran a finger up between my legs, over my most sensitive skin and upwards to my abdomen. The surprise made me gasp with delight.

“Then maybe, I’ll hang out here for a while,” he said, brushing his fingertips across my nipples.

I squirmed and tried to keep myself quiet.

“Perhaps I’ll do both at the same time.”

He reached one arm down to my hip and the other to my breast, where he stayed just outside the places I wanted him most.

“Owen,” I said with a sigh, “I was not this cruel to you.”

“I’m not being cruel,” he said, and even though I couldn’t see him, I knew he was smiling. “I’m just making sure you’re really ready for this.”

“Oh, I’m ready.”

“I don’t know,” he said, a devilish edge to his voice. “I think you might need a little more work.”

“Owen, please,” I said again, my voice catching on his name.

He reached his hand between my legs and brought it up to tease at my entrance. Even if it hadn't been a long time since a man had touched me like this, it would still be the most pleasurable thing I had ever felt; I was certain of it.

He gently circled his finger, and every movement was driving me wild. He knew exactly what he was doing, and even though I was already wet and ready for him, I never wanted him to stop.

He reached to my knee and pulled my legs apart, giving himself more space to work with. He slid a finger inside, and then another one, as I gasped at the feeling.

"Is this okay?" he whispered.

I nodded my head, unable to get any words out. It was more than okay. It was unbelievable. His free hand cupped my breast and gently massaged it, letting the pleasure course throughout my entire body.

"Skye," he said in a breathy voice, "you are so beautiful. So intelligent. So kind. So fun. I can't get enough of you."

I was panting for breath by that point, and my vision was starting to blur. His gentle and intimate movements threatened to push me over the edge before I even had a chance to enjoy it.

"Owen, let's slow down."

"You want me to stop?" he asked, pulling his hands away.

"No, no. That's not what I meant. Don't stop. Please don't ever stop. Just go slow. I want to really enjoy this."

"You got it, babe," he whispered as he wrapped his arms around me again.

He pulled me into him, holding me as close as possible, all while massaging and caressing every part of my body that desperately needed him. As instructed, he worked slowly and precisely, letting my body feel everything so completely.

A moment longer and I couldn't handle it anymore. My body squirmed and writhed as he slid his fingers in and out and all around. My entire body was tingling from head to toe,

and I was barely able to get a breath. In the back of my mind, I knew I needed to stay quiet, but my body took over. I was moaning and gasping as Owen pushed me into pure ecstasy.

“Owen,” I panted.

“Are you okay?” he said, a grin on his face.

“Oh...I’m more than okay. That was...”

“You’re incredible.”

“Me? You’re the one who—”

“Skye, that was more than I ever thought it would be. You are easily the sexiest woman in the world.”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, letting myself fall into him even further. I wanted to stay in his arms like that for as long as possible. A moment later, his hands began wandering my body again, and I was immediately ready for more.

I rolled over and climbed on top of him, much to his enjoyment. He smiled as I situated myself on top of him and gently lowered myself down on him. He stretched me and filled me to the brim as I took him all the way in me.

“Skye,” he gasped, “Skye, oh my—”

“Shh,” I said, pressing a finger to his lip.

He gasped again and closed his eyes as I started gently moving on top of him. I ground my hips down in slow circles, enjoying every second of watching the pleasure cross his face.

He reached up and grabbed my breasts, slowly circling my nipples with his fingertips. I started getting those head-to-toe tingles again, and I knew I wasn’t going to last much longer. I leaned forward and nibbled at the base of his neck, which sent him spinning.

“Skye. Oh, Skye,” he panted.

I gently bounced up and down on top of him, feeling every incredible inch of him moving inside of me. He grabbed my ass and clung on as I rode him, trying to prolong the moment for as long as I could.

“Owen,” I breathed.

He flung his head back as he reached his climax and grasped me with all his strength. He was moaning and groaning as I reached the peak of my own pleasure, and we both fell to the mattress together, reveling in our indescribable moment together.

“That was—”

“I know.”

“I can’t—”

“Me too.”

“Are you—”

“Yeah. Are you?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Owen pulled me down under the covers with him and kissed me with more intensity than ever. He put both hands on my face and looked deep into my eyes before kissing me again, this time more gently. He ran his tongue over my lips and sent shivers down my spine.

He pulled me into his chest and we drifted off to sleep together. I couldn’t remember a time in my life that I had ever felt so content, happy, and at peace.

OWEN

I woke a short time later, certain everything that had happened was a dream. But when I opened my eyes and realized Skye was still in my arms, I knew it wasn't a dream. I must have died and gone to Heaven.

I gently moved a piece of hair off her face, then kissed the top of her head as soft as I could manage, trying not to wake her. Of course, I was not nearly as subtle as I had hoped, and Skye began to stir. I held her close, trying not to pull her completely out of sleep.

She blinked her eyes open, and smiled sleepily at me. I felt my heart skip a beat. I couldn't believe she was really here, in my arms and in my bed. Not only that, but she was still completely naked.

"Hey," she whispered.

"Hey," I said pressing another kiss to her head.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"What? No, of course not."

"Good. Because I wasn't going to anyway," she said with a quiet laugh.

"I don't know if you remember this or not, but there's about five feet of new snow out there, and the plows haven't been able to come around yet."

"Oh, that's right. Well, I guess I'll just have to move in here."

“Fine by me,” I said, letting my hands begin wandering her bare skin again.

“Owen?”

“Yes?”

“Were you serious? About what you said earlier?”

“I said a lot of things, if I remember correctly.”

“The thing about...well, about not wanting this to end when we go back to New York.”

“Of course I was serious about that.”

She was quiet for a long time, and I started to think that maybe she had fallen back asleep. I kissed her shoulder and waited a moment longer for her to say something else.

“I hope you know—” she started to say.

She trailed off, and I was left in anticipation, waiting for her next word.

“I hope you know that I was serious, too. And tonight...it meant a lot to me.”

“It meant a lot to me, too. More than you will ever know.”

She turned around to face me, and pressed her forehead to mine. Her entire body was warm against me. It felt like sleeping with my own personal space heater, which was an incredible feeling, knowing how frigid it was outside.

“Skye, when Rachel died...”

I felt a lump form in my throat. I wasn't sure if now was the time to talk about her, but I feared that it was too late to take it back. If I wanted this thing with Skye to be real, I knew I had to be open with her about everything.

I must have been quiet for too long, because she started to look concerned. She grabbed my hand and laced her fingers through mine, offering me silent encouragement to go on.

“You don't have to talk about it right now if you don't want to,” she said.

“No, no, it’s okay. I want to... I want to share everything with you.”

She squeezed my hand and gave me a nod, telling me she was ready for whatever I was going to tell her.

“When she died, I thought there was no way I would survive. I wished so badly that I could have been the one who...I just wished I could have taken her place.”

“Of course you do,” she said sympathetically.

I knew there was no judgment in her whatsoever. She was nothing but supportive in my vulnerability, which made me know without a doubt that I was safe in sharing anything with her.

“If it wasn’t for Laila and Cora—I don’t know—I just wouldn’t have made it. They’re everything to me.”

“I’m so glad you have them,” she whispered.

“I didn’t think that I would ever...”

I hesitated. I had only reconnected with Skye less than two weeks ago. I had no idea if she was going to reciprocate my feelings, but I was desperate to let her know everything.

“What?” she whispered when I was quiet again for too long.

“I loved Rachel so much. Part of me will always love her, and I have come to accept that and understand that she will always be a part of me.”

Skye nodded her encouragement once again, and urged me to continue.

“I just didn’t ever think I would be able to love another woman again. Not like I loved her. I thought maybe, someday, I would find someone that made me happy enough that I would get married again, or at least have a companion, but now...”

“Now what?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“Now, I feel like I could actually love someone again. I mean, I could love you. It would never replace the love I had

for Rachel, but I feel like there's room for both of you in my heart, something that I never imagined I would be able to feel."

"Owen," she whispered.

"I'm sorry," I said, suddenly realizing that I had definitely overshared and she was about to run out the door. "That was way too much. I mean, we just barely found each other again."

"Owen," she said again, this time with more force.

"I shouldn't have said all that—"

She cut me off with a finger on my lips.

"Owen," she said for a third time. "Thank you for telling me all of that. I wouldn't ever want to replace Rachel. I hope you know that was never my intention with any of this."

"Of course not. That's not what I'm saying at all. Skye, I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of it like that."

"Shhh," she said, putting a finger to my lips again. "I know that's not how you meant any of it. I just want to be clear that I would never try to replace her or try to make you forget about her, or anything like that."

"I know you wouldn't."

"And I want you to know that you're incredibly special to me. The time we've shared together has been incredible. I always hoped we would reconnect someday, but I never imagined it would be like this."

"Neither did I."

She kissed me slowly, letting our lips melt together. I pulled her towards me and felt every inch of her skin against mine.

"Can I ask you something?" I wondered aloud as our mouths parted.

"Of course."

"Why aren't you married?"

She laughed, but there wasn't much humor behind it.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Owen, it’s fine. I get asked that a lot,” she said, with a true smile on her face again.

“You do?”

“Sure. Between my parents, siblings, friends, and literally everyone I have ever been on a date with, I’ve come up with some great excuses as to why I’m not married.”

“Okay, let me hear some of them.”

“Well, sometimes I tell people that I am married, and that I’m in an open relationship.”

“I’m sure that goes over well.”

“Some people are into it. Most don’t really want to get involved in a situation like that.”

“Understandable. So, what else do you tell people?”

“I’m just too focused on my work. I haven’t found the right person. I am too picky. I don’t want a serious relationship. I’m afraid of commitment. All of the cliché responses. The list goes on and on.”

“So, what’s the truth?”

“Well—um—I guess it’s a combination of all of those things...but also none of those things.”

“That doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“I know,” she said with a laugh, “but it’s the truth. I don’t really know why I’m not married.”

“Can I give my opinion?”

“Of course.”

“There is no one out there who could live up to your standards. You’re brilliant, beautiful, and successful. I don’t think there’s a man in the world who is good enough for you.”

“I don’t know...I think there might be one.”

It took me a moment to realize what she was saying. She smiled at me, and immediately I knew I wanted to spend the

rest of my life with her. There was no one who could make me feel the way she did. It was truly indescribable.

I kissed her cheek, and slowly made my way down to her neck, soaking in each moment that my lips spent on her skin. I wanted to worship her all night long. I wanted nothing more than a lifetime of letting her know how special and unique she really was.

But the thing about Skye, was that she didn't need anyone to tell her how incredible she was. She knew it all on her own. She was confident and secure in herself, and it made her unbelievably sexier than she already was.

"Do you remember the summer before we started middle school?" she asked as I continued to taste her skin.

"Mmhm," I groaned, not wanting to remove my mouth from her body.

"And do you remember my friend Alice?"

"The girl from Mrs. Patterson's class?" I asked, raising an eyebrow as to why she was bringing up a twelve-year-old from our past.

"Yeah, that one."

"What about her?"

"Well, that summer, she had a huge crush on you."

"She did? I didn't think any of your friends even knew who I was."

"Owen, don't be silly. I talked about you all the time. You were my best friend. Of course they all knew you."

"So, she had a crush on me? Why are you bringing this up now? Can I go back to kissing you?"

She laughed again, a sound I would never tire of hearing.

"She wanted me to introduce her to you. She was hoping something would happen between the two of you. I mean, as much as anything ever happens between seventh graders. But I wouldn't do it, and I could never figure out why."

I watched her, waiting for her to continue.

“I am realizing I couldn’t do it because I didn’t want you to be with anyone else. Even at that age, I didn’t want to think about you being with anyone but me.”

“Skye,” I whispered.

“It took twenty years of not speaking to you, and then two weeks of reconnecting with you for me to realize that I’ve always had a special place in my heart for you.”

I kissed her again, and I swore to myself that I would never stop. Not for the rest of my life. I returned to my route of tasting the skin on her neck and collarbone, then down to her chest. I could feel her heart beating beneath my lips. I climbed on top of her and prepared to make her mine once again.

SKYE

In the morning, I woke in Owen's arms, feeling more satisfied than ever in my life. I rolled over to face him, and he was already awake and smiling at me. I ran my finger down the center of his chest, feeling his firm, warm skin.

"How'd you sleep?" he whispered with a kiss to my head.

"Better than ever."

"Me too."

I leaned in to kiss him, and threw a leg over his hips. I felt him start to get hard as I pressed myself up against him. I was completely prepared for another round, but there was a knock at the bedroom door that startled both of us nearly out of the covers.

"Yes?" Owen called.

"I'm sorry," came Beth's voice through the door, "but the girls would like to go tubing this morning with some of the other kids."

"Oh, sure," he said, starting to scramble out of bed.

"But I know you're a bit—um—under the weather this morning, so I'm happy to take them myself."

Owen gave a cheeky grin in my direction as he settled back into the bed.

"Thank you, Beth."

I heard her footsteps go down the hall, and then a few moments later, smaller footsteps went scurrying out the front

door. Owen rose from the bed and looked out the window toward my family's chalet. I was worried for a moment that someone might see him standing there, completely naked, but they didn't have to know I was here with him.

"I guess the snowplow got out here sometime during the night," he said.

"I'm surprised it didn't wake us up."

"Well, I don't know about you, but I was rather exhausted."

I laughed and crawled across the bed to pull Owen back into its warmth with me. He did so without any hesitation, and within seconds, our limbs were tangled up together and our lips moved against each other's.

"I'm so glad you're here with me," he whispered as he slowly moved himself under the covers.

His lips and tongue met every bit of my skin as he worked his way downwards, making me giddy with excitement for what was to come. He gently grazed his teeth across my stomach from hip bone to hip bone. I couldn't help but let out a small laugh as his breath tickled and pleased me.

"I'm glad I'm here, too," I said with a groan.

Truly, there was nowhere else I would rather be in the entire world than laying here with Owen. I could stay in that bed all day. All week. All year. Forget my family. Forget my responsibilities. I just wanted him and anything he had planned for me.

He kissed my inner thigh, then pulled my leg up onto his shoulder. His mouth moved from my thigh to my knee, then my calf, and my toes, kissing everything along the way. He kissed the tip of my big toe, and electricity seemed to shoot through my body. It was an unexpected and exciting feeling that I wanted him to repeat over and over again.

Apparently, Owen could read my mind because he gently kissed my toe again, and smiled devilishly when it made me moan quietly.

“I never would have guessed you’d be a foot person,” he said with a laugh.

“Neither would I.”

He smiled again and pulled my other leg up onto his shoulder. Even in this exposing and intimate position, I didn’t feel embarrassed or nervous. I didn’t feel judged or scared. All I felt was secure and aroused beyond anything I had ever known.

He kissed each of my toes in turn, and then made his way back up my leg, tasting me like he was devouring an ice cream cone. Watching him enjoy himself made it that much more satisfying for me, and I knew I wouldn’t last long once he got to the place that was throbbing for him to be.

I didn’t want to rush him, though. Who knew when we would get time like this again? I wanted to enjoy every second and let myself feel the pleasure that he was offering.

“You taste so good,” he groaned as he continued working his way up my leg.

I blushed, but continued watching him. There was something so sexy about seeing him like this.

“I haven’t even gotten to the best part yet,” he added.

“Well, you better get there,” I teased.

“Oh, not yet, my dear. Soon, but not yet.”

“Oh really? When?”

“I think I’ll keep you on your toes for a while longer.”

He said the word ‘toes’ with such emphasis that I knew he was playfully mocking my discovery that I like my toes being kissed. I didn’t care though. It was sexy. *He* was sexy. He could probably do anything to me and I would enjoy it.

He kissed up a bit higher until he was right at the top of my inner thigh. My body writhed with anticipation, but before he went any further, he flipped me over onto my stomach and climbed onto my back.

“You’re so sexy,” he whispered into my ear, leaning over so that I could feel the entirety of him against me.

“What do you have planned for me now?”

He sat up and gently massaged my shoulders, then my neck, and down my back. His fingers were so warm, and I closed my eyes, feeling like I could easily drift back to sleep. Owen worked up and down my back and shoulders, giving me the most relaxing release I never knew I needed.

His hands moved gently to my sides, massaging my hips, then up towards my breasts. When his fingers brushed the sides of them, I wiggled again, pleasure coursing through me. I wasn’t sure how he could give me so much enjoyment with such little effort. It was honestly impressive.

He slid his hands between me and the sheet on the bed, and gently massaged my breasts. I let out a long moan, longer than I had expected, and he leaned over to kiss the back of my neck. The tip of his nose traced down my spine and to the side of my neck, where he started kissing me again.

I felt him throbbing against me, and I wondered how much longer he would be able to last without needing a release himself. He was certainly the most selfless guy I had ever been in bed with, and it made me admire him that much more. It wasn’t every day that a man put a woman’s needs before his own.

Slowly, his hands moved down my chest and over my ribs. Then down my stomach and around to my hips. He moved himself down in the bed and lifted my hips into the air. Once again, I found myself in a very intimate position without any embarrassment.

He kissed the skin just beneath my ass as he continued massaging me, pressing his fingers into my skin further and further. Suddenly, I felt his tongue, warm and soft against my skin, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I could handle the anticipation.

He moved his way forward and slid his tongue inside me, in exactly the place I had been dying for him to be all

morning.

“Owen!” I gasped.

“You taste better than I imagined,” he grunted, without removing his mouth from my body.

His tongue slid up and down over my clit, and then in and out of me. I could feel his enjoyment even though I couldn’t see him at all, and I knew I wasn’t going to be able to hang on for very long.

I gripped the sheets, my knuckles turning white, as he licked and sucked anything he could get his mouth on. I was glad the girls were out of the house, because biting the pillow was the only way I could keep myself from screaming.

“Shit, Skye, you taste incredible.”

“Keep going,” I gasped. “Don’t stop. Please, don’t stop.”

“Never,” he muttered.

I had no idea what he was doing, or where he learned to do it, but I had never experienced a climax like that in my life. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t see. The room was spinning and I thought I might black out. My entire body was pulsing, throbbing with pleasure as electricity shot through me from head to toe.

I collapsed onto the bed, completely breathless and unaware of my surroundings. All I knew was that I was with Owen, and I was completely safe and satisfied. He lowered himself on top of me, and pushed my hair away from my neck.

“That was the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen,” he whispered.

His mouth met my skin again before I had time to respond, and I let myself enjoy every last second of it. His body was heavy and hot against mine, but I didn’t care. He felt like a warm blanket. The most perfect blanket that had ever been created. I slowly blinked my eyes open to see him watching me.

“That was the sexiest thing I’ve ever experienced,” I finally had the breath to tell him.

“We’re not done yet,” he whispered.

He lifted himself up, pulled my hips into the air again, and plunged himself inside of me, all in one swift motion it seemed. I pushed up onto my elbows, and he reached around to grab my breasts as he pressed himself further and further inside.

Despite the *many* times he had been inside me in the last twelve hours or so, I was still surprised at how well he could fill me up. It was never painful or uncomfortable. Just the right amount to make me consider ditching the toys I had at home.

He grabbed my hips and rocked me back and forth on my hands and knees. He grunted and groaned as he moved, and I could tell he was getting close. I didn’t want to prolong his satisfaction, but I also wasn’t ready to be finished.

I pushed back and lifted myself so that I was sitting on his lap, with his pulsing erection still inside me. He grabbed my breast with one hand, and the other slid down between my legs, just as I hoped it would.

His finger slid up and down as I gently rocked my hips, and within just a short moment, both of us were riding the wave of pleasure once again.

“Skye, oh fuck, Skye,” he said as he exploded inside of me.

I gasped and moaned as his fingers continued working, and then we fell onto the bed, a mess of limbs and sweat. He rolled toward me and kissed me gently before closing his eyes and trying to catch his breath. I did the same, and we spent the rest of the morning wrapped in each other’s arms once again.

OWEN

That afternoon, Skye and I finally emerged from our sex den. At least, that's what she was calling it. I personally wasn't too fond of the name. A quick shower and some clean clothes reminded us that we were not here alone. In fact, we had families who were probably wondering where we had been all this time.

Skye made her way over to her family's chalet, albeit reluctantly, and I promised I would join her soon. She wasn't sure if we should arrive together, so I stayed back and had a few moments to myself.

Of course, the only thing on my mind was Skye and all of the things I still hadn't gotten to do to her yet. But eventually, my mind wandered to Rachel. Skye was the first woman I had been with since her, and though it had been years, I still wasn't sure what she would think about it.

I was reminded of a night, just a few weeks before she passed away, that we laid in bed together, enjoying all of the diminishing moments we had left.

She was weak and always cold, so the bed was piled high with blankets. Being touched caused her immense pain at that point, so I tried to get as close as I could without actually touching her. Just as I thought she had finally fallen asleep after a long day of nurse visits and talking with specialists, she turned her head to me and opened her eyes.

"Owen," she said, her voice cracking and dry.

"What is it? Do you need some water?"

“No, I’m fine, thanks. I just—I wanted to tell you something.”

“You can tell me anything.”

“I don’t want you to be alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“After I’m gone, I don’t want you to be alone.”

“I won’t be alone. I have Laila and Cora.”

“I know, but eventually you’ll need more than them. I want you to find someone who loves you and loves our girls.”

“Rachel, I don’t want to talk about this right now. You’re still here. That’s all that matters.”

“We need to talk about it. I don’t want to die thinking that you’re going to be a lonely old man, puttering around the house with no one to talk to.”

“You’re not dying today.”

“Maybe not, but I’m going to die soon.”

“I really don’t want to have this conversation. You are the only woman for me.”

“Owen,” she said, as her eyes began filling with tears, “please.”

“I can’t fathom the idea of spending my life with anyone but you. I can’t even consider that thought right now.”

“Just promise me something.”

“What?”

“Just be open to it. Someday. Maybe it’s in a year, maybe it’s in fifteen years. I just don’t want you to be alone forever.”

I shook my head at her, trying to get the thought out of my mind. At that time, there was no way I could ever picture myself with anyone else. Rachel was the only woman I would ever love, and I knew that would never change. How could I ever let someone else into my bed? Or into my home with my daughters? It was maddening that she wanted to have this

conversation, but I could see from the pain in her eyes that it was obviously important to her.

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. “I promise I’ll be open to it. But that doesn’t mean I’ll go out looking for anyone.”

“I guess that’s good enough for now,” she said, wiping away a tear.

I HADN’T THOUGHT about that night in a long time. The conversation was always at the back of my mind, but I hadn’t realized how vivid the memory still was. I hoped Skye was someone Rachel would approve of. She was kind and loving, she was smart and patient, and above anything else, she loved Laila and Cora as much as I could ever expect from anyone.

“Rachel,” I said quietly.

I hadn’t spoken out loud to her in several years, but now seemed as good a time as any. I felt a little bit silly, but it was the only way I could think to deal with how I was feeling at that moment.

“Rachel,” I said again. “I will always love you. You will always be Laila and Cora’s mother, and none of us will ever forget you.”

I paused for a moment and wandered over to the window, glancing out at the snowy landscape. Rachel would have loved it here.

“But I think I’m in love again, and I want to make sure you’re okay with it. You probably heard me talk about her before. She was my best friend growing up. Her name is Skye, and she’s—well—she’s amazing.”

I stopped again for a moment, debating how much I wanted to say. The logical part of my brain knew that she wasn’t really here; she wasn’t listening to me. But the emotional side of my brain needed the reassurance that she was okay with this.

“I just want you to know that no matter what happens between me and Skye, she will never replace you. I have come

to realize there's room for both of you in my heart, and I never thought that would be possible."

Before I could say anything else, a gust of wind shook the house. It sent an avalanche of snow sliding off the roof, but when I looked over at the other chalet, it didn't look like anything had happened.

A flock of birds flew overhead, and I realized it was the first time I'd seen any birds since we had arrived. I wasn't usually a superstitious man, but I didn't know how else to explain what had just happened.

I marched over to Skye's chalet, opened the front door and scanned the room until my eyes found her. I raced across the room to her, wrapped my arms around her, and kissed her like it was the last kiss I was ever going to get.

She was clearly surprised and a bit hesitant at first, but she gave in and kissed me back, wrapping her hands around the back of my neck.

"Eww!" I heard a small voice say from behind me.

Skye laughed as we parted, and I looked down to see Mae and Eva watching us intently. As I took in the rest of the room, I realized that the whole family was there. But if this was going to be a real thing, they were going to find out sooner or later.

The group was silent as they all watched us, and I was glad for a moment that it seemed Laila and Cora hadn't gotten back with Beth yet. They deserved a more personal and intimate explanation than everyone else, something that I made a mental note to take care of as soon as possible.

"So, um," Skye said to the room, clearing her voice.

"Sorry to disturb, everyone," I added, feeling my face turn a bit red.

"Owen and I um..."

"We're, uh..."

She looked at me and I looked at her. How could I begin to describe what we were to her family?

“We’re together,” she said with a glance in my direction.

“I love her,” I said without thinking.

Skye’s face softened as she looked at me, and the room seemed to somehow get quieter than it had been just a moment ago.

“You love me?”

“Of course I do.”

She smiled and her eyes started to well with tears. I reached out and grabbed her hand, and we looked back out at everyone together. I wasn’t planning on letting that slip in front of her entire family, but it was a bit late for that now.

“Kiss him!” Amelia finally shouted.

Skye blushed again and turned towards me. She rose up on her toes and kissed me gently, but I could hardly keep myself from smiling long enough to kiss her back.

“This is the best news I have heard all year!” Annie squealed as she ran across the room to us.

She wrapped both of us into her arms and let the floodgates of her tears open.

“Oh, this is just so wonderful. I can’t believe this,” she kept saying again and again.

Some of the other family members offered their congratulations, and slowly, everyone went back to whatever it was they had been doing before my dramatic arrival.

My fingers laced with Skye’s as she led me to the couch. We sat down for just a moment before Annie came and squeezed herself in between us.

“I’m sorry. I’m sure you two want to be close, but I just need to hear everything. How did this happen? When did this happen? Oh, I just can’t believe it. I always hoped this would happen.”

“Mom, maybe we can talk about it a bit later,” Skye said.

“Oh, it’s alright, we can talk about it now,” I teased.

“Was it the advice I gave you?” Annie asked me.

“Advice? What advice?” questioned Skye.

“I just told him how to win you over, sweetheart.”

She patted Skye’s leg without looking at her, and kept her eyes glued on me, waiting for a response.

“I—um—I actually didn’t use your advice... But it was great advice!” I reassured her.

“Well, then how did you do it?”

“I don’t know, really. I guess it just sort of happened.”

Annie looked over at Skye with her eyes narrowed. She turned back to me and leaned in close.

“We can talk about it later,” she whispered.

She gave my hand a tight squeeze as she rose from the couch. I smiled at her, and I knew the questioning from Skye was about to begin.

“So, tell me what her *advice* was,” she said, inching towards me.

“She, um,” I said, trying not to laugh, “you’re going to be glad I didn’t follow her advice.”

“Oh, no. What was it?”

“She told me to get you a big bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates. She said I should write our names in the snow with a big heart around them, and that I should find a guitar, learn how to play it, and then sing you a love song.”

“Wow, the woman doesn’t know me at all, does she?” Skye asked with a smile.

“She wanted us to fall in love like we were in a romantic movie. She had it all planned out.”

“Yeah, that sounds like my mom.”

A moment later, the front door opened, revealing Laila, Cora, and Beth, covered head to toe in snow and smiles. I stood from the couch and gave Skye’s hand a quick kiss.

“Hi girls, did you have a fun day?”

“Oh, yes, daddy, it was the best day!” Laila cheered.

I grabbed their hands in mine and crouched down to their level.

“Let’s go back to our cabin. I think we have some things to talk about.”

I winked at Skye before walking out the door, trying to figure out how I was going to explain any of this to two young girls.

SKYE

With the news out about Owen and me, it seemed that the questions were never-ending. The majority of them came from my mom, of course, but there were a surprising amount from the kids of the family, too. I guess the fact that they had never really seen me with a boyfriend or in any type of relationship before was a bit confusing for them, understandably.

“Skye, are you in love?”

“Kissing is gross. Why do you kiss?”

“What does Owen want to be when he grows up?”

“Are you getting married?”

“Can Laila and Cora come for every Christmas?”

“Are we still going skiing tomorrow?”

“Is Owen good at skiing?”

“Why is his name Owen?”

“Do you like Owen or me better?”

There were some questions with simple answers, and others that required a bit of improvisation on my part. In general, the kids had very innocent ideas. My siblings, on the other hand, wanted to know all of the dirty details.

“How long has this been going on?”

“Have you guys hooked up?”

“When was the first time?”

“How was he?”

“Are you going to start staying the night over there?”

“I thought I heard *noises* coming from his chalet last night.”

“Are you guys, like, a thing? Or are you just fooling around?”

Finally, I had enough of the inquisition. I was a pretty private person most of the time, and since my siblings all lived so far away, they only found out if I was dating someone if it got really serious. Which, it almost never did.

In the past fifteen years, I think I had introduced them to two boyfriends. This was an odd situation, for sure, but I wasn't positive I wanted them knowing all of my business. I was just glad I would be able to get rid of them once Owen and I were back in New York.

I WAS TRYING to relax in the hot tub that evening, but Sierra was making it difficult. She still had endless questions, and I just wanted a few minutes of peace and quiet. Apparently, that was not going to happen.

“I just never thought the two of you would end up together. I mean, he was totally in love with you as a kid, everyone knew that.”

“Sierra, we have not ‘ended up together.’ We’re just seeing how things go. We’re taking it slow.”

“Not according to Owen.”

“What do you mean?”

“He declared his love for you in front of everyone. That seems pretty serious to me.”

“He’s just a passionate guy.”

“Is he passionate in bed?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“So you *have* slept together. I knew it. I mean, that smile of his...how could you resist?”

“I’m sorry, aren’t you married?”

“What? Just because I’m married doesn’t mean I can’t admire a handsome man.”

He really was handsome. His smile was definitely impossible to resist, but I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of agreeing.

“Sierra, I don’t really want to talk about it anymore.”

“Just one more question.”

“What?” I asked with a sigh.

“Are you going to move in with him? He’s, like, super rich. I’m sure he has an incredible place.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he does.”

“So, you’re going to move in.”

“I don’t—no—I mean—I don’t know. We haven’t talked about it.”

“You haven’t talked about it? Are you serious? He’s in love with you and he hasn’t asked you to move in?”

“We hadn’t spoken in twenty years until, like, a week and a half ago. We need some more time to get to know each other.”

“You know each other. You were best friends.”

“Yeah, we *were*. But we’ve both been through a lot since then. We’re not the same people we were in high school.”

“I know that, but—”

“Sierra. I’d really like to be done with this conversation.”

“Fine. We can be done for now.”

“Not for now. Forever.”

“We’ll see.”

Sierra rose from the hot tub, grabbed her robe, and scurried inside as fast as possible. Just when I finally had a moment of peace, my phone started buzzing on the table next to me. I reached over and grabbed it, unable to resist my smile when I saw it was a message from Owen.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Just sitting in the hot tub. What are you doing?”

“I bet you look absolutely incredible in a bikini...”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Beth is giving the girls a bath. I have no plans for the evening.”

“Well, we better fix that.”

“Did you have something in mind?”

“I don’t know. Maybe...”

“You up for some night skiing?”

“Night skiing? Not exactly what I had in mind.”

I couldn’t help rolling my eyes as I sent the message. As fun as that sounded, I would have much rather done something a bit more intimate.

“Oh, Skye. We’ll have plenty of time for whatever dirty deeds you have in mind. Meet me out front in half an hour.”

“See you then.”

I quickly submerged myself under the hot water, an action I immediately regretted when my head popped back out into the cold night air. I shivered as I grabbed my robe and headed for the house, nearly falling to the ground as I scrambled across the icy deck.

WHEN I WENT to the door of the chalet, Luke and Taylor were sitting in the front room, eyeing me suspiciously. They glanced at each other and tried not to smile.

“Just say whatever you’re going to say,” I said in an exasperated tone.

“What makes you think we have anything to say?”

“The two of you *always* have something to say.”

“That’s so not true.”

“Yeah, how dare you make a generalization like that?”

I rolled my eyes at them, and reached for the door handle.

“Make sure you use protection!” Taylor called as I opened the door and let in a cold blast of air.

“You’re not funny!” I shouted as I walked out.

“It’s very important!”

“Shut up!”

I closed the door behind me and started down the steps of the chalet to see Owen waiting for me at the bottom.

“Who are you telling to shut up?”

“Luke and Taylor. They think they’re real comedians.”

“Because they reminded you to use protection? They’re right. Protection is important.”

“I never said it wasn’t. I just don’t want to hear it from my brother and his husband. In fact, they’re the last people I want to hear it from.”

“I understand,” Owen said with a laugh.

“So, where are you taking me?”

“Night skiing. Did you forget already?”

“I mean, I know that, but the resort doesn’t have night skiing.”

“Who said we were staying at the resort?”

“Owen! There’s nothing around for miles. What are we doing?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Well...yeah.”

“Okay, then no more questions. Follow me.”

I did as I was told and followed Owen around to the side of his chalet where two snowmobiles were waiting. I looked at him with an eyebrow raised, feeling very hesitant.

“It’s not actually skiing, but it’s going to be great,” he said with a grin.

“Owen...I don’t know about this.”

“I promise, you are going to have a great time.”

I sighed, still feeling fearful, but I knew Owen would never intentionally put me in danger.

“Alright.”

“Great! Here’s your helmet,” he said, tossing a black helmet in my direction.

I put it on and pulled my gloves out of my coat pocket as I watched Owen eagerly start up the engines on the snowmobiles. They roared to life and he looked at me with an expectant smile.

“Ready?”

“I suppose so.”

“Do you know how to drive one of these?”

“I mean, I’ve never done it, but I’m sure I can figure it out.”

“You’ll be a pro in no time.”

He helped me onto the blue one, and then hopped onto the red one. He looked back at me with a thumbs up, and then he was off. I struggled for a moment to figure out how to accelerate, but once I got it, I hit the ground running.

Even in the darkness, he went slow enough that I could keep up with him without too much trouble. Every now and then he glanced over his shoulder to make sure I was still close, and even with a scarf pulled up to his nose, I could see his smile dancing across his face.

We rode through the trees and up and down countless hills as the moon got higher and higher in the sky. The wind was frigid as it whipped past my face, and I was glad I had enough sense to put on my warmest snow clothes before leaving the chalet.

After a while, Owen came to a slow stop and I pulled up next to him.

“You’ve been doing great! Are you still miserable?” he asked.

“Miserable? Who said I was miserable?”

“You just didn’t seem too thrilled about the idea.”

“Well, I guess it’s been more fun than I thought.”

“I’m so glad you said that.”

“Why...” I asked hesitantly.

“Because I heard about this place, and there’s tons of big jumps for us to go over.”

“Big jumps? I don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you.”

He said the words, and I fully believed them. I knew he wouldn’t. I had full confidence in him that he would never let anything bad happen to me. And not just tonight.

“Okay,” I said with a forced smile. “Let’s do this.”

“Yes!” Owen cheered with a fist to the sky.

He pulled his goggles back down and then he was speeding away from me once again. I accelerated as fast as I could, but he was much quicker this time. We wound through more trees, and the sky seemed to get darker and darker. It was a blanket covering us and everything around us.

I glanced up for a moment, allowing myself to admire the night sky, but when I looked back at the horizon in front of me, I narrowly avoided hitting a tree. I kept my attention focused on where I was driving, and soon enough, Owen’s snowmobile took off into the air.

I didn't have time to react, and I didn't have time to stop, so I followed behind him, remaining airborne for what seemed like eternity. When the machine hit the ground again, my heart was racing. I realized I had been holding my breath the entire time, and I could suddenly breathe again.

"You okay?" Owen called.

"I'm good," I said, giving him an encouraging smile.

I was terrified, but I was going to be brave and enjoy this time with him. He was obviously having a great moment, and I wasn't going to do anything to bring him down. Besides, it was good for me to get out of my comfort zone and do something a little bit scary.

OWEN

The morning after our snowmobile adventure, I started feeling a bit guilty about convincing Skye to do something she was obviously uncomfortable with. I rolled over to see her peacefully sleeping next to me, and I leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek.

When she opened her eyes, I was once again struck by her beauty. I wasn't sure how or why she was never considered the prettier sister, but I had never seen a more perfect woman in my life.

"Skye," I whispered.

"Hmm?" she mumbled.

"I'm sorry about last night."

"Sorry for giving me, like, five orgasms?"

"No, I'm definitely not sorry for that. I'm sorry for making you go out on the snowmobiles. I know you were scared."

"Yeah, I was scared," she said, sitting up onto her elbows, "but I had a lot of fun. I need someone who will push me from time to time."

"Really?"

"I'm not a huge risk taker, but I want to be better about it. I need someone like you to push me."

"Oh, I'll push you alright," I said as I pushed her back onto the bed and climbed on top of her.

I had no idea how normal parents ever found time to be intimate with their partners, but I felt very fortunate to have a nanny who could occupy Laila and Cora for days if I needed her to.

AN HOUR LATER, Skye and I joined the girls and Beth in the kitchen for breakfast, a sight I hoped I would see many more times in my life. The girls chatted away and munched on their toast. Beth sipped her coffee and read the news on her phone. Skye poured way too much syrup on her waffles. And I sat and admired the life I had created for myself.

I still wasn't certain that this wasn't a dream I would wake up from at any moment. Surely, life could not be this simple or incredible. Everything in that moment made perfect sense. I knew going back to New York meant working and dealing with reality, but for some reason, it didn't sound so terrible anymore.

I wanted Skye to be part of that every day life, even the mundane or frustrating parts. It was amazing living in our little snow globe, but a life with her sounded even more desirable.

"Skye," I said suddenly, before I had even given it much thought.

She looked over at me with a smile on her face and a bit of syrup on her chin. I laughed and handed her a napkin, which she took with a sheepish grin.

"Laila? Cora?" I asked.

The girls turned their heads to me, each of their mouths full of food. I took a deep breath, realizing that maybe I should have discussed this in private with Skye beforehand. But I didn't want to wait any longer to ask my question.

"What would the two of you think if Skye came to live in our house with us in New York?"

I noticed Beth grin out of the corner of my eye, but she kept her head down, trying not to get too involved.

"Yeah!" shouted Cora.

“We could watch *Frozen* every day!” Laila said.

“Well, I don’t know about that, but we could definitely have some fun.”

“We could build a fort!”

“We could go to the park”

“We could play Barbies!”

“You guys already do all of that all the time.”

“Yeah, but now we could do it with *her!*” Laila said, pointing her fork in Skye’s direction.

“Well, what do you think about that, Skye?” I asked, turning my attention to her.

She was quiet for a moment, chewing a bite of food. She took her sweet time as she swallowed, took a sip of her coffee, and then turned away from me to face the girls.

“Do you guys want me to live in your house with you?”

“Yes yes yes!” they shouted in unison, bouncing up and down in their seats.

“I guess that settles it, then,” she said turning back to me with a smile on her face.

“You mean it?”

“Owen, of course I want to live with you. But I don’t know if you know what you’re getting into. I’m not easy to live with.”

“I think I can handle it.”

“Plus, living in an apartment like yours is going to make me absolutely insufferable.”

“You’ve never even seen my apartment.”

“I don’t need to. I can see it now: crystal chandeliers, floor to ceiling windows, a winding staircase, verandas overlooking Central Park, a kitchen for show, and a kitchen where your staff cooks for you. I can’t wait.”

“Only some of that is right,” I muttered under my breath.

Skye laughed and picked up a raspberry and popped it into her mouth. When she smiled again, her teeth were a bit red, and for some reason, that moment made me realize that I was making the right decision, as if I needed any further confirmation.

SKYE RETURNED to her family's chalet a while later, leaving me and the girls ready to embark on our secret plan. Of course, they were young children, so I couldn't trust them to keep a real secret, but they knew we were going on a bit of an adventure.

We trekked to the main lodge of the resort, and hopped into a car I had hired to take us to the closest town. It was a bit of a drive, but I knew it would be worth it. I wanted Skye to come with us, but my secret plan required she be kept in the dark.

The girls bickered and pestered each other as we drove, but as soon as we made it to the village, their eyes lit up with wonder. In the center of the square was a giant Christmas tree, covered in twinkling lights and tinkling ornaments. Behind it was a carousel they rode at least five times, and a playground that they would have spent all day on if I had let them.

They got their wiggles out and had their fun before I made them follow me into store after store, looking for just the right thing. I wasn't entirely sure what I was looking for, but I kept telling myself I would know it when I saw it.

After a couple hours of searching, I was getting frustrated, and the girls were getting impatient. We headed out into the cold and walked a short distance to a cafe that came highly recommended by the locals. We ordered soups and sandwiches, alongside the best hot cocoa I had ever had.

As we sat under the heater of the cafe's patio, something across the street caught my eye. There was a small shop I had somehow overlooked, and the window in the front displayed countless glittering and sparkling bits of jewelry. I was certain the store hadn't been there before, but I figured I must be a bit delusional, or tired, or something.

We finished our meal and I grabbed the girls by their hands and pulled them across the street before they had time to argue.

“Daddy, I’m bored.”

“I’m tired.”

“Can we go back yet?”

“I want to go on the carousel again.”

“Girls, this is our last stop, and then I promise we can go on the carousel or do whatever it is you want to do. I just need you to be patient for a few more minutes.”

They sighed, but didn’t argue, and I was once again grateful I had such lovely daughters. As we approached the store, I knew I had found what I was looking for. In the window was row after row of necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and rings.

In the corner, I immediately saw the one I wanted. It was a small silver ring with an oval-shaped emerald in the center. It was surrounded by tiny diamonds, each one glittering and glinting in the sunlight. The girls followed me into the shop, bewildered by all of the fancy things.

“Please don’t touch anything,” I whispered as I made my way to the shopkeeper.

“Guten Tag,” the jolly man said with a smile.

“Is that Santa?” Cora whispered, pointing up to him.

He had a rather round belly, a white beard, and a red cap on, so I could understand her question, but I was still a bit embarrassed by it. I wasn’t going to let it deter me, however. I smiled at the man, prepared to show off my lack-luster German skills, but he beat me to the punch.

“I do look like Santa, don’t I?” he said to Cora in a thick accent.

She grabbed my leg and hid behind it, suddenly feeling uncharacteristically shy.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“How can I help you today?”

“I would like to buy that emerald ring in the window.”

“Oh, a beautiful choice. Are you buying for someone special?”

“Uh, yeah, actually. I’m going to use it to propose.”

“How lovely,” he said with a wide grin. “I’ll get it right out for you.”

We followed him to the front of the store, where he cautiously reached into the window and retrieved the ring. Holding it in my hand, it was far more beautiful than I realized. I silently hoped she would like it, but I had a good feeling I knew her well enough that I was making the right decision.

AFTER PAYING, we rode the carousel several more times, drank more hot chocolate, and bought way too much candy to take home with us. We arrived back at the chalet just as the sun was going down, and I handed off the girls to Beth to get ready for bed.

I walked over to Skye’s chalet, but for once, I was hoping she didn’t answer the door. I knocked, waited, and then knocked again before the door opened wide.

“Hi, Mrs. Harris,” I said.

“Annie!” She corrected.

“Right, Annie, sorry. Um, is Skye around?”

“I think she’s upstairs with the kids. I’ll go grab her.”

“No, actually, I wanted to talk to you. And Brent, if the two of you are available for a few minutes.”

A knowing smile crossed her face, and she ushered me inside. I followed her to the back bedroom where Brent was asleep in an armchair next to the fireplace. Annie shook him awake and he grunted as he opened his eyes.

“Owen is here,” she said, “and he would like to speak to us.”

“Who?” he grumbled.

“Owen!”

Brent blinked his eyes open and looked over to see me hovering in the doorway, a nervous smile plastered across my face. Annie gestured for me to sit down, and then perched herself on the arm of Brent’s chair.

“Now, sweetie, what’s going on?” she asked with a smile.

“Well, I have something I’d like to discuss with you. Something that has to do with my future with Skye.”

SKYE

“Owen? Why won’t you tell me where we’re going?”

“I told you, you just need to be patient,” he said, reaching out to grab my gloved hand.

He had been dragging me through the snow across the resort for what seemed like hours, and I still had no idea what we were doing. My toes were starting to get cold, and my nose felt completely numb.

“I’m freezing! Are we going to be there soon?”

“Just a little bit longer.”

I sighed, resigning to my snowy fate. It seemed that an icy grave was in my near future, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I supposed I was just a little bitter that I was cold and had no idea what was going on.

“Owen—“

“Shh. We’re almost there. I promise.”

“Please just tell me what we’re doing.”

“Not yet.”

We walked in silence for a while longer, and finally Owen turned around with a smile on his face. He stopped in the snow and reached out both hands to me.

“We made it.”

“Finally,” I said with an over dramatic eye roll.

We stepped through a dense grove of trees to a small cabin that had been hiding behind them. He opened the door and ushered me inside.

“You’re not going to murder me, are you?”

“Skye,” he said, shaking his head.

“I mean, you just took me to a remote cabin completely hidden from view. How did you find this place, anyway?”

“That’s not important.”

We stepped inside and he took my coat and hung it on the coat rack. He did the same with his, but I noticed him slip something out of his coat pocket and into his pants pocket, trying not to let me see. I looked away, hoping he didn’t notice me watching, but my stomach started to flutter. I had no idea what it was, but it seemed like something I was going to be *very* interested in.

He led me into the cabin, which was much smaller than either of our chalets, but it was just as cozy and charming. There was a small fireplace in the corner and a bottle of wine on the table.

“So...are you going to tell me what we’re doing here?”

“I booked this place for us tonight.”

“Why?”

“I just thought it would be a nice little escape. You know, no kids to worry about, no listening ears, no unnecessary questions.”

“That does sound really nice, but is Beth okay being with the girls overnight?”

“She’s done it many times before. I don’t have a worry in the world.”

“Well, this was very thoughtful of you.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed my cheek to his chest, finally letting myself take a deep breath for the first time since we left my chalet.

“What do you have planned for us tonight?” I asked, looking up at him without taking my arms away.

“Oh, Skye,” he said, kissing my forehead, “I have a few more surprises for you.”

He grabbed my hands and took me into the small dining area and poured each of us a glass of wine. We sat down at the table, and a moment later, a man came walking out of the kitchen, nearly knocking me onto the floor in surprise.

“Bonjor,” he said as he set two plates of food in front of us.

Owen smiled and thanked him, and I was just trying to get my heart rate back to normal.

“Why didn’t you tell me anyone else was here?”

“Sorry, I guess I didn’t think about it. He’ll be gone once dinner is cleaned up.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s a chef.”

“How do you know him? And why is he here?”

“Well, he’s here to make us dinner, and he’s the head chef at the resort’s biggest restaurant.”

“It’s Saturday night. How in the world did you get him to be here instead of there?”

“Money talks,” he said with a shrug.

“How much did you pay him?”

“That’s not important.”

“Owen.”

“Skye, listen, if you’re going to be with me, you have to accept the fact that I spend money a lot more frivolously than many people. I can afford to, and I can’t take the money with me when I die, so I might as well get some enjoyment out of it now.”

“That’s fair, I guess,” I said, taking a sip of my wine, wondering how much it cost.

“Anyway, he has a seven-course meal planned for us, so I hope you’re hungry.”

“Seven courses? I can’t eat that much food.”

“Don’t worry, it’s seven French courses. Nowhere near the size of American ones.”

I smiled at him and shook my head a bit. I had no idea where this night was heading, but so far, it was turning out to be pretty incredible.

SEVERAL DISHES LATER, we were nearing the end of the most incredible meal I’d ever eaten. Whatever Owen had paid the man was definitely worth the money, and I made a mental note not to question his judgment ever again.

The chef returned with crème brûlée for dessert, one of my absolute favorite dishes, but Owen hesitated a moment before he started digging in. I had already shoveled a huge bite into my mouth when I looked up to see him smiling at me.

“What?” I asked, crumbs flying out of my mouth.

He laughed, but didn’t say anything. Just handed me a napkin as I sheepishly cleaned myself up. I swallowed my food and waited for him to say something, but he just continued to watch me.

“What’s going on?”

“You’re just so beautiful. I can’t believe the past two weeks have been real. It has honestly felt like a fairytale.”

I smiled, hoping I didn’t have any food in my teeth. I didn’t need to embarrass myself any more tonight than I already had.

“I agree with all of that,” I said.

“I just, um, I wanted to talk to you about something. Or, uh, ask you something, I guess.”

“Okay...” I said hesitantly.

“We’ve known each other for a long time. And even though we lost touch, it feels like the past two weeks have made up for the last twenty years. I honestly feel like we didn’t lose any time at all. And I think it really says something about our friendship that we were able to fall back into a rhythm so easily. Not anyone can do that.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, and I didn’t want to interrupt whatever else Owen had on his mind, so I just watched him intently and waited for him to go on.

“This may seem sudden, or maybe it’s a bit too quick but, Skye, I can’t imagine spending another day of my life without you.”

“Wha—” I said with a gasp as he reached for his pocket.

He stood from the table and walked around to my side, slowly grabbing my hand and lowering himself down to one knee. He pulled a small black box out in front of him and slowly opened it, revealing the most stunning ring I had ever seen.

“Skye Harris, please, will you marry me?”

“Are you serious?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He opened his mouth to respond, but no words came out.

“Of course I will marry you! I can’t believe you even had to ask!”

“Wait, you’re saying yes?”

“Yes!”

I rose to my feet and pulled him up with me. My hands were shaking more than ever, and I didn’t know what else to say. I was shocked. Speechless. Surprised. And absolutely thrilled. I may not have known what was going to happen that night, but I certainly wasn’t expecting *that*.

He pulled me into his arms and held me tight, kissing my cheeks that were now wet with tears. We remained that way for a long time, until the chef came out to see if we had finished our desserts, which we had barely touched. He

quickly retreated back into the kitchen, leaving Owen and me in a fit of laughter.

He grabbed my hand and slid the ring onto my shaking finger, then kissed the top of my hand before kissing my lips gently and with great care.

“How did you know I love emeralds?” I whispered.

“Lucky guess,” he said with a wink.

“It’s so beautiful. I can’t believe this.”

I held the ring up to the light to get a better look, and I truly couldn’t believe it was mine. I couldn’t believe that *Owen* was mine, and I was going to be his forever. Whatever expectations I had for this vacation had just been surpassed by a long shot.

AFTER FINISHING our meal and enjoying the last drops of wine in the bottle, Owen and I retreated to the couch in front of the fireplace, holding each other and cuddling up in a blanket. I threw my legs across his lap and he wrapped his arms around me, holding me tight.

“I love you,” I whispered into his chest.

He kissed my hair and squeezed me tight.

“I love you more.”

“Owen?”

“Yes?”

“Is this real life?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re stuck with me. No getting rid of me now.”

“Like I would ever dream of such a thing.”

He pulled me closer to him so we were chest to chest and my knees were straddling him. He looked me deep in the eyes, and I felt my heart start to melt. He grabbed my face between

his hands and pulled my mouth to his, immediately letting his tongue explore my lips and down my neck.

Without any hesitation, I pulled my sweater off over my head, and leaned down to him once again. Within seconds, my bra was being flung across the room, and Owen began working on his own clothes.

Finally naked and pressed up against each other, we pulled the blanket on top of us just in time for the chef to come waltzing out of the kitchen. I had honestly forgotten he was there.

“Au revoir,” he said as he made his way to the door.

“Merci,” Owen muttered.

“Au revoir,” I stammered.

We waited a moment, and then burst into laughter. Of all the people to catch us in a compromising situation on this trip, we never thought it would be a complete stranger.

“Well, we’re finally alone,” he whispered.

“I thought we were alone a long time ago,” I said with a laugh.

“Come here,” he groaned as he pulled me closer to him, running his hands through my hair.

He kissed me with intensity, and I had to pinch myself to remember this was real. I was going to get to enjoy him like this for the rest of my life.

I leaned forward and kissed his neck, which made his back arch and his mouth open wide. I ran my tongue down the front of it and to his chest, where I gently circled his nipple. He moaned as I teased him and played with every part of his body I could get my hands on. He was hard and ready for me, so I positioned myself on top of him so he could easily slide inside.

The feeling of him in me was intense and powerful. I rocked my hips back and forth, simply enjoying the sensation of riding him. He opened his eyes and looked up at me with a half-smile on his face.

“Don’t ever stop,” he commanded as he reached for my hips.

“Yes sir,” I whispered.

He gently lifted his hips, pushing himself further and further into me until I had taken him completely inside. His fingers dug into my hips and ass as we moved in time together, not saying a word.

I started to bounce a bit, and Owen hummed his approval. I promised myself that I would pleasure him like this for as long as we lived, and I was reminded of the ring on my left hand. I glanced down at it at the same time Owen did. He picked up my hand off his chest and gently kissed the ring.

“I love you,” he said between breaths.

We were both inching closer and closer to our end when Owen sat up and pressed his chest to mine. I wrapped my legs around his back, and suddenly had a completely new sensation running through me.

“Oh shit,” I groaned as he moved his hips up against mine.

He kissed my neck and my ear, whispering all the ways he loved me into it. Every word sent chills down my spine, and every second got me closer to pure bliss.

“Owen,” I whispered. “Faster.”

He obeyed without hesitation, and it only took a moment before we were both shouting into the air, finally able to release everything that had been building between us for so long.

As we tried to catch our breath, he still held me close, our sweaty skin sticking to one another. He pushed a piece of hair out of my face and kissed my neck one last time. I took his face in mine and kissed him softly, gently running my tongue over his lips.

“Let’s go to bed,” he whispered. “I have more for you planned in there.”

OWEN

The next morning, Skye and I woke still a bit groggy. We had worked our way through several bottles of wine, and stayed up far too late having enormous amounts of fun. We needed to get back to our families for the last full day of vacation. But it took quite a while to roll out of bed.

“You know what I was thinking?” I asked, my voice cracking with sleep.

She looked over at me, somehow still beautiful even with mussed hair and smudged makeup.

“We should get married.”

“Yeah, I think you told me that when you proposed last night.”

“I mean, we should do it soon.”

“How soon?”

“I don’t know. Like, next week. I don’t want to spend another day not married to you.”

“Next week? Wow. That *is* soon.”

“So, you don’t want to?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, I just—I always dreamed of having a big wedding. I don’t think we can plan that in a week.”

“A big wedding, huh? I never thought you’d want something like that.”

“Well, I’ve waited a long time. I think our love deserves to be celebrated, don’t you?”

“It absolutely does,” I said, kissing her cheek. “We can get married any time you want.”

“I think it would be nice if we got married here.”

“Here?”

“Yeah, at the resort. I mean, it is where we fell in love.”

“Maybe it’s where *you* fell in love. I fell in love a long time ago,” I said with a smile.

She playfully pushed me and laughed.

“Okay, that’s fair. But maybe we come back next summer and have a wedding here. What do you think about that?”

“I think that sounds perfect,” I said, giving her another kiss on the cheek.

A summer wedding in the Swiss Alps sounded absolutely perfect. I wanted to give her the celebration she had dreamed of, and the one she deserved. Nothing would make me happier than seeing her happy.

“We should probably get going,” she suggested, starting to get out of bed.

“Are you going to join me in the shower?”

“Well, we wouldn’t want to waste water, now would we?”

The thought of her pressed up against me was more than enough motivation to get me out of bed. I hopped to my feet and followed her into the bathroom, kissing her neck as she turned on the water and waited for it to warm up.

AFTER A HOT SHOWER, hot breakfast, and *hot* fun on the couch, we headed back out into the cold to trek back to our chalets. When we arrived, we were greeted by Laila and Cora running out into the snow to greet us.

“Daddy!” they squealed as they each hugged one of my legs.

“Girls! Come back here and put your boots on,” Beth called after them.

“I’m going to say hello to my family. I’ll see you in a bit,” Skye said as she made her way up the steps of her chalet.

I only had a moment to watch her walk away before little girls were clamoring for my attention again. I scooped them up into my arms and carried them into the house, giving each of them a quick peck on the cheek.

“Did you two behave yourself for Beth?”

“No,” Cora admitted.

Laila shot her a look that told me everything I needed to know.

“What did you do?” I asked sternly.

“Nothing, Dad!” Laila argued.

“We stayed up past our bedtime,” Cora said with a grin.

“Well, what did you do that for? Didn’t Beth put you to bed?”

Beth gave me a look, and I knew she had done everything right. Sometimes kids had their own plans in mind, however.

“We stayed in our room!” Laila told me.

“Yeah... but we played for a long time. Beth told us to go to sleep so many times. It was so funny.”

“Cora, you know you’re supposed to go to bed when Beth tells you to.”

“I know,” she said, looking down at her feet. “We were just having too much fun.”

“Well, maybe the two of you should take a nap this afternoon.”

“No!” they squeaked together. “We’re too old for naps!”

“You’re never too old for naps. In fact, I think *I* will take a nap today, too.”

“Did you stay up past your bedtime, Daddy?”

“Uh,” I said with a chuckle, “yes, I did.”

“That’s not good,” Laila reprimanded.

“You’re right. I won’t ever do it again.”

“I will!” Cora called as she squirmed her way out of my arms.

I set Laila down next to her and looked up at Beth. She had an exasperated look on her face, but I knew she was still full of love for these silly girls. Despite their occasionally rebellious attitudes, they were the most adorable kids on the planet, and I thanked the universe every day I got to be their dad.

THAT EVENING, I knew what was in store for me and Skye, but I promised Annie I would play dumb. When we arrived at the resort’s restaurant for dinner, Skye thought it was just going to be a romantic evening between the two of us. She had no idea what her mom had planned, and I honestly wasn’t sure how she would take it.

“This is such a nice place,” she said as we stepped inside. “Why haven’t we been here yet?”

“I guess I was saving it for a special occasion.”

She smiled at me as I took her coat from her and handed it to the host.

“My mom would love this place. It’s totally her style. Well, it’s her style when she decides to be classy for an evening instead of drinking Bud Light.”

“It’s funny you should mention her,” I said, glancing around for any sign of where I was supposed to be headed.

“What? Why?”

I stalled for a moment by kissing Skye and staring deep into her eyes. I listened for the sounds of her family, and finally heard something from the back corner of the restaurant. I pulled away and grabbed Skye’s hand, leading her towards the noise.

When we came around the corner, her entire family, as well as Laila, Cora, and Beth, were gathered around a sign reading “Congratulations!” and a huge number of gold balloons. Skye looked at me, her eyes wide as she turned and scanned the room. I had absolutely no idea how she was feeling. Her face was inscrutable.

I squeezed her hand, hoping to illicit some kind of response from her, but she remained stone-faced until Annie approached her and pulled her in for a tight hug.

“Congratulations, dear. We are all so happy for the two of you.”

I looked at Skye and her face was red. Whether from embarrassment or not, I couldn’t tell for sure. But then the tears started to fall, and I knew whatever she was feeling was nothing negative.

Annie leaned away from her and wiped the tears off her cheeks before pulling her in for another hug. Slowly, the rest of her family came to join the pile-up and it didn’t take long for it to become a big mess of HARRISES.

Eventually, they all started to part, but then the attention was turned to me. Annie started the pile-up once again, and everyone else followed suit. It was a welcome feeling to be embraced into a family with such ease. Even though I had known them for years, the way they made me feel like one of their own was unbelievable. I was so pleased knowing that my girls would grow up with such a wonderful family who cared for them and loved them deeply.

WHEN EVERYONE finally settled into their seats for dinner, Brent stood and raised his glass to make a toast. I looked around and found I was not the only person surprised by this action.

“Tonight, I stand before you with a heart full of joy as I raise my glass to celebrate a momentous occasion—the engagement of my beloved daughter, Skye, to Owen, the love of her life.”

I expected the toast to end there, but he continued on.

“From the moment Skye was born, she brought immeasurable happiness into our lives. As a father, I have cherished every laugh, and marveled at every accomplishment. Watching her grow into the incredible woman she is today has been a privilege.”

I started to raise my glass, but once again, I was surprised when Brent continued to speak.

“But tonight is not just about the past; it’s about the beautiful future that lies ahead. When Skye and Owen rekindled their friendship and discovered a love that had been there all along, it was like watching a fairy tale unfold before our eyes. Their connection is a testament to the enduring power of friendship. It fills my heart with gratitude to know that my daughter has found a partner who truly understands and cherishes her.”

“Hear, hear!” Luke called, raising his glass into the air.

No one else raised their glasses, and everyone turned their attention back to Brent as he cleared his throat and began welling up with tears.

“Owen, I want to express my deepest gratitude. Thank you for loving my daughter and waiting for her all these years. As we raise our glasses high, let us toast to a future filled with love, laughter, and endless happiness for Skye and Owen. Cheers!”

We all glanced around at each other, making sure he was actually done this time. When he took a sip of his champagne, we all relaxed and joined in, raising our glasses and celebrating the future that laid ahead for me and Skye.

I set my glass down and looked over at her, and she had a single tear on her cheek. I wiped it away and kissed where it had just been.

“I think that’s the most I’ve ever heard your dad speak,” I whispered.

“Me too,” she said with a laugh.

I leaned over to kiss her and once again couldn't believe my luck that she loved me. A lifetime with Skye sounded like it was going to be full of adventure around every corner.

SKYE

The morning after our impromptu engagement party was a complete blur. Everyone was frantically running around, trying to get everything packed up and ready to go back home. Fortunately, as the only person without children to worry about, my packing was done fairly quickly, and I got to spend one last morning enjoying my coffee with the most incredible view.

I wasn't usually one to get nostalgic, especially about something that had *just* happened, but I was already missing the resort and all the magic it had brought me. It wasn't just the scenery, the skiing, and the general atmosphere, though all those things certainly contributed. It was more about the things that happened there.

When I packed my bags and headed to the airport two weeks earlier, I had no idea this trip was going to change the entire course of my life. And it may sound dramatic, but my entire life really had changed.

I arrived a single woman with no intention of seeking someone out to fall in love with. I was wrapped up in my work, and happy with my living situation. Now I was going home engaged to my childhood best friend, preparing to move in with him, and suddenly become the step-parent to two amazing girls.

I never considered myself a lucky person, but I was certainly feeling that way now. I knew my friends back home were never going to believe any of it. I had just about sworn

off men, and I figured marriage and a family were never going to happen for me. I had my work, and that's all that mattered.

But now...now, Owen was all that mattered. Owen, Laila, Cora, and our life together. I still couldn't believe it was real, and I hoped when the plane landed in New York, it would all still be a reality.

I sat on the porch pondering for a long time until the door to the house opened behind me. Figuring it was Sierra or my mom, I didn't turn around, and waited for them to come to me. But instead, two strong arms wrapped around me, embracing me in a tight hug. Owen kissed the side of my neck and held me tight for a moment.

"You ready to go?" he whispered.

"I wish we could stay here forever."

"I do, too. But we'll be back before you know it."

"That's true," I said with a smile, envisioning our perfect summer wedding in the Alps.

"And I promise you, I will do everything in my power to make life at home just as magical as it has been here."

"I know life is going to be great as long as we're together."

He kissed my neck again and slowly pulled away.

"The car will be here in about twenty minutes," he told me as he made his way back into the chalet. "Do you want me to bring your bags out front?"

"No, that's okay. I'll grab them."

Owen smiled and disappeared through the door. I took a few more minutes to get my last deep breaths in, and then I followed him inside.

HOURS LATER, we were finally getting ready to board the plane back to New York. It was wonderful that all of us were on the same flight home together, as I wasn't quite ready to say goodbye to my family yet. I still had a few more hours in the skies before we all went our separate ways.

I walked around the gate area with Mae and Eva for a while, looking at the trinkets in the store windows, smelling all the food, and trying to keep them from stealing candy out of the shops.

I am fully convinced that the parents of toddlers are superheroes in disguise, especially twin toddlers. Sierra and Greg were grateful for the brief break, and I was soaking in every last second with my sweet nieces. I wasn't sure when I would see them next, but I knew they would be much more grown up by then.

When our plane started boarding, I got in line with Owen, each of us holding one of the girls' hands. Cora was determined to sit next to me, even though my assigned seat was several rows away, so I was prepping her for disappointment when Beth scooped her up and carried her to the correct seat.

Owen, Beth, and the girls all sat down before me, and I had only been seated for a moment when Owen appeared in front of me with a smile on his face. Their seats were in the second and third rows, and mine was all the way in the seventh row, so I wasn't sure what he was doing, but he seemed happy about whatever it was.

“Good news,” he said.

“Yes?”

“I got you a seat next to me.”

“You did? How?”

“That doesn't matter.”

“Owen...”

“Come on, grab your stuff and come up here. Cora is thrilled.”

“You're not going to tell me how you got the seat?”

A man appeared in the aisle next to me with a fistful of cash and reached out to shake Owen's hand.

“Thanks again, man,” he said as he waited for me to vacate the seat.

Owen shook the man’s hand and glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. I should have known it had something to do with money, but I guess I still wasn’t used to the way he was able to throw cash around. I wasn’t sure if it was something I would ever get used to.

“Owen, you can’t just pay people off for me all the time.”

“I won’t do it again. I promise,” he paused for a moment. “Well, at least not today.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed my bag so I could move up next to him. Cora was bouncing up and down in her seat as I sat down next to her and Owen sat on her other side. She had already pulled out a coloring book, and was prepared to entertain me for the next several hours, which sounded much nicer than sitting alone for the entire flight.

Of course, mere minutes after takeoff, Cora was asleep on her tray table, my hopes for an exciting flight completely dashed. Fortunately, Owen was prepared to take over for her.

“I can arrange a moving company to come for your things next week,” he whispered over Cora’s head.

“Next week? I might need a little more time than that.”

He stared at me with a perplexed look on his face. Obviously, that was not the reaction he was expecting.

“I mean, I still have a lease at my apartment for six more months. You want me to move in, like, right now?”

“Of course I do. I’ve never wanted anything more.”

“Well, I’d love to move in with you today, but I guess I just need to figure out the logistics of it all.”

I could see the disappointment written across his face, and I realized we probably should have spoken about the timeline for everything sooner. I figured we would take it slow, and move in when the timing was right for both of us. And it wasn’t that I didn’t want to move in with him, I just wasn’t quite ready to move out of my apartment.

“You could just move in with me now and keep paying rent until your lease is up,” he suggested.

“Yeah, that’s a possibility. Although the frugal side of me really hates that idea.”

“Skye, you don’t have to worry about being frugal anymore. Ever. I’ll take care of you.”

“I know, but I don’t want you to *have* to take care of me. I want to feel like I’m contributing, even if it’s not much.”

“Okay, well I don’t want to force you into anything you’re uncomfortable with.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

“I could pay off the rest of your lease if you want me to.”

“Owen, you said you weren’t going to do things like that anymore.”

“I know...but I did say I wasn’t going to do it *today*. I’ll do it tomorrow,” he said with a cheeky grin.

I shook my head at him, admiring how much he loved me, and how I knew he would do anything for me.

“I am going to see what I can workout with the landlord, and I’ll let you know, okay?”

“It’s a deal.”

“Are the girls okay with all of this. I mean, I know they seem excited, but do they really know what they’re getting into?”

Owen thought about that for a minute. I knew without a doubt in my mind that he wanted the best for them, and he would never do anything to harm or make life hard for them, but this was a big transition, and I wasn’t sure if he had totally thought it through.

“They don’t remember their mom. Laila has a few sporadic memories, and Cora recognizes her in pictures, but neither of them really know what it’s like to have a woman in their life who is not paid to care for them.”

I wasn't sure where he was headed with this, but I was very interested to find out.

"It's definitely going to take some getting used to, but I think in the long run, it's going to be a great thing for them, and we're all going to be very happy."

I smiled, knowing he was right. I never wanted to try to replace their mom. I would never be their real mother, but I hoped I could step in and be a positive influence in their lives. If I was never going to have kids of my own, I was going to do everything in my power to show Laila and Cora the unconditional love they deserved.

"I think we're going to be happy, too," I agreed.

A NUMBER OF HOURS LATER, we landed in New York, exhausted, jet-lagged, and ready for bed. I bid a tearful farewell to each of my family members, especially the kids. I was so fortunate to have such a great family, and the vacation just proved it even more.

"I can't wait to be your maid of honor," Sierra said as I hugged her.

"I haven't asked you to be my maid of honor."

"I know, but you will."

"You sound very sure of yourself."

"Trust me, you're going to need my help!"

I shook my head at her, but I knew she was right. I was definitely going to need all the help I could get, and who better to help me than my incredible little sister?

We all went our separate ways, with each member of my family headed in a different direction across the country. Owen and I picked up our luggage, and to no one's surprise, he had a hired car waiting to take me home.

It was an odd feeling saying goodbye to him. It wasn't going to be a long goodbye; we had plans to see each other the

next day. But after spending nearly every moment together for the last two weeks, it was hard to leave.

I hugged the girls and gave them each a kiss on the head before Owen opened my car door and sent me on my way.

Arriving back at my apartment felt completely strange. It was dark and cold, and nothing like the cheery, cozy chalet I had grown so fond of. The space was entirely too quiet, and I felt like a different person than I had been when I left.

It was in that moment I realized I needed to get out of there as soon as possible. I needed to be with Owen and the girls, and I was ready to start my life with them that day. I sent Owen a message telling him to arrange the moving company, and I would figure out the rest later.

I went to bed that night feeling like there was no way life could get any better, but little did I know, I was about to enter a whole new world of happiness and love with Owen by my side.

OWEN

A month after our return home from Switzerland, we were back into the swing of real life. Laila was back at school, Cora was spending her days with Beth, and I was working non-stop, it seemed. The only thing different about our life now was that we had someone new to share it with.

Skye moving in was the most exciting day for all of us, and every day since then has been a dream. It was a busy time of year at work for her, but she always made sure to get home in time for dinner, something that was very important to her. The girls absolutely loved having her there, and I couldn't have been happier.

One night at dinner, she had a smile on her face as we all sat around the table enjoying Andrew's delicious cooking. She looked from Cora to Laila then to me without saying a word. I don't think she knew I was watching her until she looked in my direction.

"What are you smiling about?" I asked.

"Nothing—I just—I don't know."

"What is it?"

"I just can't believe this is my life. I can't believe I live in this beautiful home with the most amazing family. And I can't believe I get to spend my life with you."

I leaned over to kiss her, a sight that the girls still hadn't quite gotten used to, and they groaned as our lips met.

"Gross!" Laila called.

“Sorry, but we’re in love,” I argued.

Skye nodded her head in agreement and looked back at me again, giving me another quick peck.

“I’m so glad this is our life,” I told her.

AS WE MADE our way to bed that evening, I was ready for some action, but Skye was finishing up her emails, as she always did at the end of the day. When she closed her laptop, I crawled across the bed to her and climbed on top of her.

“Owen, I have a meeting at six AM tomorrow,” she said with a laugh as I tickled her neck with my beard.

“Six AM? Those aren’t working hours.”

“The client is in Beijing. It’s six PM for them, and pretty much the only time we can speak face-to-face.”

“Well, I don’t want to keep you up too late,” I said, rolling back to my side of the bed.

“I mean...”

“Yes?”

“There’s always a *little* bit of time.”

“Oh, there is?”

“But we have to be quick.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” I said, pulling off her t-shirt and climbing back on top of her.

As I kissed her, I was reminded of the first time we kissed. It hadn’t been that long ago, but it somehow felt like a lifetime ago as well. It was a different world then, but I was starting to think I liked this world even better.

I kissed her from her mouth to her toes, enjoying every second of it, until I realized she was staring down at me with a smile on her face.

“What are you grinning about?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said, her smile only growing.

“If you’re thinking about something that’s making you smile like that, you’re obligated to tell me.”

“Oh really? Is that how this works?”

“Yes, it is,” I said as I pulled one of her toes into my mouth.

She squirmed and moaned at the sensation, and I felt just a little proud of myself for knowing how to please her so well.

“I just want you to fuck me, Owen.”

My jaw dropped open and I was frozen for a moment before I threw myself on top of her, ready to obey her every command. She giggled and wrapped her legs around me, preparing herself for the night of her life.

OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, we fell into a rhythm that suited all of us. Skye was absolutely correct when she expressed her concern about it being a big transition for all of us, but we were figuring it out.

The girls loved having her around, and I was so happy that I got to see her every day. She was quickly becoming a member of the family and taking on more responsibility than I ever expected her to. Despite my arguments against it, she insisted on cooking meals for us whenever she was able, and she took the girls out every weekend on some kind of adventure.

It was heartwarming to see how the girls came to love her, and how she loved them. The four of us talked about Rachel often, as it was important to both me and Skye that the girls have fond memories and feelings towards her. They knew Rachel was their mother, but Skye had started to become a parent figure to them, which just meant more love for all of us.

“OWEN!” Skye called as she arrived home from work one night.

“I’m up here,” I shouted.

I was still upstairs in my office wrapping up my appointments for the day when she opened the door and sat down in one of the armchairs in the corner.

“Sorry, I just need to finish this email, babe,” I said as she entered the room.

She waited patiently for me, but I could tell she had something big to say. Her knee bounced as she looked around the room, trying to find something to occupy her mind while she waited.

Finally, I looked up at her, and couldn't resist walking over and picking her up in a hug. I wasn't sure how I had spent my entire life without her, I was just glad she was here now.

“What's up?” I asked as I reluctantly pulled my lips away from hers.

“I have big news.”

“I can see that. What is it?”

“Well, okay, don't be mad.”

“Um, alright...”

“I applied for a promotion at work.”

“That's great. Why would I be mad about that?”

“I applied like two months ago, and I didn't tell you because I thought there's no way I would get it...”

“But?”

“But I got it. I just got the news today.”

“Skye, that's incredible!” I said, wrapping my arms around her once again.

“I am so excited. It's my absolute dream job. And the best part is, I'm actually going to be working way less and making way more.”

“Well, that's how you know you've made it big. I'm so proud of you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered as she reached up to kiss my lips.

“I think we should celebrate,” I suggested.

“Great idea. Let’s ask the girls where they want to go.”

“You know we’ll end up somewhere, um, not ideal for an adult celebration if we do that, right?”

“I know, but I want them to be part of it. This job means I get more time to spend with them. I think it should be a celebration for all of us.”

“It’s your big night, so whatever you want, my dear.”

She smiled up at me and squeezed my hand. I couldn’t get over how proud of her I was. She was the most hardworking and determined woman I had ever met, and no one deserved a promotion more than she did, I was certain of it.

WE TOOK the girls to one of their favorite places, and it turned out to be an incredible night. For some reason, both of them were on their best behavior, and Skye was beaming the entire time. She had worked so incredibly hard for everything she had. I was just glad I got to witness her success.

“Girls,” I said, “please raise your glasses with me. Carefully!”

The three of them all picked up their glasses and waited for my toast. One of Cora’s favorite things was to “cheers” at every meal, so she was more excited than anyone.

“I just wanted to give a quick toast to Skye. I am so proud of you, and so excited for all of your achievements, and the many still to come. You are one incredible woman. To Skye.”

Laila and Cora clinked their glasses together, and Skye’s cheeks turned pink as she smiled at me.

“Thank you,” she said, leaning over to kiss my cheek.

“I can’t wait to see what you do next.”

EPILOGUE

SKYE

*A*fter what turned out to be a year and a half of planning each and every detail, it was finally time to get married. The wait from our engagement to the weekend of the wedding seemed to drag on forever, but it also seemed to go by way too fast.

There was so much to plan and coordinate, and I felt a bit guilty the entire time for never taking any of my friends seriously when they complained about how stressful planning a wedding was. Between the dress, the napkins, the food, and everything in between, it seemed like there were countless decisions to be made.

Sierra threw me the most incredible bachelorette party in Las Vegas, and while I anticipated it being a weekend I would never forget, it actually ended up being a weekend that I didn't really remember much of at all.

She was the best support through it all, and she even flew across the country to help me find the perfect dress, surprising me at my first appointment. She made sure everything went smoothly during the planning process, and I truly couldn't have done it without her.

Even after hiring the most highly sought-after and expensive wedding planner in New York (at Owen's insistence), I still had some trouble giving up control of any of the planning. If this was going to be my only wedding, I wanted everything to be perfect.

WHEN THE DAY came that we finally boarded the flight to Switzerland, I couldn't believe the mess of emotions I was feeling. I was excited. Thrilled, actually, to finally be marrying my best friend. I was terrified that something would go wrong. And I was a bundle of nerves.

We sat in silence for most of the flight, dozing in and out and chatting here and there, but at one point, Owen reached out to grab my hand.

The simple gesture that he had done countless times sent me into a fit of tears. Knowing he was beside me for all of the stress was everything I needed. Somehow, he didn't seem nervous at all. He had been my rock through all of the planning, and he was far more involved and helpful than I imagined he would want to be.

"Skye, everything is going to be great. I promise."

"I don't know why I'm so stressed about it."

"It's a big day. You've put a ton of work into making sure it's all perfect. You have every right to be anxious and stressed."

"You're not."

"Well, I'm just excited to marry you. I want to start our life together."

"So do I. I don't want you to think—"

"I know, Skye. I know. Try to get some rest, okay? We'll be there before you know it."

WE ARRIVED at the resort many sleepless hours later, and seeing the landscape that had lived in my mind for so long again was like a dream come true. It was completely different in the middle of summer, and it was even more breathtaking than I thought it would be.

The mountains were green and lush with wildflowers and trees blowing in the wind. The chalets that had once been

covered in snow were now glistening in the sun, welcoming visitors to a reprise from the warm sunshine. Where the ski slopes once lived were rolling hills and families having picnics and relaxing in the summer breeze. It was absolutely perfect.

“Wow,” I said, completely breathless as we took it all in.

“This is incredible,” Owen said.

He wrapped his arms around me and held me close. We gazed at the scene before us, completely in awe of it all. I couldn't believe we were finally here, and we were finally about to get married.

We had a few days ahead of us that consisted of working out final details, and then our families would be joining us. But until then, it was just Owen and me in the most exquisite chalet on the resort. He had spared no expense on our accommodations, not that I expected anything different.

PICTURING the snowy landscape from a year and a half ago made me nostalgic for the days when Owen and I had begun our love story. Looking back on it was like an absolute fairytale.

There was nothing like the early days of a relationship. We spent so much time talking and getting to know each other, and we spent countless hours in bed *really* getting to know each other. It was a blissful time that I knew I would always think of with great fondness.

But the more time I spent with Owen, the more I realized that the days we were in now might be even better. I felt like I knew him so completely, but he still surprised me all the time. We were comfortable together in every scenario, and it was an easy and peaceful relationship.

“Here we are,” Owen said as he opened the front door to the chalet.

I couldn't believe my eyes. The back wall of the cabin had floor to ceiling windows that made it seem like we were right

on the edge of the mountain. It was flawlessly decorated in a way that made it seem homey, but also tasteful and elegant.

“Owen, this is gorgeous.”

“Yeah, I heard the queen stayed here once.”

“You’re lying.”

“Yeah, I am. But it is nice, isn’t it?”

“It’s perfect.”

I stood on my toes to kiss him, and in an instant, he swept me up into his arms and carried me into the bedroom. It had become a tradition that whenever we were away from home without the girls, the first thing we did was ‘break in the bed,’ as Owen liked to call it.

A FEW DAYS LATER, our families had joined us, and it was finally the day of the wedding. I didn’t sleep a wink the night before, but I think it was more out of excitement than out of nerves. Being back at the resort had somehow relaxed me. I knew that even if everything at the wedding went wrong, at least I would be going home married to the love of my life.

The hair and makeup artist arrived early that morning to get me and all of my bridesmaids ready for the day, including all of my nieces, and Laila and Cora, of course. They were more excited than anyone. They *finally* got to wear the dresses they had picked out months ago that had been waiting for them in their closets.

At five and seven years old, the two of them had some very strong opinions, and they were turning into thoughtful, intelligent, and strong young ladies. It pleased me immensely to know that I got to be part of their lives and see who they would grow up to be.

When everyone was finally ready, we made our way to the venue. We had put a lot of thought into where we wanted to get married within the boundaries of the resort. There were more than enough choices, and we ended up settling on a little

gazebo near the river that ran along the edge of the nearby forest.

I had looked at practically every picture that existed of this place, but seeing it in real life was more than I hoped for. It felt like walking into a romance novel with all of the flowers, greenery, and the running water. It was a completely secluded spot that was private and intimate, perfect for the day I had imagined.

“Are you ready for this?” Sierra asked as we prepared to walk down the aisle.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself so I didn’t tumble on my walk to Owen.

“I think so.”

“It’s not too late to back out.”

“What?” I shouted.

“I’m just kidding; you know that. Owen is perfect for you. I’m so happy for the two of you.”

I tried to get my heart rate back to normal, and Sierra tried to keep from laughing at my overdramatic reaction.

The string quartet at the back of the venue changed their tune, and suddenly, it was time to begin. After my mom, the bridesmaids, and the flower girls made their way down the aisle, it was finally my turn. My hands were shaking and I was on the brink of tears, but as soon as I came around the corner and saw Owen, all of the nerves suddenly went away.

I began walking towards my best friend, my long white train dragging behind me, as I smiled at all of my loved ones who had come to support us. As I walked, I thought about all the years I had known Owen, all the memories we had made together, and all the amazing moments we had already made together.

I thought about the trees we climbed as kids. The hours we spent doing our homework together, riding our bikes in the street, and playing in the river in the summer. I thought about

all the times that I was upset or down and only wanted to talk to him.

My memories jumped forward a long way when I thought about the day we reconnected at the airport. Somehow simultaneously just yesterday, and also a lifetime ago. We had become each other's confidants, our support during good times and bad, and the most important people in each others lives.

As I reached the end of the aisle, I looked up at him and saw him wipe away a tear, and in that moment, I knew the best was yet to come.

THE END

If you loved Snowed in with the Single Dad then you will love Miami Confessions.

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Sexy rockstar finds himself in an unexpected situation with his little sister's best friend during her bachelorette party in Miami. Uncover the thrilling allure of this covert opposites attract romance by reading chapter one on the very next page!

SNEAK PEEK

Miami Confessions Sneak Peek

Miami was supposed to be about my best friend's bachelorette party.

Not her billionaire playboy brother.

Dylan's surprise music concert throws a wrench into my perfect weekend.

My meticulously planned bachelorette party in Miami.

Ruined.

His arrogance is infuriating, but his talent...

Mesmerizing.

I can't deny the sparks igniting between us.

I can't resist his charisma.

Beneath that rockstar exterior lies a man I never expected.

One night of reckless abandon changes everything.

We've embarked on an illicit love affair.

Risking everything for a taste of forbidden passion.

But just when I think we've escaped the chaos.

A photograph surfaces that threatens to unravel all.

Was it just a moment captured in Miami, or was it a heart too?

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Chapter one

Grace

“Grace! This looks incredible! Thank you so much!” Ella squealed as she ran across the decorated hotel suite to scoop me up in a big hug.

“I’m glad you like it! This is going to be the best weekend ever. I have so much fun stuff planned out for us,” I said.

“I wouldn’t doubt it for a second,” she said with a grin.

“I just need to respond to a few work emails, and then I’ll show you around the resort before everyone else gets here.”

“Seriously?” Ella said with an epic eye roll, “You’re doing work this weekend.”

“I’m sorry! Just a few emails, and then I’m all yours for the next few days. I promise.”

Ella plopped down on the couch and started scrolling through her phone. I felt guilty that I had to work this weekend, but with how much planning I had to do to make sure everything was perfect, there were a few things at work that had started to slip through the cracks.

The world of marketing waits for no one! That’s the saying, isn’t it?

A quick fifteen minutes later I closed my laptop and hid it in my suitcase so I wouldn’t be tempted to pull it out again.

“You ready, babe?” I asked Ella.

She sprung up from the couch with an emphatic nod and we headed out the door. I wanted to keep just about everything a secret for her, but I had planned so many bachelorette parties in the last few years that I knew exactly what she was looking for. When you are friends with someone for twelve years, you tend to learn a lot about them.

Being the last single girl in my group of friends meant I was the designated party planner. I was experienced and

organized, and no one would ever trust anyone else with their last single flings.

“The pool here is incredible, you are going to love it,” I told her as I pressed the button in the elevator for the lobby.

When the doors opened, the rest of the girls were standing in front of us, and it turned into a mass of women jumping up and down and squealing at one another. Though we had all known each other for years, jobs, husbands, and school had separated us all over the country. Weddings and their associated events were the one thing that we could count on to bring us together, and this was the last one. At least, until mine, which was definitely never going to happen. I didn't mind being the last single girl in the group. I had enough to worry about without having a man in my life.

“Grace was just showing me around the resort. You all need to join us,” Ella told the group of girls.

Before we made it out to the pool area, Ella was already wearing a white feather boa and a tiara that read “Bride” across the front. We stepped outside into the hot Miami sun, and everyone was just as excited as I was about the view, the pool, the beach, and most of all, the bar.

“How did you find this place?” Maggie asked me. “It's incredible!”

“It wasn't easy, I'll tell you that.”

I escorted the girls around the rest of the resort before taking them up to our suite. The whole afternoon was a whirlwind of talking, laughing, reminiscing, and gossiping, and it went by in a flash. Before I realized it, it was time to let everyone know what our plans for the weekend were.

“I'm so glad you all could make it here for Ella's bachelorette party!” I said as I stood at the front of the room.

Everyone shouted and cheered and hugged Ella.

“We have a dinner reservation in about two hours, and then we're going to the most incredible club. It's right on the beach,

and all of the bartenders and waiters are dressed as lifeguards. Trust me, you guys are going to love it.”

There was more cheering and shouting and even a few whistles as I watched everyone get excited about what I had planned.

“So, everyone should be wearing their all-black outfits tonight, except for Ella, of course, who will be in all white. We have an hour and a half till we need to leave, so go get ready!”

There was a final round of hoots and hollers as everyone dispersed into the suite’s three bedrooms and bathrooms. Ella lingered behind as everyone started getting ready, and she ran up to me and wrapped me in another hug.

“You are the absolute best friend a girl could ask for, you know that right?” she asked as my cheek was pressed against hers.

“I hope you have a great weekend, you deserve it.”

Ella gave me one last squeeze before she scurried off to go pick out one of the several all-white outfits she had brought for the weekend. I followed behind her and pulled my black jeans and cropped black tank out of my suitcase.

It had become a tradition for these bachelorette parties that we would all wear the same color each night so that the bride could stand out in white. It gave her all of the attention while taking it off of everyone else, which had been my goal all along.

A short while later, everyone was nearly ready to go. We were just putting on the last bits of jewelry and curling a few stray pieces of hair.

“Ella! Come out! Let’s see it!” I shouted from the living room.

Ella came out of the back bedroom, dressed head-to-toe in white sequins. We all squealed as she strutted around the room, showing off her fringe top and sparkling pants.

“You look *gorgeous*,” Maddy shouted as she jumped up and down on the couch.

Ella spun around as we all cheered and clapped for her. She threw her long blonde hair over her shoulder and took a bow. Ella was never one to shy away from the spotlight, so a weekend that was entirely about her was like a dream come true.

“I’m going to go make sure the limo is here!” I told everyone as I walked out the door, “Be right back!”

Everyone cheered as I stepped out into the hall. As I rounded the corner, I came face-to-face with a brick wall. I took a step back and realized that, no, it hadn’t been a brick wall, it was an incredibly tall and muscular man who was blocking me from getting to the elevator.

“You should watch where you’re walking,” the man said as he stared down at me.

I knew those eyes. I knew that chin. They were the same ones that—oh, no.

“Are you Dylan Woods?” I asked.

The man smirked at me and winked.

“You bet I am, babe.”

It took every ounce of self-control that I had not to roll my eyes at him. Dylan Woods was a wealthy, arrogant musician with a massive social media following. He also happened to be Ella’s older brother. He was constantly on tour and sleeping with countless women, so we hadn’t ever had the “pleasure” of meeting one another. But I knew enough about him that I wasn’t too upset about that fact.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

My voice had more of a bite in it than I intended, but I rolled with it.

“I’m here to see my little sister. It *is* her bachelorette party this weekend, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. And we have plans tonight, so I don’t think she’ll want to see you.”

Dylan ran a large hand through his dark, wavy hair and let out a small laugh.

“No one has ever said no to seeing me.”

I stood there motionless, staring at him with a blank expression. I wasn’t sure if I should show him to the elevator or just go downstairs and leave him standing here.

“Well, I’m saying no on Ella’s behalf. Bye!”

I turned around and started marching towards the elevator, but when I looked over my shoulder, Dylan was knocking on the door to our suite. I stomped back down the hallway and tapped him on the shoulder.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I asked.

“I’m saying hello to my sister. Like I told you,” he said.

His voice was sharp and deep, and I knew there was no way I was going to win a battle with him. I shook my head and pulled my keycard out of my pocket. Before I had the chance to open the door, Ursula swung it open.

“Dylan Woods!” she shouted. “What are you doing here?”

“That is a very popular question tonight. Where’s my little sis?”

“Dylan?” Ella’s voice ran through the suite and into the hall, “DYLAN!”

She jumped into his arms and he spun her around. He set her back on the floor and stepped inside the suite. He glanced around the room and I could tell from the expression on his face that he was seriously judging me for the phallic decor and all of the disco balls and pink sparkles.

“What are you doing here?” Ella asked as Dylan made himself at home on the couch.

“I was in town for some work stuff, and I knew you would be here. I just wanted to come say congrats.”

I looked at a few of the other girls, all of whom were happily married, and each of whom were drooling over Dylan. Sure, I guess he was attractive, if you were into alpha male, arrogant, rockstars, which I definitely was not.

“I’m going to check on the limo,” I said to no one in particular.

“I thought you already did that.” Ashley said, without taking her eyes off Dylan.

I let out a long sigh and left the suite without another word.

I was gone for less than ten minutes, but when I returned to the suite, I could already tell that Dylan had ruined the entire weekend I had spent months planning. Ella stood from the couch as soon as I reentered the suite, and she pulled me aside into one of the bedrooms.

“Grace,” she said quietly.

I raised an eyebrow at her.

“I know you already had plans arranged, but Dylan just told me he’s putting on a private concert for us tonight,” she said.

I chewed my bottom lip. She wasn’t asking me if it was okay. She was telling me that this was the new plan. I tried to swallow my anger. It was supposed to be a weekend all about Ella, so if this is what she wanted to do, then I would support it.

“Wow,” I said, hoping that she couldn’t sense my disappointment. “That’s so sweet of him. Where is it at? I’ll let our driver know that we’ve had a change of plans.”

“You are the best!” Ella said, squeezing my shoulders, “I’ll go get all the details from Dylan.”

I smiled at her as she ran out of the room, but I didn’t follow her. I flopped down onto the bed, wondering how I was going to make it through the night. I liked Dylan’s music, but I certainly didn’t like him. How could someone just swoop in and ruin all of my plans like that? He was a selfish, arrogant, asshole I wanted nothing to do with.

When the living room started to get quiet, I realized everyone was probably heading downstairs towards the limo. I took a deep breath and got up from the bed. I grabbed my purse and followed them to the elevator. I plastered on my most excited smile. By the looks of it, I was the only one who was disappointed in the change of plans, which only made my disappointment that much stronger.

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