

A full-page photograph of actor Nicky Redford. He is smiling broadly, looking slightly to the right of the camera. He has dark hair styled back and is wearing a light blue button-down shirt that is unbuttoned at the collar and waist, revealing his muscular torso. He is also wearing dark blue jeans with a black belt. The background is a solid, vibrant red.

THE
Dashwood
BILLIONAIRES

That
STRANDED
Feeling

NICKY REDFORD

THAT STRANDED FEELING

THE DASHWOOD BILLIONAIRES

NICKY REDFORD



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For everyone who just wanted a quiet night in.

SUMMER McBRIDE

Dancing while doing dishes always makes it less of a chore.

I'm in full hip-swinging mode as I put the last clean mug on the drainer and twirl the dishcloth in circles over my head, in time to Aretha Franklin belting out instructions for me to "sock it" to her.

White soap bubbles land on the dark window and fly around the kitchen—should have thought that through and wrung out the cloth first.

As Aretha's pearls of wisdom about respect fade out, I dry my hands on a tea towel and pull up my cozy socks for approximately the nine hundred and forty-seventh time. I was so proud when I finished making them yesterday. The polka dot pattern came out well, but I clearly need to work on the staying-up aspect.

I grab my phone off the counter and scroll for a more relaxing soundtrack to my favorite part of the day—a peaceful, snowy evening snuggled up with the dog in front of a roaring fire, sketching new knitwear designs. I say "snuggled", but in reality I'm usually squished into the only remaining tiny spot on the sofa not occupied by my oversized mutt.

The thing I've loved most since inheriting my grandparents' New Hampshire cabin is being tucked up here peacefully at night, not another human soul around.

Particularly when there's a storm coming, it's dark out, and most of the light is from the fire. Well, the fire and my standard lamp that's designed like two giant knitting needles sticking into a ball of yarn.

It's like living in a warm, cozy bubble where I'm safe from the world and nothing, and no one, can hurt me.

I stop scrolling at a piano album my grandpa loved. It filled this cabin during long vacation evenings when I was a kid. He played it on a crackly old record player though, not through a Bluetooth speaker.

As I hit play, there's a loud *snap* from the fireplace.

“Shitballs!”

I race across the small, open-plan room, grab the hearth rug, and shake a glowing ember toward the fire. I could do without the brand-new rug going up in flames. Spotted it last week hanging in the window of the fair-trade store while on my fortnightly trip to town. It occurred to me the weave of muted reds and browns might be inspiration for a sweater pattern. And, thankfully, I'd taken my grandpa's old truck, so there was room for it along with all the supplies.

Elsa stretches across the sofa, yawns, looks at me, and thunks her tail once against the cushion. The wiry appendage, as well as her long legs, probably stem from the Irish Wolfhound that's mixed in with a bunch of other breeds.

The kettle whistles on the stove.

“See, Elsa,” I tell her, even though she can't hear me—she's deaf. The rescue group and vet think she was born that way, but no one's sure. I trot back into the kitchen area. “At least you don't have to suffer these piercing sounds.”

I mix the hot chocolate, squeeze in next to the dog and hitch up my socks again. If I can figure out the correct elasticity, these might sell well.

When I pull the giant blanket my grandmother crocheted about forty years ago over my knees, Elsa lifts her head and rests her chin on my leg, one of her Muppet-like ears inside out.

My heart grows a little bigger every time she does something like that. The moment she looked up at me through the bars of her kennel at the shelter, I knew she was the one. My soul dog. I kiss the top of her scruffy noggin and turn her ear the right way around.

My sketchbook is on the coffee table, open to the rough drawing of a drapey, open-front cardigan I did yesterday. It's not quite as unique as I'd remembered. I put my mug down and turn to a clean page, hoping inspiration will strike afresh.

There's a rattle as my phone buzzes with a text.

IZZIE (8:32PM)

Bit chilly here, had to wrap up.

The message is followed by a snowflake emoji. And she's attached a picture of herself having an afternoon snack in the sun on the patio of her Los Angeles office building. It's probably seventy degrees, but she's wrapped in a lacy shawl I made her years ago and fake-shivering. She never fails to make me laugh.

IZZIE (8:33PM)

Figured your shit out yet? Ready to come home to the real world and not spend a second winter in NH?

I'm about to tap out a reply telling her not to pull the shawl out of shape, but I jump at the sound of a knock on the door. Instinctively, I put my hand on Elsa's side. Sometimes I forget she can't hear and expect her to react to noises, but she's fast asleep and none the wiser.

I, however, am nowhere near as relaxed about it. The only person who ever shows up at my door is the delivery guy when he brings my yarn supplies. Oh, and a few months ago my nearest neighbor from about half a mile away came around looking for one of her sheep that'd escaped. I heard she later found it in a barn two fields down, snoozing in the hay with the farmer's cat.

But other than them, not a single person has knocked at my door in the eighteen months since I moved in. And that's just the way I like it. The whole point of coming here was to be alone, to get away from everything.

So the knocking sound isn't only unnerving, it's also disappointing—the last thing I want is someone interrupting my lovely peaceful evening just as I'm curling up.

I pause and listen, the only movement being my hand rising and falling with Elsa's breath.

Silence.

Maybe I was mistaken.

Yeah, I must have misheard. Way more likely to be the wind blowing something, or an animal moving around than someone knocking. Maybe a deer sheltering from the snow?

All sorts of creatures seem drawn to my porch. There was the turkey that kept visiting purely to pace up and down for reasons I could never establish, the feral cat that decided it was the perfect place to bring three kittens into the world, and the unfortunate incident with the opossum. He got stuck between the railings and objected mightily to me unsticking him. Of course, I can't be sure he was male. It's a guess based on him believing he knew best. I have a scar on my arm to prove it.

Oh, okay, there it is again. Yeah, definitely a knock. Of the human variety.

I could ignore it. But it's obvious I'm home. Even with the drapes shut you could tell the lights are on. And there'll be smoke coming from the chimney.

But I could really do without whoever this is.

I put the phone down and gently move Elsa's chin from my leg onto the sofa. She makes a contented grunty sound as she readjusts herself.

I ease back the edge of the curtain and peek out. Amid the snow swirling against the black sky, there's the shape of a car parked in the driveway.

Who the hell is that? I don't know anyone with a white car. And it takes a deliberate effort to drive up the long, winding lane to reach my solitary cabin at the end of it. No one could ever claim to be passing by.

This is how horror movies start. I can't be the fool who answers the door to a stranger on a dark, blizzardy night while a packed theater shouts, "Nooooo."

But what if someone needs help? It is pretty bad out there.

Elsa's still snoozing blissfully on the sofa. That's where I'd planned to be. Not only tonight but every night. I do not want to answer the door to God knows who. People usually go hand in hand with trouble.

I take a deep breath, blow it out, and shake my head. There's no way I can ignore someone who might be in some sort of danger with the weather.

I flick on the outside light and open the door as far as the chain allows.

It's a man. On my porch. A sight way less common than wildlife.

At least his head isn't stuck in the railings.

SUMMER

He's all designer floppy hair and stubble. Like a model for some hipster city store.

And clearly not the sharpest tool in the shed. I mean, how dumb do you have to be to be out in a blizzard wearing a thin sweater over a plaid shirt, jeans, and the pair of retro style sneakers he's trying to scrape the snow from on my doormat? And that little hatchback is a death trap in these conditions.

He looks up from the shoe-scraping, and his broad shoulders drop with relief. "Oh, thank God."

Guess he's not one for a polite "hello."

He rubs his hands together. "I've got a bit of a problem."

"Only one?" I ask.

"What?"

I point my finger through the gap in the door. "Well, you seem to be in an inappropriate vehicle *and* inappropriate clothing. That's at least two problems."

"Oh." He wrinkles the brow of his slightly tanned face and shakes his head. "Well, anyway, I must have taken a wrong turn. And my phone's died. So, I need a charge."

"Can't you charge it in your car?"

If he's a crazed killer trying to con his way into my house to chop me and Elsa into bits, he should have finessed his evil plan a bit more.

"I'm visiting. Didn't pack a charger. I was working right up to the last minute and threw my things together in a hurry." He closes his eyes like he's either annoyed with himself for forgetting or with me for asking. Hard to tell. "I've just turned my bag inside out and nothing."

"Well, I can't let a strange man into my house. You could be an ax murderer."

He cracks a smile. It's small, but it reaches his brown eyes and makes them sparkle. He holds his arms out wide. "Look, no axes."

He does a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree twirl. Two perfectly formed butt cheeks rotate into view and out again.

"You can pat me down, if you like." He raises his eyebrows.

It's more tempting than I would like. I mean, how often does a hot dude show up on your porch and offer to let you put your hands all over him? Also, it has, you know, been a while.

There's a moment of awkward silence I find impossible to fill with any appropriate words. Inappropriate ones would be easier.

He slides the phone back in next to his butt and sighs. He looks like he's suddenly realized he's out of options.

"Let me start over. I should probably introduce myself." He thrusts a hand toward me, as if being friendly will change everything. "Hi. I'm Owen. And I'm sorry for disturbing you."

Is he? Or is he desperate for a phone charge and I'm his only hope?

I squeeze my arm through the gap and take his hand. Oh, my God, how does a hand feel that good? The perfect combination of holding me gently, yet also giving a confident, solid shake.

His smile widens, and my belly goes a little wobbly.

“Wow. Your hand is nice and warm.” He puts his other hand on top, sandwiching mine between his. The wobbles creep lower.

An attractive stranger is holding my hand through the chain-latched gap in my door. And there I was thinking a hot chocolate would be the most exciting part of my evening.

Finally, I find a word.

“Summer,” I say.

“Sorry?”

“My name. Summer.”

“Oh, right, yes.”

Just as his hands start to thaw around mine, he gives it a quick squeeze then lets go.

“You seem to be the only house up here.” He rubs his upper arms and hops from foot to foot. “The battery died during a crucial call. And I don’t know my way without the map. Never been here before.” He gazes back toward the dark, snowy, deserted street. “So I’m also lost.”

I can’t let him draw me in with his sparkling eyes, cupid’s bow lips, and perfect square shoulders. Being handsome doesn’t necessarily mean you’re not a crazed killer.

“If you murder me, I’ll be the idiot who let a murderer into her house.”

I’m getting cold from the chill coming through the door, so goodness knows how close to freezing he must be out there.

He sighs.

I don’t think he should be the one losing his patience in this situation.

“Thing is, I’m pretty desperate right now.” He tips his head to one side. “But I get that letting a random stranger into your house might not feel safe. How about I borrow your charger and sit out here in the car till I have enough power, then give it back?”

“What phone do you have?”

He pulls it from his back pocket and holds it up. I bet it’s warm from being nestled against one of those firm cheeks.

“Yeah, mine fits that.” Damn. It would be so much easier if I couldn’t help him at all. Or if I’d lied, but that’s never my first instinct.

I look past him at the snow falling in fat, heavy flakes. “But you can’t sit out here and wait.” I nod toward his car. “Look, it’s already starting to pile up around the wheels. You’d be snowed in by the time the phone was charged enough to get you wherever you’re going.” There’s also a thick layer forming on the roof. “And you’ll either freeze to death or run the heater too much and suffocate from the exhaust fumes.”

“You seem quite sure one of us is going to come out of this dead.”

Yeah, that slight smile is irritatingly attractive.

“Well, look around you. You’ve knocked on the door of a stranger’s cabin at the end of a long, unplowed lane on a snowy, windy night, in a vehicle wholly inappropriate for the conditions, and wearing clothes only suitable for a pleasant spring day. If this were the start of a movie, you wouldn’t think it would end well, would you?”

He shoves everything back in his pocket and looks down at his achingly cool fabric sneakers, which are now damp where the snow has melted. He closes his eyes and almost laughs. I made Hot Stranger almost laugh.

“I’d like to prove to you that I have absolutely no intention of causing you any harm.” He looks up under his eyebrows at me. “But I don’t know how.”

I think for a moment before breaking the silence. “Do you like dogs?”

His eyes widen. “Er, well...”

He pauses for longer than I’d like.

“That is definitely not the right answer.”

He holds up those gentle-yet-firm hands defensively. “It’s not that I don’t like them. It’s that my aunt’s big dog knocked me flying when I was a kid and broke my leg.” He shrugs. “It’s kind of stayed with me.”

“What was the last movie you saw?”

“*What?*”

“What was the last movie you saw?”

“Are these your go-to ‘Is He a Murderer?’ questions?”

“How badly do you want your phone charged?”

“Okay, okay. *Frozen.*”

I sigh. “Well, it’s no good if you don’t tell the truth.”

He clutches his hands to his heart. “Honest to God. My niece just discovered it. She’s obsessed. I watched it three times with her last week.”

So he spends a lot of time with his niece watching whatever she chooses? Interesting information.

“Last time you cried?”

“Oh, come on,” he groans, and rolls those big brown eyes as he breathes into his cupped hands.

“Okay. Well, nice to have met you.” I start to close the door. “Good luck with finding wherever it is you’re supposed to be.”

“Oh, no. Please.” He makes a desperate grab for the edge of the door.

I still, unable to slam it shut on such beautiful fingers.

“Last week.” There’s a hint of panic in his voice. “When the snowman almost melts.”

“When what?”

“The snowman in *Frozen*. You haven’t seen it?” That possibility seems to horrify him almost as much as his lack of battery power. “He tells the girl that some people are worth melting for. And my niece turned to me and said, ‘I’d melt for you, Uncle Owen,’ and that was it. I was gone.”

Hmm, that would be a tough thing to make up on the spot. And it's adorable.

He looks a little embarrassed. "Well, you know, I wouldn't say I *cried* exactly. But there was definitely a lump in my throat."

He looks down at his shoes and wipes them on the mat again. "Anyway, I really need a charge so I can call my cousin back and find my way."

He reaches around to the other butt cheek and pulls out his wallet. "Here, this is me." He hands me a thick, non-bendy, matte gray business card. "Look, no mention of murdering anywhere in my job description."

Owen Dashwood

CEO

Two Coast Tech

San Francisco

So, he's from California. And probably not hurting for cash.

Oh, God. Of all the people I wouldn't want knocking on my door tonight, or at any time, a rich west coast guy would definitely be near the top of the list. Just below deranged chainsaw-wielding maniac.

I sigh and drop my head, my forehead clunking against the door chain.

"Oooh, careful." He steps closer and touches my arm through the gap in the door.

A shudder ripples down the side of my body. It had better be from the freezing air and not from his touch. That would be beyond inconvenient.

Owen leans to one side and peers at me. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, thanks. Fine. It's just...well, never mind." I hand back his card.

"You can keep it."

“Oh, right, yes.” I guess you generally don’t give people their business cards back.

“Then you can tell the cops my name.”

“After you’ve murdered me? Might be tricky.”

“Well, maybe after I flee the scene, leaving you dying, you’ll just about be able to muster the strength to dial 911 before losing consciousness.”

“And *now* I’m supposed to let you in?”

“The call I need to make is important.” Now his eyes plead as well as sparkle, a combination that nibbles at my defenses. “And I’m extremely lost.”

I’m sure he’s fine. It’ll be fine. I’ll charge his phone, then he’ll go. And everything will be fine.

I unhook the chain, swing open the door, step back, and let him in.

There goes my relaxing, peaceful, solitary night on the sofa.

Ruined by a potential ax murderer.

But what a beautiful way to go.

OWEN DASHWOOD

Fuck me, this is frustrating.

First, the car rental office at the airport had only tiny hatchbacks left, none of them with GPS. Then, when I thought I couldn't be far from my aunt and uncle's new place, I found myself in a blizzard, with no working phone, and barely able to see the front of the hood, never mind the road signs. God knows how far back I took a wrong turn. Should never have stopped my assistant from booking me a driver.

Now I have to figure out how to make small talk with the woman in the weird socks and oversized sweater who seems a bit bonkers.

Bonkers, but crazy cute. She stands by the log fire, her freckled cheeks turning pink as they warm up after standing in the doorway. And there's something hot about the way she keeps pushing those two blonde ringlets off her face. Not my type, though. Way too granola. Anyway, I only need to call Elliot back, wait for my phone to charge a bit, and be on my way.

I yank off my damp sneakers and step into the tiny open-plan living-kitchen area.

“So, where can I plug in?”

A shaggy, brown face with black ears pops up over the back of the sofa and stares at me. That head is huge.

“Meet Elsa,” Summer says. “She must have smelled you.”

The beast jumps off the sofa and rushes up to me, ears back, tail swishing like a single windshield wiper.

I automatically lift my arms in the air and step back to brace myself against the wall. “I smell?”

“She’s deaf,” Summer says. “She wouldn’t have heard you come in. She must have smelled you.”

Christ, I need to get out of here. I wave my phone in the air. “So, where’s best?”

Elsa’s nose is at perfect crotch-sniffing height.

“There.” Summer points at the kitchen area on the other side of the room and makes no effort to dissuade the dog from intimately acquainting herself with my genitals.

I sidestep Elsa and walk toward the outlet where the breakfast bar meets the wall. I’ve never been this happy to see a charging cable dangling from an electrical socket in my life.

There’s a nose up my butt the whole way.

“She likes you,” Summer says with what might be a hint of a giggle.

“Yeah, that’s great.”

As I connect my phone to the charger, Summer appears at my side. A flutter of surprise rushes through me. There’s a spark of fire in her bright blue eyes. I guess she wants me out of here as much as I want to be gone.

“If Elsa worries you, this will get her away.” She snaps a banana from the bunch in the fruit bowl on the counter, waggles it at me then splits it open.

The dog snaps her attention to Summer and follows her back to the living area.

“Her favorite treat.” She breaks off a piece as Elsa obediently sits and stares at her.

“It’s not that she worries me...Oh, thank God.” I blow out a big breath as my phone screen springs to life.

But a signal doesn’t appear.

Nothing.

Then more nothing.

Still nothing.

This is what happens when you’re in the middle of nowhere. This is why I’m never in the middle of nowhere.

“Is there no cell service way out here?”

“You’re not *way out* anywhere. You’re in New Hampshire, not on the moon.” Summer sighs as she feeds the dog another piece of banana. “Of course there’s service.”

I hold my phone in the air and wave it back and forth as much as the cable will allow. Nothing. My heart quickens. Elliot must wonder why the hell I haven’t called him back or shown up at his parents’ house yet.

“Well, I don’t have a signal.” I give it a shake.

“You think jiggling your phone might get you one? And you’re the boss of a tech company?” She raises her eyebrows at me and smirks. It’s cute and annoying.

“I own it.”

“Well, I didn’t think you’d stolen your phone.”

“The company. Not the phone. But I do own the phone too.”

She shakes her head, kneels on the floor next to the dog and strokes those flappy, hairy ears.

“Does yours have a signal?” I ask.

“Yeah, I got a text right before you showed up.” She leans forward and picks up her phone from the coffee table. “Oh. No. Not now I don’t.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“Yeah, looks like there’s no Wi-Fi either.” She gets up and peers into the gap between a bookcase and the wall.

“No lights on the router. Internet must be out too.” She looks at me. “It comes from two towns away. They get worse weather there, and their electricity goes down more often than here. Our internet goes out whenever they lose power.”

I toss my phone on the breakfast bar with a clatter and throw my hands in the air, pulse thundering through my veins. “Holy fucking hell. Which fool located an internet provider in a place where the power goes out at the drop of a fucking snowflake?”

I probably shouldn’t have thrown my phone onto the tiled counter, so I pick it up and look it over for damage.

“You can check the counter’s okay too, if you like,” Summer snaps. “My grandfather spent hours carefully salvaging those tiles from a heritage building that was being torn down.”

She pauses, and when she speaks again her voice is softer. “He picked up lots of things from there. Said previously loved things have character and life.” She casts her eyes around the room. “This place isn’t as old as it looks. It’s just made from a lot of old stuff.”

I run my fingers over the small blue-and-white-patterned squares. They do have a vintage look about them. The whole cabin does. With its wood-paneled walls and floors, it has a 1970s Swiss chalet vibe. But my God, it’s tiny.

“Do you actually *live* here?”

Her head jerks up and she looks at me like I asked her to clean something unpleasant off my shoes. “Yes. Yes, I do. I happen to love it. And if I wasn’t here with a door to knock on, you’d have even more problems right now.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean—”

She dismisses me with a wave of her hand. “At least we still have power. That’s something.” She stands and pulls up her socks. “The only radio I have is the emergency one. I’ll grab it and find out what’s going on.”

The last thing I want to do is offend her. This woman is my lifeline right now. And she might be a little wacky, but she seems kind. Maybe I can redeem myself with some gentle teasing.

“Emergency radio? What’s that? Something that plays the hits of the ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s when you’re in a crisis?”

She chews her lip as she gives the dog the rest of the banana. I’m pretty sure she’s struggling not to smile. Hopefully that worked then.

“You live in San Francisco, right? Land of many earthquakes?”

I nod and follow her with my eyes as she walks by.

“Then you know what an emergency radio is.”

She pulls a folding step stool out of a closet by the back door and climbs the three steps to reach the cupboard above it.

“Do you need a hand?”

“No, thanks. Never need a hand.”

I turn my head to eye the dog. As our gazes meet, her tail swishes and her tongue lolls out the side of her mouth. On the table next to her is a sketchpad open to a blank page and some pencils. What does Summer draw?

“Well, anyway.” I wander over and stand next to her as she balances on the top step. “Since you’re charging my phone, the least I can do is help.”

As she reaches into the cupboard, her long, baggy sweater lifts to reveal a band of bare flesh above her leggings. Turns out it was hiding a perfect round butt that is now right at eye level.

She kicks one leg out backward, ballerina style, as she reaches.

“Almost got it.” Her voice is muffled by the cupboard.

“Seriously, I can get up there and pass it down.”

“It’s fine.” Her leg stretches farther back, almost horizontal. The shape of the muscle in her thigh is visible through the stretched fabric. She’s petite, but possibly stronger than she looks.

“This is quite the gymnastic move you’ve got going on here.”

“Yoga.”

“What?”

“Not gymnastics. I do yoga.”

So, she lives alone in a cabin at the end of a long lane that leads nowhere, has a deaf dog, does a lot of yoga, and her name is Summer. All the signs point to her being a hippie.

“Got it,” she cries and pulls her head out of the cupboard, followed by a bright red radio. She emerges with such gusto that the stool’s front feet lift off the ground.

“Oooh.” She holds the radio above her head as she starts to topple backward.

Instinctively, I grasp her waist to stop her fall. “Careful.”

My hands make contact with that strip of exposed skin. It’s soft and warm.

I lift her off the top step and place her feet gently on the ground.

“That was close,” I tell her, as she looks up at me.

There are only a few inches between us, and my hands are still on her bare flesh. Neither of us moves. Well, not if you don’t count the stirring in my jeans. My heart, already doing overtime from stress, turns up another notch. The thought of sliding my hands farther up her sides flashes through my mind, and my eyes are drawn to the curves of her top lip.

I need to get a grip. She’s a cabin-dwelling tree-hugger and represents a lifestyle I loathe. Not to mention it would be a huge betrayal of trust to grope someone kind enough to take in a stranger in need.

“Are you about to hit me over the head with that?” I nod at the radio that she’s still holding in the air.

Her face is flushed—from the embarrassment of almost falling, I assume.

She lowers the radio and pulls away. As she moves, my fingers drag across her skin—as though she’s a magnet they cling to until the last second. I’d swear I can feel goosebumps, but I’m not in contact with her long enough to be certain.

“I would have been fine,” she mutters. “I don’t need saving.”

“Everyone needs saving sometimes.”

“Yeah, thanks, Oprah.”

She makes a soft *hmp* sound as she turns her back to me and walks away. I’m pretty sure she would have smacked her head on the wall if I hadn’t caught her, but I get the impression that pointing it out wouldn’t be a good move.

She takes the radio to the sink, wipes off the dust, pulls out a handle from the back and starts winding it.

“It’s hand-cranked? Things like that exist?”

I lean sideways on the counter next to her.

“You’ve seriously never seen one of these before?”

I fold my arms and laugh. “I’ve seen battery ones. But then, I don’t live in the middle of nowhere. Or in 1952.”

She does her smile-stifling lip-chew again as she continues to wind.

“This isn’t nowhere. There are trees and hills and a river down over there.” She nods at the window over the kitchen sink. “And town is only forty-five minutes away.”

“Forty-five minutes? Food must be cold by the time it arrives.”

“No one delivers out here.” She tilts her head and looks at me like I’m an amusing new game. “That’s weird to you, isn’t it?” She winds faster. “Let me guess, you live in a penthouse

in the city with everything available within minutes of a call from your assistant.”

“Well, it’s not quite like that.” I raise an eyebrow. “Sometimes my driver makes the call.”

Her mouth drops open, but then her fiery blue eyes meet mine and she realizes I’m teasing. She can’t help herself—those pink lips break into a wide smile, and a small laugh sneaks out. Her fair skin flushes, and she turns back to the radio.

“Here.” I extend my hand. “I’ll take a turn with the winding.”

She steps away and sets it on the counter.

“I got it, thanks. Anyway, that’s probably enough to give it a try.”

She flicks a switch, and a man’s voice bursts out.

“Whoa.” She turns down the volume. “Grandpa was a bit hard of hearing, and he was probably the last person to use it. But at least he left it tuned in.”

The voice continues at a more tolerable level.

“...much worse than predicted. Power lines are down in some northern areas, leaving hundreds of homes without electricity. In Overdale County, we have reports of at least one cell tower down and that many roads are impassable. Due to the unexpected speed and strength of this storm, road crews are working at capacity and the county has issued a driving ban and a stay-at-home order for the next twenty-four hours...”

The radio runs out of power, and Summer looks from it to me. She’s not smiling any more. But her face gets pinker.

“Let me guess,” I say. “We’re in Overdale County?”

She nods.

SUMMER

O wen slams his fist on the counter. “Fuck.”

He runs both hands through his designer haircut. It probably costs a fortune to look that casually scruffy.

I hope he’s not a petulant child underneath all the flirty, teasey, waist-grabby loveliness. My stomach’s barely stopped doing somersaults from his hands on my skin. But if he’s one of those wealthy business types who gets pissed off when they don’t get their own way, I’ll be over it pretty quickly.

I fold my arms across my chest. “Where is it you’re trying to get to?”

“Oh, God. I don’t know.” He lets out a long breath full of despair as he half closes his eyes and shakes his head, then picks up his phone which strains at full stretch on the charger cable.

He taps and scrolls. “Blythewell.”

His eyes lift from the screen to me, his brow pinching in a combination of bafflement and pleading that makes me melt around the edges and want to help him.

“Oh, that’s only about an hour away.”

“Well, I might as well still be in San Fran-fucking-cisco as an hour away. Makes no difference if I can’t get there.”

He bends over, rests his elbows on the counter, and drops his forehead on his hands. It forces his rear end to stick out toward me. Turns out, it looks even better indoors than it did on the front porch.

“What’s in Blythewell that’s so important?”

Is he meeting a woman there?

“A family party.”

Oh, okay. Interesting. Maybe he’s into his family. It would match with the watching movies with his niece thing.

“My cousins bought my aunt and uncle a house, an old thing that’s taken ages to renovate, and they’re throwing a housewarming to coincide with their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary.”

He straightens and walks around to the kitchen side of the breakfast bar. “*But*, I now also have to get there for the business meeting of my life. When my phone died, my cousin was telling me the dream investor I’ve been trying to get to see us for months is going to be there.”

“The investor’s a friend of your family?”

These rich types all seem to climb the ladder on the backs of each other.

“Hell, no.” Owen paces back and forth across the kitchen. “If I had to guess, I’d say he caught Elliot by surprise and, in a fit of social awkwardness, Elliot invited him.” He shrugs. “But this guy could change everything for us. So, I need to get there to close the deal.”

“Well, obviously, you’re not going to make it. But I’m confused. Who’s Elliot? Your business partner? Or your cousin? Is he at the party too? Can’t he deal with this investor?”

“You like questions, huh?” The furrow in his brow relaxes for a second as he side-eyes me and half smiles. The cheekiness makes my belly do that wobbly thing again. Belly needs to remember cheeky is irritating, not hot.

“Elliot’s both. My partner *and* cousin. He runs the New York end of our business, I run the West Coast end. And the party’s not tonight. My aunt and uncle got married on Valentine’s Day.” He rolls his eyes. “Such a cliché. So, the party’s on Saturday.”

Clearly, he’s an old romantic.

“Well, what the hell is all the fuss about then?” I throw up my hands. “You do realize today’s Wednesday, don’t you? This might feel like a different country from California, but I’m fairly sure you didn’t cross the international date line to get here.”

He tilts his head. “Yes. Thank you.”

“I’m sure your cousin will be fine for now.”

“I doubt it. He’s more the tech person than the people person.”

“Well, I don’t hold much hope out for the deal if *you’re* the people person.” Two can play the cheeky game.

He pauses, holds my gaze, and a devilish smile that matches the glint in his eyes spreads across his face. “I can be extremely charming and persuasive when I need to be.”

Oh, I bet he can. The curve of his lips is making my lady parts feel things they haven’t felt for eighteen months. Actually, more like two years—the final six months with Alastair were hardly a passion fest.

Owen rubs his hands together, like he’s ready for action. “Okay. If you know where Blythewell is, you can give me directions. Draw me a diagram or whatever it is people did before Google Maps. Then I can hit the road.” He looks at his phone again. “Once this is fully charged.”

Is he serious? I point at the front window. “You can’t go out in this. You heard the man on the radio. There’s a driving ban and a stay-at-home order.”

“Yeah, but those things are meaningless. If I head out and drive, what’s anyone going to actually do about it?”

He pushes up the sleeves of his sweater. Okay, so he has strong forearms. But he sounds like all those irritating tech bros I was at college with. The shallow, self-obsessed dudes in beanies, desperate to make their way in Silicon Valley, who believed rules didn't apply to them.

“Oh, I don't know.” I plant my hands on my hips. “Maybe someone will have to chip your body out of your car a week from now, when they've finally been able to dig it out of a giant snowdrift?”

He sighs. “I'm sure it's not that bad.”

I point at the front door. “Be my guest. Go take a look at your car.”

“Sure.”

As he walks across the living room, Elsa's eyes follow him. She knows a good-looking butt when she sees one too.

Even standing all the way back here in the kitchen, as soon as he opens the door, the cold air slaps me and I shiver.

He shuts it quickly.

“Well?” I ask, wandering toward the living area.

“Snow's halfway up the tires now.”

“Figured. So, how exactly are you planning to get out of here?”

I ruffle Elsa's head, then pick up my hot chocolate from the coffee table and try to stir it. It's a cold, lumpy mess.

“Is there anywhere near here that's flat enough to land a helicopter?”

I laugh and head back to the kitchen. “Would you like a hot chocolate?”

“Seriously. Where could a helicopter land?”

I spin around to find the charming smile gone. He's deadly serious. The structured cheekbones, neatly manicured eyebrows, and lips so perfect they look almost drawn on, show not a single sign of jest.

“Are you serious?” I ask, because surely he can’t be. “A helicopter?”

“Yes.”

How much money does someone have to have that, when they can’t drive somewhere, their first thought is to rustle up a chopper? More than sense, apparently.

“Well, first, we’re on the side of a pretty steep hill. Second, that hill is covered in about three feet of snow, which is getting deeper as we speak. Third, you can’t even order a pizza, never mind a helicopter, without a phone or the internet.”

“Well, I couldn’t see beyond the end of my headlights. I have no idea what the area’s like. For all I know, there could be a fully maintained helipad around the corner.” He rubs the back of his neck and turns away. “This is ridiculous.”

He mutters something else, but the only word I can pick out is “shitting.”

If I can’t get him out of here and reclaim my nice, peaceful evening, I’m going to have to at least turn down his stress levels a notch or two.

“I’d just made a hot chocolate when you knocked on the door. But it’s all revolting and congealed now. I’m going to make a fresh one. And I’ll make you one too.”

He turns back around and looks at me, arms outstretched.

“How can there be no way to communicate? It’s not possible. Where the hell am I that in the twenty-first century the only way to receive information is by winding a handle on a hundred-year-old radio?”

He gestures at Grandpa’s radio so dismissively I want to give it a hug to stop its feelings being hurt.

“You’re starting to sound a little ungrateful.”

He is, in fact, starting to sound so similar to Alastair—rich and entitled, with a California accent—that my stomach churns. He might be handsome, but he also might be precisely the type of person I moved all the way across the country to

get away from. And precisely the type of person I never wanted to be anywhere near again.

“There has to be a way out of here,” Owen says.

I shake my head and continue toward the kitchen. “There isn’t.”

“Well, I can’t stay here.”

“Oh, believe me.” I blast water into the kettle. “It’s not my favorite option either.”

I put the kettle on the stove then rinse the cold chocolate mud out of my mug.

When I turn around, Owen’s back at the counter, looking down at his phone and letting out a heavy sigh.

“No amount of huffing and staring at it will produce a connection,” I tell him.

“How long is this stuff usually out for? I mean they can’t leave people without communications. So, what? Like, a couple of hours or something?”

I slam my hands on my hips. “Are you trying to be funny? Have you ever lived in the real world?”

“More real than you can imagine,” he mutters, then looks up at me and speaks more clearly. “And I went to school in Massachusetts. Fucking hated the winter.” He shudders at the memory. “Stayed inside and avoided it as much as possible. I vowed to never live anywhere that has winter again. Why would any sane person choose that?” He looks back down at his phone, shakes his head, and mutters, “I don’t understand snow.”

I wasn’t expecting to laugh. But I guess the surrealness of the situation has finally hit me. I have a complete stranger in my cabin, and he can’t leave. He’s wealthy, handsome, and exhibits all the traits of the last man who broke my heart—the last man who will ever get the chance to. And he doesn’t understand snow.

I put my hand over my mouth to try to hold in the giggles, but they’re unstoppable. And without a clear route from my

mouth, they snort out of my nose. I bet that's super attractive. Not that it matters. Even if I did want a man to find me attractive, which I don't, I would not want it to be another moneybags asshole.

"It's not funny," he says. "If the potential investor is coming, I have to be there." He looks down again. "And if I don't show up at my aunt and uncle's place tonight, and they don't hear from me, everyone will think I've had an accident or something. I don't want to worry them."

The kettle whistles. I turn off the heat, and the screech fades to a whisper.

"Well, there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. The phone and internet will be back when they're back. You can't control it. You're going to have to try to let it go."

I grab a clean mug from the cupboard and set it down next to mine. I sense him watching me.

"I always prefer to solve a problem than sit back and wait for it to be fixed," he says softly.

I spoon hot chocolate powder into both mugs. It's a struggle to keep it on the spoon as my hand shakes a little from the heat of his eyes on me.

"Well, you are not going to solve your way out of this one. You might have met your match." I pour the hot water and give both mugs a good stir. "Just thank your lucky stars you have somewhere safe to stay."

I glance at him over my shoulder and point at the mug. "Do you want me to leave the spoon in?"

"*What?*"

"For stirring. To stop the chocolaty bits settling to the bottom."

"I meant the bit before that. Are you saying I have to stay here?"

I pass him a mug. "Have it with the spoon. It gets too chocolaty at the end if you don't stir it every now and then."

As he takes it from me, his fingers brush against mine. A shiver rises from my fingers, up my arm, and into my chest. The skin around my waist tingles as it remembers his touch when he caught me as I wobbled off the step stool.

“What do you think I’m going to do? Send you out there to die in your thin sweater, city sneakers, and two-wheel-drive hatchback? Of course you’ll have to stay here.”

He sets down his drink and stirs. “Well, I’d much rather go. But since you put it like that. I mean, if you have a guest room, that would be very kind of you.”

“I have a guest *sofa*.” I nod toward the living room. “The second bedroom is my work studio.”

“And where does that sleep?” He points at Elsa.

“Her name is Elsa.”

He laughs. “Yeah, you said. Like in *Frozen*.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Elsa is the main character in the movie.”

“Oh, no. She’s named after Elsa Schiaparelli.”

“Who?”

“A knitwear designer from the 1920s.”

He takes a sip of hot chocolate and looks at me over the mug. “That’s different.”

I shrug. “Not to me. I knit.”

“You make those socks?” A dimple appears as he lifts one corner of his mouth and points at the rumpled heaps around my ankles.

I nod.

“They need work.” He arches an eyebrow.

More irritatingly hot cheekiness. But at least my attempt to de-stress him seems to be working.

“You can always take your chances with the elements instead, if you like.” I point toward the front door. “Up to

you.”

“I’m sure they’ll be great. Once you’ve figured out how to get them to stay up.”

“Yes, thank you. Anyway, Elsa sleeps in the bedroom with me. You’ll have the sofa all to yourself.”

OWEN

Well, this is awkward.

I've spent the night with women I'd just met, but never on their sofa.

Summer carries a pile of sheets and pillows so high she disappears behind it. It's like the bedding has legs and is walking itself downstairs.

"Here you go," says the stack of linens.

It's kind of her to let me stay, but I'm vibrating with frustration at being stranded here and not even being able to get in touch with anyone. "Has your internet company not heard of backup generators?"

She drops the bedding on the armchair and huffs. "You need to let it go. It's out. You're stuck. And neither of us is happy about it. Please don't make this worse than it already is."

I sigh. "There's no need for snow to knock out all communications, that's all."

She takes a sheet from the top of the pile. "Well, I'm sure no one's ignoring it and not bothering to fix it purely to irritate you and prevent you from making a phone call that can easily wait till tomorrow."

She shakes out the sheet and throws it over the sofa.

I catch it just before it floats down on top of a layer of dog hairs. “Hold on a second.”

As I push back the sheet, my hand brushes hers. Sparks race up my fingers, shoot up my arm, and explode in my chest. The exact same thing happened when I shook her hand on the doorstep. I’d thought it was a weird one-off.

Is this what chemistry is? The sparks from a touch, the irresistible desire to tease her, and the throb in my groin when she teases me back? No one except my sister and my cousins has the balls to give me a hard time the way Summer is.

I do my best to dust off as many of the dog hairs coating the sofa as possible. I glance at Elsa, who has her chin on the ground but hasn’t taken her beady eyes off me. I’m not sure about that hound yet.

“Okay, go ahead.”

“At your service, sir.” She does a little curtsy, tosses her curly hair over a shoulder, revealing one side of her flawless neck, and then flings the sheet back over the sofa.

I can’t let this annoyingly attractive spunky woman distract me from the matter at hand. It’s okay for her, living in the middle of nowhere, happily out of touch with reality, but I have shit to deal with.

“Anyway, the phone call can’t wait till tomorrow. This investment would be a *big* deal.”

“It seems like you’re doing pretty well already.” She shoves the sheet down around the edges of the cushions to hold it in place.

“We are, but this would turn us into a billion-dollar company.”

She stops with her hand between two cushions and looks up at me. “Did you say billion? Like million, but with a ‘B’?”

I nod.

She laughs. “That’s ridiculous.” And goes back to the sheet.

“The rest of my cousins all have big companies too,” I say, as if their success might make her think less badly of mine.

She straightens, puts her hands on her hips, and looks at me like I told her I really am ordering a helicopter. “What? *All* your cousins have multi million or billion-dollar companies? How many of them are there, for God’s sake?”

“There’s two sets—a three and a two. They call themselves ‘brousin’s’ because they were all raised together, and are more like five brothers than cousins.”

“Cute. But you and Elliot are clearly the slackers of the family.”

“Yeah, that’s what the others think.”

“I was joking.” She violently stuffs a pillow into a case.

It didn’t sound like she was joking. And now she thinks I’m a heartless money-grabbing ass.

“It’s not all about the money. We want to start a nonprofit to give underprivileged kids access to tech. And this is the only investor I’ve found who might want to sponsor that too. That’s why it’s crucial I talk to Elliot and get to Blythewell. Our nonprofit plans depend on this guy.”

“Well, that’s something I suppose. What sort of tech business are you?”

“Data retention software. Elliot handles financial companies and legal firms out of New York. And I deal with hotel chains, start-ups, and online retailers out of San Francisco. I want to start developing something for the film industry, but...What?”

She pauses armpit-deep in the pillowcase and smiles as she shakes her head at me. “You lost me after ‘data.’ Everything else was ‘blah blah blah blah blah blaah.’”

She tilts her head from side to side as she blahs. It’s equal parts irritating and adorable, and I can’t help but smile. “Well,

it might not be the most fascinating thing to you, but I'm sure I'd feel much the same about the details of knitting."

"How does that happen, though? How does a whole generation of a family grow up to be billionaire business owners?" She snorts. "Oh, yeah. Probably because all their parents are loaded and helped out."

Jesus, talk about making assumptions. "Nothing further from the truth. Uncle Jim and Aunt Maggie, whose house I'm trying to get to, were a Boston city bus driver and a stay-at-home mom. Well, she was until they took in the other two cousins. Then Maggie cleaned other apartments in their building because they needed extra cash."

"They had no money, three sons, and took in two more? Why on earth would they do that? By the way, you're welcome to grab the other pillowcase and join in." She nods toward the bedding pile.

It hadn't occurred to me to help. That must look terrible.

I unfold the other pillowcase and search for the opening. "Walker and Tom's parents died in a car accident when they were like nine or ten or something. Maggie and Jim were broke, but gave them a home without a second thought."

Summer clutches the pillow to her chest. "Oh, God. I'm sorry. That's terrible."

I turn my pillowcase around and around, examining the edges. It doesn't seem to have an opening.

"Yeah, when he was a teenager, Tom went off the rails a bit from all the stress and upset. So he ended up going to live with family in England, to put some distance between him and the tragedy. He's lived there ever since. Pulled himself together though. He threw himself into music and started an indie record label in the garage when he was eighteen."

How can a pillowcase have no opening?

"And it's now worth a billion dollars?" she asks like it can't possibly be true.

“Yup. It struggled for a while. But then he spotted Four Thousand Medicines playing at a little backstreet pub. Signed them. The rest is history.”

Her mouth drops open as her eyes widen. “What? No? You mean *the* Four Thousand Medicines? He discovered them?”

“Yup.”

“Whoa, how cool.” She lays her perfectly cased pillow at one end of the sofa and turns to me with her mischievous smile again. “Are you struggling there?”

“Is this a trick pillowcase? It doesn’t open.”

“Sure it does. In the normal way. When was the last time you made a bed?”

Good question. “Before the business took off. We started it six years ago, straight out of college. I got a housekeeper after, probably, the first year. So, yeah, maybe, five years?” Now I sound exactly like the rich ass she obviously thinks I am.

“You can finish this off then. Sounds like you could do with the practice.” She drops to the floor, sits cross-legged next to Elsa, runs her hand along the dog’s back, and looks up at me. “What do the others do?”

“Tom’s brother, Walker, has a chain of hipster-type craft brew pubs, The Toasted Tomato. Heard of them?”

“I remember driving by one in LA and liking the name.”

“He and his business partner plow most of the profits back into it, they’re still growing and expanding.” I finally find the open flap. “Got it.”

“Congratulations.” She gives me a sarcastic round of applause.

I grab the other pillow and start to shove it in.

“Elliot, my partner, is one of Maggie and Jim’s three boys. He runs our New York office out of Max’s skyscraper. Max has a big corporation that owns a bunch of things, like that huge building, one of those mattress-in-a-box makers, a big grocery store chain—basically if it makes piles of cash Max

will buy it. And then there's Connor, who's generally a bit of a fuck-up." A bit like my pillow.

"But a fuck-up who's rolling in it?"

"Yeah. Deep down, he's a great guy. He started Big Brain Toys with all the right intentions. But when it took off, the money went to his head. Spends too much of his time partying. And his people spend too much of their time trying to keep him out of the tabloids."

I smooth out the pillow as best I can and drop it with pride on top of the one Summer did.

She stands up and tugs at an empty corner of the case that my pillow hasn't made it into. "Not a prizewinner."

Fuck, that's one sexy lip curl. She's given me more of a hard time in the last couple of hours than any woman has given me for years. The sassiness is hot. She is annoyingly hot.

As much as I want to get the hell out of here and hit the road to my aunt and uncle's house, I also wouldn't mind picking her up, tossing her onto those pillows, and putting my hands back up her sweater.

"What do *you* do?" I ask instead.

"Knit."

"Yeah, you said. I meant what do you do for a *living*?"

"I *knit*." She cocks her head to the side and raises her eyebrows, as if knitting is an act of defiance.

"And that's, er, profitable?"

"I make one-off designs and have an online store. And I have some private clients who come to me for commissions. So, yes. I do very well, thank you."

"Oh, right. Yeah. That's nice."

There must be some sort of a business brain hiding behind that hippie exterior. Which makes her even more irritatingly attractive.

Probably best I concentrate on the problem at hand. “Anyway, look. I know you’re fed up with me asking, but, seriously, how long do you think it will be before we have either phone or internet?”

“Oh, for the love of God. It will be as long as it will be. It will take as long as it takes.” She spreads her arms wide. “You won’t die from not being able to make a phone call or send an email.”

Yeah, I shouldn’t have asked again.

Oh, she hasn’t finished.

“And the people trying to fix it might be in danger. They might be out there in a blizzard trying to get the cell tower back up and the cable company back online. And”—her voice gets louder—“you might find it hard to believe, but whether someone has a million or a billion dollars is not as important as their safety.”

I’m starting to get the impression she has a grudge against people with money. But I can’t let her judge me based on that. Usually, I wouldn’t give a crap. I can’t remember the last time I was bothered whether someone liked me. But there’s something about this woman that makes me want her to find me at least tolerable for the twenty-four hours we might be stuck together.

“Not all people with money are dicks, you know.”

She shakes her head and looks at the floor.

“I don’t sit around waiting for people to do things for me.” I cast my eyes back to my shoddily cased pillow. “Despite what my pillowcase-stuffing skills might suggest.”

That raises a small smile. My ability to amuse her feels like a superpower.

“Elliot and I went to MIT. On scholarships we worked our asses off to get. We worked our asses off while we were there. And we’ve worked our asses off on the business ever since. We work seven days a week and haven’t taken a vacation in the six years since we started it.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but I keep going. This mysterious need to correct her wrong impression of me persists.

“And if I can get this investor, we can give kids who’d otherwise have no access to technology a chance to learn how to use it, and maybe change their futures. Most investors only want you to use their cash to make them more cash.”

Summer lifts her gaze to meet mine. Her mouth turns up at the corners, and the slight smile softens her eyes. The warmth behind those baby blues ignites a glow in my chest.

Seeing her mellow eases some of the tension in my shoulders. I gesture to the room around us. “I guess what I’m saying is, just because you want to sit in a cabin miles from anywhere and knit all day doesn’t mean anyone who makes a different choice is wrong.”

She drops her head into her hands, as if I’d said the worst thing she could imagine. I seem to have instantly destroyed my good work. My heart plummets.

Her voice is muffled between her fingers. “Well, wherever you came from”—she drops her hands and looks up at me with sadness in her eyes—“you seem to have lost some of your manners along the way.”

She stands up and half-heartedly points at the rest of the bedding on the chair. “There’s another sheet and a couple of blankets.”

I nod as she continues. “You can use the powder room over there.” She gestures toward the door next to the closet from where she retrieved the emergency radio.

“Oh, and the fire will burn out soon. You might get chilly down here without it.” Well, at least she’s still concerned for my welfare. “If you want to keep it going there’re more logs in the shed out front.”

She looks from the fire to me and raises her eyebrows as her adorable lips crinkle into a stifled smile. A quiver runs through me at the thought of what teasing comment might be on the way.

“If you don’t bring some in, you’ll have to restart it from scratch. And given the pillowcase-stuffing skills I’ve just witnessed, I don’t rate your chances with kindling and a box of matches. You’ll either freeze to death or we’ll all go up in smoke.”

She clearly thinks I’m an incompetent fool with no life skills. If only she knew I’d had to develop more of them than she could imagine and way younger than anyone should have to.

Summer bends down and pats the dog to get her attention.

“Come on, Elsa. Time to brave the weather for a pee.” The dog stands up, stretches, and shakes. Summer rubs one of her scruffy ears. “Then you and I can tuck up for the night.”

They trot off, toward the back door.

“Thank you,” I say after them.

I know Elsa can’t hear me. But I’m sure Summer can.

They both keep walking away.

SUMMER

I open my eyes and stretch. The cold morning light peeps around the edge of the bedroom curtains, and I remember the stranger asleep on my sofa. A sexy, rich Californian who's pissed off with the weather. Presumably because he can't control it. In my experience, wealthy people who can't control things with their money tend to have a tantrum like a two-year-old who's been told a plate of gummy bears does not constitute dinner.

I roll over to the edge of the bed and reach down to stroke Elsa, who's fast asleep in her usual spot, stretched out on the floor beside me. Since I've had her, I've realized how empty my life was before. I never knew it was possible to feel like this about a dog. This not-so-little creature enriches my life beyond measure, shows me what unconditional love is, and makes me laugh every day. She's become my whole world.

"Oh, Elsa. It's a good thing he's leaving." She opens her eyes at my touch and does one hard wag against the rug that covers the pine floor. "What are we going to do with the spoiled-but-hot man downstairs?"

She lifts her leg for me to tickle her belly. Not a helpful response, but totally adorable.

I slide off the bed, pad over to the window, and pull back one of the drapes. It's still snowing. Not as badly, and it's not

as windy, but Lordy, it's deep out there. Still way too bad to drive in.

My bedroom looks over the front yard. There are the remains of footprints from the house to the woodshed. And there's an arc in the snow where the shed door has been opened. I guess Mr. California Sunshine braved the elements to get logs.

I hop into my go-to sweatpants, then change my mind and replace them with snug-fitting jeans that make my backside look awesome. I shouldn't seem like I've made too much of an effort, though. I grab my favorite battered, old, UC Berkeley sweatshirt and pull it over the T-shirt I slept in.

I run my bare foot along Elsa's side to encourage her to get up, and catch myself in the mirror. My hair looks like I stuck a finger in a power outlet. Blonde curls poke out at weird angles. I guess it's always that way when I get up, but I never usually think about it. Running my hands through it doesn't help restore order. I pause with my fingers stuck in a knot.

"What am I doing, Elsa? He's nobody. And he'll be gone soon. It doesn't matter what the hell my ass or my hair looks like."

She stands up, yawns, performs a perfect downward dog, and has a good shake. Her hair fixes that easily.

I give up on mine and open the bedroom door. A delicious aroma wafts up the stairs and instantly makes my mouth water. Elsa trots past me and follows the scent—her ears might not work, but there's definitely nothing wrong with her nose.

I follow her downstairs.

Elsa sits at Owen's feet, staring up at him as he washes dishes. He pretends she's not there, rinses off a mixing bowl, and sets it to drain.

He's wearing the plaid shirt he had on under his sweater last night, with the cuffs turned back and pushed up to his elbows. He plunges those perfectly formed forearms into the soap suds and turns to look at me as I step off the bottom stair.

"Morning," he says with a relaxed smile.

He couldn't dazzle me more if fireworks flew from his pupils and burst around me.

I refocus my eyes on his defined shoulders, which aren't as close to his ears as they were last night. Christ, those things would make the perfect chin rest. Or footrest, depending on the circumstances.

He's a little ruffled, in a not-been-awake-long kind of way. I push the thought of waking up with his sleepy face next to mine out of my head. Along with how good he probably smells.

I shove my slightly clammy hands into my pockets and take a deep breath. "Hi."

The fire is roaring, and there's a fresh stack of logs next to it. I guess he managed that okay.

"She thinks you have yummy things." I nod at Elsa, who's doing a worse job of taking her eyes off him than I am. "Come on," I tell her. "Morning bathroom time."

I point toward the back door, and she follows me. Freezing air rushes in, and I close the door quickly behind her. "It's not looking any better out there."

"And still no phone or internet," Owen says, as he pulls the plug out of the sink and reaches for a tea towel to dry his hands. "I tried your antique radio again. There are still issues with the plows, and the stay-at-home order isn't going anywhere." He groans and shakes his head.

"Well, that's not awesome. But that smell is. What is it? Are you cooking something?"

"Banana bread," he says, folding the tea towel and draping it over the oven handle, as if it's a completely normal thing for him to say. Like, "coding" or "bugs" or whatever the hell jargon it is software almost-billionaires constantly use.

It certainly does smell like banana bread. But how can that be? How would someone like him know how to bake?

"Banana bread? That you made?"

“Woke up early, couldn’t get back to sleep. So thought I’d do something to say thank you for putting me up.”

“You made it from scratch? And it’s real? Like *actual* banana bread?”

He nods and smirks, as if he finds me amusing.

“Like, with bananas? And flour, and eggs, and whatever else turns bananas into bread?”

His laughter reaches his eyes, and they sparkle again. That’s all it takes to set off a trickle of pleasure from my chest to my lady bits. But add baking skills to the mix, and the trickle turns into a full-blown raging torrent.

“Yes.”

He leans back on the counter between the sink and the stove and rests his hands on the edge, making his arm veins stand out.

“Well, that’s a bit of a shock. I need tea.”

I reach past him to grab the kettle from the stovetop. My arm brushes against his and goose bumps run down my side as the hairs on my arm stand up. He doesn’t move. I’m close enough to discover he does smell good. Or maybe it’s the banana bread.

“I’m sorry if I was a bit snippy last night.” There’s a seductive not-been-up-long huskiness to his voice.

Oh, God. Don’t let him start sounding all sexy. Or being nice. It’s a whole lot easier to want him out of here if he’s an ass.

“You were.” I turn on the faucet.

“I was just desperate to get to my aunt and uncle’s place and couldn’t believe I was lost and stuck. And frustrated at not being able to get a message of any kind to anyone.”

Once the kettle’s full I give him a wider berth as I put it back on the stove. But somehow, I still brush against his arm again. He might have moved into me.

“I’m sorry if I sounded ungrateful.” Yup, there’s that low, slightly gravelly tone again. Is he deliberately playing it up? “Because I’m not.”

I turn on the gas and refuse to look at his ridiculously handsome face as I open a cupboard door between our heads. I can’t let the belly quivers and nice guy apologies get to me. What’s the point with a guy who’ll be gone before the day’s out? Someone I’ll never see again.

“Okay. Thanks. Anyway, Earl Grey, chai, ginger, or mint?”

“Earl Grey, please.”

I grab two bags and drop them into mugs.

Elsa barks outside the back door.

“She doesn’t hang around,” Owen says.

“Would you if you had to pee in ten degrees below freezing with snow up to your knees?”

I let her in and make her stop on the doormat while I dry off her paws and give the rest of her body a rubdown. She squirms with glee and pushes her face into the towel.

I plant a kiss on the top of her damp head. “Now go warm up by the fire.”

Owen’s still in the same spot, watching us.

“Nice fire, by the way,” I tell him as I hang up Elsa’s towel.

“Thanks. I had a bit of an accident, though. Slipped and dropped the logs on the way in.”

“No doubt due to your fine-weather footwear.” I walk over to examine the hand he’s holding up. “Oooh, that looks painful.”

There’s a sliver in the palm of his hand and one in his index finger. The skin around them is red and tender.

“Yeah,” he says. “I can’t get them out. Might actually have pushed them further in.”

“If you like, I—”

His phone bursts into noisy life on the counter. My stomach lurches. Shit. Service must be back. That will mean a flurry of business calls and undoubtedly some sort of lavish plan to get him airlifted out of here.

My quiet life with Elsa is almost back within reach, which should fill me with joy. So why has a horrible lead weight suddenly settled in my belly? There hasn't been a single second in the last year and a half when I haven't been certain that being alone is the right life for me. But my belly is questioning it. Does my belly think this smart, funny stranger who made it do somersaults last night and again at the mere sight of him doing the dishes this morning, might be worth a lifestyle rethink? My belly is an idiot.

Owen holds his phone up to show me. "It's the timer. Breakfast is done."

He pulls the tea towel off the oven handle and opens the door. My stomach moves seamlessly from lurching at the thought of him leaving, to rumbling at the sweet, fruity aroma that wafts out. "Oh, God. That smells amazing."

He pulls out a perfect loaf sitting in a pan I haven't seen for at least a decade. "Where did you find that?"

He gestures to a high cabinet. "Up there."

"Grandma used to make cinnamon apple cake in it when I was a kid."

"Well, I can't promise this is as good as your grandma's baking. Particularly as it's missing my secret ingredient."

"And what would that be?"

"Cranberries. You don't have any."

"Cranberries? In banana bread?"

"You should try it some time."

The kettle whistles, so I slosh hot water into the mugs while he eases the bread out of the tin.

As I reach for two plates from the cabinet he says, "Oh, we can't eat it yet. It needs to cool. If I cut it now, it'll fall apart."

“Well, you are quite the banana bread tease.”

Good God, that sounded way more suggestive than I expected. My face burns like it must be raspberry red. I turn away, take my mug to the other side of the breakfast bar, and sit.

To avoid looking at him, I gaze along the spines of the cookbooks on the shelf by my head. I’m sure none of them contains banana bread. “Where did you find the recipe?”

He slides a spatula under the loaf with the care of an artist and delicately transfers it to a cooling rack without shedding a crumb. Then he looks at me over his shoulder, raises his eyebrows, and taps his head with the spatula.

“No way,” I say to him as if he’d told me he’s about to single-handedly clear the roads between here and Blythewell.

There’s not a snowball’s chance in hell that man wastes brain space on a banana bread recipe. His head’s probably bursting at the seams with algorithms and blockchains. Whatever those things are.

“Believe what you like.” He turns to the sink and runs water into the tin. The plaid shirt fits snugly across his shoulders. As I scan down his back to his butt, he turns around.

I snap my eyes to my mug and jiggle the tea bag string. “I don’t think you’re any more likely to have memorized a banana bread recipe than I am to be able to reprogram your computer.”

“You might be a mighty fine computer scientist as far as I know. The difference is, I don’t judge by appearances.” He draws a halo over his head with a finger.

“Oh, bullshit. You totally had me down as a tree-hugging hippie who lives off-grid, crochets her own muesli, and never showers.”

He picks up his mug. “I didn’t detect the aroma of a non-showering hippie.” He glances at Elsa, who’s stretched out on the rug. “Just of damp dog.” He lifts one corner of his irritatingly perfect mouth as he walks around and sits on the

stool next to me. “But you admit you’re judging me, though. Right?”

My heart picks up the pace. Possibly out of guilt. Possibly due to his proximity. “I am.” No point denying it. “I totally am. But I’m also totally sure I’m right.”

“And, pray tell, what do you see before you?” He quirks an eyebrow and makes a sweeping gesture from the top of his head to his feet.

I could tell him I see a vision of hotness, the sight of whose forearms, cheek dimple, and muscular butt makes me hungry for more than his baking.

“I see a guy whose life revolves around technology.” I point at his phone on the counter in front of me. “Who’s at such a loss without it that he turns to”—I jab my finger toward the banana bread—“*baking*. And who thinks he should be able to solve every problem by throwing a pile of cash at it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be sitting here if I could do that, would I?”

He pulls the tea bag out of his tea, squeezes it into his cup, and tosses it overhand in a perfect arc to the other side of the kitchen, where it lands with a damp thud in the sink.

There’s someone who knows how to own his space. I widen my eyes at him.

He smirks and shrugs. “I don’t like over-steeped tea.”

I shake my head. “It’s like I have an entirely different person in my house than the one from last night.”

“I was awake most of the night worrying about not being able to get to my aunt and uncle’s place, and not being able to talk to Elliot. But I came to the conclusion that you’re right. The reality is, I can’t do anything about it.” He blows out a sigh of surrender. “Plus, baking makes me feel better.”

He thinks I was right. Mr. Fancy Company Owner learned something from me. I straighten my back and sit a little taller.

“Well, then I guess I also see someone who’s willing to learn from his mistakes and admit when he’s wrong.

Admirable qualities.” I swivel to face his ridiculously perfect profile. “Tell me, though. The banana bread recipe. Where did you *really* get it?”

His shoulders sink as he cups both hands around his mug and gazes into it. He’s silent for a moment, like he’s pondering whether to tell me something.

When he eventually speaks his voice is heavy. “Sometimes, there wasn’t much more than flour and old fruit in the house.”

I’m not sure if he’s joking. I pull up my legs and sit cross-legged on the stool. “Are you telling me you were poor too? As well as your cousins, I mean.”

He exhales and shakes his head. “My parents weren’t so much poor as irresponsible.”

I lean toward him. “You mean they frittered their money away?”

“Didn’t have any to fritter. Didn’t value it. Didn’t think it was important.”

“You mean they didn’t work?”

“They did, in a way. Mainly in exchange for things. Like, neighbors would pay my mom in homegrown vegetables for looking after their kids. Or my dad would fix up someone’s deck, and they’d repair his car in return. Stuff like that. Not a lot of cash changed hands.”

“Sounds like a commune,” I laugh.

He turns his head and looks at me under his dark eyebrows, deadly serious. “It was exactly like a commune.”

Embarrassed, I drop the smile as he continues.

“Seven families all built houses on this piece of land one of them inherited. And they all looked after each other and grew stuff and homeschooled the kids.”

“Wow. Isn’t it harder to get into places like MIT if you’re homeschooled?”

“Back then, maybe. But homeschooling can be great. It did take a hell of a lot of hard work and determination though. And encouragement from Elliot. He was my best friend even though he lived over here and I was in northern California. I’d use the library computer to email him. We planned to go to college together from when we were fourteen.”

“That must have taken some doing.”

“Yup. It’s why I want to start the kids’ tech hubs. Being able to email from the library was a lifeline for me. Well, it changed my life. And I want to be able to change other kids’ lives by giving them access to tech they wouldn’t otherwise have.”

He takes a sip of tea.

“Anyway, my sister and I would sometimes go and stay with my grandparents, my mom’s parents. And my grandma would bake. She taught me the banana bread. And I made it with her so many times the ingredients and measurements stuck in my head.”

So he can bake banana bread from memory. And keep a fire going. Those things might make him the opposite of the person I thought had shown up and shattered my glorious solitude last night.

Maybe he’s right. Maybe I did judge him too soon. But it was kind of hard not to, with all the talk of helicopters and a family riddled with billionaires.

“Were your grandparents typical?”

“Yes, absolutely,” he says with a laugh. “They encouraged me to get educated and get away from all that crap. Well, until my mom found out. She said my gran was turning me and my sister against her, and she never let us visit again.”

My heart aches for the kid trapped in a life he hated. And I can’t imagine being banned from seeing the grandparents who were everything to me.

“How awful.” My voice cracks a little.

“So, whenever my mom couldn’t be bothered to cook, and I was missing my gran, I’d make banana bread to remind me of her. And my sister and I would sit and eat it together.”

He gazes across the kitchen at the loaf cooling on the wire rack.

I look from him, to it, and back again. “Would it be okay if I cut us a slice now?”

“Yeah.” He looks back down into his tea. “Then I have to find a way to get out of here.”

OWEN

“**H**oly fucking hell.”

I grip the edge of the counter with one hand as Summer tweezes a sliver out of my other.

“Got it.” She beams and holds the offending wood fragment aloft, then places it carefully on the counter. “One down, one to go.”

I examine my finger. “It might be less agony to amputate the whole hand.”

I still can’t believe I let myself open up to her about my family. The last person I told about my upbringing was my college girlfriend. Since then, I haven’t felt close enough to anyone to share that part of me with them. Nor have I met anyone I thought was worth spending time away from the company to get to know properly.

But there I was, less than twenty-four hours in, spewing it all out to Summer as if it were the most normal, natural thing in the world. And the weird thing is, sitting next to her in her cozy kitchen over tea, it felt like it really *was* the most normal, natural thing in the world.

After we’d eaten half the banana bread, Summer skipped off and came back brandishing tweezers. She was on a mission.

At least the pain is distracting me from the touch of her hand. The initial flesh-on-flesh contact caused groin action that would have been embarrassing if I were standing.

She takes back my hand and runs her thumb over the remaining sliver in my palm. Tingles run all the way up my arms and across my chest, making my heart flutter. I'm not sure I've ever felt an actual heart flutter before. I would have been tempted to call a doctor if my hand wasn't being held by this sexy woman who still has something of the just-crawled-out-of-bed look about her.

"Does the patient need something to bite on?" she asks as she slides the tweezers around the tiny fragment of wood protruding from my skin.

"Because this is like medieval torture? Or because you think I have some sort of fetish?"

She looks back down at my hand and blushes. Funny, she's feisty but coy. An intriguing combination.

"Okay, Dr. Tweezers, let's get this over with."

She sticks out the tip of her tongue and gently bites down on it as she tries and fails to grip the end of the sliver. To take my mind off the discomfort, I slide my eyes from her mouth down to her breasts. I'm fairly sure there's no bra on under that sweatshirt. And my best guess is the T-shirt hanging out at the bottom is what she slept in. I bet it smells good.

"Ow." I snatch my hand away and press it against my chest. "That was *skin*."

"Oh, God. I'm sorry." She puts her hand over her mouth to muffle a laugh. Her eyes crinkle when she smiles. "Let me see."

She takes hold of my hand again and inspects it. I shift a little on the stool.

"You're being dramatic," she says. "It's not bleeding. You're fine. Rest it here." She pulls the back of my hand down onto her thigh. "Then I can get a better grip."

I'd better get a grip, too, because this isn't going to make my groin situation any more comfortable.

Why the hell am I finding a hippie who knits and lives in a cabin in the middle of nowhere attractive? It's annoying and makes no sense. She represents a whole bunch of things I've worked half my life to escape.

She strokes her fingers over mine to flatten out my hand. Those tingles run up my arm again. And the tweezers get back to work. I almost don't want her to be able to remove my final wooden tormentor. Once it's out, she'll have no reason to hold my hand.

"Can you get a knitting degree from Berkeley?"

She looks up from the tweezing, the poking, and the general excavation of my flesh, with a puzzled expression. "What do you mean?"

With my good hand, I point at the university logo across her chest.

"Oh," she says. "I studied accounting."

I can't disguise my surprise. "That's not what I was expecting."

"There you go judging me again." She raises her eyebrows and purses her lips in the cutest display of victory I've ever seen. "Pray tell, what were you expecting? A degree in basket weaving, or maybe the energy of crystals?"

"Okay, okay, fair point. But I just thought maybe something more, you know, creative."

She shrugs. "I was trying to be sensible."

I sense a story she might not want to tell. Not yet anyway. She looks back down and focuses on trying to grab the end of the sliver.

She looks like she's probably three or four years younger than me, maybe twenty-four or twenty-five. A quick bit of mental math puts her right across the bay in Berkeley as I was starting the business in San Francisco. Yet it's not until we're

both three thousand miles away from there that our paths have crossed.

“I love Berkeley,” I tell her, wincing at the stab of the tweezers. “Haven’t been for ages. But I remember this great little hole-in-the-wall food place. Do you like smoked salmon?”

Her eyes dart up from my hand, lock onto mine, and light up. “Oh, my God. Do you mean Sammy’s Smoked Salmon Shack?”

I laugh. “That’s the one. Not sure how I forgot a name like that.”

She lets go of my hand and raises her palms to the ceiling in surprise. “It was my favorite treat spot. My friend Izzie and I would go there as a reward after every exam.”

Well, that is quite the coincidence. Could we have even been there at the same time?

“I remember having this amazing thing there once.” I rub the sore spot at the center of my palm where the offending splinter still resides. “It was layers of salmon and avocado and fried potatoes and some sort of relish.”

Summer’s hands fly to her cheeks, and she almost pokes herself in the eye with the tweezers. “Holy shit. You mean, ‘The Stack-It-Up Special with Sammy’s Secret Sauce.’ That was the best.”

Maybe we have a connection that’s bigger than coincidence. “It was pretty damn great. Must be four years, and I still remember it.”

Our eyes stay locked, both of us smiling like giddy teenagers at discovering something that links us.

But after barely a second, the joy on her face fades, like she’s pulled herself away from a place where we found a special bond and has returned to reality.

She takes my hand again and refocuses her attention. “Anyway. Let’s get this bad boy out once and for all.”

I turn my head away and close my eyes. “Can’t watch.”

She settles my hand on her thigh again, and strokes her fingers over mine to spread them out as the cold points of the tweezers hit the spot where the sliver sits. I brace myself against the thrill of her touch and the pain of the first aid she's administering. But nothing happens. There's only silence. And the warmth of her leg against the back of my hand and the touch of her fingers on mine.

I give it a moment, then open my eyes to find her looking at me. Her fingers still rest on mine. And in the other hand, she grips the fully removed sliver in the tweezers.

"Oh, it's out?" And did I catch her full-on staring at me?

She springs to her feet, and my hand falls from her lap. "Yes. Came out easily once I got it from the right angle. It's big though." She places it next to the first one on the counter. "That's a lot of wood."

I can't help myself. "That's what all the girls say."

I do love how easily she blushes. "I'm sure they do. And I'm sure there's plenty of them."

She scoops the bits off the counter into the palm of her hand and walks around to the other side of the breakfast bar.

"Whatever gives you that idea?" I plant my elbows on the counter, rest my chin in my hands, and give her a look of exaggerated innocence.

"Oh, you know. The flashy company, the piles of cash, the utter lack of"—she points at the woody bits in her palm—"outdoorsy skills." Summer opens the cabinet under the sink and drops the slivers into the wastebasket.

"Well, I guess we're back to you judging me again. Because there aren't plenty of women. Almost none, in fact. I don't have time." I lean back and link my hands behind my head. "But, while we're probing personal lives...If you have an accounting degree from a prestigious school, why do you knit for a living? And live, well, *here*?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" The sexy defiance is back.

“That maybe you could do better.”

“And how do you define ‘better’?”

“Well, right now, somewhere with internet and a phone connection.”

She slams the cabinet door shut and strides over to the living area, where Elsa is stretched out in front of the fire. “And if I wasn’t here with my inadequate home and inadequate technological services, where would you be right now?”

She strokes the dog, then bends and kisses the bridge of her nose. Seeing those lips pucker makes me wonder what they might be like on mine. Or, indeed, anywhere on my body.

She picks up the poker and stabs at the fire.

“I guess I would have turned around and headed back the way I came.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have got far in that thing.” She jabs the poker toward the front window and the driveway where my small rental car is parked. Then turns her head to look at me. “Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to be out in weather like this in a completely unsuitable vehicle?”

Her chin wobbles a little as she resumes poking the fire.

Shit. I seem to have accidentally upset her. My heart and stomach lurch, doing their best to make me realize I care about that.

I slide off the stool and make my way toward her, stepping over the dog. I stop with my chest just inches from Summer’s side. She’s still taking her frustration out on the burning logs, her eyes full of tears that strain to spill over.

“Are you okay?” I go to touch her upper arm, but I’ve barely made contact when she snatches it away, pulls the poker from the fire, straightens and steps back.

“It’s dangerous, that’s all.” She sniffs and rubs her cuff across her eyes. “You should be happy you’re safe. Even if you do have to suffer being stuck in a poky, non-fancy cabin with me and Elsa.”

This is obviously a sensitive subject. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.” I pick up a fresh log and add it to the fire, as if that might help things. “I couldn’t be more grateful to have somewhere to stay. And thank you for taking in a stranger.”

My hands itch to touch her again, to hold her tight and stop her from feeling sad, and to wipe away the speck of ash she left on her face when she rubbed her eyes.

“Well, I wouldn’t leave anyone out in that weather, would I?” She tries to point toward the window again, but this time her arm is limp, and the poker dangles from her hand. A tear rolls down each cheek.

She turns away and drops the poker into its stand. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

My chest pounds as blood surges to my heart. Before I realize what I’m doing, I take hold of her arm. She stops but doesn’t look up at me. It’s all I can do not to stroke her face with my other hand and pull her lips to mine.

That would be wrong in every way. She took me in to keep me safe, a random stranger who knocked on her door. To repay that by making a move on her and possibly making her feel threatened would be the least grateful thing I could do. Not to mention she might throw me out into the frozen tundra with no warm clothing and a vehicle that’s probably barely visible above a snowdrift by now.

I let go, but she doesn’t move away. “I’m sorry. I was insensitive.”

She runs her fingers along the lower edges of her eyes. “No. It’s me. I’m probably *too* sensitive about it.”

She looks down and plays with her sleeves, like she’s deciding whether to say something. She takes a big breath and keeps her eyes on her cuffs. “My parents died in a car accident. In snow and ice.”

“Oh, God.”

Everything becomes clear. That’s why she opened her door to a stranger. That’s why she’s angry I keep trying to find a way out. That’s why she’s sad.

I pull her to me and rest my chin on the top of her head as if it's something I've done a thousand times before. "I'm so sorry."

"I couldn't let you go back out in that stupid car," she says into my chest. "I know how dangerous it can be. People really do die."

I stroke my fingers down her back. And though the desire to take her firm ass in my hands is overwhelming, I force myself to stop at her waist. I drop my nose into her blonde curls and inhale the aroma of coconut.

She slides her arms around my waist and nestles closer, her chest against mine. Yup, no bra. I pull my hips back a little. It's probably not appropriate to press my stiffy against a woman who's upset about her parents' tragic death.

The fire crackles beside us as we stand there, arms around each other, her cheek against my shoulder. There's as much heat coming from her as there is from the flames. I hope she feels what I feel right now.

All thoughts of cell service, the internet, my looming pitch to an investor, and how the hell I'm going to get out of here vanish as I'm consumed by the hope she's inhaling my scent the way I'm inhaling hers. I hope tiny trembles are rippling up and down her body, the way they're rippling through mine. I hope she's as wet at the thought of me as I am hard at the thought of her. And I hope she's aching for me to press against her as much as I'm aching to do it.

Maybe making the most of what we have right here in this moment wouldn't be a bad thing. Maybe wanting a one-time passion riot before I leave doesn't make me a dick. Maybe it would be a good thing for both of us.

I'm always too busy working to have a relationship, and judging from the way she lives, she clearly doesn't want one. But it's obvious there are more sparks around here than just those in the grate. We could do this, have one great night, then walk away with a happy memory and no regrets.

As I stroke my fingers up her back, she slowly turns her face further into my shoulder. I cup the back of her head and pull back a little to tip her face up to look at me.

Her damp eyes meet mine, revealing the sadness behind them, but also the warmth and compassion with which she took me in like a stray dog on a cold night.

Her breasts press against my chest as she takes a deep breath that forces her lips a tiny fraction apart.

My heart thuds against my ribs as her eyes close halfway, and I lean down, my mouth drawn to her full, pink cupid's bow as if it's calling my name.

As I ease my hand from the back of her head to cup her face, there's a push against my leg. The dog. She shoves her nose between us, snorting and nudging us apart.

“Aw, Elsa,” Summer says. She slides her hands from my waist, but doesn't break contact until the last possible moment, and drops to her knees to hug the dog. “Do you need a cuddle too?”

I try to focus on the pooch wagging and snuffling Summer's hair rather than the fact this super-hot woman is on her knees with her head at the level of my straining groin.

So close—I was so close to discovering what her lips feel like on mine.

At least I'm now clear she's not interested. She grabbed the chance to dodge out of that kiss pretty damn quickly. And it's probably for the best. I mean, what if it was so good I wanted more than the one kiss? More than one night.

Ridiculous.

I have no time for anyone in my life. And we live thousands of miles apart. And I have no intention of living anywhere with weather like this. And she hates California.

There's nothing for it but to turn away. I find safety back on the bar stool and pointlessly check my phone again. Still no connection of any variety—of course there isn't.

Summer releases the dog from a giant hug and heads into the kitchen, her face flushed. She grabs the emergency radio and cranks the handle like her life depends on it. “Let’s see if there’s any more news on when I can get rid of you.”

“You’re such a charmer.” I try to joke, but my heart sinks. She can’t have felt the things I just did. She still thinks I’m annoying and wants me gone.

“And you don’t want to leave?” She winds faster.

I look at my hand and rub the spots where the splinters were. “Well, I do need to talk to my cousin.” But my urgency seems to have faded today.

“Exactly,” she says, eyes fixed on the radio. “Got to get that investment.”

“If you’re not careful, you’re going to spin the handle off. Or start another fire.”

“Let’s see if that’s enough.” She sets the radio on the counter and flicks it on. A piece of classical violin music I can’t quite place comes to an end.

After a suitably reverential pause, a soft female announcer’s voice says, “‘Winter’, from *The Four Seasons* by Vivaldi.”

Summer and I shrug at each other as if to say, “Obvious choice.”

The woman continues, “A reminder that roads are still treacherous and some remain impassable. The weather center warns not to be lulled into a false sense of security by today’s lighter snow. A fresh storm is expected to move in overnight. Given that news, Overdale County officials have extended the driving ban and the stay-at-home order for another twenty-four hours. The plows there still struggle to keep up. But in better news, the cellphone tower is expected to be back in action by toni-i-i...” The unwinding handle grinds to a halt.

I tap my fingers on the counter. “Well, that’s good news.”

She stares at me like I told her the house burned down but I saved her keys. “Which part?”

“The phone part. I might get to call Elliot later.”

“Yeah,” she says. “That’s good.” The tone of her voice is anything but pleased.

“But I’m stuck here for another night.” There’s a piece of me that says a bit more time with Summer is the best news. Another piece says it’s the very, very worst.

Her eyes meet mine, and I hold her gaze for a second.

As she turns to look out of the window, a little sigh sneaks out. “You are, aren’t you.”

SUMMER

I toss another snowball high in the air, Elsa chases after it and is baffled when it hits the ground and disappears.

I should have come straight out to the backyard after that hot-as-hell hug by the fire instead of retreating to my studio for the afternoon to work on a new hat design. This was the breath of icy cold air I could have done with after that near-miss kiss. Especially since it was swiftly followed by learning I have to spend another night trying to keep my hands off him.

Owen *was* about to kiss me, wasn't he? I swear he was. I'm sure I didn't imagine it. He tipped his head to exactly the right angle, and those ridiculously perfect lips fell open exactly the right amount.

Thank God Elsa came to the rescue and pushed us apart. I would have willingly let his mouth drop softly onto mine. And what a disaster that would have been. I can't go kissing a stranger who's stranded at my house. And I certainly can't go kissing an almost-billionaire stranger who'll leave tomorrow and who lives three thousand miles away and I'll never see again.

What if I liked the kisses? What if they were the best kisses that were ever kissed? What if I wanted him to keep on kissing me and not be three thousand miles away? That way madness lies. Yes, thank God for Elsa saving me.

She digs in the snow, searching for the snowball. We do this over and over every day, and she never catches on. With each toss, she has fresh hope that *this* time she'll be able to find it. Oh, the joy she gets from living in the moment and not learning from previous mistakes.

I gather up another handful and keep my aim toward the middle of the yard. The last thing I want is for my precious, wanderlust-filled dog to realize the snow has drifted so high against the six-foot fence that she could now easily leap over it.

It cost me a fortune to have the whole area enclosed. But after Elsa took off the first week I had her, and wouldn't come back despite my chasing, treat-offering, and begging, I had to give myself some peace of mind.

It took me an hour of searching the wood out back, while on the verge of a heart attack, to find her. Thank God she'd bumped into a guy walking his dog and stopped to play with them or she might have kept going. I wonder if it's why her previous owners gave her up—she was too much of a free spirit for them.

My latest snowball crashes to the ground and disintegrates. And there Elsa goes again, digging and wagging. There has never been a brighter light in my life.

While most of me is glad I moved away from Owen in the nick of time, a small part wonders if it would really have been so terrible to kiss a man who makes my body react in a way it's never reacted before. Even when I was madly in love with Alastair, he didn't make my belly flip the way Owen has since the moment I opened the door and saw him standing there.

Why did he have to get lost outside my door and cause all this confusion? My life was perfect and simple before that.

I scoop up more snow and pack it into a hard ball as Elsa runs up to me, ears pricked, eyes bright, and pink tongue on full display, eager for another round.

“Last one.”

As the sun sets behind the trees, I hurl the snowball across the yard.

Elsa zooms after it.

Would it be ridiculous to think that since I've made it to my mid-twenties without ever having a one-night stand, it might be time to give it a whirl? Probably.

Elsa barks at the ground, where the snowball shattered into a thousand pieces.

After a year and a half on my own, I'm not immune to the charms of a handsome man. And he's a lot less annoying than he seemed when he was frustrated and lost last night. I mean, he can't be all bad if he makes banana bread and hugs me when I'm upset about my parents.

Maybe kissing him wouldn't be such a bad thing. Kissing the stranger who knocked at my door one winter would definitely be the wildest memory I'd ever had.

Actually, now I come to think about it, it might even be the best of all worlds—hot kisses with a hot guy, but the hot guy leaves, and then I get my blissful solitude back. I mean, that sounds like a win-win, right?

Elsa rushes back, hopeful for another snowball.

“Nope, that's it. Time to go in.”

As I turn back to the house, Owen's face disappears from the kitchen window.

Inside the back door, I make Elsa wait on the mat while I peel off my layers of outdoor clothing.

“Looked like a good game,” Owen says from the kitchen.

“It's her favorite.” I kneel to remove Elsa's coat and boots. “We play out there every day before dinner.”

As I grab Elsa's towel, my gaze drifts to Owen, standing with his hands in his pockets, smiling at us, dimple at the ready.

I can't help but smile back. “You should have joined us. It's fun.”

He leans back against the counter and crosses one ankle over the other. “Oh, I don’t think I’d be very good at it.”

Elsa pushes her face into the towel as I rub off the snow.

“Or maybe you just don’t know how to have fun.”

He looks a little put out. “That’s not true. I have lots of fun.”

I point Elsa toward the living room. “All done.” She shakes and trots off toward the fire as I hang up the towel.

“And what do you have fun doing?” As I turn back to face him, his eyes shoot up from butt-level to my face. My insides do a little happy dance. He was totally checking out my ass. I’ll check out his biceps then. The plaid fabric of his shirt pulls tight around them as he folds his arms.

“Enlighten me,” I demand. “What fun things do you do?”

“Well, I...” He looks at the floor and runs his toe around the edge of a tile. “How old is this place?”

Drawn to him like a bee to nectar, I push my shoulders back and stride over. I rest a hand on the counter next to him, close enough that his body heat warms my fingers. “Oh, you don’t dodge the question that easily. Spill the beans, what’s fun for you?”

He continues to stare at the ground. “You’d pay a fortune in the city for cool retro tiles like these.”

Clearly, I’m bowling him over with my womanly charms. I poke him in one of the firm, sexy biceps that had held me against him earlier and barely make a dent. “Come on.”

“You won’t like the answer.”

I make a beckoning gesture. “Try me.”

He looks up, right into my eyes. “The best fun I can have?”

I nod.

“The best fun I ever have?”

“Yup.”

“The best fun I’m ever likely to have?”

“Oh, get on with it.”

“Making a deal.”

I groan as my head drops back and my arms fall to my sides. “Oh, my God. I can’t bear it.” I look back at his playful smile. “You’re a lost cause.”

Or maybe I’m a terrible seductress. Or probably both.

I head to the sofa and flop down. Elsa’s already passed out in front of the fire.

“You know what?” He turns to face me and pushes his fingers through his hair in a way that makes my knees wobble even though I’m sitting down. “I have an idea.”

Might it be taking off his shirt, leaping over the breakfast bar, scooping me in his arms, and taking me right there on the rug?

He crosses the room and drops onto the sofa next to me. “I’d find it fun if you told me something about *you*.”

I take a second to absorb how his top lip curls up a little, how his eyelashes are so thick and dark they almost look false, and the way his stubble outlines his strong jaw.

“That is a totally non-fun idea.”

“Why?”

“I told you about my parents earlier. There’s nothing else to know. Anyway, it’s pointless.”

“Well, we’ve got nothing but time till the cell tower’s fixed and the road’s cleared. And also”—he twists to face me—“I’d *like* to know you better.”

His eyes are soulful and serious and locked onto mine.

My insides tremble, and everything around us blurs into the distance as I focus entirely on those welcoming brown pools.

The air between us is suddenly alive with sparks, or energy, or a type of connection that’s way beyond anything

I've ever experienced. Or possibly a highly flammable mixture of all three.

A few minutes ago, the thought of giving in and kissing him seemed like a good idea, but now it feels like it would be the tip of an enormous iceberg. The way his look connects with something in the very essence of my being is making me feel things. Not just hot, want-to-rip-his-clothes-off things. But feely things. I do not need feely things. Feely things are where trouble starts.

I drag my eyes away from his, curl my legs up and pull my cuffs over my hands, like a turtle retreating into its shell for safety.

Owen breaks the electric silence by getting up and heading back to the kitchen. "When I was looking for a pan for the banana bread, I saw this."

As he stretches up to reach to the back of a high cabinet, his shirt pulls slightly out of his jeans.

"Look." He holds up a dusty bottle half full of Irish whiskey.

My hands fly to my cheeks. "Oh, my God. That was my grandpa's. Guess I never cleared out that cupboard. It could have been up there for years."

"Pretty sure it doesn't go bad." He opens a couple of cabinets until he finds two mis-matched tumblers.

The smile on his face as he heads back toward me says he's pleased with his find.

"Here you go." He plonks everything on the coffee table, splashes the amber liquid into the glasses, and hands me one.

The aroma is warm and welcoming. "Must be a couple of years since I've had whiskey."

"Cheers." He chinks glasses with me.

We both take a sip and "hmmm" in unison.

"Okay, then." He tucks one foot under him and swivels to face me. "Time to start a story."

Why is he doing this? There's nothing about me that could possibly be of any interest to him.

I sigh. "What do you want to know?"

He looks at me with a warmth and softness that makes me want to give up every secret I've ever had, going back to when I was six and broke one of my aunt's precious glass ornaments and said it was her dog who'd wagged it off the shelf.

Owen holds up his glass. "Since we're drinking your grandpa's amber nectar, how about you tell me about them. And why you live in their place in the middle of nowhere, knitting and playing snowballs, when you could be number crunching for big bucks."

There's a caring, thoughtful tone in his voice. Like he's genuinely interested. Could *this* guy be the real him? Is the only reason I got a bad impression of him last night because he was frustrated at being lost and stuck?

Shit. Nice Owen could be trouble.

I suck on my lips and sigh. "Okay. I'll tell you. But only because my grandparents were great people, and everyone should know about them."

I take another sip of whiskey for courage. "I went to live with them when my parents died."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve."

"Shit, that is young."

I nod as I run a finger around the rim of my glass. "Yeah. They lived outside Boston. We came up here weekend after weekend while my grandpa built this place. He'd take me to the reclamation yards with him when he was hunting for cool old stuff to include, like the kitchen tiles and the old railway sleeper for the fireplace mantel."

My gaze drifts around the room, touching on all the woodwork he lovingly crafted. "I think it was his therapy for trying to cope with losing my mom."

“He did an excellent job.” Owen raises his glass to my grandpa’s construction skills. “This place is beautifully made.”

I smile and point to the wall over the fireplace. “The panel in the middle there, he got me to carve my initials and the date on the other side before he installed it.”

Owen’s eyes meet mine for a second and my belly somersaults before I look away. “Anyway, then, when I was choosing universities, I thought it would be good to get away from the sad memories here, go to the West Coast and start afresh. I picked accounting because I was good at math. I didn’t like it, but I was good at it. And it would mean a secure job, with a secure income for the rest of my life.”

“A disrupted childhood can make a person think like that.” He sighs. “Guess we had a similar theory. But I went from west to east for school, and you went from east to west.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that we have that in common. Maybe we’re not as different as I thought.

A sip of whiskey warms my throat. “Anyway, I fucking hated accounting.”

The surprised laugh that rolls out of him lights up his face and instantly relaxes me.

As if it’s the most everyday thing in the world, I rest my fingers on his bare forearm and lean closer as if I’m about to tell him a huge secret. “Do you have any idea how boring accounting is?”

He makes no effort to move away from my touch. “Hell, yes. I could cheerfully code all day. But as soon as we could afford to take on a bookkeeper, I jumped at it. I fucking hate bookkeeping.”

As we laugh together, I drag my hand off his arm before I end up leaving it there for an embarrassingly long time. I wrap it around my glass to keep it otherwise occupied.

“Anyway, when I graduated, I moved to LA to be with my college boyfriend, because that’s where he’d gone for work. But he turned out to be a spineless ass right before my

grandparents died. They left me this place, and now”—I hold a palm to the ceiling— “here I am.”

“Hmm.” His mouth curls up at one side. “You might have left something, or rather, *everything*, out of the last part.”

“Well, the shitty boyfriend part doesn’t matter anymore. The part where I’m here is all that matters now.”

“It sounds pretty terrible, though.”

“It was. I mean, obviously, I was heartbroken. I lost the man I thought I was in love with and my amazing grandparents in the same month.”

“How did they die?”

“Grandma had an aneurysm. Out of the clear blue sky. She had a headache. And then she died.”

“Awful.” The concern on his face looks deep and real.

“I’d heard things about people dying of a broken heart and assumed it was some romantic nonsense. But I honestly think that’s what happened to my grandfather. He’d been healthy his whole life. But he died four weeks later.”

“What did they say it was?”

“Stress-induced cardiomyopathy.”

“So, like a heart attack?”

I shrug and press my lips together to try to stop my chin from wobbling.

Owen lets the silence hang for a second, before speaking softly. “And now you live here, all cozy in your grandparents’ place, knitting things, and making Elsa happy by chucking snowballs for her.”

I smile, my eyes moist with tears that haven’t yet fallen. “And we’re doing great. She’s my world.” I watch her side rise and fall as she naps by the crackling fire. “She gave purpose to my days and brought me back to life. Without her I might still be lying right where she is now, crying into the rug.”

As hard as I try to hold it back, one tear spills out and trickles slowly over my cheek.

Before I realize what's happening, he leans in, pushes my hair back from my face then wipes away the tear with his thumb. He leaves his fingers resting against my cheek and looks at me in silence.

And there it is again, that fizz in the air between us—that spark, that connection.

If he can't hear my heart thumping, he must be able to see the tremble run through me.

Braver than I've ever been in my life, I place my hand over his and press it against my face.

I'm suddenly aware that we've both moved closer. Our foreheads are almost touching.

“You'll leave tomorrow,” I whisper. “And we'll never see each other again.”

He nods. “I've thought that too.”

I look into his eyes and try to see his soul like I'm sure he can see mine. “That means you can't ever hurt me.”

He laces his fingers with mine.

“Also.” I turn my face into his hand and plant a gentle kiss on the palm where I pulled the sliver from earlier. “You're sexy as all hell.”

SUMMER

Holy shitbags. I'm about to kiss a virtual stranger. An exceptionally hot, virtual stranger who's sitting on my sofa drinking my grandpa's whiskey.

I've never made a pass at anyone in my life before. No one. Not once. Not ever. It's terrifying. But also, somehow, exactly the right thing to do.

Owen glides his gentle fingers over my cheek. The intimacy of that tiny action makes my heart swell and dance at the same time. As if acting by themselves, my eyes drift shut, and my face sinks into his hand, like it knows it belongs there.

He slides closer.

"Are you sure?" he whispers, his breath warm on my skin.

I open my eyes. His face is inches from mine. Those dark lashes outline his brown eyes, the light from the fire picks out honey tones in his hair and stubble, and his lips part the tiniest bit.

I untwine my hand from his, desperate to stroke his cheek. His skin is smooth, and the stubble tickles my fingertips as I run them along the bottom edge of his lower lip.

Well, I guess I've gone this far already, so what the hell. I lean in and capture that lip between mine.

Oh, sweet Jesus, it's full and juicy and sends an arrow right between my legs.

He kisses me back, all soft and sweet. His lips move to the end of my nose, then my forehead, before he brushes them across the closed lids of my still-damp eyes.

This is not at all how I expected one-night-only kisses to feel. I figured they'd be all about the lust, not gentle, kind, and soothing. It's like he saw the hurt in my heart and is trying to kiss it better.

He takes my glass and sets it on the table with his, then lifts his other leg onto the sofa and scoops me toward him. I uncross my legs and wrap them around him. It's either that or my feet are heading straight for his crotch. And there are parts of me I'd much rather head in that direction than my toes. Not that those parts will be heading there anytime soon. All I'm doing is kissing him—that's reckless enough for me. I'm not having the first one-night stand of my life with someone I barely know.

Just kisses. That's all.

He takes my hands in his and runs his lips across my knuckles.

"Are you sure?" he asks again. "I don't want to take advantage of a stranded woman who's had booze on an empty stomach and is upset about her ass of an ex-boyfriend."

"I'm not upset about him." I return the kiss to his hands. "And I had a snack before I went out to play with Elsa." Another kiss. "Also, it's not me who's stranded."

The need to be as close to him as possible is all-consuming. I wrap my arms around his neck and press my cheek against his. Lordy, his skin smells mouthwateringly good—part him and part my grapefruit body wash.

My spine melts as he runs his fingers up and down my back. As I arch into him, his breath deepens against my ear. Lips brush my earlobe and tickle a path down my neck as his hands move over my hips and onto my thighs. The sparks

racing down my neck collide with the ones rising from my legs.

My willpower starts to dissolve.

But I must stay on the right side of this and stick to just kissing. Only kissing.

I tilt my head and pull my hair out of the way to give him as much neck as possible to play with. If I've been brave enough to make this happen, I want his mouth on as much of my skin as possible.

Goosebumps radiate from his every touch, rippling up beyond my hairline and down my side.

Then his lips are on mine. I open my mouth to welcome him in and greedily suck the sweet essence of whiskey from his tongue. Shouldn't kissing someone new be awkward? Shouldn't it take time to figure out how your mouth works with someone else's? It always has for me.

Not so this time. For the first time in my life, my lips instantly fit with someone—a someone who will be gone tomorrow. It's like fate is making an ironic joke at my expense. Thanks, fate.

Owen's hands move up under the edge of my sweatshirt. I shudder as they revisit the spot they first touched when he caught me from falling off the steps last night.

I can allow a bit of skin touching. I mean, that's barely more than kissing.

"You're so warm and soft," he says against my mouth, his voice deeper.

I tip my forehead against his and trace the outline of his mouth with a finger. "Your lips are even more delicious than your banana bread."

Our mouths crash back together. Is this what passionate attraction feels like? If it is, well, my God, I let Alastair steal years of my life.

Owen lies back on the sofa and pulls me down on top of him. I press the whole of me against the whole of him. Good

God, he's hiding something good in those jeans.

Must not think about that.

Must stick to the "just kissing" plan.

But I can't shove it out of my head. It's impossible. The wetness from moving my groin against his is out of this world.

He slides his hand higher, scoops his thumb under my breast, and brushes it over my nipple.

My gasp is loud. My body vibrates with yearning. His touch is electric.

Oh, God.

Am I going to have sex with him?

I can't.

That would be, at best, unwise. At worst, stupid and disastrous.

I've never had sex with someone I barely know. But, oh holy hell, I want to with this particular someone. More than I've ever wanted to do anything. He doesn't feel like a stranger. When he looks in my eyes and teases me, it's like he knows me and I know him. And, good God, our mouths were clearly made for each other.

Desperate to touch what he's pressing against me, my resolve starts to evaporate, and I find the outline of his long, thick hardness. As I press my palm against him, he squeezes my breast and groans. The touch and sound of him lights a fire in my core.

His other hand finds its way under my sweatshirt and to my other breast. Another gasp flies out of me as his thumbs sweep over both my nipples.

His dick twitches as I squeeze it through the heavy fabric. Good God, I've spent my whole life missing out. I might not have had sex with a vast number of men, but I know what's in my hand feels pretty damn special. And I'm absolutely certain that the way Owen is driving me crazy is extraordinary.

I'm sure it's not normal to feel completely at one with someone straight away, or for that someone to almost tip you over the edge with the mere brush of a thumb. What trick is the universe playing by giving me a taste of this magic with someone I'll never see again after tomorrow?

"I don't want you to move your hand," he breathes, "but I do want you to take this off."

He pushes my sweatshirt and T-shirt up to my armpits. I sit up and lift both arms in the air so he can pull them over my head.

"Much better." His eyes lock onto my bare breasts as he sits up to meet me. He desires me. This smart, sexy, self-made man desires *me*.

He eases me down onto my back and kneels over me.

"These are beautiful." He strokes his fingers around the curves of my breasts. I close my eyes and give myself to him completely. He can do whatever he likes with them.

Turns out, what he likes is pretty damn amazing. He takes one nipple in his mouth while tweaking the other, then switches, and continues back and forth until I'm about to come from purely the nipple action.

I open my eyes and lift his head away from my breasts. "You have to stop before I pass out. Also, I shouldn't be the only one topless."

He smiles the sexiest of smiles as I push him back and undo the buttons of his plaid shirt. There's something mind-blowingly hot about unbuttoning a shirt, even when it doesn't reveal bare flesh—he has a T-shirt underneath.

I get to the last button, and he yanks it the rest of the way off, then pulls the T-shirt over his head.

"Guess you didn't need my help." I laugh as I stroke the outline of his pecs and trail my fingers down to his abs.

Oh, the dimple in his cheek as he smiles.

He scoops his hands under my backside, swivels us around to sit me on the edge of the sofa, and kneels on the floor

between my legs.

“I can’t wait to see all of you.” His voice drips with desire, and I know he means it.

He presses his lips against mine in the deepest of kisses as he undoes my jeans and pushes his hands down the sides of my underwear.

Oh, Jesus. I’d forgotten I’m wearing the most unsexy boyshorts that were originally pink, but are now a weird shade of dirty lilac after I accidentally washed them with jeans. And I’ve not exactly been on top of the personal grooming down there since living alone. These are things I’ve always cared about until right this moment when the fierce, burning need for him to touch me is the only thing that matters.

One final tug on my pants and I’m stark naked. On the edge of my sofa. With the hot, rich, topless, stranger from California kneeling between my legs and taking me all in. This is not how I’d expected my day to end. But I can’t imagine ever wanting anything more than I want this right now.

“I need to keep telling you you’re beautiful,” he breathes, as he strokes up my inner thigh and over my center.

And I believe him. He gazes down at me like he’s just unwrapped the best and most-surprising gift. I feel as beautiful as he thinks I am, truly beautiful for the first time in my life.

I grab his shoulders, and my legs fall farther apart as he gradually opens me, his fingers searching deeper.

I drop my mouth to his shoulder and gasp against his firm flesh when he finds my entrance.

Desperate to touch him, too, I grapple with his belt. But before I make it to the button, he slides his finger up to my clit. Fireworks of pleasure shoot from my center and blast through my veins. I grip the ends of his belt as he slides back and forth from my entrance to my clit.

“You feel perfect,” he says with a deep, gravelly sigh, as his other hand finds my nipple.

“I need to feel you too.” And, somehow, I gather enough mental capacity to undo his jeans and slip my way inside his boxers.

He heaves out a long breath when I wrap my fingers around his long, thick, rock-hard dick.

The plan to stick to just kissing has clearly flown right out of the window and is now over the mountains and far, far away.

Good God, if he feels this good in my hand, I can't even comprehend how good he will feel inside me. His hungry tongue finds mine. And as he pulses in my fist, he still manages to maintain full concentration on my mouth, my nipple and my clit.

I could come any second, but there's no way I'm letting that happen without this glorious dick inside me.

I have some two-year-old condoms in a drawer upstairs, but right now that might as well be a million miles away, and I don't want to break the magic to fetch one.

“Do you have protection?” I pant against his lips.

He nods, reaches into his back pocket, and pulls out his wallet.

Part of me is pleased we don't have to stop and go upstairs, and part of me is dismayed he might have packed one in case he picks up someone at his aunt and uncle's party. But that's a dilemma for later.

I push his jeans and underwear down to where his knees rest on the floor, and finally feast my eyes on what my hands have been enjoying. And what a delicious feast it is. A smooth, delicious, proud dick that's mine for the taking. I am one very lucky girl. I bend and take the tip of it in my mouth as he rips the foil pack open.

I've only ever done this out of duty before, but right now I could not be more desperate to feel him in my mouth and get my first taste of him. As I run my tongue over the head, lick off the precum, and give it a gentle suck, he pulls his hips back.

“If you do that, I’ll be over in a second. And I can’t tell you how much I want to be inside you.”

Thank God. “I want that too.”

He sheathes himself as we kiss, and maneuvers into place. I lean back on the sofa and wrap my legs around his waist as he eases his tip inside me.

Every drop of air in my lungs flies out of my mouth in a long sound that’s somewhere between a gasp, a sigh, and whatever noise it is you make when you see heaven.

It’s been such a long time for me, and it’s a stretch to take him. He must notice, because he slowly and thoughtfully eases himself bit by bit inside me until I’ve adjusted.

My eyes drift shut as my body dissolves into a pile of feelings. It’s like I don’t exist. I’m consumed by him, full of him. There’s plenty of him, and yet I still can’t get enough.

He leans forward over me, pressing his hands into the sofa on either side of my chest.

I look up and can’t quite believe I’m naked and cradling this beautiful man who’s rocking in and out of me in my living room.

He dips his head and sucks my nipple. “So good,” he breathes.

I grab his butt with both hands and pull him forward so he rubs against me at the perfect angle. Every nerve ending in my body is more alive than it’s ever been. I know I’m on my way. I’ve hit the point of no return.

“I can’t hold on,” I whisper.

“Me neither,” he pants, grinding his hips and hitting me in the perfect spot as he thrusts back and forth.

I’m rising and lost, my mind empty of everything except blind bliss. His skin against mine, his strokes inside me, his lips on the side of my neck.

I start to break and let myself go, allowing the waves to crash over and over me. Then I realize he’s coming with me,

his thrusts hard and eager, wanting me as much as I want him.

My waves won't stop. I've never felt it go on like this before. The release seems like it might never end.

"Oh, my God," he cries as he slaps his hand on the sofa.

Gradually the aftershocks subside, and I come back to my senses to find his head resting between my breasts.

He looks up at me as I start to giggle.

"What?" He sounds a little hurt, like I might be amused by his performance.

I point over his shoulder. "Look."

Elsa must have felt vibrations from our movements because she's now wide awake, standing there, staring at us, wagging.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to look her in the eye later," he says, as our bodies rock against each other again, but this time with laughter.

SUMMER

M mm, my bed is warmer and smells more delicious than ever. The sheets are rich with the scent of Owen, and of the two of us mixed together.

I reach across to the empty half of the bed. He got up a little while ago, while I was only five percent awake. I'd figured he was going to the bathroom and would only be gone a minute. But I guess not. And I must have fallen right back to sleep. I run my hand over the sheets where he was lying. They're almost cool.

I scrunch up my eyes and stretch every muscle from the tips of my fingers to the ends of my toes. A lot of them ache from not having been used in the way they were used last night for quite some time.

I'd been unsure about letting a virtual stranger sleep next to me, but it would have been weird to make him stay on the sofa again after, well, everything we'd done on it. So, I invited him to spend the night in my bed.

Two more screaming orgasms later, I'd apparently gotten over my fear of a one-night stand. And here I am, with a man-shaped impression in the sheet and pillow next to me.

I can't remember the last time I slept naked and the sheets touched all of me. Even with Alastair I would always wear a T-shirt and underwear. He always wore underwear, too, because, "What if there's a fire?"

After the sofa episode, I figured if Owen and I created such brain-exploding fireworks together, I might as well make the most of him while he's here. After all, he'll leave today, and I'll go right back to my celibate existence.

And I'm fine with that. Totally fine. I was fully prepared that this was all it was. One night of mind-blowing sex with a hot guy who then vanishes never to be seen again. Perfect.

It's not like I'd want him to stick around. I'm sure he'd only become unbearable and annoying if I got to know him

properly. I mean, he's a soon-to-be-billionaire who doesn't understand snow. Every part of him is wrong for every part of me. Aside from the naked part, obviously.

Actually being involved with someone has never worked well for me, anyway.

So, yes, this is absolutely the ideal arrangement. I'll wave him off then snuggle back up with Elsa and my knitwear designs and be delighted to have the super-sexy memory.

I roll to the edge of the bed and reach down to stroke Elsa as usual. She's not there. And now there are voices downstairs. She must have gone down with Owen. Maybe he's finally realized how awesome she is and is chatting with her. For a deaf dog, she is an excellent listener. Lord knows, she's often the only living being I talk to for weeks on end.

I lean up on my elbow and listen. Sounds like he's on the —

Oh, my God.

Phone service.

The internet.

I've been sucked so deep into Owen World I almost forgot they existed.

I sit up and search the underwear drawer of my nightstand for something that's the color it's supposed to be. He might be leaving today, but you never know, and I'd hate for him to think every pair I own is terminally unsexy. Even though a thorough search would suggest it is.

Ah, there, right at the back and under everything—a black lace thong that I bought with a matching bra for my vacation to Hawaii with Alastair. What a washout that was. He spent the whole time on the phone negotiating a difficult contract, and we ended up flying home five days early because he said the only way to resolve it was in person.

I am never dating a workaholic again. Owen is a workaholic. Not that I'm thinking of dating him. Of course I'm not. It's not possible. He lives on the other side of the

country. And even if it were possible, I wouldn't want to. Nope. Had my fill of workaholic moneyed Californians, thanks. They're nothing but trouble.

I slide the thong up my legs. Might as well throw them on, in case he fancies an extra special goodbye.

Oh hell, I'm going to go all in and add the matching bra.

Black yoga pants, black T-shirt, and a cream open-front cardigan—I made it for one of Alastair's mom's friends but didn't get to hand it over before he dumped me—and that's a pretty good straight-out-of-bed look.

I open the bedroom door and pause at the top of the stairs as Owen says, "Yeah, I got lucky. It's like a little hippie cabin in the woods."

My heart clenches and a chill runs through me. Did he just put me in the same hippie category as his parents?

The parents he resents for ruining his childhood. The parents he worked his ass off to escape. The parents whose lifestyle he loathed so much he created an exact opposite one for himself.

I tug at the lacy bra digging into my side and make my way down the stairs.

Owen sits at the breakfast bar, ear pods in, talking to someone on his laptop.

"Thanks for catching me up." His eyes flick toward me, and he shoots me a quick smile. "I'll do some more research until the road's cleared, then I'll give you a shout when I'm on my way. And get Max to stop sending me messages telling me how irresponsible I am for not being there yet. It wasn't my fault."

He pauses, presumably while Elliot speaks.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Apart from the part where I foolishly didn't book a driver, got a shitty rental car, and took a wrong turn. Anyway, Max needs to stop acting like he's the head of the family rather than just the oldest cousin."

He pauses and listens again before wrapping up.

“Okay, later.” He salutes the screen, hangs up, and pulls out the ear pods.

If he hadn’t called my home a hippie cabin, my bra would be undoing itself at the sight of him perched on the stool, knees apart, jeans hugging his thighs, and white T-shirt tight across his shoulders, biceps, and chest. The chest that not long ago I’d been using as a pillow.

My blood surges with lust, while my stomach drops like a stone from hurt, and my brain tells me Owen’s an ass who just put me down. My body is very confused right now.

The room is toasty warm from the fire. He’s done a good job on that again, and there’s another new stack of logs piled up on the hearth.

“Morning.” His dimply grin and sparkly eyes say he’s pleased to see me. And there’s a fresh energy about him I haven’t seen before.

I’d like to think a night of hot, naked action with me has given him a new reason for living. But it’s more likely because he was finally able to chat with Elliot and is a step closer to getting out of here.

He bounds off the stool, moves in close, and strokes my upper arms.

“We have internet. No cell service yet.” He drops an affectionate kiss on my forehead. “But internet is fine. I’m surprised it’s this good out here.”

I stand motionless as he goes back to the laptop which must have come out of the large, artfully distressed, brown leather duffel at his feet.

“Yeah.” I finally manage. “Who’d have thought we might have decent internet out here in Hippieville. Our mail isn’t delivered by pigeons any more either.”

He stares at his screen and nods, presumably agreeing to whatever he wasn’t listening to me say.

My eyes scan the room. “Where’s Elsa?”

He taps the computer keys. “By the fire.”

“No, she’s not.”

I walk into the living area and all the way around the couch in case she’s lying out of sight at the end of it.

My heart rate rises. This isn’t right.

She would have noticed me by now and run over to say a waggy good morning.

“Owen,” I snap to get his attention. “*Where* is she?”

I walk around the breakfast bar. Maybe, for the first time in her life, she’s napping on the kitchen floor.

He doesn’t look up from his laptop. “Here somewhere.”

I peer out the window over the sink in case he let her out into the back yard for a pee and forgot.

No sign.

My hands go icy cold and start to tremble. It’s like there’s a ten-ton weight on my chest stopping me from breathing.

“Seriously, Owen.” The voice doesn’t sound like mine, it’s loud and shaky. “Where is she?”

I guess whatever that tone was, and wherever it came from, finally snaps him out of his business trance. Well, partially. His eyes momentarily shift from the screen to me while his fingers keep moving.

“Oh, right,” he says. “I forgot. What with the call and everything. Sorry. Yeah, I let her out when I fetched the logs.”

I race to the back door and peer desperately through the little window in it. “I can’t see her anywhere.”

I shove my feet into the boots on the doormat and grab my parka.

“Not that way,” he says casually. “Out the front. When I went to the woodshed.”

He squints at the laptop and runs a finger down the screen, like he’s examining a spreadsheet.

A searing wave of heat rises within me. “You did *what*?”

I run through the cabin to the front door without taking off my boots, my heart pounding like it's trying to escape my chest.

Owen finally turns away from the laptop and looks at me. His hands fall to his thighs and his brows draw together, like he can't grasp why I need any further explanation.

"I was going out to get logs to make a nice fire." He points at the fire. "She wanted to go out. I saw you let her out by herself yesterday. So, I did that."

I stop in my tracks.

"Out the *back*." I point, arm outstretched, to the back door.

He raises his palms in a what-difference-does-it-make gesture.

"The *back* yard." I jab my finger harder toward the back door as if that makes it clearer. "Which is *fenced*. She's a runner."

Icy cold blood flows through my boiling hot body.

Owen's entire body droops and his mouth falls open.

"The front is wide open to the road," I say, my voice cracking.

"Oh, God. I'm so sorry. I didn't know. You should have said." He looks mortified. Then a glimmer of hope crosses his face. "The road's still a mess, though. There won't be any traffic."

"But she could be anywhere, Owen. She could have wandered anywhere. And it's freezing. Did you put her coat and boots on?"

He closes his eyes and shakes his head.

My poor baby girl, out in the snow. We've walked up and down the lane a thousand times, but always with her on a leash. She doesn't know her way out there.

"How long ago?" My hand is on the front door handle.

"About half an hour," he says with a grimace.

“Holy shit, Owen.”

He moves his feet from the stool footrest to the ground.
“I’ll help.”

But as he starts to stand up, his eyes flick back to the computer screen. It’s only for a tiny fraction of a second, but it’s enough to clearly show where his heart and his priorities lie.

Yeah, sure, he cares about finding her.

I yank the front door open and snort. “No. You stay here and work on your precious fucking deal. I’m better off on my own.”

The cold air chills the tears on my cheeks.

“But, Summer. Let me—”

I slam the door shut behind me. I couldn’t give a shit what he wants me to let him do.

OWEN

“F uck.”

I lean on the counter and drop my head into my hands.

My stomach tightens in the way it does right before you puke.

That dog is Summer’s world. How would I ever live with myself if anything happens to her and it was all my fault?

All I want to do is charge out there and help, but judging from her reaction, that would only make things worse.

I take a deep breath, blow it out, and try to think positively.

Hopefully, Elsa won’t have gone far.

And Summer will find her, she’s smart and resourceful.

And beautiful.

An image of her face, eyes closed in pleasure, flashes across my mind. Last night wasn’t like any one-night stand I’ve ever had before. It was different. There was a feeling deep down inside, in a place I didn’t know existed, where we were connected in a way that was more than purely physical. At least, there was for me.

But, regardless of the impossible logistics of seeing her again, it seems Summer’s decided her first instincts were right after all—I’m a jerk whose help she doesn’t want.

Chasing after her and insisting on joining the search for Elsa would undoubtedly only make her more pissed off with me, so I clamp my backside to the stool and resist the impulse to run out the door.

I need to focus on the spreadsheet Elliot sent, anyway. It’s vital I get these figures into my head, so I can show how investing in us, to grow the business *and* start the nonprofit kids’ tech hubs, would be the best decision Archie Banks could ever make.

And we might be in luck, he's showing signs of being eager. Apparently he pretty much invited himself to Maggie and Jim's party so he could meet us in person. That's as far as Elliot had gotten with the story when my phone battery died two nights ago.

I suspect Archie's enthusiasm might have ulterior motives, and could be related to bad publicity about his swanky, stylish hotels not being particularly child-friendly. There've been a couple of viral social media posts from celebs complaining about staff being rude to their little angels, and refusing to accommodate their every whim. Now, the chain's in danger of falling out of favor as the go-to home-away-from-home for those who are rich, famous, influential, and also parents.

That might be why Archie's already asked if a deal would mean his company's name could be slapped all over our kids' tech centers.

Anyway, Elliot said when he took Archie's call he got uncomfortable—Elliot hates the schmoozing side of the business—and started rambling about his parents' housewarming bash in a tiny village in New Hampshire. And Archie said that, by coincidence, he was going to be nearby visiting his girlfriend's family this weekend, and he could come along so we could pitch to him face to face while Elliot and I are in one place.

Outside, Summer calls Elsa's name.

It sends a chill through my veins. I have to hope the dog's happily wandering around, and digging for nonexistent snowballs.

I blink a couple of times and make my gray matter concentrate on the spreadsheet. Elliot's done an awesome job on these numbers. They make *me* want to invest in our company. I never cease to be pleased I teamed up with the family geek.

Time for me to learn a little background on Mr. Banks.

He has a bit of a reputation for being difficult. But since he keeps himself to himself, it's hard to be sure of the rumors.

We've never met him, but the people on his team have all been super helpful and easy to get along with. None of them seems like the type to tolerate working for a megalomaniac ass, which a lot of people say he is.

Just in case, though, I need to be sure to make a personal connection with him. That can be crucial to closing any deal, especially with a tricky personality. I need to know what makes him tick—whatever his favorite hobby, or wine, or vacation spot is, will coincidentally be mine too. And I will, quite by accident, drop it into the conversation.

Search results on his name are topped by a row of photos of him at various black-tie events, different skinny blondes who tower over him on his arm at each one. Rumor has it he's a bit touchy about his height—or lack of it.

Summer's shouts get louder. My stomach clenches and the about-to-puke feeling gets worse. She's so desperate, she's calling a deaf dog she knows can't hear her.

All I can do is focus on the deal. She doesn't want me out there. And she'll be fine. Elsa will be fine.

This article could be exactly what I'm looking for, an interview titled "*Taking It To The Banks—We Check In With Global Hotel Phenomenon, Archie Banks.*"

It's in an Australian magazine, and on page five of the search results, not something everyone would pick up on.

But my mind's wrenched back to Summer. I'm sure Elsa's thick coat of scruffy hair will keep her warm enough out there, even without her winter jacket on. And she'll be safe. I mean, animals don't wander too far from where they know they have a cozy bed and food, right?

I hunker down over the article.

The helicopter ride to Archie Banks's private island off the Florida Keys is the perfect vantage point to view the new 30-acre feather in the luxury hotel entrepreneur's cap. Visible among the lush green foliage are an Olympic-sized swimming pool, tennis

courts, golf greens, several guest cottages, and his sprawling seven thousand-square-foot waterfront vacation home.

Hugging the shoreline is a newly constructed path, designed so the self-made man can take laps of the island in his golf cart without ever losing sight of the water.

Summer calls Elsa's name again. This time her voice cracks. It sounds like her heart is breaking. Mine aches in sympathy. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to push it out of my mind so I can concentrate on what has always been my number one priority—the business.

But it's hopeless.

The sound of her hurt has pierced a hole in my soul.

My chin drops to my chest.

She's in pain. And it's my fault.

“Fuck.”

That's it.

I slam the laptop shut and grab my jacket and shoes. Summer's knitted hat with ear flaps is hanging by the door. I grab that too. And, for the first time in my life, I prioritize something other than work.

OWEN

The air is icy cold, but at least it's stopped snowing.

Summer's nowhere to be seen. Her broken cries of "Elsa" come from around the corner.

I slip and slide through the front yard, thanks to what she called my "inappropriate Californian footwear," make my way out into the lane, and follow the sound of her voice.

A little way around the corner, Summer stands facing away from me. The snow drifts make it impossible to know where the path begins and ends amid the surrounding fields.

Hands deep in her coat pockets, shoulders heavy with defeat, she looks out over the white landscape that falls away into a deep valley before rising again to form hills on the other side.

"Where are you, Elsa?" Her pleading tone is like a punch to my chest.

She kicks hard at the snow, her frustration sending up an arc of white powder.

I pull up the collar of my wool jacket, which offers such little protection from the New England winter I might as well not be wearing it. My outside might be cold, but my insides burn with the dread rising deep within me.

Summer turns around, lifts a foot out of the snow to take a step, then stops when she sees me. Despite the distance between us, I can tell her eyes are as red as her tear-stained cheeks.

"What the hell are you doing here?" It's a half-hearted snap, like she wants to be furious with me but also doesn't think I'm worth the effort that fury would take.

"I came to help. Please let me help."

She rolls her eyes and stomps to the side of me. "I don't need help. From anyone. Ever. Least of all the person who lost

my dog.”

“And I brought you this.” I hold out her hat. “You must be freezing.”

She snatches it out of my hand. “Not as freezing as Elsa. Wherever the hell she is.”

She rams the hat on her head, blond curls sticking out haphazardly beneath it.

Overwhelmed by the need to comfort her, I reach out to touch her arm. “I’m so sorry, Summer. Let’s look together. Please.”

She snatches her arm away and stares me hard in the eyes. “Go back to working on your deal.” Tears roll down her cheeks. “That’s the only important thing, right?”

A sob catches in her throat and she gasps for air.

The sound tears at me, like the twist of a knife in my gut. I’ve caused this. This pain she’s consumed by is because of me, my stupidity, my thoughtlessness, me being wrapped up in my business worries.

I take a firm hold of her shoulders. I can’t let her think I’m a complete shit who would sleep with her, then lose her dog and abandon her to look for it herself.

“If I thought work was the most important thing, I wouldn’t be out here.”

She breaks into wracking sobs.

“I can’t bear to see you like this, Summer. And it’s all my fault.”

I pull her toward me, desperate to ease her hurt, but she balls her hands and slams the sides of her fists into my chest.

“Yes. You did this.” Her frozen lips struggle to move, but she manages to shout between her uneven snatches of breath.

“Look.” She pushes me off, frees herself from my grip, and does a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn, arms outstretched.

“Look at it. Look at it out here. She could be anywhere.” The words squeak out of her, as tears stream down her panic-stricken face. “She’s lost. She could be lying somewhere freezing to death.”

Her strained voice is the most heartbreaking sound I’ve ever heard.

There’s nothing I’ve done in my entire life that’s made me feel as angry and disappointed with myself as I do right now.

“She can’t even *hear* me.” Summer presses her hands against her chest and leans into them. “She’ll think I’m not looking for her.”

I wish I could turn the clock back to this morning and make sure Elsa stayed inside. I wish I wasn’t the cause of the heartache etched on Summer’s face.

“I’m so sorry. I honestly thought it was okay. I’m so sorry I got it wrong.” I reach for her again. “But I’ll fix it. I’ll find her.”

She slams her fists into her thighs. “I might never see her again.”

Christ, that had better not be the case. I can’t let that be the case.

I make one last effort to pull her close and, thank God, this time she goes limp, finally surrendering to me.

“I love her so much,” she sobs. “She’s my everything. She’s all I have.”

Summer’s already lost her parents to the snow. I can’t let her lose her beloved dog to it too.

I bury my face in her woolly hat. If only I could soak up all her pain like a sponge and bear it for her. She deserves so much more than to hurt like this.

“And you are going to get her back,” I say, as if me willing it to be true will make it so.

Her breath catches in her throat as the sobs start to slow.

“Go back inside and get warm,” I tell the top of her head. “I’ll stay out here until I find her.”

She shakes her head “no” against my chest, making the bobble on her hat swing from side to side. It’s so adorable that, despite the desperate nature of the situation, I can’t help but smile.

She slowly lifts her face. The sadness in her eyes squeezes my heart.

“I’ll look with you,” she says softly.

A new calm has come over her. I hope that’s me. Please let it be me easing her pain.

“Okay.” I kiss her forehead.

She looks back down at my chest and wipes it with her glove. “I got snot on your jacket.”

I shrug and laugh. “So what?”

It’s the first time I’ve ever said anything like that about a gift from a world-renowned designer.

I pull a napkin from the airport coffee shop out of a pocket.

“Here, blow.”

I step back and take in the snowy wilderness. If I’m honest with myself, it doesn’t look good for Elsa. But I can’t let that show. “Okay, where have you looked? Where haven’t you looked?”

“I’ve looked everywhere nearby.” She’s limp with defeat. “She must have wandered off pretty far.”

“Let’s try going back to the house first, in case she found her way home while we were out here.”

Summer nods and wipes her eyes with the napkin.

“There aren’t even any paw prints anywhere,” she says as we tromp our way back toward the cabin. “And it stopped snowing when I came out to look. So she can’t have been anywhere around here for at least the last fifteen minutes.”

That is a very good point.

We stop at the entrance to her front yard and I point at the woodshed. “You checked in there, right?”

Her mouth drops open, eyes wide. She freezes for a second, then shakes her head and sprints through knee deep snow. Sprints.

I follow. Less efficiently.

She gets there well ahead of me, fumbles with the catch on the door, then yanks off her gloves and drops them at her feet to tackle the stubborn catch with bare fingers.

“Oh, thank God,” she cries.

I go a little lightheaded as relief washes over me. Thank fuck for that. I stop in my tracks and bend double with my hands on my knees to try to stop my head from swirling. I’m suddenly colder than I’ve ever been in my life. My socks have soaked up their own weight in melted snow.

But the laughter coming from the shed warms me and brings a relieved smile. I take a deep breath and straighten.

How would I have ever lived with myself if I’d caused Summer to lose the thing she loves most?

In the space of forty-eight hours, this woman has carved a place deep in my soul that no one else has even found.

I drag my freezing, sodden feet to the shed door.

Summer is on her knees, face buried in Elsa, who is wriggling and wagging against her, licking Summer’s face.

I step inside and crouch down beside them, one hand on each of their backs. “She must have followed me in here this morning, without me realizing, when I came to get the logs. And I shut the door on her.”

Summer rests the side of her face against Elsa’s neck and looks at me. “Thank you for finding her.”

“I’m pretty sure it was me who lost her.”

“Yeah, but you thought to look in here.”

She rubs both sides of Elsa's neck, and the dog throws her head back in glee.

"I'm just happy she wasn't wandering around cold and terrified. Fuck, that was scary." And it was, I can't remember the last time I experienced as much fear and dread as I've felt this last half hour.

Summer plants a big kiss on Elsa's nose, then locks eyes with me. "Back yard, fenced. Safe. Front yard, not. Dangerous. Got it?"

I scratch Elsa's butt with one hand and tuck a stray curl back under Summer's hat with the other. "Oh, I promise you, that is something I'll remember until my dying day."

I stand up. "Come on. Let's all go inside, warm up, and have a late breakfast."

A couple of hours later, all three bellies are full, and my socks are drying by the fire.

Summer's on her laptop at the breakfast bar, and I'm on mine on the sofa resuming my research on Archie Banks. The snow is still too deep for me to leave so I might as well make the most of the time for studying.

And I'm truly comfortable here.

There's a part of me that will be sad to go. A part of me I'm desperately trying to shove into a hidden corner. No good can come of listening to that part of me.

It's certainly been an interesting couple of days, to say the least.

"The plow won't be up here till tomorrow," Summer says.

I stop reading halfway through a sentence about how Archie was a child chess protege but fell out with the game's international federation over not being allowed to snack during games, and never played again.

“What do you mean?”

She swivels to look at me. “The snow plow. Even though it’s stopped snowing, this area won’t be cleared until sometime tomorrow because there still aren’t enough plows in action.”

“Tomorrow?” So I won’t be leaving today after all? I should be concerned about another delay in getting to my aunt and uncle’s place, but this tremor in the pit of my stomach is more like excitement at having to stay. “Where did you hear that?”

She points at her screen. “County website.” She slides off the stool and walks over to sit next to me on the sofa. “Your family’s party is not till tomorrow evening, though, right? So you’ll still be there in time.” She yawns, stretches, puts her feet up on the coffee table, and flops back.

She must be worn out after all the stress. Adrenaline rushes are exhausting. And it’s not like we got a whole lot of sleep last night. Now she’s warm and fed and Elsa’s safely dreaming away by the fire, Summer looks fit to flop.

“Wherever will you stay?” she asks, as her head drops onto my shoulder and she instantly falls asleep.

OWEN

“I still can’t believe I fell asleep on your shoulder this morning,” Summer says for about the seventeenth time. “And for an hour. Embarrassing.”

I place the large cardboard box I’ve just brought in from the trunk of my car on the kitchen counter. “It was more like a coma than a sleep. You didn’t notice my arm moving while I typed or anything.”

I’d tapped the keys as gently as I could, so as not to disturb her, and silently rehearsed the things I’d say to Archie in my head, instead of pacing up and down and practicing them out loud like I usually would.

Since it was me who’d caused all the worry and upset that had exhausted her, my priority was to let her rest. And I had no intention of doing a single thing that might disrupt that.

But there was another reason I didn’t want to wake her.

Having her head on my shoulder felt good.

Sitting on the sofa with my feet up in front of the fire, the dog dreaming on the floor, and Summer using me as a pillow, was an entirely different way of doing business. If anyone had told me I could be this at ease prepping for a meeting with Archie Banks, I’d have told them to get their brain checked.

And it had an unexpected side-effect. Usually after a research session, my jaw aches from clenching and my shoulders are knotted from tension. But when I closed my laptop this time, I didn’t have a twinge anywhere.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t disappointed when Summer eventually woke and said she needed to go upstairs to her studio to finish some work while I carried on with mine. I was also a bit concerned she might be using that as an excuse to avoid any mention of what happened between us last night.

For the few hours we were apart I felt a strange emptiness, as if I’d forgotten something incredibly important.

When she emerged, I decided to mark our last snowed-in evening together by tucking into the box of gourmet goodies I'd brought as a wedding anniversary/housewarming gift for my aunt and uncle.

“Okay, what have we got here?” Summer stands on tiptoes as she opens the flaps on the box and peers in. “Oh, and ready-chilled.” She grabs one of the two bottles of champagne and checks out the label. “Means nothing to me, but I’m assuming this is good.”

I smile and nod. “Yes, it’s excellent. Not expensive or fancy. But excellent. Made at my friend’s vineyard.” I open a couple of cabinet doors looking for glasses. “Do you have any champagne flutes anywhere?”

She puts the bottle on the counter. “No idea. When do you think the last time I had champagne was?”

“When was it?”

“Urgh, never mind.” She sighs and peers back in the box.

“Let me guess, it was with the guy who was a tool?”

She ignores me and lifts out a gift-wrapped basket of smoked salmon, gourmet cheese, crackers, olives, and fancy condiments.

“This, right here, is dinner,” she says with delight as she unwraps the crinkly cellophane, then scrutinizes the labels on the jars. “Triple Ale Onion Spread, and Balsamic Fig Mostarda.”

She looks from the jars to me. “What the hell is mostarda?”

“Not a clue. My assistant put it together.”

She gives the jar of olives a sharp shove to the back of the counter and screws up her nose.

“What’s up with the olives?” I ask.

She looks at me through narrowed eyes, like she’s suddenly suspicious. “You like them?”

I shrug. “Of course.”

“Then you might have to leave and take your chances with the snow.” She points at the olive jar like it’s committed a crime. “Because they are the work of the devil.”

The passionate level of her dislike is endearing and hilarious.

“Don’t you laugh.” She turns her pointing finger to me. “No sane person would put something that tastes like a salty eyeball in their mouth.”

“That is definitely the most passionate anti-olive reaction I’ve ever witnessed.” I shake my head at her adorableness. “Okay, well, olive hating aside, we can’t drink this fizz out of mugs.”

“Try the cupboard over the backdoor closet. Grandma kept some special things up there, as well as the emergency stuff like the radio.”

I reach up and open the cabinet door, but even at full stretch only the few things at the front are visible, so I pull out the steps from the closet. My mind flashes back to grabbing Summer around the waist when she almost toppled off them—the first time I touched her bare flesh.

“Oh my God, these look amazing,” she gasps.

“Found the chocolates?”

“Yup. Dessert!” she cries. “You found champagne glasses?”

The sounds of food being unwrapped and plates being placed on the counter emanate from the kitchen.

“Not yet. There are a couple of old maps, a box with a tea set in it, a pile of sketchbooks, and some coloring pencils.”

“Probably my drawings from when I was a kid. Bless Grandma for keeping those. God, this is the pinkest salmon I’ve ever seen.”

There’s an intriguing dark blue box with gold lettering on it right at the back of the cupboard. But it’s out of reach, and I can’t read what the writing says from here.

“Can you pass me some sort of a utensil with a long handle?”

“Why?”

“Oh, you know, thought I’d whip up a cake while I’m up here.”

I can almost hear her eyes roll. Then her voice suddenly comes from somewhere near my waist. “Here you go.”

I pull my head out of the cupboard to see her offering me a soup ladle.

“Thanks. There’s something at the back.” I scoop the cup of the ladle around the side of the box and pull it toward me. “This looks promising.”

The lettering is just visible enough through the thick dust for me to read it out. “Patrick Byrne and Lorna Ferguson. February 14th, 1965.”

Summer takes it from me, wipes it with her hand, and gasps. “I can’t cry again. I can’t keep crying. Honestly, I hardly ever cry at all. But, since you’ve been here, I cry all the time.”

I step down and wipe my hands on my jeans. “What is it?”

She lifts the lid and shows me two champagne glasses nestled in pink satin. “They were my grandparents’. From their wedding.”

“They got married on Valentine’s Day?”

She nods and runs her fingers over the glasses.

“So that’s tomorrow. Same day as my aunt and uncle’s wedding anniversary.”

Also the day I’ll drive away from Summer and she’ll disappear from my life forever.

“It’s probably a popular day for weddings.” She heads back toward the kitchen. “So not that much of a coincidence.”

“Yeah.” I kick the steps to fold them up. “And such a cliché. Valentine’s is the most ridiculous day of the year. No

one in their right mind would choose to get married that day.”

I turn toward the kitchen and she’s standing there staring at me. “It’s all well and good being cynical and unromantic and not believing in real love or...” She waves her hand dismissively, “Whatever it is you do or don’t believe in. But it’s pretty fucking horrible to say something like that about my dead grandparents.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean—”

Shit.

That was absolutely not what I meant.

But I guess it might have been what I said.

“Yes, you did.” She plants her hands on her hips. “You meant your aunt and uncle and my grandparents are four loser romantics who knew no better. They thought they were in love, but they can’t have been, because love doesn’t exist, so they’re being ridiculous. And their choice of wedding date wasn’t cool enough for you.” She makes a sarcastic peace sign, half closes her eyes, and sways her head from side to side.

“But in fact, Owen, the four of them prove you wrong, don’t they?”

I step toward her, but she thrusts her palm forward to stop me.

“The fact your aunt and uncle are celebrating thirty-whatever years of marriage, and the fact Grandpa couldn’t even go on living without Grandma, are proof it is possible for two people to be deeply in love with each other. And for it to last.”

She stares at me for a second, and even from this distance I can tell her eyes are welling up.

She presses a hand over her heart. “How could you say that about my grandparents?” Her tone’s shifted from anger to hurt. “You are precisely the cynical, insensitive asshole I thought you’d be, aren’t you?”

She bites into her top lip for a moment before speaking again. “You must be thrilled your aunt and uncle’s party has turned into a business opportunity for you, or you might have had to find a way to try to look happy for them.”

So now this is not only a monologue about living happily ever after, it’s a character assassination. We might have connected on a level that caused a whole bunch of new feelings to rampage through my mind and body last night, but she doesn’t know me well enough to make a judgement like that.

Not to mention it’s hard to accept a lecture on true love from someone who bases their life on being alone. It’s not okay for Miss Single And Independent And Needs No One to make out it’s only me who’s a cynic when it comes to romance.

“Oh, come on.” I take a step forward, closing some of the distance between us. “You think that stuff is as much bullshit as I do. You hide up here. Away from the world and everyone in it. Letting no one but your dog get close to you. Yeah, right, that’s a standard sign of a belief in true love.”

Summer’s face is now flushed as much with anger as with hurt. “I gave you a place to stay when you had nowhere to go. I took in a male stranger from the street. You repay me by losing my dog then being sarcastic about my grandparents, even though I’d shared with you how much they meant to me. That’s a special kind of heartless thoughtlessness.”

I bite my tongue to stop from pointing out I repaid her in mind-blowing orgasms too. Probably not a good time for that.

“Come on, Elsa.” She marches toward the dog and pats her on the back. “I’ve got work to do. Owen and his heart of stone can enjoy the smoked salmon by themselves.”

Both their backsides wiggle as they disappear up the stairs.

She is infuriating. How is it possible to feel so at one with someone so different from me? It makes no sense. We have nothing in common. Apart from a wild attraction for each other, obviously.

I try to shove away the nagging ache in my gut. If I didn't know better, I'd think it bore all the hallmarks of that "meant to be" sensation people talk about. But I've always known the "meant to be" and "you know when you know" and "love at first sight" bullshit is precisely that—bullshit.

I take a deep breath and my gaze drifts toward the light sprinkle of snowflakes falling against the black sky outside the kitchen window. For a moment there, I'd completely forgotten about the snow, and about my need to get out of here and prep for the meeting.

I look back down at her grandparents' wedding flutes and run my finger around the base of one of them.

I will never believe in all the mushy Valentine's Day nonsense.

But am I starting to believe in Summer?

SUMMER

I'm going to have to unpick the hat I've rage-knitted in the last hour. It's a mess.

And I'm starving. I should have grabbed the salmon when I stormed off.

My phone pings on my worktable.

IZZIE (8:14 PM)

Why have you still not replied??? Pleeaaaaaaase let me know you're okay or I'll have to head to your Arctic tundra to check on you. THAT's how worried I am.

When I finally checked my phone after napping on Owen's shoulder, there was a long list of texts from Izzie in various stages of distress—from wondering why I hadn't replied to the photo she sent two evenings ago, to panicking I was dead, to being relieved when "Mr. Google" told her our services were out and she realized that's why I wasn't replying. But then she worried I was snowed in and starving to death.

I should have gotten back as soon as the internet was restored, but I was consumed first by Elsa's vanishing trick, then the stupid fight with Owen.

ME (8:16 PM)

Sorry. Yes. Am fine. Been distracted. By a hot stranger lost in the snow.

IZZIE (8:16 PM)

Oh, thank GOD! That you're alive, I mean. But also for the hot stranger. Tell me all!!!

ME (8:17 PM)

Roads too bad to drive. I let him stay.

IZZIE (8:17 PM)

You let a strange man stay in your house???

ME (8:17 PM)

Yup

Also...

might have slept with him.

IZZIE (8:17 PM)

You did WHAT??? With a STRANGER??? Who you let stay in YOUR HOUSE??? You did that? YOU??? *angel emoji*

ME (8:18 PM)

I did. *devil emoji*

He's great. But also a rich dick. I think. Well, I know he's rich. Think he's a dick. But also might not be. It's hard.

Whatever he is, tomorrow he'll leave and start to fade into a weird blip of a memory.

If he's not a rich dick, that would make things worse. I mean, imagine if he really were the brilliant, funny, sexy guy who gives raging sofa orgasms that he led me to believe he was for a hot minute, but then leaves and I never see him again. It would be tragic. And no one needs that kind of tragedy.

So yeah, I'm going to go with rich dick.

Elsa nudges her nose into the part-made, unevenly patterned hat on my lap. She's bored of being cooped up in my studio.

The phone pings again. And at exactly the same time, there's a knock on the door. Elsa and I both jump—me because of the knock, Elsa because of me.

My heart races as my stomach drops—it's the first time that sitting in my studio has ever resembled being on a roller coaster.

I can't deal with him. I'd rather stay up here till tomorrow morning when he'll be gone, and then walk downstairs to an empty house and pretend this was all a fever dream that never actually happened.

"Summer?" Despite his voice being muffled by the wooden door, I can hear his hesitancy. Like he's worried I might yell at him again.

I rub Elsa's cheeks, bury my face in her ear, and whisper, "If we ignore him, maybe he'll go away."

"Could I come in?"

I stay still, as if not moving might make him think I'm not here, even though there's absolutely nowhere else I could be. Unless I climbed out of the window. Which I'm not ruling out.

"Just for a minute?" The sound of his voice makes me a little warmer. And that's incredibly annoying.

Why did the one man in the world to have this effect on me, have to get lost outside my house? Life was so much simpler without all this torment, without all the emotions that have been stirred up inside me over the last couple of days. Emotions that were much safer left undisturbed, like sediment at the bottom of my soul.

"Please?" That one word strains my already overstretched heart strings.

I whisper-ask Elsa, "What am I going to do about him?"

"Okay, I'll leave this here for you." The "you" cracks slightly.

And that's it. I'm done for.

The tremor in his voice flings open the door to my heart.

I fold. Cave. Surrender. Wave the white flag. Give in.

I rest my head against Elsa's and close my eyes in defeat. "Come in, Owen. Come in."

The door opens with his elbow pushing down on the handle. In one hand he holds a full champagne glass, in the other a plate of goodies.

Any resolve I had left crumbles in a split second. How can I be pissed off when he's brought me dinner, even though I yelled at him?

As hard as I keep trying to convince myself he's a dick, and that I can't wait to see the back of him, I know he isn't. I know he's smart, funny, ambitious, and wants to do some good in the world as well as make piles of cash. Add that to the backside, the shoulders, the dimple, and the skills I now know he has with the magical being in his pants, and I'm a lost cause.

Elsa immediately rushes over to sniff the food.

Owen lifts it out of her reach and holds the plate and glass out to me, his arms fully outstretched, like he's afraid to get too close. "I brought you these."

There's a slight question in his voice, like he thinks there's a chance I might tell him to stick the food where it will never catch sunlight.

Elsa cranes her neck and twitches her nose in the smoked-salmony air.

My heart warms at his thoughtfulness, while my belly screams for the contents of that plate. I push scraps of yarn, scissors, and knitting needles to one side and point at the empty space. "Thank you."

He puts everything down and crouches in front of me, his hand on my knee. A sizzle of anticipation runs up my thigh.

"I'm sorry it sounded like I was being sarcastic about your grandparents. I understand how much they meant to you." His voice is soft, low, and warm enough to melt every part of me if I let it. "Because I've never felt anything like they must have felt for each other, I guess the whole big love story stuff seems unreal to me."

He looks up at me under a pleading brow.

I'm in grave danger of being sucked into those sparkling brown pools of honesty and swallowed whole. I can't do this again. I'm already in trouble after the spectacular sofa experience. I can't let myself slip and fall into something even more dangerous than his eyes.

In need of a distraction, I reach for a cracker on which he's artfully arranged some sort of soft cheese, a curl of smoked salmon, and a blob of either the fig or onion fancy stuff. He seems to be good at everything—except dog-sitting, that is.

Ah, it's the onion one. The deliciousness in my mouth does its job, for a second, of taking my mind off the deliciousness crouched in front of me. Must focus on the oniony bits melting into the salmon and cheese on my tongue. And try to figure out what herb this is in the cracker. Anything to fight the desire to push my fingers through that thick brown hair.

“I know you hate everything I stand for.” Owen looks down at my knee as his thumb strokes back and forth.

The sizzles shoot higher up my inner thigh, causing a dangerous heat at my center. Distraction over.

But I can't let him seduce me. It was supposed to be a one-night-only thing. He was supposed to be gone by now. Doing it again would make everything even more difficult.

Maybe the champagne will do a better job of refocusing my mind than the food did. The bubbles dance up my nose as I take a sip.

“So, I was thinking,” he says.

Nope. Champagne's not working either. My legs have developed a mind of their own and are desperate to wrap themselves around him. I stick my feet to the ground like they've been nailed down. I reach for an octagonal cracker loaded with bleu cheese and a different condiment, which must be the fig one. Perhaps it will have magical powers of distraction.

“Since you made assumptions about me,” he continues, “because someone like me treated you badly. Maybe you could tell me what happened.”

He watches as I shove the cracker in my mouth. Some of the cheese smears against the side of my lip. Before my tongue can get it, he reaches up, wipes it off with his finger, and offers it for me to lick.

Well, it would be a terrible shame to waste fine bleu cheese.

I wrap my lips around the cheesy tip of his finger. I hadn't meant for it to be sensual, but my eyes are drawn to his like magnets and, as he holds my gaze, my tongue develops a will of its own, circling his fingertip until I've licked off every last scrap.

My lady parts throb in a way I didn't want them to throb again. Last night has to be a one off. That was the plan.

Owen's eyes close as I suck his finger and it pops from between my lips. The thrill in my belly flutters up to my chest.

He stands up, and the hard shape in his jeans makes me even more aware of the wetness in my underwear. He grabs the chair behind him and pulls it so close he has to sit with his legs spread to either side of me.

"I think it's only fair I get to hear the story about the man who caused you to hate me before you'd even met me." He trails his fingers up and down my thighs.

Good Lord, with him in front of me and the amazing food and champagne next to me, I'm seriously between a rock and a hard place. The hard place being in his pants.

Another sip of the champagne both chills and warms my throat. I cradle my grandparents' precious wedding flute with both hands—to keep them busy and stop me intertwining my fingers with his.

I guess I might as well tell him. Perhaps reminding myself why I stay away from men—particularly Californians with more cash than ability to drive in the snow—might take my mind off the deep, warm eyes looking up at me as if I'm the only important thing in the world.

And his delicious soft lips.

And the sexy way that bit of hair has fallen onto his forehead.

And the way all I want to do is jump onto his lap and straddle him.

Well, it's worth a try.

I take another sip of champagne. And a deep breath. "Okay. Not sure I've ever told the whole thing from beginning to end before."

He gives my thigh a squeeze that pushes the blood up to my pounding heart. "All the time in the world."

"I met this guy in college."

"Berkeley?"

"Yes. He was in law school."

"When?"

"My first semester."

"Wow, you mean you gave your whole college dating life to a guy who turned out to be a dick?"

It's hard not to stare at his ridiculously beautiful face. "Are you going to keep asking questions?"

I pop another of the crackers from heaven into my mouth to give him thinking time.

He presses his lips together and shakes his head. His lips are even pinker when he releases them.

"Well, he kind of swept me off my feet," I say through the final chews of the mouthful. "God, this stuff is damn good." I point at the fig whatever-it-is on the plate and swallow. "Anyway, I was nineteen and from rural New England. He was twenty-three, smart, hot, athletic, and from a wealthy showbiz lawyer family in LA."

Owen raises his eyebrows. "Sounds quite the catch."

"Yeah, it was great for the first three years. Then he finished law school and moved back to LA to work in his

parents' practice. They do contracts for a bunch of movie and TV stars."

"So, they're loaded?"

"Yup. House in Beverly Hills. Beach house in Malibu."

Elsa lets out a sulky groan, and we both turn to look at her. She's given up staring at my plate and has sprawled on the floor.

"Go on." Owen taps my leg.

I take a deep breath and try to ignore the tingles racing up my thigh. "After he went to LA, I decided to take up knitting to keep me busy. A new cool yarn store opened in town, and my grandma had taught me the basics when I was a kid, so I thought I'd give it a try."

God, I want to hold his hands. Instead, I fiddle with my champagne glass.

"Well, like I said, my heart was never in accounting, and I got all caught up in the knitting."

His strokes inch higher up my thigh, closer to my butt. My chest vibrates and my hands shake a little. I should move. Or make him stop.

"I still studied hard, but every other moment I was knitting either in my room or at the shop. The owner semi-adopted me. And she taught me to design things too."

"Is she still there?"

"Yup. We've stayed friends. And now the internet's back I can ask her how to elasticize socks properly."

"Oh, I don't know," he chuckles. Even his chuckle is hot. Who has hot chuckles? "Crumpled around the ankle isn't a bad thing. Kind of like a sock-slash-leg-warmer hybrid."

I laugh with him, then stop suddenly when I realize my hand has developed a mind of its own and my fingers have somehow come to rest on his.

A flash of panic makes me hot all over.

Best I try to make out it was nothing more than a friendly gesture.

I pat his hand. A bit awkwardly. And pull away.

“That’s why you’re the businessperson,” I tell him. “Anyway, Alastair encouraged the knitting.”

“Alastair is the dick?”

“I haven’t gotten to the being-a-dick part yet.”

“Oh, I’ve been all-in on him being a dick from the start.” He slides his hands down and off my legs, leans back in his chair, and rests his fingers inside his jeans pockets.

That’s better. I wanted him to stop touching me. Much better. I’m not already missing his hands on me at all. Not one bit.

“So, yeah, I finished school and moved down to LA to live with him. He told me not to bother getting an accounting job because he knew I’d hate it, and said he’d support me while I gave knitwear design a go. So, I did.”

My body refuses to listen to my brain and screams to have Owen’s hands back on it.

He cocks his mouth up at one side. “You’re a terrible storyteller.” There’s the cheekiness that makes his eyes sparkle again. “How did you get from that perfect arrangement in LA to here?”

“Knitwear went well. I started a little label, sold to some one-off boutiques. And then one of Alastair’s clients, a young-up-and-coming actress, wore one of my cardigan-wrap things in an Instagram photo. Overnight it went bonkers.”

“You can’t buy publicity like that. Well, you can. But didn’t.” He pauses. “Sorry.” He gestures at me to go on.

“After that, Alastair’s parents started to get twitchy.” I need more champagne for this part. “They kept asking me to do their business accounts and offering to get me other accounting work from their friends. Knitting was too lowbrow for them.” I throw my nose up in the air to demonstrate their snootiness.

He laughs. “Is that what hoity-toity people do?”

“It’s what his mom does. She spends half her life looking like she’s sucking on a lemon.”

He reaches for a cracker, but I slap his hand away. “Hey, they’re mine for when I finish the story.”

He sinks back in the chair and smiles that smoking-hot, dimply smile again.

“She’d have been fine with the knitting if I made fancy things for fancy people and charged thousands of dollars for them. But I like making affordable things, so more people can enjoy them. What’s the point of making a three-thousand-dollar poncho for a Hollywood housewife who’ll only wear it once because God forbid she should be seen in anything twice?”

“So, she never really got you?” There’s a knowing look on his gorgeous face.

Oh, hell. Does that mean he thinks *he* gets me? He might, though. He actually might. He might be brilliant, cheeky, sexy as all hell, and get me. Well, he’s definitely brilliant, cheeky, and sexy as all hell. And also he might get me. Shit.

“No, she didn’t get me. Or maybe she did, but didn’t like what she got. Whatever the reason, Alastair soon started piling on the same pressure. I assume because she made him. I refused to give in.”

My stomach lets out a loud rumble. I point at it. “Sorry, can’t wait till the end of the story.”

I pop in the cracker Owen almost took and chew it with my eyes closed, taking the moment to pull myself together. Blissfully yummy. I open my eyes to find him gazing at me with his head cocked to one side, like he’s looking at an abstract painting and can’t quite figure out what it means.

“Anyway, then he dumped me. Now he’s engaged to the actress who wore my wrap thing on Instagram. I guess that’s the punchline.”

“It’s not particularly funny.”

“It kind of is, though. Apart from the being heartbroken part. And then losing my grandparents right after.”

He leans forward, back into my orbit. Taking both my hands in his, he pulls them to his mouth, and presses his lips against them. “I hate that you were hurt like that.”

He looks at me like I can trust him. Like I can lean on him. It makes me all warm and glowy. I haven’t had anyone I could lean on in forever. I’ve propped myself up for as long as I can remember. It was my self-preservation plan—never rely on anyone, or need anyone, or want anyone again.

But maybe a little lean wouldn’t do any harm.

Two nights isn’t much different from one, right?

OWEN

I close my eyes and kiss the back of Summer's hands again.

The anticipation of what might be about to happen sets my heart racing with something I've never felt for a woman before—need.

Yes, I want her. Even more than I want my next breath. But I also *need* her. Like there'd always be a part of me that would feel it had been deprived of something incredibly special if I'm not naked with her within the next five minutes.

Yesterday was supposed to be a one-off. A never-again chance to have a mind-blowing experience with this remarkable and gorgeous woman with whom I have nothing in common, and with whom there's no possibility of a future.

The opportunity to share that moment with her, to be naked with her, to watch her face as she came, was a privilege I won't ever forget. And the memory will never be tarnished by trying and failing at a relationship. It will always be preserved, untainted, as one of the great moments of my life.

The possibility that it might be about to happen again makes me beyond fortunate.

I've never felt such a pull, such a deep-seated desire, for someone I should run a mile from. I will never be a free spirit like her, who enjoys life in the middle of nowhere. And she'll never want to live in a city again, never mind one in California.

But maybe, deep down, we're more alike than I thought. After all, she runs a thriving little business all by herself. And that might even make her more business-savvy than me. I'm not sure I would have gotten our company off the ground and made it such a success without Elliot.

I open my eyes, and the freckles on Summer's clear skin dance as she smiles. "You're kissing my hand." There's a soft, naughty, huskiness to her voice that vibrates through me.

"Would you rather I didn't?"

She drops her chin and looks up at me from under her lashes as she twitches her shoulders in the sexiest semi-shrug I've ever seen. "You leave tomorrow, right?"

"Yup."

She tips her head back to drain her champagne glass, revealing more of her smooth, soft neck. A smooth, soft neck that my lips need to touch, my tongue needs to tease, and my teeth need to nibble.

She plants the glass on the table with a firm *clunk*. "Like, for real leaving this time?"

"Yup."

"Okay." She looks at me out of the corner of her eye, with a flirty smile that has my cock straining against my zipper. "Well, until then, you can kiss whatever you like."

"That's not an offer I'm going to pass up." Without missing a beat I stand up, put one arm around her shoulders, one behind her knees and scoop her out of the chair.

Elsa immediately gets to her feet and pokes her nose into my leg. Summer reaches down and rubs her head. "It's okay, Elsa. He's not stealing me."

I press my lips to Summer's warm forehead. "Well, I am for a little while. But it's more of a borrow than a steal." And that's exactly how it feels, like we're borrowing each other for this moment in time, before returning to our real lives.

She wraps her arms around my neck as I carry her toward the bedroom.

My feet detect the instant change from hardwood floor to thick carpet.

I hold Summer over the large wrought iron bed with its tiny fairy lights wrapped around the headboard, and drop her onto a thick quilt that looks handmade.

"Whoa!" She throws her arms up and to the side and spreads her feet wide to form a star shape.

I've never seen a brighter star in my life.

I lie down on my side next to her and prop myself up on my elbow. “This was only supposed to be one time though, huh?”

I rest my hand on her belly just above the waist of her yoga pants and stroke the soft, smooth skin.

Even if I were to get to do this every night for the rest of my life, I can’t imagine the thrill of touching her would ever wear off. It makes my stomach backflip like an overenthusiastic circus performer, and my dick gets even harder as she reaches up and pulls my face toward hers.

Our lips come together in a perfect fit. Even though we’ve known each other only two days, nothing is awkward.

I tease her lips with my tongue, more gently than the unbridled lust of yesterday, and she welcomes me in for a long, deep kiss.

As I press myself against her leg, she pushes back against my hardness. My fingers glide up over her bare flesh to discover her breast encased in lace.

I pull back and smile at her. “You’re not always braless, then.”

“Not when I’m hoping to have company.” She smiles and runs her finger in a straight line down my nose, over my lips, and down to my chin.

Her eyes drift shut as I inch my way under the edge of the lace. “You had company yesterday too.”

Her breast is even smoother and softer than her belly.

“Yeah, but yesterday I thought you were a spoiled ass who was about to leave, so I didn’t care about sexy undies.”

“And now?” I find her pebbled nipple. The sensation of the delicate yet firm nub in my fingers and the sight of her back arching away from the bed are like lightening to my throbbing dick.

“Now, I think you’re a bit less spoiled. And a bit less of an ass. And you might be worth a bit of an effort. You’re still about to leave, though.”

I dip my head to her belly and plant a row of kisses from one side of her waist to the other, while I scoop the cup of her bra under her breast and free the tantalizing pink bud that's calling for my mouth.

Pushing up her T-shirt, I glide my tongue up her body till I find my prize and lock my lips around it. She sighs and arches again, pressing up against my mouth.

Seeing how much she likes it gives me a level of satisfaction that rivals my own pleasure.

She pushes her fingers through my hair as I continue the tongue circles and move my hand down to stroke her inner thigh. Her legs drop open slightly as I inch my hand higher and find her heat. My heart races for this amazing, unique woman who wants me as much as I want her.

She gasps, reaches for the hem of my T-shirt, and lifts it. I pop her nipple out of my mouth and raise my arms so she can pull it all the way off.

Then she skims her fingers across my bare shoulders, down my chest, and over both my nipples, leaving a trail of sparks behind. A fresh surge of desire rushes through me for the independent soul who needs no one, but right now wants me.

I'm consumed by the need to yank off her clothes and bury my face between her legs. But I want it to last longer than that. I want the warmup to go on and on until she can't bear it.

I dot kisses up the side of her soft, warm neck as I tease between her legs with gentle strokes.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders. "It's unbearable," she breathes.

"In a good way?" I ask, as I make my way up to suck on her ear lobe and bury my face in the coconut scent of her hair.

"Hell, yes." She pulls back a little and shifts her head to look at me. "I've never wanted anything as much in my life."

She holds my face and takes my top lip between hers, then the bottom, then strokes her tongue against mine as I slip my

hand inside her pants and into her underwear.

I disappear into the heady combination of the warm wetness on my fingers and the warm wetness of her mouth on mine, and when she reaches down and unbuckles my belt, it almost pushes me over the edge.

Pulling away to save myself, I slide down her body, and kiss that creamy belly again. But this time I inch her clothes down, my lips making contact with every new spot of flesh as it's revealed.

The excitement of seeing the blonde hairs is too much, I have to have her. I shove her pants and underwear down to her knees and bury my face in the soft downy patch.

“Hold on.” She lifts up on her elbows to look at me.

Oh, God, does she want me to stop? “Did I do something wrong?”

“Hell, no. But it's weird with my yoga pants stuck around my knees. I can't move my legs.”

She flaps them up and down like a mermaid and laughs.

Laughter during sex. A new one for me. A refreshing new one.

“That's easily solved.” I push them down and off her feet, along with her socks.

She lies back. “That's better.”

“You're telling me.” The sight of her naked lower half awaiting me makes my mouth water.

I lift one leg and kiss from the knee all the way up her inner thigh. Operating on instinct, my tongue laps at her center when I get there. The sweet taste of her, the sound of her moan, the tilt of her hips to my mouth, her sensitive nub under my tongue. Her pleasure is even more of a turn-on than my own.

While I circle her clit with my tongue, I find her entrance with a finger and slowly slip it inside as she sighs and bears down on my hand.

I want this to be the best she's ever felt. I try to forget about my aching cock pressing down on the bed as I concentrate on her, and only her, and ease in another finger, pressing upward until she gasps when I hit her most sensitive spot.

The sight of her rocking against me, eyes closed, one hand on her forehead, the other clutching at the quilt, is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

And then suddenly she breaks. Her inner walls contract against my fingers and her body arches and trembles. The waves crash over her as my tongue teases out the final ripples.

As she gets her breath back, she sighs and half laughs. "Christ, I might have blacked out for a second."

I rise on my knees to look down at her flushed face.

She reaches for my jeans again. "It is *so* your turn."

"I won't stop you this time."

She makes short work of pushing them down. And here I am, kneeling before her, my cock worshiping at her face.

I can't imagine anything better than her lips wrapped around me, but, as she dips her head, I pull her back by the cardigan that's somehow still there, and tug at the black T-shirt bunched up under her arms. "Can we lose all this first?"

"God, yes."

She makes swift work of them and sits in front of me in only her black lacy bra, one side still hooked under her breast.

I lean into her and stroke my dick against the silky soft skin. She pulls me closer and rubs the tip against her nipple. I have no idea what's going on inside my brain right now, but it feels like a mixture of shooting stars and confetti cannons.

I sink toward her. "You are unbearable."

She raises her eyebrows. "In a good way?"

"Fuck, yes."

My cock twitches with anticipation as she lowers her head. I'm about to feel her lips on me, her mouth on me, her tongue on me. Even the mere thought of it puts me on the verge of explosion.

She takes just the head into the warm wetness, and a loud groan I don't recognize resonates in my chest. As she swirls her tongue around the tip, it's more than I can stand. A fire burns in my lower back, and my balls tighten.

"It's too much. I need to come inside you." Against all my instincts I pull away from her mouth.

"Do you have another condom?" she asks.

I reach for my jeans at the bottom of the bed, make short work of grabbing a blue square from my wallet, and hold it up like a prize. "Last one."

"Better make it good then." She stretches up and teases my nipple with her tongue as I sheath myself, fumbling in my desperation.

"Need a hand?" she asks with a smile.

I regain control for the second it takes to roll it on fully. "All good."

I ease her onto her back and position myself at her entrance. She lifts her hips to meet me, and I slide the tip that was just in her mouth into her innermost warmth. Another groan bursts from me as I'm enveloped by her wetness. I'm consumed by every part of her—her body, her feisty independence, her desire to let me into her solitary life—even if it's only for this all-too-brief time.

As I inch inside her, I know I'll barely last. She gasps as I bury myself and, dear God, I hope I can take her with me one more time.

She breathes harder and rises with me as I slide my hand down and make contact with her clit, stroking in time with my movements. I can hardly hang on. The grip of her around me, the warmth of her, the wetness of her is crushing my willpower.

Summer lying under me, eyes closed, searching for her release, naked apart from a half-on bra, is the hottest thing I've ever seen. And it's my mission to make her come again. I must hold on.

Just as I'm on the verge of losing control, she groans and gasps. "Oh, God. Don't ever stop."

The sight of her climbing and climbing is a vision to behold. And when she comes undone against my finger and my dick, it's more than I can bear. I fly over the edge with her, our groans and cries blending into one.

It lasts. And it lasts. Holy fuck, it lasts.

When the waves finally subside, I sink on top of her, our damp chests thumping against each other, our aromas merging. She is part me, and I am part her.

How the hell am I supposed to get this woman out of my head when I leave?

As we finally catch our breath, her belly lets out a loud rumble.

"You still hungry?" I chuckle into her hair. I will never again be able to see a coconut without thinking of the scent of this mass of blonde curls.

She taps my backside with her heels and whispers into my ear. "If you move, I'll go grab the rest of the snacks."

SUMMER

“What the hell is that noise?” Owen mutters in a deliciously sexy, gravelly, barely-awake voice as he stretches and yawns beside me.

The sound of metal grating on asphalt outside is nowhere near as pleasant.

“Probably the plow,” I mumble, and curl into his warmth.

The comfort of his skin against mine is immediately replaced by the gut-churning realization this is the last time I’ll get to wallow in this heavenly sensation.

“The plow?” His voice is suddenly crystal clear and wide awake.

I fall back from him as he throws off the covers, runs to the window, and pulls back the curtains. The shape of his naked form, from his messy bedhead hair to his broad shoulders, firm butt, and worked-out calves, is a gorgeous sight I won’t see again.

My mouth goes dry. And not only because I’m dehydrated from finishing off the bottle of champagne last night.

Owen dashes back to his pile of clothes on the floor by the bed and pulls on his underwear and jeans. “Finally.”

The relief on his face knots my stomach tighter. He’s happy he can leave.

I force a smile. “Yeah. And in the nick of time.”

He leans across the bed and presses his sweet, delicious lips against mine. I melt into him. All I want to do is pull him down on top of me. But the kiss is all too brief.

“I’ll run downstairs and tell the folks I’ll be able to get there for the party,” he says. Then pushes off the bed and walks out the door.

A second after he’s vanished, his beaming face reappears. “And I’ll put the kettle on for you.” He grabs his T-shirt from

the floor and disappears again.

I roll over and ball the quilt, made by my grandma, against the twinge in my chest.

So much for my plan of one night—well, accidentally two—with a hot, passing stranger, who then leaves as I wave him off, thankful for the amazing sex and happy to go back to my glorious life of independent solitude.

The walls I've thrown up around myself this last year and a half are supposed to be tall, strong, and impenetrable. But this man has found a secret shortcut around them. Or dug a tunnel under them. Or thrown a rope over, hauled himself up, and dropped to the other side. Or some other physical feat of wall-breaching that I hadn't prepared for.

Him leaving wasn't supposed to cause my stomach to feel like it did that night in college after my first tequila shots, when Izzie had to hold back my hair for three solid hours. My throat wasn't supposed to sting like it's closing up around a giant cactus. And my chest wasn't supposed to ache like it's been hit by a wrecking ball.

I reach down and stroke my adorable pooch's side. "We've gotten over worse though, huh, Elsa? We'll be fine."

She lifts her tail and bangs it on the floor. I'll take that as a yes.

I pick up my phone from the nightstand. There's a series of texts from last night.

IZZIE (8:17 PM)

I bet it was HARD! *three eggplant emojis* *three cry-laughing emojis*

What's she talking about? I scroll back to my last message that she was replying to—I'd said I didn't know if Owen was a dick or not, and it was hard.

Yes, Izzie, hilarious.

There are four more messages after that, at varying intervals.

IZZIE (8:20 PM)

Tell me about him.

(8:27 PM)

Hey, where'd you go?

(9:03 PM)

Are you doing it again?

(10:43 PM)

You're doing it again, aren't you?!

I reply.

ME (7:17 AM)

I did it again.

But he's about to leave, so it'll all be fine.

Owen's laughter rings up the stairs as I make my way down and find him standing in the kitchen. The sound of his joy is both delicious and heart-wrenching.

But the upset and disappointment crawling around inside me is all my own fault. There's no one but myself to blame for this particular situation.

"Yes, Max," he says to his screen. "I promise not to get lost again. Be on the road as soon as I can. Oh, and tell Elliot thanks for staying up half the night to do all that research. I only just saw what he sent me."

He pauses, presumably while Max speaks.

"No." Owen snips. "I had an early night, that's all."

Owen's cheeks go a little pink as he pauses and listens before talking again. "I *do* get an early night sometimes. Anyway, got to go. See you all later."

The kettle whistles behind him. He spins around and turns it off.

"Hey," he says as I approach, his smile sparking his adorable one-sided dimple and lighting up his ridiculously warm eyes. "I was going to bring this up to you."

He drapes an arm around my shoulders.

I try to ignore how much it feels like it belongs there, but my hands shake a little as I open a cabinet and grab two mugs.

"Which tea?" I ask.

"None for me, thanks. Have to run. But I've been thinking." He kisses the side of my forehead with relaxed affection, like it's something he's been doing for years. "I could push back my return flight, and stop off here to see you again before I go home."

Oh, Christ. No. Don't make it worse. That would be like peeling off a Band-Aid agonizingly slowly, tearing out every individual hair one at a time. I need to minimize the pain and rip that sucker off fast.

I duck out from under his arm, my stomach tightening and my fingers going icy cold. "No."

One word. That's all I can manage.

Owen looks a little stunned by my brevity and harshness. "Oh. I thought it might be nice to—"

"There's no point." I turn to face him and swallow hard. "This was just a moment. Then you leave. And we won't see each other again. We both knew that." I pick up a box of teabags and examine it. It's less distressing to look at than Owen's furrowed brow. "It was great. But now you're going. And everything will be fine."

I toss a bag into my mug and lift the kettle off the stove. But I'm not concentrating, and slosh the water into the mug so hard that it splashes out onto my arm. "Ow. God." I drop the

kettle onto the counter and grab a tea towel to wipe the water off me. “Shit. Fuck.”

“Can I—” Owen reaches for me, but I turn away and run my arm under the cold faucet.

“It’s fine. You should get your things together and go.” I fix my eyes on the cool water bouncing off my burning skin.

He doesn’t move, arm frozen for a moment in mid-reach for me. As it falls to his side, his chin drops to his chest.

My skin numbs under the cold water.

Owen lifts his head, and I sense his eyes on me.

Then he turns and walks away.

My eyes sting. Must be from the burn.

Half an hour later, Owen’s feet land heavily on the stairs. I’d expected him to skip down and straight out the front door. But he appears slowly, gradually. First his feet, then thighs wrapped in snug denim, followed by that goddamn butt, and finally his beautiful, but downcast, face topped with hair still damp from the shower.

He swings his bag over his shoulder. “Okay. I was thinking —”

Absolutely no point finding out what those thoughts are, they’re bound to only make things worse. “I’ll help you clear the snow from around the car. So you can get out.”

I turn away, get off the sofa, and walk to the front door.

Suddenly, he’s right behind me, smelling of my grapefruit body wash again. It’s even more mouth-watering than the first time.

“Summer? Can we please talk? For a second?”

My eyes stay locked on my boots as I pull them on. “No point.”

I'm not putting myself through the torment of a long farewell. I can protect myself from that, at least.

I pull on my coat, ram my hat on my head, open the door, and wave him through ahead of me. There's no way I'm leaving him to shut the door in case he accidentally lets Elsa out again.

He stops next to the little hatchback and looks down at the wheels. "Yeah, I'll move some snow to give it a fighting chance."

I keep walking to the end of the drive to check out the lane. Good God, the plow has done a terrible job. Jesus, what the hell is Owen going to do?

"You can't take *that* thing out on this," I call back.

"What?" He slips and slides up the drive to me. "What's wrong with it?"

"Well, if you don't know, then you'll be even less safe on it than I thought."

He looks baffled.

"They've left way too much behind," I explain. "Either they were rushing to catch up, or maybe it was one of the faulty plows. Either way, the tires on that thing"—I nod toward his car—"won't cope with it."

"Oh, I'll be fine." He shakes his head dismissively. "I absolutely have to go. My meeting's tonight. The party's tonight. There's no more time."

He turns and heads back to the car. "Can I borrow a shovel to clear some of this hard stuff from around the wheels?"

I march up to him. "Look at those tires."

"They're fine," he says, opening the trunk and tossing in his bag.

"Fine if you're in California. Life-threatening if you're on a badly plowed road in New England in February."

He walks around next to me. "Honestly, it'll be fine. Could I please borrow a shovel?"

“No.”

He screws his face up at me. “*What?*”

I swing my arm to point at the lane. “You are not going out in this car, on that road.”

“Well, I have to. The clock’s run out. I have to get there to talk to Archie.”

“You’ll risk your life for a stupid deal and a stupid pile of stupid cash?”

He presses the heel of his hand against his forehead, screws up his eyes, and takes a deep breath.

The only way I can save him now is with a cold hard dose of reality.

“Do you not realize what you’ve done, Owen? You’ve overcorrected. You’ve spent so many years focused on escaping your parents’ casual attitude to money that you’ve taken it too far and lost all perspective.”

“I have to go. Elliot’s depending on me. The kids’ tech project depends on me getting the cash for it.”

The furrows on his brow are as deep as canyons. But there’s no way I’m going to let him out on snowy, slushy, icy roads in that ridiculous vehicle.

There’s only one solution. “I’ll take you.”

“What?”

“My truck will be totally safe.”

As much as I don’t like driving in these conditions, at least I know how. I thought it was funny when he told me he didn’t understand snow. But now it sounds like a death sentence. I have to do this. For his sake.

“No. You can’t. It’s not fair.” He looks at me like I’m the first person who’s ever offered to do him a favor.

“I am not letting you go in this. People die in this, Owen. My parents died in this. Remember?”

I swallow hard. I am not going to cry in front of him again. “It’ll take me a couple of hours to drive you there, then get back here. So I need to let Elsa out for a pee and grab my keys. I’ll be back in a minute.”

I walk toward the house and point at the garage. “Truck’s in there if you want to wait in it.”

“Summer.”

I keep walking. “You can call the rental company and throw some money at them to come pick up that death trap.”

“Summer,” he pleads.

I ignore him. I’m not listening to him tell me he’ll be fine again. Not when I know he’d be in a ditch before he got to the end of the lane.

This unexpected trip does mean I get to spend another hour or so with him, though. But that rips at my soul as much as it fills me with joy. All it does is prolong the agony.

“Summer, *please*.” He’s right behind me as I step inside the front door.

I bend to pull off my boots. “No arguments. I’m taking you.”

As I straighten, he takes hold of my shoulders and spins me around to face him.

The urgency of his touch and the closeness of his body stir me deep inside. Please don’t let him slam his lips on me right now, I’d never be able to stay strong and resist.

But he looks like he’s wearing a different face. His features, which have been full of swagger and self-confidence since he walked through the door three days ago, now appear tired, slightly panicked, and a little desperate.

His obvious worry nibbles at the edges of my resolve to keep my distance, but rather than smash my mouth against his, I’m overwhelmed by the need to calm and reassure him.

I take a deep breath and reach out to hold his hands as they hang at his side. “It’s okay. I’ll get you there. You’ll make the

meeting. Don't worry."

He squeezes my hands tight, his shoulders hunched, his face drawn and pale. "Come with me."

I laugh. "Well, I can't drive you there without going with you, can I?"

He shakes his head. "No, no. I mean, don't just drop me off and leave."

"What are you talking about?"

He has the same look in his eyes that Elsa gets when she's pleading for the last treat because she's worried someone else might get it instead.

"Come to the party. My aunt and uncle's party. Come with me."

OWEN

Come on, Summer. Come on. Say yes.

Her eyes light up, and she's on the verge of a smile that looks like it's about to turn into agreement. But, as if she suddenly comes to her senses, her lips morph into a tight line and the joy fades from her face.

She looks down. "Like I said, there's no point. Dragging it out will only make it worse."

The disappointment that crashes over me is more painful than I could have anticipated.

I know now that part of my heart would be left behind if I walk away from her.

But my brain is certain she's right.

In practical terms, there's no room in my life to be suddenly obsessed with a woman who lives thousands of miles away. And definitely no room for me to prioritize seeing her over getting together with Elliot and planning our strategy to land a life-changing investment. Yet, here I am, after less than three full days of knowing her, asking her to meet my family.

If a woman asked me to do that, I'd run—and Summer looks like she's about to. But right now, my heart is talking louder than my head. And for the first time in my life, I'm listening to it.

"Look, these last couple of days have been like nothing I've ever known. Walking away from this, what we have here, what we might have here, would be madness."

I'm gripping her shoulders way too hard, so I let go.

"I know it makes no sense. Of course I do. But we could take one step at a time. Tiny steps. See how each tiny step feels before trying out the next one." I take her hand. "The first tiny step could be instead of saying goodbye, you come to the party with me."

My head, my heart, my stomach clench as she looks up at me. The tension in her face fades, and the armor she's been wearing since this morning appears to crack a little.

If her answer's no, this will be one mightily awkward ride to my aunt and uncle's place.

I rub my face hard with my free hand, as if it might help me get a grip.

Summer's brow crinkles with concern. "You okay? You look a bit pale."

"Yeah, yeah. It's nothing." Only that I'm nuts about you, can't bear the thought of saying goodbye, and my heart might actually fall out of my body if I don't get to see you again. "Stressing about the meeting later, I guess."

She strokes my arm. "Well, let's get you there then. But I can't stay for the party because I can't leave her." She points at Elsa.

"*That's* why you won't come?" A flutter of hope ripples my belly. "The only reason?"

She steps closer and nods.

All my muscles relax and my lungs release a giant heaving breath. I hadn't realized how tense every part of me was till right now. Jesus, the only reason she hesitated was she didn't want to leave the dog.

"If you mean it, if you really mean it, I would like to take a tiny step with you." She smiles. "But Elsa couldn't go without the bathroom until I got back late tonight. Or without her dinner."

She rubs her toe into the doormat. "But even if we both want to, we know it's not the best idea anyway."

She's right.

Of course she's right. I live on the opposite coast and have no time for a relationship. She lives here and doesn't want one. On paper, you couldn't evaluate it as anything other than a truly terrible idea.

But our connection overwhelms the theory. The glow that radiates from her can't be categorized on a spreadsheet. And the desire to trace my tongue over every inch of her smooth, delicious, soft skin would be off any chart.

"Maybe not." I shrug. "But it might be fun. And it's only one evening."

"Only one evening?" She laces her fingers with mine and her mouth turns up at one corner. "Think I might have heard that before."

I cup her beautiful face with my other hand and stroke my thumb across her cheek. Her skin is still cold from being outside. "Yup. And it was your idea the first time. Now it's my turn."

Elsa pushes her nose between us.

I ruffle her head. "Oh, hell. Bring her."

"Seriously?"

I rest my forehead against Summer's. "Yeah, my aunt and uncle love animals."

She closes her eyes as a wide smile spreads across her face. I drop my mouth to meet those happy lips, the berry flavor of her lip balm mingling with her own sweetness.

"Okay," she whispers. "Let's try one tiny step into the bad idea."

She rubs one of the dog's ears. "Come on, Elsa. Road trip!"

The thrill and relief of knowing I get to spend the rest of the day with her warms me. I scoop my hands under her butt and lift her off the ground. "Good decision."

She laughs. "Yeah, but it's still a terrible idea in the long run."

I kiss the end of her chilly nose. "Maybe. But I'll take a good-for-now idea."

As her feet hit the floor, she looks like she thought of something. "Oh, and I'll have to grab a change of clothes to

take. I can't go to a party in this."

She gestures from her head to her feet and screws up her face, which only makes it look even more adorable.

"Yeah, all you need to pack is the socks that won't stay up and you'll be good to go."

She play punches me on the arm. "I can do way better than that."

She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively and stretches on tiptoes to plant a deliciously light peck on my lips. If we didn't have to hit the road, I'd help her out of what she's wearing right now.

"I'll go throw some things in a bag." She skips off.

An equally happy and wagging Elsa trots after her.

"Seriously, Elsa. Please stop." I wipe dog saliva from the side of my neck for what feels like the four-hundredth time since we hit the road.

Apparently, Elsa likes to ride on the back seat of the truck with her head between the seats, and I seem to be blocking her usually clear view.

Summer chuckles as she keeps her eyes focused on the road ahead.

I prod her shoulder. "Don't dare tell me again that it means she likes me."

"But she *does*. Anyway, we're almost there."

Farmhouses appear on either side of the road, the first buildings we've seen for about half an hour.

"This is the start of Blythewell," Summer says. "What are we looking for?"

I check my phone. "Max's instructions say, 'Through the village and out the other side.'"

Gradually we pass more and more buildings. And they change from agricultural barns to country homes. Some brick, some clapboard. All look like they were painted yesterday.

“Are shutters compulsory around here?” I ask, as Elsa finally takes the hint and leans against the back seat.

“It’s pretty cute. My grandparents used to bring me here for ice cream sometimes when I was a kid. It’s even nicer on the other side—more heritage homes there. Your cousins picked a nice spot to set up their parents for retirement.”

We enter the center of the village with stores on either side. It’s pretty cute. A coffee shop, bakery, florist, a general store, something with a window full of baskets called Nellie’s Charms—all the staples of country life.

The other cute thing about my view is Summer’s profile against the low winter sun.

“We’re almost through the village,” she says. “Where next?”

I drag my eyes away from my gorgeous driver and read the next line of Max’s note. “‘First right after the clock tower,’ which I guess is *that*.” I point at a wooden tower covered in carved flowers on an island in the middle of the road, then go back to the instructions. “He says, ‘Then second left. Narrow path, careful you don’t miss it.’”

I sigh. “It can’t ever just be ‘first right, second left’ with Max. There always has to be something like ‘careful you don’t miss it.’ As if everyone but him has the potential to fuck up.”

As Summer turns right, I take in the pub on the corner. “The Frisky Ferret. Good name.”

She points at the yarn shop on the opposite corner. “More importantly, that place has the best kettle-dyed yarn.”

Beyond the buildings, there are fields to the right and a hill on the left.

Light snowflakes start to fall and Summer turns on the wipers. “Well, there’s first left.” She nods toward a road behind the knitting store.

“Second must be there.” I gesture a little way ahead to a gap in the fence that runs alongside the road. “It does look narrow.”

Summer hits the brakes to stop us overshooting. It flings Elsa forward off the back seat, and her nose rams into the side of my face.

“Sorry, folks.” Summer laughs, as I rub my cheek and Elsa climbs out of the footwell and back onto the seat.

“Did Max mention it was steep?” She drops the truck down a gear as we climb the hill. “At least the gravel gives us some traction.”

She leans forward, grips the steering wheel, and concentrates on the road ahead as the wipers swish the snowflakes back and forth. “Where are the houses, though? Do you know what number we’re looking for?”

“Oh, it doesn’t have a number. It’s the only one up here. This path ends at the house.”

We curve to the right and a pair of huge wrought iron gates, in a high wall around what is presumably my aunt and uncle’s new home, come into view.

Summer jerks the truck to a sudden halt.

She looks like she’s seen a ghost. Her mouth hangs open as she points at the gates with a trembling finger. “Is *that* it?”

“I guess.” I read the plaque on the stone pillar to the right of the gates. “Blythe Manor. Yeah, this is it. Are you okay?”

She says nothing, so I tap my phone and call Max who picks up halfway through the first ring. “Hey, we’re here.”

“About fucking time,” Max says, then hangs up.

Summer is frozen, statue-like, as the gates drift open to reveal a sweeping circular driveway with a large sculpture of dancing cherubs in the center. Behind it is a wide, three-story, stone manor house with steps up to a shiny, dark green front door at its center.

Summer still doesn’t move.

“Max has opened the gates,” I tell her. “We can go in.”

The truck doesn't move.

I stroke her thigh. “Are you okay?”

“I'm not going in there.”

“Why not? It's just my aunt and uncle's house.”

She jabs her finger toward it. “That, is not *just* anything.” She looks from the house to me and back again. “*Look* at it. Have you spent so much time around piles of cash that this is ordinary to you?”

Ah, now I see the problem. “I know what you're thinking. And they're not like that.”

She slams the truck into reverse. “You can get out here. I'll head home.”

I pry her white-knuckled fingers off the shifter and wrap both my hands around them. I can't allow her ex to have ruined her for me. “It won't be like you imagine.”

“You have no idea what I imagine.”

“Yes, I do.” I plant a gentle kiss on the back of her hand. “You think everyone in there is a rich ass who's going to treat you as shittily as Alastair and his awful parents did.”

She slumps back and leans her head against the headrest. Elsa stretches forward and nuzzles her hair. Summer tickles her under the chin. “It's okay, we're going home now.”

I twist around as far as I can to face her and sit up tall. “At least come and meet them for a few minutes. Please. Then you'll see everything's fine. One tiny step at a time, right?”

She looks down and shakes her head.

I need to show her how wrong she is about my family. “Okay. But it's too narrow to turn around here. And you can't reverse all the way back down this steep path. You'll have to circle the driveway. So, you might as well drop me at the door.”

“I'm not meeting them. If that's what you're trying to do.”

She sees right through me, and she's on the verge of a smile.

I pout and shake my head. "Nope. Not at all."

"Hmmm." She peers through the windows and assesses the distance on either side. She rolls her eyes. "You're right. I don't have much choice but to drive up there."

As we crunch up the driveway, she side-eyes Max's and Elliot's sports cars, which are each probably worth more than her cabin.

She stops the truck outside the front door and turns to face me, her eyes full of disappointment.

This might be the end. She looks like she's about to say farewell forever. A wave of hot panic runs through me. I'd thought I had all evening to work on how to make this not be goodbye, but now all I can do is open my mouth and hope the right words fall out.

Summer turns and looks toward the creaking sound coming from the huge front door.

Aunt Maggie's smiling face appears. Perfect timing! Now Summer will realize how normal and non-assholey they are.

Maggie's face is pretty much the only thing I recognize about her, though. The woman I've rarely seen wearing anything but gardening clothes emerges in a long, blue evening gown and looks like she's spent most of the day in hair and makeup.

She hitches up her dress and tiptoes on her heels down the steps, through the dusting of snow, and to the truck, a relieved smile on her face. "Owen. Finally!"

I fumble to wind down my window—it takes a moment to realize it uses an actual crank, not a button—as she waves her hand at the pickup and shrieks, "What are you doing in *this* thing?"

My eyes dart to Summer, whose usually soft, warm face looks like it's made of cold, hard steel.

SUMMER

Normal, my ass.

If the first words out of this woman's mouth are to mock my truck, it says everything I need to know about her.

I'll take my well-loved vehicle over the two soulless penis extensions parked in the driveway any day.

Maggie grabs Owen's face through his open window and slaps a kiss on his forehead, then reaches past him and extends her hand to me. "You must be the lovely Summer. I'm Maggie."

I take her hand, which is rough for someone with such polished nails.

"It was rude of me to smother Owen before I introduced myself," she says with a bright smile. "But I haven't seen his face on anything but a screen for two years." She pinches one of his cheeks. "Two years!"

Owen winces.

Maggie pats the side of the truck. "And kudos for getting him to ride in a pickup. He hasn't been in mine since he was a kid. Always had his heart set on higher forms of travel." She steps back to give it a nose-to-tail once-over. "Yours is in much better condition than mine, though."

She has a truck?

"That's because it's still the one I wouldn't get in as a kid," Owen says.

She has an *old* truck?

"Because it's still perfectly serviceable." She shakes her head at him. "Well, apart from being in the shop for a new muffler right now. But waste not, want not, young man."

She's careful with money?

Maggie tiptoes around the front of the truck, snowflakes floating around her. Owen takes my hand between both of his, like he did that first night on my porch. And the exact same quiver runs through me.

“You like her, don’t you?” he says with an I-told-you-so expression. “I knew you would.”

“Well—”

My door swings open, and Maggie appears at my side. “Come on in, my love,” she says.

“Oh, it’s okay, I’m not—”

“My, oh, my!” Maggie gushes, as Elsa shoves her head between the side of my seat and the open door. “Who is this with the cute, cute face?”

Okay, maybe I do like her a bit.

“That’s Elsa. But you should stand back. You won’t want a wet nose and dog hair all over you.”

Maggie grabs Elsa’s face and gives it a rub. “Oh, I think this one is worth more than a silly dress. Damp patches will dry, hair will brush off.”

Elsa’s tail beats against the back seat.

“Let’s get all three of you inside,” Maggie says.

I have a brilliant, gorgeous man stroking my hand on one side and his aunt, who’s becoming more adorable by the second, on the other. It’s hard to believe what’s happening here could be real. After shutting myself away all this time, can I even allow myself to believe this might be what I want? And allow myself to give into it?

Just one step, right?

One tiny step.

I smile at Maggie, squeeze Owen’s hand, and take a deep breath. “Okay. Thank you.”

“I hear you’re a knitter,” says Maggie, who now has a layer of white flakes on her head. “If we get a minute, maybe

you could help me figure out where I'm going wrong with the scarves I'm making for the animal shelter fundraiser. I haven't knitted for years, and everything's coming out a bit wonky."

Knitting and animals in the same sentence. It's like being wrapped in a cozy blanket by someone who knows how to create a loving family.

"I'd love to help."

"Excellent." Maggie steps back. "Now let's go. I'm freezing in this ridiculous dress."

I turn to kiss the top of Elsa's head. "Back in a bit."

"Don't be silly," Maggie says. "Bring her in."

"Oh, I couldn't. She'll make a mess."

"My love, you have no idea how much I miss the sound of paws on the floor and picking dog hair out of my dinner. It's been four years since we lost Billy, and I could still shed a tear for him at any time."

Owen appears, drapes his arm around Maggie's shoulders, and looks at her with warmth in his eyes. "Billy was a menace."

Maggie slaps him on the chest.

"Because he knocked you over in front of a cute girl when you were about fourteen."

Owen's eyes are wide with mock outrage. "And broke my leg."

I put my hand over my mouth to hide a laugh. "Well, if you're sure about Elsa, that would be great."

When I open the truck's back door Elsa hops out and immediately rushes at Maggie, leaving a long damp doggy snot smear right across her dress.

"Oh, God. I'm sorry." I grab Elsa's collar and pull her off before she can do any more damage. "It's so beautiful."

"Thank you." Maggie straightens the skirt. "I borrowed it for the party. Had no intentions of putting it on till the last

minute, but Max had a photographer come take pictures to mark the occasion. They came with a hair and makeup person too.” She taps the back of her updo, knocking off some of the snow. “So now I guess I’m stuck in it till bedtime. Anyway, I’m very happy you were there to take in Owen in his hour of need. We thought he must have found a hotel to ride out the blizzard in.” She points her finger at him. “I do hope you’ve shown Summer your appreciation.”

He cocks his head to one side and looks at me. “Well, I’ve tried my best.”

I have to turn away or my cheek redness level will shoot up from rosy to neon cherry.

Elsa strains on my arm, desperate to get closer to Maggie. “Is it okay if I take her for a little walk? She always needs a quick run-around to stretch her legs and burn off a burst of energy after being cooped up in the truck.”

“Of course. Help yourselves to the grounds. We’ll be in the kitchen, at the back of the house. Come around there and let yourself in the French doors.”

I pull Elsa’s favorite orange ball from my pocket and finally get her attention.

Owen rubs Maggie’s arm. “What’s the deal with the, er, delightful fountain?” Owen arches a brow at the concrete centerpiece in the driveway.

She turns back to me. “Those hideous... *things*.” She points at the pile of cherubs. “The previous owners had some sort of cherub fetish. They were everywhere. That monstrosity is the last to go. We have to wait for a big truck to come and haul it away.”

She walks up the steps with Owen, takes his elbow with one hand, and waves to me with the other. “French doors to the kitchen. Whenever you two are ready!”

I smile at Elsa, whose bright eyes remain firmly fixed on the ball, like lasers locked on their target. “She’s quite the character, huh, Elsa? And she likes you. So, I think we’re good. Okay, here you go.”

I toss the ball on the lawn to the left of the house, and Elsa takes off after it like it's her life's work. Which I suppose it is.

I follow her across the wide expanse of snowy yard that stretches to a line of trees inside the surrounding wall.

Elsa darts back and drops the ball at my feet, then looks from me to it and back again. Another throw and off she goes. I stroll along the side of the house and look up at its beautiful, towering, gray stone wall. In other hands, this place could be imposing, but it's warm and welcoming in Maggie's.

Elsa gets half-a-dozen more throws to stretch her legs and tire her enough to be well-behaved.

"Okay." I tell her as I pick up the ball again. "Last one. Then we'll go inside, and you can see the nice lady again."

While she chases, I round the rear corner of the house.

Wow.

A wide patio runs across the back, with steps down to a formal garden that resembles something from a magazine. If it looks this pretty now, in the dead of winter with nothing flowering, I can't even imagine how spectacular it must be in full bloom.

Beyond that, the vast lawn sweeps away and slopes toward a lake.

A lake.

They have a lake in their backyard.

Is it a backyard? What do you call something this big? An estate, maybe?

The whole estate is bordered by trees that look like they've been here a hundred years. And on the other side of the lake, there's enough of them to form a small wood.

At the far end of the patio, Owen and two other men huddle together with their backs to me as they examine an enormous and extremely fancy grill like they're doctors assessing a patient. It must be a pretty special piece of equipment if they've ventured out to admire it in this

extremely non-barbecue-y weather. The snow's falling a little heavier now.

Elsa jabs her nose into my side. Apparently, I hadn't noticed the ball at my feet.

"Time to go inside." Her shoulders almost sink with disappointment when I pick it up.

But ever hopeful I might rethink my decision to end the game, she trots alongside me, staring at the ball in my hand, as we make our way alongside the wall of windows toward Owen.

I glance inside, where Maggie leans on the counter of a huge open-plan kitchen and dining area that runs the full width of the house. At the far end, there's a fireplace and a sofa. Maggie seems like the sort of person who could create a cozy spot anywhere. She's watching the guys at the barbecue, but as soon as she catches me out of the corner of her eye, she smiles, waves, and points at the French doors a little way along from where I'm standing. She straightens and beckons me in.

I try the handle, but it won't budge. Pulling doesn't work. Pushing doesn't work.

Jiggle it. Nothing.

Tug it back and forth. Nothing. Just rattles the glass.

It's as stuck as if it had been nailed shut.

Maggie sees my struggle, and I just about make out her muffled shout of, "It sticks a bit."

She totters toward me as I make one more effort to get it to shift, and ram the door with my shoulder.

But as she's almost within grasping distance of the handle, one of her heels slides along the tiles. If her dress weren't long enough and slim enough to stop her, she'd be doing the splits right now.

Skidding like Bambi on ice, arms windmilling, she manages to right herself and lunges for the door at the exact moment it finally budes under the force of almost my entire body weight.

It flies open with me right behind it.

There's nothing I can do to stop the momentum.

I don't know if that screaming noise is coming out of my mouth or is only inside my head. But I do know with horrifying inevitability what's about to happen. It's like watching a car crash in slow motion and being powerless to prevent it.

As Maggie lurches forward and grabs the handle to steady herself, the door, with me still firmly attached to it, slams into her face.

She flies backward and lands hard on her backside, her mouth open, eyes wide and glazed.

Oh, no.

Oh, no, no, no-no, no.

SUMMER

My stomach twists as I freeze to the spot and stare in disbelief at Maggie sprawled on the floor, holding the side of her face that I slammed the door into.

My blood runs cold. Then hot. Then cold again.

It feels like a herd of horses is galloping across my chest, and my hands are shaking so much there are tremors up my arms.

I can't render Owen's aunt unconscious right before her special party. Or at any time for that matter. I'd prefer her to always remain conscious. This would just be extra-bad timing.

As I try to absorb the scene and the fact I'm responsible for it, Elsa barrels past me, leaving a trail of snowy footprints on the newly tiled floor. She barks excitedly, and runs straight up to Maggie, whose face is at perfect licking height.

Regaining feeling in my legs and discovering they do still work, I run in, crouch at Maggie's side, and push Elsa away. Not only have I almost knocked out Owen's favorite relative, but my dog is slobbering all over her.

"Oh, my God. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

What a ridiculous question—of course she's not okay. I whacked her in the face with a door. And now, with a will of its own, the door slams shut behind me with such force that I jump and my brain pictures the glass shattering into a thousand shards, along with my hopes of any sort of a relationship with Owen.

I look over my shoulder to find the glass thankfully intact. But staring at me through it is Owen, flanked by the other two guys. My stomach tightens. Owen must be horrified by what I've done to his beloved aunt.

I turn back to Maggie and rub between her shoulder blades. "Is your back okay? Did it hurt when you landed?"

There's muffled chatter outside as the door rattles in the frame behind me. I guess they can't open it again either. At least it's not only me. That's something.

Elsa thinks this whole sitting-on-the-floor thing is a great new game and shoves her nose back in Maggie's face.

"Elsa, off." I give her my sternest stare and point away. She backs off to give us some space.

"This is awful. I'm so sorry." How the hell do I make up for this and put it right? "Do you think you can get up?"

"Oh, yes, yes. I'm fine." Thank God, she's talking. "A little winded. That's all. And shocked. But puppy kisses help. No need to send her away."

She's pale and dazed.

If only I'd gone with my gut, dropped off Owen, and gone back home. If only I hadn't let myself believe that taking the one tiny step of coming inside was worth a try. If only I'd stuck to knowing that being home alone is the best way to live.

Owen raises his voice through the glass. "Are you okay?"

I might be about to puke. Right next to the woman I almost knocked out and who's covered in my dog's saliva.

Maggie dismisses Owen's concern with a wave as she tries to get up. "Fine. Fine," she calls back.

I put one hand on my belly to suppress the stress-vomit reflex and my other arm around Maggie to help her up. "Let's sit you down."

I pull a chair out from the dining table and ease her into it. "Can I look at your head?"

She moves her hand away. The skin's not broken. That's a relief. But it is red and already starting to swell.

"There is a bit of a lump. Is it okay if I get some ice from the freezer for you?"

"Okay, yes. Maybe that would be good. Thank you." She manages a thin smile and gives my arm a little pat.

I glance back over to the door as one of the men with Owen, a guy about my age and wearing glasses, eases Owen aside and tries the handle himself. Maybe that's Elliot.

The other man looks like he doesn't belong. The polite term for him would be "portly". He's a bit red in the face, and the gold chain around his neck looks so heavy I'm amazed he can stand. He turns away and shakes his head, clearly not impressed by the farcical scene before him.

I can't believe how much I've let Owen down. How could I be so clumsy? He must seriously regret bringing me here.

I grab a glass from a shelf over the sink, and a tea towel from the counter, and head to the ice dispenser in the fridge door. Momentarily daunted by a control panel more fit for launching a rocket than summoning lumps of frozen water, I hold the towel under a large button with a snowflake on it and hope for the best. Thankfully, chunks of ice fall out.

Not wanting to push my luck, I fill the glass from the tap.

"Here you go." I set the water beside Maggie and gently press the makeshift ice pack to her temple. She suppresses a wince as she takes it from me. "Thank you."

As she sips, color starts to return to her cheeks, and she manages a smile. "This is why I never wear high heels."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure this was nothing to do with your footwear and everything to do with me being unable to figure out the simple task of opening a door."

"Not your fault at all. It's been a problem since it was installed. They're supposed to come back to fix it."

Our heads turn simultaneously as a tall, dark-haired, serious-looking guy in a suit strides into the kitchen. He furrows his brow at the three faces on the other side of the windows.

"Fuck's sake. Walk around," he booms at them as he jerks his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the front door. Then, with a shake of his head, he mutters, "Bunch of idiots."

Let me guess—Max?

He marches over to us and squats at Maggie's side with his hand on the back of her chair.

"I heard a commotion from upstairs. Are you okay, Mom?" He shoots a glance toward Owen and the other two men as they walk off. "Doesn't look like they're much help."

Elsa trots over, tongue lolling. I grip her collar and hold her tight to my side, certain that getting hairs or drool on this guy's suit would not do me any favors.

"I'm fine," Maggie says.

She pats the hair on the opposite side of her head from where she's holding the ice pack and smiles. "Just took a little tumble and got a bit rearranged. Anyway, meet Owen's new friend Summer who saved him from the blizzard." She turns to me. "Summer, meet Max. My eldest and most in charge son."

He gives me a quick, businesslike "Hi."

He couldn't seem less interested. Not like he's looking down on me, but like he couldn't give a crap who I am or why I'm here.

He turns back to his mother. "Dad'll be down in a minute. He's having a bit of trouble tying his bowtie."

Maggie drops the ice-filled tea towel on the table and starts to get out of her chair. "I'll go help him."

Max places a firm hand on her shoulder and eases her back down. "Nope. I'll take care of it. You rest here."

She looks in him the eyes and sighs. "You know he'd rather I do it."

"Well, he's going to have to put up with help from me for once." He looks at me and points at the bits of Maggie's updo that are no longer up. "Could you help fix that?"

So he's interested in me now he thinks he has a use for me. If only it was something a little more in my skill set.

I laugh and point at the pile of wayward curls growing out of my own head. "Hairdressing isn't exactly my area."

He doesn't crack even the barest of smiles. "The stylist left for the day. And it's probably more your thing than mine. Or Owen or Elliot's."

Apparently, he's not much of a one for jokes. Or smiles. Or possibly joy of any kind.

He kisses his mother on the forehead and heads out, presumably to take charge of his father's tie.

Well, I guess it's the only chance I have to redeem myself, with Maggie at least.

I've let Owen down so badly. He must be mortified. He shows up with a woman he met three days ago, a woman from a completely different world than the ones these guys all inhabit, and look how I've repaid him. My instinct tells me to run away, back to the safety of my solitary life, and save him the trouble of asking me to leave.

But, for Maggie's sake, I should make an effort to fix her hair first.

I take a deep breath and plaster on a smile as I rescue three hairpins dangling from her disheveled 'do. "Okay then. Let's give this a shot."

"You are a sweetheart. Thank you."

I pick up a loose wave at the back of her head and try to wind it up to match the elaborate twirls that someone with actual skills has put in place. If no one looks too closely, it might pass. I tuck the end in and secure it with a pin. She jumps as I jab it too hard and too far.

"Oh, God, sorry. I'm making this worse, aren't I?"

If only the ground would open up and swallow me. And transport me back home while erasing my memory of Owen and everything Dashwood-related.

Maggie reaches around and taps me on the leg. "Not at all. I appreciate you trying."

In the distance, the front door creaks open and shut and a flurry of footsteps and voices gets closer until Owen trots through the kitchen door.

Half of me warms with reassurance that he's here to make everything better. The other half freezes with fear that his knitted brow means he regrets ever inviting me.

He looks from his aunt to me. "Are you both okay?"

The tightness in my chest eases when he approaches and places his chilly hand on my back. It floods me with reassurance, and I'm finally able to take a deep breath. It has to be a good sign that he's asking if I'm okay, too, and touching me, rather than instantly banishing me from the premises.

The guy with glasses appears behind him with a perplexed expression. "What happened?"

Bringing up the rear, Gold Chain Man blows out a loud breath that ripples his lips like a horse. "You simply can't get good—"

I don't catch the rest, because Owen, eyes wide, breaks into a loud coughing fit as he spins on his heels, puts his arm around the guy's shoulders, and hurries the bewildered-looking man from the room.

OWEN

My fake coughs might not have been Oscar-winning but thank fuck they were loud enough to prevent Summer from hearing what Archie just said.

I'm absolutely certain if I hadn't foreseen how he was about to end that sentence, and managed to drown out "You simply can't get good *staff these days*," there's no way Summer would still be here and trying to repair Aunt Maggie's hair.

At the very least she would have silently walked away, jumped in the truck with Elsa, and driven off, never to be seen again.

But, more likely, she would have given me a large piece of her mind on the way out. The gist of it being how she was right all along about people with money being superior pricks who view her as someone so unworthy of their company they'll always assume she's a maid and never consider she might be my date.

I threw myself into the pretend coughing so enthusiastically, it's triggered an *actual* coughing fit that I don't seem able to stop.

Archie whacks me on the back as we walk into the foyer. Maybe he's trying to help, but it only makes me worse.

"You okay?" he asks. "That came on suddenly."

"Yeah, Owen," Elliot says, following us out. "Do you have dog allergies or something?"

Thanks, El, that's a gift I can run with.

"Maybe, yeah. Now we're away from it, it's not so bad. Let's stay here." I grab onto the railing of the curved staircase and bend over as I try to pull some air into my lungs.

"Useless staff is one issue." Archie's voice bounces around the double-height hallway and off the antique-tiled floor, making my head rattle. "But bringing their dirty, hairy hounds

to work is taking advantage.” He jabs his finger toward the kitchen. “That one has got to go.”

Elliot starts to correct him. “Oh, Summer isn’t—”

I hold up my hand sharply to shush my cousin, and just about muster the breath to cut him off. “I think the coughing’s passed. Feel much better.”

I manage to straighten without losing control of my lungs. “Anyway, good of you to stop by early, Archie. Such a surprise.”

And not a good one. He wasn’t supposed to be here for several more hours. Elliot and I haven’t had a chance to do a dry run of the presentation. We sure as hell aren’t ready to pitch to him right now.

I hold out my hand as a subtle sign it’s time for him to shake it and leave. “Look forward to seeing you at the party later, when we all have time for a proper talk about our potential future together.”

“Yes, must dash,” Archie says. “Only had a minute. But, as I was passing, thought we could get the introductions out of the way.”

He grips my hand and crushes it. One of the many things I’ve learned in business is that men who try to exert their dominance with a bone-breaking handshake almost always turn out to be unpleasant company.

But if this guy invested, it would change our business, our lives, and the futures of underprivileged kids, who’d get hands-on experience with tech that could set them up for life. I owe it to Elliot and all the work he’s put in to build the business with me, and to the kids who are just like I was, to try to make it work with Archie.

“Look forward to your presentation,” he says. “I hope you’re going to dazzle me.”

As he releases my hand, he slaps my upper arm with such gusto I have to step sideways to keep my balance. I’ll check for a bruise later.

“I’ll head back to the hotel to *freshen up* with the little lady.” He winks. “If you know what I mean.”

He nudges Elliot, who responds with a smile that’s somewhere between uncomfortable and disgusted.

I pull open the front door to encourage Archie on his way, and find a chauffeur-driven Bentley at the bottom of the steps, engine purring. The driver is in full uniform, hat and all. Archie lives most of his life behind closed doors, so I’m not sure who these affectations are designed to impress. Maybe he enjoys showing off to himself.

“See you later, boys.” He stops by the side of the car and waits for the driver to get out, walk around, and open the door for him.

I close the front door and blow out a giant breath.

Elliot takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. “I’m more nauseated than when Mom tried to get me to eat cottage cheese when I was four.”

I shake my head. “Lord, help that man’s poor woman.”

“I expected him to be a bit insufferable.” Elliot replaces his glasses. “But I didn’t expect him to be one-hundred-percent loathsome.”

“Caught me completely off guard to see you with him when I walked in. I wasn’t ready for that at all.” And those words could not be more of an understatement. “Nice idea to take him outside and distract him with the grill.”

“Yeah, sorry. When he called to say he was at the gate and wanted to drop in for a quick hello before this evening, there wasn’t a way for me to say no. Or time to warn you.”

“Well, at least we know what we’re dealing with now. And we only have to put up with him for two or three hours. I’ll charm him, we’ll get his investment, and hopefully go back to dealing with his team instead.”

Elliot pushes his hands into his pockets and leans back against the wall. “As long as his investment doesn’t give him a say in how we do things.”

“I’ll figure it out. Don’t worry.” At least I hope I will.

Our concern is shattered by Summer, Maggie, and Elsa emerging from the kitchen.

Summer cranes her neck to look at the back of Maggie’s hairdo. “Well, I can’t tell you how awful I feel. I’m such a klutz.”

“You are a worrier. Entirely unnecessary. Complete accident. No harm done.” Maggie gives Summer a reassuring pat on the arm, then spots Elliot. “Elliot Dashwood, off the wall. The painters worked hard and did an excellent job, let’s keep it nice.”

He gives his mom a good-humored smile, and stands up straight.

I place my hand in the small of Summer’s back. It pains me to imagine how mortified she must be by what happened. “So, are you guys okay? No broken bones? All hair back in place?”

Summer gives me a thin smile and nods. “I’ve tried my best. But even my best hairdressing skills aren’t great.”

All I want to do is wrap my arm around her waist and pull her to me, in an effort to calm the worry I’m certain is simmering away inside her. But I satisfy myself with the way the curve of her back rests against my palm instead. “Summer, this is Elliot. My cousin and business partner.”

“And my youngest and most studious son,” Maggie adds.

Summer and Elliot shake hands and say their nice-to-meet-yous.

Elliot turns to his mom. “You know you have a bit of a red mark on your temple?” He taps the side of his own head to indicate its location.

“Nothing a little makeup can’t fix,” Maggie says. “More importantly, people will start arriving soon. So I’m going to show Summer to a spare room so she can shower and change. Not that she isn’t already completely gorgeous, of course.”

She beams at Summer whose face pinkens and I can almost feel her squirm with embarrassment.

“If the caterers and musicians show up while I’m gone,” Maggie continues, “please show the caterers to the kitchen, and tell the string quartet to set up over there.” She points to the side of the sweeping staircase and guides Summer to the first step.

As Summer moves away I immediately miss the warmth of her body on my hand. Any moment not spent touching her seems like a tragic waste of time.

“Owen, be a dear,” Maggie says, turning back toward us. “Bring her things in from the truck, would you?”

Summer’s eyes meet mine, and she smiles a smile that makes my heart soar. Christ it was lucky that I forgot to pack my charger. Imagine if I hadn’t gotten lost with a dead phone outside her cabin, and I’d never met her. I almost physically shudder at the thought. It doesn’t bear thinking about.

Yes, she’s the opposite of anyone I’ve ever thought I’d want to be with. But there’s something in her that’s caused a shift in me already. She makes me want to be the man she hopes I am. I’ve no idea if I have it in me to be as good a human as she is but, in this moment, I know I’m ready to try.

“Thank you,” Summer says as she turns and heads up the stairs with Maggie by her side and Elsa following.

She’s been here less than an hour, almost knocked out the woman of the house, and still been instantly welcomed with open arms into the bosom of the family. That says everything about the warmth and charm she radiates. I want to pick her up, take her back to San Francisco, and settle her into my penthouse. But I’m sure she’d run a mile at the thought.

I guess I don’t have to live in a characterless apartment, though. I could get a house outside the city. Maybe a craftsman that needs renovating. Summer’s creative eye would work wonders. And she saw her grandpa reclaim a bunch of historic bits and pieces for the cabin. Even though she was

only a kid, I bet she learned a lot from that and would love to follow in his home-making footsteps.

Fuck.

It hits me like a door in the face—I want to live with Summer. Build a home and a life with her.

I do.

As she walks up the stairs with Maggie and the dog, a wave of warmth washes over me and everything inside my head slows down as a sense of inner peace settles in.

I can't fly back home without her.

Even the thought of being apart from her tears at my guts.

The idea of coming home from work, snuggling with her under a blanket on the sofa, and watching a movie suddenly seems like the only way I want to spend my evenings. Why would I want to be at the office till midnight, when I could bicker with Summer over whether we watch a comedy or an action-adventure?

Is this the mythical thing people talk about that I never thought was real? The thing where you meet someone and, whatever your priorities were before, all you want now is to be with them, you'd upend your life for them, and nothing else matters anymore?

Is this the true love thing? The thing that Maggie and Jim have. The thing that Summer's grandparents had.

Well, I definitely can't tell her any of that. She'll think I'm delusional. We've only known each other three days.

I take a deep breath.

Yes, one step at a time.

Tiny steps.

As the women disappear, I turn back to Elliot, who's staring at me. "What's with the weird grin?"

He chuckles. "You've got it bad, my friend."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“I’ve never seen you look at a woman like that before. And I didn’t think you’d ever bring anyone here until you were ready to marry them.”

I almost tell him I could marry her right now and be totally sure it was the right thing to do. But he’d think I’d lost my mind. So I’ll keep that to myself. For now.

I lower my voice. “Well, anyway. Look, under no circumstances must Summer find out what Archie said back there, when he thought she was a housekeeper.”

“Sure, yeah.” He shrugs, like it couldn’t matter less.

“I’m serious. Nothing. Not a word.”

I guess I don’t have much of a poker face, because Elliot looks at me like I’m threatening to tie him to a chair in the basement with no food or water for a week.

He holds up his palms toward me. “Christ, man. Yeah, okay. Got it.”

I have to keep Summer away from Archie this evening. I will not let that man ruin the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I’ll seal the investment deal, then he’ll be on his way.

It has to be possible to have the money and the girl.

“Great! Thanks, El. You’re a pal.”

I heave the huge front door open and head out to get Summer’s bag from her truck.

SUMMER

Elsa crunches the last of the treats I've given her and snuggles into the pile of blankets Maggie placed in the corner of the guest room to make her comfy. My scruffy pooch is totally worn out after the truck ride and the excitement of a new place and new people. Doubtless she'll sleep soundly while I'm downstairs for a couple of hours.

This room is beautiful, the perfect combination of cozy and stylish. The pale carpet is thick and bouncy, the walls are a caramel taupe, and the sofa and bedding are in heavy, natural-colored fabrics. Walking in here felt like slipping into a pot of warm heavy cream.

The delightful twangs of the string quartet tuning up in the foyer waft up the stairs. And guests must have started arriving because the heavy door knocker sounds at regular intervals and is followed every time by squeals of delight and chatter.

My hands tremble a little as I check myself in the full-length, freestanding mirror and prepare to step into Owen's world.

I don't own any chic cocktail dresses. Not anymore, anyway. The couple I did have, I donated to the animal charity shop after the Alastair debacle, when I left the Los Angeles whirl behind and vowed to never again go anywhere that required fancy clothes.

But this top I made is one of my favorite things. It has the look of crochet but is actually knitted and nips in perfectly at the waist to make it form-fitting. I love the zigzag pattern in shades of oranges and blues, inspired by a vintage Missoni design. I hold my arm out and admire the flared sleeves. I should make more things like this.

Given I had about two minutes to choose what to bring, I'm happy with my selection. It ends mid-thigh so you could easily toss it on with jeans, but it also goes perfectly over this

ankle-length, plain black sleeveless dress. It seems a perfect match for Maggie's elegant but unstuffy gathering.

Her dress is fabulous, but she's bound to be more dressed up than anyone—it's her party after all.

The sound of voices and laughter downstairs gets louder as more and more people arrive. Dishes and glasses rattle and clink in the kitchen. And the string quartet has now launched into a tune.

I lean closer to the mirror and run a shaky finger under my eyes to dust off a couple of loose specks of fallen mascara, then lift a section of hair and tuck a particularly errant curl under it.

I'm about to be the stranger walking into an intimate celebration of family and close friends. The butterflies in my stomach have butterflies in their stomachs.

But I will have Owen by my side, and that thought both calms me and makes my heart surge at the same time. I've never taken a risk like this. Even if Owen and I have the magic that can make your insides flutter for the rest of your life, we still live three thousand miles apart. I'm not moving to California again, and he sure as hell won't ever move here, where we have winter.

But I've never felt this unique, all-encompassing, all-consuming, overwhelming desire to be with anyone—to soak in his quick brain, his wit, his presence in the room, and his oh-so-hot ass. And after spending the last eighteen months refusing to deal with anything but certainty and known quantities, here I am, about to take my first tiny step into the unknown.

I take the deepest breath I've taken all day and stroke my pooch, who's already snoozing.

"Here we go, Elsa," I whisper. "Time to do it."

Her feet twitch as she chases snowballs in her dreams.

When I open the door, the sound of joy gets louder. There's no going back now. I wobble along the hallway in my

heels. I know exactly what Maggie means about being out of practice. I live in either flip-flops or winter boots these days.

Before I reach the top of the stairs, I grip the rail of the galleried landing and take in the scene below. The strains of the quartet mingle with the happy chatter of groups of guests, filling the expansive foyer. New arrivals and servers with trays of drinks and canapés weave their way through the happy throng.

Owen stands in the middle, his back to me, holding a drink and talking with Elliot and Max.

The jacket of his black suit sits perfectly across his broad shoulders, and a crisp, white shirt collar hugs the back of his neck. His hair is still floppy on top, but in a tidier way than I've seen it before.

My breath hitches.

Was the Owen in a plaid shirt, jeans, and sneakers—the man I've known for the last few days—someone else? Is *this* who he really is? A man who dresses in designer suits, attends cocktail parties, and does multi-million-dollar business deals? Is this an utterly different person?

What I've seen up to now is a man who chose to come find Elsa in a snowstorm rather than prep for a vital meeting. A man who knows how to bake banana bread from scratch, from a recipe he keeps in his head. And a man who looks at me in a way no one ever has—like he can't tear his eyes off me, like he wants to be by my side forever, and like he wants to remove my clothes and kiss me all over.

Max catches my eye, gets Owen's attention, and jerks his head in my direction.

Owen looks up at me over his shoulder.

His eyes light up and a smile spreads across his face that says he couldn't be happier to see me. Now *that's* the man I know.

And, right here, my heart opens to the possibility that being with someone, the right someone, might be better than being alone.

He turns away from his brothers and skips up the stairs,
two at a time.

OWEN

If my legs were longer, I'd take these stairs three at a time. I can't get to Summer fast enough.

When I first turned to see what Max was gesturing at, I did a double take. Gone was the natural beauty in leggings, oversized sweaters, socks that won't stay up, and a flawless, makeup-free face. And there stood an entirely different kind of beauty, one with an understated elegance and red lips. For a second, I was taken aback, but then I spotted twists of the Summer I know—a couple of blonde curls not following the pack, and a top that has to be one of her own unique handmade designs.

Finally, I summit the stairs.

“You are stunning.” I dip my head, plant a gentle kiss on her soft cheek, and whisper in her ear. “If there were time, I would take you somewhere quiet and try to figure out how to get you out of this sexy creation.” I tug at the sleeve of her top as she presses her cheek against mine.

“It unties at the back.” Her breathy whisper brushes my ear, sending a shiver chasing the goosebumps down my side.

Good God, I need to make this a three-night stand before Archie gets here. And this simply can't be the last evening I spend with her. I can't allow that to happen.

“And look at you.” She eases back a little and runs her fingers down a lapel of my jacket. “Is this what you look like every day at work? Is this the real you?”

I take her hand and squeeze it. “You have a pretty good idea who the real me is. The real me can't drive in snow. The real me accidentally shuts your dog in the woodshed.” I pause and lock eyes with her. “And the real me could come from just watching you come.”

Her eyes widen with feigned shock. I love that I can bring a flush to her cheeks and a smile to her lips.

“But if you think Silicon Valley tech people wear a suit, tie, and shiny leather shoes to work, you’re ill-informed.” I lift her hand to my lips and kiss the back of it. “Maybe you’d like to come find out for yourself sometime.”

Something resembling fear flashes across her face.

Shit.

Those words fell out of my mouth by accident. I’ve gone too far. Suggested too much, too soon. I’d planned to work up to it later, to suggest I fly her out to visit me. But my mind is so consumed by the need to spend every possible second with her, it slipped out straight away. I’m such a fucking fool. I can’t ruin this before I’ve even attempted to convince her that tonight doesn’t have to be goodbye forever.

“Sorry. I was kidding. Of course I know you’d never want to come visit.”

She presses her red lips together and straightens my tie. That tiny action sends a dart of desire to my groin, tightening my balls and making my dick twitch. I had no idea tie-straightening could be the hottest thing ever.

Oh, it’s not.

Running her fingers down the length of it afterward, *that’s* the hottest thing.

I rest my hands on her hips and pull her against my growing hardness. She arches into me and slides her hands inside my jacket and around my waist.

“Maybe there are a couple of minutes before Archie gets here.” I raise a hopeful eyebrow. “And I believe you have a room.”

She smiles and taps a finger against my mouth. “You have no idea how long it took me to get this lipstick on straight. There’s no way you’re kissing me and smudging it. I’d never be able to do it again.”

I brush my lips against her earlobe and sense a need in her as big as my own when her fingers sink into the muscles in my

back. “I can think of other places to kiss you where it wouldn’t harm the lipstick.”

“Oh, God, Owen,” she breathes. “I can’t believe you’re trying to tempt me into a quickie upstairs at your aunt and uncle’s party.”

“But do you want to?”

“Hell, yes.” Her voice is soft and velvety, and full of the same thing that’s coursing through my veins—desire. Unremitting, unrelenting, unrivalled desire.

I take her hand and move toward the guest room.

“Owen!” It’s Elliot, calling up from the foyer.

He gestures in the direction of the living room.

I pull Summer back to me and drop my forehead onto hers. “Fuck.”

She laughs. “The guy’s here, is he?”

I close my eyes and nod. “Rain check?”

“Hell, yes.” She tugs at my tie. “I can’t wait to take this off.”

“Oh, Jesus, stop it. I have to switch my brain to business mode now.”

She laughs as she brushes her lower belly against me. “You’ll have to drag it out of your crotch first.”

I summon all my willpower and peel myself off of her, step back, and offer her my elbow. “Come on, then.” I sigh. “May I accompany you down the stairs?”

Now begins my second most important mission of the evening—keeping Summer away from Archie. If anything could sabotage my plan to convince her that what we have is worth more than three days, it would be a pompous billionaire asshole. But he’s a pompous billionaire asshole who could change the course of my and Elliot’s lives, as well as the lives of countless youngsters for generations to come. So, if I want to keep them both, I can’t let Summer and Archie cross paths again.

As soon as is polite, I'll whisk Archie off to the study, where Elliot's set up our presentation. He'll be out of harm's way there. Then, when we're done wooing him, I'll get him back in his chauffeur-driven Bentley and send him on his way.

Summer grips my arm as she concentrates on the stairs. "I have to take it slowly in these shoes."

I rest my hand on top of hers. "I've got you."

"You do, don't you." She looks up and gives me a smile that makes me the luckiest man alive. "This is all a bit scary, you know. Not knowing anyone. Being the odd one out among family and close friends."

"I appreciate how brave it was for you to come. And I couldn't be happier that you're here."

As we reach the bottom of the stairs, Maggie rushes through to hug an arriving couple.

"Oh, my goodness. Thank you." She takes something from them that resembles a huge test tube on a spike.

It looks like a device from a giant's laboratory. Or an instrument of torture.

Maggie brandishes it at Summer and me with an ear-to-ear grin. "The perfect housewarming gift."

Summer makes an obvious effort to be polite. "It looks... interesting. I've never seen one of, er, those before."

This weird contraption might be my savior. "Mags, would you mind getting Summer a drink while you explain your new garden gizmo to her?"

"Of course," Maggie says.

I kiss Summer on the cheek as my aunt leads her away. Thankfully, in the opposite direction from the living room, where Archie awaits.

SUMMER

Owen's smile and mini wave as he walks away gives me an inner warmth, like a safe sense of belonging. I haven't felt that since I left my grandparents' home and headed across the country to Berkeley six years ago.

I turn back to Maggie. "So, it's for the garden? I thought it must be for some sort of Dr. Jekyll-type experiment."

"Ha. Well, if Jim doesn't finish tinkering with his speech and come downstairs soon, I might need a potion to turn him into less of a perfectionist. But, yes, it's a rain gauge." She couldn't be happier if someone had given her a bag of diamonds. "Stick it in the ground, and you can monitor the rainfall. Perfect, since I'm not sure what the conditions here are like yet."

Owen's back disappears into what I think is the formal living room.

"My dear," Maggie says, putting her hand on my arm. "My handsome nephew is correct. You are drinkless. Let's fix that."

We weave around the string quartet and between people in beautiful dresses and fine suits gathered in groups sipping drinks and nibbling hors d'oeuvres. With every step, someone stops Maggie to say "Happy anniversary," or "Beautiful new home," or "You're so lucky."

She smiles, thanks them, and says she'll catch up with them in a little while.

We reach the relative quiet of the kitchen, where a couple of the catering staff fill glasses and lay appetizers in rows on trays.

Maggie strokes my sleeve. "Did you make this beautiful top?"

I nod. "Thank you."

"It's remarkable. You are as talented as Owen said."

The knowledge that Owen appreciates my creativity enough to have mentioned it to her, fills me with pride and gratitude that fate sent me this amazing man and his welcoming family. It's quite something after suffering Alastair's and his parents' shitty putdowns.

Maggie stops a server who's about to leave with a tray of drinks, takes a champagne glass, and hands it to me. "I'm delighted you decided to stay for the evening. And even more delighted Owen met you."

She gives me a warm smile as she drags a giant catering-sized jar of olives across the counter toward her.

"And I'm happy I met him. I'm extremely lucky."

"Oh, he's the lucky one. It's about time he put some perspective in his life." She stretches her fingers across the saucer-sized lid, but it's too big to grip. "I could tell the moment I saw him earlier that a sort of weight had lifted from him."

She thinks he's changed? Because of just three days with me? My stomach shimmies and sends a burst of excitement up my body that joins the champagne bubbles zipping up my nose. Possibilities of a future dance in my head.

"Has he been under a lot of pressure?"

She rolls her eyes and grasps the olive lid with both hands. "Only the pressure he puts on himself." She nods at the jar. "Could you hold the bottom still for me?"

I grasp either side of the glass while Maggie frowns and twists with all her might. The lid doesn't budge. She screws up her mouth and looks at the jar like it's a tricky puzzle.

"He's put pressure on himself since he was a kid and decided to take charge of his own life and make something of himself."

She bangs her fist down in the center of the lid. The jar bounces on the marble counter, and I jump back in fear it might shatter.

"That sometimes works," she says. "Hold on to it again."

I grab the bottom and twist it in one direction while Maggie turns the top the other way.

“He told me about his parents,” I say, as Maggie throws her shoulder into it and goes red in the face. Still the lid doesn’t move.

“Goddamn it.” She checks her bright red palms. “Yes, his parents are still idling their lives away somewhere.” She plants her hands on her hips and gives the jar a hard stare. “But I wanted to get you an olive.”

“Oh.” I smile. “If all that was for me, no need. I don’t like olives.”

She slaps the counter and laughs. “Ha! Me neither. Can’t stand the things. They’re like briny chihuahua testicles.”

If I hadn’t already been sure I liked Maggie, that would have swung it.

She turns to face me. “Anyway, yes, Owen inherited the admirable Dashwood work ethic. But sometimes he doesn’t know when to stop.”

“He was totally stressed out when he showed up at my door the other night.”

Maggie straightens her dress. “Well, he looked like a different man when he stepped out of your truck earlier. You might have worked some magic.”

Hopefully, my cheeks aren’t as embarrassingly pink as their warmth suggests. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Well, whatever you didn’t do worked, so you keep right on not doing it.”

She takes another glass of champagne from a tray ready for a server and hands it to me. “Here. Go track him down and give him this.”

I nod and take the glass.

“And I’ll go find that husband of mine and check he hasn’t given up on his speech. God help us all if he tries to wing it.” She shakes her head in affectionate exasperation as she teeters

off and is immediately stopped by someone asking her the secret to a long and happy marriage.

SUMMER

I breathe in, hold the champagne glasses high so I can ease around the back of the people talking to Maggie, and make my way to the room Owen disappeared into a few minutes ago.

I pause in the doorway for a moment to soak up the warm glow of joy, family and friends that fills the air.

It's packed with people laughing and smiling. Some gather by the large fireplace, others dot the room, standing in small groups. Some sit on a sofa, others in wingback chairs.

And in the far corner, by the heavy swag of the tapestry curtains, stand Owen, Elliot, and the Gold Chain Man who witnessed me almost render Maggie unconscious earlier.

Holy shitballs. He must be the big potential investor, Archie Banks.

The warm glow is flushed away by an icy wave, and a ten-ton weight descends on my chest, leaving me struggling to breathe.

What the hell kind of shambolic impression did I create on Owen's make-or-break investor when I smacked the hostess in the face with a door and ended up tending to her on the kitchen floor with my dog drooling all over her? Presumably the exact opposite impression of the one he would have wanted.

But Owen hasn't even mentioned it. Unlike Alastair, who would have had a fit about any kind of social faux pas in front of a big client. Not only has Owen not uttered a word, but a moment ago, at the top of the stairs, he looked at me like he thought I was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen. So it definitely hasn't put him off the idea of sleeping with me.

With Elliot standing next to him, you can tell how different they are. Not that Elliot's not attractive. He is, in a geeky kind of way. But he shifts from foot to foot, and his eyes dart around the room. He looks like he'd rather be anywhere else.

On the other hand, Owen is all confidence and charm—shoulders back, chest out, smiling, and in charge of the conversation. Archie is rapt. Owen seems to have him in the palm of his hand. Watching him in business mode is sexier than I could have imagined. And, it has to be said, he’s ridiculously hot in a suit. A rush of desire mixed with admiration ripples through me.

Owen says something that must be hilarious, because Archie throws his head back and laughs, his white shirt straining across his belly under his bright blue sport coat. Maybe I didn’t do as much damage as I’d thought.

Archie’s face is even redder than it was earlier as he smacks Owen on the shoulder and booms, “Need to visit the little boy’s room. Then you guys can put on your show for me.”

Excellent. Owen will have a free moment for me to give him his drink, and I can apologize for causing such a ridiculous scene in front of the man I now know is his dream client. I hold the two glasses of champagne to my chest and squeeze sideways between the backs of a woman discussing her horse’s injured leg and a man wearing too much cologne.

I emerge to find Archie Banks’s ample chest staring me in the face.

He snatches my glass from my hand. “Ah, finally some service.”

I recoil in surprise. And wipe a bit of spit from the end of my nose.

He hands me his empty flute. “Here you go.”

My cheeks burn as I stare at the used glass I’ve taken from him without realizing what I was doing. How can he think I’m a waitress? All the servers from the catering crew are wearing white shirts.

“Erm, actually—”

“You’re the one who caused the embarrassing fiasco in the kitchen earlier, aren’t you?” he says. “Surprised you still have a job after concussing your boss.”

He takes a sip of his—or, rather, my—drink with his pinkie sticking out.

A surge of burning fury and frustration swells inside me. I always expected some rich dick to treat me like this. That's why I'd wanted to slam my truck into reverse and go home the moment I saw this place. Why the hell did I let my feelings for Owen get the better of me and agree to stay?

This man might be Owen and Elliot's dream investor. He might be their ticket to growing their company and giving kids a start in tech but, my God, he's foul.

All I want to do is tell him he's an offensive ass and throw my remaining drink in his stupid face. But I can't do anything. Can't say a thing. How would I live with myself if I jeopardized their deal?

Over his shoulder, Owen's head is dipped toward Elliot in intense conversation. They're oblivious to everyone around them.

Maybe I can put Archie straight nicely. "The thing is, I'm not—"

"And this is a formal affair, dear." He leans back and looks down his nose at me. "You should probably be wearing something a little more appropriate than a dishrag." He waggles his finger at the top that is my pride and joy.

Rage, shame, humiliation, and hurt swirl together and eat me alive from the inside out.

With every ounce of strength I have, I force my mouth to stay firmly shut while I fight the sting in my eyes and the constriction in my throat. I will not give this superior jerk the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

After everything I've tried to put behind me to come here tonight, it turns out it's exactly as I'd feared. It's exactly the same as Alastair's parents mocking my knitwear business, and me never being good enough for their la-di-da, rolling-in-it friends.

I'll always stick out like a sore thumb. Never be good enough.

Owen looks up from his deep discussion with Elliot and catches my eye. He raises his eyebrows as if surprised to see me. Then his mouth drops open as a look of horror creeps across his face. Guess he doesn't want me talking to ass-face in case I wreck everything.

Archie's self-satisfied smirk makes my furious heart thump so hard my chest moves in time with it, and I worry for the safety of the glasses I'm clutching way too hard.

Behind him, Owen tries to make his way toward us but is stopped by a middle-aged woman in a voluminous floral top, who strokes his shoulder and air-kisses him while batting her eyelashes excessively.

Unable to speak through the giant boulder in my throat, I turn back toward the door. I push my way back between Horse Woman and Cologne Man, and come face to expensive-silk-tie with Max.

He raises his palms and leans back. "Whoa, hey."

"Oh, shit." I shake my head in frustration. I just need a clear path to get the hell out of here. "I mean, sorry. Sorry, Max."

His face is blurry through the tears I'm barely managing to hold back. But I can see well enough to detect a hint of compassion in it as he puts his hands on my shoulders and looks down at me with a crinkled brow. Perhaps he does have some human emotions hidden behind the bravado.

His voice softens. "Are you okay? Is something wrong?"

I'm hot and shaking with panic and need to get out of here. I thrust the full glass of champagne I'm still holding at him. "Can you give this to Owen? I have to...go."

He takes the glass from me. "Go? Already?"

"I mean...go check on Elsa. Thanks."

He steps back to let me by.

I pick my way through the packed foyer, put Archie's empty glass on a side table, and run up the stairs.

Halfway up, an elderly man in a tweed jacket and a yellow bowtie stops me.

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

He points at a faded black-and-white photo hanging on the wall. “This place. Built in 1856.”

I force my eyes to focus and see it’s an old picture of Blythe Manor.

“The people Jim and Maggie’s boys brought in to restore this place were real craftsmen,” he says, lifting his gaze to the ceiling. “They’ve done a fabulous job.”

“Right, yes.” I move up to the next stair. “Must go.”

“I was an architect for fifty years.” He points up at the coving then strokes the wooden banister. “You rarely see work like this.”

I hold it together for two minutes of something about “quarried stone” and “traditional mortar” before I finally extricate myself from what, under all other circumstances, would have been a charming and fascinating conversation.

I burst into the bedroom and drop to my knees beside Elsa, who’s still fast asleep in the same position as when I left. As I bury my face in her neck, she lifts her tail and thunks one hard wag on the blankets.

That’s the moment my heart cracks.

How could I let myself believe for even a second there was a chance for me and Owen? No matter how much he’s rocked my world, my mind, my body, and my soul in the last few days, I’ve always known it would never work. We live in different worlds. And Alastair and his family taught me those two worlds are completely incompatible.

Me and Elsa—that’s the way life works.

Today will be my last ever shitty Valentine’s Day. For Maggie and Jim, like my grandparents, this is the day they celebrate dedicating their lives to their true soulmates. For me,

today is the day I vow never to let anyone get close again. I'm sticking with Elsa's unconditional love.

Tears roll down my face. But I allow only two sobs to squeeze out before I give my ever-loving pooch a giant kiss on the head, stand up, and start tossing my things in my bag.

“Okay, Elsa. Time to go.”

OWEN

“What happened to Summer?” I ask Max as he shoves a glass of champagne at me like he has no idea why he’s holding it.

She’d looked like she was heading this way before she ran into Archie. The exact thing I didn’t want to happen. But as soon as I tried to make my way over to separate them, one of Maggie’s old friends stopped me, and I lost sight of her.

Archie sure as hell had better not have said something dickish. Jesus, why does the one investor who’d be happy for some of his cash to be used for the nonprofit have to exhibit all the billionaire asshole traits that Summer hates?

I lean around Max and peer over the heads of the happy, chatting partygoers to see the back of Summer’s curly blonde head disappearing out the door. My heart races. It’s all I can do to keep my feet rooted to the spot and not chase after her to find out what happened. That’ll have to wait till we’ve dealt with Archie.

“Said she had to go check on the dog,” Max says. “And asked me to give you this.” He points at the glass he’s still holding out to me.

I take it and knock back half of it in one go. “Was Archie talking to her? It looked like he was talking to her.”

“Think so, yeah.”

Elliot pats me on the shoulder. “It’ll be fine. I bet she’s fine. She’s probably just worried about the dog.”

I shake him off. “Christ, Max. What the fuck did Archie say?”

“What’s up with you? It looks like your head is about to explode,” Max says. “Not sure what he said. I only caught the end of it. Something about her top not being appropriate for the event, I think. But what does it matter?” Then a lightbulb

turns on behind his eyes. “Oh, yeah. I think he said it was like a dishrag.”

Oh, holy fuck. For Summer, that’s history repeating itself. And proving her right while it’s at it. This is the worst possible thing that could have happened.

Archie’s blown all the effort it took for me to get her to come this evening to smithereens.

My pulse hammers inside my brain. “What does it *matter*? Jesus Christ. Only every-fucking-thing.”

That’s it. I have to find her and try to repair this fucking disaster.

I move around Max to head after Summer, but he suddenly falls forward and steps on my foot. “Argh.”

And there, right behind him, is Archie who’s obviously just slapped Max on the back so hard he almost knocked him over.

Where the hell did Archie pop up from? That was a quick restroom visit.

And now he’s sniffing Max’s shoulder. “Ahh.” He closes his eyes and inhales deeply. “The unmistakable aroma of cash. You must be another Dashwood.”

Max turns to face him and squishes himself between me and Elliot to put as much distance between himself and Archie’s nostrils as is possible in our cramped corner.

“Good job Connor’s not here to sniff,” Max mutters under his breath. “You’d get a noseful of stale booze and women’s perfume.”

Then in true Manhattan CEO style, he slaps on a smile, and holds out his hand. “Yes, I’m Max. And I’m going to take a wild guess that you must be Archie Banks, the man behind the legend. My brother and cousin are lucky to have you interested in working with them.” He catches my eye. “And they’d be mad to let you slip through their fingers. I’ll leave you guys to it.”

Max twitches his eyebrows at Elliot, as if to say, “Don’t let Owen fuck this up because of a girl,” as he turns and disappears into the crowd.

He’s right, of course. We are lucky a man of Archie’s wealth and standing would consider investing in us. Even if it’s only because he wants to give the impression his company cares about children. That’s how business works, right?

But it’s like I’m being ripped in half.

All I want to do is run after Summer, gather her in my arms, and tell her everything will be okay.

But one look at Elliot, who was my lifeline and saved my sanity when I was a teenager, and I’m reminded how much I owe him this shot at the cash that would change everything we’ve spent years working toward.

If there’s one thing Elliot hates, it’s the schmoozing side of things. He’d sooner give up fixing worn out computers than have to chat up someone for funding. And, man, he loves tinkering with that old crap more than anything—almost as much as he loves whatever that video game is he plays all the time.

I can’t run off and leave him here alone to deal with this—that would be cruel and selfish.

This is like being between a rock and two hard places.

So, as much as my heart breaks for how hurt I know Summer must be, I glue my feet to the spot. Wrapping myself around her and making it right will have to wait till after I’ve dealt with this.

I take a deep breath and force a smile. “Okay, we’ve set up our presentation in the study. If you’re ready to hear our pitch, let’s step away from the revelry for a few minutes.”

“Well, I’d love to stay here and admire the scenery.” Archie turns and looks at the backside of a woman who’s wearing a tight red dress. “But I guess I should get down to the business of hearing how you think you can use my money to make me plenty more.”

I lead the way through the gaggle of guests and out into the foyer. A blur of movement on the landing catches my eye, and I look up in time to catch Summer striding toward the guest room.

An explosion of heat erupts inside me. Fuck this, I have to go after her right now.

I've taken one step toward the stairs when Elliot's voice comes from the doorway to the study. "Owen?"

I hadn't even noticed him overtake me. I shift my gaze from where Summer just was, to Elliot who's rooted to the spot and staring at me.

Jesus, it's like my arms are tied to dump trucks pulling in opposite directions.

But Elliot has brought me back to reality. I have to snap out of it and keep myself together for enough time to pitch. I can sort it all out with Summer afterwards.

"Sorry, yes. I'm coming."

And I turn away from the direction that would take me to Summer, and walk toward the business meeting.

OWEN

I step inside the study as Archie sinks into the brown leather Chesterfield sofa and pulls a cigar and a lighter from his inside pocket. He puts the cigar between his lips without it seeming to cross his mind to ask if it's okay to smoke in the house.

Elliot narrows his eyes. "Erm. This place is all freshly decorated. I don't think my mom would—"

"It's okay, Elliot," I tell him.

My mind shoots back to when I was fourteen and would sit in the public library to use the computers to chat with him every day. And how our talk of going to MIT together and starting a business seemed like an impossible dream. But it was a dream that got me through those days and helped me believe I could create a life entirely the opposite of my parents'. The tech hubs Archie might help us create could be the same lifeline for other kids.

I need to focus on the greater purpose here, and just get through it.

"Open a window," I tell Elliot. "We won't be long."

"There's a good fellow," Archie says, lighting his cigar and sucking on the end until he blows out a cloud of white smoke.

What an obnoxious, entitled asshat.

And that's what Summer thought I was when I showed up on her doorstep three days ago. An obnoxious, entitled asshat.

I'm seeing what she saw. And I don't like it.

Cold air leaks into the room when Elliot opens the window. He turns back to the desk and fires up the big screen hooked up to his laptop.

"Owen will give you an overview of who we are, how we got here, and our vision for the future," he says. "Then I'll run you through the numbers."

“Excellent. And make sure you fill me in about the gadgets-for-kids thing. Not about the kids, though.” With a wave and a sneer, Archie dismisses the thought of underprivileged kids who’ve never touched an iPad in their lives. “I mean, fill me in on how much of my hotel branding you could get on everything.” He stretches one arm along the back of the sofa, causing his shirt buttons to strain like those on the Chesterfield. “I do hope you’re going to impress me.”

Completely as I’d imagined. He doesn’t give a shit about the tech hubs beyond what’s in them for his company.

“Owen?” Elliot breaks my reverie and points at the big screen displaying our Two Coast Tech logo.

I’ve never been this unfocused in a business meeting. I’ve never had getting out of there as my top priority. This is the biggest meeting of my life, and all I want to do is hold Summer, pepper her face with kisses, and make everything better.

I nod and step forward to stand beside the screen facing Archie. He sucks on his cigar and puffs out his smoke-filled cheeks.

Fury bubbles within me. I’m selling our souls to the devil here. As sure as I know I’m breathing smoky air, I know Summer’s hurt right now by whatever shit he said to her. And I know the most amazing woman I’ve ever met would never sell her principles down the river.

“*Owen?*” Elliot says again, more firmly, and jerks his head toward the screen.

In the few days I’ve spent with Summer, she’s not only made me feel more alive and connected with someone than I’ve ever been before, she’s also given me a new perspective. I look at Archie and see what I’m doing through her fresh eyes.

He tips his face to the ceiling and puffs out three smoke rings, then blows them away as he empties the rest of his lungs. He points at me with the cigar he’s holding between two fingers clad with chunky gold rings.

“Yes.” He makes an exaggerated nod. “Let’s get on with it. I’d like to go back and find that maid of yours. She might be a clumsy fool and wearing a dishrag, but I wouldn’t say no to ten minutes in a corner with her.”

Holy fucking hell. I dig my nails into my palms and press my fists into my thighs in a desperate effort to keep them to myself.

I turn to Elliot. “You can switch all this off.” I nod at the monitor as blood surges through my veins and whirls inside my head.

“What?” Elliot asks, his brow deeply furrowed with puzzlement.

Christ, I hope he can forgive me for this.

Only three days ago, I’d thought the man on the sofa was the most important person in my life. How quickly things can change.

“Archie, you know what. Neither Elliot nor I want to do business with a condescending, loathsome asshole.”

I’m not sure who’s most surprised by those words, Archie or Elliot or me. But Elliot is the only one who smiles.

Archie screws up his face in disbelief. “Who? What?”

He genuinely can’t comprehend what I’m saying.

Elliot emerges from behind the desk and offers his hand to Archie. “Thank you for taking time to meet us, Mr. Banks. We appreciate it. But we’re going to pass.”

Well, look at Elliot bringing it. And quick as a flash. There was me worrying he’d be pissed off at me throwing away this chance. Nice one, El.

Archie’s face turns an alarming shade of flaming beet, as do his hands, so I can only assume all the other parts of him that aren’t visible are also a furious purple. Not an image I wish to dwell on.

He lives in a world where no one disagrees with him, where every word that falls from his lips is considered a pearl

of unfathomable wisdom, and every joke he cracks is the most belly-achingly hilarious thing anyone has ever heard.

He jabs his finger into his chest, shaking ash from his cigar onto the leather sofa. “You mean *me*?”

“I absolutely do. You’ve been nothing but unpleasant since I met you. You invite yourself to my aunt and uncle’s private party, you make degrading, lecherous comments about women, and I’d bet everything I’ve spent my whole life working for that you were so rude and superior to my girlfriend that she couldn’t bear to be around you.”

Elliot looks at me and quirks an eyebrow at my use of the word “girlfriend.”

Yes. That’s what she is. If I can fix this, that is. I hope, anyway.

Summer was right. About everything. But particularly that I’ve overcorrected. If she’s been belittled by this over-indulged dickhead, it’s my fault. It’s my determination to distance myself from my parents’ lifestyle at all costs that’s led me to contemplate doing business with him.

Well, fuck that.

I’d rather work my ass off twenty-four hours a day for as long as it takes to find another way to fund the nonprofit.

Time for a re-correction. Or un-correction. Or anti-correction. Whatever the hell the opposite of overcorrection is.

Archie hauls himself out of the chair. “Who the hell is your girlfriend?”

“The amazing, courageous, beautiful woman with the dog.” I’ve never felt more pride in anything than in saying that sentence.

A patronizing grin forms on his face. “The maid? Or is she a server? The one wearing the dishrag?” He rests his hand on his belly and leans forward as he laughs. “Like to slum it with the staff, do you?”

Rage boils up from the tips of my toes to the top of my head and propels me forward. But Elliot puts a hand on my

arm and holds me back. “Don’t punch him. He’s not worth it. And his lawyers are probably better than ours.”

My entire body is suddenly covered in a film of sweat—my face must be almost as red as Archie’s.

I jab a shaky finger at him. “You’ve been out of touch for so long you don’t even recognize good people anymore.” Spit dots the air in front of me. “Incredible people. People who are smart. Resourceful. And have beautiful souls. People who can change your life.”

My voice catches in my throat as my arms fall limp at my sides.

“Oh, you’ve got it bad.” Archie snorts. “We’re done here. And don’t bother approaching any of my friends—no one’s going to invest in you after they hear about this pathetic performance.”

“Friends?” I can’t help myself. “I doubt you have many real ones of those.”

He arcs around me, staying more than an arm’s length away, and heads for the door. “Good luck with your little business, boys.”

“Oh, please. Allow me.” He flinches as I lunge for the door handle. “It would give me no greater pleasure than to escort you off the premises.”

I sweep the door open and wave him through. As he passes in front of me, I snatch the cigar from between his thick fingers. “And learn some manners.”

Elliot looks around, grabs a potted fern from a nearby bookshelf, and holds it out to me. I jab the cigar out in the soil.

Archie’s eyebrows shoot up his furious purple forehead. “How dare you? That was a hundred-dollar cigar. A Fuente Fuente Opus Ten.”

“I couldn’t care less if it was the rolled-up Mona fucking Lisa. Now get your disrespectful ass out of here.” I point through the doorway.

The cheerful sound of the string quartet fills the foyer as I follow Archie's wide back between the smiling, chatting guests and toward the big, green front door.

I slide sideways past him to get there first. "No, please. Allow me again." A freezing blast rushes in as I pull it open. "I want to be extremely certain you're gone."

"Mark my words. You'll be back with your tail between your legs. And it will devastate me to turn you down." Archie dramatically wipes a fake tear from the corner of his eye as he steps through the door.

Elliot appears by my side, still holding the fern with the cigar in it.

Snow swirls against the dark sky behind Archie. "I hope you and the hired help are very happy together," he sneers.

I hook my foot around the door. "Oh, fuck off, you obnoxious bastard." And slam it in his reprehensible face.

Elliot and I both stare at the closed door for a second. I can't quite believe what we've done.

I point at the plant Elliot's holding. "Why are you still carrying that?"

He looks down, equally puzzled to see it in his hands. "Didn't realize I was."

I grab him in a half hug and hold onto him for a second as we stand there wrapped in the warm tunes of the violins and the laughter of guests who're too busy having a good time to notice what happened.

"Christ, man," I tell him. "I was worried you'd be pissed off. But I couldn't take him anymore."

"God, no, not at all." Elliot pulls back. "I never want to see that dickwad again, never mind do business with him." He pushes his glasses up his nose. "He can't ruin us. We'll be fine."

I swallow past a lump in my throat and slap him on the back. "I knew there was a reason you're my favorite cousin."

I cast my gaze up the stairs. “Now I have to find Summer and fix this.”

“Yup, you go get the girl.” He looks down at the fern. “And I’ll go put this back.”

OWEN

This time I manage three stairs at a time.

A sprint across the landing and I stop dead outside the guest room door.

I fight my racing heart and tight chest to take a deep breath.

Then tap gently.

Nothing.

I tap again. "Summer?"

Nothing.

"She left," Max says, appearing out of the bathroom.

"What?"

"She *left*." He straightens his cufflinks. "And didn't look mighty happy."

I fling the door open.

Empty. Apart from a pile of blankets in the corner for a makeshift dog bed. Breath catches in my throat, and I'm on the verge of choking. "Fuck."

I spin around and grab Max's shoulders with both hands. "Favor. Your car. Any of them. Can I borrow one?"

Max keeps about half a dozen cars here in a row of garages he had specially built during the renovation.

"Not a chance." He chuckles at the madness of my suggestion. "No vehicle of mine is going out in *that*."

"Out in what?"

"The snow. You're a fair-weather California driver. You'll crash it or something." He shrugs. "Oh, and hurt yourself. Yeah, I guess that's more important."

"It's snowing?" I flashback to Archie's face framed by swirling flakes. "Oh shit. Yes. It is."

“Almost blizzarding again. You shouldn’t go out in it at all.”

“I’ll ask Elliot.”

I’m already halfway down the stairs by the time Max calls after me. “His is rear-wheel drive. A death trap in this weather.”

Fuck.

I almost collide with Maggie at the bottom of the stairs. Oh, yes, of course. Maggie! She has the perfect vehicle. “Aunt Mags. Huge favor. Can I borrow your truck?”

“You want to borrow my truck?” She laughs and presses the back of her hand to my forehead to check my temperature. “Are you unwell?”

Elliot appears by his mother’s side.

My chest is so tight I can barely force out words. “Summer. She left. I need to go after her.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Maggie rubs my cheek. “I told you earlier, the truck’s in the shop for a new muffler.”

Max has come down the stairs behind me. “And by the look on Archie’s face when you guys headed to the front door, you should be chasing after a new investor, not a girl.”

He whips a glass of champagne from a tray carried by a passing server and strides off.

“Order a car service and a driver to come get you,” Elliot says, brushing soil from his fingers.

“Definitely not.” I rub my forehead. “I’m not showing up at Summer’s house in what looks like a chauffeur-driven car. That would do me no favors. You’ve no idea how much she’d hate that. I’ll have to call for a rental to be dropped off.”

“Well, there’s no way that will get here till tomorrow, my love,” Maggie says.

My shirt sticks to my back under my jacket. “Christ, I can’t believe this. First, I was stranded at Summer’s house, now I’m stranded *here*.”

Maggie rubs my arm. “Give her a call. Apologize for whatever you did. Then go see her tomorrow once someone’s brought you a car.”

She smiles like that solves all the problems.

“I never got her number.”

SUMMER

I drop my latest tear-soaked, snotty tissue into the fireplace, where it erupts in a burst of yellow flames. The flickering shadows dance on the walls, the warm glimmer of the fire the only light in the room.

When I trudged downstairs a few minutes ago, having given up hope of ever falling asleep, all I wanted was to sink into the darkness and stare at the burning logs.

It makes a change from staring at the images of Owen that played on a loop in my head as I tossed and turned for hours.

The nonstop action replay of the last three days kept pausing on his smile when he teased me about my socks, on his bare chest as he leaned over me on the sofa, and on the wonder in his eyes when he saw me at the top of the stairs at Blythe Manor just hours ago.

I pull my thick, plush, fleece bathrobe tighter, drop to the floor, and sit cross-legged facing the crackling flames.

I barely remember driving home. And with the combination of the black sky, snow swirling in my headlamps, and my emotions swinging between blind fury and wracking sobs, I'm lucky I got back in one piece.

Poor Elsa was subjected to a running commentary of how I always knew this is how it would turn out, and how stupid I was to think it might be different. But also how mind-bogglingly amazing those brief moments were when I had a taste that being with him could actually be better than being alone.

I'm lucky my stream of consciousness fell on literal deaf ears, or she might have asked to get out of the truck and walk. But she must have sensed something was extremely wrong because she clambered through from her usual spot in the back to sit on the passenger seat, and kept nuzzling my hair.

I close my eyes against the intense heat from the fire but can't tear myself away.

At least it distracts from the pain in my heart, which couldn't feel more bruised if it had been ripped out, used as a punching bag by a particularly vicious boxer, smashed by an angry chef armed with a meat tenderizer, then driven over multiple times by a monster truck loaded with rocks.

Until that awful, humiliating moment with Archie, I hadn't realized how much I'd allowed myself to believe Owen might have changed after a few days with me—that my opinions had opened his eyes, and he might truly want to be with me. But, given how much it hurts now, I obviously had.

Underneath all the signs that he thought I was special, all the signs that it was safe to finally believe in someone, Owen was exactly who my gut told me he was the moment I read the business card he handed me through the front door. He really is cut from the same cloth as Alastair. He's all about pandering to the rich and influential for the sake of money.

So stupid to let myself believe otherwise.

I know better than that.

I know that being here with Elsa, getting on with running my business, and not letting anyone get close, is the best way. And I never should have strayed from that path.

Look at me. If I'd been able to stick to my plan of enjoying Owen for some quick, fun, sexy times and a wave goodbye, everything would be fine right now. I'd be fast asleep, dreaming of a long walk with Elsa tomorrow morning, followed by a day clacking away with my knitting needles.

But here I am, burning my face staring at the fire at God-knows-what-o'clock because my heart and my head hurt too much to sleep.

My eyes sting from fatigue, as well as crying. My chest hurts from broken pride, as well as a broken heart. My stomach churns from the hurt, as well as from not having eaten since the granola bar Owen and I shared on the drive to Blythewell.

Stupid me.

Stupid.

Stupid.

Stupid me.

I pull my phone from my bathrobe pocket. 4:03 a.m. Jeepers.

I flick to my messages and reread Izzie's last reply in the I-always-knew-he-was-a-dick conversation that I started as soon as I got home.

IZZIE (11:37 PM)

At least you know for sure now. And on the upside, you finally got back in the saddle. YEE HAW! *cowboy emoji*

At least she makes me smile.

As does the sound of Elsa trotting down the stairs. I'd crept out of the bedroom without disturbing her. She must have woken up and realized I wasn't there.

Her eyes smile when she sees me, and her tail makes low swishes as she pads over and licks the side of my face.

I wrap my arms around her and bury my face in her neck as the gentle, sleepy wags continue. There'll never be another love like this.

Mid pooch-hug, a giant yawn creeps up out of nowhere and consumes me.

I've never been so exhausted yet so unable to sleep. But I dread the thought of the Owen movie montage restarting in my head if I lie down in bed again.

"Maybe we could try a *real* movie instead." I rub Elsa's ears as she presses her head against mine. "Let's tuck back up and watch something cute."

Hopefully that will replace the images my brain keeps forcing on me and I'll finally nod off.

I haul myself to my feet, put the fireguard in place, and grab my laptop from the coffee table. "Come on then."

As I follow Elsa up the stairs, I know there's only one movie I want to watch.

OWEN

My hands shake as I tie a red bow around the bright blue lidded tin that I found lurking in a kitchen cupboard while I was searching for sugar. And discovering this ribbon at the back of the utensil drawer was a stroke of luck. Hopefully Maggie won't mind me borrowing them.

I'm not sure if my hands are trembling from fatigue, lack of food, or the frustration of not being able to get out of here and rush to see Summer. Or possibly all three.

It wound up being a late night. After the guests left, we ended up sitting around the kitchen fireplace drinking Uncle Jim's best scotch—nowhere near as good as Summer's grandpa's old Irish whiskey—and talking about our favorite parts of the evening. Needless to say, Elliot and I had quite the tale to tell.

I toss the left-over ribbon back in the drawer.

Elliot wanders in, barefoot, in a gray T-shirt and plaid pajama bottoms, yawning, hair sticking up. “Hmm. Something smells good. How long have you been up?”

“Hours. Couldn't sleep.”

The precise answer is since 4:03 a.m. And I'd only slept for about an hour before that. My mind raced as I tossed and turned and mentally rehearsed over and over what I might say to Summer if I'm lucky enough to see her again.

I'm not sure she'll accept any explanation, but I sure as hell have to try. If fate decided I should get lost outside the front door of the woman I'm meant to be with, who am I to walk away from that destiny without giving it a go?

Elliot shuffles over to the full pot of coffee I just made. “Want some?”

“Please. I'll make breakfast while I wait for the car.”

“Trying to keep busy, huh?” Elliot sloshes coffee into a mug and slides it toward me.

I drum my fingers on the edge of the counter and smile at him. “Yeah. Rental company said they’d be here between eight and nine.”

We both look at the clock on the stove. 7:56. I’m sure it’s said seven fifty-something for about three hours.

Elliot takes a seat at the vast marble island, yawns again, and stares into his steaming mug.

I pick up mine and rest against the counter. “Any second thoughts about last night?”

He shakes his head. “None. I’m proud of us for what we did.”

“Good. Me too.”

“Yup, let it be the start of our No Assholes policy.” He raises his mug to cheer the new corporate strategy.

“Morning, folks.” Max strides in and ruffles my and Elliot’s hair, something he’s done to us since he was about ten.

He looks like he’s already showered. His slicked-back hair is damp, his chin pink from shaving, and his crisp white shirt makes him look ready to grab the day by the balls and twist them.

He pours himself a coffee. “What are you two up to? The morning-after debrief on how to lose the biggest investor of your life?”

Elliot and I shake our heads at each other. There’s no point explaining a No Asshole policy to Max, who’s recently taken on a rude, domineering, and unpleasant-in-all-ways chief financial officer partially because of his unrivaled brilliance with numbers, but mainly to stop a competitor getting him.

“You guys should be on your way to counting your first billion,” he says. “Not looking like you lost a buck and found a penny.”

“There’ll be other money. There won’t be another Summer.” The moment those words leave my lips I instantly regret letting them slip out in front of Max.

“Oh, excuse me while I find a bucket to barf in.” He makes a gagging noise and turns to his youngest brother. “Remember the pact, Elliot. Business now, life later.”

Elliot straightens his glasses and stares back. “And when do you think *you* might get to the life part?”

Max wanders over to the fridge, pulls open the door, and stares at the contents. “When I’m good and ready. But right now, all I’m ready to do is dial a number and have breakfast delivered to me. Three days out of New York is way too long.”

I join Max at the fridge, nudge him out of the way, and gather eggs, milk, and butter. “When was the last time you ordered something from anyone who wasn’t your personal chef?”

I grab the bowl and whisk I washed up earlier and search through cupboards for a pan and some plates.

The last time I familiarized myself with a new kitchen, it was Summer’s. When she realized I could bake something off the top of my head, her face was a picture. I shook her expectation of me. Surprising her made my heart sing a whole new song. Who knew something so small could feel so fucking good?

Then, last night, I didn’t surprise her at all. She saw what her gut always told her she would see. She saw a wealthy person pandering to someone who looked down on her. And I did it for the sake of money. I didn’t stand up for her. In that moment, I chose the deal. The business. The cash. But more important than what I chose was what I *didn’t* choose. Her.

A heavy weight drags my chest down to my belly as I break eggs into the bowl.

“Careful. You’re not so much cracking those things as shattering them to smithereens,” Elliot says. “Guess they won’t need much beating though.”

I slam another egg on the side of the bowl. “This is a perfectly reasonable cracking technique.”

Elliot sighs. “I’m sure the car rental people will be here soon.”

Max folds his arms, leans against the side of the fridge, and watches me. “And what the hell did the pepper grinder ever do to you? Looks like you’re trying to throttle the last breath out of it.”

I plant the grinder on the counter like I’m planting a flag at the North Pole. “I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

Elliot and Max look at each other and raise skeptical eyebrows.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, you guys. One day you’ll feel like this about someone. And you’ll be panic-stricken that you can’t get to her and fix your fuck-up.”

Max walks over to his laptop that’s sitting on the dining table and opens it. “Never. Going. To. Happen.”

I find a pair of scissors in a drawer and snip some chives and parsley from Maggie’s countertop herb garden into the eggs. “Is there any bread?”

Elliot points across the kitchen at a wooden box with the word “bread” carved in the side. “Maybe there?”

“That, El, is why you’re the brains of your operation,” Max says.

A lump of butter sizzles and spits when I drop it into the pan.

Elliot pulls a large, crusty loaf out of the wooden box and looks at it like it’s a Rubik’s Cube.

“No chance you could slice it, I suppose?” I ask.

“Christ, Owen, I know you’re desperate to hit the road, but do you always have to be snippy when you’re frustrated?” He opens a drawer. “Yes, I’ll slice it. God knows what might happen if *you* get your hands on a sharp blade.”

He pulls out a carving knife.

“Serrated edge, Elliot.” I shake my head. “Bread knives have serrated edges. Seriously, do you two never cook for yourselves in New York?”

“Nope,” they say in unison, Max not looking up from his computer screen.

I tip my perfectly whisked egg mixture into the pan and try to push an image of Summer, curled up in front of the fire with Elsa and a morning cup of tea, out of my head.

“You can toast it when you’ve sliced it,” I tell Elliot.

“Isn’t this spectacular,” Uncle Jim declares with a big smile as he and Maggie wander in, in their bathrobes and slippers. “The boys pulling together to make breakfast.”

Maggie puts her fingers to her temples and closes her eyes. “Shh.”

Jim looks at the three of us, points at Maggie, and lowers his voice to a whisper. “Hangover.”

I should make an effort to tone down my anxiousness now they’re here. “Well, I have the perfect cure right in this pan, and Elliot can pour you coffee, so you’re all set. Take a seat.”

I fold the eggs back and forth on themselves into the perfect scramble.

I look at Elliot and nod toward the toaster that just popped. “You’ll find toast is generally more palatable buttered.”

Maggie sniffs her coffee, goes pale, and puts it back down.

Max strides over, stands between his parents, and puts an arm around each of them. “You two had a good night then, eh?”

“It was lovely, Max.” Maggie pats his hand. “Thank you for organizing it. Shame Connor and Walker couldn’t make it, though. But Tom enjoyed his video call. He was quite taken with the string quartet.”

Max draws himself up to his full, considerable, height.

“I can excuse Walker for being tied up with work—sounds like that brewery tank bursting was a complete disaster. But what the hell Connor was up to is anybody’s fucking guess.”

“Max. Language,” Maggie says, then closes her eyes again, like she hurt herself talking.

Walker was supposed to be here, but the opening night of the newest craft brew pub he owns with his business partner, Emily, turned into a nightmare. He ended up stuck in Portland because he didn't want to leave her alone with beer flooding from a vat. Those two have been best friends since day one of college and created the business together right after. Toasted Tomato Brew Pubs started slow, but now they have a thriving empire.

As for Connor, he's erratic at the best of times. His billions come from owning a kids' educational toy company. Unlike the rest of us, his management style is a lot more, erm, shall we say, hands off. Well, how could he have his hands on the company when they're usually wrapped around a bottle of vodka or the latest "it" model?

I scoop the perfect amount of eggs onto the raggedy toast Elliot's made and slide the plates to Jim and Maggie. "This should blow away some cobwebs."

Maggie looks at the food, then at me, and any remaining blood drains from her face. "Sorry." She grips the edge of the counter and stands up. "Need to go back to bed for a bit."

Jim chuckles affectionately and shovels a forkful into his mouth.

My heart leaps at the noise of the doorbell. Finally, the sound I've been waiting for. My stomach trembles with nervous anticipation as I pick up the blue tin. "That'll be my car. Got to run."

Uncle Jim puts down his fork and stands to shake my hand. "I'm happy you decided not to take that guy's money." He squeezes my arm with his other hand. "Sounded like an absolute prick."

He sits down and picks up his fork. "Great eggs."

I give Maggie a quick peck on the cheek. "I'm borrowing this." I hold up the tin.

She smiles and pulls me into a tight hug. "Go get that girl."

"That's the plan," I tell her as I snatch up my bag from the floor. "If she'll have me."

I trot out of the kitchen, my pulse pounding as much with fear as excitement. What if Summer won't forgive me?

With a weaker than usual voice, Maggie calls, "And if I find out who stubbed out a cigar in my Boston fern, they're in big trouble."

SUMMER

Elsa lets out a long sigh and pushes her feet against me, stretching her legs till she's taking up the rest of the sofa. She's still passed out after our marathon walk this morning. We were out for so long I lost track of time, and she was ready to come home before I was. I could have walked all day, mainly because it's something to keep me busy that doesn't require thought.

It's beautiful out there—the sky is a crisp, clear blue after last night's storm, and it's much milder now. A lot of the snow has already turned to slush, making it easier to get around, and what remains glints prettily in the sun.

I should fetch in some more logs, but I'm suddenly as limp as a shriveled balloon. I finally nodded off after watching the movie, so probably at about six a.m., only for Elsa to wake me up a couple of hours later, asking to go out.

I lie on my side, squeezing between her and the back of the sofa, and wrap my arms around her.

I'll allow myself today to give in to the ache consuming my stomach and chest, and the heavy rock sitting in my throat. Then tomorrow, it's full steam ahead back to the real world.

These last few days consumed by the good and bad of Owen have left me behind on two orders. I'm never behind on orders. And I still need to figure out the whole sock elastication thing.

The lingering aroma of Maggie's perfume on Elsa's fur shoots my mind back to the last time I saw Owen's face. Maybe the reason he looked shocked as I made my way over to him, was because he saw Archie talking to me, and he dreaded what he might say. Well, that's a hazard of going into business with an asshole jerk. And if that's what Owen wants to do, he's not the person I fell for anyway.

I screw up my sore eyes and bury my face in Elsa. This is where I belong. And boy, oh boy, am I worn out now. Lack of

sleep, an enormous walk, and a hefty dose of heartache and sobbing are an exhausting combination.

But a good, solid rest might now be a real possibility. Maybe I'll let myself drift off for just a little while.

I snuggle Elsa tight.

My mind finally settles.

My breath slows.

Everything behind my eyes goes hazy.

My whole bodyweight sinks into Elsa and the cushions, and I start the slow drift along that delicious, dizzying path to slumber.

Suddenly, pulse racing, I bolt upright.

I bash into Elsa, and she jumps too.

My heart thuds from the shock of being jolted from semiconsciousness.

Had I fallen asleep? Did I dream that noise?

Nope, there it is again.

A knock at the door.

I slump and blow out a big sigh.

Well, shit. Of course, the rental people would show up to collect Owen's car right as I'm about to nod off. Of course, everything to do with him shatters my cozy, solitary world.

I unravel myself from Elsa and peer out the window.

Yup. There's a large black SUV in the driveway, right next to that ridiculous little hatchback.

I grab the rental keys from a coat hook and open the front door.

But it isn't a rental company guy.

It's Owen.

I must look as shocked as an abruptly woken rabbit caught in headlights.

My heart surges, and I go a bit dizzy from fatigue, hunger, and, oh yes, the sight of the man I've fallen for hard and fast even though he's entirely wrong for me.

His smile is somewhere between all-consuming joy and deep concern that I might be about to yell at him.

"Hi?" he says, as if it's a question.

As his eyes meet mine, every inch of my skin tingles and my brain switches to the spin cycle. I'm not sure I have the capacity to make my mouth form even that tiny two-letter word in reply.

I grip the door to steady myself, then remember the car keys in my other hand. He must have come to collect it himself, so I hold them out to him.

He looks at them and furrows his brow. "What are they?"

I point at the hatchback. "For the car."

"Oh." He shakes his head. "Someone will come get it tomorrow."

He fiddles with the red ribbon tied around a blue tin he's holding, then shifts it into one hand and runs the other through his hair. It's ridiculous that such a tiny action causes a ripple of heat through my body. How is it possible to feel such a connection, such a fitting together with someone, when I know it would never work?

"Why are you here, if not for the car?"

He reaches his hand toward me, then thinks better of it and pulls it back. "Because I owe you an apology."

Oh, shit. I can't listen to this. I don't need to hear him spin whatever line he's going to spin. When it came down to choosing between me and the money, he became the second man to make the wrong decision. And his justification for that is something I don't need to hear.

I rub my stinging eyes with the corner of my cuff. Judging by the marks it leaves on the fabric, I mustn't have washed off my mascara properly last night. I shouldn't care that I might have given myself panda eyes, but I do.

“There’s no need to apologize. You can just go.” I step back so I can shut the door.

“Summer, please.”

As much as I know I don’t want to throw myself on this fire again, to be burned again, turned to ashes again, something deep inside me stops me from closing the door.

Owen’s eyes are wide, pleading for me not to walk away again. But he obviously wasn’t bothered when I left last night. Not bothered enough to tear himself away from Mr. Moneybags, anyway.

A groggy Elsa appears by my side with a big yawn. Owen reaches down and pats her head like someone who has no clue what to do with a dog. “Hi, Elsa.”

It’s the first time he’s willingly approached her and voluntarily touched her. I guess he’s making an effort.

His hand brushes my leg as he pets her, causing goosebumps to shimmy up my thigh to my center.

I shake off the tingles, take a deep breath, push my shoulders back, and slap on my business face. “So, why are you here?”

He straightens and fiddles with the ribbon around the tin again. “I heard about what Archie said. I hate him for hurting you. It was wrong of me not to walk away from him and go after you.”

He lifts his eyes to meet mine and pauses as he searches for something in them. It’s mesmerizing. And I’m transfixed, drawn deep into those warm brown pools. It’s like he’s looking right into my heart.

The cold air between us crackles with the sparks of our unique, undefinable connection.

I’ve wished it wasn’t real. Over and over these last few hours I wished I’d imagined it, that I was mistaken about this thing we have. I mean what are the odds that a stranger who got lost outside my cabin would be my person? Pretty close to

zero, right? So this whole thing must be my mind playing tricks because I've lived alone for so long.

But here I am, feeling all those things again. And now I'm certain I'm not imagining them. They're real—so tangible I could almost reach out and touch them.

And yet, a relationship with Owen isn't even possible. Thanks, Universe, for that tragic joke.

My belly flips and flops like it doesn't know what to do for the best.

Owen swallows hard. "I made a mistake. I prioritized the wrong thing. I should have put you first. And I'm sorry. More sorry than I will ever be able to tell you."

So, I wasn't wrong about him having changed? Maggie wasn't wrong when she told me she saw a different Owen? My heart shifts up a gear. The desire to grab his face and kiss it all over is overwhelming. But I can't jump the gun here. It's all well and good that he's saying sorry, but words are easy. You can only judge someone by their actions.

"I was humiliated, Owen."

He closes his eyes and nods. "I know. And in the worst way. Because I wasn't there to stand up for you."

"Oh, I can stand up for myself, thanks."

He smiles. "And I adore that about you. You don't need anyone for anything."

He adores something about me?

"I've done my best to put it right," he continues.

If he thinks his best is whatever is in that tin he's staring at, it's going to have to be one hell of a gift.

"After you'd gone, I told Archie to stick it. And came looking for you. But you'd already left, and no one had a sensible car I could borrow to drive here in the snow. I had to wait till this morning for a rental and..." His brow pinches over pleading eyes. "Well, I followed you here as quickly as I could."

I point at the SUV. “At least you got a better vehicle this time.”

“Yeah, and that’s not the only thing I learned from you.” His soft eyes glisten in the sunlight. “All I cared about was that I’d let you down, and you’d gone. For the first time ever, I wasn’t high off trying to close a deal. All I felt was sick to my stomach that I might never see you again.”

“And you really told Archie to stick it?”

“Yup.” His mouth slowly turns up at the corners. “Told him he was a rude, obnoxious ass who I didn’t want to do business with.”

My hand flies to my cheek as my mouth drops open. “No! Honestly? You told him that?”

He quirks one eyebrow. “And that he could fuck off.”

Owen walked away from the biggest investor of his life?

For me?

He sacrificed the deal for *me*?

The butterflies in my belly do a little dance. “You told the man who could have made you a billion-dollar company, and fund the nonprofit, that he was an obnoxious ass who could fuck off?”

Okay, now I can’t help but giggle, imagining the man with the red face and the gold chain being told where he could stick his money. “I don’t imagine it went down particularly well.”

Owen nods. The adorable dimple forms in his cheek as a proud smile spreads across his face. “You imagine correctly. But it was deeply satisfying.”

Well, damn this man for being the most amazing person I’ve ever known. The person I want to laugh with, to snuggle up by the fire with, and the person I want to rip off my clothes and throw me on the nearest piece of soft furnishing. Or floor. Or kitchen counter. Or whatever’s handy, really.

He’s beaming now. “The rush I got from the expression on his face was better than any deal I’ve ever done. I had no idea

that not taking the money could feel better than taking it.”

My eyes prickle as the reality of what he’s done sinks in, and a solitary tear slips down my cheek. “But, why would you do that?”

“Do you honestly not get it?” He brushes the tear away with his thumb and tucks a stray curl behind my ear. “Because I want to be with you.” He cups my cheek. “I want to put *us* first.”

He thinks there’s an *us*?

A mess of emotions swirls inside me. I never thought anyone would ever choose me over enough money to buy a small country. What do you do when your body doesn’t know whether to laugh, cry, or pass out?

I’m on the verge of doing a bit of all of them when he dips his head and brushes his soft, delicious lips against my mouth. I melt into him, sure it’s where I belong.

He rests his forehead against mine and lowers his voice to a husky whisper. “I’m going to ask Elliot to run everything for a few days, so I can take a week off. I thought maybe I could stay a while longer. With you, I mean. If you’ll have me.”

All my worries, my fears, my doubts dissolve. If he can make a monumental shift in his priorities for me, the least I can do is crack open my solitary shell and let him in.

“Oh, hell, yes.” I throw my arms around his neck and his body presses into me. He’s like an island of warmth amid the chilly air.

His lips are soft, warm, and mine. The gentle touch of his tongue sends shivers to my soul, to the depths of my heart, and to a spot between my legs I am desperate for him to touch.

He pulls back, holds up the blue tin that had been pressed between us, and straightens the crumpled ribbon. “Hey, careful.”

I feign surprise. “Is that for me?”

“Maybe. But you have to answer some questions first.”

“Like what?”

“Do you like cranberries?”

“Ugh, well—”

“Oh, that’s not the right answer.”

“It’s just that my grandmother made awful sour cranberry sauce every Thanksgiving.”

“Hmm, okay.” He puts a finger to his lips as he screws them up in thought. “What’s the last movie you saw?”

I close my eyes and chuckle. He’s playing me at my own game. “I can’t believe you’re doing this to me.” I shake my head. “And you won’t believe the answer.”

“Try me.”

“*Frozen*.”

He throws his head back and laughs. “Seriously?”

“Yup. Last night. Or rather the early hours of this morning. Couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d see what all the fuss was about.”

“And?”

I put my hand to my chest and widen my eyes. “It’s amazing.”

I sobbed my heart out at the end of the movie, and now standing here, looking at this beautiful man who’s given up what he thought he wanted because he’s realized what he actually wants is me, the tears flow freely again.

He kisses my cheek as a river runs down it.

“I guess I don’t need to ask you the last time you cried,” he says softly against my skin.

I rest my cold face on his warm chest, no longer afraid to lean on him.

“When this week is over,” he whispers into the top of my head, “we’ll figure it out. But if I’ve learned anything from *Frozen*, it’s that love is putting someone else’s needs before your own.”

Love?

Did he say love?

He said love.

I pull back and look up at him. “Did you say *love*?”

He smiles and shrugs. “I know it’s only been a few days, but they say when you know, you know.”

I pull back, sniff, and wipe my face. “Now I’m going to cry as much as I did last night when the snowman said that the only thing that thaws a frozen heart is an act of true love.” I look up at him. “You’ve certainly managed that.”

“Oh, yours wasn’t frozen. It was just chilled so it would stay fresh for me.”

I slap him on the chest. “Oh, stop the cheesiness.”

He raises his non-tin-holding palm skyward and raises his eyebrows. “Anyway, sooo...?”

“What?” What is he asking? Oh God, yes, the love thing. “Of course, yes! Of course, I love you too. And of course, we can take it one step at a time.”

He reaches to wrap his arms around my shoulders, and whacks me in the back of the head with the blue tin.

“Ow!”

“Oh, shit.” He rubs the spot of impact. “Sorry, got carried away.”

I point at the tin. “Do I at least win the prize now?”

He nods and hands it to me. “Happy belated Valentine’s Day.”

My eyes shoot up from the tin to his face, and I freeze for a second. “You’re wishing me Happy Valentine’s Day?”

He nods.

I point at the tin. “And you’re giving me a Valentine’s gift?”

“Yup.”

“So, you suddenly don’t think Valentine’s Day is a tacky, clichéd, cheese fest?”

He pushes his sexy tousled hair off his face, sighs, and tilts his head to one side. “Well, let me put it this way. Maybe I’m starting to understand that what your grandparents had, and what Maggie and Jim have, is something real. Something that absolutely does exist. And it makes you do crazy things. But you don’t care they’re crazy.”

His words are like sunlight warming my heart.

I tug at the ribbon around the tin. Before I’ve even fully lifted off the lid, the aroma of bananas wafts out. And there it is, a perfectly formed, freshly baked loaf of banana bread.

He proudly points at the red flecks. “With cranberries.”

My heart soars with love for the man I know will make me banana bread when I’m old and gray and knitting in a chair by the fire.

Elsa and I step aside to let him in.

“Welcome back.”

EPILOGUE

SUMMER

The spring sun shines through the leaves of the trees in the grounds of Blythe Manor.

Local kids run and laugh in the dappled shade as they race each other to find the chocolate treasures Maggie's hidden for her Easter egg hunt. She's started what she hopes will become a new tradition, opening the grounds to children from the village as the season changes and we all look forward to new beginnings.

There's still a chill in the air, and I pull my mohair wrap around my shoulders as Owen strolls over, kisses my cheek, and hands me a cup of hot peppermint tea.

After that day he showed up with the cranberry banana bread, he never left.

Well, apart from visiting San Francisco for a week to catch up with staff in person and do the few things he can't do remotely. And he grabbed a few more of his things while he was there. But, other than that, he's fully ensconced in my place, working from the kitchen counter. We really should get him a desk.

Despite being away from the office he's not slacked off. He's been plugging away at finding a new big investor to replace Archie Banks and is on the verge of landing someone who owns a huge consumer electronics company. Owen and Elliot pitch to him in New York next week. So, there's still hope they might get to have a billion-dollar company *and* their nonprofit. And this guy sounds like he's a good person. That will be a nice change.

Owen's adjusted remarkably well to cabin life. I'd offered to let him set up an office in half of my work room, but he said someone knitting in the background of his video conference calls might be a bit distracting.

The only thing he misses about California is his sister, Gwyneth, and her seven-year-old daughter, Braith. But he's

getting a fix for the next few days with them here for a visit.

Owen nods toward Braith, who's laughing like she's known the children she's running around with all her life, even though they met only this morning. Elsa chases her every step of the way.

"She's loving it," he says with a proud uncle smile.

He flew them out for a few days to coincide with the egg hunt. Gwyneth is staying with Maggie and Jim, and Braith's with us. Partly to give Gwyneth a break from single-parenting, and partly because Owen can't get enough of his niece.

She's been with us only three days and already she's formed an inseparable bond with Elsa, Owen's mastered Braith's favorite mac 'n' cheese bites that he used to order in for her, and I've memorized all the songs in *Frozen*.

I snuggle into his side. Owen's barely been out of my sight for two months, but still a thrill runs through me every time any part of him so much as brushes against any part of me.

"She is an amazing kid." Dare I wonder if one day we'll watch our own children run around this lawn?

On the far side of the garden, Jim bellows into a megaphone. "Time's up everyone. Stop hunting. Gather 'round for the grand egg count."

Gwyneth and Max amble across the lawn toward us from the house. Max has some business in Upstate New York, so he took a diversion here for the weekend to catch up with Gwyneth. Owen joked the real reason he came is to make sure Maggie organized the egg hunt properly.

"It's good to finally meet the rest of the family and put faces to everyone." I rest my chin on Owen's shoulder and look up at him. "They're all exactly as you described."

He turns his gaze to the patio, where Elliot, Connor, and Walker are chatting.

"Yup. Connor looks like he just crawled out of bed after a restless night's sleep in his clothes. And Walker needs to trim that beard before he becomes a hipster cliché."

When we all video chatted with Tom in the UK this morning, Maggie said it was the first time all the brothers and cousins had been in the same room since Tom's wedding in London five years ago. He seemed nice, and his semi-English accent from living there for so long, is adorable. Owen says his wife's knocked all the spunk out of him. Connor said similar, but with added profanity.

Max and Gwyneth arrive beside us, laughing as egg-hunters from all four corners of the yard race toward Jim.

"Braith better not have found the most," Gwyneth says. "Everyone would think it was a fix."

"Don't stomp on her appetite for success," Max says. "She's a Dashwood. Crushing the competition is in her blood."

"Well, one of you seems to have loosened their grip on that a little." Gwyneth tips her head toward Owen and twitches her eyebrows. "The love of a good woman can do that to a man, you know, Max."

Max's phone rings in his back pocket.

"Thank, God," he says, looking at it. "My assistant. Should give her a raise for getting me out of this conversation." He puts the phone to his ear. "What's the problem now?" He strides back toward the house, away from the noise of happy children.

Jim raises his arms in the air as the kids all run up to him, proffering their egg baskets for counting. "Whoa, leave an old guy on his feet, please!"

"I'm going to go help Uncle Jim," Gwyneth says, trotting away. "Before he gets mauled by twenty little people on a sugar high."

Owen wraps his arm around my waist. "Let's go for a walk by the pond."

"I wish you guys would stop calling it a pond. It's a lake. I mean, you have rowboats for it, for God's sake."

We amble across the lawn that slopes away from the house and down toward the "pond."

“I’ve been thinking,” Owen says as he takes his arm from around my waist and shoves his hands in his pockets.

Oh, no. My stomach plummets like a ten-ton rock. This is it. The moment I’ve been dreading. The moment he tells me he has to go back to San Francisco permanently. I’ve always known it was inevitable and that we’ve been living in a fantasy world. But it doesn’t stop me wanting to sink into the ground and disappear, to avoid hearing what he’s about to say.

He looks straight ahead. “I’m not sure it’s totally working with me being away from the office all the time.”

I clutch my tea mug with both hands and swallow hard. “I thought you seemed to be making out okay.” I turn to take in his profile. “But, I guess I don’t really know how it all works.”

Owen points to a bench in the shade of a huge tree that has a perfect view down to the lake and the trees beyond. “Let’s sit.”

I’m grateful for the seat to support my wobbly legs, and it might help stop my head from spinning. The world I’ve allowed myself to dive headfirst into is about to be ripped away.

An engraved plate on the back of the bench glints in the sunlight.

“Who were Eleanor and Charles?” I read the rest of the inscription out loud. “They would have loved to sit here with us.”

“Tom and Walker’s parents.”

“Oh, God. I should have guessed. Sorry.”

Neither of us talks for a moment as we both take in the view.

“It’s beautiful here.” I flail to fill the silence. “The perfect place for family gatherings. And the way Maggie and Jim are opening it up for community events like today is wonderful.” I tighten my grip on the mug to stop my hands from shaking. “They’re amazing people. You are all—”

“Summer.” He turns to face me, takes my mug and sets it on the grass at his feet, then holds both my hands.

My head drops. I’m too queasy to even look at him. I stare down at our fingers instead, laced together, right where they belong.

He strokes the back of my hand with his thumb. “I’m worried about saying the wrong thing here.”

I squeeze my eyes tight closed, as if it will shut out the inevitable.

“Anyway—” There’s a nervous tremor in his voice.

“It’s okay.” No point putting him through the torture of an explanation. “I understand.” I lift my head. His face is a blur. “It was always too good to be true.”

“What was?” He sounds like he has no clue what I’m talking about.

“If you need to go back, I understand.” I take a breath, but it gets stuck in my throat, and I half choke and cough.

He rubs my back and chuckles. “No. No. Don’t be silly. I don’t want to go back.”

I draw in a deep breath to confirm I’ve regained use of my lungs. But I’m not sure I heard him correctly. “Tell me that again?”

“I’m worried you might think this is a bit much. Because you’re so independent and everything.” He squeezes my hands, pulls them up to his lips for a kiss, then holds them under his chin as he continues to talk. “I’ve arranged things with Elliot so I can take a year off. Well, kind of off. Work a lot less, at least.”

I must be blinking like a stunned cartoon character who’s been hit over the head with a frying pan. “You want to stay? For a *year*?”

“Well, if it’s too long, then I—”

“Of course, yes. Of course, it’s not too long. Of course, you can.”

“Working remotely is hard. It would be better if I was either all there, or all not there. So, since I’m exhausted after these last few years of non-stop work, and you’ve shown me there’s more to life...”

He pauses to tip his head and lift one shoulder in a half shrug.

“...I’d like to take my foot off the gas a bit. Elliot says he’s happy to pick up the slack. There will be some work I *have* to do. Like, if things work out with this new investor, I’ll have to see things through with him. And I might have to go into the New York office every now and then. And possibly to San Francisco a couple of times. But other than that, I’d like to hang out with you.” He lets go of my hands, and holds up his palms. “If you’ll have me?”

It doesn’t sound entirely like a year off, but it’s more of a step away from work than I thought Owen would ever take. And he wants to do it to be with me.

It’s like a part of me I didn’t know was empty is now full. I throw my arms around him. “That’s probably as close to not working as you’re ever going to get, so I’ll take it.”

He buries his face in my hair and rests his lips against my ear, sending goosebumps down my neck. “One other thing.”

I pull back. “What?”

“Look.” He sweeps his hand across the vista in front of us. “Wouldn’t this be a great view for a wedding?”

What’s he talking about? “Who’s getting marri—”

He slides off the bench and kneels in front of me.

My stomach does cartwheels and everything inside my head goes all spinny. Is he...?

Oh God, he is.

He gently takes my trembling hands again. “You’re everything, Summer. You fill my heart and my soul.”

I gaze at him, unable to comprehend what I’m seeing and hearing. Completely overwhelmed, my body doesn’t seem to

know what to do, other than produce a steady flow of tears that stream silently down my face.

“I need nothing other than you. I don’t need a billion-dollar business, a cool office and a penthouse. I just need you, your cozy cabin, your deaf dog, and your socks that won’t stay up.”

“Hey.” That’s enough for me to find my voice. I poke him in the chest. “They stayed up much longer last time. I’m almost there.”

He smiles, reaches up, and strokes my damp cheek. “I don’t know how the rest of our story goes from here. How we figure out the future, or how we work, or where we live. But as long as the future has us together, I know we’ll find our way.”

I nod. “We will.” The words come out squeakier than I would have wanted.

“Please say you’ll light up every day of the rest of my life with your spark, your fire, and your joy for all things—except olives. Please say you’ll marry me.”

Words I never thought I’d hear. Not from anyone, least of all someone smart, funny, and with a huge, warm heart. And a butt as hot as hell.

“Of course. Yes. Yes. Of course, I will.”

He scoops me off the bench and gathers me into his arms. In that moment, all my old fears vanish in a puff of spring air, and I realize I’d do anything for him. I pull back for a second and look into his moist eyes. “I’d move to San Francisco.”

He looks at me like I’ve told him I know how to change the hard drive in his laptop. “What? You would?”

“If it’s the best way for you to run your business, I absolutely would. I can work from anywhere. You’ve put years of your life into building the company, and if you need to be there to keep on building it, well, then San Francisco it is.”

“That’s the most generous, selfless thing, I’ve ever heard.” He scoops me back into his arms. “We can figure out the details, but thank you for even being willing to consider it.”

I’m about to tell him I love him when I’m drowned out by whoops and hollers careering down the slope toward us.

Owen plops my feet back on the ground. I reach into my pocket to text Izzie, but Gwyneth is almost upon us. Max, Elliot, Connor, and Walker are close behind.

“Holy hell! Were you just on one knee, Owen?” cries Gwyneth as she rounds the end of the bench and crashes into us, arms wide, gathering us both into a giant hug.

Over her shoulder Max stands, hands on hips. “I didn’t think you’d be the first of us to fall, Owen.”

Owen extricates himself from me and Gwyneth and shakes Max’s extended hand. “Well, it was never going to be you, was it?”

Elliot, Walker, and Connor move in and offer Owen a mixture of high fives and fist bumps. I get a slightly awkward embrace from Elliot, a full-on warm hug from Walker, and a “Congratu-fucking-lations” from Connor, accompanied by a thumbs up.

Maggie and Jim jog up behind them, both a little out of breath and each holding one of Braith’s hands. Elsa trots beside them, tongue lolling, tail swinging.

“Looks like you’re getting a new auntie,” Maggie says to Braith.

“You are,” Gwyneth says. “Uncle Owen and Summer are engaged.” She picks up my left hand and tilts her head at her brother. “But it looks like the dork hasn’t got her a ring yet.”

“She has very particular tastes,” Owen says. “The right ring will be the one she designs herself.” He drapes an arm round my shoulder. “I’ve lined up a jeweler you can work with, someone who makes quirky one-offs. You’ll get along great.”

I smile at Gwyneth. “That’s the perfect and most thoughtful idea.”

“Can I be a flower girl?” Braith asks, as she mimes tossing petals from her egg basket.

She’s adorable. I can’t imagine it any other way. “Well, you obviously already have the technique down,” I tell her. “And I’d be honored.”

Behind her back, Jim sneaks a mini chocolate egg from her basket without her noticing.

“We need a toast,” Walker says.

Connor raises his hand. “I second that.”

“There’s still some champagne left from the housewarming party. I’ll go get it.” Walker tugs at Connor and Elliot’s sleeves. “And you guys can carry the glasses.”

As the three of them head up the grassy slope toward the house, Maggie’s gaze drifts toward the plaque on the bench. Her eyes rest there for a second before she pulls me into a hug and holds me tight. “I can’t tell you how happy I am, Summer. Welcome to the family.”

“Hate to break up the party.” Max makes one loud clap. “But I have to run.”

“Oh, Max,” Maggie cries, her shoulders sinking. “Why?”

“Got to go to Warm Springs. The small-town pen pushers at the council have an issue with our application to build a Yellow Barn.”

Whoa. I bet they have an issue. Warm Springs is a quaint small town, and Yellow Barn is a bargain grocery chain with large brightly colored stores.

Jim frowns. “You must have people to sort out that type of thing for you.”

“Usually. But this is the first store out in the sticks. And it’s my idea. The Yellow Barn execs already hate me for buying their company. And they’ve fought my plan to expand into small communities every step of the way. There’s no

chance any of them would make any effort to push it through. They want to see it fail. To see *me* fail.”

He rubs his hands together in glee at the thought of proving them wrong. “Anyway, the council guy wants to meet me at eight tomorrow morning. Since it’s a four or five-hour drive, I’ll go now and spend the night.”

Max kisses his mom on the cheek.

“I’ll put the Lamborghini in the garage and take the Mercedes. The Lambo might not look very ‘small town.’”

He makes air quotes around “small town.”

“Neither will the Mercedes,” Owen says.

Have I really understood this right?

“Do you mean you’re building a Yellow Barn in Warm Springs?” I ask. “As in cute little Warm Springs? In Upstate New York?”

Judging by how Max’s eyebrows have shot up, guess I didn’t do a good job of disguising my alarm.

“I haven’t been there for a while, though.” I attempt a rescue. “It used to be a charming little place, with a pretty Main Street and lovely local stores. That’s all.”

There’s no way the residents will want a Yellow Barn monstrosity spoiling the scenery. And undoubtedly crushing some of their small businesses.

“It’s becoming cool,” Max says. “And growing. The hipsters who’re priced out of Brooklyn are moving up there. So there’s money to be made. No big grocery store’s moved in yet. I intend us to be the first.”

“The locals must be up in arms,” Owen says.

“Yes,” I join in. “The bakeries, produce stores, florists, and the like must be terrified you’ll put them out of business.”

If I had a knitting shop there I wouldn’t be happy about it, and Yellow Barn doesn’t even sell knitting products. Communities have been shattered by grocery giants like that.

“I bet there’s already a dozen petitions against you,” Owen says.

“Ha. No one knows yet,” Max says. “I’m still in negotiations with the council.”

“I wouldn’t bet no one knows.” Jim snorts. “We’ve only lived in a small town for a few months, and I’ve already learned nothing stays secret for long. Larry from the hardware store told everyone he was going to Florida to visit his daughter. He’d only been gone a couple of days before we all knew he was actually having hemorrhoids removed.”

“I can handle a bunch of small towners with petitions,” Max says.

“You’ll just pay them off, right?” Owen says, like he’s seen it a thousand times before.

“Check’s already half written my friend.” Max slaps Owen on the back. “There’s always someone who’s a royal pain in the ass, but I’ve never had any trouble shutting them up before.”

He strides off with a wave. “Have fun, folks.”

I certainly wouldn’t want to take on Max. God help anyone who has the guts to stand up for their small business and the community and oppose him.

Wondering who might stand in the way of Max’s ugly new grocery store in cute Warm Springs? Polly, that’s who!

She owns the local organic produce shop on Main Street, and once she gets wind of his plans, she’s as mad as hell and determined to stop him.

Read their story in [That Conflicted Feeling](#).

Want to know what engagement ring Summer chose? And the disaster that almost befalls it at Owen’s spectacular San Francisco penthouse? Hint: there’s some steam involved (in more ways than one!)

Download their FREE Bonus Scene!

OTHER ROM-COMS BY NICKY REDFORD

The Dashwood Billionaires

That Stranded Feeling

(Owen & Summer)

That Conflicted Feeling

(Max & Polly)

That Fake Feeling

(Connor & Rose)

That Friendzone Feeling

(Walker & Emily)

That Geeky Feeling

(Elliot & Charlotte)

That Reunited Feeling

(Tom & Hannah)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicky Redford writes bladder-threateningly funny rom-coms with all the steam and all the feels.

She loves heroes who think they know what they want (they're wrong, obviously), the feisty, independent, heroines who don't take their crap, and the sparky banter that inevitably ensues.

Nicky learned the word "cock" at an inappropriately young age from a Jackie Collins novel that either her mother or grandmother left lying around—she doesn't recall which, they don't talk about it. But it sure got her hooked on romance.

When she discovered Nora Ephron movies, Nicky found her jam and fell head over heels in love with smart, romantic comedies. If anyone tries to say *When Harry Met Sally* is not the greatest film ever made they will be treated to a very detailed explanation as to why they are wrong.

Nicky aims to bring you page-turning raunchy rom-coms to brighten your day, put a smile on your face, and make you need to sit on an ice pack.

A British Canadian who lives in Toronto, Nicky likes to be invited to everything, but go to nothing.

Her previous life as a journalist has left her with a love of deadlines—without them, you'd find her watching dog videos and make-up tutorials all day long.

Never miss a new release, a special offer, a freebie, or a funny story, by signing up for her newsletter The Redford Files:

www.nickyredford.com/newsletter

And let's be social!

